

Nosce te Ipsum:
Identity in *Invisible Man* and *White Teeth*

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For
All those Lost,
And not yet Found

Acknowledgements Page

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Abstract

I analyze how various groups within Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* create identity. Self-concept includes but is not limited to race, cultural history, social recognition, and class. Specifically my thesis looks at how race fails to adequately define the individual. The characters find ways of usurping racial stereotypes and their negativity.

Chapter one investigates fantasized whiteness. Liberal progressives like Mr. Norton and Joyce Chalfen try to uplift racial minorities through assimilation. They belong to the majority culture and assume whiteness to be the best state. Therefore, they attempt to convert minorities like the Invisible Narrator and Millat Iqbal. Conversion, however, continues racial hegemony because it erases individual differences, denies personal histories, and denigrates the minority's humanity.

Chapter two follows characters who reclaim negative stereotypes by finding pride in their ethnicity and by rebelling against white assimilation. Ras the Exhorter/Destroyer and Millat Iqbal become leaders wanting to usurp white hegemony. They emulate "the ideal" minority and are thus responsible for social change. The characters use terrorism as a means of asserting their legitimacy. Violence consumes the enterprise that dissolves into anarchy rather than a revolution.

Chapter three looks at those who are individuals. Mad Mary, the vet from the Golden Day and Samad Iqbal construct selves from various social groups. They reject fantasies of whiteness and Otherness because neither accurately depicts racial interactions. These individuals deconstruct themes of assimilation but are unable to enact change. The world denies them authority, and they lack the independence to live according to their wisdoms.

The final chapter traces how the Invisible Narrator and Irie Jones become autonomous individuals. They move through similar transition phases: assimilation to the white majority; deconstruction of racial categories; recognition and acceptance of cultural heritage; and, hibernation. The combination of the above precipitates unique selves who act independently.

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Short Titles

WT: Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth*. New York: Vintage Books, 2000.

IM: Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*, 2d ed. New York: Random House, Incorporated, 1952;
New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

Who's Who of *White Teeth*

Iqbal Family (From Bangladesh)

Alansa is 20 years younger than Samad, sews to raise money and constantly fights with her husband. Samad is well educated but works as a waiter, served with Archie in World War II and is a struggling Muslim.

Alsansa + Samad

- Millat* (radical Muslim, rebel of the family, popular with the ladies)
- Magrid* (sent to relatives in Bangladesh returns an atheist scientist)

Jones Family (Mix ethnicities)

Clara is 20 years younger than Archie, was born in Jamaica and raised a Jehovah's Witness. Archie is the "average" Englishman, folds paper for a living and is best friends with Samad.

Clara + Archie

- Irie* (looks like her Jamaican ancestors, loves Millat and marries Josh)

Chaflen Family (Third generation Jewish immigrants)

Joyce is an expert horticulturist and anxious housewife. Marcus is a genetic scientist creating the Future Mouse. They tutors/supports Irie and Millat after the school catches them smoking pot with Josh.

Joyce + Marcus

- Mark* (eldest, not with family)
- Josh* (goes to school with Millat and Irie, radical animal rights activist)
- Oscar* (youngest child)

Introduction: Battle Royal

“Our boys are fighting in Europe, Asia, and Africa to keep those people off our soil. If when these boys return they should become refugees who have to give up their homes because their own neighborhood with the help of our city fathers had been invaded and occupied by the Africans, it would be a shame which our city fathers could not outlive.”

Michael J. Harbulak, a white resident of Oakwood, Michigan (1945)¹

“As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see ‘the River Tiber foaming with much blood.’ That tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic but that which is interwoven with the history and existence of the States itself, is coming upon us here by our own volition and our own neglect.”

Enoch Powell, Parliament representative (1968)²

Michael Harbulak’s fears were unfounded. The Federal Housing Administration’s redlining policies ensured no such “refugees” or “Africans” would “invade” his white community.³ Levittown, home ownership, and job advancement in post-World War II America praised a uniform world, a white homogeneity (Jackson, 245). Echoing these sentiments, Enoch Powell looked at the Civil Rights Movement, city riots like those in Detroit and Los Angeles, Black Power, and Martin Luther King, Jr., dreading that those same movements would “invade” Great Britain. With the immigration of half a million West Indians by the nineteen eighties, Powell foresaw

¹ Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 57.

² Enoch Powell, “Rivers of Blood” (speech presented on 20 April 1968) [database on-line]; available from <http://www.hippy.freemove.co.uk/rofblood.htm>. 8 August 2003.

³ Kenneth Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 156.

“blood” and “feces” corrupting the national identity, its white purity.⁴ Not to be dismissed as cultural aberrations, Harbulak and Powell had followers, persons just as entrenched in their racist ideology and as committed to keeping out the “undesirables” (Sugrue, 85; Clarke, 323).

I highlight the above historical sketches to provide contexts, a tangible example of the prejudice fought against in the novels I investigate. *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison confronts Harbulak’s racism and his inhuman, unsympathetic attitudes toward African-Americans.⁵ During an interview with Allen Geller in 1963, Geller asked, “Baldwin lately seems to have laid emphasis on his being a Negro; you seem to consider yourself an American in—” “I consider myself both and don’t see a dichotomy. I’m not an American because I arbitrarily decide so. I write in the American tradition of fiction. My people have always been Americans.”⁶ Cutting the interviewer off, Ellison resisted even the language of separation. Racial heritage mixes with national identity in Ellison’s answer and his work *Invisible Man*. Although across the Atlantic and written decades later, *White Teeth* (2000) fights the same racism, ignorance and inhumanity.⁷ Confronting persons like Powell and later Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the novel challenges national exclusions based on race. More blunt than Ellison, Smith stated, “I

⁴ Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-1990* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 327.

⁵ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 2d ed. (New York: Random House, Inc., 1952; New York: Vintage Books, 1995), page. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix “IM.”

⁶ Ralph Ellison, “An Interview with Ralph Ellison,” interview by Allen Geller, in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, ed. Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh (Jackson, M.S.: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 82.

⁷ Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), page. Hereafter cited in the text with the prefix “WT.”

get pissed off when I hear the novel described as “post-racial” by the press. It’s as though they’re saying that all the trouble is over and it’s not.”⁸

Following four different reactions to overt prejudice, like that of Powell and Harbulak, my thesis looks at specific groups and individuals who try to reconcile national, personal, and ethnic forces. Where do I belong? Who am I? How do I react to hatred? Themes of identity and belonging bind the chapters. Carla Freccero posits that identity is the teasing out of conflicting, interweaving contexts like gender, race, and sexuality.⁹ Freudian psychoanalysis also describes how identity is constructed from the surrounding environment: “in the individual’s mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent” and so it “is at the same time social psychology as well.”¹⁰ One affiliation, like race, fails to adequately define the self because self-image is a subjective creation. The conflict is constructing what the individual perceives as himself or herself. Therefore, I trace how the characters within *Invisible Man* and *White Teeth* challenge racial categories through constructing independent identities.

The first chapter analyzes fantasies of whiteness perpetuated by supposed progressives. Mr. Norton from *Invisible Man* and Joyce Chalfen from *White Teeth* claim to liberate the “fallen” minority. The Norton/Chalfen paradigm sets white America or Great Britain as the ideal and so saving the Other means converting it. Conversion, however well intended, continues racial hegemony: “[as modernity] increasingly insists

⁸ Zadie Smith, “The Voice Interview: Zadie Smith; Success story; Zadie Smith’s debut novel *White Teeth* is not just a bestseller—it’s also a cracking good read,” interview by Peter Kennedy, *The Voice* 24 April 2000 [database on-line]; available from <http://80-proquest.umi.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu>. 20 September 2003.

⁹ Carla Freccero, *Popular Culture: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 60.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1959), 3.

upon the moral irrelevance of race, there is a multiplication of racial identities and the sets of exclusions they prompt and rationalize, enable and sustain.”¹¹ Mr. Norton extends his identity to encompass the Invisible Narrator, making him into the easily controlled “cog” or “destiny” to fit into the Norton self. Joyce Chalfen tries to adopt Millat, bringing him into her world of perfection through maternal adoption. By controlling others, Mr. Norton and Joyce legitimize their racial identity and personal superiority. Their beliefs are those socialized mechanisms of prejudice, the more insidious because not violent or explicit subjugation of others.

The second chapter looks at fantasies of Otherness. Juxtaposed to the Norton/Chalfen ethos, Ras the Exhorter/Destroyer and Millat Iqbal (whom I call the Violent) perceive themselves as embodying the ideal minority. They construct personae expected of them, namely racialized violence. Goldberg describes such as an “identity in otherness” because the minority acts in accordance to stereotyped violence (59). This racialized identity, however, turns into blind warfare. The instruments of change overpower their wielders. Millat and Ras progressively distance themselves from the reality and the truths they wish to make the world conscious of. Much younger, Millat lacks Ras’s clarity in either his missions or rhetoric, but they share the same emotion, the same fury.

The third chapter follows those whom I dub the Insane: Mad Mary and Samad Iqbal from *White Teeth* and the vet from *Invisible Man*. Defined as outcasts, the Insane do not ascribe to either whiteness or Otherness. In fact, the Violent and the Norton/Chalfen group avoids the Insane because they represent disorder. Living on the

¹¹ David Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Malden, M.A.: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1993), 6.

street, Mad Mary communicates her insights to antagonistic pedestrians. The vet from the Golden Day elucidates the hypocrisy of Mr. Norton and tries to educate the naïve narrator. Samad fails to express his wisdoms because he is restricted psychologically and socially from venting his thoughts. Because the Insane have been defined as outcasts, they control their own identities. Marked by individualism, Mad Mary, the vet and Samad unveil the hypocrisy of any one identification. But, they are inhibited from acting on this knowledge.

