

A SEARCH FOR AUTHENTICITY: UNDERSTANDING ZADIE SMITH'S *WHITE  
TEETH* USING JUDITH BUTLER'S PERFORMATIVITY AND JANE AUSTEN'S  
SATIRE

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by

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## **DEDICATIONS**

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## PREFACE

Critics often cite Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) as the literary emergence of a multicultural Britain. In her essay, "'Happy Multicultural Land'? The Implications of an 'excess of belonging' in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*" (2005), Molly Thompson asserts that Smith challenges implications of multiculturalism's ties with the roots of heritage. Thompson writes, "the notion of home as having a fixed and singular origin for anyone in a multicultural world is...shown to be illusory" (133). According to Thompson, Smith challenges ideas of cultural heritage as being a necessary part of the identification process through which immigrants and their subsequent generations emerge. Rather, the characters of the novel identify their authentic selves through a mingling of the past and present, a rootedness which clings to both personal histories and present circumstances.

Jonathan P.A. Sell takes the search for identity one step further in his essay "Chance and Gesture in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*: A Model for Multicultural Identity?" According to Sell, Smith presents an identity which is "produced for us socially, which never matches our own self-presentation. Thus, social relations are informed by a dynamic of chance and instability and conducted through a process of interpretation and misinterpretation which, dependent as it is on communication, may actually enhance the prospect of social communion" (27). Sell suggests that the "social communion" is made possible via "communication," hinting at an exchange between individuals and society. He goes on to say that Smith's novel announces "a break with the past [that] heralds a fresh concern for a present disembarrassed of all complexes about historically determined origins and identities," a

statement which seems to speak precisely to Smith's main character, Irie Jones, and her search for self authenticity, an almost utopian notion (29).

*White Teeth* tells the story of three families, the Joneses, the Iqbals, and the Chalfens, and their interactions with each other. Archie and Clara Jones met when he was forty and she was nineteen. He is English and she is Jamaican, and they have one daughter, Irie. Bangladeshi Samad Iqbal, Archie's old war buddy, has a wife, Alsana, and two identical twin boys, Magid and Millat. The Chalfens are a large, English family with several children, but the text focuses primarily on the parents, Joyce and Marcus, and their son, Josh.

Irie ultimately takes the main stage, or displaced center, of the novel as her chapters are stuck between others. Prior to Irie's chapters are those of Archie and Samad. Meanwhile, Smith groups Magid, Millat, and Marcus together in the section after Irie's. Smith says the "reason Irie gets to the centre of the book is not really about Irie, but about a certain idea of indeterminacy which is in a lot of writing of my generation of my peers, about the centre always being slightly displaced" (O'Grady 107). This idea of a "displaced centre" describes Irie in a way it cannot describe other characters. Irie is, almost literally, "stuck between a rock and a hard place," locked between her roots and her future just as her chapters are stuck between that of her father and the potential fathers of her own, unborn child (Smith 351). Through the characterization of Irie, Smith reveals not only the struggle of a second-generation immigrant, but also the struggle of a contemporary woman searching for her authentic self. This search occurs in the delicate space between Irie's roots and her present life.

The challenge of the novel is how Irie identifies herself in “Happy Multicultural Land.” Smith says, “sometimes...it feels like there is no precedent for the person you are and the experience that you have” (O’Grady 108). This sentiment articulates the problem of how self-identity – based on gender, race, nationality, religion – becomes increasingly difficult in a multicultural world.

The critical problem with the novel has to do with understanding the nature of Irie’s struggle and Smith’s intentions. This thesis uses Judith Butler’s theory of performance and performativity as a framework for understanding Irie’s process of identification. Irie demonstrates performativity in practice, creating a visualization of some of the tenets of the theory as she struggles to define herself as a woman of color. Additionally, Smith uses satire in Irie’s chapters as a means to further highlight Irie’s struggle and the unrealistic expectations of gender norms.

New in this thesis is how performance/performativity works in a multicultural novel, and how that framework is part of a larger, feminist British literary tradition.

Smith states:

There is no dearth of women writers. There are hundreds of them. I think women are at the beginning of the novel and the end of it. The novel is their form. If you kind of squint and don’t look at Samuel Richardson, it was a woman’s form and it is [still] somewhere. It has a very intimate connection with women because it was a kind of business they could do even if they had to hide it under a piece of blotting paper like Austen did. They could do it in private, it didn’t cost too much money, and the means were there for them. (O’Grady 108)

Here, Smith turns the idea of novel-writing as a white man’s enterprise on its head, putting men as the “displaced centre” instead of women. Because “women are at the

beginning of the novel and the end of it,” Smith claims the space of the novel as an inherited, feminine location.

At the same time, Smith recognizes “the influence of all these old dead men who wrote so brilliantly” (O’Grady 108). However, Smith mentions Jane Austen as one of her influences (108). This hints at the larger literary tradition in which Smith writes.

Women’s writing, including Austen’s, can be viewed through the lens of Judith Butler’s theories to reveal a connectedness between women authors of different generations. This is particularly applicable when considering the subversive satire used by both Austen and Smith. These two authors, not previously studied together, use satire in such a way that it operates as a literary performative. In a search for authenticity that resembles Irie’s search, Smith herself recognizes the need for women writers to step out of the constraints of gender performance and into the realm of gender performativity.

## CHAPTER ONE: JUDITH BUTLER AND ZADIE SMITH

“You must present yourself as an attractive woman even if you’re a rocket scientist. It’s total arse, isn’t it?”

- Zadie Smith in a December 2000 interview with *The Guardian*

*White Teeth* works as a multicultural novel, but its dual function within the framework of Judith Butler’s theory of performance and performativity has yet to be critically addressed. Performativity applies to declarative, linguistic statements. For example, a pastor saying, “I now declare you husband and wife,” signifies the precise beginning of a marriage, a union which did not exist prior to the utterance. More recently performativity has been borrowed from linguistic studies and applied to sociology, psychology, and literary criticism, among others. In these cases the theory works in a similar fashion as in linguistic studies. Linguistic studies focuses on language itself, but in literary studies, performativity also focuses on behavioral/character analysis. In Smith’s *White Teeth*, for instance, acts of performativity and performance demonstrate one of the main character’s (Irie Jones’) need to belong while she simultaneously struggles to locate her authentic self. A close study of the character Irie reveals the ways in which performativity and performance illuminates Smith’s work.

In his essay, “Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*: Multiculturalism for the Millennium” (2003), Dominic Head says Smith is “harnessing the novel’s capacity to embrace heterogeneity, and has used it to give convincing shape to her presentation of an evolving, and genuinely multicultural Britain” (107). Smith offers a version of multiculturalism that, similar to performance demands, depends upon a specific historical moment. The novel treats multiculturalism as a transient idea, one subject to change and reinterpretation (116). Just as becoming “multicultural” is a societal evolution, the word itself changes meanings over time as societal needs grow and adapt and definitions of inclusion broaden.<sup>1</sup> Multiculturalism no longer means simply a region full of people of differing backgrounds; rather, it means a sort of inclusion with a transition towards tolerance. This tolerance, following Butler’s theory of a past open to constant reinterpretation, must also assume some future of multiculturalism as well.

Head aptly states “post-colonial identity is properly conceived as *process* rather than *arrival*,” hinting at the notion that multiculturalism itself is on a quest for self authenticity, continually changing and adapting as society requires (107).<sup>2</sup> Head says,

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<sup>1</sup> Philosopher Martin Heidegger’s authenticity model recognizes that “any moment is a crossing point of past and future” (Dostal 135). Heidegger’s theory goes on to say “The present bears within it the past and the future. Past and future make it up,” suggesting a reconciliation of past, present, and future in each moment, allowing for a constant reinvention of self, one without terminality” (Dostal 135). Therefore, according to Heidegger the self is in a constant state of flux, realizing and reinventing itself each moment. Freedom is defined as “not mean[ing] boundless license for the ego, but instead the capacity for human [existence] to ‘let things be’” (Zimmerman 299).

<sup>2</sup> See Charles B. Guignon’s “Authenticity, Moral Values, and Psychotherapy.” Here, Guignon notes “authenticity has nothing to do with such romantic ideals as getting in touch with a deep inner self or rising about the herd...since our own life stories are inseparable from the wider text of a shared we-world, authenticity can be nothing other than a fuller and richer form of participation in the public context” (281). In relation to

“Smith’s conviction [is] that we are all hybrid post-colonials, biologically as well as culturally, and the pursuit of our ethnic origins is a pointless objective” (114). Overall, Head insists that Smith’s novel is a multicultural experiment, one that envisions a combining of the past and present in both personal and societal ways.

The multicultural experiment resembles Smith’s own primary school at Queen’s Park. She says, “it is the most multicultural place I can think of – more than the city – the school is so phenomenal” (O’Grady 106). That is to say, Smith tries to recreate the experience of her school in her novel. She says her old school makes her “want to drag certain people to the school and say ‘Look at this, look at how well it can work. Look at how these people are doing’” (106). Smith seems to reproduce this design, albeit with flaws, in *White Teeth*. For example, the principal of Irie’s school misinterprets multiculturalism when he tells her that one of the goals of the school is “Bringing children of disadvantaged or minority backgrounds into contact with kids who might have something to offer them. And there could be an exchange, vice versa. Kids teaching kids basketball, football, et cetera. We could get *funding*” (256). Instead of “how well it can work,” Irie’s principal thinks of the money multiculturalism can potentially garner.

In contrast, Susie Thomas’ essay “Zadie Smith’s False Teeth: The Marketing of Multiculturalism” berates critics for their praise of Smith as the “cover girl of the ‘Multicultural Novel’” (par. 1). Thomas cites authors who previously cleared a multicultural, literary space, which Thomas seems to think Smith claims as her own: “the

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Irie, this means expressing herself in a way that is acceptable to herself. Through this acceptance Irie comes to live and “participate” more fully in the “we-world” around her.

‘ease’ with which Smith has tackled immigration, class and growing up as a ‘mixed race’ child rests squarely on the territory that [Hanif] Kureishi opened up in...*My Beautiful Launderette* (1985) [et al]” (par. 9). Thomas accuses the “contemporary canon” of excluding “the more edgy and challenging work of Hanif Kureishi, Caryl Phillips and David Dabydeen” for authors such as Smith (par. 16). Nevertheless, Smith’s search for authenticity, in a fashion similar to Irie’s, must occur in spite of an established history in an attempt to reinterpret the past and reinvent the present. In the novel, for instance, each section has two years attached to it, one in the past and one in the present, showing the need to reconcile the past and the present. This search for authenticity acknowledges the existence of roots, but rejects self-definition based solely on them. As Butler argues, the search for authenticity begins as a performance, a need to belong, and transitions into a performative declaration of self.

