

Reading *White Teeth*

White Teeth – A Contextualization

White Teeth (2000) is Zadie Smith's much appraised debut novel and a »huge human fresco« (Ledent 2016, 81). The novel is about three British families in London, the Jamaican/white Jones, the Bengali Muslim Iqbals, and the Jewish/white Chalfens. Because of the conjoined paths and experiences of the three families and family members, around which the novel revolves, *White Teeth* is more often than not categorized and regarded as representing »multiculturalism« (Moss 2003; Thompson 2005; Korte 2009; Matt 2009; Perfect 2014). »Multiculturalism« refers to an embattled discourse, and the various facets of cultural lifestyles that are fostered by the histories of Europe, initially, religiously grounded, othering, colonialism, imperialism, immigration, and immigrants that pose a challenge to dominant, monolithic understandings of *the nation*, and whom it should include and with which consequences (Kirpikh 2017; Baglama 2019, Kershaw 2021). Used in praise or disavow, such a term though appears as a reduction of a complex amalgamation of dynamics and strategies of exchange and encounter, of a *worldliness* that is interlinked with this long internal and external history of »Europe« and its after-effects, which are still marked by discursive and socio-economic ties.¹ *White Teeth* rather »redefines culture as unstable and open to new formations« (Sakiz 2023, 25). The novel »[...] shows a society yet to achieve this multicultural success« (Kershaw 2021, 869). Instead of reducing the complexity of the novel to this topic, I would therefore like to take a closer look at the orchestration of the evoked *life-worlds* of the novel. *Life-world* (*Lebenswelt*)² (Husserl/Hua 1976 VI: 48) is a critical term coined by Edmund Husserl that depicts the world as fundamentally *experienced*, as a historically driven, spatially situated *life-context* which is constitutive for the formation of subjects and subjectivity, and from which meaning/knowledge/power-lessness is deduced as well. Husserl's student Merleau-

- 1 Dominic Head locates this more classical reading of »multiculturalism« within a historical, generational self-understanding as different adaptations of a multivocal construction of »culture«. Cf. Dominic Head (2003). Another more recent critical entry to this discussion is offered by Justin Omar Johnston who problematizes the term by considering biopolitics and discourses on »security« and neocolonial strategies to mark and subject People of Color in specific panoptic ways. Cf. Johnston (2021); see also the critical approach of Hannah Kershaw (2021).
- 2 For an overview of the discussions on Husserl's different problematizations and understandings of *life-world*, see Lee (2020).

Ponty also stresses the formation of subjectivity and the subject-related meaning of *life-worlds* as corporeal, bodily inscriptions, and as the way we learn to ›know‹ (Brinkmann 2022; Said 2000, 9). Merleau-Ponty also interlinks subjectivity to a process in which, not only a self but also an other is constituted. As Edward Said in *The Labyrinth of Incarnations* (2000) argues:

»Merleau-Ponty's answer to charges against his blatant subjectivity is always that subjectivity is itself a universal which means that intersubjectivity, or the whole of all existing subjectivity, is the only transcendent value. ›By myself I cannot be free, nor can I be a consciousness or a [wo]man[*]; and that other whom I first saw as my rival is my rival only because [s]he[*] is myself. I discover myself in the other, just as I discover consciousness of life in consciousness of death, solitude and communication, which is heading towards its resolution.« (Said 2000, 9; Merleau-Ponty qtd. in Said)

Lebenswelt thus emphasizes the subjective formation of singular and intersubjective lives in specific historically conditioned sociopolitical, *experienced* contexts but also acknowledges their inter-relation, connectivity, and crossing (Guignery 2014, 19). *Life-world* thus refers to the *rhythm* and infinite formation of *different* subjectivities along historical and institutional structures of power. *Life-world* is therefore taken here as the interlinking, historically driven life-context that organizes the social web of *White Teeth*. The lives of the three families mirror »the lived experience of a locality« (Brah 1996, 152) and are also shaped by historically conditioned, colonial, antisemitic, racist, postcolonial, and diasporic forms of othering and experiences of »trauma, separation, and dislocation« (Siccardi 2020, 215, Tew 2014). These experiences operate along minoritizing attitudes through *different* processes of othering (Kirpikli 2017, 217). *Life-world* thus also encompasses the processing of othering in the formations of subjectivity in singular as well as inter-related, inter-subjective ways. In one of her more recent collections of essays, *Intimations* (2020), Zadie Smith explicitly refers to ›real life‹ and to writing as an after-effect that attempts to make sense of life experience as a form of resistance:

»Writing is control. The part of the University in which I teach should properly be called The Controlling Experience Department. Experience – mystifying, overwhelming, conscious, subconscious – rolls over everybody. We try to adapt, to learn, to accommodate, sometimes resisting, other times submitting to whatever confronts us. But writers go further: they take this largely shapeless bewilderment [the experience of what she calls ›real life‹] and pour it into a mold of their own devising. Writing is *all* resistance.« (Smith 2020, 6)

Life-world, as a concept that pays attention to this ›bewilderment‹ that the experience of life is, may therefore be of special importance for the way *White Teeth* displays the figures and sociopolitical structures that surround them as well as pivotal for how these are organized and narrated in specific ways.³ In *White Teeth*, the *life-world* of these three fam-

3 Pallavi Rastogi refers not only to an ›ironic tone‹ as a typical feature of Smith's oeuvre that they also describe as characteristic for this book, but also to the importance of the liminal, overlapping spaces of intimate, inner, and public outward experiences. Cf. Rastogi (2022, 242; 254 ff.).

ilies and their family members are problematized along »the endearing qualities of [the author's] sharp-eyed but warm-hearted book« in connection with the »ludicrously out of date« workings of antisemitism and racism (Taheri 2018, 114; Chisholm 2002; Moss 2008). By considering the protagonists' *life-world* as well as the subjectivity of the different ›authorial‹ instances of the novel, I wish to look at the affective economy and humor that the novel sets into play to see what they may mean and problematize.

To an extent, the (postcolonial) humorous tone of the novel has been given some attention, most often in conjunction with the ›comic English novel‹, whereby Zadie Smith is often compared with well-known literary British authors like Evelyn Waugh, Salman Rushdie, Laurence Sterne, Charles Dickens, and last but not least, E. M. Forster (Lane/Mengham/Tew 2003, 2013; Ramsey-Kurz 2005; Ross 2006; Tynan 2008; Sutherland 2010; Tolan 2013, and, critically, Tate 2016). Especially E. M. Forster has a decisive role in this regard as he is highly appreciated by Smith as a role model. She even considers her third novel *On Beauty* (2005) as an *homage* to E. M. Forster's *Howard's End* (1910) (Smith 2005, 1).

Thus, humor in *White Teeth* seems so obvious that it has received some scholarly attention. But despite its overall centrality in the novel there are only few works that pay closer attention to *how* it is used in the novel and *what* the reasons for its evocations may be beyond its ›British comicality‹ (Tew 2010, 94; Smith 2001; Wood 2001, 2005; Seeber 2010; Wille 2011); the aesthetic, epistemological as well as affective possibilities that may lie behind and be connected to the use of humor in *White Teeth* and what it may signal, are sometimes mentioned in passing but not further pursued. By considering Smith's fable for the work of E. M. Forster, in the following I propose to look at the humor employed in *White Teeth* but not just for itself (Tancke 2013) nor in order to pay attention to its ›Britishness‹ and intertextual references and indebtedness, arguments that go in the direction of construing ›national‹ literary boundaries and traits (Rupp 2010; Tew 2010; Thompson 2005; Tolan 2013), in an attempt maybe to embed and expand the scope of this canon to include works by Black British and other(-ed) writers of Color. Instead of such angles, I wish to look at the different *uses* and *functions* that the humorous inclinations and affective economy of *White Teeth* set into being within its rhetorical and narrational instances.⁴ The humorous tonality of *White Teeth* as a »comical novel«, to cite Smith (Smith 2003), entails complex poetic and poetological instances. The novel evokes different spaces of touch in affective as well as epistemological ways on different levels, through which it sets a multiplicity of meanings into play.

In *Love Actually* (2003), a non-fiction text by Smith, which is based on her *Orange Word Lecture* at Harvard University, she describes the novel as an ethical space. In this text, Smith also makes references to humor, especially in the literary writings of Forster.

4 Against this narrowing down of her text also stands Smith's stance towards language as an uncontrollable matter even in the hands of the author: »To me writing is deeply irrational, idiosyncratic, because its medium – language – has so much ambiguity built into it. That argument that Alice and Humpty Dumpty have about the instability of meaning that's the epigraph of a million graduate dissertations ... Language is the absurd bit of writing that can't be entirely suppressed or controlled« (Smith quoted in Tew 2014a). This unruly aspect of language may well come into sight in the deployment of humor in the text. See also Phillip Tew's overall critical assessment of the reception of Smith's often underestimated works (2014).

She further discusses Forster as a writer who brings in *a muddled version of the ethical mess* into the novel in which the characters are caught up (Smith 2003; see also Tolan 2013, Amelsvoort 2018), a trait of Forster's novels that she highly praises. Smith particularly emphasizes Forster's humorous strategies and distinguishes them from those of Jane Austen's rather ›proper‹ narratives considered to be humorous. While according to Smith, Austen's characters engender humorous traits through (conform?) rationalistic readings of the world and other people around them, ›Forster's folk are famously always in a muddle: they don't know what they want or how to get it‹ (Smith 2003). Smith sees in this ›muddle‹ that the figures enact the creation of an ethical quest and calls this trait the ›ethical strategy‹ of the novel as a ›good‹ and a ›value‹ that every author/novel must find out to bring to the fore in the text, in one way or another. Smith vaguely also speaks of Forster's attempt to bring ›Freudian‹ features to the novel, by which she may refer to aspects that show unconscious elements, which are evoked in the acting of the figures. These psychic tendencies indeed show themselves in *White Teeth* in the processes of decision-making, (mis-)speaking, and the errantry of memories, encounters, and experiences, which give impetus not only to the plot and its humorous inclinations, but also to the affectively riddled agency and performance of the characters. Such subconscious threads, the *clueless muddle*, can be regarded as a perplexity, which surfaces in the text, in writing, as forms of not-knowing (*NichtWissen*) and power-lessness (*OhnMacht*) (*what to do how*). Smith also binds two further aspects to the *ethical* epistemology of the literary text. These are, on the one hand, a novel's *affective traits*, which she considers to be underestimated aspects of meaning and sense-making, and, on the other hand, unresolved, *open ends* rather than ›good‹, or ›comprehensible‹ ones (Smith 2003).

This ambiguous affectivity and undecidable transparency indeed lend *White Teeth* an infectiously humorous tone, inviting more often than not, bursts of ›laughter‹, but also pensiveness, as the text opens up myriad complexities by alluding to unconscious as well as questioning traits. Smith stresses the complexity of the process of reading and seems to aim at a form of writing in which this complexity, in unresolved ways, may resonate from out of the literary text, not in order to mystify ›life‹, but in order to show its chaotic, aberrant, amalgamated, messy sites.

The novel also entails those aspects that Smith admires in Forster's work: Rather than to follow an intelligible trajectory of considerations, the characters in *White Teeth* appear in a *muddle* of ambivalent and contradictory trails of affectivity, and their actions, too, are more perplexing and baffling than ›reasonable‹ decisions. Even when they seem ›reasonable‹, they also encompass other stray and paradoxical elements. This is not only true for Archie Jones, one of the main characters in *White Teeth* – a *white* British protagonist, who due to class-based preconditions, could not attend college. The same is true of the educated characters with university degrees, such as Samad Iqbal, Archie's friend, and another central figure in the novel, as well as Marcus Chalfen, a Jewish British scholar and scientist and a third central male character. On the other hand, Alsana Iqbal, Samad's wife, who does not have an academic degree, appears more astute than the *white* educated writer of non-fiction books, Joyce Chalfen, Marcus' wife, who follows the wisdom of conventional, mainstream ›knowledge‹. Yet, in spite of these redeployments of ›knowledge‹, the novel does not adhere to another straightforward understanding of a ›good way‹ of reasoning; instead, it offers the humorous opening of these traits to ›understanding‹. It

also forges an ethical approach towards the various characters who are not weighed and valued by their ›ethnic‹ or educational backgrounds. *White Teeth*'s humorous strategy lies in the spaces it carves out by denormalizing prevalent beliefs and notions.

Yet, as Smith herself points out in another essay, *The I Who is Not Me* (2018), although there resides in an author a desire to write as if they could represent and echo any possible ›voice‹, these voices are nonetheless also bound to the subjectivity and experiences of the writing self. Smith writes:

»This is the kind of fiction I have always loved to write and read: worming itself into many different bodies, many different lives. Fiction that faces outwards, towards others. But after my book [*On Beauty* (2005)] was finished and I had a chance to reflect upon it, I could see more clearly how the I who is me ran through it all in a subterranean way. *On Beauty* is not my life, but it's certainly full of my loves, my interests, my ideas. [...] The novel is a record of my preoccupations, although they are mapped on to strangers. Meanwhile the strictly autobiographical, if it occurred at all, was deeply buried and almost entirely subconscious. But it was there.« (Smith 2018, 335)

It must be assumed, then, that this *subconscious voice* and the preferences and experiences of the ›real author‹ are close to the evocation of an ›implied author‹, and are also echoed in the activities and voices of the characters as well as the narrator, and that these voices represent and give impetus and orientation to the *epistemological* directions, the (not only humorous) tonalities of the novel take. This does not mean that the humor or epistemic *unfolding* that the novel offers is monolithic or one-voiced but that the *subjectivity* of the writing subject pervades the signification economy that the novel attempts to set into work.

White Teeth is embedded in a postcolonial sociopolitically asymmetrical world. The story is depicted here in the framework of the encounter of the two main protagonists, Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal, and their evolving, Quixotic friendship⁵ as a foundational

5 I am grateful to Achim Geisenhanslüke for the reference to the parallels between the friendship of these two characters and the relationship between Alonso Quijano and Sancho Panza in Miguel de Cervantes' epic novel *Don Quixote* (1605/15); another indication of affinity between the two works is Samad's and Alonso's war-disabled arms. On the hand as a structure of signification originating in Cervantes, see von Koppenfels (2002). Another semiotic and historical continuation may indeed be implied in these parallels, in particular with regard to the meanings of ›Jewishness‹ and ›Muslimness‹ in a European context, which seem to merge and continue here: Cervantes family line is linked to Converso origins, and it is also considered plausible that Cervantes was a Converso and thus of Jewish background, who had to hide his Jewish origins. Along these lines it is thus also possible that his novel's hero, the first European novel-protagonist ever, represents a cryptic, resistant, subversive, and self-ironic self-assertion of this lost Jewishness and Jewish Spanish history, however consciously or unconsciously evoked with the figure of Alonso Quijano (and surely not exhausted by it –). With Samad Iqbal, another character understood as a ›Muslim‹ figure takes on a similar role of social devaluation that is being ironized. This portrayal and allusion to Cervantes' *Don Quixote* figure may critically refer to a palimpsest-like resurgence of primordial forms of colonial othering of ›Jews‹ and later ›Muslims‹ (and eventually other others) – although the roles that ›Jewishness‹ and ›Muslimness‹ have historically occupied in relation to each other are of course another field of inquiry and must be seen in their asymmetries and dependencies, even within ›Muslim Spain‹. More in-depth studies on Cervantes' Converso background and its underlying dis-

cornerstone of the novel (Perfect 2016, 257; Ledent 2016, 81), which also opens up other friendships within their families: those between the two figures' wives, Clara Jones and Alsana Iqbal, and later between their children, Irie Jones, Magid and Millat Iqbal and Joshua Chalfen, and also between the scientist Marcus Chalfen and Samad's and Alsana's son, Magid Iqbal, who, it is implied, will become a lawyer and poet with Marcus Chalfen's support. There are, furthermore, other central figures in this *life-world* who are Alsana's lesbian niece, Neena. And there is Irie's Jamaican grandmother Hortense Bowden, a Jehovah's Witness. And somehow, it seems, they all grow into a big, close-knit, patch work family – that may, in spite of all atrocities and miseries that seem to divide and separate our earth, already mirror (*and* nurture?) some wonderfully growing niches of our existing and experiencing world, also on these sides of the book.

Archie's and Samad's encounter touches (in various ways) upon the history of British colonialism.⁶ Colonialism is the violent source of causation, as it were, for their encounter as well as its continuance and development in *London* as a postcolonial hub, a meta-place of different, overlapping historical trajectories. *White Teeth* thus is also a counter-narrative of and challenge to nationalist(-ic) representations of a *white* and *Christian* Britishness. The narrative of friendship evoked in *White Teeth* is accompanied by an affective humorous rhetoric within the voice of an extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator. To rephrase in another way: *White Teeth* is a novel that *unfolds* the effects of antisemitism, racism, and ›race‹ as still significant sociopolitical categories within an affectively and epistemologically loaded humorous tonality; this tonality emerges, touching upon the spaces and unwritten paths, and meanings that the term friendship harbors. Without losing track of a stereotypical imagery that is bound to the (post-colonial) other, the novel traces and displays other *folds* of togetherness and *humanity*, engendering another imagery.

Folding can in fact be regarded as an immanent humorous signifying theme in the book; it is an *image* and *act* that combines humor and spaces of touch, relegating ›reality‹ as a *life-world* with the *life-world* of the novel. Although *folding* as such is thereby humorized as a monotonous activity in the novel, it is also praised as an almost meditative,

course would be a valuable contribution to these questions. See for example the following works in support of Cervantes' *Converso* background: McGaha (2004), Wolski (2009), and Foss (2018). For a general discussion within Cervantes Studies, see Presberg (1999).

- 6 The similarities and differences between historical writing and fiction are thoroughly discussed and also still ongoing issues; I am alluding, on the one hand, to the authoritativeness of the factualization of texts and what they say and unsay, and on the other hand, to the ways historical events like colonialism have formed materiality and have given meaning to ›the world‹, to subjectivities, to ›things‹, and to bodies (in different ways, according to different con-texts). While some of these aspects have been discussed on a theoretical level as well as with regard to specific novels, especially in so-called ›postcolonial literature‹, critical acknowledgments and analysis that would inform narratological and more formalist concepts and terms as such are still rare. To my ›knowledge‹ these have not been established within narratology and literary analysis or theory in a systematic way or are dealt with in a rather ghettoized sense with regard to ›Postcolonial Theory‹. Hayden White's essay *Literature and Social Action* is still an important entry point to the question of literature as a historical text (and the historical text as literature) and its presumptions as it challenges the concept of perspective and *form* of (historical vs literary) writing/text(s). See White (1980), see also Young ([1990] 2004), Hutcheon (2005), and Fludernik/Falkenhayner/Steiner (2015).

cautious, pensive, and meaningful form of creation and *ordering*. Archie, who throughout the novel represents an uneducated simpleton but also a not-knowing, powerless yet good-willed (anti-)hero, is depicted as the folder, *folding* indeed being his profession. After the Second World War, uneducated and with war experiences that no one wants to hear about, Archie gets a job because he:

»[s]till had a good eye for the look of a thing, for the shape of a thing, and that's how he had ended up in the job at the Morgan *Hero*, twenty years and counting in a printing firm in the Euston Road, designing the way all kinds of things should be *folded* – envelopes, direct mail, brochures, leaflets – not much of an achievement, maybe, but you'll find things need folds, they need to overlap, otherwise life would be like a broadsheet: flapping in the wind and down the street so you lose the important sections. Not that Archie had much time for the broadsheets. If they couldn't be bothered to fold them properly, why should he bother to read them (that's what he wanted to know)?«
(Smith 2000, 15)

Folding can be understood as a double-edged metaphor for how meaning is *folded in* within processes of signification: You have a surface meaning while the trace of the words and significations are *folded in* on themselves, within *the paper*. The paper can be seen as a synecdoche for a Derridean, encompassing idea of *writing* and *text* in which traces of other meanings are housed, *folded* together, *attouched* to each other. *Folding* also stands for the *order* and the *ordering* in which things, signs, meanings (*re*)appear (to us). *Folding* in this way also signifies the aesthetic way in which meaning and discourse are construed and aesthetically packaged. The aesthetics of *folding* does not only depict pleasure and not only stands for the invocation of lust, a motivation (and manipulation?) of form to unleash *the desire to read*. It also speaks of a *transparent power*, a *subject* behind the folding who *decides*, who *has a feeling for how to fold* a paper in a specific way to make sure it is *read*. Archie as a *white*, male figure in his ›best years‹, years that symbolize power, activity, success, can, on the one hand, be considered as the figuration of (supremacist) *white* male subjectivity per se that is in this way mocked; on the other hand, Archie stands for a working-class, marginalized *white* position who is regularly made a fool of without his notice. This trait of not-knowing and powerlessness marks his subject-position amongst the other *othered* ethnicized positions. In Archie's case, whiteness is not a figuration of power in this sense. It depends thus how a meaning, an entity is wrapped and how it can be *unwrapped*, to get a meaning – there is not a pre-cooked meaning per se there. The novel here already inscribes and *unfolds* critically within the folds of anti-racist and postcolonial counter-discourses, another possibility of looking, as a decolonial strategy. This is not meant in the sense of excusing whiteness or its supremacist structures. But it does pay attention to instances where these three features associated with power in a postcolonial world (whiteness, supremacy, masculinity) do not collapse, and yet something else might be visible instead, here namely that (cis-male) whiteness may not always be dominant, and that it is not as stable as it seems, either, while the question of vulnerability always remains: A warning and a quest for the meanings of the ethical in the entanglements of ›knowledge‹/power. And maybe it is also a proposition to look at other forms of dominance as well, stressing the aspect of

dominance, which *we* – everyone and all of *us* – may be part of and occupy in different ways.