The final chapter looks at two individuals, Irie Jones and the Invisible Narrator, who move beyond racial categorizations. By understanding history, enacting contemplation and taking personal action, they subvert the limitations of white conversion, the Violent and the Insane. Initially they seek assimilation into the Norton/Chalfen world: the Invisible Narrator through a masculine corporate identity and Irie through a feminine model persona. Conversion necessitates actively denying perceived differences or inadequacies such as habits or hairstyle. Neither the Invisible Narrator nor Irie successfully assimilate to the Norton/Chalfen whiteness. Bypassing identifications with Otherness, the characters hibernate. The cocoon phase allows for evaluation. Specifically, individual contemplation spurs doubt about the righteousness of others. The characters reclaim personal and cultural histories they formerly denied, assert independent selves and actively resist social influences. Unlike other characters, Irie and the Invisible Narrator become truly independent.

I. Personal Ignorance: My name is What? My name is Who?

The Norton/Chalfen paradigm holds that the empowered class, namely themselves, has a duty to lift up the racial minority. Deliverance from assumed ignorance and depravity, however, necessitates minority erasure. Stuart Hall asserts, the subjective creation of Englishness is made “by marginalizing, dispossessing, displacing and forgetting other ethnicities.”¹² Those being “saved” must forfeit their individuality, cultural history and ultimately, humanity. Mr. Norton and the Chalfens share a fantasized ideal of whiteness that they project onto others, hoping the reflection of the reformed reifies their own greatness. For instance, the narrator from *Invisible Man* and Millat from *White Teeth* are molded into ornaments to be worn as marks of achievement. Through his funding of the university, Mr. Norton desires public recognition of his munificence. Joyce Chalfen’s insecurity drives her to adopt and control others through suffocating motherliness. The uplifted person is important only in that its success reinforces the righteousness, the purity of the benefactor. Individuals like Millat or the Invisible Narrator become objects, “faceless, silent and invisible” (Goldberg, 115). The Norton/Chalfen ethos holds domination as its highest goal, a judgment that excludes the legitimacy of other perspectives.

Mr. Norton from *Invisible Man* maintains racial inequity although he views himself as a liberator: lifting the dispossessed African-Americans to be absorbed into his Anglo-American culture. He fails to understand the ethnically divided world he creates. The first scene of the two characters, for instance, has the narrator driving Norton around the campus. Certainly a reflection of the Jim Crow laws found during that time, the

¹²Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities,” in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (London: Routledge, 1995), 227.

situation shows Norton sitting in the back commanding the African-American student driver. Norton's discussion and praises for the school's uplifting principles are undercut by his position of authority. In fact, the conversation from the backseat is one-sided. He shows pictures, tells scandalous stories of his daughter and talks of his high morals but only seeks the narrator's nodding approval. The driver is silent while the passenger dominates thought and discussion.

In addition, Norton perpetuates divisions through language. Talking to the Invisible Narrator, he states, "'You are important because if you fail I have failed by one individual, one defective cog'" (*IM*, 45). The Invisible Narrator is a thing, nameless and faceless to the Nortons of the world. He contributes to a Norton identity. Norton states, "'it was because I felt even as a young man that your people were somehow closely connected with my destiny'" (*IM*, 40). The narrator is not a free person, allowed an independent identity or future, but he is subject to his group, "your people," separate and therefore lesser than Mr. Norton's "my people." The Invisible Narrator becomes an object subject to a larger, Norton persona projected onto him. The situation again reflects white supremacy. For instance, the trustee is known only by his last name and is formally referred to as "mister" throughout the text, distancing the reader and the narrator from discovering whom this person, this power is. The power relationship continues and the miscommunication persists because "the agent of exclusion remains a stranger to the object, the victim simply objectified for the agent" (Goldberg, 115; Freccero, 163).

The irony to the cog relationship is that Norton does not to recognize its failure or success. Norton perceives the narrator as an extension, albeit lesser part, of his identity. The trustee assumes funding the college allows him stock in the students attending it, a

claim so to speak. Individuality and personal accomplishment reflect Norton's achievements not their own: "If you become a good farmer, a chef, a preacher, doctor, singer, mechanic—whatever you become, and even if you fail, you are my fate" (*IM*, 44). The named occupations assume a binary world: the legitimate, Norton worthy jobs against the unnamed others. "Failure" remains undefined although it certainly encompasses rejecting the perfect whiteness offered. Despite his original intentions, the Invisible Narrator becomes an independent person, the development of which is discussed in the fourth chapter. The narrator becomes human, rejecting both the "failure" and "cog" options offered to him. Thus, Mr. Norton does not recognize him at the train depot. On a platform in New York City, Mr. Norton approaches the narrator asking for directions. When the narrator reminds the trustee of his fate lecture, Norton replies, "Why should I know you? [. . .] My destiny, did you say?" He gave me a puzzled stare, backing away. 'Young man, are you well?'" (*IM*, 578) He cannot see himself reflected by this "cog" because it has become a separate person. Furthermore, the power relationship between the two has shifted: the Invisible Narrator dictates conversation and knowledge while the white benefactor depends on him.

The Chalfen family from *White Teeth* also desires to absorb the independent identity of the Other. Third generation immigrants, the family through its educational backgrounds at Oxford, financial success, and group attitudes have been assimilated into the white British majority. Indeed, the family is so insular that past histories, creeds and religions are undeveloped. The family places itself in a God-like perspective, judging those beneath them.¹³ For instance, the Chalfen's actively pronounce their judgments of

¹³ Claire Squires, *Zadie Smith's White Teeth: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2002), 34.

others: "Bottom line: the Chalfens didn't need other people" because "they were all perfect" (WT, 261). The family places itself as the unreachable ideal, actively excluding others, and reinforcing their own superiority over non-Chalfens (Goldberg, 100; Hall, 226). They exclude those beneath their immediate family, creating a hierarchy that combines culture, education and class. The fantasy of whiteness exhibited by the family maintains its elite status through language, "They referred to themselves as nouns, verbs, and occasionally adjectives: *It's the Chalfen way, And then he came out with a real Chalfenism*" (WT, 261). Uplifting others, for them, means bringing the minority or non-Chalfen into the family fold. Joyce Chalfen, specifically, perpetuates racial classifications and colonial relations with Millat Iqbal.

She looks to Millat to represent the exotic Other.¹⁴ Joyce leans "across the table like a schoolgirl. 'God, he's *gorgeous*, isn't he? Like Omar Sherif thirty years ago'" (WT, 267). The subject is denied an identity separate from the viewer's projections. Millat becomes a person not of his own accord or background but is the representative of a people. Ironically, Omar Sherif is Egyptian while Millat is Bengali. She names him according to her ideal, and this act claims his identity. Joyce controls and denies autonomy to "the racial Other" by reshaping and renaming him into her heartthrob actor (Goldberg, 150). From racial associations, Joyce moves to a larger class categorization of Millat: "She'd never been so *close* to this strange and beautiful thing, the *middle class*, and experienced the kind of embarrassment that is actually intrigue, fascination" (WT, 267). Millat is her pet representative of numerous groups.

¹⁴ Merritt Moseley, "The Modern World," review of *White Teeth*, by Zadie Smith, *The World & I* 15 (Washington), September 2000 [database on-line]; available from <http://80-proquest.umi.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu>. 20 September 2003.

Similarly, Joyce Chalfen attempts to control the Other because she needs verification of her authority. She exhibits insecurity in her position as a mother since her children have outgrown her domineering attitude towards them. Through Millat's struggling, she spies an opportunity to become his surrogate mother, to legitimate her maternal status by saving a supposedly lost soul. The cog image becomes the perpetual child metaphor. Both images govern the Other so as to "save them from themselves, from their own Nature" (Goldberg, 150). Joyce believes she uplifts Millat from his dysfunctional Iqbal household. She fails to analyze the veracity of such assumptions: "'Oh God,' said Joyce, tears springing immediately, pulling her chair closer and taking his hand, 'if I was your mother, I'd-well, anyway'" (WT, 276). Joyce fails to communicate how she could save him, concluding only that through money and therapy sessions can she become his surrogate mother. In fact, she waits during this emotional outpouring for Millat to ask her to become his provider. The further he strays, the more proof he needs her: "the more Millat veered off the rails [. . .] the more Joyce adored him" (WT, 278). Joyce wants him to accept her assessment: "your family is wrong and mine superior so let me rescue you." According to Joyce's elementary psychoanalysis, Millat "was filled with self-revulsion and hatred of his own kind; that he had possibly a slave mentality, or maybe a color-complex centered around his mother" (WT, 311). Her diagnosis supports her own desires. Millat's individual identity is suppressed by Joyce's plastered image of him. Furthermore, bringing him into the Chalfen home would validate its whiteness, Oxford education and righteous Englishness.

Mr. Norton from *Invisible Man* and the Chalfen family from *White Teeth*, perpetuate racial divisions despite personal affirmations of equality and inclusion. Both

groups see themselves as progressives in regards to minority issues, but actually continue cycles of subjugation and prejudice. Their ignorance characterizes them as blind followers but not necessarily villains. They continue racial standards and divisions because of their unawareness, unwillingness or inability to identify their positions within a larger social context. They mirror the statue of the Founder from *Invisible Man*. The center of campus displays a towering image of the Founder whose hands are “outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil that flutters in hard, metallic folds above the face of a kneeling slave” (*IM*, 36). He is the savior of a disenfranchised people. The slave, however, continues to kneel in submission to a larger authority that dictates what face should be revealed. The question remains, “whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly in place” (*IM*, 36). Joyce and Mr. Norton assume through assimilation they “unveil” the racial Other. Through exclusion and exoticism, however, they enact a normalized and naturalized form of racial thinking and articulation.