Despite the on-going critical argument about Smith’s multicultural (or not) novel, the author herself recognizes the limitations of the catchword “multiculturalism.” Smith confesses, “that whole kind of 60s, 70s, liberation ethic that you will be released by knowing your roots, that you will discover yourself. I just always thought was a crock basically, and it’s partly true, but your roots come with baggage. And the baggage isn’t always fun” (O’Grady 106). Smith admits the underlying motive behind her work is that rootedness remains independent of place and often, if not always, subjectively drives people. Rootedness does not, however, necessarily assist in the search for authentic self unless it is interpreted to do so. For example, in the novel, Millat and Magid Iqbal deal with their “roots” and “baggage” in completely different ways; Millat stays in London

and joins the extremist group KEVIN, while Magid is sent back “home” to Bangladesh. The boys’ surroundings, in large part, influence their self-constructed identities irrespective of a shared heritage, operating in a sort of cultural engineering which combines past and present while keeping in mind future implications (Head 117).

This idea of cultural engineering carries through all of *White Teeth* in the form of FutureMouse, a genetically engineered mouse whose entire lifespan has been planned out by a scientist. Thompson argues, “this ability to manufacture [FutureMouse] for whom past, present and future are predictable, rootedness and rootlessness become meaningless concepts,” thus reinforcing the critical notion that Smith attempts to challenge ideas of the necessity of roots and the predictability of a future dictated by these roots (135). Additionally, one could argue FutureMouse represents Smith’s metaphor for all human life in that roots do not serve as a defining moment. Instead of being defined by their pasts, individuals retain responsibility for interpretation and reinterpretation of their past (and present and future). Self-identity, such as Irie’s, depends on constant reinvention, a process of sorts rather than a singular moment.

Smith says *White Teeth* is “about uniting a certain kind of cerebral experience with something from the stomach or the gut,” an elusive style of writing that mirrors the search for authentic self (109). Smith seems to support the idea that *White Teeth* is less about roots, heritage, or multiculturalism in the general sense of the term. Instead, the novel attempts to portray an experience that combines roots and “baggage” with subjective experience. This creates a continually evolving self. Smith says, “the allegiance you once had to your country or to a state or to a town you lived in...is now

transferred to things like...visiting a certain site on the 'Net. Those communities seem just as strong as the old binding ones – the religious communities or whatever” (O’Grady 109). This hints at Smith’s fascination with modern individuals’ need to belong and the confusion incited by multiculturalism in determining where one fits. Rather than seeking commonality through religion or cultural heritage, it seems to Smith people need connections in a more personalized, overarching way. In *White Teeth*, the younger generation of characters seeks community in various ways, one of which is in the extremist group, KEVIN. This group allows for a diverse group of young people to come together, albeit in a quasi-terrorist faction, and embrace what they consider to be their cultural roots. Older male characters gather together at a local bar where no woman has been known to set foot. Older female characters come together, but in less defined arenas. They meet in a beauty shop, on a park bench, or in a kitchen. These groups, particularly the women’s groups, come with their own sort of “baggage” which often appears in the form of gender and/or race norms.

In *White Teeth*, Irie as a young girl comes to understand the English standards of gender and race performance through her interactions with other female characters. Gender standards include being thin (including dieting), being strong (but submissive), and being willing to maintain patriarchal expectations. Race standards include being white (skin, but also white teeth and straight hair), being submissive (but without strength), and being a sexual object. Using Butler’s performativity theory as a framework illuminates Irie’s discovery of a self-identity which often goes against expected norms

(sometimes societal, sometimes familial). Throughout the novel, Smith employs satire,<sup>3</sup> a form of performativity in itself, to show inherent flaws found within these gender and race norms.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is grounded in the work of Heidegger, Hegel, Beauvoir, Sartre, Foucault, and Freud. Citing Beauvoir, Butler adopts the idea that gender "is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance or substance, of a natural sort of being" ("Bodily Inscriptions" 91). As such, gender is separate from sex, created by society, and must operate under constraints and regulations of cultural expectations. Gender is not something a person does, but rather something done to a person. Gender, then, is performance. When a person takes over this performance and challenges established gender norms, gender becomes performative.

In the novel, performance becomes obvious when Irie compares herself to her mother, Clara, who is more ideal by societal standards than her daughter. In a satirical twist, however, Clara has false teeth. After discovering her mother's secret, "Irie had already put two and two together. The midnight voice. The perfect daytime straightness and whiteness," satirically showing how the ideal gender norms are never fully recognized (31). Even Clara, as beautiful as she is, still performs her gender according to

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<sup>3</sup> While critics have gone out of their way to mention that *White Teeth* is not a satire, a discussion of the novel as satire appears in Peter Childs' chapter on Smith in *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction Since 1970*. He says "*White Teeth* itself could be considered a fairy-tale in that its view of race-relations, though far from Utopian, seems more closely to resemble hopes for Britain's future – satirized as 'Happy Multicultural Land' – than observations about its past. In Smith's view, that future is not be engineered like [FutureMouse}...but enriched by cultural commingling, accident, and chance" (209).

these norms and can never be perfect enough when compared to them. Clara's repetitive act of wearing false teeth makes her gender a performance.

Performativity, though, cannot be confused with performance. Performance relies heavily on power, particularly as described in Foucauldian terms. For Foucault, "power imposes itself on us, and, weakened by its force, we come to internalize or accept its terms" in a similar fashion as Freud's views of lost desire (*Psychic Life* 2).<sup>4</sup> As with gender, "[p]ower not only *acts on* a subject but, in a transitive sense, *enacts* the subject into being...power precedes the subject" (*Psychic Life* 13). This external power as read through Nietzsche and Hegel "pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination, assumes a psychic form that constitutes the subject's self-identity" (*Psychic Life* 3). Hence, performance depends upon society and acts with full knowledge of that society's expected gender norms. Meanwhile, performativity engages society through an active discourse, a declarative act of repetition. For example, being a sexual object is a gender norm. Irie's friend, Neena, goes against this norm by being a lesbian, a repetitive, declarative act of performativity.

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<sup>4</sup> See Butler's *Psychic Life* in which she uses Freud to explain how children internalizing the lost desire of a same sex parent ultimately leads to reinforcing heterosexual normativity. Butler says the "oedipal conflict presumes that heterosexual desire has already been *accomplished*, that the distinction between heterosexual and homosexual has been enforced (a distinction which, after all, has no necessity); in this sense, the prohibition on incest presupposes the prohibition on homosexuality, for it presumes the heterosexualization of desire" (*Psychic Life* 135). A young child who loves their same sex parent reconciles this desire in the "oedipal conflict." They feel badly for having experienced that love because of the societal "prohibition on homosexuality." Hence, heterosexual normatives are reinforced.

Butler explains the difference between performance and performativity in this way:

the performance of a gender is also compelled by norms that I do not choose. I work within the norms that constitute me. I do something with them. Those norms are the condition of my agency, and they also limit my agency...gender performativity is not just drawing on the norms that constitute, limit, and condition me; it's also delivering a performance within a context of reception, and I cannot fully anticipate what will happen. ("Changing the Subject" 345)

Performativity, then, must take on the added component of audience reaction, a variable which can neither be predicted nor ignored, but which also opens possibilities to not follow societal norms. In the novel, one of Irie's most distinctive performative moments is when she straightens her hair, hoping to attract Millat's attention. This fails because, although she assumes he will be smitten with her straight hair, he continues to ignore her.

Butler goes on to argue that there exists a "cultural situation in which men have traditionally been associated with the disembodied or transcendent feature of human existence and women with the bodily and immanent feature of human existence" ("Variations" 27). In other words, according to Butler, gender norms align men with mind and women with body, showing men's ability "to make themselves other than their bodies...the masculine 'I' is a noncorporeal soul" and that "[m]asculine disembodiment is only possible on the condition that women occupy their bodies as their essential and enslaving identities'" ("Variations" 28). Women become exactly men's Other.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler says the "Hegelian other is always found outside; at least, it is *first* found outside and only later recognized to be constitutive of the subject" (*Account* 27). She goes on to say, "one finds that the only way to know oneself is through a mediation that takes place outside of oneself, exterior to oneself, by virtue of a convention or a norm that one did not make, in which one cannot discern oneself as an author or an agent of one's own making. In this sense, then, the Hegelian subject of recognition is one for whom a

There are a number of ways in which women are Othered and reduced to their bodies in *White Teeth*, most notably in chapters devoted to Irie. Irie's saturation in English culture causes her to want "Straightness. Flickability" in her hair in an effort to perform white femaleness more effectively (236). Irie enters the beauty salon P.K.'s to have her hair straightened. Two halves divide the salon: "In the male section was all laughter, all talk, all play; there was an easiness that sprang from no male haircut ever costing over six pounds or taking more than fifteen minutes. It was a simple-enough exchange and there was joy in it" (229). Contrasting to this "easiness" is:

the female section of P.K.'s was a deathly thing. Here, the impossible desire for straightness and 'movement' fought daily with the stubborn determination of the curved African follicle; here ammonia, hot combs, clips, pins, and simple fire had all been enlisted in the war and were doing their damndest to beat each curly hair into submission. (229)

In P.K.'s, women are separated, not only physically, but also in terms of ease of being. They have an "impossible desire" and must "beat" their "hair into submission." Women in P.K.'s are reduced to their hair, a "bodily" existence, while men remain "other than their bodies." In fact, men's interactions with their own bodies in P.K.'s is short-lived and "all laughter," hardly full of the "simple fire" women must endure in their quest for straight, gender-performing hair.

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vacillation between loss and ecstasy is inevitable. The possibility of the 'I,' of speaking and knowing the 'I,' resides in a perspective that dislocates the first-person perspective it conditions" (28). Because "a mediation" must occur "outside of oneself" and because women define themselves "by virtue of a convention or a norm that [they] did not make" (i.e. gender norms), women experience an estrangement from self. Because their exterior bodies are expected to conform to certain norms and much of their worth is placed on the success of this conformity, women cannot help but feel this sort of displacement.

Women in *White Teeth* want straight hair in part because, as Butler points out, “it is not possible to exist in a socially meaningful sense outside of established gender norms” and “to stray outside of established gender is in some sense to put one’s very existence into question...a freedom made burdensome through social constraint” (“Variations” 27). Gender performativity, which can upset societal norms, equates running a very real risk of social suicide. Performance, on the contrary, does not run the same risk as it means repeating accepted gender norms for the sake of societal survival. Performance acknowledges the reception, anticipates it, and reacts accordingly, seeking to influence the reception. Because Clara is “compelled by norms” that she has not chosen, her actions are a performance. Because Irie attempts to anticipate Millat’s reception, her actions are a performative (and also a failed performance).