The fact that Archie does not notice the ridicule also shields him from embarrassment. As a narrative gesture this also upholds dignity as an ultimate safeguard and border of vulnerable subjecthood. In contrast to what is believed and seen in him, Archie may have unwillingly and not-knowingly understood, may have gained a (philosophic) insight that is more fundamental than any other rationale and capability: that things need to be folded so someone *wants to read them* at all, that *folding*, in other words, reveals firstly, the mechanisms of power, and here again Archie symbolically signifies this very power, but secondly, also an arranging subjectivity and subjecthood that stands behind the folding hands. *Folding* can thus be conceived as an elementary procedure of touch: The papers and meanings are prepared, cooked in the economy of ›laws‹ and ›bylaws‹; they undergo processes of internal and external permission and forbidding. Later in the novel, Irie, Archie's daughter, too, becomes invested in the *folding* business through a job as an assistant to the scientist Marcus Chalfen. Irie understands it as a ›folding policy‹ that organizes everything regardless whether one is in the business of ›world domination‹ or not (Smith 2000, 341 ff.). Adolescent Irie also represents innocence, youth, pure-mindedness, but she also is a strategic person that orders things nicely and neatly, which does not mean that everyone likes it that way. If Irie can be regarded as a possible proxy for the implication of a ›real author‹, and thus for authorial power(-lessness), it could be concluded that the novel itself stands for the *folding* and *unfolding* of meanings of a ›real author‹ in the paper work of writing, which is also a work *folded* upon itself.

Thus read, the novel seems to suggest to have a look at how we can deconstruct images of racialized bodies and histories without idealizing them or endowing them with forever fixed meanings and with an eye on the hands that *fold* their written, inscribed paper-meanings. Furthermore, *unfolding* can also be described as the affective, rhetorical, and deconstructive epistemological mechanism that lies in the work and performance of humor; it not only is a metaphor but also metaphorizes the work of humor. This mechanism of humor/*unfolding* is also invoked by another image that depicts repetition, difference and the possibility of change that lies in the performative; Archie is not only a folder, but also a cyclist:

»What else? Well, Archie hadn't always folded paper. Once upon a time he had been a track cyclist. What Archie liked about track cycling was the way you went round and round. Round and Round. Giving you chance after chance to get a bit better at it, to make a faster lap, to do it *right*. Except the thing about Archie was he *never did* get any better.« (Smith 2000, 15)

Tracking the traces of discursive paths, which may resemble Archie's track cycling, may be what we already do when we use language and meaning. Whether we are aware of it or just repeat them in other ways, *White Teeth* seems to suggest that the way Archie does by track cycling, we are holding on to familiar patterns. Maybe therefore repetition, the way it is represented in language, the novel seems to claim, is also double edged. On the one side, it is an attempt to find out one's faults, to succumb, out of processes of not-knowing and power-lessness, to the urge to find out what is wrong and paradoxically, to

find reassurance in the repetitive of the ›known‹, to have some form of power and control just in order to experience a selfhood at all. But in the end this self is *different* because each encounter, context, of the repetition may be different, which makes one react differently. That this psychic *automatism* might lie at the heart (or bottom) of the desire to know things is perhaps what repetition reveals, rather than a traumatic encounter as such or the desire to overcome it, the way a Freudian understanding of trauma suggests. Instead *With Teeth's* repetitive, cycled, *folded-in* claim may be that trauma is a form of non-knowledge (and remembering) that confirms itself as an experience of coming to power (and losing it on the way at some point), of selfhood and that it is just reassuring for itself. This is what it may have in common with the meditative quality of *folding*.

Folding also designates the very metaphorically utilized wor(l)ds of poststructuralist thought – another way of depicting the chasm of Merleau-Ponty's *chair* and Derrida's unfolding of the touch. Especially Gilles Deleuze refers explicitly to the fold (*pli*, *repli*) in many of his writings, and it is also the title of one of his works (*Le Pli*, 1988) in which he tackles Gottfried Leibnitz's monadic reading of the world/substance as an endless internal and external *unfolding* rather than a sample, a predetermined substance. Deleuze thereby understands the fold also as a relational connection between the self and the other, within the self (and its others) as well as outside of it, in infinite, unfinished ways. ›Identity‹ slides in this way into difference, infinitely. The fold becomes an encounter of selves and (their) others within specific but dynamic *life-worlds*. While Leibnitz can be regarded as a Cartesian philosopher who pays attention to scientific order and ordering, Deleuze in this book not only *rereads* Leibnitz but also what follows him, the Baroque, which he describes by relating it to the other of the Occident, to *the Orient*; in this way history, too, can be seen as an *unfolding* of *attouched life-worlds*: »The Baroque does not refer to an essence, but rather to an operative function, to a characteristic. It endlessly creates folds. It does not invent the thing: There are all the folds that come from the Orient« (Deleuze 1991, 227).

›Archie‹ thus occupies an undecidable position in the book that empowers him in the same time that it disempowers him. This is the mechanism of the *unfolding* that also appears in Deleuze's text, it empowers and disempowers both, *the Orient* as well as the Occident, and in this way, shifts attention to *the endless processes of becoming* rather than fixities and fixed meanings – an idea that also accompanies Smith's *unfolding* of meanings through the deconstructive functionality of humor's rhetoric and its capability to create such spaces of touch.

In a review, the cultural critic John David Ebert speaks reproachfully of Deleuze's book, describing it as a book without teeth:

»I read Deleuze books because they have teeth. His books are the philosophical equivalent of a Francis Bacon painting: you will not walk away from the experience without a few bite marks left in your psyche. *The Fold*, however, fails spectacularly on a number of levels. It not only has no teeth, it has no skull. It doesn't even have a spine. There is, in short, nothing predatory about it at all.« (Ebert 2010)

White Teeth might be understood as this *unfolding* of the senselessness with which the other is depicted. There is nothing predatory about the other. The ›implied author‹ in

White Teeth seems to open another seam in-between Leibnitzian ordering and Deleuzean folds. It unfolds the materialized structures that have dis/entangled the wor(l)d and have inscribed themselves not only into the body and mind of the other(s) but also in those of the imperial Other(s) as well. The novel deconstructs such binaries as untenable and at the same time gives expression to another (othered) subjectivity.⁷ This is its gentle (and yet effective, I think) bite marks on the psyche. An ›implied author‹ in *White Teeth* thus touches upon presupposed wor(l)dings and meanings. In doing so, they do the impossible, they use the grammar of *différance*: The work shows the effects of phallogocentric thinking in deconstructive ways by using the economy of *affective humor* as a rhetorical tool within the spaces of touch that come with friendships, which traverse the oceans of the everyday. Nothing remains but a trace of ambivalent meanings. Its affectivity, too, has a special task, it liberates the frozen parts of the (othered) self in pleasurable ways, be it through grief, joy, pensiveness, or other affective, epistemological responses.

White Teeth is divided into four chapters with five subchapters each.

The basic setting and unfolding for the development of the plot in the novel constitutes the encounter of the two protagonists. This encounter is taken up in the fifth and last subchapter of the first section of the novel. Archibald (Archie) Jones, 17, and Samad Miah Iqbal, 19, meet as British soldiers in World War II. Due to the events, they experience in the outskirts of this war, they develop a curious bond that begins with Archie's eyeing of Samad and Samad's talk-active speaking back to this eyeing as well as the racism that is at work around him. At the center of their friendship is a secret that further welds together their relationship and which is resolved in the very last chapter of the novel.

When Samad later, years after the war, decides to immigrate from Bangladesh to the ›little Island‹ with his wife, Alsana, he directly moves to London, trusting, that he has a friend there:

»[I]n the spring of 1973 Samad had come to England, a middle-aged man seeking a new life with his twenty-year-old-new bride, the diminutive, moon-faced Alsana Begum with her shrewd eyes. In a fit of nostalgia, and because he was the only man Samad knew on this little island, Samad had sought Archie out, moved into the same London borough. And slowly but surely a kind of friendship was being rekindled between the two men.« (Smith 2000, 12)

And so the friendship begins to flourish again, albeit while both figures are in quite destitute, marginal social positions. This ironic trait of their encounter around biased colonial perceptions in the mess of national/imperial understandings of otherhood and selfhood, and the bond between the two is further stressed by physical disabilities, which mirror the marks of sociopolitical underprivilege and marginalization that are inscribed in the

7 See also Derrida's *Dissemination* ([1972] 1981) and the vanishing not only of ›identity‹ but of difference as well. What remains is *différance* ›pure‹ and infinite. And yet Derrida, too, speaks from a specific (Jewish-Algerian-French) subjectivity and (singular) *aut-bio-graphy*, and his work is therefore likewise embedded in such experiences of unfolding exclusions within instances of non-knowledge and powerlessness.

body. While Samad's right hand is injured, due to a war accident,⁸ Archie has to live with a shell splinter in his leg as a result of a war injury. The grotesquery of this dis/ability is further emphasized by the characters' jobs/preferences, by what they *do*: Noteworthy is of course Archie's fable for cycling and profile as a (mediocre) track cyclist. *Track cycling*, understood as an almost obsessive repetitive movement, may signify here a metaphor for the intractability of social positions, of marginality, that cannot be overcome so easily. Samad is a waiter, a profession in which a disabled hand is conspicuous. Samad's injured hand also marks othering and speaks back to images in which the other is *made* to serve and to please, a position of disablement in society.⁹ It represents, in this sense, social hinderance as the real cause of dis/ability. Both injuries and activities may also stand for different forms of resistance as wounds that speak back to the constructedness of bodily as well as sociopolitical ableness.

The novel begins with Archie's suicide attempt. Archie wants to poison himself with carbon monoxide in his car after a divorce at Age 47. He is saved, however, by the Muslim butcher next door, who does not want any suicides near his place. Archie sees this as a redemption, drives around town and happens to meet his much younger (23 years) future wife, the Jamaican-British Clara Bowden, at a random party.

The other friendships around the two figures reflect the lives of three generations in postcolonial London: Alsana's and Clara's decision to stick together against the bulwark of their husbands' stark amity, which make them feel isolated. They regularly meet, often also with Alsana's lesbian niece, Neena. Although Alsana has nicknamed Neena ›Niece of Shame‹ and calls her in this way on a regular basis, Neena remains a respected and intimate member of the family; as she is an educated, intellectual, and self-confident young woman, Alsana often asks for her help, especially when it comes to the wider British society and the entanglements with the educated, middle-class Jewish/white Chalfen-Family: »Sit down,‹ hissed Alsana, grabbing her by the arm, ›Sit down,‹ alright, point made, Miss Clever Lesbian. Look, we need you, OK? Sit down, apology, apology, OK? Better« (Smith 2000, 346)). Neena is, furthermore, an auntie-like family advisor for Irie, Archie's and Clara's daughter: »Look, you are a smart cookie, Irie. But you've been taught all kinds of shit. You've got to re-educate yourself. Realize your value. [T]he truth is the Barbara Streisand cut you've got there ain't doing shit for you. The Afro was cool, man. It was wicked. It was *yours*« (Smith 2000, 285)).

A special friendship, furthermore, develops between Irie, Millat, and Magid, Samad's and Alsana's twin sons. They are born in the same year and grow up together, visiting the same school and sharing the same neighborhood. While in an extramarital affair, Samad repentant and afraid where this diasporic life in an un-Islamic surrounding might lead

8 See also annotation 5, p. 235.

9 O'Leary problematizes Samad's injured hand within traumatic psychic patterns that have a quite monolithic pathologizing tendency of traumatic experiences which she, in a straightforward manner, binds to Samad's sexual desire and libido; a reading that seems problematic to me as it conceives of Samad in a rather stereotypical way or can at least be understood in this way; she furthermore, instead of looking at Samad's situation in the UK, discusses their past, taking Samad's ›Muslimness‹ and relation to Islam for granted. In contrast to Samad, Archie comes off well; his sexuality and desire for Blackness and otherness is not pathologized or related to Christianity, European ›Enlightenment‹ or colonialism. See O'Leary (2013, 39–52); see also Taheri (2018, 114 ff.).

to, sends one of his sons, his ›favorite‹ son, Magid, back to Bangladesh to grow up in an Islamic environment with their grandparents at the age of ten (Mirze 2008, 193).

This is a disillusioning event for Irie as well as for Millat (not to mention Alsana), which is why they stick together even more. While entering adolescence, both Irie and Millat¹⁰ struggle with ›identity‹ issues that encompass their bodies as well as minds; in Irie's case it begins with the search for the ›right‹ hairdo and psysical appearance that is bound to images of femininity and the nightmarish experiences she makes, until she slowly can discern her beauty (Baglama 2019, 86, Taheri 2018, 115). Disillusioned though by her parents, Irie develops a close relationship to her Jamaican British grandmother, Hortense Bowden, and lives at her flat, for a while; at the end of the novel she even moves to live with her and her baby-daughter, and then lover Joshua Chalfen in Jamaica. Millat, missing his brother without knowing it, is moody and good-looking; he holds on to a ghetto-gangster prestige he has learned from the movies, gets involved in short-lived love-affairs but slowly loses track and comes into contact with a fundamentalist Islamic grouping named KEVIN (Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation).

The twins use different strategies to negotiate racism and othering. While Magid tries to become invisible by assimilating as much as possible, willing to change his name to ›Mark‹, which *marks* this desire *not to be* marked, to just *be* without much ado and to be as transparent as *white* children (making Samad furious and climbing the walls: ›I GIVE YOU A GLORIOUS NAME LIKE MAGID MAHFOOZ MURSHED MUBTASIM IQBAL! [...] AND YOU WANT TO BE CALLED MARK SMITH!‹ (Smith 2000, 151) – and of course there is a lovely reference to the very name of the very ›real author‹, involved in the novel, who sends her greetings with a twinkle in her eye; while Magid is later sent ›back‹ to Bangladesh and reappears as a perfect *mimic man* who, though not unlike Marcus Chalfen, tries to change things through science and ›knowledge‹ (both later develop a close *friendship* – and the image of the Muslim *mimic man* who becomes the poet-lawyer-to-be of the Jewish scientist Marcus Chalfen, is not without its own beauty and specter of hope), Millat's role model, in the absence of any meaningful other dark-looking idols with which he could identify, metamorphoses into a popular representation of the mafia figures he has seen and learned about in movies just when he is ›discovered‹ by the fundamentalist group that seems to offer him some kind of illusionary escape from unpromising and offensive social images¹¹:

»[A] confused pattern that transforms him from a street thug to a member of a group of young Muslim fundamentalists. The whole process originates in his awareness of the stereotypes projected unto him in England: He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelled of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or a filmmaker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and

10 It is noteworthy that Millat's figure, which is connected to the aberrant figure of the ›Muslim terrorist‹, is a much more discussed element than Magid, although they are twin brothers (also in a symbolic sense). See, for example, McMillan (2012, 617), who critically raises this point.

11 On the different meanings, images, and negotiations of radical Islam in *White Teeth*, see also Ringrose (2007).

earn his bloody keep; that he worshiped elephants and wore turbans; that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. [...] Millat perceives such fantasies as attempting to simplify his existence by using labels, easy associations (curry, turbans, elephants) and a crystallization of the social order. [...] Even in liberal Britain, in cosmopolitan London, this process turns him into an [o]ther who, for the sake of cultural stability, needs to fit into a linguistic category so that he may fit into a social category.» (Ciribuco 2017, 4)

Here, too, although all three figures are drawn and shown in an empathic but paradoxical and funny display (Magid turns to something he is not expected to become, Samad despairs as he just cannot convince his children of ›their‹ glorious ›cultural roots‹, and Millat, while staying in the UK, becomes a (mafiosi) Islamic-fundamentalist), the grief and misery that accompany their becoming, is sensible, too. In this way, the affective humorous depiction remains a complex one, laden with different, aporetic meanings that indicate the messed up ›reality‹-update of historical threads, the workings of racism on the psyche and subject-formation of the figures, but also their ability to deal with it differently, in ways that are not only painful but also pleasurable and make them *feel*, to some extent at least, happy. The humorous depiction in this way, portrays their powerlessness, but also their historically determined power to act as *agents* rather than as victims of such historically driven *conditions of* experience that are centralized, while Millat's fate, staying in Britain, signifies a threshold of powerlessness and the collapse into sheer impuissance and vulnerability.

A major influence on all three second-generation children is the middle-class, Jewish, British Chalfen Family. The Chalfens consist of scientist Marcus Chalfen, his *white*, Catholic wife Joyce, a horticultural writer, and their four sons, Joshua, Benjamin, Jack and Oscar. Joshua is Irie's and Millat's classmate and, as part of a school disciplinary sanction, they are obliged to spend (study) time with the Chalfens twice a week after they have been caught smoking a joint.

Irie and Millat are both warmly welcomed by the Chalfen-parents who subconsciously *know* very well what it means to stand at the margins from where they still act, although, on the outside, seemingly fully assimilated and part of the greater (*white*) British society. Joyce feels attracted to handsome and vulnerable Millat and, neglecting her own children, also feels an urge to mother him (yet she can only do so within *white* axioms and prejudices – but can she do otherwise? *White Teeth* seems to ask, bringing in the problem of subjectivity once again to the fore from another angle). In the end, Joyce and Alsana, join forces and get *involved*¹² to open up Millat for other perspectives. Joyce would also like to see Joshua and Irie become more than friends (a wish that is eventually granted). While Marcus is initially attracted to Irie, compliments her in well-intentioned ways, to compensate for his wife's focus of care on Millat, he even offers her a job, suggesting that she could bring some form of *order* into his office (and Irie indeed can see a need for a proper form of *folding*, as mentioned...!), Marcus and Magid, who

12 Roupakia understands this joint involvement of the two mothers as an ethical entanglement »in the very webs of affective connections they have woven« as a »pragmatic result« and an act of responsibility towards the ones they are connected to and love. Cf. Roupakia (2015, 154).

is still in Bangladesh, soon become close pen pals and develop an intimate friendship inscribed in written words.

When Magid finally returns to London with the help of the Chalfens, Irie, loving both brothers, accidentally sleeps with both of them. Irie becomes pregnant, but at the end of the novel she raises her child with her grandmother and Joshua in Jamaica. In this way, all three families are blessed with the same grandchild, forever marking a new common lineage and kinship – within and yet beyond empire, ›Europe‹ – and the world, giving an (ancient? *life-world*) a new form?

The final chapter of the novel, however, brings the three families together in a building in the middle of London on the occasion of Marcus' presentation of his FutureMouse project, a genetically programmed mouse who is supposed to die at a specific time – to ensure life in the long run.

While most of the protagonists are invited to the event and are in the hall, Hortense Bowden, out of religious reasons, as well as Joshua, who has meanwhile joined an animal protection group, protest outside the building.

