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of an even longer story”

Mess and complexity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*



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**“The end is simply the beginning of an even longer story”:
Mess and complexity in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth***

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“Like some fallen angel”¹

Commonly acknowledged for its sparkling satire and multicultural candour, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) embraces a largely ignored feature which is anything but spotless or linearly cause-and-effect homogenous. The novel boasts a surprisingly high concentration of descriptive musings on dirt and mess such as garbage, bodily fluids, human and animal faeces, social aliens and alleged sexual filth. In paying attention to these particulars this essay will propose a more inclusive understanding of the metropolis novel.

Reviews of Smith’s tragicomic generational saga have generally praised its humoristic ridicule of the positives and negatives of London’s transnational urbanism,² celebrating its “post-racial” (Alibhai-Brown), “incredibly optimistic portrayal of life in multicultural London” (O’Connell) and its offer of a “corrective to England’s distorting mirror” (Jaggi). It is the intention of this reader to go beyond views of the novel as festive comment upon urban patchworks, tracing its repeated narrative and linguistic play with dirt and forms disrupted into main themes of personal and collective identity. It will be a reading of its “unposh contemporaneity”, in keeping with Sukhdev Sandhu, from perspectives as diverse as psychoanalysis and complexity theory in social sciences. This is not to argue that the text lacks in representational engagement with the British capital’s multicultural *contact-zone*³ However, emphasizing the narrative’s metaphoric reflections on mess, manifest throughout, present analyses concentrate on a transnational, threshold comprehension of the novel’s same-other, order-disorder negotiations. The interactive network, not mere coexistence, of distinct elements and people are to be highlighted. Overall, discussions will fall into three sections, expanding

outwards as close readings of exemplary passages come to serve as theoretical springboards for problematizing the polluting smear of cultural and ancestral history, linking these to wider perspectives on the complex and *glocal*⁴ present day.

“The angry man, the masturbating man”

Notably, the novel opens in a halal butcher’s back yard where life and death, human and animal uncannily coincide amidst butchered corpses, bloodshed and the infestation of pigeon droppings. Central character Archibald Jones lies sprawled over the steering wheel of his Cavalier Musketeer - in a Rushdiean echo of falling angels Chamcha and Farishta - waiting for exhaust fumes to send him to his death. However, some foresight or unfounded logic - “stuff that Makes Shit Happen” (4) - takes on a directive role, deciding that life will find a way. “To be born again ... first you have to die. Ho ji! Ho ji!” (Rushdie 3).

Significantly, Cricklewood Broadway, emporium of trash and grease, is the place of rebirth and the narrative’s filthy point of departure. The crickle - not holly - of the Broadway articulates the crack and pickle characteristic of the unglamorous London backdrop inaugurated, “this nasty urban street” (4) launched from first sentence. Paradoxically, excrement saves Archie’s life, seeing as this worldly reject brings Mo Hussein-Ishmael out to swing a meat cleaver in an immigrant’s parodist version of English cricket, one critic noted, at “the flow of dribbling purple” (5). One swipe satirically ends the lives of six birds and saves one man, because, as Mo says, “No one gasses himself on my property ... We are not licensed.” (7). Life’s waste products comprise a reverse platform for life and text, and are subsequently installed as narrative signposts.

The story goes on to outline the (mis)fortunes of Archie Jones and his Second World War mate Samad Iqbal and the lives of their families in late twentieth century London. Defying historical chronology and structural linearity, the viewpoint is passed disorderly between present and past

characters, only occasionally interrupted by an all-seeing narrator's frequently satiric commentation upon states of affairs and contemplation of wide world matters. The novel becomes a timely and geographical plurality encompassing, in interplay with the Bangladeshi Iqbals and British Jamaican Joneses, animal rights activists, Muslim extremists, Jehovah's Witnesses, eugenicists, halal butchers and pub owners, always with the metropolis as collective and personal reference point.