Irie presents a failed gender performance that creates the sort of social suicide Butler mentions. Obsessed with her body, Irie draws a picture of “Before. After. Before. After. Before. *After*” weight loss, and “this belief in her ugliness, in her *wrongness*, has subdued her; she kept her smart-ass comments to herself these days, she kept her right hand on her stomach. She was all *wrong*” (222, 224). Here, Irie not only wants to be thin, but wants to change her entire visual presentation, creating a socially acceptable gender performance. Although Irie knows gender norms require her to be thin, because she fails in her performance she experiences mockery from her classmates and teachers, resulting in a diminished sense of self. She also feels the added pressure of not conforming to the race norm of being white.

Butler does not believe gender and race need to be mutually exclusive as “no single account of construction will do, and that these categories always work as background for one another, and they often find their most powerful articulation through one another” (“Bodily Inscriptions” 95). In this way, race and gender norms are inseparable, particularly in terms of performativity. According to Butler:

What are being performed are the cultural norms that condition and limit the actor in the situation but also in play are the cultural norms of reception, which may or may not accord with the ones that are constituting a situation so that we actually have a retrospective of constitution of the performance through the norms of reception – and this can produce really interesting problems of cultural translation and cultural misunderstanding. And those problems are very productive. (“Changing the Subject” 346)

Combining race and gender as limiting societal constraints also speaks to issues of exogamy; marriage must not take place within a family, as the incest taboo clearly prohibits such a union. Likewise, Butler claims that socially-defined marriage “must be outside the clan but not outside of a certain racial self-understanding or racial commonality” and “it’s important that we understand both how the mandating of heterosexuality and the mandating of heterosexual marriage are linked with notions of cultural transmission that are invariably linked with questions of what race that culture will be, questions of racial transmission and racial purity” (“Changing the Subject” 350-51). Here, Butler addresses heterosexual normativity as well and links gender with race, suggesting both depend upon bodies, both in physical terms as well as performative terms. In this way, both women and people outside of a certain race/sexuality classification become Othered and must choose to either perform their societal gender/racial norms or take on the potential problems of gender/racial performativity.

The subjugation of minority women in *White Teeth* extends to all women – white and black, Christian and Jewish, straight – and gay. Marcus says to Neena and her girlfriend “You two are terrible temptations for a man...dykes always are” (289). This societal view of all women, particularly the Othered group of lesbians, as enticement for men is also expressed by Millat. He thinks the girl for whom he pines “was encouraging [male attention], that she positively *wanted* men to look at her, that she was...’prostituting herself to the male gaze.’ Particularly white males. Because that’s how it worked between Western men and Western women” (309). It becomes apparent through Millat’s observation that women are continually subjugated, forced to perform their gender under the focused eye of white men, forced to perform appropriately based on the expectations and desires of the concentrated gaze. Based on gender norms, women are made visible via their performance.

In *White Teeth*, Irie’s interactions with her English class show how her performance is closely observed. While in class, Irie dares to suggest William Shakespeare thinks “Black?...Is?...Good?” (225). Following her comment, a fellow student passing her a note which reads “ODE TO LETITA AND ALL MY KINKY-HAIRED, BIG-ASS BITCHEZ” (227). This note and its implications make the subjugation of her body whole. Irie is assured that blackness, fatness, and perceived bitchness (or womanness) are intolerable in society. Moreover, this sentiment is given in a tone similar to Shakespeare, an invisible visible white man,<sup>6</sup> which serves to continue

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<sup>6</sup> Visible because he is part of the canon, invisible because he is Kintz’s definition of the invisible: both white and male. For further explanation, see Linda Kintz’s “Performing Virtual Whiteness: The Psychic Fantasy of Globalization.” She writes, “White bodies, of

subjugating women into an idealized image of white, thin, and, above all, silent. Irie's gender performativity, then, leads to a heightened degree of subjugation and societal backlash.

Butler cites drag as one of the most noticeable forms of gender performativity in that it creates a parody of established gender norms. Drag reveals the original to be a copy, "and an inevitably failed one, an ideal that no one *can* embody. In this sense, laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived" ("Bodily Inscriptions" 113). Here, the copy (drag) displaces the original gender, imitates it, and ultimately shows how the definitions which hold gender norms together are, in fact, imagined. Gender performativity, then, acts as a dialogue to challenge established gender norms by making them laughable, by satirizing them.

In other words, satire becomes a literary performativity, one which exposes the established mode of contemporary literature as a copy, "an inevitably failed...ideal." Rather than operating solely within the terms of literature performance in hopes of entertaining, the satirical contemporary novel instead can open new ways of viewing the human condition. Further, satire is defined as a "genre that uses irony, wit, and sometimes sarcasm to expose humanity's vices and foibles, giving impetus to change or reform through ridicule...[satire] essentially has a moral purpose" (Murfin 426). Smith's subversive satire becomes the contemporary novel's drag show, undermining literary

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course, have a special relation to race, but this special relation is rendered invisible because it is so obvious and cannot be precisely specified. Whereas people of color can be reduced to their bodies, whites, in this frame, cannot" (341). In this way, whiteness is a privileged condition, but one which is simultaneously invisible.

norms and operating within a literary performative, creating laughter while also suggesting need for change.

Smith sets up this literary drag show immediately in *White Teeth* through her allusion to Virginia Woolf as she thanks “Lisa and Joshua Appingnanesi for contriving between them to get me a room of my own” in the Acknowledgments section of her novel. This, Smith’s opening line, begins the novel’s satirical journey through a necessary performance of Englishness by minorities as she assumes a role not typically assigned to a woman of color (Is she white? Is she black? Is she British? Is she Jamaican?). Additionally, this carefully tailored reference to Woolf establishes the novel as a voice, not only for women, but for all subjugated groups; thereby the book becomes a performative. Smith declares the need for her “own room,” not solely as a woman, but as a minority as well. Because the novel is satirical, it becomes also a literary performative, a declaration of undeniable existence that can upset traditionalized views of women, minorities, and writers in general.

This idea of agency via female voice, a declarative, performative discourse, carries throughout the work, reinvented by various characters. In an initial meeting between Clara and Alsana, for example, the women realize the importance of female communication as “their husbands told each other everything. That it was they themselves who were kept in the dark” (55). The female characters begin to see that “There’s enough fucking men in the world” and embrace the need for female communication, for a discourse which exists outside the established societal norms and permissions (66). Because Irie witnesses many such exchanges between other women,

she sees how to bring herself into being through declarative performatives that are not always verbalized.

Smith further explains the negation of roots and how self-authenticity must sometimes be found without a precedent. She points to women writers and how often they do not appear in canons, even in contemporary ones. Smith says women “need to feel that they are the subjects and the person who is doing the writing and not the thing who is being looked at or judged or observed by other people,” a task that can be daunting particularly in the face of so many great, white, dead male writers (O’Grady 109). She also cautions women in that “sometimes it feel like there’s no precedent for you and the way you think...[but] role models are another crock and something which limit you. They don’t set you free” (O’Grady 108). In this way, Smith’s work not only clears space for cultural writing, but for gendered writing as well.

By establishing herself as a woman writer without a clear set of roots, Smith sets the precedent for other women writers within the historically male-dominated literary genres of both multicultural and satirical writing. At the same time that she clears this space, she seems to warn against women seeing her as a role model. Rather, she suggests instead that women seek inspiration from themselves, tackling “the complexity of the world” without fear (O’Grady 108). Similarly to Irie, Smith must clear space for herself in the absence of a role model worth emulating. Although many women interact with Smith, they cannot help her in her search for self-authenticity as they “don’t set [her] free.”

However, despite Smith's own assertion that role models are "a crock," Smith's literary performativity is not unique and is, in fact, grounded historically with other women satirists such as Jane Austen. Particularly interesting is Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), which includes a lengthy scene concerned with the play *Lovers' Vows*. In this scene, performance and performativity are easily identifiable and the subversive satire found in Smith's work becomes based on an established English tradition of the novel.

## CHAPTER TWO: SUBVERSIVE SATIRE IN *MANSFIELD PARK* AND *WHITE*

### *TEETH*

“Pictures of perfection make me sick and wicked.”

- March 23, 1816, letter from Jane Austen to her sister, Fanny Knight

Smith’s subversive satire, as well as performance and performativity, appears in other English writers, including Jane Austen. Stylistically, the two writers are quite different; Austen’s novels follow a linear timeline and the reader discovers characters’ true motives through a narrator, free indirect discourse, and dialogue; meanwhile, Smith’s style jumps back and forth, playing with time, and characters are revealed through a variety of ways not limited to dialogue. However, both writers’ work can be understood via gender performance and performativity, and through their uses of satire.

A number of critics have suggested that Austen does not use satire and irony directed toward a conservative agenda; several, including Mona Scheuerman and Patricia Meyer Spacks, also argue that her novels are devoid of sex and bodies in general, that she was conservative, and that she was concerned only with issues of strict moral obedience. For example, Scheuerman argues that a “moral outlook is at the core of all Austen’s fiction” and that she “is presenting precisely the conservative moral agenda that was so

typical of her class” (294, 296).<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Spacks argues that the most humorous of characters show “moral weakness” and therefore cannot be laughed at (76). According to Spacks, irony and satire cannot be at work in Austen’s writing because of the moral framework, even though it is this framework Austen seems to criticize in *Mansfield Park* (76).

However, several critics have looked at the subversive humor in Austen’s works and established a basis for, not only her knowledge of sexual humor, but also her subversive use of satire as corrective. For instance, Pierre Goubert says that in *Mansfield Park*, “it is left to the reader to get the irony. The author concerns herself with giving the reader the means to do so. It is the reader’s personal sense of irony that is established here. It is what will build rational critique of the book’s fundamental ideas and pronounce ultimate judgment on the conduct of the characters” (40). Goubert argues that Austen’s irony works to satirize the moral agenda mentioned by Scheuerman and Spacks.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly, while Scheuerman assumes that the moral lines in Austen’s novels are clearly drawn and that the narrator religiously follows these lines, both Eileen Gillooly and Pam Perkins argue that the narrator’s voice more closely resembles Mary Crawford’s than Fanny’s, emphasizing Mary’s eroticism. Perkins says *Mansfield Park* “might not be

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<sup>7</sup> See Jillian Heydt-Stevenson’s *Austen’s Unbecoming Conjunctions: Subversive Laughter, Embodied History*. Although a number of critics tackle Austen’s satire (or lack thereof), one of the more comprehensive readings of her humor is offered by Heydt-Stevenson who traces earlier criticisms of Austen, ultimately revealing her humor and satire.