These other friendships around Archie and Samad negotiate different aspects within the colonality and asymmetrical dynamics of a *life-world* and negotiate as well intersectional, diverse categories of ›race‹, class, gender, age, sexuality, and religion around antisemitism and postcoloniality. As these other stories ensue from the main story yet develop their own dynamics within a nexus of sequences of events, they can be regarded in a vertical sense as part of the main story rather than as sub-framed-stories. The interlinked stories symbolize a web of different forms of belonging based on the kinship of friendships and patchwork-family relations across ›cultural‹, ›religious‹, racialized generational borders in a modern 1945 and 1970s–1990s London setting.

White Teeth thus touches in this way upon different overlapping issues of a *life-world* within specific discursive configurations. Beyond the effects of antisemitism, racism, and colonality, the novel tackles in humorous ways the intimate relationships of the characters, who all have their different historical traces. Antisemitism, racism and othering *are* and *are not* part of the ways Archie and Samad deal with each other, the way Clara and Alsana understand each other, the way the two families and the Chalfens get to know each other and grow together. The book also reflects the asymmetries of the humanimal relationship and thus other forms of othering, violence, and exploitation that structure our everyday attitudes and lie beneath discursive language and imagery. Not only is this shown as a still existing residue of scientific genetic experimentation, but also in the everyday cycle and the naturalized meatification of animals (Buchanan 2013; Johnston 2021).

The novel tentatively also problematizes how we can speak of ›stereotypes‹ when in fact images of the other are already inscribed in bodies and therefore naturalized and materialized aspects of the way we conceive of people and gaze at others. It looks back at the images and meanings of *white teeth* and dismantles violence and power, and through humor also thematizes the horror that is bound to this image in order to liberate, to an extent at least, other(-ed) subjectivities, histories, and bodies.

On the one hand, the characters can be read as a display of othering and embodied stereotypes, but, especially due to the dialogic direct discourse in the novel, they can also

be seen as singular figures that defy such imagery. In this way, assumed ›knowledge‹, mainstream stereotypical, representative agendas, are laid out and, at the same time, challenged and changed. Processes of othering are problematized, subtly displaced, and ridiculed, while the figures preserve their singularity – outside of such stereotypes. The novel thus provides a platform for reexamining and rearranging stereotypical imagery within discourse, making the task of reading, challenging on an epistemological level – which may be why the novel is often categorized, in simplistic fashion, as a ›multicultural‹ project, but because of its humorous tone, and rhetoric, also as pleasurable. The pleasure of humor, its wit and affective economy, thus develops touching spaces in the process of *unfolding*. The characters, in any case, as well as the setting of London as the place of the other (Perfect 2014; Pope 2015), carve out space for epistemological shifts as the humorous display unleashes into rapturous openings. This is not only done through the dialogic instances of the novel, but also through the way the characters act, and the way their despair and exasperation are configured in the voice of the non-character narrator.

Friendship encompasses, on the one hand, the figuration of the processual development of the different amities as a kind of displaced, abstract, *real home*, a heterotopia, in the form of a delicate edifice of affective relational ties that bind the figures through specific preconditions or events (Siccardi 2020). On the other hand, friendship is depicted in a more manifest literal meaning as *ships*, intimate spaces of encounter and forms of touch that *connect* different histories and different experiences of racialization/deprivation within a safe sphere where they cannot be pitted against each other. On the level of the story, these friendships form part of touching spaces that the novel evokes in an affective humorous tone. These spaces of touch are a narrative tool that deals with the material of friendship in conjunction with political chasms between different and differently referenced racialized communities. While the narrator's voice stays in close proximity to the characters, it also keeps a distance to the figures through a rhetoric that teasingly ironizes their acts, but in this way also refrains from victimizing them. It does so within the incongruity of *affective humor* as Smith's ›aporetic aesthetics‹ (Bergholtz 2016, 543). In this regard, too, Smith's novel deploys what Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* terms an ›intensely, stifling human quality of the novel‹ that he describes within an ethical and sociopolitical touch of the novel in a nutshell in the following way:

»We may hate humanity, but if it is exorcised or even purified, the novel wilts, little is left but a bunch of words. And I have chosen the title *Aspects* because it is unscientific and vague, because it leaves us the maximum of freedom, because it means both the different ways we can look at a novel and the different ways a novelist can look at his work.« (Forster [1927] 2005, 39)

The *we* that Forster employs in the above passage as well as *the novelist* who, too, has a look at the work, signal a common as well as a distinct aspect between Smith's approaches and Forster's. While their aspiration towards the ethics of humor in the novel may be akin, their subjectivities deploy different threads in this ethicality in the literary text. Unlike Forster's characters, *White Teeth* is bound to the images of otherness from the other side of *white* (Christian-)enlightened Western European self-constructions. *White Teeth* may be read as a symbol of what Derrida in *Dissimulation* describes as an *E(a)st-West* rela-

tion as well as the relation through which ›the West‹, or maybe more generally dominance/supremacy, construes itself by hinting (and construing) its other in signifying processes of transference: of what it wants to be and not to be, principles of lust/unlust in which the other becomes a mirror for the constitution of the (colonial) self.¹³ ›The East‹ becomes a postponed way of what the West does or does not want to be. Smith tackles this a bit further by discussing the materiality of processes of othering and its effect on ›life‹, as it were, in the *life-world* of the novel. The question is whether it can be recognized and whether it matters:

»This technique is both paradoxical and precarious because its success depends upon the reader both recognizing that the narrator is mimicking the dogmatic certainty of her characters and *reflecting* upon the inadequacy of such structural certainty in addressing the problems dramatized in the novel.« (Bergholtz 2016, 542)

This includes the internal coloniality and violence that are bound to the experiences of Jewishness and antisemitism in Europe, and their overlap with the violence of other forms of colonialism, coloniality, and racism within and outside of Europe.

In these ways *White Teeth* touches on the abstract as well as materialized levels of the meanings and effects of concepts such as ›race‹ as a pillar of colonial ›knowledge‹ formation. From the cover of the novel, *White Teeth* is looking at (any and every) (colonial) gaze, questioning it and laughing (at it) with a wink. It is a liberating ›laughter‹ that rather than ridiculing or laughing down, affectionately and teasingly, but also undeterred and witty stands for another *life-world* beyond and yet within ›reality‹, in which the other is not victimized, but not heroized either, and instead remains an agent in liberating processes of *unfolding*.

Instead of denying or sugarcoating those injurious inflictions, *White Teeth* touches upon them in stroking and striking ways, driven by the desire, at seems, to carve out a space for other utterings and forms of experience that may reach into other futures. These, all quite existential, life-forming tracks are dealt with by a humorous rhetoricality and performativity within the different narrative levels of the novel as will be seen.

White Teeth – Paratextual UnFoldings

White Teeth, the title of the novel, may in the above sense be seen as a *folding* that borders the narrative. *White Teeth* is opened out in the novel through an enigmatic paratextual structure – a threshold instance between the narrative discourse and a meta-level, an off-text that comes *in* from *the outside*, beyond the bookcase. In doing so, the novel evokes a plethora of images and possibilities of reading. Different slices of its meaning seem to be chopped like uncooked vegetarian food for a delicious meal. With regard to the sensitive approach that the novel takes to questions of the humanimal, it may even be vegan.

13 This idea was taken up by Homi K. Bhabha to describe the function of stereotypes and the work of pleasure and unpleasure that is bound to the economy of othering. Cf. Bhabha ([1994] 2004, 94 ff.).

The title is not only a relevant paratext but also a poetological bulb. It is a bulb in two senses. On the one hand, it represents a bulb in a more literal sense because it has an enlightening effect as a connecting structural factor for the reading possibilities it offers. On the other hand, it is a bulb in a more hidden, *folded*, way. In this second sense *White Teeth* evokes meanings that are part of experiences of antisemitism and racism and is also an answer to them: For one thing, *White Teeth* seems to be a synecdoche for the workings of racisms on singular bodies as well as on a societal level of encounter. For another thing, the term ›race‹ itself is deconstructed, so as to avoid any renewed form of essentialization that would explain and *reset* thinking within the parameters of the concept.

The humorous allusive senses that *White Teeth* as a title arouses evoke different, ambiguous, injurious, and painful, as well as empowering and liberating images. In this way, the title dialogizes dynamically what it means to be O/other and self, rather than coming to rigid conclusions or a fixed alternate imagery. Humor works here as a technē that sets a poetics into work, which is versatile and *moving* in the sense of shifting meanings and in the sense of affective rearrangements. Thus, *White Teeth* does different things at once, and seems to encompass different literary functions as well in the text.

It metaphorizes the effects of racialization on the materiality of the body and in a conspiratory way, knowingly, lets the body smile at them, construing experiences of survival and invincibility. It clips together these two forms of experience and releases them within an undecidable rhetoricality that can indeed be understood as an overarching image of what the novel wants to circuit. *White Teeth* is a simple image with a complex trajectory like the novel itself.

The rhetoric of humor in the novel and the narrative voice of the extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator, the non-character narrator, stay in dialogue with the ›implied audience‹ as well as with the characters and the different voices of the figures, negotiating this complexity of the title in equivocal and pleasurable ways. In doing so, also historically determined, painful incidents that are part and parcel of the coloniality of antisemitism and racism are touched upon and find a place in the text. The novel in this way distances itself from uncritical celebrations of ›multiculturalism‹-narratives and instead *unfolds* historical and present, power-related vulnerabilities and biased discursive images, dealing with these from marginalized positions.

»If, with its immense rhetorical resources, narrative is an instrument of power, it is often about power as well« (Abbott 2021, 61). Porter H. Abbott not only refers here to narratives as the site of and for negotiations of power; later on in this book Abbott also makes the observations that »[...] narrative is a form of passionate thought« (Abbott 2021, 203). But against the backdrop of a postcolonial world, and more general, a world also knit in structures of dominance in which narratives are soaked within specific significations and imageries, power goes far beyond the notion of mere ›agon‹ or ›conflict‹ as Abbott calls it. What is negotiated in narratives is power in the far more encompassing sense of *dispositives of power*, (historically conditioned) discursive *regimes of meaning*, which are structured through different supremacist and/or colonial experiences and other forms of dominance, like cis-normativity or ableness, and which are mirrored in language and discourse in infinite forms of different *life-worlds*. Narratives thus are a testament to the impossibility of using language without making conscious or unconscious deployment of existing meanings and imageries.

The negotiation of power in *White Teeth* must also be understood against this economy of power-relations and the structuring of meanings. Therefore, the subjectivity of the narrating position plays a role: The questions *who* is centralized and *who* speaks (on behalf of *whom*?), and the question from which (however implied) political position a narrative is written. Humor can thereby be understood as a rhetorical tool to come to terms with the different, complex trajectories with which power is negotiated that rather than confirm another ›truth‹, offers power-lessness and non-knowledge as (liberating) forms of being in and experiencing the world. At the same time, this rhetorical tool in the poetics of the text unfolds as a kaleidoscope of affectivity as ›passionate thought‹. ›Passionate thought‹ in *White Teeth* means that the affective economy of humor in the poetic entanglements of the narrative is enmeshed with epistemological insights and their deferrals. It also means that ›passionate thought‹, evoked *through affective humor*, forms part of the narrative's pay-off and pleasure-promise.

White Teeth is about power as well as powerlessness, ›knowledge‹ and non-knowledge that negotiate dominant beliefs. It plays humorously with such notions – which also means that humor can be regarded as an affective, rhetorical tool of the poetics of powerlessness as well as of the power-lessness of poetics: The novel deals with the different forms of dominant signification through the affective economy of humor by rhetorically evoking and deinstalling them throughout its dynamic poetic movements. Yet *affective humor* here remains a ›weak theory‹ in Sedgwick's sense, in that it does not enforce other meanings to arrive at other ›truths‹; rather, truisms and firm beliefs are deconstructed by way of thoughtful, pleasurable dialogues, multiple evocations, and possibilities that reside in the unfinished performative economy of humor.

White Teeth not only resonates in the chapters' titles but is also depicted in different and allusive ways throughout the novel in the narrative discourse.

In the first three of the four chapters, the title of the novel reappears in the subtitles in allusive forms, depicting the biological structure of *teeth*. In Chapter I three subtitles allude to teeth: *Teething Trouble*, *Three Coming* and *The Root Canals* of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal; Chapter II entails the subchapter titles *Molars*, *The Root Canals* of Mangal Pande; in Chapter III, one section is called *Canines – The Ripping Teeth* and another *The Root Canals* of Hortense Bowden. Only the final chapter, which is more concerned with the ›present‹ situation of the characters and alludes to the possibilities of how their future might become, does not refer to any imagery that would depict parts of *teeth*. But in the rest of the novel *teeth* evokes several meanings at once. On the one hand, *teeth* names the concept of ›race‹ as well as the effects of racism. On the other hand, the idea of ›race‹ is made nonsense of, without negating its multiple heinous effects. Also, as K. Nandhini observes, »[t]eeth are white no matter what a person's race, making them a universal symbol of humanity. By the same token, they are enduring and preserved in the skull long after we die. Therefore, teeth leave a particularly long legacy and connect people throughout time« and space, it could be added (Nandhini 2019, 47).

The metaphorical sense and dramatic expectations inherent in the title *White Teeth* and the allusions to it in the chapter-title *Teething Trouble*, which promise to disclose, to some extent, the meaning of *teeth* in the novel, stray off into other directions. Instead of a possible expecting meaning, its meanings drift apart into three complex trajectories: Not only does the evocation of ›buck-teeth‹ (ascribed to Clara) negotiate ›beauty‹, the

way it is expected from a ›beautiful‹ (*cis-male-desired* and exoticized) female body, and not only does it hint at how much ›beauty‹ is a construction with null basis; it also negotiates within this trajectory the shallowness of the concept of *roots*, which signals something like ›authenticity‹, as well as of *teeth* as a symbol of 19th century anthropological and ›scientific‹ racist gazes. *White Teeth* zooms in on the idea of ›roots‹ as bodily organs in *the mouth* (and thus as a mere word, an image), showing their shortness, which stands in contrast to what ›roots‹ often symbolize in the metonymic relationship to ›genes‹ or ›blood‹.

At first sight, the title of the first chapter, *Teething Trouble*, refers to anything but ›race‹; it introduces, as a matter of fact, a ›love‹ story. The chapter describes how Clara and Archie first meet and fall in love: ›There was Clara and Ryan for eight months before Clara and Archie were drawn together from opposite ends of a staircase‹ (Smith 2000, 27). And this love story, according to the narrator, has *really* something to do with Clara's *teeth*. Here, it is indeed the *congruency* that generates a humorous tone. According to the narrator, Archie and Clara fall in love at the two opposite ends of the staircase *because* Clara lost her (*original* front) teeth. But Clara's missing front teeth, an *actual* loss of teeth, becomes a ›chance‹ for Clara who can get rid of her (according to convention) unsightly teeth, and is much more comfortable with the false ones with which she can go through life now. The false teeth are those that are expected of her, and Clara wears them, and she is in an implicit way aware of the social value that they grant her. This not-knowing trait sets her in a safe state as a character and shelters her in a cloud of innocence and power-lessness. With the loss of her *teeth*, Clara, furthermore, is not any longer a stereotype-image of an exoticized beautiful Black body, but a singularity, an individual, a ›person‹ with a singular body that has a specific, singular history: Clara is first described as ›buck-toothed‹, but then she has an accident on her boy friend's scooter in which she loses her front teeth. After that incident Clara's then boy-friend Ryan, a doomed *white* figure, becomes more and more attracted to the missionary Jehovah's-Witness-preaching of Clara's mother Hortense. While Clara loses her ›original‹ teeth, Ryan loses some of his *white* male supremacy and succumbs to Hortense's religious faith – the colonial enterprise seems to be returned to the homeland in another peaceful way. Ryan and Hortense form a patch-work family of a different kind. It is a humorous yet touching togetherness as both figures represent social outcasts and yet find each other to form another family, which is a comforting image and also a desire that may be very common but not always fulfilled, its humor thus also satisfies such a secret desire – the promise of the possibility of ›love‹ lurking somewhere in the gray zones of life's light and darkness. Clara's now straight but artificial front teeth, rather than being a blemish, intensify her beauty. Within this process, she becomes more and more the center of attention and slowly tries to break off and flee the confining teachings of her mother's Jehovah-life-style; Archie standing at the end of the staircase seems to be the right candidate to do so.

But there is not only humor involved in this deployment and ridiculing of teeth. The tragic side of Clara's *teething trouble* is not only that she loses her teeth but of all things, also her *front* teeth, an image that evokes different painful fears and a feeling of uncanniness as well. Yet, in this way the novel underscores the social conditions that condition her possibilities all the more. *Teeth* as a symbol for good health, social background, and well-being, as well as female beauty, define her social value and show critically her dependence on gendered images.

That these imageries are always already racialized is evoked by her ›origins‹, which do not actually lie somewhere *else* or in the workings of ›race‹ as such, but in the fact that »[s]he had *roots*. More specifically, she was from Lambeth (via Jamaica)« (Smith 2000, 27). That Clara has to endure a withdrawn and secluded life is not only because of the marginality of her faith, but also has something to do with the mechanism of coloniality and the imperial enterprise that *relates* Jamaica to the United Kingdom in specific material senses, »[t]he Bowden living room sat just below the street level, and had bars on its windows so all views were partial« (Smith 2000, 29); the workings of class also put the Bowden family in a specific destitute material and social place in London, as well as on a discursive, representational level of imagery within mainstream discourse, in which the novel intervenes in intersectional ways.

White Teeth gets its persuasive power not only through these affectively rich and humorous evocations. And yet here, too, the novel does not satisfy any stereotypical images of ›Jamaica‹ or Jamaican immigrants, but displaces such imagery by an individual, singular story of the Bowden's Jehovahian background. This, too, has the function of a gentle shift of imagery within an empathic humor that ensures that they are not ridiculed but affectionately fancied. At the same time this already humorized image of the Witnesses of Jehovah is interposed with a specific seriousness as the characters' stories and idiosyncrasies are centralized in the novel, and their religious otherness moves *naturally* into the background. It also makes it possible to sympathize with Hortense Bowden as she appears quirky and whimsical. In this way she is also ›protected‹ from negative images of a negligent, uncaring mother, whose daughter must endure to lose her (beautiful) front teeth.

With Lambeth being the *center* of London, moreover, the narrator suggests that Clara's ›roots‹ lie nowhere else in fact but in the heart of London itself. Her *teething trouble* is in this way relegated to her life in the UK. The injunction in brackets ›(via Jamaica)‹ again indicates the narrator's giggling, which sympathizes not only with Clara, but also with the insight that almost everyone in Lambeth is there via another location, which makes it a *natural* trait of London. The term *roots* in conjunction with *(via Jamaica)*, furtively smuggled into the text, as well as the magisterially evoked *Lambeth* as the center of London, but also as the place of the other, are combined and play humorously with the idea of rootedness and ›authenticity‹, which are taken to the absurd and shown to have something to do with class im/possibilities and effects of colonial capitalism. The simultaneous evocation of these contradictory images arouses an almost hyperbolic, hysterical humorous tone, *without* forgetting to capture the materially impoverished conditions that accompany these other Londoners' lives. And yet, the humorous poetics also paves the way for empowering and self-sustaining traits of sovereignty, which do not allow any form of benevolence and pity. Rather it is shown how the imagery of flawless body (parts) has deep sociopolitical *roots* that can also be traced in the materiality of the city's districts and *routes*.

White Teeth, in this way, is also a synecdoche for the body of the other that seems never complete and yet desired. The body of the other is always presented in an exoticized way and in parts. Against such imagery stand Clara's teeth as well as Samad's hand and Irie's discontent with her hair. Thus, while the grotesquery of the images evokes a humorous trait, their tragic side, the losses they symbolize, are touching, as is the ability to endure

the loss, to embrace it, and live with it in one way or another, which demonstrates dignity even within the humorous trait. Yet, *White Teeth*, as the title promises, is not about the other, it is about historically set structures and meanings, and about the effects of dominant images that shape the forms and im/possibility of relations: Even Irie, Clara's daughter, is embarrassed, frightened and feels betrayed about her mother's false teeth, which she literary stumbles over during »a late-night attack« when she gives her mother a bedtime visit in the middle of the night to get permission for a »year off« »in the sub-continent and Africa«, which Clara is opposed to and refuses to give.

