



Modernist Mapping and Post-postmodern Feeling: The Rhizomatic Framework of
Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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Modernist Mapping, Postmodern Irony, and Post-postmodern Feeling: The Rhizomatic Framework of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) self-consciously foregrounds its structure, shape, and organisation, doing so to channel modernist legacies of the encyclopaedic novel. But Smith also reacts against postmodernism's extension of this experimental framework – an extension which in the second half of the twentieth century was bolstered by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the 'rhizome'. Resisting the threats of stasis and unfeeling that come with this development, Smith's work can be seen as engaging with post-postmodern affect and sincerity, which in the case of *White Teeth* facilitates a vital discussion of the subject of race. This potential of connected feeling is present even before page one of Smith's debut novel, because she gives her reader a chapter list that breaks *White Teeth* down into a series of numbered lists of formative events, which appear collected under the names of different characters and dates. The first part of the chapter list, for instance, reads:

Archie 1974, 1945

1. The Peculiar Second Marriage of Archie Jones
2. Teething Trouble
3. Two Families
4. Three Coming
5. The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal

As the critic Matthew Paproth highlights, this contents page 'makes visible Smith's interest in constructing a web of parallels and correspondences among the four parts of her novel'.¹

¹ Paproth, Matthew. 'The Flipping Coin: The Modernist and the Postmodernist Zadie Smith' in *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays* (ed. Walters, Tracey L; Peter Lang Publishers, 2008), 20 (all further references indicated in parentheses within the text – this also applies to further cited texts).

Connections can be seen between the novel's different characters, but its disrupted chronology is also made clear, showing the work that must be done over the course of *White Teeth* in achieving convergence and completing connections. It can also be said that this list establishes Smith's relationship to both modernism and postmodernism in this novel, which are both implicated in how we conceive of post-postmodernism. As Paproth has observed, this list resembles the 'Linati schema' which was devised by James Joyce in 1920 to help his readers understand *Ulysses* (1922). Although the Linati schema only covers the events of a single day, Joyce's narrative breakdown demands a modernist reading of his novel, just as Smith's reworked version of this invites a post-postmodern reading. *White Teeth* uses past modernist structures while acknowledging the subsequent license of postmodern irony, but in fusing these earlier movements demonstrates the disunity that must be surmounted as post-postmodernism strives for *fulfilled* connections. In Smith's novel, the modernist map is more than experimental framework; her version outlines a set of associative, affective links that become fully realised as the narrative pursues a harmonious multicultural London society. *White Teeth* uses the structure of the rhizome to establish entangled roots, then identify the productive shoots or lines of flight that, via post-postmodern feeling, can come from them.

Smith's contents page does not provide immediate clarity, as a structural breakdown might do. The narrative map remains complicated, with the contents page divided into four lists of five chapters each, under the headings 'Archie 1974, 1945', 'Samad 1984, 1857', 'Irie 1990, 1907', 'Magid, Millat and Marcus 1992, 1999.'² For the reader, specific comprehension of these names and dates come as the novel unfolds. But at this point every symmetry or logical connection in this information is paired with an incongruity. Each section has two dates, but in three of these sections the dates are in reverse chronological order. Each grouping is given the title of a character name, except the final section which promotes fusion as it has three. Within these sections, there are scattered consistencies and parallels,

² Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth* (Hamish Hamilton, 2000), v.