<sup>8</sup> See Claudia Johnson’s *Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel* for a more thorough reading of Austen’s irony.

as funny as [Austen's other novels], but that does not mean Austen has suddenly adopted a blandly humorless moral stance at the expense of any interest in comedy. On the contrary, the novel displays a considerable interest in comedy as a literary genre" ("A Subdued Gaiety" 2). Perkins rejects assertions made by Scheuerman and Spacks and accepts that Austen's writing does not exclude humor. For instance, both Mary and Fanny display an interest in riding Edmund's horse, a point Jillian Heydt-Stevenson argues "carries fleshly overtones," stating "both women become the punch lines to bawdy jokes that situate them libidinally in terms of riding" (140). Edmund tells Mary "every sort of exercise fatigues [Fanny] so soon, Miss Crawford, except riding" (119). This joke of Fanny and Mary riding Edmund's horse continues throughout the novel. For instance, as the horse Edmund gets for Fanny to ride "continues in name as well as fact, the property of Edmund, [the family] could tolerate its being for Fanny's use" (66). Likewise, Mary says that "no part of [the walk] fatigues me but getting off [Edmund's] horse" (95). Both women are poked fun at for their use and subsequent jealousies over Edmund and riding his horse.

The narrator takes over these jokes at several junctures, ensuring a solid connection with Mary's voice and a less than convincing one with Fanny's. For instance, it is the narrator who subversively says "[Fanny's] delight in Edmund's mare was far beyond any former pleasure of the sort; and the addition it was ever receiving in the consideration of that kindness from which her pleasure sprung, was beyond all her words to express" (66). Here the narrator begins to satirize Fanny's affinity for riding what belongs to Edmund in a voice similar to Mary's.

Hedyt-Stevenson further establishes Fanny as a joke by saying she “has ‘won’ because she has dissembled – she has performed the role patriarchal rules dictate women should play,” a sentiment also found in *White Teeth* (158). Fanny seems to take to heart Rushworth’s early advice of “Learn your part, and we will teach you all the rest” (166). She warns him, “It would be absolutely impossible for me. If I were to undertake it, I should only disappoint you,” but he assures her “You’ll do it very well,” “We do not expect perfection,” and “you will be a very proper, little old woman” (166). This seems to come to fruition by the novel’s end as Fanny, who abides by all moral codes of conduct and performs her “part” quite beautifully, is rewarded in her society, but becomes the immediate and obvious satirical butt of all the narrator’s jokes (the Price of a Fanny).

Moreover, Heydt-Stevenson points to Austen’s symbolism as further proof of her being read as conservative rather than being actually conservative, an important distinction to make when arguing for Austen’s use of satire. For instance, in *Mansfield Park* Austen’s use of an amber cross pendant means to signify Fanny’s sensual nature. The debate over which chain to use, Henry’s or Edmund’s, serves as a subtle reminder that only one man’s chain can perfectly fit Fanny’s cross. Heydt-Stevenson points to Fanny “burst[ing] forth” following the decision to wear Edmund’s chain over Henry’s as an example of the “aversion Fanny has to wearing ‘Henry’ around her ‘lovely throat’ and to having his gold thread through her amber cross; at the same time, the thought of Edmund’s necklace serving the same purpose electrifies her” (259, 148). In this example, Austen clearly uses satire to demonstrate Fanny’s covert sexual excitement by masking it as excitement for a mere material possession. She does this in other scenes, particularly

those dealing with the improvement of landscapes, as a subversive satirical way to look at nineteenth-century men's treatment of women and their views about the "improvement" of women, an important point in *Mansfield Park*. Heydt-Stevenson asserts this is Austen's way of arguing that men's views of improvement, of not only landscapes but women as well, serve to "fragment...the garden as well as society" (152).

Fanny's reward is examined in a comparison of Mansfield and Portsmouth. Scheuerman says that "Austen is not being ironic" when she says that Fanny is "in the most promising way of being starved, both mind and body" while at home (318, 413). Heydt-Stevenson, on the other hand, claims that Portsmouth and Mansfield Park are linked by an ironic sort of dirt, literal at Portsmouth and existing in Maria's adultery at Mansfield Park (153-54). Portsmouth is literally dirty with stained walls and a messy household; Mansfield is figuratively and ethically dirty because of Maria's decision to elope with a man who is not her husband. Maria's contaminating action forces Sir Thomas to send Maria away to "another country – remote and private" while Fanny's pureness of character inspires Sir Thomas to bring her home (461). In the face of what Maria has done, Sir Thomas believes Fanny to be "the daughter that he wanted" (467).

Peter Sabor traces Austen's satire back to her childhood copy of Oliver Goldsmith's *History of England* in which she wrote a number of satirical statements in the margins:

Recounting a naval battle between the Dutch and the English fleets, Goldsmith observes delicately that "the loss sustained by the two maritime powers was nearly equal; but the French suffered very little, not having entered in the heat of the engagement." Austen declares abruptly, "what cowards" (pp. 326-7). When the queen herself is accused by Titus Oates of being a Catholic, Goldsmith quotes, without commenting on, Charles's response: "I will not suffer an innocent women

to be abused.” Austen takes his side with a firm “that’s right” in the margin (p. 328). When Goldsmith describes John Hampden as “grandson to the great man of that name,” Austen responds “for great read vile” (p. 328). And when Goldsmith writes that Lord Howard, one of the conspirators against Charles II, “was taken concealed in a chimney,” Austen exclaims with relish, “how dirty he much have been” (p. 328). (221)

This satirical account of Goldsmith’s *History* points directly to *Mansfield Park*. Both Maria and Julia Bertram can quote facts and figures from Goldsmith’s *History*, but Fanny has never read it. Austen’s own version of the book sheds light on her lifelong satire of moral and class lines. This suggests that, although conduct and decorum are to be valued, they are not without criticism or reform. In the same way, Smith offers a satirical critique of multicultural London through the experiences of Irie.

Of Smith’s *White Teeth*, Michiko Kakutani of the *New York Times* claims:

*White Teeth* is not satire; Smith loves these people and makes us laugh with them more than at them. Their passion for belonging, while at the same time escaping the cultures their families are rooted in, could easily be reduced to ridicule or pathos. But here the conflicting impulses amount to a kind of civic virtue as these people pull together to remake England into a patchwork and pleasant land. (2000)

While Kakutani assumes satire must necessarily include ridicule of a novel’s characters, the subversive satire of Smith requires readers to sympathetically laugh at characters who are often silent themselves. For example, a number of Irie’s experiences force the reader to giggle, but in an empathetic way rather than a humorous one. When Irie has her hair straightened and it falls out, she must ironically buy the hair of “some poor oppressed Pakistani woman who needs the cash for her kids” (236). The hair of the “oppressed Pakistani woman” must then be woven into the remnants of Irie’s hair, and the reader laughs even though Irie does not see the humor. In other words, because Irie is not let in

on the joke, the reader is laughing at her rather than with her. However, it is satirical laughter of understanding and solidarity, a reaction to a subversive satire in which the reader recognizes some part of themselves exaggerated in Irie's lost locks. In this way, Kakutani is correct in saying there is no ridicule in reading the scene; rather Smith creates dramatic irony inspiring sympathy for Irie by placing her in situations which reflect and amplify the reader's own experiences. It is exactly this sort of readerly introspection inspired by Irie's experiences that make *White Teeth* satirical in nature, despite Kakutani's assertion that the novel is not satirical.

Smith's satire compares to Austen's in a variety of ways. For example, Austen's Fanny Price refuses to marry a wealthy man. Because a gender norm of Fanny's society dictates she should accept his proposal, be grateful, and assume responsibility for her own economic well-being, her refusal results in Sir Bertram, Fanny's uncle, berating her for being ungrateful and disrespectful. He sends her back to her parents in Portsmouth, setting the scene for an ironic and satirical comparison of class and standing, one that shows the two classes to be more similar than different. While Fanny feels guilty for her inability to marry a man whose character she finds repulsive, she stands her ground and refuses to play the part of grateful surrogate daughter if it means sacrificing her morals. Similarly, Irie learns to accept her body and her race despite gender norms which tell her she is too fat, too smart, and too black. This often results in satirical moments such as Irie's first encounter with KEVIN, the extremist Islamic group with an obvious acronym problem.

Although Fanny's refusal to marry the man of her uncle's choosing is deplorable to him, her guilt over the situation makes sense in view of marriages being performed around her. For instance, the Bertrams certainly do not have a loving relationship. Lady Bertram cares more for her pet pug than her family and humorously remarks "I hope [Fanny] will not tease my pug...I have but just got Julia to leave it alone" (41). Likewise, Maria's fiancé, Mr. Rushworth, is impotent and exceedingly dull.<sup>9</sup> Austen satirically points out his short-coming when Rushworth forgets a gate key and must return home to get it while his future bride sneaks through the ha-ha with Henry:

Go therefore they must to that knoll, and through that gate; but the gate was locked. Mr. Rushworth wished he had brought the key; he had been very near thinking whether he should not bring the key; he was determined he would never come with out the key again; but still this did not remove the present evil. They could not get through; and as Miss Bertram's inclination for so doing did by no means lessen, it ended in Mr Rushworth's declaring outright that he would go and fetch the key. (121-22)

Likewise, the morally bankrupt Henry seduces sisters Maria and Julia, attempts to make Fanny fall in love with him, and ultimately elopes with Maria, forcing her to divorce Mr. Rushworth. Even Fanny's own parents do not offer an example worth emulating; when Fanny returns home to them she sees how tasteless, unfeeling, and uneducated they truly are. Their interactions, though, do provide a sympathetic, ironic laugh from the reader as their awfulness is accentuated by Fanny's comparison to the Bertrams: "to have so little said or asked about herself – to have scarcely an inquiry made after Mansfield! It did pain her to have Mansfield forgotten; the friends who had so much – the dear, dear friends!" (384). These existing relationships of others provide for Fanny the only examples of

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<sup>9</sup> For a more complete reading of Rushworth's impotence, see Heydt-Stevenson, 149-50.

marriage. She subsequently romanticizes the idea of marriage, believing it a mistake to marry without love should she end up in similar situations or married to an amoral man.