Irie discovers the meaning of *White Teeth* as the discovery of the falseness of everything she has taken to be *normal*: »Irie looked down to where the pain was. In any war, this was too low a blow. The front set of some false teeth, with no mouth attached to them, were bearing down upon her right foot« (Smith 2000, 376; 378).

The shrieking humorous perception of *teeth without a mouth* reveals Irie's shock, and makes Irie violently aware of the tragedy of the »falsehood« of »truths« and the belief in any kind of stability, certainty, and »knowledge« that like *teeth* seem to come with a function and purpose (and bite you in the end), right before they are lost. But Irie must also bitterly realize that this instability seems to be *attached* to their very immigrant parents:

»Oh what a tangled web we weave. Millat was right: these parents were damaged people, missing hands, missing teeth. These parents were full of information you wanted to know but were too scared to hear. But she didn't want it any more, she was tired of it. She was sick of never getting the whole truth. She was returning to sender.« (Smith 2000, 379)

Rather than to make her desperate, though, this painful incidence ultimately shows Irie her own vulnerability as a limit and form of non-knowledge and power-lessness. It demands that she makes and finds her own *routes*, which brings her closer to her *origins*, her »past«, with Bus 47 and her grandmother's flat in Shoreditch, not the arty area it is today, but the infrastructurally segregated working-class area it was in the 1970s and 1980s, the *roots* of all »un-truths«.

The contention between Clara and Irie rests on a caution, a »knowledge«, in fact, on Clara's side that reacts allergic to notions in which other(-ed) parts of the world (catchword: »Africa« or »subcontinent«) appear as (inferior) laboratories for anthropologic gazes and spaces for benevolent acts (catchword: »year off«), and in which the other always remains an object rather than a subject of »knowledge«; Clara turns this around far beyond its logic:

»Even in the darkness, Irie could see Clara scowl. »Permishon for what? Koo go and share and ogle at poor black folk? Dr Livingstone, I presume? Iz dat what you learnt from da Shalfenz? Because if thash what you want, you can do dat here. Jush sit and look at me for shix munfs!« »It's nothing to do with that! I just want to see how other people live!« »An gek youshelf killed in da proshess! Why don' you go necksh door, dere are uvver people dere. Go shee how dey live!« (Smith 2000, 378)

(– And somewhere in the dispute comes Alsana's furious exclamation »*Are you saying my country is not good enough for your daughter?*« (Smith 2000, 376), which brings another (»internal«-dispute and) critical dimension beyond the point into the same critical anti-colonial gaze.

That Clara is upset and speaks here vehemently without her front teeth is a charmingly disarming humorous trait that shows her in an impeded, vulnerable position and also shows how serious this matter is to her because she is nevertheless speaking with *teeth* and without. Being made *tooth*-less in this regard symbolizes also a form of silencing that other(-ed) people must endure, and shows how difficult it is to make oneself understood from such a forestalled position. The »implied author« in *White Teeth* knows about these dynamics, and the novel carves out space for this »knowledge« to be pronounced. As Clara, in her not-knowing and power-less way, nonetheless is one of the central figures in the novel, thus, signaling a position of power and importance within its framework, her impaired pronunciation, in addition to her *other* English accent, softens her argument, »beautifies« it, empathically humorizes it and makes it more possible to listen to her annoyed tone and to record and think about what she says in a decelerated way that contrasts with her understandable anger.¹⁴ Clara's words are driven by two severe arguments: On the one hand, Clara wants to save her daughter from a »knowledge«-system with colonial historical *roots* (which means they can be changed) that still remain disrespectful to the other, and in which the other still remains a spectacle and human resource for »acquiring knowledge«. On the other hand, Clara's dismayed objection goes against dichotomized and biased images of »us« and »them«, suggesting to regard »the other« as »oneself« rather than to gaze at »them« from an unreflected position of dominance that *pretends* not to know and to be »innocent«.

It is an ethical claim that Clara demands from any approach to what »knowledge« might be, and which empowers her powerlessness. Although Clara may be »uneducated« in a meanwhile (global?) conventionalized sense, she *knows*, she can see through structures of dominance, and she *knows* other »knowledges« that are not yet part of *education*, the »knowledge«-making system. Clara reacts out of this process of non-knowledge that critically questions naturalized forms of »knowledge«, rooted in colonial history. *White Teeth* thus also stands for the reconsideration of »knowledge« and power. It can be understood as a counter-discourse and is the invocation of other unacknowledged »knowledges« that are part of (the power of) powerlessness.

In this way *White Teeth* can also be read as an aspiration to begin to build such an *earthbound homeland* on equal grounds that can be safe for everyone and will let different »knowledges« co-exist, and in which such different powers are valued.

Three Coming depicts the almost simultaneous birth of the three children of the two families, Irie, Archie and Clara's daughter, and Samad and Alsana's twin sons, Magid and Mil-lat. *Three coming* is a funny expression as it depicts the teething stage of babies. Its humor

14 On the role of language, especially English, and its polyphonic use, see Ledent 2016. Referring to Ryan's »cockney accent«, Ledent draws attention to the ways *English* is also shown in its various dialects to depict and mark *white* figures. Ledent (2016, 82).

also evokes a sweet baby phase, which is easy to relate to and which has a touching, humanizing, unifying trait. In this way the novel construes, through the affective economy of the humorous rhetoric, a *safe stage* on which the protagonists can appear and perform their way of life without being looked down upon. Furthermore, what enhances a humorous trait here, as well as a ›common‹ affective angle towards the characters that shields them from racist or racialized thinking, is evoked by the image of children as ›body parts‹, ›body parts‹ that quasi outlive the ›old teeth‹, which have already gone through life and endured its hardships. Imagining ›the babies‹ metaphorically as *coming milk teeth* generates a sweet, affectionate picture that makes one smile (in the hope, and presumed, that ›one‹ cannot *not* love babies). While describing them, the narrator speaks in close proximity to the expectant, mellow, and caring affective trail that the protagonists experience. In doing so, the narrator interweaves a vulnerable, moving, ›warm‹ tone in their humorous evocations, which again makes it possible to regard the characters not just as ›some funny immigrants‹ but as *people* who go through hard times and yet also share some happy, hopeful ones. That way, those ›foreign‹ and ›strange‹ people become one's close neighbors, just a handbreadth away in the book, next to you. The idea of ›roots‹, moreover, is in this way once again narrowed down to the body and to parts of the body, which in fact have *no* roots; milk teeth eventually just fall out, making space for the permanent *teeth* whose *roots* are limited.

The three other titles with allusions to *teeth* depict singular historical events that are important for the plot and the characters. These, too, interconnect the entanglement of historical and *autobiographical* trajectories: »The rest«, as the narrator proclaims, »that terrible thing: history« (Smith 2000, 363), without reducing the singularity of the characters' life to history or using them just to invoke historical themes.

These three titles depict the way Archie and Samad meet, »*The Root Canals* of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal« (Smith 2000, 83–122), the special family history of Samad as a part of history that never did find official recognition, especially so in imperial British historiography, and is, however, humorously mentioned in the novel, »*The Root Canals* of Mangal Pande« (Smith 2000, 244–261), and the special circumstances of Hortense Bowden and her place-bound yet singular connection to empire, on the one hand, and her life in London, on the other hand, as »*The Root Canals* of Hortense Bowden« (Smith 2000, 356–364).

Root canals as traits of family history within history, this doubleness of a contingent *moment* in history that nevertheless shapes the (internal, family) lives of people from out of external historical circumstances, is what is negotiated as *original roots*, events that have an impact on people's lives. It is as if a female* Frederic Jameson would symbolically raise her* hand and say: »Always historicize!« instead of presuming some ›natural‹ markers, because ›nature‹, too, after all has its genealogical (colonial) histories that make out its *roots* in its most literal sense.¹⁵ ›*Root canals*‹ are place-and time-bound, and this is their (only) *origin* within a historical continuum. *Root canals* thereby, rather than inferring a

15 This may in fact be another dimension of the novel, as through the figures of Joyce Chalfen in particular, but also her husband Marcus and their son Joshua, plants as well as animals, another *hu-*

›place of origin‹, refer to historically driven time-spaces where different threads meet in intersectional *striking ways* and change people's lives or give an(-other) orientation to them.

The first title of these three chapters, »The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal«, denotes a humorous tendency, which arises from a sympathetic naming of the two characters who do not have much in common. This subtle incongruity heightens expectations and suspense, mingling them with empathy and thus a playful humor. The humorous tone attached to the title is composed of four elements. Firstly, the character's full names are cited in the title, which functions like the appeal to an official invocation. Secondly, the parodying appeal of the chapter title to an official statement in its humorous function splits and doubles its effect: It announces the forthcoming of official, important, and factual information, and it derides the pretention of factuality and objectivity of official and authorized statements and documents. Thirdly, the chapter's parodic statement of an authoritative performance annuls at the same time, with regard to the story as a non-official, fictional space, its own claim to be official and reinscribes a (possible) instance of history of World War II that is missing in its official accounts. Fourthly, it exhibits a resignifying, affectionate, sympathizing resonance towards both characters as singular, non-stereotyped entities without romanticizing them or denying empire's effects and the colonality of discourse.

As a paratext, the chapter's title, is a signification structure that alludes to the ›external‹, meta-level of the narrative. It suggests to assume a directing subjectivity behind the story, conjuncting the story with an ›outer world‹ from whence it is conveyed. The paratext indicates a subjectivity – ›behind‹ an ›implied author‹ who influenced the story's discourse.

However, the title is humorous not only because of its function as paratext but also because of what it signals, inducing and at the same time questioning the notion and category of ›race‹ by harking back to a metonymic insinuation and a bodily part that denote ›root canals‹, living but rather short parts of teeth. Again, while ›root‹ alludes to ›roots‹ in the metonymic chain of ›origins‹, of the biologized colonial concept of ›race‹ and of the construction of geo-political space and ›original belonging‹, ›canal‹, as a part of teeth and as a synecdoche for the body, is metonymic to how this idea is inscribed in, is *made part of*, the body. At the same time, the injunction of ›race‹ in a metonymic chain with ›root canal‹ ridicules racialized concepts as derivative parts of a (his-)story, *told by someone*, rather than evidence of ›authenticity‹ or a given ›truth‹. As Pérez Zapata observes with regard to Smith's displacement of any ›origins‹ and ›authenticity‹, »[d]iscourses around (in) authenticity can thus unveil the anxieties derived from lack of representation and/or misrepresentation and the assimilation that racial, ethnic and class hegemonies still enforce, as well as the anxieties that arise when confronted with forms of otherness that destabilise normative identities« (Pérez Zapata 2020, 187).

›Roots‹ as an assignment to define (geographical) spaces and nationalities is humorously shown as inadequate and hollow. The reference to ›root canals‹ furthermore not

manism seems to be represented, one that addresses the bitter lives and histories of other earthly beings as part of colonial history.

only refers to *White Teeth* and makes this section of the story one tract of the issues thematized in the book as a whole, but also links it to society at large. It moreover binds Archie's and Samad's story and the fictional narrative to the history of colonialism and the British empire as well as the materialized effects and meanings it has (had) on ›bodies‹, on the experientiality of subjectivity as well as on history-telling and on *storytelling*. ›History‹ and ›story‹ become convertible and subjectivized: A narrative is someone's story and history is someone's (authorized) narration. In this respect, the appeal to ›real history‹ also supports Bakhtin's distinction between centripetal (authorized, institutionalized, archived history) and centrifugal discourses (fictional and/or oral narratives outside of institutional archives that *deauthorize*, correct the former). The humorous tendency of the chapter title, then, inherits a laborious task of discerning and knitting together, a web of possible meanings that, as it is merely laid out before an ›implied audience‹, have to be decoded, albeit on a voluntary basis that emphasizes its deconstructive propensity.

Samad's anti-colonial family history entails a mutiny *against* the colonial British occupation but remains a shadowy event that is laughed at and that appears as a lie, as boasting. It remains a haunting matter of pride for Samad, but it is never recognized within official colonial, global, or national historiography or intimate relations – there is an instance, however, in the novel, where Samad, with the help of his nephew Rajnu, who studies in Cambridge, finds an entry about his ancestor in an historical compendium, written by an A. S. Misra, but even then, maybe because the author of the book does not have a *white* British name, no one believes Samad or believes that it is ›true‹¹⁶ (Smith 2000, 257; see also Kershaw 2021, 873). It is perhaps because of this colonial ghost that Samad remains trapped in and haunted by the past, and his actions are all impregnated by the *origins* of this haunt and its non-recognition, defining his life as a series of painful and disturbing failures, especially his decision to send his London-born son to Bangladesh.

This haunting that describes Samad, as well as Clara and Archie's daughter, Irie, in different, but related ways, is also a hunt *for roots* in the sense of *a home*. The narrator lets us know this by voicing Irie's disillusioned thoughts:

»No fictions, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs – this is how Irie imagined her homeland. Because *homeland* is one of the magical fantasy words like *unicorn* and *soul* and *infinity* that have now passed into language. And the particular magic of *homeland*, its particular spell over Irie, was that it sounded like a beginning. The beginningst of beginnings. Like the first morning of Eden and the day after apocalypse. A blank page.« (Smith 2000, 402)

While humor is invoked in this passage through a focalization of Irie and the juxtaposition of those loaded concepts (soul, infinity) that have never found a satisfactory answer,

16 Hannah Kershaw indeed refers to a book written by the historian Anan Swarup Misra (1961), to which the novel may refer, entitled *Nana Saheb Peshwa and the Fight for Freedom*, which also features a portrait of Mangal Pande. Cf. Kershaw (2021, 873).

as well as these resentful thoughts of a touchingly angry adolescent who feels disillusioned and betrayed, are not in vain. They pave the way for Irie to indeed look for a *home* somewhere else. The quiet, reassuring humor also has a playful twinkle regarding an ›implied audience‹ that it ghostly evokes at the invisible rims of the narrative. The narrator hints at a narrative thread that, actually, connects Irie to Jamaica. It is Irie's *turn to Jamaica*, the first home of her grandmother on her mother's side, in a kind of back-to-the-ro(o)utes search to find some form of solace, which expands and broadens her notion of belonging to the world.

Thus, *root canals* not only questions *roots* and the violent concept of ›race‹, but with gloomy resignation also *the desire for origins* in those other ones, accused of not-belonging, on the other side of discourse. But the genuine place to which everyone assumedly belongs, *home*, remains hazy, *homeland* a mere fantasy, *attouched* to notions of ›origins‹ and ›roots‹ and other places where people never arrive.

But the liberating, joyful side of this insight is that one's *home* can be *made* (Klaeger/Stierstorfer 2015, 1 ff.), which is an essential strategy against ›inner fragmentation‹ (Siccardi 2020, 218). It becomes a blank page that can be endlessly filled with unicorn-tales, with lived narratives, with *friendships* across space and time, something that *White Teeth* stands for, too. *Home*, thus seen, can be understood as a weaving of relations, a texture of life and writing, of life-writing, on the route, along and against historiography. *Home* in this way can emerge in internal ways as well as in external ways, by reaching out to others, who, too may be instructed to similar boats of non-belonging. *Home* thus invokes a relation to others that may also be the answer to it. *Home* also seems to be *a search* for those other(-ed) countries that remain connected to the myth of *origins* and to which one may belong as well.

In Hortense's case the *root canals* lead to nothing less than a narrative of colonial rape as the very *roots* of her existence. The colonial desire for the other is projected onto (female*) bodies – and all in the name of ›love‹; although the topic is painful, the narrator finds a cheerful tone to name it anyway, and to put it center stage as a relevant and common, abusive and gendered historical trait that is hardly ever mentioned in historiography: »([O]h he *loves* her [the *white* gentleman of *Christian* descent, Durham, Hortense's mother, Ambrosia]; just as the English loved India and Africa and Ireland; it is the love that is the problem, people treat their lovers badly)« (Smith 2000, 361). Humor emerges by an ironic incongruity and a joyful tone that do not seem to fit. What appears and is named as ›love‹ is the naked exercise of power – the self-declared right of dominance. The tragedy and atrocity of this history is expressed in a leisurely humorous tone, evoked playfully by the image of lovers and the (unsafe) hierarchy that can accompany ›love‹ relations, and which is detrimental (not only) within colonial history but also on the psyche of those who have to deal with it, internally and externally, while in dependent relations. This is at least why Ambrosia and succinctly, Hortense find their *home* in religion (Siccardi 2020, 216). *White Teeth* thus also indicates the interlaced affective investment of colonial history and its traces. Hortense's very existence is the product of such a history and it is her mother's religion, an abstract God, with whose help from the background, as it were, Ambrosia (and eventually Hortense), can develop a decolonizing attitude in an attempt to break the power of the colonial tormentor who not only wants to own her mother's country and

her body, but also her mind; Durham wants to *educate* Ambrosia. But Ambrosia as well as Hortense choose to be educated in another way, by the belief in a day of relief beyond history, at the end of time (Smith 2000, 363). They choose *infinity* rather than colonial ›knowledge‹. This, too, is a form of decolonization process that takes place in the mind. It carries not only hope but also a critical, suspicious stance to power, on the one hand, and an openness to other forms of ›knowledge‹, on the other hand, to empower themselves in situations of powerlessness. Thus, the humor and playful tone that is evoked here is not a mere masking of injurious events, but also the tone of overcoming, triumph, a tonality within interstices of non-knowledge and powerlessness. On a meta-narrative level, it also is the tonality of critique and of a critical faculty beyond ›knowledge‹ and power.

This amalgamation of historical violence and the production of (scientific or ›truthful‹) ›knowledge‹ is also taken up in *Molars*. Three instances are thereby noticeable as unconscious and uncanny encounters that lead to affectively loaded, significant events. *Molars* seem to stand for the severity of those incidents and occurrences that remain hard to digest. It is shown throughout the chapter by small episodic miniature narratives and how colonial atrocities are in ghastly ways still sensible as part of lived experiences in the present and not necessarily as part of the past. The narrator here speaks of *trauma* as a repetition that is repeated from the outside and therefore cannot end:

»Because immigrants have always been particularly prone to repetition – it's something to do with that experience of moving from West to East or East to West or from island to island. Even when you arrive, you're still going back and forth; your children are going round and round. There is no proper term for it – *original sin* seems too harsh; maybe *original trauma* would be better. A trauma is something one repeats and repeats, after all [...].« (Smith 2000, 161)

A trauma is also something that *reappears* again and again when its *sin*, injurious touches, still resonate in the sociopolitical structures and repertoire of thought, language, and imagery – within the very everyday.

An *affective humor* here seems to go beyond itself, miming another limit that lies somewhere beyond graspable comprehension, changing into something like a mania and oscillating somewhere between insanity and obsession.

Firstly, *Molars* depicts again another historical episode and indicates the genocidal meaning of *white teeth* in colonial history that resonates uncannily and menacingly from everyday experiences: Irie, Millat, and Magid visit an elderly *white* man as part of a school project with charitable character, to distribute foodstuff. Here the image of *white teeth* is depicted as a murderous marker for Black bodies. It is also one of the few passages in the novel where *white teeth* as an expression is explicitly used. Mr J. P. Hamilton, it turns out, had been in the British army and had taken part in genocidal campaigns in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.¹⁷ He uses the term *white teeth* not only to refer nostalgically to his own youth when he could eat everything and ›philander freely‹, another suspicious

17 It is possible that ›Hamilton‹ in fact also killed the very allies who fought for the British army in the genocide. See Perfect (2016, 244 ff.).

name for ›love‹. Mr Hamilton connotes also his memory of *white teeth* to the genocide he was involved in; apparently the sight of the three ›dark‹ kids reminds him of this past: ›Clean white teeth are not always wise, now are they?‹ Mr. Hamilton recognized whom he was allowed to kill ›by the whiteness‹ of ›their teeth‹. And he adds: ›Poor bastards. Or rather I survived, to look at it in another way, do you see?‹ (Smith 2000, 171).