each having a chapter title related to their character that begins with a definite article and is about something pivotal for that character: ‘The Peculiar Second Marriage of Archie Jones’; ‘The Temptation of Samad Iqbal’; ‘The Miseducation of Irie Jones’; ‘The Return of Magid Mahfooz Murshed Mubtasim Iqbal.’ In a gesture to the structural function of the title, most sections have two or three chapters that include a dental metaphor: Archie’s ‘Teething Trouble’ and ‘The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal’; Samad’s ‘Molars’, ‘Mitosis’, and ‘The Root Canals of Mangal Pande’; Irie’s ‘Canines: The Ripping Teeth’ and ‘The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden’. From the outset, Smith encourages her reader to work to recognise links, find attachments, and make associations, so it is fitting that the critical conversation surrounding her debut novel also does this in a wider arena, invoking earlier generations of writers and different phases of modernism. *White Teeth* is a novel that internalises yet makes explicit the conversation categorising certain twenty-first century fiction as post-postmodernism; Smith’s rhizomatic framework can be viewed as a structural agent in this. *White Teeth*’s mapping dramatises tensions between modernist performance (akin to Joyce’s experimental, encyclopaedic approach), postmodern irony, and post-postmodern feeling. This contiguity of connection and complication defines the concept of the continuously horizontally growing rhizome and is also evident in the ambivalence surrounding theorisations of post-postmodernism.

There are several important aspects of Smith’s chapter list to which we should attend. Firstly, by beginning her novel with a contents page resembling an index, Smith establishes an analytical, scholarly frame for her narrative, doing so self-consciously and experimentally, without precluding the sincerity and feeling at the heart of her stylised narrative. Secondly, when considered within a scholarly frame, Smith’s index puts *White Teeth* in conversation with ‘post-theory’ – so, as part of the ‘array of novels’ that ‘might be said to ‘know about’ literary and cultural theory’. As Judith Ryan puts it, ‘Some build on theory, some argue against it, others modify it in important ways’.³ This strengthens the role of the university in

³ Ryan, Judith. *The Novel After Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 1.

the development of post-postmodernism: a problematic but appealing term for fiction that responds to and expands on both modernism and postmodernism. Post-postmodernism also broadens the focus, transcending these earlier literary movements' hermetic textual space by internalising theory within fictional narrative but making it secondary to the lives and stories of characters. Thirdly, Smith's emphasis on narrative mapping and the influence of modernist legacies of the networked novel put her work into dialogue with the rhizome: a theoretical development adjacent to postwar postmodernism (in terms of twentieth century chronology) but also one that extends modernist emphasis on encyclopaedic structures.

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As Deleuze and Guattari suggest, a rhizome is the result when you 'subtract the unique from the multiplicity to be constituted' yet 'There is a rupture in the rhizome whenever segmentary lines explode into a line of flight [...] the line of flight is part of the rhizome. These lines always tie back to one another'.⁴ *White Teeth* can be considered a rhizome, or at least rhizomatic, due to precisely its mediation between singularity and pluralism, between ties, lines, and points of simultaneous connection and the unique specificities being connected. The friendship between Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal is at the centre of a series of links between the lives of their family members within their suburban London community. These begin as strong links (as outlined in the contents page) and then end as newly reformed links, but must first unravel over the course of the novel, generating fracture and disunity and instigating fallouts, heartbreaks, and moves away from London. By using the theoretical framework of organised conflicts, qualified convergence, and stalled progress, *White Teeth* offers an initially impeded but ultimately productive rhizome. Smith's novel illustrates how the continuously horizontally growing plant stem is an apt metaphor for the way that the aesthetic aspirations of modernism and postmodernism must confront the real,

⁴ Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. 'Introduction: Rhizome' in *A Thousand Plateaus* (Bloomsbury, 1980), 6-9.

lived experience of race and its attendant twenty-first century cultural uncertainty. Post-postmodernism must break out of the rhizome's constant sideways movement – movement which can perhaps be aligned with modernist and postmodern fiction's conceptual stasis, as symbolised by their interests in style over sincerity and aesthetics over affect (due to the importance of experimentation and irony to these preceding phases of modernism). Post-postmodernism's centralisation of a new principle of growing *upwards*, of aspiring for progress, simultaneously prioritises feeling and negates the possibility of unfeeling that can come with modernism experiment and postmodern irony. In this article, I argue that Smith's novel enacts this shift from modernist and postmodern legacies to post-postmodern potential – potential which manifests as social harmony amongst her diverse cast of characters, which the Jones and Iqbal families are at the heart of. In order to demonstrate Smith's relevance to the debate surrounding post-postmodernism in contemporary fiction, this article reads *White Teeth*'s contents page alongside Archie's opening section of the novel to show how Smith's use of rhizomatic mapping (to access post-postmodern sincerity and feeling) works at a micro level within her text.