In the same way, Irie's examples of performed marriage are satirized as she learns Clara's perfect white teeth, part of her attraction, are fake and that Clara married Archie because, at that time in her life, he was "the bloke in the joke: the last man on earth" (38). Clara seems to suffer even though she has white teeth and is both thin and beautiful. Likewise, Irie sees the Iqbals, Alsana and Samad, continually argue until Alsana decides "to stop speaking directly to her husband" (178). Finally, the Chalfens, the stereotypical English family of *White Teeth*, perform a marriage with its own set of flaws. Joyce calls herself a "staunch feminist" even though she marries Marcus because "it was always [her] aim to marry a man cleverer" (269). From these examples, Irie learns beauty, submissiveness, and "staunch" feminism are all gender norms for women. Because of these examples, Irie romanticizes marriage in the same way as Fanny. In both novels the clash between marriage as a commercial transaction and marrying for love is treated satirically by the authors. This results in the women of the novel suffering even as they perform their designated roles.

Another way in which subversive satire works in both *White Teeth* and *Mansfield Park* is in the depictions of home as a microcosm for England as a whole. For instance, Mary debates with Edmund about whether or not "the metropolis...is a pretty fair sample of rest" (117). Contrastingly, Edmund argues "Not...of the proportion of virtue to vice throughout the kingdom. We do not look in great cities for our best morality. It is not there that respectable people of any denomination can do most good" (117). These

comments suggest that Mansfield Park and its morality could be taken as a “fair sample” of all of England. Likewise, the Chalfen home works as an embodiment of England. For example, when Irie enters the Chalfen house “she felt an illicit thrill, like a Jew munching a sausage or a Hindu grabbing a Big Mac. She was crossing borders, sneaking into England; it felt like some terrible mutinous act, wearing somebody else’s uniform or somebody else’s skin” (273). Fanny feels this same sort of outsider mentality and she “crosses borders” in the same way Irie does, entering into a home representative of all the stereotypes of the country and the gentry at large.

Irie feels “There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land,” a sentiment Fanny feels within the walls of her own home (222). Similarly, Fanny does not exactly belong in her parents’ home as she only ever mentions missing her brother, William, and never either of her parents, a distinction of affection set up early in the novel when the narrator tells the reader “it was William whom she talked of most and wanted most to see...her constant companion and friend; her advocate with her mother (of whom he was the darling) in every distress. ‘William did not like she should come away’” (46). Fanny’s entire encounter with her family, while serving as “a pretty fair sample of the rest,” seems to blur the lines of class itself; Fanny, clearly belonging to her family, is turned off by their lack of manners and boisterous behavior. She misses Mansfield greatly and calls it her “home,” yet she does not quite belong there either; she is more of a servant, more of a companion, than an actual daughter, and it is not until Mr. Crawford’s true character is known that anyone seems to appreciate Fanny’s propriety (430).

From very early on, then, it is established that Fanny feels as though she is an outsider, even at her own parents', and needs her brother to be "her advocate...in every distress" with her mother. Later, the reader sees Sir Thomas receive Fanny after he has been away more affectionately than her own father. Sir Thomas "came forward with a kindness which astonished and penetrated [Fanny], calling her his dear Fanny, kissing her affectionately, and observing with decided pleasure how much she was grown!" (195). Her own father's reception toward her is decidedly colder as he "received his daughter; and, having given her a cordial hug, and observed that she was grown into a woman, and he supposed would be wanting a husband soon, seemed very much inclined to forget her again" (382). Both Irie and Fanny navigate this "stranger land," always feeling slightly outside while being within, and always with the knowledge that their class situations keep them separated from that England, idealized by both women, of which they so desperately want to be a part.

Irie's encounter with Marcus acts as foil to her own father, Archie, similar to Fanny's interactions with her father and her uncle. Marcus shows a keen interest in Irie as Joyce's interest in her wanes with "the more progress Irie made – whether in her studies, her attempts to make polite conversation, or her studied imitation of Chalfenism" and it becomes "Marcus who seemed to keep an eye for her. It was Marcus who had helped her...as her brain changed from something mushy to something hard and defined" (278). Meanwhile, her own father plays almost no role in her life and very few conversations between the two are recorded. Ultimately, though, Marcus employs Irie in a similar fashion as Sir Thomas does Fanny, making her into more of a servant and a perfect filer

than anything else. Marcus offers Irie “fifteen quid a week if you come round twice a week and get a grip on this filing disaster,” an offer she accepts (284). Later, of course, even Marcus loses interest as he develops a writing relationship with Magid Iqbal and Irie files the letters which leads to “An unpleasant mixture of jealousy and animosity,” a feeling which subsides and “Irie wasn’t offended. She had the sniffles for a while, but they soon passed” (303, 305). Although Irie rarely boldly cries as Fanny does when defying Sir Thomas, she feels the slights of a once-doting father turned apathetic and she continues to feel outside of the two homes even while she is in both.

In a similar fashion Fanny is continually aware that she is outside of her home. Moreover, Mrs. Norris never fails to remind her that she is “very ungrateful indeed, considering who and what she is” (166). In these ways both Irie and Fanny are outside their given worlds while still being a part of them. They are constantly Othered, constantly kept at a distance, constantly forced to acknowledge how separate they are based on perceived class differences. This leads both characters to step cautiously, to perform in certain ways so as to be accepted. For instance, Fanny considers going against her better judgment and acting in *Lovers’ Vows* even though she knows her uncle will disapprove. Likewise, it is Millat’s approval Irie seeks when she attempts to straighten her hair. In these ways both women feel the need to belong and be accepted even if it means causing themselves great physical or emotional pain, points accentuated by the authors’ use of subversive satire to create sympathy and understanding for their female characters.

The difference in the novels' satirical relationships, though, is the way in which Irie and Fanny are rewarded in their given worlds. Fanny is rewarded only because her performance of female morality, essential to the society satirized by Austen, is flawless. Although Fanny stands up to Sir Thomas, she ultimately becomes his ideal daughter because she does not fall victim to life's temptations in the same way as Maria. Meanwhile, Irie is rewarded because of her refusal to perform; she does not play the part assigned her – she is not thin, her hair is not straight, and she gets pregnant outside of marriage without being able to identify the father with certainty. However, Irie does locate her authentic self as she balances between the person she is expected to be and the person she actually is. Fanny, on the other hand, although at first seeming to stand up to gender norms, finally does play the part. In a way, even though she does not necessarily end up with her dream man as Fanny does with Edmund, Irie finishes her novel with a stronger sense of self.

## CHAPTER THREE: THE PERFORMANCE AND PERFORMATIVITY OF IRIE

### JONES

“Nothing I know about perception tells me how my love of the sycamore caused, or contributed to, my failure to love the palm.”

- Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty And Being Just* (1999)

The performance/performativity dichotomy under which Irie Jones struggles to find her authentic self is situated within a long history of feminine roots. This line begins with Irie's grandmother, Hortense Bowden, continues with her mother, Clara Bowden Jones, and finally traces through Irie's own life. The book begins with Clara, ends with Hortense, and has Irie's chapters in between, “stuck between a rock and a hard place, like Ireland, like Israel, like India” (351). However, for the purposes of an investigation into Irie's search, it makes sense to begin where the line of Bowden women begins and where Irie eventually finds herself: at the doorstep of Hortense Bowden.

The Hortense Bowden of 1972 is a devoted Jehovah's Witness who has recently moved to England from Jamaica with her daughter after her husband has already been in the country for fourteen years. “Steam was something Hortense had in abundance” and, upon her arrival to the country, she gives her husband “the tongue-lashing of his life” (26). Hortense is not a woman to be crossed, but rather a woman who will take grief from

no man, and who manages to force her husband to retreat to his television so that she might assume her role as family matriarch. Hortense does not approve of her daughter's first love interest, Ryan Topps, and says "Some people...have done such a hol' heap of singing, it *late* for dem to be making eyes at Jehovah" in an attempt to discourage her daughter's attachment to the young man with the motorcycle (26). This display of fervent faith, this belief in her rightness, compares starkly with Irie's own "belief in her...in her *wrongness*," an emotion that "had subdued" Irie and demonstrates the battle between self and society in which Irie struggles (224).

Hortense signifies the strong woman of the novel, the woman who stands firmly in her beliefs. She signifies more of an idea than a person to the point that she is described physically only as an afterthought. In fact, Hortense is only described physically when she meets Irie in 1994, a telling moment in which the effects of a society saturated in the performance of the physical comes out: "It was Irie Jones all right. Six year older than the last time they met. Taller, wider, with breasts and no hair, and slippers just visible underneath a long duffle coat. And it was Hortense Bowden. Six years older, shorter, wider, with breasts on her belly and no hair...and slippers just visible underneath a long, quilted baby-pink housecoat" (315). In this moment, Hortense is reduced to her body, but only because Irie is present. Irie, saturated with Western stereotypes about women, sees herself and her grandmother as "the target audience" for weight loss and complete bodily overhaul, the "*little Caribbean flesh for a little English change*" (221-22). Hortense becomes corporeal in this interaction with Irie, she becomes something more than a grandmother with a strong will. Despite this reduction of Hortense to her

physicality, even Irie ultimately recognizes and respects her grandmother's sense of self even though her mother fears that Hortense will fill "her head with a whole load of nonsense" (326). In fact, in Irie's chapters, Smith uses free indirect discourse<sup>10</sup> to describe exactly what sort of effect being with Hortense has on Irie who "was intrigued by the Bowden household" and thought:

This was living in the eternal instant, ceaselessly teetering on the precipice of total annihilation; there are people who take a great deal of drugs simply to experience something comparable to eighty-four-year-old Hortense Bowden's day-to-day existence. So you've seen dwarfs rip open their bellies and show you their insides, you've been a television switched off without warning, you've experienced the whole world as one Krishna consciousness, free of individual ego, floating through the infinite cosmos of the soul? Big fucking deal. That's all bullshit next to St. John's trip when Christ laid the twenty-two chapters of Revelation on him. It must have been a hell of a shock for the apostle (after that thorough spin-job, the New Testament, all those sweet words and sublime sentiments) to discover Old Testament vengeance lurking round the corner after all. *As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten.* That must have been some eye-opener. (327)

In this section, Smith adopts Irie's voice roughly mid-way through and expounds upon something truly ironic; Irie has been so consumed in the "dwarfs rip[ping] open their bellies" and "floating through the infinite cosmos of the soul," destroying her hair and hating her body that she has ignored the relativity of her concerns when compared with "St. John's trip when Christ laid the twenty-two chapter of Revelation on him." Hortense, the beginning of Irie's roots, full of a religion rejected by Clara, ultimately becomes Irie's

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<sup>10</sup> *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms* defines free indirect discourse as "discourse that is represented, rather than directly related, to the reader" (177). In this example the third-person narrator adopts some of Irie's language ("dwarfs rip open their bellies," "a hell of a shock," "that thorough spin-job") to show how Irie absorbs Hortense's home and what it means to her. The narrator does not tell the reader what living with Hortense means in generic terms but rather in terms specific to Irie. Smith uses free indirect discourse in a number of other narratives throughout *White Teeth*.

saving grace in that she grounds Irie, giving her a sense of self that is not only her birthright but also a perfectly acceptable way of being.