II. The Violent: Are you Lookin' at Me?

Where the Norton/Chalfen paradigm revolves around an idealization of whiteness, the Ras/Millat group pivots on fantasized Otherness. Norton and Joyce Chalfen remain at best ignorant of the racial stereotypes they perpetuate and at worst try to deny the existence of them. Mirroring the Norton/Joyce ignorance are those whom I categorize as the Violent: Ras the Exhorter from *Invisible Man* and Millat Iqbal from *White Teeth*. Replacing whiteness with Otherness, these characters still believe in binary worlds of racism but seek to reverse the present power structure. Le Bon from *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* describes how the “racial unconscious emerges” so “what is heterogeneous is submerged in what is homogeneous” (Freud, 9). The individual is absorbed by a group identity, the racialized Other mindset.

The Ras/Millat paradigm uses violence instead of persuasion, action instead of passivity. It uses the resources of the majority white culture but pervert the intended purposes. Millat accepts Joyce's money and buys marijuana with it. The same racial categories, minority status against mainstream white, exist although the perspective changes. Norton defines himself through his difference from and exclusion of the Invisible Narrator's race. Ras knows himself as one who rejects white institutions and persons. The Violent perpetuate binary social systems and are proud of such assertions. Ras and Millat move through similar patterns of increasing anger, recognition of racial inequity and blind action against the majority. They also create pastiche identities made from emotional hostility, cinema and violence. Stylistically comparing Ras to Millat carries with it some caveats. On the one hand, Millat's interior monologues are told through the omniscient, wandering narrator who gives authenticity to his discourses. On

the other hand, Ras's actions and thoughts are mediated through the Invisible Narrator's interpretation of him. The truth or accuracy of either picture will be assumed because ultimately the authors decided to depict them in this light.

Ras the Exhorter is the self-appointed crusader, the voice of African dissent verging on insanity. Educating the world about the righteousness of minority identification, Ras attempts to unveil the hypocrisy of white inclusion. Speaking to the Invisible Narrator and Tod Clifton from the Brotherhood, Ras the Exhorter cries, "'You young and intelligent. You black and beautiful-don't let 'em tell you different!'" (*IM*, 373) He communicates his pride in his racial identity and seeks to usurp denigrating stereotypes. For Ras, racial categories should dictate persons, actions and values. Identity assumes belonging to and acting in accordance with a larger group association. He reverses the opinions quoted at the beginning of the thesis: blackness is righteous and whiteness corrupt. He continues, "'You call *me* crazy? Look at you two and look at me—is this *sanity*? [. . .] Three black men fighting in the street because of the white enslaver? Is that *sanity*? Is that consciousness, scientific understahnding?'" (*IM*, 372) His language reverses the polished rhetoric of persons like Mr. Norton and those within the Brotherhood. Ras's persona pivots on the creation of a masculine, West African identity. Oversimplifying racial constructions, Ras describes a world of clarity: "'They hate you, mahn. You African. AFRICAN!' [. . .] 'They enslave us-you forget that?'" (*IM*, 371) "They" according to the vet are "'the white folks, authority, the gods, fate, circumstances—the force that pulls your strings until you refuse to be pulled any more'" (*IM*, 154). Ras, however, means more than to inspire personal consciousness and mental alertness. He wishes to incite physical rebellion.

Millat Iqbal from *White Teeth* hates his social Otherness because it actively denigrates him. He comes to Ras the Exhorter's same conclusion that the majority culture dislikes and actively denies his existence. Power, social recognition and opportunity are withheld because of an arbitrary minority status. And, like Ras the Exhorter, anger seems the only means of overturning white hegemony:

In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country, until the week before last when suddenly people like Millat were on every channel and every radio and every newspaper and they were angry, and Millat recognized the anger, thought it recognized him, and grabbed it with both hands (*WT*, 194).

This volatility focuses against an unidentifiable social force oppressing him. The lack of recognition, bullying and teasing are revenged through a like-minded aggression. Millat therefore continues racialized violence. Yet, instead of the lone vigilante, Millat from *White Teeth* joins organizations. More akin to a '70s gang from *The Warriors* than a filled out organization with laws, doctrines and protocol, Raggastani is his first rebellious group. Their creed is "to put the Invincible back in Indian, the Bad-aaaass back in Bengali, the P-Funk back in Pakistani" (*WT*, 193). Millat and these teenagers reverse the minority and outcast negativisms they have experienced. Similar to Ras the Exhorter's praise of black pride, the Raggastani reassert respect for their varying ethnicities. The group takes on social slanders and twists the negativisms into empowerment, denigration into respect. They avenge themselves on those "who had fucked with" them because of participation in chess clubs or wearing traditional garb or "tight jeans and white rock. But no one fucked with any of them anymore because they looked like trouble. They looked like trouble in stereo" (*WT*, 193). Together, the members find a united identity.

This group ethos seeks revenge rather than justice. Instead of challenging racial profiling and prejudicial violence, they use these same techniques against everyone. Millat joins another organization that absorbs minority slanders as a means of empowerment, Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation (KEVIN)—“they are aware they have an acronym problem” (*WT*, 250). The group follows extreme Muslim doctrine, berating Western influence and decrying the sinfulness of modern society. Millat enters with this group not to purge himself of the West, but as a vehicle to voice his anger. More will be said on KEVIN’s actions.

To mobilize their anger, the Violent act against those persons and institutions assumed to be controlling racial stereotypes, namely the majority culture. The problem with their mission is that one questions their simplistic answers. Norton and Joyce Chalfen rule through normalized expectations about whiteness, not through force and so making the identifiable enemy all the harder to pinpoint. The solution for Ras and Millat is violence against any person perceived as a betrayer. The reader feels that Millat and Ras are justified in their emotions but ultimately wrong because of their terrorism. I use this word with caution since it has become a much maligned and abused term. Ras and Millat are terrorists in the traditional, *Oxford English Dictionary* sense: “Any one who attempts to further his views by a system of coercive intimidation” and “refers to a member of an organization aiming to coerce an established government by acts of violence against it or its subjects.”¹⁵

Anger and dispossession so consume Millat and Ras that insight into their religious or minority identification becomes distorted into a thinly veiled excuse for mass

¹⁵ *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. “terrorists.” [database on-line]; available from <http://ets.umd.umich.edu/o/oed/>. 3 November 2003.

destruction. Millat acts against others just to do so: “And if the game was God, if the game was a fight against the West, against the presumptions of Western science, against his brother or Marcus Chalfen, he was determined to win it” (*WT*, 369). The violence is a means to what? Certainly for self-recognition, but to what end? Does anything exist beyond the desired anarchy? Neither Ras nor Millat suggest options beyond terrorism, and therefore we raise doubts about their solutions. Ras the Exhorter wants anarchy rather than revolution: “‘We gine chase ‘em out,’ the man cried. ‘Out!’” and “‘Blood calls for blood!’” (*IM*, 159; 376). A structured revolution depends on philosophical justification for war against the present establishment. The Violent, however, forfeit doctrines. Offering no other solutions, hopes or even future plans, Ras wants revenge on all of “them,” regardless of the consequences. The anger takes on a name, Ras the Destroyer. His violence consumes his identity. The purpose becomes “payback” against all persons regardless of future change.

Looking at another member of KEVIN suggests that violence becomes the only goal. Comic and pathetic, Mo is the disenfranchised, abused citizen. A local halal butcher, Mo has been brutalized for years by the local community: “decrepit drunks, teenage thugs, the parents of teenage thugs, the darts team, the football team. [. . .] But they all had one thing in common, these people were all white” (*WT*, 393). When Millat or KEVIN talks about white abuse, they talk for Mo. Mo does not look to avenge himself on those who attacked him but to punish the larger group, all white persons. Mo initially joins the group for two reasons, religious fundamentalism and violence. But, religious doctrine is absent from his motivations. KEVIN, Mo and Millat use personally charged reasons to legitimize assault: “He wanted a little *payback*. For himself” (*WT*, 392). Mo’s

attackers characterized him as a “Paki” and so felt justified in channeling prejudicial resentment onto him. He reacts in the same manner. He believes that all whites are threats and preemptive violence is the only deterrent.

Furthermore, the Ras/Millat identification rests on pastiche images of Otherness. Neither authentic nor stable, the Violent ascribe to visions of “their origins” that are illusory and unfounded. Namely, they use Hollywood composites of masculinity and power. They become distanced from the realities they critique. They become movie tropes rather than legitimate leaders. For instance, Ras the Destroyer rides on a horse through Harlem during a riot presenting, “A new Ras of a haughty, vulgar dignity, dressed in the costume of an Abyssinian chieftain; a fur cap upon his head, his arm bearing a shield, a cape made of the skin of some wild animal around his shoulders. A figure more out a dream than out of Harlem” (*IM*, 556). He resembles some demon out of *Revelation* rather than a man. His clothing calls forth images of the exotic African hunter with the “animal skin,” “fur cap” and Ethiopian clothing. But, what tribal chief gallivants through Harlem?

His identity is molded of random parts, nothing making sense including the minority identification he aspires to emulate. Ras is an invention pieced together by images of Africa and Hollywood Westerns: ““them cops riding up he reached back of his saddle and come up with some kind of old shield.’ ‘A *shield?*’ ‘Hell, yes! One with a spike in the middle of it. [. . .] the kind you see them African guys carrying in the moving pictures”” (*IM*, 563). Ras the Destroyer harkens back to empty images, produced not by his historical past but fictionalized accounts of “what Africans are like” by Anglo-Americans. The final irony is that others describe Ras as if he is a part of the pictures,

rather than an African chieftain. Those seeing him, both black and white, cannot understand him; Ras is so foreign from normal consciousness that he resembles Western fictions more than reality: “you could hear him grunt and say something ‘bout that cop’s kinsfolks and then him and that hoss shot up the street leaping like Heigho, the goddam Silver!” (IM, 564) Ras’s minority identification becomes undermined through his use of Hollywood caricatures. Thus creating multiple layers of uncertain fantasy references that interchange with the distorted “truth” of now, of history.