Smith's praxis transcends the performative aspect of this structural feature. *White Teeth* ultimately uses rhizomatic framework to locate sincerity and feeling, to react against the horizontal paradox of the rhizome and allow upward growth to reach something *beyond* organisation and patterning. This expansion can be considered a post-postmodern gesture, breaking out of modernist experimentalism and postmodern irony in equal measure. The affective renewal that comes with this is amplified within the context of race in Smith's novel, particularly given *White Teeth*'s staging of the anti-affective obstacles placed in front of her characters and their experiences as individuals from racial minorities. These obstacles each pose the threat of unfeeling that comes from becoming desensitised to racialised mistreatment, which Archie's Jamaican wife Clara fears will become a trait in their mixed-race daughter Irie, just as much as Samad fears his children will forget their Bengali roots, which pushes him as far as banishing his eldest son Magid to Bangladesh. Smith imbues her prose with post-postmodern sincerity rather than postmodern irony or modernist

experiment, and this stylistic interest also impacts her characters and their access to feeling. In *Post-postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (2012), Jeffrey T. Nealon suggests that post-postmodernism signals ‘the never-ending end of everything’.⁵ His different position on postmodernism is signalled in his term ‘hyper postmodernism’ (8), which can be placed in contention with Andrew Hoberek’s antithetical ‘antipostmodern’ or Charles Harris’ ‘suspiciously lively’ postmodern ‘corpse’.⁶ Stylistically, post-postmodernism arrives as an extension of the equally conflicted terms modernism and postmodernism, which are also underpinned by the provocative declaration of a new literary moment (or movement) despite an absence of clarity and even a reliance on the definitional ambiguity that can come with this declaration. The specificity of post-postmodernism’s timing is subject to interpretation, but the turn of the twentieth century saw widespread critical interest in the idea of writing after the perceived end of postmodernism, which generated a new priority of feeling in reaction to the perceived problems of modernist and postmodern unfeeling.

Rachel Greenwald Smith’s concept of the ‘Affective Turn’ is also useful here for understanding how we might distinguish post-postmodernism from modernism and postmodernism, because she suggests that this turn ‘chronologically coincides with the end of the postmodernism debates’.⁷ Greenwald Smith claims that the turn that has come with this post-postmodern moment offers a ‘corrective or counter to postmodernist suspicion towards subjective emotion’ and helps alleviate the problem of ‘being estranged by the performative distance of postmodernist prose’ (424, 438). I would argue that by extension this ‘corrective’ also responds to the modernist tendency to *structure* a novel performatively, with a map of allusions and references that risks sacrificing feeling. Smith’s self-conscious, updated map instead pivots away from unfeeling, aiming to complete and find meaning from

⁵ Nealon, Jeffrey T. *Post-postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism* (Stanford University Press, 2012), ix.

⁶ Hoberek, Andrew. ‘Introduction: After Postmodernism’ (*Twentieth Century Literature*, 53:3; 2007), 236; Harris, Charles B. ‘PoMo’s Wake’ (*American Book Review*, 23:2; 2002), 1.

⁷ Smith, Rachel Greenwald. ‘Postmodernism and the Affective Turn’ (*Twentieth Century Literature*, 57:3/4; 2011), 424.

the connections between characters and their lives which necessitate a structural map in the first place. If we attribute it with mapping that recentralises feeling, Greenwald Smith's turn is therefore towards affective potential but also towards constructions of post-postmodern sincerity. Her suggestions of a 'general critical consensus that postmodernist literature tends to be tonally – and therefore affectively – cold' underpin post-postmodern resistance to coldness (423). *White Teeth*'s use of mapping repositions sincerity and feeling at the centre of her connections between settings, dates, and characters. 'Cold' could be considered as the antonym of the earnest self-consciousness that defines the Jones and Iqbal families and their intertwined lives and experiences.