Faeces, spit and semen, broken bones and dead bodies. Smith's London is brimming with filthy ghosts, like a Dickensian fog haunting its inhabitants. Ironically, "the smelly bustle of black, white, brown and yellow shuffling up and down the high street" (179) are largely preoccupied with pursuits of bodily and cultural purity. Nevertheless, although fear "of infection, penetration, miscegenation ... is both the most irrational and natural feeling in the world" (327), human disruption, figurative or actual, emerge continuously and at diverse stages: Samad Iqbal is bestowed with a dead arm, Clara Jones lacks all front teeth, the owner of O'Connell's Pool House has an abnormally big head badly infested with acne and teenage Irie is depressed over "big tits, big butt, big hips, big thighs, big teeth" (265). All in some way or other related to "the great immigrant experiment" (326) of the post-imperial era, the protagonists contemplate mixed origins, some to a lesser degree than others, and are forced to acknowledge, some more willingly than others, the extent to which they irreversibly plural.

Samad's confidence in supposed manipulative authority over events is not ignored when it comes to a process of gradual disruption. Not only does he, a self-proclaimed orthodox Muslim, erupt in impious sexual spasms, masturbating uncontrollably in lust for his sons' red haired teacher, he is repeatedly befouled by unruly "projectiles of phlegm" by homeless Mad Mary. Her potentially contagious crazy existence in the streets makes all Londoners uncomfortable. Here, in particular, the infectious threat and subsequent aversion on part of confronted subjects encourage psychoanalytical

understanding. “She is Mad Mary. And she is not remotely funny. She is dangerous” (176).

Whether bodily or allegorical, filth is psychologically located in the realm of the other and rejected as an alterity foreign to the subject. It is discarded as ultimately different and held distinct from the human self-same whether it be an invasion into mental order or the contaminating presence outside the body of bodily fluids made uncannily inanimate. Despite the degree of determined rejection, all the same, filth attaches itself to the subject in question, like Mad Mary to Samad: “She had spotted the madman in him ... he felt sure she had spotted the angry man, the masturbating man ... the foreign man in a foreign land caught between borders” (178).

This haunting experience of the dirty alludes to the uncanny, *das Unheimliche*. Ugly madness personified, “galloping down the high street on an imaginary horse” (175), comes to represent the sublimated re-emergence from Samad’s unconscious of a basic or previously conscious attachment to the befouled. Dirty shadows are realigned with their origins. Freud describes how dread and horror inducing elements used to be familiar - illustrated by the child’s proud affection for excrement, a product of its own making – and are subsequently conserved in the socially adept adult via forces of repression. Thus, uncanny sentiment is the effect of the once well-known surfacing, compelling the subject to take it into re-consideration. A familiar-unfamiliar coalition, it demonstrates concurrent familiarity and distance.

On the disagreeable appearance of foulness, William A. Cohen comments in psychoanalytical echo,

Filth is frequently so disturbing that it endangers the subjective integrity of the one who confronts it. By the time one has encountered and repudiated filth, it is too late – the subject is already besmirched by it. In this way, filth challenges the very dichotomy between subject and object (x).

That is, if the filthy is simultaneously intrinsic to the subject and the object of rejection, confrontation consequently challenges same-other dichotomy, destabilizing subjective order seeing that the foreign frustrates the boundaries of a unified self.

In *White Teeth*, the foreign other is not employed for the benefit of a clear us-versus-them discourse, but an us-and-them contact-zone perspective. In other words, at the level of individual and collective identity, the national same and immigrant foreigner may be two sides, but two sides to one matter. Subject and object are neither exhaustively different nor exhaustively integrated; they exist in the confrontation. Thus, resonances of otherness and uncanny problematics in here suggest, more or less directly, a means for examining experiences of contemporary transnational exchange of localities. “They were from the same place, he and Mad Mary, which is to say: *far away*” (178, original emphasis). Thus, mental, physical and cultural forms of mess are aligned and compared.

“Everybody’s old historical shit all over the place”

An imperative outlet from initial pigeon dropping reflections is the idea of past shit, particularly in paying closer attention to the narrative landscapes of multiple spatial and historical backdrops. *White Teeth*’s plurality of timely and territorial resonances bring 1850s’ India, Eastern Europe during the Second World War, the 1907 Kingston earthquake and contemporary Bangladesh into intimate relation with twentieth century London. A transcultural writer of the millennium, Smith embraces messy nonlinearity of irregularly entwined historical and geographical signifiers and subsequent personal and social relations, moving from the ancestral account of one character to the next.