Rather than a John Wayne figure, Millat emulates an underground gangster, an unrecognized but powerful lord. He thinks of himself as “the DON, the BUSINESS, the DOG’S GENITALIA, a street boy, a leader of tribes” (WT, 182). Millat’s self-image is a composite of religious rhetoric, movie tropes and minority leadership. Like Ras the Destroyer, Millat sheds the other references and emulates solely film characters. Whatever justification he felt is undermined. In fact his actions and thoughts go against KEVIN’s doctrine. One tenet of the organization holds that its members and the world should be purged of Western influences, especially Hollywood films. Unable to divest himself from the gangster roles he adores, Millat translates his reality and persona through gangster films: “It was his most shameful secret that whenever he opened a door [. . .] the opening of *GoodFellas* ran through his head” (WT, 368-369). So that the famous line “**As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster**” becomes “**As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a Muslim**” (bold original; WT, 369). Anathema to KEVIN’s rhetoric, an American movie is his motivation.

Taken outside of their context, movies create a pseudo-reality. Millat takes *GoodFellas*, adds it to KEVIN's fanaticism and builds a self that exists outside of both spheres. For instance, initially KEVIN decides to assassinate the scientists responsible for making the Future Mouse. Marcus Chalfen and his mentor are labeled infidels for playing God. The group chosen to kill them, however, decides to verbally protest the scientists instead. Millat breaks from the resolution and takes on the original mission himself. The gangster image merges with his religious beliefs. While carrying his gun, Millat thinks, "It's all so familiar. It's all on TV. So handling the cold metal, feeling it next to his skin that first time: it was easy" (*WT*, 436). By the end of the episode, Millat lives within the movies. He no longer stands for a group's identity because he forfeits his thoughts, motives and actions to cinema. His life is "an unstoppable narrative, written, produced, and directed by someone else" (*WT*, 436). The instigated "narrative" plays out its scripted format: a hero unjustly oppressed enacts justice against evil forces. With the gun, a prop much like the lion skin Ras wears, he transforms into Al Pacino, killing those who challenge his edicts. Identity and action, therefore, are attributed to television rather than historical roots or minority status.

The Violent recognize racialized hierarchies and so act to overthrow those seen as responsible. They attempt correcting the world through force and so disassociate any responsibility for their actions. Their anger and destruction seem partly induced by social injustice but also suggests something inherently volatile about these specific characters. Ras and Millat deconstruct the negative stereotypes continued by Norton/Chalfen identification. They construct what they envision as the ultimate Other, the true African warrior or the empowered Muslim crusader. They burn buildings, fire weapons, ride

horses through Harlem and shoot scientists to express that one African or Muslim identity. And, embodying this ideal minority assumes that one such image exists. Carla Freccero in *Popular Culture* notes that reclaiming the negative identity as a positive “elides the differences that may exist within each” (61). Surreal characters, Millat and Ras reflect identifications limited to violence. Finally, the crusade is marred by its lack of focus, its uncertain end and questionable understanding.

III. Limited Individualism: Insane in the Membrane

Different from both the Violent and the Norton/Chalfen groups, Samad and Mad Mary from *White Teeth* and the vet from *Invisible Man* (the Insane) fail to operate through stereotypical definitions of racial dichotomies. Insanity is a window through which these characters impart truths, judgments and ridicule others without suffering the responsibility of change. Because they live on the paradoxical borders of normality, the Insane find independent voices. The Norton/Chalfen mentality fantasizes about racial conversion, an act that discounts the legitimacy and necessity of ethnic heritage. In addition to the sheer arrogance of such a concept, assimilation ignores or consciously falsifies the Other's ability to become white. The Ras/Millat group, in contrast, rejects false promises of white conversion and instead champions a unified identity in Otherness. Again revolving on dualistic principles, each category confines individuals. The self is subject to a larger ethos based on illusory composites of racial identity, history and purpose.

Alienated or independent, depending on the onlooker, Mad Mary, as her name epitomizes, believes in and is reflected by her unique social perspective. She belongs to those outcasts who "*announced* their madness [. . .] they flaunted their insanity, they weren't half mad and half not, curled around a door frame. They were properly mad in the Shakespearean sense, talking sense when you least expected it" (*WT*, 146). Although a minor presence in the text, her character unmaskes hidden tensions and true personalities. Described later in this section, Mad Mary connects with Samad and communicates her awareness of his true identity. Her character threatens both the Norton/Chalfen group and the Violent. She rejects classification with social ideals. Mad

Mary resists conformity in dress, manner and behavior. In fact, her uncouth etiquette disassociates any group from absorbing her into it. Because Mad Mary lives on the streets of London, few acknowledge her as more than an inconvenience. Being a vagrant and social deviant (shouting at pedestrians, sitting on people's laps, following them randomly), Mad Mary's strange truths are written off as illegitimate. Her independence threatens those around her, resulting in a double bind: the street affords her liberty to act as she desires but undermines her credibility.

Physically imposing her opinions and judgments on others, Mad Mary represents an alternative to any group's legitimate authority. Her character exists independently of normalcy and therefore has an individual power. Mad Mary dictates her body image, her thoughts, biases and actions without adhering to an established system. Mad Mary does not worry about becoming the perfect Chalfen or Muslim gangster. In fact, her only part in the story is to frighten others with her unbiased insights, for the Insane "will use their schizophrenic talent for seeing connections in the random (for discerning the whole world in a grain of sand, for deriving narrative from nothing) to riddle you, to rhyme you, to strip you down, to tell you who you are and where you're going" (*WT*, 146). Refusing to perpetuate standards of "normalcy," her physical body represents another mode of living, of questioning.

The vet from *Invisible Man* exhibits a similar social threat because he defies classification. Of the Insane, he is the only one who is a patient of an asylum. The label of insanity, however, belies his individuality. The public denies his humanity and his truths because of his institutionalization. The reader, the narrator and Norton assume certain traits about the vet like incompetence. Listening to him, the narrator disregards

the vet because he is labeled insane. Mr. Norton also denies the vet a life beyond the institution. Talking to the vet, Mr. Norton states, ““Your diagnosis is exactly that of my specialist [. . .] Only a few men in the whole world possess such knowledge’ ‘Then one of them is an inmate of a semi-madhouse’” (*IM*, 90). Norton assumes that an African-American inmate of an insane asylum lacks specialized training, intelligence or identity. Race combined with the atmosphere of the Golden Day prompts certain stereotypes in Norton’s mind.

The vet differs from the college student narrator because he exercises independent power and awareness. Like Mad Mary and Samad, he has the ability to unmask the world around him. He is neither included nor persuaded by social groups. For instance, he deconstructs Norton’s aura. Inmates of the Golden Day look at Mr. Norton and mistake him: ““He’s Thomas Jefferson and I’m his grandson’” ““that’s John D. Rockefeller’” ““the Messiah’” (*IM*, 78). Hilarious in its construction, such statements reflect the narrator’s own misconceptions. Norton places himself as the ideal, the center of all references to which others like the Invisible Narrator follow. Because of his fantasized perfection, Norton is converted from a man into God. The vet, however, dissembles such erroneous perceptions. Speaking to Norton, the vet states, ““to some, you are the great white father, to others the lyncher of souls, but for all, you are confusion come even into the Golden Day’” (*IM*, 93). He can explain the roles Mr. Norton plays. Unlike those around him, the vet recognizes Norton’s false selves.

Ironically, the vet graduated from the same university as the narrator. By extension, he also represents Mr. Norton’s “destiny.” He is the disastrous “cog,” the

failed image of Mr. Norton. Thus, Mr. Norton cannot recognize himself in the vet's reflections. Looking at both the Invisible Narrator and Mr. Norton, the vet judges them:

Poor stumblers, neither of you can see the other. To you he is a mark on the scorecard of your achievement, a thing and not a man; a child or even less—a black amorphous thing. And you, for all your power, are not a man to him, but a God, a force (*IM*, 95).

Very similar to sentiments found in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the quotation highlights how the white mainstream interprets the Invisible Narrator and the vet. To Norton, they are “an abstraction, an idea, and not [men] of flesh, blood, and bone.”¹⁶ The vet takes on both Norton's and the narrator's perspectives. Confined to the asylum, the vet cannot act on his knowledge, and until the two characters in question believe him, his insights lack power. Experience, wisdom or perception lends him credibility but not adherents. The Invisible Narrator will continue as “a walking zombie” because he fails to absorb the vet's knowledge (*IM*, 94). He charges the narrator, ““Play the game, but don't believe in it. [. . .] Even if it lands you in a strait jacket or a padded cell. Play the game, but play it your own way”” (*IM*, 153). The vet, like Mad Mary, lauds alternatives to normalcy. Rather than convert to another's principles or life, the narrator should become an individual, a person in his own right. Although confined by this choice, the vet exists beyond idealizations like race but is suppressed into silence (Goldberg, 151).

Although not labeled insane by the text, Samad Iqbal from *White Teeth* lives on the edge of normalcy, threatening always to fall off the cliff of socially acceptable norms. I placed him with the vet and Mad Mary because he shares with them individuality,

¹⁶ Donald Gibson, introduction to *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), xiii.

wisdoms about society, inaction and confinement. The restaurant at which he works, the Palace, distorts perceptions of him: "Outside the doors of the Palace he was a masturbator, a bad husband, an indifferent father, with all the morals of an Anglican. But inside here, within these four green and yellow paisley walls, he was a one-handed genius" (*WT*, 118). Ironically, the restaurant is both a sanctuary and a prison. Within its walls, customers judge him only according to his service. His religion, family life and personal quirks are absent from their constructions of him. He can act the perfect person.