The thread running through *White Teeth* is the concept of association, which defines Smith's character ensemble as much as her narrative structure. But as her contents page shows in its distinctions between Archie, Samad, Irie, and Magid/Millat/Marcus' sections of the novel, character and structure are co-dependent and inseparable. As we soon learn, the binding connection between Archie and Samad (and their sections of the novel) is their friendship, which can be traced back to serving together in the British Army in the Second World War. The link between Archie and Irie is fatherhood, and Clara Bowden is the interlocutor for these sections. Archie meets Clara on New Year's Eve in 1974, a meeting that dissuades him from suicide and is the first step leading to their marriage and the conception of Irie. Magid and Millat are Irie's friends and Samad's sons, by his wife Alsana. Marcus Chalfen is the anomaly and evidence of Smith's tendency to give you a cohesive map of her fiction only to then complicate it, just at the moment the reader thinks they have a hold on her organisational logic. The Chalfens (Marcus, wife Joyce, and son Joshua) become a surrogate family to Millat as he falls out with his own family and loses his way. Marcus also strikes up a relationship with Millat's brother Magid when the latter is sent back to Bangladesh; they work together on the FutureMouse experiment, which ties the novel together and brings the ensemble to the same place in its final chapter. Paproth suggests that FutureMouse can also be used as a lens for considering Smith's relationship to postmodernism – as he says, 'like the FutureMouse, Smith's novels are alive and kicking,

unable to be labelled either modernist or postmodernist, and rushing away from us as we attempt to pin them down' (27). Towards the end of the novel, Irie literally refers to the experiment as a challenge to '*physical fact*' and '*fiction on the wings of fantasy*' (368). Irie repeats this notion in the last few chapters of the novel. If FutureMouse offers the promise of structural convergence and (within the novel's philosophy of striving towards social harmony) existential clarity, the experiment also offers a way out of the difficulties of reality, via the embrace of fiction and its ability to distort and correct these difficulties. As Irie says, 'she had in her hand a cold key, and surrounding her lives that were stranger than fiction, funnier than fiction, crueller than fiction, and with consequences fiction can never have. She didn't *want* to be involved in the long story of those lives, but she *was*' (393). Irie's realisation is ironic, of course, given that she is trapped within a fictional narrative. FutureMouse is a strategy of internalising a discussion of post-postmodernism within *White Teeth*, then, as it both alludes to legacies of postmodern irony and metafiction and shows how those legacies have been replaced by difficult twenty-first century realities. *White Teeth* refutes singular categorisation but is more comfortable identifying with post-postmodern potential, highlighting plurality on narrative and thematic levels too by focusing on two generations of three different families that come together in Northwest London at the end of the twentieth century.

FutureMouse holds the key to *White Teeth*'s break from rhizomatic stasis, then. As Deleuze and Guattari posit, 'any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be. This is very different from the tree or root, which plots a point, fixes an order' (7). Smith's novel operates within this theoretical conversation of networks and territorialisation, but her use of a roots metaphor (teeth and trees) complicates her alignment with the rhizome. *White Teeth* holds up as a rhizome until that concept is distinguished from that of the tree – as Deleuze and Guattari put it, 'There exist tree or root structures in rhizomes; conversely, a tree or branch or root division may begin to burgeon into a rhizome', but the two are not one and the same (15). Perhaps it is productive to consider *White Teeth* as layered, then; it may share the characteristics of a rhizome, but within this the novel contains

more *productive* tree and root structures of human connectivity and genealogy, which is where the continuously horizontally growing rhizome begins to grow upward, thus ceasing to be a rhizome. As Deleuze and Guattari say, ‘In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification.’⁸ It is useful to think about Smith’s novel within a rhizomatic framework, but not to limit it as a straightforward example of this, as that framework is itself built on negotiations and oppositions. Problematizing the clarity and unity indicated by the contents page, Smith’s narrative map opens up over the course of *White Teeth* and invites in tensions, which must be worked through before FutureMouse can bring everyone together at the end of the novel, providing eventual harmony when the characters are all in the same room together. These tensions can be seen by Samad splitting up his sons across the globe, Irie’s problematic relationships with both Iqbal brothers, and Samad and Alsana’s marital troubles as well as (to a lesser extent) Archie and Clara’s. So it is with the same approach of rhizomatic qualification that we can apply the premise of post-postmodernism to Smith’s fiction, showing how post-postmodern mapping gives a new license to meticulously organise and structure but with a purpose to and destination for this. After everything, this purpose is symbolised by the final moments of *White Teeth*, when the family’s shared and individual issues are momentarily ironed out – and when, crucially, they are collectively and optimistically existing within a changing, racially diverse London as it approaches the twenty-first century.