It is important at this point to distance *White Teeth* from postcolonial traditions which have seen a tendency to wear history as a heavy bugbear, maintaining an unproductive - nostalgic and melancholy - ponder on cultural, ethical or religious roots. Here, the underlying narrative tone seems to discard bitterness for creative acceptance. Following from the philosophies of

Caribbean-American migrant writer Derek Walcott, “The truly tough aesthetic of the New World neither explains nor forgives history. It refuses to recognize it as ... a culpable force” (371). Transculturalism is necessarily a product of “The monumental groaning and soldering of two great worlds” (374). Smith’s fictional explorations of the function and character of history today acknowledge past times and places as creative discourses, not sources of negative pollution. One is always already made up of others. ““And what is a Bengali, husband, please?” ... ‘you go back and back and back and it’s still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It’s a fairy-tale!” (236).

Returning briefly to Cohen, he distinguishes two formats and applications of filth, a polluting and a reusable form, and notes the fluidity of the division. That which is initially discarded still holds potential value and can re-emerge in new fertile form. In this line of thought, Salman Rushdie adds to the interrogation of newness and its passage into the world, “How is it born? Of what fusions, translations, conjoinings is it made?” (8). Rushdie’s very questions approximate their own answers. Namely, the past is the origin of the present and newness is never altogether new, but a creative combination or re-enactment of what went before, of what is already there. In a sense, the present evolves as fertile recycling of historical excrements, literarily so in Archie’s case.

No matter the extent to which children or grandchildren of immigrants struggle to swim free of paternal narratives, the text repeatedly shows inherited pasts’ persistent presence as part of identity. There is no such thing as neutral space. Even North London “blank people” like the Chalfens, whose whiteness the Jones and Iqbal children are initially drawn to, become tainted with the disorder of a rebellious son and final FutureMouse failure. Much like a re-emergent subliminal other, history is uncannily part of the self,

A neutral place. The chances of finding one these days are slim ... The sheer *quantity* of shit that must be wiped off the slate if we are to start again as new. Race. Land. Ownership. Faith. Theft. Blood. And more blood. And more. And not only must the *place* be neutral, but the messenger who takes you to the place, and the messenger who sends the messenger. There are no people or places like that left in North London (457-8, original emphases).

People are inexorably inserted into unclear - or unclean - existential minefields of diverse cultural practices and social viewpoints. Subsequently, “they take what was blank and smear it with the stinking shit of the past like excitable, excremental children” (464).

“What’s past is prologue” (vii). Smith’s narrative prefix from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* purposely invites history to introduce the contemporary text, and life. However, foul it may momentarily be, it is not to be understood as past manipulation of the present, but an entanglement of present and past, of endings and beginnings involved. In keeping with Alsana Iqbal, “Involved is neither good, nor bad. It is just a consequence of living” (439). Influenced by human subjectivity and multiplicity, history gradually emerges *in vivo*. It thus reflects David Lowenthal’s⁵ conclusions on the (not) foreign country of the past - “Only by altering and adding to what we save does our heritage remain real, alive, and comprehensible” (411) - as well as Homi Bhabha’s encouragement that “in restaging the past it introduces other incommensurable cultural temporalities into the invention of tradition” (2). History is not merely acted out according to received templates, but *re-enacted*, implying a shift in context and actor, and necessarily ensuing change in meaning and form. It follows from Bhabha that any reproductive attempt to copy a form will subsequently come to produce a retake of the original, something new. Paradoxically, it is a play upon similarities and differences concurrently. Presence-absence dualism becomes the source of confusing and disorienting category overlap and, as will appear in detail below, today

emerges as an experience of transit “where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity” (Bhabha 1).