A first generation immigrant from Bengal, Samad struggles to find a meaningful job, a happy family life and an understanding with God. Because he is victim to both misinterpretations, Samad understands the hypocrisies of idealized Englishness and fantasized Otherness. His individuality is unrecognized by either mode. Anxious about such misinterpretations, he wants to publicly announce his identity. Samad wants to wear a placard proclaiming:

I AM NOT A WAITER. I HAVE BEEN A STUDENT, A SCIENTIST, A
SOLDIER, MY WIFE IS CALLED ALSANA, WE LIVE IN EAST LONDON
BUT WE WOULD LIKE TO MOVE NORTH. I AM A MUSLIM BUT ALLAH
HAS FORSAKEN ME OR I HAVE FORSAKEN ALLAH, I'M NOT SURE. I
HAVE A FRIEND-ARCHIE-AND OTHERS. I AM FORTY-NINE BUT
WOMEN STILL TURN IN THE STREET. SOMETIMES (*WT*, 48).

To the world and specifically within the Indian restaurant, Samad is an Indian waiter, not an educated man from Bangladesh with a family, religion or insecurities. In this way, the restaurant restricts his identity. The multiplicity and contradictions of his references

highlight why I have classified him as part of the Insane: the duality of place (the Palace), conflicting labels (waiter versus intellectual) and recognition of racial inequities.

Furthermore, Samad's personal frustration lends him understanding with another outcast, Mad Mary. The two effectively communicate: "Mad Mary was looking at him with *recognition*. Mad Mary had spotted a *fellow traveler*. She had spotted the madman in him (which is to say, the *prophet*)" (*WT*, 148). The two share an insight, a state rarely seen in *Invisible Man* or *White Teeth*. Miscommunications, failed connections and erroneous assumptions, drive both texts. The Invisible Narrator remains nameless and formless because no one in the text truly knows him. We are even prohibited from fully recognizing the narrator. Likewise, Irie cannot express her desires for Millat, her anger with her family, or her personal insecurities with those around her. Finding a common link, Samad is frightened not relieved: "he felt sure she had spotted the angry man, the masturbating man, the man stranded in the desert far from his sons, the foreign man in a foreign land caught between borders . . . the man who, if you push him far enough, will suddenly see sense" (*WT*, 148). He fears her because of their mutual insight. Why? Does he fear "sense"? Would articulating his identity lead to undesired action? Perhaps Samad recognizes truth in her madness and so lends them power. Regardless of his reasons, Samad remains hidden.

Living on the social outskirts of normalcy, the vet, Samad and Mad Mary fail to find adequate voice in either whiteness or Otherness. The Insane recognize the falsity of the former and fundamentally reject the later. The group is defined by its restricted individuality. Resisting any larger categorization, Samad, Mad Mary and the vet are rendered immobile. Larger associations reject them and their pithy wisdoms. They lack

the force of a Ras and the money of a Norton. Akin to Cassandra, they recognize profound social truths but are unable to impart them. The few who listen become responsible for positive change.

IV. Independence: Breaking the Wall

“Conversion is her name and she feasts on the wills of the weakly, loving to impress, to impose, adoring her own features stamped on a the face of the populace. At Hyde Park Corner on a tub she stands; shrouds herself in white and walks penitentially disguised as brotherly love through factories and parliaments; offers help, but desires power.”

Virginia Woolf¹⁷

Social persuasion threatens to erase the individual. The power of “conversion” lies in its seeming innocence, its unquestioning acceptance. So that finally, the normalizing rhetoric erases the independent or culturally different entity, reforming it into the desired “better.” Whether in the name of love or education, the institutions of *White Teeth* and *Invisible Man* seek conformity. Mr. Norton and the Chalfens are victims and perpetrators of conversion. They seek to shape the world to reflect their own grandeur. The Insane recognize this social persuasion. The Violent react against it. But, how might this understanding and action come about? How does one resist conformity without resorting to violence? According to Freud, independence is a balance between various “group minds—those of his race, of his class, of his creed, of his nationality” (78). Each social group exerts its own force, images and standards on the individual. The “group mind” tries to assimilate him or her into its larger identity. Reading Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, we champion the Invisible Narrator and Irie Jones because they resist identification with any one group. They are the rare individuals who act independently. Both characters start from ignorance, try to conform to social norms, fail to do so, and finally reject social definitions for self-action. They become

¹⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway* (San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1981), 100.

visible persons through understanding race, history and social institutions as parts of themselves.

1. Gender Idol

Initially, Irie and the Invisible Narrator reform themselves to meld into the larger Norton/Chalfen identity. By becoming the perfect Norton “cog” or Joyce Chalfen’s child, the Invisible Narrator and Irie gain a certain cache, a trademark of respectability. Clinging to answers pushed upon them, Irie and the Invisible Narrator believe the maxim, “‘If It’s Optic White, It’s the Right White’” (*IM*, 217). The characters desire the same thick coating of “whiteness” that Optic Paint is renowned for: “‘Our white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you’d have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn’t white clear through!’” (*IM*, 217) The thick whitewashing they seek, however, can never be obtained. Attaining that English or American assimilation fails because the system depends on exclusion. If the Invisible Narrator could actually tell Norton his fate, he would not be driving Norton around.

The characters suppress individuality and independent identities for a larger cultural ideal: “I was naïve, I was looking for myself and asking everyone except myself questions which I, and only I, could answer” (*IM*, 15). Irie seeks social belonging through beauty and the Invisible Narrator through a job. The two characters share three phases of denial: explicit faith in the ruling order; emulate the norm; and, suppression of the self. Both want the whiteness of Norton and the Chalfens because they have the qualifications to dictate behavior, identity and perfection. To become a Norton or a Chalfen, the Object expunges doubts about the righteousness of those ruling and purging what is wrong. The narrator tries to separate himself from his rural, Southern roots while

Irie changes her appearance. Furthermore, the pathways toward social acceptance reflect gendered themes of identity in that Irie wants recognition of her feminine beauty while the narrator seeks a masculine business persona.

In *Invisible Man*, the narrator seeks approval from the white mainstream. The Anglo-American community has monetary as well as psychological control over him. At the Battle Royal, the Invisible Narrator has been invited to give a speech on “social responsibility,” but he becomes the entertainment. Blindfolded and forced to fight others in a prepared ring, he ruminates, “I wanted to deliver my speech more than anything else in the world, because I felt that only these men could judge truly my ability” (*IM*, 25). The same persons laughing, spitting and cursing at him are those best to judge him? Arbitrary pigmentation defines both entities: the African-American narrator exists only as entertainment and the Anglo-American audience dictates action. Pulled about and controlled much like a living Sambo doll described later in the text, the narrator lacks autonomous action or thought. The Invisible Narrator rationalizes the legitimacy of his puppeteers because of socially perpetuated stereotypes. Furthermore, those white spectators crying for blood have the power to finance his college aspirations and so have the authority to abuse him. The university like the Battle Royal perpetuates hegemony in that it continues dependence on a white majority. Stepping beyond its etiquette leads to expulsion. Independence in either sphere challenges the power relations and so those in control suppress possible dissenters.

Similar to Mr. Norton, the Invisible Narrator believes in a fantasized whiteness. Two worlds exist and should remain separate. While in *Golden Day*, the narrator despises the vet’s impertinence and his disregard of racial divisions: “Men like us did not

look at a man like Mr. Norton in that manner" (*IM*, 90). The Invisible Narrator internalizes racial boundaries to the extent that any compromising persons are threats. Persons are divided in the lesser "us," African-Americans, and the superior "men like him," Anglo-Americans. His faith in Norton's perfection allows the narrator to become the "cog." As a mechanical man, the narrator forfeits self-desire, individuality and thought. Norton gains an admirer, and the narrator is lifted from the "us" through association.

The Invisible Narrator idealizes merging with a Norton like community. After being expelled from the Southern college, the narrator is given recommendation letters to white businesspersons in New York City. The contacts embody the possibility of assimilating into an elite world of privilege: "The very thought of my contacts gave me a feeling of sophistication, of worldliness, which, as I fingered the seven important letters in my pocket, made me feel light and expansive" (*IM*, 157). For the narrator, white fascination entails avoiding minority categorization. Preparing to hand out the letters, he rehearses, "I would smile and agree. My shoes would be polished, my suit pressed [. . .] and my armpits well deodorized" because "you couldn't allow them to think *all* of us smelled bad" (*IM*, 157). The ideal person starts from the point of erasure. Actively subjugating parts of his identity, the narrator represses signs that associate him as African-American. Delivering the college recommendations, he thinks, "If you made an appointment with one of them, you couldn't bring them any slow c.p. (colored people's) time" (*IM*, 163). The Invisible Narrator has an image of how an intellectual should look (pressed suit), smell (deodorized like the white "them" not the black "us"), act (early, no

c.p. time), and eat (very little). History, Southern traits, and clothing are altered to blend into *The Man in the Grey Suit* world.

The Invisible Narrator travels to Harlem trying to distance himself from his roots, trying to emulate ideal whiteness through cutting off his decried blackness. The coffee shop incident illustrates his newfound self. The owner asks if he would like the daily special: “Pork chops, grits, one egg, hot biscuits and coffee!’ He leaned over the counter with a look that seemed to say, There, that ought to excite you, boy. Could everyone see that I was Southern? ‘I’ll have orange juice, toast and coffee,’ I said coldly” (*IM*, 178). The interaction highlights various levels of the narrator’s insecurity. Being Southern and young, he feels anxious about becoming a respected businessman in the North. Therefore, he perceives the waiter calling him “boy” and assumes the special is offered as a slander. Refusing such assertions, the narrator resists the Southern meal: “it was an act of discipline, a sign of the change that was coming over me and which would return me to college a more experienced man” (178). Becoming a corporate leader in New York City requires purging his Southern background. At the Men’s House, the narrator dreams of being on the cover of *Esquire*, “making a speech and caught in striking poses by flashing cameras, snapped at the end of some period dazzling eloquence” (*IM*, 164). He wants recognition for his intelligence and corporate masculinity. By moving North and denying his roots, the Invisible Narrator seeks a sophisticated self, befitting the university’s image.