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⁸ Elsewhere in Deleuze and Guattari’s introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus* – part one in their *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* study – the pair claim that ‘A book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters [...] To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters’ (3), that the book can be considered ‘as an assemblage [...] in connection with other assemblages’ (4), and that ‘Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come’ (4-5).

Considering *White Teeth* as a rhizomatic, networked novel is a useful way in to discussing its relationship with modernism, postmodernism, and post-postmodernism. If *White Teeth* can be understood as internalising the debate of post-postmodern categorisation that stems from this – a debate generating differing claims such as the ones offered by Nealon, Hoberek, and Harris – then the novel’s narrative trajectory of cohesion and unity (as symbolised by FutureMouse) acts as a metaphor for moving towards a coherent understanding of post-postmodernism. The foundations of both Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome and post-postmodernism are a balance of reservation and qualification, a negotiation between constant movement and the difficulty of moving upwards. Post-postmodernism’s definitional plurality comes with inherent contradictions and a self-undermining rationale of association and detachment, of attraction *to* and separation *from* modernist structures and postmodern rhizomes. It is the success with moving upwards and achieving affect, sincerity, and feeling that fundamentally detaches post-postmodernism from these earlier modes of fiction. I argue that Smith’s connection to post-postmodernism is given an internal narrative stage in *White Teeth*, which is entirely about moving away from singularity and embracing social plurality, which is captured by the FutureMouse’s success in bringing the characters together at the end. These interests in plurality, multiplicity, and particularly diversity provide the angle for much of the scholarship surrounding Smith’s work, often leading to studies into her fiction’s value as multicultural literature, as social realism, as work that has something urgent to say about twenty-first century Britain and experiences of race at this time. But *White Teeth* is equally interested in modernist and postmodern aesthetics, which translates into the novel’s experimental framework. The novel’s complicated but stimulating engagement with post-postmodern potential is defined by an associative impulse that ultimately *does* lead to fulfilled, meaningful connections between Archie, Samad, their wives, and their children. This navigation around obstacles to achieve connection is mirrored in the characters’ experiences of confinement, their necessary confrontations of problems – shared by all but intensified for Samad (as a Bengali Muslim from Bangladesh living in London) and Clara (a Jamaican whose mother is a devout Jehovah’s Witness), then passed down to their

children who experience their own forms of mistreatment and discrimination over the course of *White Teeth*. These obstacles threaten the characters' abilities to be sincere and to feel, emphasising the task the novel's rhizomatic structure sets up for itself here, where it must lead to social connectivity and harmony and an elimination (or at least a reduction) of inequality.