To sum up, in the light of textual reflections on uncanny otherness, with specific regard to historical and cultural identity, Smith’s satiric “unflinching and honest stare” (83) upon multiculturalism neither recognizes an all-inclusive fusion of pluralisms into melting pot harmony nor does it unconditionally celebrate London’s mosaic contact-zone. Precisely by way of investment in the chaotic dialogue of *heimlich-unheimlich*, the novel proffers a straightforward mode of imagining complex socio-cultural interplay, an inescapably tainted and unsound human reality. In the words of the author, “It’s about uniting a certain kind of cerebral experience with something more from the stomach or the gut” (Smith in O’Grady). Naturally, the majority of her literary critics are right in emphasizing the novel as a pluralism of concurrent multicultural positives and negatives. Nevertheless, closing novel analyses with arrival at positive-negative coexistence would fail to grasp the mechanisms at work, mechanisms whose exploration Smith, as we have seen, pays considerable narrative attention. This is not to argue that the author holds clarifying responses to the problematics presented, but viewing the novel as introspection into active transition and threshold selves, *White Teeth* clears a scene for additional speculations on the personal and collective in transcultural urbanism.

A socio-political perspective drawn from musings on the workings of otherness, one might mention Julia Kristeva’s considerations in *Strangers to Ourselves*. She argues, in view of Freudian arguments, that awareness of same-other coexistence’ activation of the uncanny and subsequent subject confrontation with the internal object can prove productive in social politics. “With Freud indeed, foreignness, an uncanny one, creeps into the tranquillity of reason itself, and, without being restricted to madness, beauty, or faith anymore than to ethnicity or race, irrigates our very speaking-being” (170). When forced to consider the other inside, the knowledge “that we are foreigners to ourselves” (170), she claims, we are the better equipped to

accept life with others in our socio-cultural midst. The recognition and “repetition of differences” internal may present the possibility for evading hatred towards the foreigner himself and consequently obliterate negative notions of the other in all.

“Oh what a tangled web we weave”

As argued above, the dynamics of otherness simultaneously enable and disable the subject, throwing him off course and sketching an outline for understanding and politics. In due course, the storyline becomes evident as a perpetual circling around dialectic poles of there-and-then and here-and-now. Cravings for order and clarity consistent with culture related values, it becomes evident, are not to be fulfilled or even experienced as positive endeavours. Any structure perpetually resists deterministic control.

At first glance, anticipated by Archie’s second *chance*, the random human element repeatedly comes out triumphant over any pre-programming or design. No longer static or linear, the weight of time has been lifted from the shoulders of multicultural existence. Contrary to his mentor Samad’s unsuccessful attempts to manipulate events, Archie appears the non-heroic embodiment of chance. Whenever Samad makes a meticulous choice, Archie flips a coin, and counter to Samad’s careful consideration regarding his sons’ education, Archie’s attention to his daughter’s upbringing is at best inconclusive and incomplete, “Well, it’s not up to me, love, is it? It’s your mother, really, I ...” (377, original omission). And Samad does crumble as accidental elements balance deterministic efforts on his part. At one point he complains to Irie about a powerlessness over developmental twists of fate as both his sons have abandoned their parental home and Samad’s designated plans for them, “And then you begin to give up the *very idea* of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this *belonging*, it seems like some long, dirty lie ... and I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that everything is an *accident*. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you do? What does anything matter?” (407, original emphases). To Irie, Archie’s offspring and

central representative of the young generation, Samad’s dystopian “land of accidents” sounds like paradise. At the same time, she acknowledges the utopia or “magical fantasy” notion of “no myths, no lies, no tangled webs” (402), knowing that purity pursuits would be “as useless as chasing your own shadow” (407).

On reflection, though, it is imperative not to overlook linkages which emerge between that which initially appeared chance-directed relations, but at closer introspection respond to some degree of creator determination. That is, chance and determinism as manners of progression appear intertwined; one is never truly allowed to dominate the other. Both dimensions are brought into play, leaving neither characters nor audience capable of locating precisely the driving forces, “the weird interconnectedness” (Sandhu), behind the storyline.