Individuality, including ethnicity, is vehemently suppressed. The Insane, especially the vet, understand the misguided assumptions of those who would be persuaded to a Norton/Chalfen mindset. The catch is that few listen to their insights. The

Invisible Narrator rejects the vet's warning. The vet exclaims, "Already he's learned to repress not only his emotions but his humanity. He's invisible, a walking personification of the Negative, the most perfect achievement of your dreams, sir! The mechanical man!" (IM, 94) Both Norton and the Invisible Narrator adhere to the racial and power roles attributed to themselves and the other. Refusing to question or doubt the skewed relationship, the narrator is absorbed into the Norton ideal, a cog. Currently, he clings to this submissive identity. When expelled from the school because of the Norton conundrum with the Golden Day, the narrator states, "I convinced myself, I had violated the code and thus would have to submit to punishment" (IM, 147). The narrator blames himself rather than the paranoid university. If one accepts the infallibility of the ruling system, then the Object absorbs all problems arising from its inherent errors. The victim calls for or deserves punishment not the aggressor.

Irie from *White Teeth* also feels unwanted and lesser than mainstream white culture. She searches for a new identity. Too long the inanimate thing or perhaps so modern as to see a way around her Object status, she wants to become a Chalfen. Bypassing the Invisible Narrator's extension of Norton's purity, Irie desires to be a Chalfen: "She just wanted to, well, kind of, *merge* with them. She wanted their Englishness. Their Chalfenishness. The *purity* of it" (WT, 273). To her, they are England which makes her the outsider. The situation reinforces her feelings of "unbelongingness," a psychological state described by Fred D'Aguiar.¹⁸ Essentially, the self is an outcast, a social aberration without a specific place or national identity. Irie wants certainty, an acknowledged belonging. Chalfen absorption offers a means of

¹⁸ Fred D'Aguiar, "Home is Always Elsewhere: Individual and Communal Regenerative Capacities of Loss," in *Black British Culture & Society: A Text Reader*, ed. Kwesi Owusu (London: Routledge, 2000), 200.

cultural acceptance. As the pinnacle English family, the Chalfens seem perfect. For instance, their family tree depicts generations of normalcy: they have the statistically appropriate number of children, the women live longer than the men, and the lineage traces itself to 1675 (*WT*, 280). Irie's family lineage lacks even documentation. She hears random stories about past persons, and like her mother, she disregards them. She feels like an outcast because of the families' different histories and class status. The Jones's lack the money, prestige and intellectual prowess of the Oxford graduate family of the Chalfens. Irie wants to own their clear-cut identity seemingly offered by their perfect Englishness.

Entering the Chalfen's house, allows Irie perspective: "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 terribly mutinous act, wearing somebody else's uniform or somebody else's skin" (*WT*, 273). To steal "into England," Irie wears another's "skin." Her mixed ethnicity prohibits her entrance into the heart of English society. Thus, Irie identifies the Chalfen house as England, and her participation in the family as treacherous. In fact, her mother comments at various points that she dislikes Irie spending so much time at the Chalfen's. Her mother recognizes their world as a threat, the prohibited country. Being accepted by the Chalfen's household, Irie compares what she had known to what she could become. Marcus Chalfen's office "wasn't like the spare rooms of immigrants—packed to the rafters with all they have ever possessed, no matter how defective or damaged, mountains of odds and ends—that stand testament to the fact that they *have* things now, where before they had nothing" (*WT*, 278). Like the

Invisible Narrator, she crosses boundaries, sees the assuredness of the Other and wants to convert.

Where the Invisible Narrator seeks corporate assimilation, Irie looks for recognition of her femininity. Physically, her body shape and color differ from those images amply supplied by *Cosmopolitan* and Hollywood. The despondent emotions spurred by this difference lead her to doubt her national identity: "There was England, a gigantic mirror and there was Irie, without reflection." (WT, 222). The mirror imagery suggests that the individual depends on a positive social counterpart. Lacking presence, much less positive expression, Irie's body is actively denied by the populous. Thus she feels alienated, wrong.

The classroom example illustrates the futility of her search for national belonging. "Sonnet 127" offers a possible venue of acceptance, but she offers up her interpretation and self-image to a dissenting public. The passage reads: "In the old age black was not counted fair, / Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name; But now is black beauty's successive heir, / And beauty slander'd with a bastard shame."¹⁹ Irie envisions herself as the "black beauty." The illustrious Shakespeare pierced her heart, found her doubt and soothed it. Reading this text, Irie finds a new social norm that embraces her. The schoolmistress calls on Irie to describe her interpretation of the sonnet but ridicules it: "Irie reddened. She had thought, just then, that she had seen something like a reflection, but it was receding; so she said, 'Don't know, miss'" (WT, 227). Charged with independence and inaccuracy, her thoughts just like her physique are wrong. Any possibility of finding a positive reflection ends with a practical joke played on her.

¹⁹ William Shakespeare, "Sonnet 127," in *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Jean Howard and Katharine Maus (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 1996.

Mocking Irie's reading of the sonnet, a sign made by a classmate announces: "By William Shakespeare: ODE TO LETITIA AND ALL MY KINKY-HAIRED BIG-ASS BITCHEZ" (*WT*, 227). Distorting the sonnet format, the sentence mocks both her skin color and body type. Irie becomes the stereotypical African, "Letitia," who between her hair and frame is an outcast. Publicly shamed for her difference, Irie is reduced to an empty stereotype sans recognition, belonging or humanity.

Insecure about her body image, Irie wants to emulate the popularized icon of beauty. Her figure is "wrong" and "unnatural" because of its unique frame and color: "the European proportions of Clara's figure had skipped a generation, and she was landed instead with Hortense's substantial Jamaican frame, loaded with pineapples, mangoes, and guavas" (*WT*, 221). Her female individuality is slandered or in the best of situations absent from mass media images. Irie feels ashamed of her different body and so obsesses about changing it. Reading an advertisement in the paper:

LOSE WEIGHT (it was saying) TO EARN MONEY. You, you, *you*, Miss Jones, with your strategically placed arms and cardigan, tied around the arse (the endless mystery: how to diminish that swollen enormity, the Jamaican posterior?), with your belly-reducing panties and breast-reducing bra, with your meticulous Lycra corseting (*WT*, 222)

Irie yields her self-image and confidence to the Hollywood gaze. And, this public vision decries differences like Irie's. Not to dwell too much on the industry, fashion pursues and sells the perfect body that is usually thin and white. Running through the contents page of *Cosmopolitan*, titles of sexuality, beauty and personal success merge: "Naughty

Party Girls”; “LOVE!”; “8 Great Date Outfits”; “Signs Cupid’s Shot You in the Ass.”²⁰

Existing beyond the narrow limits of fashion is therefore equated with failure, low self-esteem, spinsterhood, etc. And, Irie absorbs *Cosmo*’s definitions of femininity.

Finding herself the aberration, Irie wants conformity however temporary or ineffectual. Compounded with the perfect Englishness she finds at the Chalfen’s, Irie feels like an outcast: “And this belief in her ugliness, in her *wrongness*, had subdued her. [. . .] She was all *wrong*” (*WT*, 224). Irie assimilates to the fantasized female whiteness through denying her differences. She wards off errors through “the mantra of the makeover junkie, sucking it in, letting it out; unwilling to settle for genetic fate” (*WT*, 222). The Invisible Narrator shows up early and wears cologne while Irie tries to physically morph her body. Both evade racial negativisms through distance and change. Cologne, extreme punctuality or garter belts seek to obviate the ridicule of others. The battle assumes that judgments can be avoided. Despite pain and preparation, neither character thwarts the slanders hurled at them.

The battle is over the body and the goal to change the permanent. Kobena Mercer describes the Michael Jackson phenomenon of “becoming white” through socializing hair styles: “black hairstyling may thus be evaluated as a popular art form articulating a variety of aesthetic ‘solutions’ to a range of ‘problems’ created by ideologies of race and racism.”²¹ For instance, the names applied to natural African hair such as “‘woolly,’ ‘tough’ or more to the point, just plain old ‘nigger hair’” stigmatize it (Mercer, 114). Trying to separate herself from such racial images, Irie goes to the beauty salon seeking English hair. She wants to convert her curly brown to straight, red locks. To attain the

²⁰ *Cosmopolitan*, February 2004, 9.

²¹ Kobena Mercer, “Black Hair/Style Politics,” in *Black British Culture & Society: A Text Reader*, ed. Kwesi Owusu (London: Routledge, 2000), 112.

idealized whiteness, Irie battles her physical limitations and pain thresholds. When Irie complains about the burning sensation she feels from the ammonia, the hairdresser replies, “‘Life hurts,’ said Andrea scornfully, ‘beauty hurts.’ Irie bit her tongue for another thirty seconds until blood appeared above her right ear. Then the poor girl blacked out” (*WT*, 231).

The beauty parlor is in fact filled with women who hate their looks and are willing to endure blackouts, blood, tears, etc. in order to attain that elusive perfect self. The shop “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” (Mercer, 229). They feel compelled, just as Irie does, to fight their natural bodies, converting the slandered into the mainstream. Physical beauty, therefore, requires a “war” against the physical and emotional self. Psychologically, the women are compelled to change their bodies, but for the pleasure of others. Irie wants Millat’s attention and communal affirmations of her beauty. The social judgments are not challenged because the women want conformity. Therefore, their temporary “solutions” to obviate racial slanders through hairstyles sustains hegemony (Mercer, 230).