As *White Teeth* properly begins, it soon marries the organisational obstacles of the contents page to the idea of serendipity, offering a further complication to aspirations of structural and social unity. *White Teeth* introduces us to Archie (and his section of the novel) 'Early in the morning, late in the century [...] At 06.27 hours on 1 January 1975.' As the opening moments of Smith's narrative describe, 'Alfred Archibald Jones was dressed in corduroy and sat in a fume-filled Cavalier Musketeer Estate face down on the steering wheel, hoping the judgement would not be too heavy upon him' (3). This opening and introduction to the suicidal Archie somewhat echoes the beginning of another modernist novel: Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1938). Smith's opening specifically recalls the elaborate description of precisely how Beckett's eponymous hero is tied to his rocking chair – stasis which in that novel we learn is self-inflicted, leaving Murphy rocking back and forth in the dark in his West Brompton flat. Smith goes into similar detail with Archie's positioning and arrangement of owned objects, creating an illusion of order and stability within Archie's characterisation that is as deceptive as Beckett's Murphy. After this detail, Smith writes that Archie 'had flipped a coin and stood staunchly by its conclusions. This was a decided-upon suicide. In fact it was a New Year's resolution' (3). Like the organisation of the novel he is in, Archie functions within a dialectic of chance; as a character, throughout the novel he has design and direction contingent on the authority of a coin toss, an external organisational force. Archie's coin toss moves the narrative along and is a device ensuring that *White Teeth* works towards its finality and closure. Within a novel about holding together as a harmonious multicultural English community – or at least trying to do this, or recognising the social responsibility to – Archie's coin offers chances to reduce further tension between characters. As he says in the chapter 'Two Families', 'This is a nice neighbourhood, new life, you know. Look, let's not

argue. Let's flip a coin; heads it stays, tails...' (46). In this scene, he and Clara are arguing over what to do with a coat-stand Clara bought her husband, which he claims he never wanted, which if relinquished would help make space for their guests that evening: Samad and Alsana. Smith's narrator then zooms out and contextualises their disagreement, highlighting how

True lovers row, then fall the next second back into each other's arms; more seasoned lovers will walk up the stairs or into the next room before they relent and retrace their steps. A relationship on the brink of collapse will find one partner two blocks down the road or two countries to the east before something tugs, some responsibility, some memory, a pull of a child's hand or a heart string, which induces them to make the long journey back to their other half.

(46-47).

The ramifications of the coin toss are bigger than victory in an argument, then. And as Smith's generalising, omniscient narration indicates, the act is more important than just Archie and Clara's relationship. It transcends the specific connection of their characters and their self-contained fictional lives and stories.

The coin toss has authority over the entire narrative trajectory, but only because Smith has allowed it to, which reminds her reader that the author of *White Teeth* is the only person or thing truly in control of it – but here, this does not draw from postmodern irony's emphasis on authorial manipulation and is replaced with authorial sincerity and alignment with her story and characters. As Bruce King puts it, Smith's 'world is governed by chance and personalities rather than the abstractions of science, ideologies, and literary criticism'.⁹ This logic is nowhere more relevant than in *White Teeth*, as symbolised by the coin toss. Equally, Peter Childs acknowledges that 'life in *White Teeth* is itself characterised by

⁹ King, Bruce. *The Internalization of English Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 290.

contingency, coincidence, and the drive to freedom'.¹⁰ King's claim speaks for the novel generally, which internalises an aesthetic debate of modernist categorisation but does not often explicitly engage with specific literary criticism or theory. Ged Pope suggests that 'this acceptance of the random as a principle of contemporary life is related, in turn, to the novel's celebrated exploration of cultural and racial hybridity'.¹¹ Chance brings a balance of similarity and difference, and as Philip Tew puts it, helps *White Teeth* to establish 'architectonics [which] are interwoven with a plethora of action, dialogue and memory, creating a historiography of both personal and cultural identity'.¹² It is precisely the complexity and multiplicity of 'personal and cultural identity' that provokes tensions between similarity and difference, between structure and disorder, between stasis and movement in the first place – tensions which are sustained for over four hundred pages until they are finally resolved. Tew goes on to describe what he calls Smith's 'social coordinates', which due to the way she 'mixes symbolism with eclectic realism' are 'transformed by compulsiveness and repetition, creating an 'obsessional' mimesis of life's minutiae' (24). It seems that the wider 'social' representation of *White Teeth* manifests as a network of complex, often contradictory narrative coordinates though, too, which as I have suggested can be justified by an underlying interest in the possibilities but problems of post-postmodern rhizomatic expansion.

As Tew suggests, Smith's novel is preoccupied by 'the aleatory, the perversities of her characters, and an occasional humour inherent in death and suffering, an inflection of the absurd. Such elements constantly subvert her realist topography' (46). This opening of *White Teeth* and Archie's plan to commit suicide bring together the 'aleatory' and Smith's sense of 'humour', but together these components complicate her realism, drawing on the brand of

¹⁰ Childs, Peter. 'Zadie Smith: Searching for the Inescapable' in *Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction Since 1970* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 209.