One textual example of indistinct progressive modes is the lives of twin brothers Magid and Millat Iqbal, “white suited, silly wig lawyer” and “fully paid-up green bow-tie-wearing fundamentalist terrorist” (407), respectively. Contrary to expectation and objective, the one sent to Bangladesh to cultivate homeland values returns “more British than the British” and the one who matures in suburban London turns to radical religion. The clear discrepancy aside, however, the twins are connected somewhat telepathically by means of minor parallel events that disregard geographical distances and affect both synchronously. For example, an earthquake in Bangladesh causes a falling vase to break Magid’s nose while a fit of laughter simultaneously makes Willesden Millat trip and break his nose on the kitchen sink. Magid comments upon such unexplainable logic, linking twins: “I don’t need to speak to him to know what he thinks. He is my twin ... Do you understand the nature of twins? Do you understand the meaning of the word *cleave*?” (430, original emphasis). For something to be cleaved it had first to be connected. At once, the twins are two individuals and coupled, interchanging selves, their doubling encompassing both a sense of order and disorder. Existing in between same and other, they disturb subjective individuality and pre-set paths, but their mirrored developments towards the extreme reverse of paternal intentions

nevertheless communicate some inexplicable symmetry. Magid and Millat are at once each others' repetition and originally distinct versions, embodying structural overlapping and confusion between same and other.

Furthermore, Smith makes a habit of confusing linearity by turning endings uncannily into beginnings, demonstrated in the novel's outset in a death wish and its subsequent progression from near-fatal suicide to victory of life in the end, embodied in FutureMouse escape and Irie's fatherless daughter. The child is the product of Irie's sexual relations with both identical twins within a short time span, thereby obscuring true paternity absolutely. Thus, not only does the story close with a new generation, life is victorious as a discourse in itself, ensuring that its mystery, its chaotic logic, remains superior to human determinism. The infant girl's very existence exercises twins' concurrent connection and discrepancy. Having simultaneously a number of and no distinct father, the girl comprises personified emphasis on complexly networked human identity.

Above chance-choice illustrations do not merely bear witness to the idea that new generations always are sons and daughters of past generations, they are existential explorations into a *maybe this, maybe that* erratic of concurrent question mark and exclamation mark. Into what firstly appears a readymade Pinocchio definition of Irie's daughter, Smith inserts and highlights uncertainty, "A puppet clipped of paternal strings?" (541, emphasis added). Albeit free from *clear* historical coordinates, the child remains existentially a marionette of the past, simultaneously liberated and bound by her paternal question mark. Additionally, when Archie appears to fall accidentally and cause the release of FutureMouse from *in vitro* destiny of pre-programmed genetic fixity, it is nevertheless followed up with a remark and exclamation mark, signalling some deliberation on Archie's part, "Go on my son!" (541, original emphases). Thus, Archie's concluding act, the action which symbolically releases built up tensions, is indistinctly intentional and accidental. The literary pendulum continues to swing uneasily between the arbitrary and informed.

Never resolving to a static response to ethnic or cultural axioms, identity is ever negotiating and redefining itself according to social human relations, adjusting itself to particular milieu at particular periods in time. Personal and collective identity are not treated as absolutes akin to bodily fixities like blood or skin colour, but subject to continual movement between physical and metaphysical levels of self-perception; looks and lifestyles for example are as valuable identity markers as race and religion. It is a tangled network of association. In this light, Irie adopts a central narrative position. Not only navigating transitory childhood-adulthood territory, she is also found pondering the conflict of loaded versus neutral heritage and finally gives birth to the ultimate chance-choice confusion.

Whereas older generations tend to cling to stasis of familiarity, the younger generation largely cultivates identity via social relations outside the one family home. For the transcultural latter, a “social chameleon” (269) self is cultivated among locality overlaps and displacements. “It is only this late in the day that you can walk into a playground and find Isaac Leung by the fish pond, Danny Rahman in the football cage, Quang O’Rourke bouncing a basketball, and Irie Jones humming a tune.” London identity is indeterminate, a home-world ping-pong of intersecting particulars. Thus, to the children of immigrants especially, past tradition and convention are no more definite or accessible than future potentials. Neither beliefs in achievable finality nor central causal rationale persist, only questions. Relations are not impossible, but they are random and subject to a both-and logic, as opposed to unambiguous or exclusive neither-nor. The identity view supported by Smith, therefore, appears equally open to the metropolitan global as well as local neighbourhood and family inputs. London is a space for negotiation. In the words of Bhabha,

It is the city which provides the space in which emergent identifications and new social movements of the people are played out. It is there that, in our time, the perplexity of the living is most

acutely experienced ... [and] that we are in a position to translate the differences between them into a kind of solidarity (170).