Irie and the Invisible Narrator become the perfect children, naively believing in the Norton/Chalfen parents of the world. To become the ideal, they must alter parts of their individuality. Irie and the Invisible Narrator endeavor to “merge” with the Norton/Chalfen fantasy. Irie and the Invisible Narrator see two diametrically opposed options: the Chalfen/Norton world of opportunity or the blacklisted Other. The “I” for both definitions depends on a third person. Independent thought or action is yielded to

someone “better” able to judge. This passive identity for the Object requires constant denial. Thus, the Invisible Narrator blames himself for his expulsion from the university. Thus, when Irie’s hair falls out because of the products applied, she opts for fake extensions. Going to a supply store, she buys her perfect self: “6 Meters. Indian. Straight. Black/red” hair (*WT*, 231). The vision of straight, flowing red hair still exists despite the bleeding scalp and emotional drama. Binary worlds pivoting on racial categories will not be altered, but can be recognized and deconstructed.

2. Don’t Know Much About History

Incidents like the coffee shop and the hair straightening fiasco, illustrate a desire to erase not only a part of the character’s immediate past but also to deny a cultural history, creating a tabula rasa. Purposefully forgetting a family’s slavery or one’s Jamaican roots, the Object can be easily subsumed by mainstream beliefs. Individuality dissipates in the cultural “melting pot” because the national goal is conversion not diversity. Assimilation thus requires dis inheriting previous selves, standards and perspectives. Previous cultural “baggage” should be forgotten and the self relinquished to the majority. The minority characters in *White Teeth* and *Invisible Man*, however, resist the larger English or American assumption that they are “*blank people*, free of any kind of baggage, happy and willing to leave their difference at the docks and take their chances in this new place, merging with the oneness of this greenandpleasantlibertarianlandofthefree” (*WT*, 384).

Although both texts are written in post-colonial contexts, the theme of erasure and constructed subjectivity look hauntingly similar to the times of Empire: “If the Primitive has no history at all, it is only because the theoretical standard-bearers of Civilization

have managed first to construct a Primitive Subject and then to obliterate *his* history” (Goldberg, 157). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the first definition of history is “a relation of incidents (in early use, either true or imaginary; later only of those professedly true); a narrative, tale, story.”²² Thus, “history” is a story based on how the present perceives the past rather than on historical accuracy. Specific events are rewritten, twisted to accommodate the current fad. Thus, the fitting warning from *White Teeth*: “But surely to tell these tall 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). Conceptions of former persons and events are fluid. The “truth” about an ethnic or personal past changes with author, time and perspective. Identity formation, therefore, necessities embracing a cultural mythology while also questioning it. Irie and the Invisible Narrator differ the Violent, for instance, because understanding stereotypes does not lead them to fantasize about Otherness.

Aptly named “root canals” in *White Teeth*, generational adventures, lessons and mistakes aid the present. Irie while in her grandmother’s basement asks about her great-grandmother from Jamaica, her mysterious white ancestor Captain Durham and the family’s religious beginnings. With the development of these figures, Irie claims her past:

This all *belonged* to her, her birthright, like a pair of pearl earrings or a post office box. X marks the spot, and Irie put an X on everything she found, collecting bits and pieces (birth certificates, maps, army repots, news articles) and storing them

²² *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. “history.” [database on-line]; available from <http://80-proquest.umi.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu>. 3 November 2003.

under the sofa, so that as if by osmosis the richness of them would pass through the fabric while she was sleeping and seep right into her (*WT*, 331).

Immersed by these artifacts, Irie reevaluates those events once thought unimportant (Squires, 46). Fascinated but not consumed, she can analyze her Jamaican roots against the Chalfens's "immaculate" history. Acknowledging her former obsession with the Chalfens and the importance of her immigrant history, Irie constructs a complex, pastiche identity: immediate past, former idols, popular culture, cultural images, social pressures, etc. Formerly burdened by her immigrant past, Irie converts her "baggage" into "riches" (*WT*, 278; 331). Reclaiming those artifacts, Irie questions former hopes of assimilation and avoidance of history. Her doubt separates her from the Violent and the Chalfens who accept the status quo.

In the same manner, the Invisible Narrator recognizes how identity is shaped by history. Throughout the text, he has collected various objects but avoids looking at them. From explicit symbols of slavery to present social stereotypes, the objects threaten the Invisible Narrator's naïveté. They challenge the perfection he attributes to Norton and his business aspirations. They deconstruct white fantasies by highlighting the impossibility of assimilation. Within the briefcase given to him at the Battle Royal is Tarp's chain and Mary's minstrel change bank. The briefcase represents his former faith in Norton's salvation, the chain reminds him of a slavery still continuing, and the bank mocks racial progression. Although mentally and physically burdened with such images, the Invisible Narrator has until this point avoided them. Embracing these racial stereotypes and his former idealizations prompts truth, vision: "I was in a deep basement [. . .] and I realized that to light my way out I would have to burn every paper in the brief

case” (567). The papers within the briefcase are: Clifton’s Sambo doll, his high school diploma, an anonymous threat, and his Brotherhood name.

Each object represents some problem with the established order. For instance, Sambo symbolizes “what blacks should be” according to 1940s mainstream, white culture. According to Freccero, such a cultural production is a “ventriloquizing [of the Other] that silences those represented” (62). Thus, the doll resembles Norton’s “cog” in that both deny humanity to the minority. The Invisible Narrator was the doll: “I saw a short pot-bellied man look down, then up at me with amazement and explode with laughter, pointing from me to the doll, rocking” (*IM*, 433). He believed in the purity of social institutions, like his college or the Brotherhood. These establishments in turn tried to hide their hypocrisies. Through burning these images, the Invisible Narrator drains their power and destroys what fear or awe he formerly felt towards them. Confronting these symbols, he negates their influences over his identity, actions and thought.

The two characters recognize, embrace and move beyond racial fantasies. Irie clings to the bric-a-brac found in her grandmother’s basement for the same reason the Invisible Narrator burns his papers: resolution. The slurs and larger social judgments persist, but these prejudices are challenged. The question becomes, why do Irie and the Invisible Narrator resist emulating the Violent? Perhaps misled by one group identity, they refuse to be duped by another group’s idealizations. Taking such lessons offered by both the Insane and the Violent, Irie and the Invisible Narrator create personal composites of themselves that combine former idealizations, cultural history, independent thought, and personal action.

3. Free at Last, Free at Last

Moving beyond the false ideals requires awareness of the hypocrisy of either a Norton/Chalfen or Violent assimilation. The former denies a cultural history and personal humanity while the later precipitates anarchy based on media images of an ethnic past. Defiant individuals, the Insane reject any group identification but their freedoms are limited. Irie and the Invisible Narrator are unique in that they watch all three pathways and they pass through two of them. Initially they seek absorption with the larger white community of the Norton/Chalfen variety, those self-acclaimed progressives who misguidedly perpetuate racial elitism. Then the two characters veer toward the Insane, those who recognize racial practices and resist any conformity. The Invisible Narrator and Irie become individuals acting freely within and beyond social categories like the Violent or the Insane. Freedom of self and thought comes through hibernation for both characters. Oddly enough, the theme of “going underground” translates across the texts: Irie leaves for her grandmother’s while the Invisible Narrator lives in the basement of an apartment building.

Akin to a meditative sabbatical, hibernation allows adjustment. A retreat separates the self from surrounding pressures, images and perceptions. Such a free space resists obsessions like those seen with Norton, Joyce Chalfen and the Violent. Frustrated with her family and their constant disagreements, Irie lashes out: “But she didn’t want it anymore, she was tired of it. She was sick of never getting the whole truth. She was returning to sender” (*WT*, 314). At this point in the text, Irie shifts from a passive to an active character. She moves into her grandmother’s basement apartment. The new space permits mental change because her family problems and the Chalfen perfection can be

analyzed. The title of this chapter is “Chalfenism versus Bowdenism” because both theories battle during her hibernation. Irie’s frustration precipitates doubt that deconstructs her former beliefs. Within the neutral basement, Irie has the physical safety and mental space so as not to be awed by “Chalfen perfection.” Unlike the Invisible Narrator, Irie does continue relationships with her family, the Chalfens and schoolmates. Her hibernation allows contact with others but such interactions reinforce her isolation: “So she hurried back to No.28 Lindaker Road, Lambeth, relieved to be back in the darkness, for it was like hibernating or being cocooned, and she was as curious as everyone else to see what kind of Irie would emerge” (*WT*, 330). The cocoon metaphor reinforces the power of her retreat. The basement precipitates change, a metamorphosis that all persons acknowledge.

Post-hibernation finds Irie a woman. Body image doubts are no longer mentioned in the novel, and she begins to act in accordance with her desires. Listening to Joyce’s talk show, Irie turns “Joyce off. It was quite therapeutic, switching Joyce off. This was not entirely personal” (*WT*, 332). The mythology of the Chalfen clan is usurped. The prejudice, arrogance and ridiculousness of that “pure Englishness” is revealed, the fantasy void. In addition to confronting her former idols, Irie faces her family. On the bus with the Iqbals and Jones, she speaks out against the emotional inanity of those around her: ““Shut up the lot of you. All right? Just shut up”” (*WT*, 442). Irie continues ranting for two pages about their dysfunctions. She finds a voice, a personal expression previously stifled. No longer ingesting her awe of the Chalfens or anger about her immigrant past, Irie emerges an empowered individual. Unlike the Insane, however, her recognition and independence creates a healthy communication with the outside world.

Although the text abruptly ends after this episode, her character resists confinement like that of the vet's asylum or Samad's restaurant. Lifted from the pressures around her, Irie becomes independent in her actions: seduces the man she adores (Millat); sleeps with the man she blames for Millat's rejected love (Magrid); marries her friend (Joshua Chalfen). In a sense, Irie does "merge" with the Chalfen family when she marries Joshua. Their histories, ethnicities and anxieties intertwine in a way that defies any one categorization. They move to Jamaica and their child is the biological offspring of either twin Millat or Magrid.