¹¹ Pope continues by saying that 'hybridity here also equates to chance, to random combinations and the comedic overturning of any drives towards certainty and purity [...] the novel's overall sense is the suburb as benign chaos, as site of farce, experimentation and the provisional.' 'I Tried to Work Out Where I Was: Contemporary Suburbia' in *Reading London's Suburbs: From Charles Dickens to Zadie Smith* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 171.

¹² Tew, Phillip. *Zadie Smith* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 24.

experimentalism passed down from modernism and postmodernism. Matthew Paproth includes ‘rejecting absolutes’ in this interest in experiment and irony, in this process of ‘embracing a postmodernist perspective’ (10). Paproth also suggests that Smith is simultaneously reliant on ‘determinedly *modernist*’ constructions (emphasis added) when *White Teeth* ‘demonstrates the problems of living in a postmodern world’.¹³ The stylistics she develops and builds on are passed down from different phases of modernism and are most evident in her approach to structure, but alongside these stylistics Smith is interested in a different problem, which takes on a new level of urgency in post-postmodern fiction. This problem is consciously addressed in the novel thematically, but also underpins it narratively; it is a problem of pervasive racial inequality. This is not an experience a white character like Archie Jones is subject to first-hand, but one he becomes familiar with and is witness to due to the diverse group of people he shares his life with, from Clara and Samad to other, more peripheral characters he encounters in *White Teeth*. Clara’s importance to Archie’s life is defined by the nature of their meeting, with Archie about to end his own life until that same night he finds someone worth living for.

White Teeth’s diverse characters collectively search for belonging in Northwest London at the end of the twentieth century, so finality and closure are recurring aspirations of Smith’s structure, whether it comes in the form of the novel’s closing century change – which Smith herself would have been writing in anticipation of – or as the ‘WELCOME TO THE ‘END OF THE WORLD’ PARTY, 1975’, which is painted in ‘large rainbow-coloured lettering’ at the doorstep of the house party Archie first stumbles on and meets Clara at (17). As Smith elaborates in the second chapter of Archie’s section of the novel, ‘The end of the world was nigh. And this was not – the Lambeth branch of the church of the Jehovah’s

¹³ Paproth goes on to specify these constructions which modernism passed to postmodernism, discussing how Smith ‘picks apart traditional understandings of the world by poking holes in language, religion, culture, history, and other structures through which people typically give meaning to their lives’ (9-10). I would add that particularly in *White Teeth*, Smith’s mobilises modern and postmodern influence (and reworks this as post-postmodernism) by ‘poking holes’ but not just poking *fun*. Her post-postmodern sensibility reflects a balance of parody and pastiche with sincerity, with a deep appreciation of and respect for the previous generations of writers she has been influenced by, even if her own fiction moves beyond their aesthetics and turns towards post-postmodern affect.

Witnesses was to be assured – like the mistakes of 1914 and 1925 [...] this time the entrails of sinners around the trunks of trees would appear’ (27). These endings and destinations can be aligned with the novel’s journey towards understanding its own position in post-postmodern culture, which comes inextricably attached to a journey towards a more productive understanding of how to live with equality and diversity in twenty-first century Britain. Smith’s project and her characters’ searches for belonging are connected in this way, strengthening the link between rhizomatic structure and an important, real discussion of race that transcends literary aesthetics.