White Teeth echoes Bhabha humoristically. Solidarity may not be a grand scheme, but it is nevertheless established across differences, here in the act of trading and smoking cigarettes.

Everyone at Glenard Oak was at work: they were Babelians of every conceivable class and colour ... 67 different faiths, 123 different languages ... And everybody, everybody smoking fags, fags, fags ... celebrating their power to bring people together across cultures and faiths, but mostly just smoking them – *gis a fag, spare us a fag* (292, original emphases).

“The flap of a tiger-moth’s diaphanous wings”

White Teeth’s same-other, chance-choice dialogue resonates the past quarter of a century’s increase in chaos and complexity theories in socio-cultural studies. Before proceeding to an explanation of complexity theory, it is significant to acknowledge its development on a background of and, to some extent, in response to forces and effects of globalization and anti-globalization. The novel’s musing upon mess can be treated as a reaction to global-local discussions, recognizing the “interconnectedness”, the networks of known and foreign constituting contemporary societies. The author herself observes, “The world is very complex and the writers who are going to be interesting and who are going to succeed are writers who have the kind of complexity to match the complexity of the world” (Smith in O’Grady).

The present day is witnessing emergent consensus to recognize transnationalism or cosmopolitanism, not as an ideal and abstract move for one worldwide community, but as “located and embodied” (2-3) in thought and action, as Bruce Robbins has it.⁶ It is from empirical example and local place that affiliations arise. According to Robbins, transnationalism is

“pluralizing *and* particularizing” (3, emphasis added). Correspondingly, in his influential essay “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy” (1990) Arjun Appadurai disregards myths of universalizing globalization and approaches alternatively the interactivity of contemporary social situations in stressing mutual global and local processes, co-working motions for homogenization and heterogeneity that feed on and reinforce each other. Following Appadurai, today is a point of induction of new conjuncture or *disjuncture* rather. In glocal modern day, search for certainties is repeatedly and conditionally frustrated by the fluidity and hybridity of transitory local and world “scapes”. He argues,

The central feature of global culture today is the politics of the mutual effort of sameness and difference to cannibalize one another and thereby proclaim their successful hijacking of the twin Enlightenment ideas of the triumphant universal and resiliently particular (43).

Thus, “if *a* global cultural system is emerging, it is filled with ironies and resistances” (29, original emphasis). It is crucial to distinguish the contemporary as no cultural blend into unity, but a transnational contact-zone or, even better, a complex of excessive overlapping and perpetual rupture, a “moveable feast”, constantly shifting the order of localizing, globalizing networks of identity. Discarding conceptions of stasis and considering chaos theory instead, Appadurai assesses, will enhance possibilities for a more dynamic and true practice of the shared-individual room. The need is for *rethinking* socio-cultural plurality in order to remove idealist distortions of order and centre suggestions. Smith responds literarily to this complexity logic, commenting in an interview, “The reason Irie gets to the centre of the book is not really about her, but about a certain idea of indeterminacy which is in a lot of writing of my generation of my peers, about the centre always being slightly

displaced and there are a whole myriad of reasons for that” (Smith in O’Grady).

The central is simultaneously decentralized, ordered and disordered. In this sense, it is significant how the Iqbal twins navigate a relational room of distance-and-intimacy in which the pre-programmed is discarded and the accidental, and yet ordered, is given unexpected, unpredictable power. A similar motion is at work in the final movements by various activist groups towards one room. No matter the different paths taken, all directions seem to lead to the same “final space” (517). However, all individual itineraries are shattered by the embodiment of chance, Archie, who does not answer to set agendas, whether that of KEVIN, FATE or others. What appears firstly an argument in favour of one ordered room is thus confused by disordered turn of events. Even the narrative form abandons conventional structure and collapses momentarily into narration blur, “the answer to every questionnaire nothing nothing space please just space nothing please nothing space[.]” (518). Again, however, one is not abandoned to absolute chaos, seeing that meaning is nevertheless discernible within syntactical disorder, “please just space”.