Humor deflates here into pure, unrepairable insanity. The murderous trauma caused by Mr. Hamilton haunts him, too, and has corrupted his soul, and yet there is a hint of a desire, palpable in this response, a desire to understand, to learn. Mr. Hamilton somehow knows that he has to figure it out, to look at it in a different way. Here, the resonates with the inclination to hope, striving to open up the possibility that there could be not only remorse in the feeling of guilt but also an awakening of responsibility.¹⁸ It depends, the novel seems to emphasize, on who uses humor and in which way to say what. And yet, still, the novel reaches out to Mr. Hamilton, giving him a place in its world, and somehow, by showing the horrors that still haunt him and have driven him mad, it opens up a space for something like the rehabilitation of his soul.

While Irie quietly begins to cry, Magid and especially Millat, shocked, ›red-faced and furious‹ (Smith 2000, 172), try to explain that their father had also been part of the British army (Perfect 2016, 242). Mr. Hamilton does not believe them and instead accuses the twins of lying and threatens them with rotten teeth for telling ›fibs‹ until the children flee from the apartment, ›tripping over themselves, running to get to a green space, to get to one of the lungs of the city, some place where they could breathe freely‹ (Smith 200: 174). In Mr. Hamilton's colonial memories, the image of Blackness is reduced to beautiful *white teeth*. It recalls the reduction of the Black body to the colonial *white* gaze. However, it is also symbolic of the racist and colonial vestiges of the question – the question of dominance – which determines whose lives are worth mourning and whose do not count, even when they are murdered. This is where humor reaches an end, as it cannot trespass as such, turning (back) to tragedy. It can only be trespassed by the other bodily threshold-expression (*Grenzerfahrung*) that Helmut Plessner mentions in addition to ›laughter‹ by crying. Crying and laughing are not opposites but reactions to an experience that is beyond comprehension. The body translates it into this almost painful shattering or overflowing response. Mr. Hamilton symbolizes colonialism and how the othered body has been either explored or eliminated (or both). But the scene still harbors a form of humor, one that comes with and lies in what Hannah Arendt famously has called *the banality of evil* (1963) – a phrase often misunderstood as trivializing the horrors of the Nazi genocide. Yet the opposite is the case: it marks the ease and thoughtlessness with which the most abhorrent atrocities and crimes are committed. This humor transcends the realm of humor and capacity. Mr Hamilton gives the children the creepy advice to brush their

18 Guilt not only as an ›affect‹, but also as a kind of rupture in consciousness that can be an essential interdependent ›political capacity‹ for singular and collective forms of (future) responsibility that Smith implicitly problematizes here is an approach developed by Theodor W. Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* ([1966] 1973, 2015). It is a conceptualization, which continues to be neglected in anti-racist theories and decolonial thinking. However, it should not only be of relevance within structures of coloniality, but also in relation to all possible supremacist atrocities, structures of domination and for transformative justice – globally. For a more recent and in-depth discussion of these Adornoian ideas, see Cucharó (2021).

teeth three times a day. The hushed ›laughter‹ of Mr Hamilton indicates a weird, pitiful, uncanny humor of ›superiority‹. The children get out with an unwell feeling without knowing what it means, but they feel, especially Irie, that something in this relation is wrong. The children are the third generation that endures the coloniality of racist thinking. The incident shows how racism not only effects discourse, language, ›institutions‹, ›structures‹, and the very subject of coloniality, but also those othered bodies on an everyday level. This ›little incidence‹ is so painful that humor, instead of its breaking, shattering work, comes here with a stop sign. The children, helpless and not knowing the range of this history and its meaning, can, nonetheless, feel a harmful, hazardous aura and flee from this place of evoked horror. Even the narrator gets silent and lets the performance speak for itself without further comment. The text seems to have written itself by itself in shock. To understand the episode as an appeal to mourn, and to feel through this uneasiness and what humor from this Other side can cause and mean, is what the text may want to say – and how pitiful this Other is as well. There is no power attached to this ›knowledge‹. It rather evokes the desire to escape, to find a sphere of ›non-knowledge‹ and power-lessness, a green space, to breathe freely.

Another such borderline incidence that evokes Plessner's *Grenzerfahrung* in *Molars* is, secondly, the appearance of Mad Mary.

Even the children know that ›the city breeds the Mad‹. Mad Mary is one of them, ›a black, voodoo woman with a red face whose territory stretches from Kilburn to Oxford Street‹ (Smith 2000, 174). Yet, *White Teeth* looks at ›madness‹ from multiple angles; by focalizing the three young friends, the novel distinguishes ›madness‹ from ›madness‹, making it appear as a matter of fact. ›Real madness‹ is rehabilitated in *White Teeth* in fact as a form of life-style and thinking that even the children can distinguish. ›City-mads‹ ›were better, less scary than Mr J. P. Hamilton – they flaunted their insanity, they weren't half mad and half not [...]. They were properly mad in the Shakespearean sense, talking sense when you least expected it‹ (Smith 2000, 174). (Here, the narrator seems to unwittingly succumb to the colonial gesture that evokes the self-praise of ›Great Britain‹, to which poor Shakespeare has to remain loyal – though I think that this ›madness‹ that they so rightly diagnose may (at least: *may also*) come from other, much older literatures of the world, while Shakespeare is prided for it along a ›British‹ colonial fantasy style.) Anyway, the narrator also hastens to mention that people have learned to avoid eye-contact in the streets of the city, so no one gets annoyed, and everyone (›mad‹ and not, who can differentiate between the two), can indulge in their own sauce of (or saucy) thoughts. But it happens that Mad Mary, ›a beautiful, a striking woman‹ with her majestic appearance, ›ageless midnight skin and a long neck that Queens can only dream about‹ (Smith 2000, 177) catches Samad's gaze; although at first sight, there is a funny humor emerging from this scene, as Samad appears again caught unprepared, before an ›implied audience‹, it changes into another humorous tone: While their eyes are intertwined beyond darkness, beyond light, beyond reason and ›madness‹, Mad Mary asks Samad ›WHAT'S DE SOLUTION, BLACK MAN?‹, and, perhaps contrary to possible expectations, what comes about in this interlocked gaze between Samad and Mad Mary is a bond. Samad has an insight, the narrator muses, reading Samad's thoughts, Samad understands that he and Mad Mary both are standing in a close relationship to each other, that they are akin to each other:

»Mad Mary was looking at him with *recognition*. Mad Mary has spotted a *fellow traveler*. She had spotted the madman in him (which is to say, *the prophet*) [...] She recognized him. Simply because they were from the same place, he and Mad Mary, which is to say: *far away*.« (Smith 2000, 177–78)

Not only is there a chiasm of thought between Derrida's and Samad's outdoor activities and their encounters with the other, in the neglected corners of the polis, the self and discourse. The humorous tone of this exchange remains humorous because the merciless narrator reveals all of Samad's naked thoughts about himself, decentering and ironizing him, but it is also humorous because of the simple, beautiful, and rich rendering. It expresses the most elaborate understanding of ›diaspora‹ – *far away*, which may indeed describe the experience of life (and death) as such – life, death, ›diaspora‹ or just *far away*, the only real place there is, as it were, folded between the pages, in the book and untraceable. There is no stable homeland to turn to, or to return to, or at least it is not the same anymore, people move, the birds move, the earth moves, everything moves, endlessly, and nothing belongs to one, and no one belongs anywhere or everyone belongs everywhere – to *far away*. The experience of home is *far away*, and *belonging* exists in-between the gazes of the passing people, this is the *pass-port* to the O/other, *far away*, a humble, mutual recognition, the light touch, of an other *fellow traveler* in the infinite, not-knowing, and power-less darkness of something that may be called wor(l)d or ›soul‹.

Perhaps realizing a Derridean moment, Samad talks to Mad Mary. He responds to Mad Mary, taking her seriously. For me, this is one of the most significant and brilliant passages in the novel. It may be its heart, with its silent closeness and distant, mocking description, as well as what it purports to say beyond this smile. As a *prophet* that Samad feels he is, the narrator lets us know, not without an ironic tone, Samad quotes the one person, enlightened or not, he somehow knows he can trust. He cites *Ghandi ji*, saying one word to Mad Mary, a word that stands for (colonial) resistance against oppression, for decolonization – and for hope. And while this word is absolutely resolute, it is at the same time also absolutely anti-violence, this is what gives it power – its powerlessness:

»Satyagraha‹ said Samad, surprising himself with his own calmness. Mad Mary, unused to having her interrogation answered, looked at him in astonishment. ›WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?‹ Satyagraha. It is Sanskrit for ›truth and firmness‹. Ghandi-gee's word. You see, he did not like ›passive resistance‹ or ›civil disobedience‹.« (Smith 2000, 178)

And not only that,

»[...] Samad did what no one had done to Mad Mary for well over fifteen years: he touched her. Very lightly, on the shoulder.« (Smith 2000, 179)

This fraternal *understanding*, comforting touch, may be a sign of connectivity within non-knowledge and powerlessness. What connects the two characters is an understanding that deeply *seems to know something of value, another value*, beyond the moment and questions of ›value‹ as such, that can *existentially sense*, in many different ways, what it means to be from *far away*. It is a connection in difference, in which ›madness‹, ›reason‹, ›re-

sistance«, and ›truth« become one in figurative as well as allegorical ways, where the difference does not seem to matter (does it ever?) and is sublated. Humor, grief, melancholy, and affection join hands in this folded touch beyond time, space, ›identity«, and ›gender« in a not-knowing, power-less, threshold understanding in which both figures appear outside of themselves, outside their ordinary situatedness ›in life« and yet in the thick of it, and most intelligible in understanding something impossible, something beyond ›knowledge«, expressed only by a pure touch of connecting gazes, beyond the sight of the eyes.

Mad Mary as well as ›madness« in this way acquire *a place* in the novel and are not rejected as ›monstrous« or ›retarded«; rather, ›madness« appears as another form of reasoning and of ›knowledge« and is, at the same time, an untouchable sanctuary and territory of sovereignty; instead of being associated with ignorance, ›madness« appears as a form of craziness *because it understands so well* and is not afraid to tell the ›truth«.

Beyond Samad's *personal*, (Islamic induced) religious beliefs (›Personally, my hope lies in the last days«), Ghandi's (political) philosophy, which Samad proposes here and *which transcends his personal beliefs*, represents a beautiful gesture, a planetarian, cross-community teaching that conveys the idea of *far away* – but without absolutizing it:

»Truth and firmness is one suggestion, though there are many people you can ask if that answer does not satisfy.« (Smith 2000, 179)

This may indeed reveal the ›prophetic« capability of Samad. Although the scene appears comical, as he utters just this one word, ›satyagraha«, which seems ›mad« and powerless, and yet, in remembrance of the historical developments, and because Samad is shown as both frightened and heroic, speaking with fervor to a *fellow traveler* while Mad Mary exudes an aura of decisive authority, it is also tragic. This is not only because of Samad's oblivious role, speech, and crumbled dreams that are *barely* echoed in this exchange and yet grace the encounter, but also because of Mad Mary's so abandoned and immense vulnerability, her seeming unawareness of herself, her exposure to the narrator's facetious gaze, which evokes a scenery of voyeuristic quality before an ›implied audience«, and because of the sorrow she invokes, alongside her decisiveness. On the one hand, the scene is amusing because of the very performance of the two characters, and on the other hand, the performance of the quite desolate characters, is also disconcerting and heartbreaking. Very Shakesperean indeed.

Another scene evoked in this chapter, finally, occurs in a park, and again involves Samad and his mistress, his sons' young *white* teacher, Poppy. Samad apparently feels safe in the park, invisible to unwanted observers, but then all of a sudden he sees, not far from them, ›quite clearly by the bandstand his two sons, their white teeth biting into two waxy apples, waving, smiling« at him (Smith 2000, 182).

White teeth here represent not only ›beauty« and ›delight« but also ›innocence«, all brought up by the white color of teeth that not only allegorizes protection and untouchability. It also entails a specific temporal threshold, a threshold that is about to be transgressed and that threatens to destroy this image of ›beauty« and ›innocence« that seem to emanate from *white teeth*, an image that is an affectionate part of one's very

heart, coming from untraceable paths. Here, another form of ›beauty‹ and ›innocence‹ is apprehended and *grasped*, one that quite clearly circumscribes non-knowledge and power-lessness – that of children, on the verge of destruction, against which an ›implied audience‹, as ideal observing subjects, may feel, not only unknowing and powerless but also guilty, because they seem to be or become witness to it.

Ironically it is the image of his children, his own two sons, who cannot know (and probably would not care) which ›laws‹ their father is breaking, that triggers something in Samad. The children become *wax puppets* at the mercy of their overwhelmed father, who cannot abide by the unwritten ›laws‹ that he has to obey qua birth, ›laws‹ that seem timeless, unaffected by the peculiarities of his life or that of his wife, that have acquired a life of their own, and seem ›right‹ and ›reasonable‹ – these are not only religious ›laws‹ in a narrow sense, but also historically driven, discursive ›laws‹ and those that frame the fringed con-texts of decoloniality. And if Samad does not protect them, nothing of him (or Alsana) may survive, as the beautiful and yet vanishing, vulnerable transience of his son's *white teeth* seems to remind him. Samad, living an inner crisis, overwhelmed by an overflow of paradoxical desires, religious duties, and images of postcolonial masculinity, postpones a decision and projects his dazed state, with all due religious obligations, onto his sons – a process of transference beyond ›good‹ and ›evil‹, which *white teeth* also render in the image of this moment in which Samad experiences the multiple dimensions of non-knowledge and power-lessness. On the surface it appears comical, on the inside it seems to resemble and reveal a carambole of tragic traits that have webbed his ›life‹. Full of remorse for his extramarital sins (but not willing enough to end them either, too sweet are the bargains, it seems), Samad decides, with some unintended help from his friend Archie and without Alsana's awareness, to send one of his sons to live with his grandparents in Bangladesh (he cannot afford to send both of them) so at least one of them can grow up with *roots*, having a traditional Islamic education. After this downright kidnapping and injurious act, in which Magid is put on a plane *home* (whose home whatsoever), Alsana refuses to talk to Samad for the next few years until their son returns. Female (and feminist) resistance against so much ›reason‹ is expressed in a state of muteness.¹⁹ This, too, is arranged in a funny hyperbole and tumbling and escalating series of thoughts and events, and one, moreover, can clearly imagine the funny side of a couple in a permanent state of calm-war, in which one side is, if at all, only indirectly speaking to the other. The grotesque condition also shows Samad's despair and the tragically confined possibilities

19 It is interesting that Alsana's downright rejection of sexuality stands against Samad's sexual appetite, sexuality standing in-between them, binding and unbinding them at the same time; what this un/says about the meaning of the institution of marriage and ›love‹ (and the affective economy of sexuality) in marginality and diaspora, and how it itself becomes a muted institution/discourse is another unfinished story, maybe for further scrutiny. In any case, it would be interesting to read Alsana's dismissal of sexuality as negligible and subsidiary against the importance that sexuality occupies, explicitly and implicitly, on a material and discursive scale. Alsana, at least, cannot find in Tagore's nationalized poetry or in critical political imagery a difference in how people ›are treated in life‹ and ›the sky they live under‹; whereas she sees that her possibilities in Bangladesh would not have been prosperous, in the UK, too, she can sense that she is deemed as incompetent, even in her role as a mother, and looked down upon even by ›feminists‹ (as represented by Neena and Joyce and what they claim to be (their) right). See Jiao (2019, 548 ff.).

with which Alsana reacts to this violence in order to carve out some space for herself and for her mourning (Smith 2000, 212). The silent *mouth* that speaks only indirectly stands metaphorically for protest and grief. On Samad's part, too, while the grotesquery of the situation may insinuate a zany humor, it shows the dramatic helplessness of Samad and his actions. One senses that there is more behind this humorized awkwardness that has driven Samad *crazy*: The fear of exposing his children to an order that is not only foreign to him but also unconvincing, as well as the fear to forget his own memories and connections, to forget his *roots, far away, not knowing who he is about to become* (or, much more importantly, is *assumed to be*) is so strong that it makes Samad part with the most precious he has. It also shows that ›the immigrant‹ never arrives and never finds themselves in the past and present records of (history and) discourse (at least not in a good way, and always uprooted – there is always something sudden about their existence, caught in a vacuum of presence, in mid-air). The idea of *roots*, moreover, relates to a country that has only recently and painfully acquired independence through partition. Its *roots* are awkwardly divided – not to say that there are no *roots* to which Samad's son could connect; *Hindustan* (in all its wounded divisions) is in a complex, motley state. This *turn*, as well as the acquisition of an (other[-ed], Islamic) ›knowledge‹ thus refers to a fantasized *future* rather than to the return to a past that has already passed but probably never existed in the first place. Magid, however, in the six years he is away, *home*, becomes what his brother and family could not (never?) achieve in Britain. He *belongs* to this other country he did not know before. Magid seems to be an accepted part of this other country, so much so, in fact, that he wants to reform it (against the backdrop of progressive, developmental policies and measures and although no one has probably asked him for the favor), but nevertheless ›*longing to improve the lot of my poor country*‹ (Smith 2000, 366). *Class* lurks in here as another (*the?*) dividing and defining issue of belonging. Magid has changed class in Bangladesh. Rather than naming failures and assigning blame, the narrative reveals a more interwoven, eclectic dynamic in this way that seems to sadly laugh about everything, everywhere. It may also suggest the possibility of another beginning, one that is built on the material and epistemological ruins of this tragic texture. In this sense, and the further development of friendships throughout the novel, it is reminiscent of Fanon's ›laughter‹ and its invitation to participate and begin *another* humanity, perhaps.

Canines – The Ripping Teeth, in Chapter III, seems to resonate such an image. *The ripping canines* may refer to the adolescents' attempt to find their own paths in this manifold fractured world and can be read as miniature-coming-of-age narratives – painful, unsettling procedures for the young as well as for the parents. The separation process and its pain are doubled by the material, social, and psychic uncertainty that the parents endure, and that they, to an extent, transfer to the children; the rest that their children must withstand comes from the sociopolitical pressures, from the outside world.

The third generation of ›immigrants‹ after independence still fights within pressures and processes of coloniality in its different forms, on smaller, much more invisible accounts within the everyday, struck between a rock and a hard place.

In this situation the home of the Chalfens becomes an anchor for Irie, Millat, and later for Magid. That Irie and Millat befriended Joshua, the oldest son of the Chalfens and Irie's and Millat's schoolmate, may be more than a coincidence. It seems to symbolize two

other things at once: On the one hand, Jewishness is integrated in this other worldliness of the ›immigrants‹, finding its age-old *ur-space* of otherness *per se*. On the other hand, the experience of antisemitism obtains a central place as the oldest form of (internally colonizing) racism *within* Europe, with *roots* that reach far into the past and still mark Jewish marginalization in Europe and beyond. Not only does the Chalfen Family become a quasi-foster home, where an ›implied author‹ places Millat and Irie and *decides* that they should thrive there. They become permanent guests of the Chalfen household, supported in every way possible, from listening to their concerns to providing money, food, shelter, and jobs. Not that this care is one-sided; the Chalfens, too, are in need of a minor/other-mirror, to *feel* again another non-knowledge they seem to have repressed, namely that Jewishness is connected, in every conceivable way, to experiences of marginalization, genocide, and genocidal dangers. Not only did the Chalfens, ›an aging hippy couple both dressed in pseudo-Indian garb‹, support Samad's suggestion in their children's school to remove the ›pagan‹ ›Harvest Festival‹ in favor of other religious festivals, and ›raised their hands defiantly‹ (Smith 2000, 131), it is also figured in Marcus Chalfen's profession and aspirations and the urge of his wife Joyce ›to help‹ and gain confidence from helping and caring for those who are socially marginalized. Especially Joyce's well-meant, although always derailing, *white* (she has a *Christian* background) racist comments are nevertheless a chief note in this direction: ››You'll stay for dinner, won't you?‹ pleaded Joyce, ›Oscar really wants you to stay. Oscar loves having strangers in the house, he finds it really stimulating. Especially brown strangers‹ (Smith 2000, 326).