Hortense's religion has told her the end of the world will come; in fact, it has done so twice and failed to be true twice. Yet, despite the world telling her otherwise and the end of the world failing to come twice, despite the world's gender stereotypes and norms, Hortense ardently clings to her faith, not in desperation, but in complete earnest, and refuses to play the part of anyone other than herself. Even though Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe women can be one of the chosen few who make it to heaven, Hortense tells Irie "I still hope to be one of de Anointed evan if I am a woman" (338). Hortense knows what is expected of her and what her gender role should be as told to her by English culture. However, she says, "Dat's always bin de problem wid de women in dis family. Somebody always tryin' to heducate them about something, pretendin' it all about learnin' when it all about a battle of de wills...My mudder was strong-willed deep down, and I'm de same. Lord knows, your mudder was de same. And you de same" (338). By explaining to Irie how English education has objectified Bowden women, but never been able to fully subjugate Bowden women, Hortense offers Irie hope. Irie can move forward in the belief that she will find her authentic self and have the strength to maintain it in the face of adversity.

Hortense's demonstration of performativity stands in stark contrast with Clara's gender performance, which accepts English gender roles and acts them out to laughable extremes. For example, Clara as a young girl has her teeth knocked out in a motorcycle accident. At the time, she still believes in her mother's faith and says "I tink to myself:

come de end of de world, d'Lord won't mind if I have no toofs" (20). At nineteen, Clara meets Englishman Archie Jones, marries him, and at their wedding wears "a long brown woolen Jeff Banks dress and a perfect set of false teeth" (42). At this point, it becomes clear that Clara has abandoned her roots and Hortense's belief that Bowden women are "strong-willed" and that "somebody always tryin' to heducate" them. In contrast, Clara embraces English education and strives to be beautiful with perfect, straight white teeth. Clara wants to perform her gender role as completely as possible.

This acceptance of performance requirements is accentuated by the first description of Clara, one that reduces her to her body:

Clara Bowden was beautiful in all senses except, maybe, by virtue of being black. The classical. Clara Bowden was magnificently tall, black as ebony and crushed sable, with hair braided in a horseshoe that pointed up when she felt lucky, down when she didn't. At the moment it was up. It is hard to know whether that was significant.

She needed no bra – she was independent, even of gravity – she wore a red halter that stopped below her bust, underneath which she wore her belly button (beautifully) and underneath that some very tight yellow jeans. At the end of it all were some strappy heels of light-brown suede, and she came striding down the stairs on them like some kind of vision, or, as it to seemed to Archie when he turned to observe her, like a reared-up thoroughbred. (19)

This physically reductive description of Clara comes in Archie's chapters to show how Archie sees Clara as a perfectly bred "thoroughbred," "independent, even of gravity." Clara becomes her body devoid of her authentic self, a body made more perfect by the addition of false teeth, a body that performs the role expected of her by both her husband and society as a whole. This appeasement of English expectations stands in stark contrast with Hortense's performativity and her "baby-pink housecoat." However, the English expectations are a strict set of rules under which Irie finds herself in London.

Irie's parents are married when Clara is nineteen and Archie is forty-seven. After finding out Clara is pregnant, Archie convinces himself his child will be born with blue eyes as he expects "the genes mix up, and blue eyes! Miracle of nature!" (59). This sets Irie up for gender performance failure before her birth. In other words, because Irie is expected to be born with blue eyes, because this is a gender norm imposed upon her by her father, she is destined to fail as a woman because of the genetic disposition for her to be born with brown eyes. Evidence of further failure of her gender role includes Irie's "big tits, big butt, big hips, big thighs, big teeth" (221). Instead of being as thin as Clara, Irie's body takes a different, plum-like shape, resulting in the ridicule of others.

Irie finds herself (and others) reflected in England in Hegelian reciprocal recognitions.<sup>11</sup> This further sets up the performance criteria against which she is evaluated in her performativity. For example, the most significant and satirical portion of Irie's chapters, the straightening and subsequent losing of her hair, is book-ended by references to England as a mirror in which Irie finds no reflection. The first of these reciprocal recognitions is a reflection of herself against what she considers to be the ideal she is supposed to perfectly perform: "There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a strange land" (222). This mirror shows to Irie how she is supposed to perform, but offers her no contemporaries within its glass.

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<sup>11</sup> See Judith Butler's "Desire, Rhetoric, and Recognition in Hegel." She writes, "As a movement outside of itself, desire becomes an act of willful Self-estrangement even as its overriding project is to establish a more inclusive self. Thus, the effort to overcome the Other is simultaneously an effort to overcome self-consciousness' own otherness to itself" and talks about the self-consciousness' need to destroy the object of desire in order to overcome it (76). In relation to Irie this means the desire to be thin with straight hair must be destroyed (pulled out) in order for Irie to no longer want it.

This idea of being both within and without pushes Irie to want to change, to want to be accepted (or acceptable) by those around her. She has recurring dreams about a weight-loss ad for which she knows she is “the target audience” and accepts the price of a “*little Carribean flesh for a little English change*” (222). She adopts “[t]he mantra of the makeover junkie, sucking it in, letting it out; unwilling to settle for genetic fate; waiting instead for her transformation from Jamaican hourglass heavy with the sand that gather round Dunns Rive Ralls, to *English Rose* – oh, you know her – she’s a slender, delicate thing not made for the hot sun, a surfboard rippled by the wave” (222). Here, Irie understands what it will mean for her performance to be socially accepted in a Western world obsessed with thinness, whiteness, and delicacy.

In true form of a Western woman, Irie begins to constantly evaluate her body, becoming aware of its shortcomings and failings, and trying to change each curve so that it becomes more suitable for England and more pleasing to Millat Iqbal, her crush. She takes special notice of parts of her body commented on by others; in this case, she focuses on her hair after a classmate passes her a note that reads, “By William Shakespeare: ODE TO LETITIA AND ALL MY KINKY-HAIRED BIG-ASS BITCHEZ” (227). Irie takes this jab at her appearance to heart and goes to a salon to get “[s]traight straight long black sleek flickable tossable shakable touchable finger-through-able wind-blowable hair. With bangs” (228). When Irie explains to the stylist that she is “Half Jamaican. Half English,” the stylist remarks, “Half-*caste*” (228). This comment, directed at Irie’s hair, speaks also to the larger issue in London of a multiculturalism that

reportedly does not discriminate. Here, however, it becomes clear that skin color still factors heavily into English culture, a factor further illuminated later in the novel.

The salon to which Irie goes, P.K.'s Afro Hair: Design and Management, is a place where "the impossible desire for straightness and 'movement' fought daily with the stubborn determination of the curved African follicle; here ammonia, hot combs, clips, pins, and simple fire had all been enlisted in the war and were doing their damndest to beat each curly hair into submission" (229). The ammonia the stylist uses on Irie's hair burns, causing the stylist to tell her "Life hurts...beauty hurts," a statement suggesting that women, particularly non-white women, suffer a double pain of being alive (231). Unfortunately for Irie, her hair reacts to the ammonia and falls out, forcing her to buy hair to replace that which she has lost. Her lesbian friend, Neena, mocks Irie's attempt to win over Millat by changing her appearance. Neena tells Irie, "that's not *your* hair, for fuck's sake, that's some poor oppressed Pakistani woman who needs the cash for her kids" and "what the fuck do you look like!...what was the grand plan? The Negro Meryl Streep?" (235-36). Neena tries to explain to Irie that her body is not as important as her mind, as her history, as all the indefinable bits of Irie not told in the shape of her body:

'Haven't you even wondered why [Millat] hasn't snogged you?'  
 'Because I'm ugly. And fat. With an Afro.'  
 'No, fuckface, because you're all he's *got*. He *needs* you. You two have history. You really *know* him. Look how confused he is. One day he's Allah this, Allah that. Next minute it's big busty blondes, Russian gymnasts, and a smoke of sinsemilla. He doesn't know his arse from his elbow Just like his father. He doesn't know who he is. But *you* know him, at least a little, you've known all the sides of him. And he needs that. You're different.' (237)

Neena, through her colorful language, satirically explains to Irie the importance of things which are immeasurable, things which belong to her regardless of her appearance, a

lesson Irie is not ready to learn. In words later echoed by Hortense, Neena says, “you’ve been taught all kinds of shit. You’ve got to reeducate yourself. Realize your value, stop the slavish devotion, and get a life, Irie” (237).

This entire episode of Irie discovering the problem of her “KINKY” hair and its falling out is punctuated by a second reflection. Again in the form of a mirror, this time the reflection comes as Irie accepts herself the way she is, an important step, but one which she herself does not recognize. As Irie stands in front of a mirror for the second time, she finds herself staring back. Irie stands in front of England, “facing her own reflection, busy tearing out somebody else’s hair with her bare hands,” realizing for the first time how her performance has failed her (241).<sup>12</sup> This moment of self recognition during which Irie recognizes a part of herself in the other that is England represents a significant shift for Irie’s search for authenticity. For the remainder of the novel, Irie keeps her short hair, never bothering to replace the hair that fell out or the hair that she pulled out.

This gender performance failure results in the start of Irie’s performativity that is realized in her interactions with two boys from her school. Josh Chalfen, a young man with whom Irie comes to spend a great deal of time, and Hifan, one of Millat’s friends, both comment on Irie’s short hair. Josh tells her “I like short hair on girls. I like that androgyny thing” (247). Hifan, a member of the extremist group KEVIN, says, “it is

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<sup>12</sup>This follows the Hegelian model in that the “subject states or enacts or otherwise externalizes its conviction that it is absolutely other to this or that aspect of the world, the very process of externalizing that conviction works to undermine it, and, eventually, proves that the opposite is true” (“Desire, Rhetoric, and Recognition” 59-60).

refreshing to see a woman who dresses demurely, wearing her hair short. KEVIN believes a woman should not feel the need to pander to the erotic fantasies of Western sexuality” (246). In both instances, Irie pays no attention, not particularly concerned with the opinions of either boy. Although she still cares what Millat thinks of her, it is clear Irie has stopped caring what everyone thinks of her. Indeed, the reflective experience of seeing herself in the mirror, of finding her own reflection as her contemporary, even if it is her only contemporary, seems to have released Irie from some of England’s expected gender norms. This is also Irie’s first encounter with Josh Chalfen who develops a crush on her and thinks:

he had often observed her strange hair and broad shoulders and thought he might have half a chance there. She was clever and not entirely unpretty, and there was something in her that had a strongly nerdy flavor about it, despite that boy she spent her time with. The Indian one. She hung around him, but she wasn’t *like* him. Joshua Chalfen strongly suspected her being *one of his own*. There was something innate in her that he felt he could bring out. She was a nerd-immigrant who had fled the land of the fat, facially challenged, and disarmingly clever. She had scaled the mountains of Caldor, swum the River Leviathrax, and braved the chasm Duilwen, in the mad dash away from her true countrymen to another land. (246-47)

For the most part, Irie ignores Josh, obsessing about Millat and his brother, Magid, two twin boys from her youth for whom she carries a torch. However, the way Josh classifies Irie as “nerd-immigrant” and Millat (whom he refuses to dignify with a name) as “that boy” demonstrates the racial subjugation faced by Irie which her performativity can challenge. Her “broad shoulders” and “strange hair” are already beginning to undo her own preconceived ideas of how she should behave, and the performativity of her actions are, in this case, acting to give her some power. Granted, this power is based on Josh’s perception that she is “disarmingly clever” having “fled the land of the fat,” outside of

England while still a part of it, but it shows the possibilities of a dual existence outside of gender and race norms.