Likewise, the narrator from *Invisible Man* hibernates in order to evaluate his former self, beliefs and desires. Rinehart instigates the Invisible Narrator's social retreat. A character introduced very late in the text, Rinehart is never physically present, but his chameleon reputation introduces the Invisible Narrator to a new way of thinking. Certainly other catalysts in the text could be explored, but this final role-play leads directly to his hibernation. Wearing green sunglasses and a white hat, the Invisible Narrator is mistaken for Rine the runner, Rinehart the pimp, Reverend B. P. Rinehart and Rinehart the gangster. The incident suggests that the social identity changes in accordance to outward interpretations: "His world was possibility and he knew it [. . .] The world in which we lived was without boundaries. A vast seething, hot world of fluidity, and Rine the rascal was at home in it" (*IM*, 498). Realizing the fluidity of social identity, the Invisible Narrator, like Irie, becomes an active participant. He can verbalize the problems of social persuasion and so he evolves into an independent entity: "Before that I lived in the darkness in to which I was chased, but now I see. I've illuminated the blackness of my invisibility —and vice versa" (*IM*, 13). A packed metaphor merged with

word plays, the sentence manipulates “light” or truth, “darkness” or ignorance, and “invisibility” or racial stereotypes. The poetic translation could also be “light” as knowledge, “darkness” as pigmentation, and “invisibility” as personal identity. Regardless of the specific interpretation, the sentence still conveys the theme of recognition. Like the Insane, the Invisible Narrator understands the forces, meanings and dynamics of social interactions. He can now extrapolate Norton’s hypocrisies, grasp the Brotherhood’s abuse and allow Rinehart’s existence.

The narrator has resolved, at least for himself, the paradoxical pulls of race and individuality. Written during his hibernation, *Invisible Man* itself expresses the narrator’s new identity. Like Irie, the narrator chooses self-affirming acts such as writing as opposed to riding a horse through Manhattan wielding a spear. No longer an outgrowth of a larger institution like the college or the Brotherhood, the narrator becomes an independent person. Andrew Hoberek’s essay suggests that the novel is the assertion of an autonomous individual, freeing himself from corporate America.²³ The narrator, therefore, evolves from following the wills of others into finding his own voice, power and identity. For instance, *Invisible Man* opens with “I am an invisible man,” and at the expense of filling another volume of criticism about “the meaning” of invisibility, I hold that the narrator becomes visible to himself because of his final identity, his cognitive autonomy (*IM*, 3). This self recognizes the cultural stereotypes pressed upon him, the fallacy of becoming Norton’s cog or Ras’s follower and resolves the Golden Day paradox of individual restrictions.

²³ Andrew Hoberek, “Race man, organization man, *Invisible Man*,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 59 (March 1998): 99-119 [database on-line]; available from <http://80-proquest.umi.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu>. 20 September 2003.

The narrator finds the confidence to decide a lifestyle against those he once adored because he has deconstructed the godlike aura surrounding them: "I had no longer to run for or from the Jacks and the Emersons and the Bledsoes and Nortons, but only from their confusion, impatience, and refusal to recognize the beautiful absurdity of their American identity and mine" (*IM*, 559). National loyalties struggle with perceptions of individuality. Echoing the sentiments of W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, the Invisible Narrator "wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (xv). Racial slurs and pressures to conform undercut the theoretically inclusive American or British identity. All such tensions pull at the characters, but only Irie and the narrator sift through them. Individuality necessitates an uncertain mix of separating and embracing national, cultural, and personal schemas.

Epilogue: "Nosce te ipsum"²⁴

"Race as a refuge is a short cut from dealing with the condition. So long as the individual uses race as the first and last port of call to escape the panic caused by feeling and thinking unbelongingness, in-betweenness history will invoice their imagination, life will demand redress, when all along it is the art that calls for it."

Fred D'Aguair (206)

Art is the means for Fred D'Aguair, Zadie Smith and Ralph Ellison to understand "unbelongingness." Their answers temporarily solve anxieties about identity, place, history and race. Their solutions are fluid, unconfined by any one category. Ultimately, race fails to define identity. Moving through racism, the characters identify themselves in certain ways so as to grasp and usurp those prejudices depicted at the beginning of the thesis. Those persons most secure in their prowess have an anxiety floating about, fearful that the assumptions and creative histories built upon will crack. Mr. Norton and Joyce Chalfen from the first chapter are incomplete. The white American requires an outward signifier to justify his superiority. The wealthy trustee needs the Invisible Narrator, the vet from the Golden Day or the other students at the university to legitimize his higher status. The affluent Englishness/Chalfeness necessitates the conversion of others. Joyce needs Millat or Irie to recognize her utility through her superior motherhood. White idealization must have its true believers, like Norton and Joyce Chalfen, and its pledges. Likewise, the Violent reclaim racial stereotypes, converting negatives into positives. Ras the Destroyer and Millat ascribe to fantastical Otherness, the projections of Black America or Muslim Britain. Assuming one such image exists, minority identification

²⁴*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. "know thyself." [database on-line]; available from <http://80-proquest.umi.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu>. 3 November 2003.

needs followers perceiving him as the leader and an enemy, a counter force responsible for all things. Their anger and their terrorism consumes them. For both groups, racial categorization is “the short cut,” the inadequate solution to identity and of belonging.

D’Aguiar points to a self beyond specific definition, “Just when I thought unbelonging was the geographical, cultural psychic, I find it is creative too, that I lose selves along the way and acquire new ones” (204). Moving between physical and psychological states, his identity becomes independent of any one force or ideal. He is an individual, unique and changing. The Insane described in the second chapter are independent but restricted. Static in both their actions and presence, Mad Mary, the vet and Samad are the same persons at the end of the texts. Mad Mary disappears after her five pages. The vet exists only in the Invisible Narrator’s dreams. And, Samad continues living on the edge of normalcy, unable to resolve any of his religious, emotional or occupational struggles. Unconfined by place or mindset, Irie and the Invisible Narrator become fluid individuals, “losing selves and acquiring new ones.” Initially awed, they try to assimilate to the fantasized whiteness and so repress their histories, former selves, bodies, color, and families. Listening to the Insane and watching the Violent, they hibernate. Whether in a grandmother’s basement or a hole in New York City, seclusion affords Irie and the narrator time, freedom from persuasive influences.

Finally, the texts move beyond the printed page holding us, the readers, responsible for further action. The search for identity bears relevance to all. It is a universal principle of individual struggle, social identifications and personal choices. During an interview with Alfred Chester and Vilma Howard in 1954, Ellison stated the following about the ubiquitous goals of his text:

Interviewer: But isn't it going to be difficult for the Negro writer to escape provincialism when his literature is concerned with a minority?

Ellison: All novels are about certain minorities: the individual is a minority. The universal in the novel—and isn't that what we're all clamoring for these days?—is reached only through the depiction of the specific man in a specific circumstance.²⁵

Leading Ellison to a desired answer, the interviewer explicitly creates a dichotomy between Ellison's ethnicity and his occupation. His prompt rates the work, its impact and importance as lesser because the main character is African-American and the book is written by an African-American. Compellingly, Ellison resists such an assumption. Reversing the tables on the interviewer, Ellison states that all readers can identify with the main character. Humanity rather than race dictates the scope.

Through art, Ellison and Smith elucidate racial hypocrisies, resolve personal struggles and educate us, those communicating with them. *Invisible Man* and *White Teeth* offer a prism through which the world, its prejudices and beauties, come to light. Neither definitive solutions to social inequity nor representative, the texts illustrate a means of approaching identity, of confronting "unbelongingness." They attempt to embrace all readers. The Invisible Narrator asks, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (*IM*, 581). Switching from the first to second person, the quote draws us to identify with the Invisible Narrator, his struggles and emotions. We are held accountable for his trials and triumphs through our empathy. Lacking a distinct description or name, the narrator further invokes our active participation. Taking on this

²⁵ Ralph Ellison, "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," interview by Alfred Chester and Vilma Howard, in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, ed. Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh (Jackson, M.S.: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 8-9.

journey recasts how we perceive our actions: "You go along for years knowing something is wrong, then suddenly you discover that you're as transparent as air. At first you tell yourself that it's all a dirty joke, or that it's due to the 'political situation.' But deep down you come to suspect that you're yourself to blame" (*IM*, 575). We are responsible for change regardless of the surrounding situations, personal struggles or ingrained assumptions. Tradition must give way to doubt. Question rather than accept situations. And, wield power over the self, its idols and actions instead of forfeiting those rights.

Assuming we believe the abrupt ending to *White Teeth*, Irie creates her own mixed world: returning to her family's origin (Jamaica); marrying the "English" renegade; bearing a child that "can never be mapped exactly nor spoken of with any certainty" (437). The family and the child point to a future state, "when roots won't matter anymore because they can't because they mustn't because they're too long and they're too tortuous and they're just buried too damn deep" (*WT*, 437). Idealistic, the end of the text hopes for a world beyond race or history because both restrain individual independence. Lowe called this outlook a "genuine melting pot"²⁶ while Alibhai-Brown dubbed it "a hybrid metropolis."²⁷ Both critics acknowledge the discrepancy between modern Britain and the one described in the novel, but they interpret this distance as an aspiration, a hope for a new Britain. Other critics resist the romantic convenience of the ending. Too clean, too perfect and unrealistic, some rail against *White Teeth's* universalisms (Squires, 73-75). Ultimately, the "world without roots" should be a

²⁶ Jane Lowe, "No More Lonely Londoners," *Small Axe* 9 (March 2001): 166-180.

²⁷ Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, "A Magic Carpet of Cultures in London," review of *White Teeth*, by Zadie Smith, *New York Times*, 25 June 2000, sec. 2.1 [database on-line]; available from <http://80-proquest.umi.com.proxy.lib.umich.edu>. 20 September 2003.

question rather than a distinct answer, playing with its faults and possibilities. Is the ideal erasure of cultural pasts and origins, a deliberate amnesia? Or, is it a merging of selves, ethnicities and histories? Or, is it simply a rhetorical question for the individual?

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