Emblematic on Marcus' side are his ideals, through which the past shows its presence:

›And always with humanity in mind – a cure for cancer, cerebral palsy, Parkinson's – always with the firm belief in the *perfectibility* of life [...]. It was the Chalfen way handed down the family for generations; [...] If you were arguing with a Chalfen, trying to put a case for these strange French men who think truth is a function of language, or that history is interpretive or science metaphorical, the Chalfen in question would hear you out quietly, then wave his hand, dismissive, feeling no need to dignify such bunkum with a retort.› (Smith 2000, 312)

Not only the strong emphasis on the idea to make the world more human (handed down for generations in the family), but also any touch on history (and its atrocities) is understandably rejected as it is read as antisemitic, perverse attempts to relativize the Shoah or at least as a possibility that it may be *used* in this way to foster antisemitism, concerns that are anything but unjustified. Instead of stating this obvious and painful argument and announce it, it is put aside with a dismissive gesture of the hand – an organ of touch that rejects touching upon an injurious issue, which goes deep into the body, soul and presumably the deeply affected family history. Nonetheless, the narrator's cheerful tone remains teasing and affectionate with regard to Marcus, as echoed in expressions like ›and always with humanity in mind‹. The allusion to a ›strange Frenchman‹, which of course depicts poststructuralist thought in an already devaluating gesture by focalizing Marcus, is also a playful tongue-in-cheek and an allusion to another ›strange Frenchman‹ in the novel, whom Marcus and the ›implied audience‹ *know* and yet *not know* at the same

time, and which entails another painful, disillusioning trait of horror. The humorous allusion thus is not only funny and playful but also loaded with grief, which sympathizes with Marcus' and the Chalfen's non-knowledge and power-lessness.

So, ›the care‹ (and the question who cares for whom) does have its own sand-traps in the ripping of the canines and is frequently mocked throughout the novel. Yet, out of this encounter, that, in its own ways, timidly touches upon different issues and effects of antisemitism and racism, different family bonds ensue, which are ›funny‹ and moving at the same time: The relationship of Marcus and Magid can be named as an especially noteworthy example. An accomplished Jewish scholar and a young Muslim lawyer-›poet‹-to-be become (close) soulmates (and how close!). They both believe in scientific ›truths‹ as problem-solvers of human development. A sweet ›irony‹ is set into work here as the two, Jewish and Muslim visionaries, feel akin and ›family‹ to each other, rescuing and protecting each other (something one can only hope for in the long run (of the ongoing history) – Jewishness as the experienced ›uncle‹ of little, but ambitious ›nephew‹ Islam (– or I would rather like to imagine Jewishness as a mother-religion to Islam). The allusion to their common religious *roots* comes with its own especially delicious and special delicate humor: ›[t]hey would *save* each other. This couldn't be faith could it, Marcus? [Marcus thinks to himself]. He questioned himself [...]. Not faith, no, Marcus, not the kind with no eyes. Something stronger, something firmer. *Intellectual* faith‹ (Smith 2000, 422). But they are both duped, *White Teeth* laughs with a resigned, painful ›irony‹, by the parameters of whiteness, and the belief in pure, positivist science and ›reason‹. It is invoked here by a slightly ironic tone with which the narrator accompanies Marcus' thoughts at the airport, where he wants to pick up Magid, who will be arriving. A ›Muslim‹ (not only?) (cis-) man in this way appears as the ›Jewish‹ (not-only?) cis-man's future lawyer and cousin in Europe, as it were (›Muslim‹ and ›Jewish‹ women* and LGBTQIA+ do not have a problem with each other, it may be safely assumed...– cheerfully? In solidarity? – always –?) – *yeah! Let's stick to that...*). In the end indeed, both of the two men seem to lack (another) ›knowledge‹, namely the ›knowledge‹ about the workings of power: The fact that Marcus' very mentor has been a Nazi scholar who was involved in eugenics. The evocation of ›real‹ historical ›knowledge‹, always right behind the back of the other, here of Jewishness, awaking horror in the poor ›implied audience‹, standing at the niche of the novel at the mercy of (and a merciless) well-knowing narrator, is a shrieking and ›maddening‹ humor that accompanies this development and yet is not so far away from the ways history is involved in the present. This may be the most striking element of non-knowledge and power-lessness that the novel may want to remind its dissimilar audience of.

All these instances of *White Teeth* and the allusions to the meanings of ›race‹ within the histories of external and internal colonialisms in the contemporary present, evoke different forms of touch amidst of miseries that are soothing and stroking, but also striking and shocking and that allude to the formative period of *new beginnings*, beginnings in the sense of a coming to ›knowledge‹, coming to understand (›coming home to oneself‹), and rejecting supremacist, logocentric ›truths‹ even when they appear as ›knowledge‹ or scientific ›truths‹ – and *beginnings* in the sense of *other* future possibilities.

With these images *White Teeth* generates not only a timeliness but also another imagery. This other imagery is part of its humorous as well as its rhetorically invoked poetic epistemological shifts that, despite all misery, smilingly turns to *friendships* as an ethical

emblem of another, possible, *humanity* that must learn to act in *earth-bound ways* within and yet against binarist and dominant imagery, one that »is resolutely turned towards the future« (Ledent 2016, 87).

Seen in this way, *White Teeth* can be conceived of as a metaphor for the concept of »race«, supremacy, and phallogocentrism, especially in the European context and its (global) historical implications. On the one hand, it shows how these structures have been materialized and have inscribed bodies, structured »reality«, our pasts, our presences, our gazes, even our most intimate relations. It simultaneously ridicules these structures by showing how hollow and untenable they are and that we are still not fully usurped by them. *White Teeth* thus shows the holes and gaps within the texture of our texts and corpuses as spaces of agency and rethinking. These are spaces of non-knowledge and power-lessness that become visible through the rhetoricality of *affective humor*.

White Teeth as an allusion to a body part located squarely in the face also undermines a separation between fiction and »reality« in this way; it reinforces the realistic, almost documentary sense of the novel and signifies a threshold-place where it is not possible to distinguish between the two realms of reading that are considered as epistemically separate spheres of experience, as »reality« and »fiction«. In this sense, the concept of »race« is brought to the fore as a materialized bodily signification and experience that has been condensed in scientific and cultural discourse under the abstraction of violent philosophical and discursive approaches and their (material) effects that are dismantled here. These become palpable, visible, and, at the same time, remain invisible, in the mouth, in language, discourse and the folds of »reality« *unfolded* in the novel. Every touch of the tongue, as an organ that sets language in motion, also touches the wounding inflections of »race« and supremacist thinking as a fundamental concept of othering (and *selfing*). So this suggests, at least to a certain extent, that it matters *which subjectivity* speaks about *what* from what instance of »knowledge« and power. Humor, for all the affectivity it can evoke in different ways, is the deconstructive, subtle, rhetoric that triggers this process of *unfolding* and, and makes it possible, on a psychic level, to speak about trauma by simultaneously also sheltering the self, on the one hand. And, on the other hand, by opening up a discursive space for contemplation.

White Teeth can thus also be understood as a disguise, as a mask that speaks about racism, antisemitism and, more generally, about structures of dominance, and their manifold materializing effects without speaking about them explicitly (Isaac 2005, 40). Understood in this way, it can also be regarded as a metaphor for the work of humor: It names indirectly, without naming, and intervenes by way of an in/congruency to make itself heard, without blaming, without opening wounds, and without hurting. The humor in *White Teeth* can thus symbolize (trickster, hidden) subversive forms of resistance that work from within language, altering narratives without much ado. »Mouth« also resonates images of vulnerability and exposure, of penetration and silencing, all evocations that depict the hazards of marginal (sociopolitical) positions and »the laws« that define the limits of what can be touched in discourse (and by whom) and what cannot (and by whom). *White Teeth* also includes (and conceals) the tongue. The tongue, in turn, marks a metaphor for language (and thus also discourse). Like the movements of a tongue, in which it touches itself within the mouth, *affective humor* appears as a

rhetorical and poetical as well as *bodily* movement that touches from within the mouth as the place of language and discourse, language and discourse by pointing upon their sociopolitically defining instances and sending them into other directions of thought and imagination. Although it is seldom considered, the *place* of touch is thus not only linked to a *bodily*, performing dimension attached to it, but also to an (*autobiographical*) subjectivity: It matters *which* mouth speaks of (and as) *W/white T/teeth* in which ways and for which (however unconsciously aroused) purposes. What invokes the zany ›laughter‹ is the enveloped play that is a corrective to discursive imagery, and the complex historical uprooting in the sense of violent displacements and mass-migrations that accompany internal and external colonialisms and their effects, which, consequently, mark bodies as injured entities and which are negotiated, as it were, as teeth-damage and teeth-fillings in *White Teeth*.

White Teeth – On the Level of the Story – Archie and Samad

Archie's and Samad's encounter is told through an analepsis in Chapter III, »The Root Canals of Alfred Archibald Jones and Samad Miah Iqbal« (Smith 2000, 83). The chapter disrupts the chronological and teleological temporal order of the novel. It goes far back to the Second World War and His Majesty's Army, when India was still a *British* jewel and had not yet fallen apart.

The protagonists are in a ground war division, somewhere in Eastern Europe, and together with three other inmates, two other privates and a captain, they are assigned, to a tank with supportive functions. They are described as »a coalition of abject figures« as they apparently do not quite fit the prescribed format of regular soldiers. As Justin Omar Johnston perfectly puts it, »[t]his coalition of abject figures is abandoned or left to die because they are seen as not fully human. Even as they risk their own lives, their bodies make them risky, and so, like the enemy, they remain under suspicion. And yet neither can they escape the war. They must go on as ›the losers‹ within the victorious army, trapped inside the securitized space of an excluded interior« (Johnston 2021, 99).

Within this event that gives structure to the story in the proposed reading, fiction and ›reality‹ in the sense of historical events and their material and discursive effects touch upon each other through the references of the non-character narrator, triggering evaluations that in some way evoke a subjectivity, which comes close to the ›real author‹, implied by a specific disguising humor and a signifying trail. We hear the narrator speak:

»Their journey was a long tiresome one, rarely punctuated by any action. Archie's tank was a bridge-builder, one of the specialist divisions not tied to English county allegiances or to a type of weaponry, but providing service across the army and from country to country, recovering damaged equipment, laying bridges, creating passages for battle, creating routes where routes had been destroyed. Their job was not so much to fight the war as to make sure it ran smoothly. By the time Archie joined the conflict, it was clear that the cruel, bloody decisions would be made by air [...]. Meanwhile, on the ground, their heavy, armor-plated scout-tank had a simpler task: [...] to avoid the civil war in the mountains [...]; to pick their way through the glazed eyes of dead statis-

tics and the ›wasted youth‹; [...] ›Private Ick-Ball has passed to me at 16.47 hours a radio message that informs me that the area, as far as can be seen from the air, sir, is unoccupied, sir‹ said Archie. ›This is not war,‹ Samad had said quietly. [...] Two weeks later, as Archie checked their route to Sofia, to no one in particular Samad said, ›I should not be here.‹ As usual he was ignored; most fiercely and resolutely by Archie, who wanted somehow to listen. ›I mean, I am educated. I am trained. I should be soaring with the Royal Airborne Force, shelling from on high! I am an officer! Not some mullah, some sepoy, wearing out my chappals in hard service.‹ (Smith 2000, 86–7)

It is clear from the passage that Archie and Samad are unequal figures. We learn that Samad is ›mostly ignored‹ by the others and that Archie, too, tries to ignore him. We further learn that Samad does not feel good about his appointment in the tank. We further come to know that there is not much of a war going on as the tank rolls through the landscape, that it is quite calm, and that Archie nevertheless dutifully announces his protocol to a higher officer via radio, while Samad, apparently uneasy with the strangeness of the situation, puts his thoughts on record, in a wondering, questioning, and gloomy way. We can infer from all this a slight tone of humor in the passage, which is evoked by the mentioned strangeness of the incongruent circumstances that the scene displays: While they are in an armed military tank, there seems to be no war. Humor works in the passage mainly in two ways: It is firstly, based on the formation of what Judith Roof, drawing on Bergson's observations, calls an *aside*, an implicit address to a thus evoked ›implied audience‹ (Roof 2018, 49 f.). Secondly, it is established by evoking the characters as being unaware of being ›observed‹.

This unawareness is related to the figure of the ›fool‹, which has a history in the Western literary and philosophic understandings of humor. It is often seen as the representation of allegedly ›inferior people‹ (Colletta 2003, 18). However, it also signifies powerlessness, and although ›the fool‹ appears as a figure who seems not to know, they apparently *know* something (other). ›The fool‹ seems to be wise in a naïve, not-knowing way – which mediately also endows them with a kind of indirect authority and power.

Usually in dramatical plays an *aside* is a device in which the audience is enabled to hear a thought or an inner monolog of a character – the character speaks aloud as if speaking to itself – and in which the point may be ›aside the point‹ (Roof 2018, 49 f.), which is regularly the case with humor. Here, it is the silence in which Samad's thoughts are laid out for all to hear that evokes an *aside*. A humorous tone is emphasized by the suggestion that no one is really interested in hearing Samad speak, who speaks nevertheless, and that Archie, who actually is interested in what Samad has to say, tries to suppress his desire to listen to him. Archie *wants* to listen to Samad. Archie's wish softens the harsh humor, enhances suspense, and gives a warm trait to the passage. The narrator's *aside*, an implicit address, has a splitting effect, signifying the presence of diverse subjectivities in the text and beyond the text. In addition to the figures and the voice of the narrator, there seems to be an ›implied author‹ involved in the composition of the scenery, as well as an ›implied audience‹. The ›audience‹ is implicated in the descriptive address of the narrator and is ›created‹ in the form of a trace in the text. The describing *aside* of the narrator establishes a close relationship between the narrator and the ›implied audience‹. A secret is shared, in this way, between the narrator and an evoked

›implied audience‹ above the characters' heads. Through this, a humorous play is generated in the narrator's descriptive rhetoric. The narrator's telling as well as their *acting* (addressing an ›implied audience‹ and revealing the character's thought) triggers both, a humorous tone and a bond with an ›implied audience‹, as well as a space, a scenery, in which the affectively loaded acting of the characters can be envisioned. The narrator's knowing and observing aside is, moreover, incongruent with the unawareness of the characters. Humor is not only inherent in the narrator's remarks and in the subtle address they evoke, as in the sentences, ›Their journey was [...] rarely punctuated by any action‹; ›Archie's tank‹; ›their job was not so much to fight the war as to make sure it ran smoothly‹. It comes also as an evocation of a scenery that is incongruent with what it signifies. On the one hand, the aside ›shows‹ the surroundings of the protagonists and thus has a ›reality effect‹. On the other hand, it invokes a secrecy from which the characters are excluded and which is only shared with an ›implied audience‹, and yet through this implicit telling, a space of intelligibility is laid out, ensuring a stage within the text. The humorous display is *told* as well as *shown*, as if from a position of secret observation, on the quiet, aimed at an ›implied audience‹. The humorous tone also comes into being through the dialogic, fractured meanings of the narrator's comments. This dialogic, doubled phrasing is generated by the insinuation of tragic-comic significations, the meaning of ›war‹ and its many effects on individual, singular as well as societal levels. The phrase ›[t]heir job was not so much to fight the war as to make sure it ran smoothly‹ relegates the idea of ›war‹ not only to a *stage of war* but also to a *backstage of ›war‹*. This is not to say that ›war‹ is evoked as a harmless play, as other references of the narrator in the passage clearly show. Rather an image of ›war‹ as a sociopolitical theater is generated, the notion that ›war‹ occupies a theater with an exterior and an interior appearance, that there is nothing ›natural‹ about it, that it is a performance of ›forces‹ within the texture of history and that therefore both its sites share grotesque tragic-comic elements: The ›war‹ in all its tragedy must run smoothly – a grotesque and yet naturalized venture. The tragic-comic trait is thus based on the grotesque. The grotesque not only links the tragic and comical properties of the sentence, but also keeps them apart. This creates an ironic rupture, a gap, in the meaning of the sentence. From this gap in between the tragic and the humorous, which shows the double absurdity of the theater of ›war‹, the sentence also acquires a meditative, touching tone. This ›gap‹ in the entanglement of the grotesque, the meditative, the tragic and the comic is signified by the expression *to make sure* that the *war runs smoothly*. The verb *to make sure* functions as a central deixis, which binds together the various, paradoxical semantic parts. It signals an aporetic disposition, *making* disaster appear harmless, and yet, because ›war‹ is often discursively evoked as historically as well as sociopolitically unavoidable, *we have to make sure that it runs smoothly*, *we have to adhere* to its alleged *imperative dynamics*. ›War‹ thus signals a sociopolitical pathos to which we are not only subjected; it also produces subjects of ›war‹, heroes, patriots, brave *men*, *us* and *them*. *Must* stands here metonymically for social convention and (false) beliefs as well as for the interwovenness of discourses, norms, ›values‹, historical encroachments or rather encroached histories, but there are rarely ›wars‹ *against* atrocities (– and what kind of ›wars‹ must they be?).

Archie and Samad are placed in the backstage of the ›war‹. The description denies them any image of bravery and emphasizes their redundancy, from which the passage,

too, gets its humorous sting as their role appears flawed. Here, ›war‹ seems to be different from what it should be: a brutal and bloody exchange of fire and weaponry, of ›manhood‹, ›masculinity‹, and camaraderie. In such a sense ›proper‹, ›war‹ is associated with ideas of nationalism, patriotism, ›action‹, ›heroism‹, and ›guardianship‹. In the economy of ›war‹, power seems to transcend itself, exploiting its own discourses, by misusing images of masculinity and male bodies and minds. *Men seem obligated* to protect a family, a ›nation‹, ›history‹ (›culture‹, ›religion‹, and so forth) – a legitimization and in fact a machinery for all possible kinds of violence. In the passage this is discernible, critically, in the expression ›wasted youth‹. The ›war‹ in the *backstage* where Archie and Samad are placed does happen, but apparently without ›heroism‹. It is incongruent with idealized images. It appears in the guise of its almost buffoonish aftereffects: ›[T]o avoid civil war in the mountains‹, to pick their way through the glazed eyes of dead statistics‹, ›to make sure the roads of communication stretching from one end of hell to the other were fully communicable‹. This ›war‹ has more to do with forms of care and service – practices that are usually overlooked and made invisible. These are not just considered effeminate activities but activities largely associated with femininity, social class, the outcast. Somewhere in-between the lines of ›war‹ and the novel, the passage seems to imply that a swindle is taking place, and the ›implied audience‹ must decide for themselves, where this is the case, and must also negotiate what ›heroism‹ may mean. Although it presupposes sacrifice and a willingness to sacrifice, *service*, clearing the way so that ›war‹ can proceed smoothly, is certainly not understood as being ›heroic‹ but as a task that *must be done* so that the (classicized, gendered, and racialized) subtext of the phallogocentric theater of ›war‹ for the ›real‹ heros of the ›war‹ can go on. The humor of the passage mirrors a sentiment that Bakhtin would probably have called ›the falsity of conventional pathos‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 402). It results from the incongruity between the dominant discursive understanding of ›war‹ and the way it *appears* to Archie and Samad in its ›reality‹ and that, at the same time, through the aside, addresses an ›implied audience‹, signaling both, the gap between the pathos in discourse and the discourse of pathos as well as a meditative space to reflect on the logics that open up in this gap between the two possibilities of understanding. These meanings of the aside are underscored by Samad's almost desperate and also maybe ashamed, statement ›[t]his is not war‹ and the narrator's empathetic supportive observations of these emotive words, created by the word ›quietly‹: ›This is not war, Samad had said quietly‹. The passage is not only deconstructive regarding images of ›war‹, it also suggests a critique of phallogocentric values and effects. The overlapping of the semantic meanings can be seen, with Bakhtin, as a strategy of ›prose narration‹ to make conventionalized social meanings sound strange, in order to understand their ›false pathos‹. »[T]he novel teaches prose intelligence, prose wisdom« (Bakhtin 2014, 404).