David Byrne is one representative of contemporary social sciences who has applied methods and manners of thought from complexity theory as found in natural sciences into sociological disciplines. He argues that a range of distinct systems - culture, religion, gender - must be mutually considered in attempting to reach comprehensive social views. That is, systems and systemic levels are necessarily complex and in complex interrelation, thus, an understanding of a condition such as that of the multicultural migrant or metropolis is not accessible via monocausal, reductionist analysis. Byrne argues that “the trajectories of complex systems will always be directed by complex and contingent cause. History will matter ... Context will matter. Agency will matter” (105). Therefore, the novel’s final intentional-unintentional happenings are inevitably the result of various collective and personal discourses. Byrne goes on, “The same outcome might be produced by different causal combinations” (106). Despite different directions and

agendas all characters find themselves in this “logical endpoint” (517) drawn by complex, diverse structures.

Continuously, the novel displays disproportionate relations between cause and effect, for instance, leaving *the little guy*, Archie, momentarily with accidental control and influential power. This gesture can be seen to advance from recent complexity theorists such as sociologist John Urry who talks of “mobile connections”, of the social as “circulating entity” unbound by structural or human agency alone. Discarding previous systems thinking which aligned small or large causes with small or large effects respectively, complexity thinking depicts how end products do not immediately relate to causation. Rather, Urry argues, the insignificant is fused with a potential to create unexpected large scale consequences and unplanned side effects,

It is disordered, full of paradox and the unexpected, and of irreversible and juxtaposed complexity. Indeed ... the linear metaphors of scales – such as those stretching from the micro level to the macro level, or from the local to the global – that has plagued social theory from its inception, should be replaced by an alternative metaphor of complex mobile connections (2002: 58).

In fact, complexity thinking is recognized as governing force in the very introductory lines of *White Teeth*, seeing how the so called *butterfly effect* chaotically saves our model of chance,

For, though he did not know it, and despite the Hoover tube that lay on the passenger seat pumping from the exhaust pipe into his lungs, luck was with him that morning. The thinnest covering of luck was on him like fresh dew. Whilst he slipped in and out of consciousness, the position of the planets, the music of the spheres, the flap of a tiger-moth’s diaphanous wings in Central Africa, and a whole bunch of other stuff that Makes Shit Happen had decided it

was second-chance time for Archie. Somewhere, somehow, by somebody, it had been decided that he would live (4).

Luck and “somebody’s” resolution entwined, Archie’s initial choice to die is disrupted by chance just as his chance-action in the end is confusedly mingled with choice. Bound in this beginning ending resonance, the novel erupts in a *fair is foul, and foul is fair*⁷ metaphysicality covered in pigeon dropping physicality, a Greyday⁸ where anxieties towards the unknown and uncontrollable are tested, ultimately with the departure of perfectibility ideals alongside FutureMouse. Control and certainty are muddled by the messy pile of life, responding to disordered order, balancing on the verge of chaos without wholly tipping over. Neither the haphazard human element nor chance visits from historical and geographical past rooms can be easily eliminated, and thus continue to “ring the Bowden doorbell and intrude” (402).

In short, the boundaries between familiar home and unknown world are entangled and navigable. Modern experience of displacement aligns itself with complexity thinking which captures the threshold realities of contemplated object as well as contemplating subject. The human experience must not only navigate an environment of illogical constructions, it is disturbed by the inner turbulence or stability deficits in observation and interpretation, urging the subject into a state of constant interplay with others.

“We live and fucking learn”

At all levels, messes in relation to identity and such erratic processes as migrants’ both-and position are foundational features in contemporary social existence in general, mirroring and accentuating workings of today’s transcultural urbanism. Recognizing disjunctive reality, Smith understands that transnationalism is not an all-encompassing answer towards one dominant centre, one global principle, but a challenge to homogenization *and* heterogenization discourses, simultaneously bringing people worldwide closer

and loading them with local particulars. Any search for order or stasis in cultural form or personal identity is frustrated by mutually overlapping home and non-home.