The exact need to arrive at this understanding is demonstrated in the scene later in the novel involving the elderly white man Mr. J. P. Hamilton and Magid, Millat, and Irie, who visit him as part of a community initiative for school. Discussing his memories of London to the trio, using a racial slur, Hamilton tells them that “I’m afraid you must be mistaken”, because (as he says) “There were certainly no wogs as I remember – though you’re probably not allowed to say that these days are you? But no ... no Pakistanis’ (149). Smith’s narrator acknowledges that Hamilton is ‘assessing the question as if he were being given the opportunity to rewrite history here and now’ (149), emphasising how readily available this ‘opportunity to rewrite’ is to people like Hamilton.¹⁴ Conversely, people from minority backgrounds like Magid, Millat, and Irie must go to unreasonable lengths to earn the opportunity. The drive towards a collective sense of belonging that this results in is an affective aspiration, one hopeful of leading to experiential truth. In a 2002 interview with Kathleen O’Grady, Smith herself said that *White Teeth* ‘is about people who are obsessed and who build a kind of world which is entirely rational to them. And I don’t have contempt for that; I’m kind of totally impressed by it’.¹⁵ Using her own metaphor, Smith’s novel is one that

¹⁴ The defeated, clinical narrator here differs from elsewhere in the novel, such as on page 190, when they are at their most inflammatory and cynical: ‘Ah, but you are not convinced by coincidence? You want fact fact fact? You want brushes with the Big Man with black hood and scythe? OK: on the 28th of April, 1989, a tornado whisked the Chittagong kitchen up into the sky, taking everything with it except Magid, left miraculously curled up in a ball on the floor’. At their most characterised and reckless here, the narrator even challenges the framework of ‘coincidence’ that after Smith’s contents page they are of course themselves conforming to and sustaining.

¹⁵ O’Grady, Kathleen. ‘White Teeth: A Conversation with Author Zadie Smith’ (*Atlantis*, 27:1; 2002), 107.

builds itself as much as its characters build their individual worlds. Expanding itself structurally rather than rejecting or replacing anything – modernist experiment, postmodern irony, and rhizomatic framework (which are all reworked and reconsidered) – *White Teeth* builds itself upward to the extent that it reaches a ceiling, imagined by its characters as the end of the world, or the end of history. Here, a post-postmodern reset is provided, which recalibrates contemporary fiction, placing truth and honesty at its centre, coming from an affective turn towards sincerity and feeling.

In the O’Grady interview, Smith expands this notion of all-encompassing human history, suggesting that ‘if you take all of human history as a body or a human person then there are events within that which are like trauma, like childhood traumas’ (105). The end of history symbolises the kind of unproductive destination different phases of modernist categorisation (its ambivalence, contradictions, and lack of resolvability) may be headed towards. To return to Jeffrey Nealon, this is where the critical debate surrounding the classification and categorisation of contemporary fiction could lead to the ‘never-ending end of everything’. *White Teeth* dramatises cultural acceleration towards this endpoint but only does so to show that arriving there offers the opposite of an ending anyway: a post-postmodern reset, which turns unfeeling into feeling and transforms modernist structures and postmodern irony into new forms defined by affect and sincerity. But the past will never truly have left us at that point of reset, derailing the effort to reach an ending because ‘trauma’ would always remain. Racialised trauma is at the centre of a complex relationship between the past, present, and future in Smith’s novel, as determined by its chronological nonlinearity and shifts between different character timelines, which create the effect that Smith herself is also playing with chance by tossing a coin, just like her character Archie Jones. *White Teeth*’s relevance to the conflicted debate about post-postmodernism instigated by scholars such as Nealon, Hoberek, and Harris may generate conversations about style and aesthetics, but it is imperative that the subjects of fiction after modernism and postmodernism are reclaiming sincerity and holding on to feeling, which in *White Teeth* have a specific context of overcoming the social obstacle of racial inequality. As we never forget

while reading Smith's novel, it is only Archie that even has a coin to toss; his wife and daughter, the Iqbal family, and the other non-white characters around him are steered by experiences subject to contingency and qualification (like the rhizome) but are not able to control their own coin tosses, as it were. In this way, Smith's internal, self-reflexive engagement with the critical debate of post-postmodern categorisation demonstrates the debate's relevance to contemporary discussions of race, which is after all precisely how the rhizome can stop growing sideways and move upwards. In exposing problems and pointing to solutions surrounding race in twenty-first century Britain, *White Teeth* allows the metaphoric plant stem to break through the earth and enter the world.