The tranquility of the situation in the *backstage* of ›war‹ seems like an ineffectual mechanical display, evoking Bergson's comical automatism, which is further emphasized by Archie's automated adherence to instructions that are incoherent, incongruous, with the dull situation in which the task seems obsolete. Bergson, speaking from within European modernism, links humor in the figuration of foolish behavior and its social functions to the ›automatism of acquired habits‹, an inability of individuals to adapt to changed circumstances (Bergson 1911, 8 b). For Bergson this ›mechanical inelasticity‹ is humor-

ous as it is incongruent with the quantity of alertness that is expected from individuals in society, which is bound to flexibility and adaptability (Bergson 1911, 9 a). Such a case is implicated in the beginning of the passage: ›Their journey was a long tiresome one, rarely punctuated by any action‹. The quiet, uncanny silence is contrasted with Archie's vain protocol announcements. A tragic-comic moment is also woven into the scene by the juxtaposition of Archie's automatic statements and Samad's lost speech. Against the backdrop of ›war‹, Archie and Samad appear futile and pathetic, and therefore foolish because they still seem to be playing along. The representation of foolishness is also linked to the sense of pleasure in observing »the suffering of other people« (Colletta 2003, 18), along superiority theories of humor, which associate humor and ›laughter‹ to power. But it is not only superiority that is triggered here. Ideally, an ›implied audience‹ can also see itself as foolish, laughing at its own inadequacy, and is therefore also disempowered in the contemplative process of humor that the scene evokes. At the same time that the unheroic backstage of ›war‹ is conjured up, the evoked ›implied audience‹ seems to be watching and listening to the performance of the characters, who, on the other hand, are unaware of being observed and spoken about. This unawareness of the characters creates a space in which the performance of affective, touching humor is staged since humor depends not only on the comic element in the rhetoric and semantics of texts, but also on an addressed other. In the novel, the addressed other of the humor is the ›implied audience‹. ›The joke‹, as Freud explains, needs not only the ›person‹ who makes a ›joke‹, but also another subject to whom it is uttered and who can confirm, ›countersign‹ its comic (and also tragic, insightful, thoughtful) instances. Although both characters, Archie as well as Samad, thus appear as ›simpletons‹, it is Archie's figure, in particular, that corresponds to a modest, obedient, ›naïve fool‹, while Samad, as the educated one, who apparently understands what is going on (›This is not war‹ Samad had said quietly), appears as naïve and a ›simpleton‹ because of his belief in ›the false pathos‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 402) of discourse and the bravery of ›war‹ or ›war‹ as bravery as is further emphasized in the passage: ›I mean, I am educated. I am trained. I should be soaring with the Royal Airborne Force, shelling from on high! I am an officer! Not some mullah, some sepoy, wearing out my chappals in hard service‹.

Samad's statement ›This is not war‹ expresses the incongruity between what ›war‹ should mean and the ›anti-heroic‹ role he feels stuck in. It is the subtext of ›I should not be here‹ that ironizes the character and laughs at him a little bit, but empathically. This subtle form of humor also comes from Samad expressing his thoughts while *no one is listening*. It has the character of a *meditative aside*, opening a space for empathy between the character and an implicitly addressed audience. This is reinforced by the narrator's remarks: ›Samad said‹ and ›to no one in particular‹. A humorous and at the same time somber tone is expressed in the way Samad seems to perceive ›the reality‹ around them as ›unreal. The aside function and Samad's direct speech lends the utterance a melodramatic style. Furthermore, the direct speech reduces the distance to an ›implied audience‹ and increases the distance to the narrator. Samad is placed in the center of the stage, which creates a space for his unhappy feelings to be heard. The subtle, ironic humor is thus also sad as an incongruous effect resulting from the contrast between Samad's self-image and ›the reality‹ he has to endure resounds, and we hear Samad's sense of being trapped. While this affectivity of humor is directed at an ›implied audience‹ and is cre-

ated through the focus on Samad and the direct and indirect discourse that zoom in and out around the character, Samad can also be imagined in a state of mourning; instances of showing and telling thus go hand in hand. The passage conveys both meanings and both effects: It is ironically humorous with regard to the incongruent image of ›war‹ and its ›reality‹, and it is somber with regard to Samad's grief and his realization that he does not conform to the image of the hero. Between these divergent meanings of the produced *affective humor*, a void emerges as a space for meditations in which the (different) meanings can be further thought through.

There are three dimensions of humor that characterize the aside in this scene: the theatricality of the aside that establishes a secret audience, a secret that is lost (because it is spoken aloud) and yet archived in the sad utterance, and the characters who seem unaware of themselves. These three dimensions of the aside are affective in two senses: on a formal level, the aside evokes various affective traits, joy, pleasure, secrecy, sympathy; on a rhetorical and performative level – since the aside is spoken (told) and, in the instance of its telling, also performed, the aside is a *movere-docere*-dynamic, it moves affectively, instructing and orienting the text towards specific meanings. In this sense of untying fixed meanings, making them perceivable and unsettling their ground, the aside is also a setting to work of deconstruction in which the order of signification is altered. It cuts through perceived perceptions. This *parabasic* cut comes at the same time with a payoff. On the one hand, there is the playful pleasure resulting from describing the scene, and on the other hand, there is the setting to work of nonconformist meanings. These meanings open up presuppositions and destabilize their normalization by revealing embedded or tabooed implications in discourse. Humor appears as a form of pleasure that transcends the moment of its uttering in a suspenseful way. The aside enables something beyond itself. Moreover, another form of ›foolishness‹ is shown as well, which is not directly related to naivety as in the case of Archie, but to (mainstream understandings of) education. *Foolishness*, naivety, is also linked to (institutionalized) education. The passage places Samad between his portrayal of ›war‹ as an instance of class-specific masculinist heroic images of bravery and competence, and the ›reality‹ in which he appears to be neither. Bound up with this heroic-figuration of ›war‹ is also Samad's desire and expectations with reference to a specific class-oriented heroic subjectivity that is expressed in his claim to belong to another, higher army rank, which enhances empathically Samad's naivety to rely on ›authoritative‹, nationlistic discourses and shows tragically the failure of subjectivity regulated by mainstream discourse, and a singular ›mind‹ and ›life‹.

The above passage also allots instances of subjectivity within colonialism and questions, at the same time, the subject-positions engendered by colonial discourse. It is within this gap, between the performance of the subject-positions, the performative of subjectivity, the singularity of a ›mind‹ and *Leib* as well as the signifiers that determine them that *affective humor* ensues in the passage and its unfolding. Subjectivity within the context of the Second World War and in the passage is signaled through the characters' names ›Archie‹ (*white* British related to British nation) and ›Samad‹ (Person of Color related to British empire). The juxtaposition of the two English and Indian names touch upon colonial history and the different subject-positions it has enabled. What gives it a comic, humorous tone is the unusual *use* of the names that mark an aberration, an incongruency with regard to the representation of ›the self‹ and ›the other‹. *Archie* and *Samad*,

next to each other, like ›Tim and Anton‹, signal that the names are of equal importance and value (although locked up in the tank, in the middle of the road to nowhere – or because of that?). ›Samad‹ thus does not signify the other of the (European) self in the margins of ›Archie's‹ image as the superior, supposedly *knowing* and capable subject of empire. Rather, both characters are depicted as differently *foolish* in the way they *act* or are *fooled*, in the way they are acted upon, as representations of the discourses that have ›made‹ them. The names, in this order, thus convey a counter-order of dominant, authoritative discourses. Both names furthermore are shifted at the same time from the center of their contexts ›proper‹, as it were: The ›Indian‹ name ›Samad Iqbal‹ is not just (another) ›Indian‹, Hindi, and Hindu name along the usual ways in which ›the Jewel of empire‹ is homogenized and generalized. ›Samad Iqbal‹ signals a Muslim *Bengali* name. So while Samad regards himself as Bengali, a designation that no one can seemingly differentiate, the name also mocks, with a weeping eye, the cuts and scars of other kinds of *imagined geographies*, the painful separating ›geographs‹ of so-called decoloniality in the design of the earth (– and could these not be also read as a (depressing) success-process of colonialism?) Samad's ›origins‹, *routes*, and connection to ›India‹ is at least a theme that is played on throughout the novel.

›Archie's difference from ›the nation proper‹ is indicated by his different attitude towards ›Samad‹. Archie cannot really ignore Samad the way the others do and ›Archie‹ as a *white* British (superior) subject, is supposed to do; ›Archie‹ somehow, without knowing why, wants to listen to Samad. The humor here is engendered through Archie's sociopolitical standing within a discourse that allows him to act out the performance of a superior subject-position, and by a ›secret‹, ›unofficial‹, inner attitude that guides Archie to act differently and that is expressed in the narrator report, which informs us about Archie's wish *to listen*. But again, the humorous paradox of Archie's behavior that the narrator describes does not laugh at Archie. It rather underscores Archie's inner turmoil and his ›individuality‹, ›singularity‹, and resistance to discourse. Thus its funny underpinning is also accompanied by an aquiver, empathetic sense that heightens expectations of something different that seems to take place as well. Its humor then alludes to different things that are about to happen at once. The performativity of Archie's paradox affectivity opens up a gap and alludes to a rapture in colonial discourse's placements of Archie and Samad as well as in the humor towards them. Archie acts deliberately, distancing himself from the ›authoritative‹ discourse. As a result, Archie cannot only be seen as the ›fook‹ he initially appeared to be, but also as an agent who acts out of an inner impulse, in disagreement with his prepared and alleged discursive subject-position. *Listening* is a signifier in the metonymic chain of ›importance‹ and ›love‹. One listens to the news, and one listens to one's friend. The verb represents notions of concern and attachment. One listens to what *touches* one – *somehow*. The instance of touch signals the conjunction of non-knowledge and power-lessness. It is a moment by which one's actions are directed in specific ways beyond authoritative external control in the (discursive) work of humor. This internal turmoil, Archie's desire to listen to Samad, on the one hand, and the sociopolitical and discursive place in the ›British empire‹ reserved for Archie as a subject-position of superiority, on the other hand, is indicated by Archie's attempt to clinch to the role assigned to him in discourse ›fiercely and resolutely‹. But Archie resists playing the role assigned to him by the subject-position of colonial discourse. Rather he is

inclined to regard Samad as a singular ›speaking human being‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 332) and *wants* to listen to him despite and instead of the dominant discourse's offer of a superior position. Archie *acts* differently. He does not laugh at Samad and does not consider his comrade's interjections as odd. The desire to *listen* within the humorous display signals an affective, emotive attitude on Archie's side. The narrator's close distance in the free direct style, engendered through the deixis ›somehow‹ and the verbs ›wanted‹ and ›listen‹, on the one hand, captures this process of resisting mainstream discourse, and on the other hand, leaves enough space for Archie to act without an absolute ›knowledge‹ of the narrator and beyond their power that could verify and explain him (to an ›implied audience‹). Archie, in this way, is put in the forefront of the narration, which shelters him from being ridiculed. He can be seen as a deliberately acting ›person‹.

The difference between the two different subject-positions, beyond their names, is stressed, firstly, by Archie's cumbersome pronunciation of the name Iqball as ›Ick-Ball‹. The throatal sound of the Arabic letter *qāf* (ق) transcribed through *q* in ›Iqball‹, is foreign to Archie (although Samad is fluent in English ...). Archie fails to pronounce it and is unaware of it. Instead Samad's name, in Archie's pronunciation, becomes an exclamation of disgust, *ick!*, and a *ball* – images that oscillate between a plaything and a party, something ›the British‹ can shoot or dance at. All three meanings show the dimensions of un/pleasure that are bound to the exoticized figure of the other, that the ›implied author‹, behind the narrator's shoulders, seems to be well informed about and slips in here to engender an almost impalpable sense of humor (*some people* in an ›implied audience‹, may note it though ;-)). Secondly, it is emphasized by the *fact* that the other men in the tank, a very small space, rigorously keep ignoring Samad.

Archie's and Samad's racialized difference is, moreover, alluded to through a sociopolitical hierarchy and its effects. Samad seems different (from ...) because he uses another ›language‹, terms (›mullah‹, ›sepoy‹) that are, willingly or unwillingly, not recognized by the others (this is not the way ›one‹ speaks). From a *white* perspective Samad does not play by the rules. Samad touches and pulls at a set code of language use that is deemed as untouchable and superior. He does not seem to have authority over them either Samad does not recognize them or does not care about them (or both). They are not *his* ›rules‹ and ›laws‹ of touch. This un-*knowing* plays with the decoding signification-normalcy of a ›proper‹ *white* subject-position to whom these words sound unintelligible, making ›Samad‹ as a ›speaking subject‹ seem funny, odd, unserious, so that ignoring Samad *seems* justified. He does not belong. And again, this ›knowledge‹ alludes to the mark of an ›implied author‹ who is aware of the ways in which the other is homogenized and generated in colonial discourse, and who is also aware of the ignorance this produces in the *white* mainstream understanding of the self and its alleged other – the harmful side of depicting difference.

It is in the indication of racism in the humorous passage on Samad, however, where affectivity invades the humorous display. The racist attitude towards Samad is not presented as a taken-for-granted-normalized behavior, but shown in its ›weirdness‹, its oddity, which makes it also possible not to perceive Samad as the clown of the group and to sense some kind of soft empathy for him. What can be felt behind this invoked signification in the humorous display of the narrator regarding Samad's exposure to the others is the tragedy of racism that differentiates people, human beings, into differ-

ently evaluated (and hierarchized) ›groups‹ of people. Samad escapes such a flattened image, because he occupies not only a central role in the novel, but also because he can speak for himself, his ›voice‹ is heard, loud and clear, in direct speech. Moreover, an ›implied audience‹ is informed by the narrator about some kind of bond that is about to ensue between Archie and Samad, generated through a close distance to Archie. The narrator indicates that Archie is *somehow* interested in what Samad wants to say. This ›somehow‹ is a deixis that carries four functions: ›Somehow‹ constitutes a pause in the straightforward report of the narrator, it makes space for an affective trait that comes up in the middle of the unresolved different discursive meanings that are gathered together here (colonial discourse/mainstream, national language, Archie and the others as placeholders of this language, Samad as the speaking other, Samad as decolonial discourse/mainstream language, presumably by an ›implied author‹ who can distinguish all these meanings; this opens the possibility for other meanings at the limits of different discourses and beyond them. Furthermore, ›somehow‹ signals a ›varied *play with the boundaries of speech types*, languages and belief systems‹, which Bakhtin regards as ›one most fundamental aspect of comic style‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 308; emphasis in the text). As a placeholder of a sentiment, ›somehow‹ marks, finally, the possibility of compassion. Despite colonial discourse and its restraints, Archie feels ›somehow‹ *called upon* to listen. Archie's desire is skewed by what he *is expected* to do, but he remains attracted to what Samad wants to say. This affective inclination also limits the portrayal of both figures as mere ›fools‹ in the sense of dumb, unintelligent, unknowing figures. It functions like a signpost that stages the characters as two ›speaking human beings‹ *through* and *beyond* mainstream discourse. ›Somehow‹ adds depth to the scene and introduces a touching, gripping tone of solemnity to the humorous performativity of the passage, which in turn *asks for* listening and attention, relegating Archie's desire ›somehow‹ *to listen* to a level of alertness in the text and the possible attentiveness of an ›implied audience‹. Embedded in this performance is the performative dialogue of Archie and Samad, in the directive of *an also somehow knowing* ›implied author‹, as it were, which places the narrator as the narrative instance, the camera lens, in close proximity to the character's intersubjective relationship, to what is going on beyond the spoken words of Archie, of Samad, and the narrator's humorous play. The narrator's humorous tone that depicts a common image of ›Samad‹ as the strange colonized other is thus enriched by an allusion to something beyond this weird image. Samad's direct speech disrupts the colonial discourse, as does Archie's desire *to listen*. Not only does Samad speak for himself, but he also does not seem in the least intimidated by being apparently ignored by his *white* comrades. As Samad can speak, he does not repeat biased discursive images of the other and does not represent the inferior other, but a reference to another ›reality‹ outside the rigidity of imperial discourse. It is a reference to decolonial discourse within the bigger picture to which the story alludes and in which this other is ›a self‹ with an *other* self-image and world image. Samad does not perceive himself as other or ›foreign‹, but rather regards himself in fact as superior, potentially even looks down at the others in the group (›I am an officer!‹). He sees himself as part of ›a world‹ that comprises both the ›East‹, as the use of the hybrid Hindi words indicate as well as the ›West‹ as he places himself not outside of empire or in the ›East‹ or ›West‹ but literally amid of empire's most powerful *forces*: the ›Royal Airborne Force, shelling from high!‹. Hybridity, invoked in the passage, does

not signify a ›third space‹ in Homi K. Bhabha's sense, but as an outcome of (historical) circumstances that comprises both, the ›East‹ as well as the ›West‹, in *one* ›speaking person‹. It thus is a form of Bakhtinian hybridity that does not mean a ›mixing up‹ in the configuration of empire but the unimpeded and interrelated dynamic co-existence of different languages and ›cultures‹ within *one* ›self‹. This insight into ›Samad's‹ subjectivity and the responses it gets within a *white* British context can be seen as the footprint, the trace and instance of the ›real author‹ somewhere behind the novel. It hints at an ›implied author‹ who at least must *know something* about the experientiality of such postcolonial textualities and their effects in the formation of subjectivity and thus about a cultural subtext, about the effects of decolonial discourse at the borders of mainstream discourses and images. The playful humorous sentiment of the passage also derives from such an instance of *knowing* that informs the not-knowing observing narrator and a possible ›implied audience‹. This ›knowledge‹ responds to a double movement: It is an analysis of the mainstream/colonial discourse while at the same time, deconstructing it. Its deconstructive trait is inherent in the play between the iteration of the image of ›Samad‹ within colonial discourse; ›Samad‹ is represented as if he was the (stereotyped) other. He acts differently by using another language and by speaking in a way that is perceived as unusual, ›un-British‹ ›un-proper‹. However, the stereotype is only partially repeated, as Samad can speak for himself and is not just talked about. The humor also emanates from the incongruity between the *white* British figures' understanding of Samad, Samad's self-understanding, and the invocation of an ›audience‹, whom the narrator, informed by an ›implied author‹, lets in on the secrecy of the scene. The humor of the scene therefore involves *telling* as well as *showing* instances in the performance of the *act of narration* and in the *performative acting* of the characters.

Yet the narrative text is not satisfied with the inversion of biases and strives to a completion of its deconstructive movement, if there can be any. Samad's words, too, are fractured in the passage and their centralizing effects infringed upon; consequently, Samad is neither heroized nor romanticized by the anti-stereotypical evocation of the other, but, again, appears as yet another singular ›speaking human being‹ full of complex forms of inconsistencies and shortcomings: Samad also distinguishes himself from others by class based-dominance and colonial hierarchies. These are signaled at by ›education‹ and by the effects of colonialism's discourse of divide-and-rule (›I mean, I am educated. I am trained‹; ›Not some mullah, some sepoy, wearing out my chappals in hard service‹). The humor that marks his ›individuality‹ and singularity as a ›speaking human being‹ at the same time also marks the sense of superiority that is part of mainstream/colonial discourse on education as well as being different societal evaluations marked (not only) by colonialism's effects. Samad's humorous tone, by invoking an other within a sense of superiority, is impregnated by an affective overtone that can evoke not only pleasure but also ›shame‹ as an other is laughed at. This spares ›Samad‹ from being captured within benevolent colonial images. The humor of superiority thus comes at the price of the possibility of an unpleasant sensibility at the ›end‹ of the humorous display and its ›laughter‹. It makes it more complex and something to be worked through beyond the immediacy of the humorous presentation. Samad's utterance is like a double bind. The tone of his dismissive remark is comedic as well as tragic, it is a play of superiority at the cost of ›injustice‹ towards an other. The affectivity of *humor*, thus, not only dialogizes, fractures,

mainstream discourses and images. It also dialogizes, fractures, and explodes itself: »The comic event is that which disrupts itself as the condition of its operation« (Roof 2018, 18). The meaning that is constructed through it is also obliterated within it, so that no utterance remains as a validated, confident ›truth‹.

The naming of Samad next to Archie, too, symbolizes an *aside* insofar as it evokes the (still effective) complex set of colonialism and its relationalities. It is an *aside from* out of mainstream, authoritative, and institutionalized colonial discourses. The character of Samad can be seen as a figure of an *aside from* as he symbolizes being (put) *aside from* the center that is Britishness as well as *aside from* the notion of a (qualified) main protagonist in a British novel. Yet it is these *asides from* through which ›Britishness‹ and the norms that give it credibility on a discursive as well as a materialized institutionalized level, and which are often concealed, are put in the foreground. Colonial discourse and its symbolic order appear disrupted, contrary to the norms that rule in the quiet. Both *asides* thereby have the function of a meticulous analysis of signifiers in a direct and immediate manner »without the imagined benefit of distance« (Roof 2018, 12). The performative humor that permeates their presentation is an analytical critique of supremacist and mainstream discourses in a present (and a presentable) form. In this sense, these narrative *asides* are also *performative besides* in Sedgwick's sense that play with the signifying practices in discourse, exploiting them and their validity.