This initial interaction with Josh Chalfen begins Irie's total saturation into Chalfenism. After they are caught smoking marijuana at school, both Irie and Millat are taken to the principal's office where they are told the school needs to bring "children of disadvantaged or minority backgrounds...into contact with kids who might have something to offer them," and both children are sent to the Chalfens' each afternoon after school (256).

The Chalfen father, Marcus, is a geneticist who has created FutureMouse, a mouse born in a lab that is programmed to live for seven years, develop cancer, and die, all while on display in a London museum. FutureMouse (whose life is laid out and whose movements are often anthropomorphic) serves as the satirical double for many of the other characters in the novel. Marcus' wife, Joyce, is a horticulturalist who believes "cross-pollination produces more varied offspring, what are better able to cope with a changed environment" (258). Joyce introduces interesting notions of gender performance, including her idea that feminism and patriarchy can go hand-in-hand. She says, "it was always my aim to marry a man cleverer than me...[a]nd I'm a staunch feminist...but I knew it would be liberating" (269). This sentiment shows Irie that proper gender performance assumes a feminist sense of self that can only be obtained through marriage to a man who is in some way superior. Both of these characters satirically represent equations for the middle class status quo – the idea that a woman must declare herself a feminist while maintaining the patriarchy. Although both parents initially take an interest

in Irie, ultimately Marcus reduces her to a “secretary” in his office and establishes a relationship through letters with Magid-in-Bangladesh, while Joyce becomes infatuated with Millat and notices Irie only in passing (352).

For Irie, “the Chalfens were more English than the English. When Irie stepped over the threshold of the Chalfen house, she felt an illicit thrill, like a Jew munching a sausage or a Hindu grabbing a Big Mac. She was crossing borders, sneaking into England; it felt like some terrible mutinous act, wearing somebody else’s uniform or somebody else’s skin” (273). The Chalfens act as a stereotypical white, English family, and she finds herself often Othered and subjugated in their home despite her apparent love of them. Here, Irie demonstrates, not only her need to belong and perform according to that need, but also the ways in which her performance, even if flawless, can still not produce acceptance.

Much of the subjugation of Irie occurs in ways which are not verbalized, but nonetheless felt. For instance, Marcus looks up at Irie while kneeling on the floor and observes her as “a mountain range from that angle; a soft and pillowy version of the Andes” (283). In this way, Irie is broken down into her constituent bodily parts<sup>13</sup> based on her gender and race and valued as nothing more than these. Her body is the visual representation of all the ways in which she does not belong in England, the ways in which her performance has failed her and further reduced her.

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<sup>13</sup> See Sneja Gunew’s “Postcolonialism and Multiculturalism: Between Race and Ethnicity.”

Sometimes, though, verbalized gender or racial subjugation, while heard by Irie, is not about her. For instance, Oscar, Joyce and Marcus' son, calls Millat "Millat the Monkey"; Marcus asks Millat if he is upset because he "Couldn't get in a girl's pants? Girl wouldn't get in your pants? Girls not wearing pants? Out of interest, what kind of pants...?"; Millat calls Samad "a cunt"; Marcus calls Neena and her girlfriend "dykes" and Joyce asks them "Do you use each other's breasts as pillows?...white sleeps on brown, or, as one might expect, brown sleeps on white?" (274, 275, 277, 289, 290). All of these statements imply that sex and body are connected, but also that gender, particularly the classification of woman, is somehow tied to materialism. This materialism reflects itself throughout Irie's chapters; Marcus' use of "pants" points back to the note Irie received in class about "BIG-ASSED BITCHEZ," and Joyce's use of "breasts as pillows" reiterates Marcus' visualisation of Irie as "a soft and pillowy version of the Andes."

Women of color are further reduced into basic sexual beings, as with Joyce's breast question and Marcus' statement, "I can't help thinking...that a Chalfen man and an Iqbal woman would be a hell of a mix...You'd give us sex and we'd give you sensibility or something," an Austian allusion (290). Each Chalfen verbalizes their racism, linking minorities to women, whiteness to men, separating sex and intelligence respectively, while simultaneously upholding English patriarchal culture. From this interaction, Irie learns two things about performing Englishness; first, name-calling is a necessary part of that performance, particularly if you are male; second, no amount of performance will ever be good enough.

This point is accentuated when an unsuspecting Irie steps on her mother's false teeth and realizes Clara performs gender norms and lies about it: "Irie had already put two and two together. The midnight voice. The perfect daytime straightness and whiteness," satirically showing how the ideal gender norms are never fully recognized and that even Clara, as beautiful as she is, must perform her gender according to these norms and can never be perfect enough (313). Irie resigns herself to the performance needs of England, but, instead of continuing to conform to them as her mother does, begins to rebel against them, a process that cements itself during the slipper-footed visit to her estranged grandmother. In this way, then, the Chalfen family, in their feigned multiculturalism, represents the patriarch of Irie's present, while Hortense, in her bath slippers, is a return to the matriarch of Irie's roots.

Irie's comparison of Clara to Hortense seals this understanding. Irie sees her grandmother in her mother's face, "those majestic cheekbones, those feline eyes" and death in her grandmother's, "as Irie had never seen it before. The waiting and the fear and the blessed relief" (315-16). As previously explained, Clara and Hortense differ a great deal. Here, however, Irie begins to see the strength in her family, although it will be a number of pages before she is able to act upon her inherent strength. She sees Hortense as strong but tired, welcoming death. She sees Clara as a "majestic" beauty, one that is not false or white, but that is rooted in a long history of Bowden women. Every moment of Irie's search for authentic self that occurs after this comparison shows the development of Irie's choice and freedom of being, culminating in her performativity as a response to

society's gender norms regarding her performance. Irie's performativity then begins to work toward her advantage in the search of her authentic self.

Her name is one of the more interesting ways in which Irie reacts to gender norms as the battle between her roots and her society rages on, a battle accentuated by the differences in opinions and actions of her mother and grandmother. Clara says, "I like *Irie*. It patois Means everyting *OK, peaceful, you know?*", while her grandmother says, "*No problem. Dat's what her name mean in patois: Irie, no problem. Now, what kind of a name is dat?*" (64, 326). This difference, so distinct between the first and second generations, becomes what Irie finally strives for: to be okay. Although initially this okayness takes form in changing her body for the sake of English gender and race norms, it finally means allowing the influence of both her roots and England to mold her. This is done in a very performative way; at the end of the novel, rather than being acted on, she chooses the parts of her roots and the parts of England which suit her and makes them her own, even if they conflict. For instance, Irie expresses this feeling of being something outside of the country, of oppression (which is ill-suited to her authenticity<sup>14</sup>) in other ways outside of the Chalfen home. She fantasizes about Jamaica as "a place where things simply *were*" (332) and thinks that birthplaces as "the land of accidents sound[s] like

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<sup>14</sup> See Dorothy Leland's "Conflictual Culture and Authenticity: Deepening Heidegger's Account of the Social." Leland says, "a failure to note that the social world in which we actually live is structured by relations of dominance and subordination may oversimplify and distort the complexities involved in authentic living for members of subordinate groups." (122). She admits she does not answer the question, "What is authenticity to a person experiencing oppression?", but does acknowledge that this process makes the search for authenticity more difficult for an oppressed person (123). For Irie, then, oppression means a confused, difficult search, one that is not impossible, but that is different.

*paradise*” (337). In this way she adopts and idolizes her roots, wanting to return to them in the search for self.

Irie also adopts pieces of England for herself that are separate from her roots, choosing to define her authentic self in a myriad of ways that do not always align perfectly with her heritage. For instance, she begins smoking, something neither of her parents do, but all of her classmates do (335). Additionally, as Irie struggles to figure out whether Millat or Magid is the father of her child, she realizes roots, as tangible as they are, are not everything. Irie also exerts herself against her mother’s control, deciding to take a year off before becoming the first in her family to go to college. This decision “which led to three months of open warfare between her and Clara” is a price Irie is willing to pay in service of her authentic self (312).

Irie borrows from Millat’s example as well: Millat “infuriated Samad beyond all reason. No, that’s wrong. There was a reason. Millat was neither one thing nor the other, this or that, Muslim or Christian, Englishman or Bengali; he lived for the in between, he lived up to his middle name, *Zulfikar*, the clashing of two swords” (291). From observing Millat, Irie realizes she does not have to live up to all of her parents’ ideals, nor all her society’s ideals. Irie, at seventeen and fully aware that “[n]ever again in your life do you possess the capacity for such total personality overhaul,” reinvents herself (334). “She was like her mother, like her father – a great reinventor of herself, a great make-doer,” a young woman conscious of where she comes from and where she is, in complete control of where she’s going (305). This is the essence of the performance/performativity struggle, the search for authenticity which leads to a constant restructuring of self in

terms of the surrounding world, its reactions to self, and in what ways those reactions are allowed to affect self.<sup>15</sup> For instance, Irie spends a great deal of time responding to her environment's reaction to her body, namely that it was too big, too black, too loud. Irie comes to care less and less about how her body is viewed by others, leading to a further restructuring of herself in search of authenticity.

Although initially Irie is overcome with "this belief in her ugliness, in her *wrongness*," the end of the novel shows a different Irie, an Irie who demonstrates gender and race performativity to her advantage (224). At the expense of always being socially accepted based on her gender performance, Irie's behavior can be understood in terms of performativity. In this way, Irie demonstrates her inherent *okayness*, as she refuses to accept the societal binary norm of wrong and right, being and not being, accepted as the Other. For instance, finally tired of Joyce's constant know-it-all attitude, tired of not living up to Joyce's high expectations, Irie tells her "you don't *know* anything about those people. Why don't you worry about *that* for a while, and keep the *fuck* out of everybody else's business" (359).