“I savour living in the world, planet of growth, of decay” (1997: 140). With emphasis on the in motion, growth-decay experience, London writer Bernadine Evaristo ends her first genre disrupted novel-in-verse *Lara* (1997) and takes up a position in close range to Smith in a group of *undressing* contemporary literary voices. They make a case of not shying away from dirt or destabilization, from explorations of human waste and mess. Evaristo even dedicates parts of her most recent novel, *Soul Tourists* (2005), to a close study of piss, vomit, trash, decay and human corpses, the protagonist’s closing sentence declaring, “The earth’s centrifugal force is holding my world together” (281). The increased recognition of and response to contemporary complexity exhibited here clearly echoes Smith. The chance reappearance of Dr Sick in the ending and his central influence from a marginal position articulate a similar unpredictable, yet circular energy. “So Archie is there ... about to do something unusual, even for TV: save the same man twice and with no more reason or rhyme than the first time. And it’s a messy business, this saving people lark” (540).

Samad’s mistaken belief that Archie killed the Nazi doctor during the war constituted the catalyst of their friendship, consequently launching the storyline. As the lie is uncovered in the narrative ending, it highlights beginnings at that: the revival of Dr Sick, FutureMouse’ escape into life *in vivo* and Irie’s many-fathered child. A “centrifugal force”, life is presented as a continuous, but unpredictable movement of events and events re-enacted *and* an illogical logic perpetually throwing the subject off course. Individuals are faced with having to make sense of life which erupts in same and other, continuous and disrupted dynamics.

Bernadine Evaristo and Zadie Smith are by no means the only or first writers to impend on fictional examinations and reflections on human mess, but they are prime examples of such productive attempts, in migrant

perspective, towards complex network understanding of life in contemporary plural London. Their's are not illusive efforts to erect a "Happy Multicultural Land" (465). Alongside Hari Kunzru, Diana Evans and others they comprise a group of urban polyphonic voices who discard black-white binaries and dead end searches for assurance and permanence, embarking persistently on grey zones and insecure grounds. In so doing, otherness moves gradually from being a contaminating no-go to a fertilising resource for defining and redefining self and affiliation, opening identity onto the continuous and complex navigation and negotiation it is. The other is not central to self-understanding as contrasting mirror, but as correspondence. Historical and geographical localities continuously come together in the city where one is constantly confronted with and part of collective mess. Inescapably, "the end is simply the beginning of an even longer story" of the messy networks which constitute you and me.

Always on the threshold between here and there, now and then, the text naturally heads towards a confessional note of the author's which discards any idea of ultimate answers, but does hint at solidarity,

I couldn't resolve a lot of the issues that the book brought up. In the end I kind of threw up my hands and so do all the characters really. I don't think it is particularly optimistic on that front. But I did want to try and say that there is a lot to celebrate (Smith in O'Grady).

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise specified, quotations and subtitles are from Smith 2001.

² Adopted for present purposes is Michael Peter Smith's fixed expression *transnational urbanism*, embodying social action and actors who are either materially connected to opportunities or practices found in cities or whose

exercise of advanced means for communication or travel associate them with cosmopolitan ideas or images generally ascribed city culture.

³ Mary-Louise Pratt’s concept *contact-zone* designates a point in time and space for mutual coexistence and interaction between people and peoples, not for unifying blends or integration of one into the other.

⁴ A linguistic blend of *global* and *local*, the terms *glocal* and *glocalization* were popularized in the nineteen nineties by British sociologist Roland Robertson and later expanded on by Zygmunt Bauman. The term recognizes local and global as two sides of the same coin, highlighting the often neglected importance and influence of the former in larger worldly processes.

⁵ In *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Lowenthal argues that until the nineteenth century past and present were not radically separate. In a sense, the past was a country like the present in that human nature was not perceived as a process of ongoing development. With the beginning of modern times, however, the past became an object of study differentiated from the present condition and was considered a lesser stage in evolutionary progression. In other words, the past *became history*. Lowenthal believes that only by acknowledging the influence of the present on the past can history become a useful media to us. “We can use the past fruitfully only when we realize that to inherit is also to transform” (412).

⁶ Confer among others Bruce Robbins, Kwame Anthony Appiah, Michael Peter Smith, Arjun Appadurai and Homi Bhabha, John Urry and Doreen Massey.

⁷ Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* Act I, scene I.

⁸⁸ In Hari Kunzru’s *Transmission* (2004) a computer virus causes global technological mayhem which subsequently disrupts standing social structures and hierarchies. Consequently, “the period when there was most noise in the global system has come to be known as Greyday” (271).

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