Additionally, Irie allows the rage of her life, a rage familiar to Hortense, to act out. At the same time, Irie accepts the inherent not knowing that sometimes occurs as the

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<sup>15</sup> See Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in which she says "gender norms (ideal dimorphism, heterosexual complementarity of bodies, ideals and rule of proper and improper masculinity and femininity, many of which are underwritten by racial codes of purity and taboos against miscegenation) establish what will and will not be intelligibly human, what will and will not be considered to be 'real'" and that "those who are deemed 'unreal' nevertheless lay hold of the real, a laying hold that happens in concert, and a vital instability is produced by that performative surprise" (101, 103). In this way, then, search for authentic self depends in part on a performative act, particularly if "gender norms" do not consider the subject searching for authenticity to be "intelligibly human."

consequence of decisions. She has sex with Millat, who does not love her, and then determines to “make Magid the second son for once...She grabbed him, kissed him, and made love to him, angrily and furiously, without conversation or affection” (382).

Naturally, Irie becomes pregnant without being able to know which of the twins is the father. She decides to choose the one she wants, “to tell one of them and not the other,” to decide for herself who the father of her unborn child will be (426-27). Smith ends the novel satirically, with several possible endings in mind including Irie with Josh and her child unburdened by the lack of knowledge of its father, Irie, Josh, and Hortense “sitting by the Caribbean sea,” and “Irie’s fatherless little girl writ[ing] affectionate postcards to *Bad Uncle Millat* and *Good Uncle Magid*,” thus reminding the reader that “to tell these tales and others like them would be to speed the myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect” (448).

The interactions between Irie and her mother and grandmother as well as the struggles between the two older women factor heavily into Irie’s search for authentic self and her performativity. For instance, Clara and Hortense differ in their opinions of the meaning of Irie’s name. Clara seems to want Irie to be happy with who she is, but Hortense seems to believe giving a child a word for a name is absurd (neither Clara nor Hortense is a patois word). Hortense recognizes that naming Irie “*peaceful*” does not necessarily mean that she will be, or that she should be. Rather, Hortense believes in the struggle of life as she herself was born on the night of an earthquake; human existence requires a certain degree of shifting which Hortense expects and which Irie understands after spending time with her grandmother, an understanding Clara never seems to grasp.

Likewise, Irie comes to respect the strength of Bowden women, a strength she finally starts to emulate at the end of the novel. At the same time, though, she continues to seek to be “OK,” but worries more about being okay with herself than being okay to those around her. She takes Hortense’s and Neena’s advice to reject “all kinds of shit” that “somebody always tryin’ to heducate them about.” Instead, Irie begins to “realize [her] value, stop the slavish devotion, and get a life.”

## CONCLUSION

“Look: wear your black some days, and your purple others. There is no other rule besides pulling it off.”

- Zadie Smith in the *Everyday Writer*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed. (2009)

Irie Jones' characterization in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* offers a literary example of how performativity can work in conjunction with the search for the authentic self. Judith Butler's theory of performativity can be applied to Smith's character Irie Jones, a young, second-generation immigrant struggling to identify herself in a multicultural London. Irie, confused by how her roots fit into her identity, attempts to perform expected gender norms with disastrous outcomes. After attempting to make her hair “straight” and “flickable,” Irie realizes the beauty, majesty, and possibility of her homeland, Jamaica. She adopts certain philosophical outlooks and character traits from her grandmother including self-confidence, determination, and a rejection of some of society's gender norms. At the same time, Irie incorporates some of her society's gender norms into a collaborative performative. This performative of Irie's, acted out on her own terms, includes smoking cigarettes, getting pregnant but not knowing the actual father of

her child, and recognizing that performing gender norms often fails as is the case with her mother's perfect, yet false, white teeth.

It seems Irie, far from merely rebelling against her parents, wants the freedom to make choices for herself. More than that, Irie, hardly the "staunch" feminist Joyce claims to be, wants to "find whoever had *damaged* [Millat] like this, damaged him so terribly; she wanted to find whoever had made him *unable to love her*" (381). Finally, toward the end of the novel Irie realizes how "OK" she is and stops blaming herself for Millat not wanting to be with her. Irie knows Millat does not love her and she is "sure there must be somebody she could blame for that...What was the root cause of Millat's feelings of inadequacy? Magid. He had been born second because of Magid. He was the lesser son because of Magid" (382). Rather than blaming herself, Irie looks for the "root cause of Millat's feelings of inadequacy." By now, she has learned that the interpretation of roots can greatly determine the present situation of a person's life. Because she understands this while Millat does not, Irie feels it necessary to save him, to make him the first son. To do this, she has sex with Magid after having sex with Millat, giving her the final option of choosing the father while simultaneously making Magid "the lesser son."

Initially, Irie, "weeping and pacing and rolling it over and over in her mind," finally realizes the freedom of sleeping with twin boys has afforded her (427). "Because whichever brother it was, it was the other one too," Irie realizes the power she has over the situation (426). "She would tell one of them and not the other; she would decide which," enacting her right to choose her own future and her child's roots (426). Because

the roots are the same (as the boys are identical twins), Irie has the freedom to interpret them as she chooses.

Smith's novel operates within a long-standing literary tradition of British feminist writing. Smith cites Jane Austen as a predecessor of the contemporary women's novel, a woman who had to "hide [her work] under a piece of blotting paper." Austen's own work can be understood within the framework of performance and performativity, showcasing the use of subversive satire as one genre for feminist writing. The works of the two authors, although seemingly different at first glance, resemble each other in surprising ways. Not only do both authors explore a young woman's discovery of self, but they do so for young women who are considered second-rate in their respective societies. Just as Irie Jones deals with class limitations imposed by multicultural society, so, too, Fanny Price deals with class and the expectations placed on her as a woman who should be grateful.

The comparison between Smith and Austen suggests the feminist writing in which Smith participates is not new. Subversive satire appears in Austen's work as well as Smith's, showing the literary roots influencing Smith's work. Smith claims "women are at the beginning of the novel and the end of it," showing how the line of women writers has evolved (where Austen is near the beginning and Smith is near the end). Further, despite Smith's own assertion that role models are "a crock and something which limit you. They don't set you free," she clearly admires and aspires to reclaim the novel as a space for and by women. Therefore, her own work operates as a sort of literary

performative, a celebrated and critically-acclaimed book written in a club with “so many boys” (O’Grady 108).

Moreover, Smith experienced a confrontation with gender norms and performance requirements during the publication and marketing of her novel. Katarzyna Jakubiak points out that “marketing industries’ need to control the text of *White Teeth* resulted also in media attempts to regulate the authorial persona of Zadie Smith” (211). Jakubiak argues “What is predominantly lacking from the marketing strategies designed for *White Teeth* is a clear invitation to reflect on the ironic dimensions of the novel and on the ways in which the novel’s disembodied world refers to material relations hidden behind simulated images” (211). This sets up the problem of the novel. Performance results in a “disembodied world” creating images that are “simulated” rather than authentic. The “ironic dimensions” of *White Teeth* are forgotten in marketing strategies that try “to regulate the authorial persona of Zadie Smith.”

For example, many reviews mention the money Smith received as a signing bonus for *White Teeth*. The reviewers call her “an amazing success story of a working-class Jamaican immigrant’s daughter” (211). Jakubiak cites several such reviews; Simon Hattenstone of *The Guardian* calls Smith “the perfect demographic: young, attractive, black, female” while *The Los Angeles Times*’ Lynell George says Smith is “as prickly as a blooming succulent – if you want to inspect the flower close up do so with trepidation” (211-12). However, Smith made the decision to sell *White Teeth* film rights to BBC “Despite more lucrative Hollywood offers,” and because she “objects to the commodification of her own persona” (213). In this sense, Smith’s own authenticity was

challenged by market forces as critics reinterpreted her Jamaican and working class roots in an effort to justify them calling her “an amazing success story.” Smith’s objections to the “commodification of her own persona” can then be understood in terms of Butler’s performativity, suggesting that author norms (much like gender and race norms) can be challenged.

This thesis also raises questions about the contemporary novel. For example, how does the multicultural novel operate in contrast with other contemporary novels? In other words, does a multicultural novel deal with the same issues as other texts? If *White Teeth* were not set in multicultural London, would the focus of the story change? Would Irie’s search for self be less complicated or less interesting? If the performative act is designed to effect change, what is the changing role of the satirical novel? For instance, Austen’s *Mansfield Park* can be understood in terms of performativity as challenging ideas of class and morality. Smith’s *White Teeth* raises similar class questions, but, instead of morality, focuses on gender and race norms. Further, if “one is not born, but rather becomes” gender, what are the performance requirements of the contemporary novel in order to “become” a novel (Beauvoir 301)? While Austen’s plots have a clear beginning, middle, and end, Smith’s *White Teeth* clearly does not follow a linear timeline. Do the requirements of a novel change as a text changes locations, being published in multiple areas, and if so to what end? For instance, a first edition of *White Teeth* printed in Britain features a picture of Smith with curly hair and glasses. The American version of Smith, however, shows her with “[s]traight straight long black sleek flickable tossable shakable touchable finger-through-able wind-blowable hair. With bangs” and no glasses.

Furthermore, if novel-writing is, indeed, “a woman’s form” how does that change the ways in which novels are written, read, and understood? Does it mean reading audiences are predominantly women, and if so, does novel-writing itself, whether satirical or not, move away from performance and into performativity, keeping audience in mind? In other words, does the writer’s work become a performative if the audience for a novel is largely female? Does an emerging women’s form of writing change how the literary canon is defined and maintained?

Smith identifies the literary canon as full white men. Often, women writers see no reflection in the canon causing an estrangement of self. Smith seems able to reconcile this estrangement through the writing and publication of her work. Although she herself does not want to be “a spokesperson for women and minorities,” she is, nonetheless, “crossing borders” and “sneaking into” the literary world (Jakubiak 213). It seems that, if Smith herself is uncomfortable as a “role model” or “spokesperson,” *White Teeth* instead becomes the role model. The text itself operates as a cultural production, one with satirical and feminist roots, but that is misread. For example, saying the novel is multicultural or transnational, although true, misses part of the point. Instead of fitting a genre or creating a new one, Smith works to recover the novel as a form for women and minorities. She does this through the character of Irie Jones, taking the text (and the reader) on its own search for authenticity.

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