These complex relations, at least in the moment of presentation, »are impossible to parse because their parsing produces more things to parse. The comic always explores infinitely and endlessly all directions« (Roof 2018, 12). What Judith Roof alludes to is the processual working of humor that indicates an opening beyond its allusions. Here, it is founded on the grotesque asymmetry that is brought about by colonialism and the concept of ›race‹. Archie and Samad may be soldiers of the same power and should be seen as equals yet it is quite clear that they are not. While Archie's *white* Britishness seems ›normal‹, unchallenged, it becomes fragile when it is paralleled with Samad's position to Britishness who is mentioned next to him as a soldier in and of the ›British empire‹, and further as a protagonist with the same relevance. The figure of Samad as an *aside (from)* restructures and resignifies images of ›the self‹ and the other. The other does not symbolize an array of inferiorized, romanticized, or exoticized otherness, but rather equity in terms of validity, representation, oddity, and fallibility. There is already this resignified incongruity that the novel creates through its two main entities from which its humor ensues. Furthermore, if we take Freud's insight into account and characterize the humorous instance as one that brings to light something that is hidden, repressed, and concealed, we can conclude that it is the repressed memory of colonialism and its effects that is condensed and concealed in the image of the British soldiers of World War II (who could be named ›Archie‹ and ›Samad‹), ostensibly English and ostensibly non-English names that are narrated (signaled by names) and that, in turn, signal specific characteristics, *white* figures and non-*white* figures – who are shown and can be seen side by side. The concealed hierarchy that ›race‹ signifies and its displacement in discourse, conspicuous by its absence and referenced and normalized by stereotypical images, is indicated in the novel by the two figures that are marked by it and who mark the discourse outside and inside the diegesis – but in unexpected ways. This mechanism of discursive coloniality is unconcealed in the reiterated *presence-absence* of stereotyped images and

discursive references. It is incongruous with regard to the organizing effect of ›race‹ in older, canonized texts. A symbolic order as an effect of colonialism, or as an order of its subsequent colonality, is subtly revealed in its negativity, its fundamental *abnormality*. Freud's ›joke‹-work, its laborious effect, can be understood in a two-dimensional way. It encompasses not only the techniques on the part of ›the person‹ telling a ›joke‹, or if we take a novel, of a character, a narrator or an ›implied author‹ within the work of the rhetoric of humor, the linguistic and signifying techniques of humor. It must also comprise the part of humor that occurs at its end, and also comprise an addressee, an ›implied audience‹: The humorous performative must be recognized and *assigned* in a specific way in order to work. Humor in the invocation of Archie and Samad as British soldiers in World War II arises from instances of congruency as well as incongruency, which are not only inherent in the humorous paralleling of the figures per se, but in the address of and the relation to an ›implied audience‹ that is evoked in the narrative. While the humorous display may be felt as uncanny to one addressed ›implied reader‹, it may be felt as soothing to another ›implied reader‹ – depending on the dominant and marginalized discourses and subjectivities that the humor triggers and ›sends out‹ and which can or cannot be received. The ambiguity of humor also unleashes a mixed array of affectivity, encompassing ›shame‹ as well as joy, mourning as well as relief. All these ›affective traits‹ may exist next to each other and may be felt in different doses (by an unequal and diverse ›implied audience‹). This affective side of humor is not spelled out straightforwardly. It rather has the form of an ›affective labor‹ (Ngai 2012) that must be worked out within and beyond the presence of the humorous performative. It is part of the discourses that are triggered and exploded in the humorous display of signification. The humorous insight ›just‹ opens up and unpacks meanings, or, as we will see in the course of the reading, a complexity of meanings, but it ›just‹ lays there to be *grasped* (*with the hands, the heart, as an insight*) (or not *grasped*). The humorous performative, unlike its readings, also this one, entails a playful manner (a deconstruction) that does not enforce an other meaning but that, through its many-dimensional un-concealments, can be understood as a gesture of opening up meanings, and of suggestions that go beyond the immediate meaning of the humorous. It suggests the possibility of another, to come to a or forgotten understanding that is not *pregiven* but has to be worked out within and outside of the text. The humorous, then, opens up meaning in an untimely way, touching the past, the present as well as the future, without sticking to any of its time-bound understandings. The passer-by (the implied, non-implied in the text) can take it or leave it. The idea of address, whether we think it as an aside, an ›implied audience‹, an unintentional sender or receiver in a Derridian sense, or as the materiality of a book and its economy, implies at least *an other* as a potential receiver or as someone who feels they are receiving something, or who receives something anyway. This instance of sending out and addressing/receiving implicates a space of relationality. *Affective humor* works on different dimensions: It is performative, invokes the fabric of affectivity, is laborious, opens up meanings, and is relational. It is thus affective in two senses: It invokes different instances of affectivity and it is an affecting element of/in writing/performance, based on the meanings and effects of historically conditioned contexts. In *White Teeth* these trigger the story of an equalized-unequal friendship that explores and further develops the allusion of an amity between ›Archie‹ and ›Samad‹.

On the level of the story, thus *White Teeth* can be read as bringing these two subjectivities together in a frame that reflects historically acquired meanings and sociopolitical and symbolic orders, while at the same time fracturing and shifting them. The experientiality of the characters' encounter is not only grounded within the diegesis, the story-world, but also outside of it. *Outside* of it, insofar, as it indulges in the representational semiotics of discursive formations, and insofar as the two *forms* of textuality, the text of fiction, on the one hand, and the text of historical events, on the other hand, are linked.²⁰ This referentiality to historical events in the novel establishes a complex and affectively difficult, ambiguous humorous work. It pervades and drives the entire novel. At the beginning of this chapter, the extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator again begins their report with an indirect address that implicates a division in their ›speech-/description; it refers to a speaking/showing narrator and a listening/observing ›audience‹. This division in the narrator's ›speech‹ accommodates an instance of mediation in the narrator's movement between telling and showing and an ›implied audience's‹ faculty to decode and to read what is told and shown by the narrator: On the one hand, the characters, and, on the other hand, also the insertion of an ›implied author‹ as a meta-discursive level of evaluation from a more ›real‹ world.

The chapter starts in the form of an address, presupposing and approaching an ›implied audience‹. It begins with the jocular expression ›A propos‹. The jocular trait arises from the playful inclination of the expression that addresses an other in the text, a ›you know what‹ and a ›besides, do you know‹ out of the text. ›A propos‹ indicates *someone else*, someone one is already talking to and who is again evoked as a receiver of the story told. ›A propos‹ also engenders a space, a stage, and a space behind or close to the stage, from which someone talks to someone else or to others about the stage on which the story takes place. This address-like performative utterance with which the chapter begins and which introduces the beginning of Archie's and Samad's encounter and *friendship*, on the one hand, reads like the musings of a stage director or an off-voice outside the scenery of the narrative discourse, alluding to an ›implied author‹ somewhere in the shadows of the narrative. On the other hand, as it, at the same time, depicts the characters and speaks within the text, it evokes the voice of the narrator. The address is thus divided, at once alluding to a meta-level of narration as well as to the narrative discourse. It is built on a former uttered direct speech of one of the characters, namely Samad's wife, Alsana:

›A propos: it's all very well, this instruction of Alsana's to look at the thing close up; to look at it dead-straight between the eyes; an unflinching and honest stare, a meticulous inspection that would go beyond the heart of the matter to its marrow, beyond the marrow to the root – but the question is how far back do you want? How far will *do*? The old American question: what do you want – *blood*? Most probably more than blood is required: whispered asides; lost conversations; medals and photographs; lists and certificates, yellowing paper bearing the faint imprint of brown dates. Back, back, *back*. Well, all right, then. Back to Archie spit-clean, pink-faced and polished, looking

20 Regarding ›fact‹ and ›fiction‹ in narratives see Monika Fludernik (2015); Fludernik especially draws on the definition, parallels, and distinctions of factual and fictional writing.

just old enough at seventeen to fool the men from the medical board with their pencils and their measuring tape. Back to Samad, two years older and the warm colour of bread. Back to the day when they were first assigned to each other, Samad Miah Iqbal (row 2, Over here now, soldier!) and Alfred Archibald Jones (Move it, move it, move it), the day Archie involuntarily forgot that most fundamental principle of English manners. He stared. They were standing side by side on a stretch of black dirt-track Russian ground, dressed identically in little triangular caps perched on their heads like paper sailing-boats, wearing the same itchy standard uniform, their ice-pinchd toes resting in the same black boots scattered with the same dust. But Archie couldn't help but stare. And Samad put up with it, waited and waited for it to pass, until after a week of being cramped in their tank, hot and suffocated by the airless machine and subjected to Archie's relentless gaze, he had putted-up-with as much as his hot-head ever could put up with anything.« (Smith 2000, 83)

With ›a propos‹, Alsana's utterance is split in such a way that it frames different interleaved spaces, which open unto a square, a stage, alluding, in an inner back part to an ›implied author‹, and in the next to an extradiegetic heterodiegetic narrator who looks at the figures in the middle of the square, and to an ›implied audience‹ that watches the acting figures from the other, the front side. This nesting space can also be imagined as circular and still interleaved, with an implicated audience around it. While the title as a paratext and the tendency of an ›implied author‹ can be seen as traces of a meta-discourse entering the novel, the unwritten space in which the narrative discourse takes place in its relation to the narrator, the characters, and an ›implied audience‹ can be regarded as the stage on which the story unfolds. The bifurcated address, then, is aimed at different narrative levels of the story. It ties together historical, mainstream discourse and the narrative discourse. It links fact and fiction and engenders a reality effect by interconnecting them within the narrative discourse. This ›third space‹, between fact and fiction, functions as the performative space in the making in which the figures can intervene. In this way, the novel problematizes, touches upon, historical omissions and other sites of history that could not find their way into mainstream historiographical discourse.²¹ The narrator's language is charged with humorous meanings that create a dynamic tension between what they allude to and what an ›implied audience‹ might understand, so that a *backdoor*, the infinity of dialogicity is opened up, from which also suspense arises.

The narrator also narrows the distance to Alsana, taking her voice seriously and giving more flesh to the illusion of her as a ›real‹ figure, a ›speaking human being‹. Within this nested performance the narrator muses along the meanings of ›origins‹, ›truth‹, and ›purity‹ by playing, on the one hand, with Alsana's ›instruction‹ to look ›close up‹ at something, to try to see something as it is, and by the chapter's title, on the other hand, that invokes the word ›teeth‹ and ›root canal‹ as quite short and short-lived enterprises, so that looking close up on a meta-discursive level is doubted as an endeavor to find some ›origins‹, implicitly suggesting that it might lead to a search in vain. Alsana looks close

21 This is, for example, the case with the British Army and its colonial subjects, which were part of it and fought for it. Cf. Foster (2005); Jeffreys/Rose (2012); Bourne (2012); Perfect (2016); Thompson (2024).

up at something to gain insight regarding its ›nature‹, ›essence‹, or ›being‹. The narrator's proclamation questions, at the same time, whether the full presence, some ›truth‹, can be detectable at all, no matter how close one looks at something. ›Beyond the heart of the matter to its marrow‹, ›beyond the narrow to the root‹ can be read as metaphorical expressions that allude to ›meaning-construction‹. ›Teeth‹ as a bodily part serves not only as a synecdoche for the body, taken up repeatedly throughout the novel, as discussed but can be regarded as a reference to the illusion of both fact and fiction, to history as well as to story and to the unreliability of a sign and an image per se that seem to be undone in infinite marks, without an essence or inner meaning. If the sentence is read as a metaphor for ›teeth‹ and for the construction of meaning, ›teeth‹ can be considered as alluding to a process of selection and meaning endowment. Here the term links narrativity (fictional and factual, story and history) and the inclination of ›truth‹ and ›untruth‹ to the materiality of the body. By invoking the materiality of the body, discourse is taken from a level of abstraction to the level of matter. Alsana's utterance forms a background to the reflections about any given ›truth‹ that would be verifiable. Its doubtful inclination is built on an idiom that bifurcates and ironizes an authoritative claim, and that concomitantly is echoed as an authoritative, other superior claim that inferiorizes the first one. While the idiom ›it's all very well‹ doubles and dialogizes Alsana's utterance, its mechanism here is not bottom up but rather seems to belong to a (patronizing) voice outside the narrative discourse and even outside the narrator's reach. It reads like a parody of a authoritative statement in court, whereby the voice uttering it, indicated through the idiom, is judging Alsana's statement. The ironizing and inferiorizing tone is evoked by the words ›Alsana's instruction‹ in juxtaposition with the idiom ›its all very well‹. This is done again in the form of an hyperbolic exaggeration of the verb *to look*, ›to look at it dead-straight between the eyes‹, giving it an overstated explanation that mocks its ›truth‹-content. The increasing hyperbole not only calls into question the ›presence‹, ›truth‹, and ›authenticity‹ of *things* and of *the other* as they apparently present themselves to us; the increasing hyperbolic rhetoric and humorous tone of the passage are used to link the question of the other and of ›being‹ to the question of ›essence‹, ›truth‹, and ›race‹ as hollow notions without any material essence. The judging voice, it can be inferred, does not inferiorize Alsana's ›instruction‹ to ›look at the thing close up‹ per se but rather transfers it to another thematical field. It scrutinizes its generality and validity with regard to the question of ›truth‹, ›origins‹, and ›essence‹. At the same time, linking the question of ›truth‹ and ›being‹ to ›race‹ also implicates how much ›race‹ *matters* in (postcolonial) contemporary perceptions. The passage's rhetoric in its addressing form directly confronts an ›implied audience‹, in whose perception ›race‹ and *things* that apparently show themselves ›to be‹ as they ›are‹, may matter and are put into question. By the implication of the hyperbolic humorous rhetoric, on the one hand, and the serious matter it raises, on the other hand, the passage also aims at affecting an ›implied audience‹. The passage's style of address and utterance is humorous as well as thought-provoking. The evaluative statement that plays at the border of the meanings of fiction/›reality‹ within a fictional text is a critique of unquestioning understandings as *mis(-sed)* understandings. It raises the very ›real‹, historically driven and sociopolitical important, and often concealed discourse of ›race‹ evoked through the metonymic descriptive verticality of a tooth as a bodily part. These metonymies can be seen as synecdoches for the racialized body, which in turn is

inscribed by the empty and yet, with regard to its ramifications, grave codes of racism as an everyday practice. This is also implied by its juxtaposition with ›blood‹. ›Blood‹ is another synecdoche for the materiality of the body within its discursive manifestation and a metonym for the colonial concept of ›race‹. It is done by a humorous rhetorical address, presuming an addressee in the ›implied audience‹ whom it seems to directly ask: ›What do *you* want?‹ – indicating that racialization is also a question of (political) attitude that one can choose to adhere to or disregard. The rhetorical question is humorous, first, through the form of the question. The question parodies a threat as an instance of power. Through the parody, power is, in this way, rendered as if it was performed by the inferiorized other, is questioned and mocked from a position of powerlessness, which in this way shows also its other power, the power of assumed ›weakness‹. The speaking voice that seems to overarch the observing narrator's voice, possibly that of an ›implied author‹, is close to the threatened other and well-informed of the image and discourse that engulfs it. The rendition of the threat by parody restores the other's subjectivity and sovereignty, whilst teasing and humbling the threatening one. Its parody contains a seductive and disarming undercurrent and comes with the payoff of ›entertainment‹ and pleasure. Its pleasure again ensures that the inherent critique of the parody is not taken as an offense. The ensuing humor rather plays with the efficacy of the menace and mimes the effects of its affectivity, of fury, as a zany and unjustified part of the utterance rather than of ›the person‹ or subject that threatens. The ›laughter‹, or at least pleasure, that it may engender is shifted to the unconscious and affective site of the thread and its ›general‹, ›common‹ feature. In this way, the derision comes as an insight about the unconscious affectivity of mechanisms of power as well as anger and has an emollient effect.

It implies an incongruous comparison that rests on an odd counterpart. ›More than blood‹ has the function of a humorous and multilayered, suspensive deictic unit. It contains the indication of the concept of ›race‹ as well as its meanings and effects. The expression gives meaning to the whole passage as well as to the unequal *friendship* that is explained and depicted later on in this chapter. With ›[m]ore than blood‹, the concept of ›race‹ is delinked from a naturalized, biologized understanding (›blood‹) and juxtaposed and transferred to its meanings in the production of discourse and ›culture‹ within a historical process. ›Blood‹, an essential bodily fluid that signifies ›nature‹, a ›natural‹ ›biological, ›self-evident‹ phenomenon that has also naturalized ›race‹ as ›natural‹ and ›given‹, is revealed within its metonymic signification and ridiculed in the passage. By the allusion to dominant and defunct discourses, ›blood‹ is linked to cultural productions (›medals and photographs; lists and certificates, yellowing paper bearing the faint imprint of brown dates‹). The metaphor of ›blood‹ also signifies the way the event and process of (colonial) history have shaped discourse with all its material effects and have given meaning to subjectivity and (post-)modernity in the (national) understandings of self and other.

Implicitly the passage also questions whether there can exist any ›given‹, self-evident meaning, in the way history and historical artefacts are archived. This is indicated in the implication of any historicizing as an *active, interfering act* of archiving and selection that determines what is stored (›yellowing paper bearing the faint imprint of brown dates‹), as well as in the construction of ›the nation‹ and its materialized and institutionalized signifiers (›medals and photographs; lists and certificates‹).

The payoff, therefore, not only lies in the humorous pleasure, but also in learning: we gain insight about the effects of power on the self, on the other, and historical ›reality‹, which are also part of an ›implied audience's‹ subjective and subject-related experiences within instances of non-knowledge and power-lessness. The ridiculing of power thus also shows another form of power from ›below‹ and produces a space of balance in which exchange and dialogicity seem attainable beyond discourse.

Furthermore, the passage gets its humorous underpinning by correlating a serious question (that of ›race‹) with a popular image (of the U.S.-American colonial history), whereby this U.S. popular image of brute and masculinist settler colonialism that signifies *white* US-American cis-masculinity is also mocked. Moreover, an addressed other is implicated in connection with the question of desire (what do you *want*?). Desire, the will to gain insight and the construction of subjects (the self and the other) are, in this way, inextricably knotted together as *one* activity within (colonial) encounter and ›knowledge‹ production. The passage's humorous rhetoric thus plays by implication on the edge of other significations that of violence, of an image of U.S.-American history as the ›Wild West‹, of racism, and at the same time shows how much racism, historical violence and dominant popular culture are interrelated.

In its manifold humorous allusions, the passage has an ›explosive‹ affectivity regarding the raised and exploited meanings that it inheres. Its manifold humorous play explodes »complexities« understood as »systems, regimes, discourses, intertwined conventions, occasions [...] joggling, clashing, resignifying and repeating« (Roof 2018, 36). The repetition of different discourses and images, though, is shifted, displaced, accomplished by a humorous rhetoric of performative resignifications. It bears on past and contemporaneous meanings and opens them up without restoring another fixed meaning. The explosive element of resignification rather awaits to be thought through in unfinished ways within an alley of non-knowledge and power-lessness; it requires Freud's ›receiver‹ of the humorous message ›at the other end‹ and thus suggests an ›implied audience‹ by whom these repetitions are recognized and to which these repetitions are *retold*. Like Antonin Artaud's ›theater of cruelty‹, the humor's explosive »anarchic destruction« engenders a »fantastic flight of forms« (Chang 2003) that questions the idea of ›reality‹ as well as of ›representation‹ by *representing* conventionalized images in a deferred and estranged form (Artaud 1988, 245). The humor that is at work in the passage unfolds by »beginning with the simplest elements, or ›bits‹ [...] building bit by bit to increasing combination« (Roof 2018, 36) without having an end in itself. Rather each statement is followed by another one that questions, ›cuts‹, the former one and ends with an alluding suspensive utterance. The engendered humor is funny because of the many allusions and exploitative meanings. At the same time a touching, pensive affectivity is unleashed, which is part of the humorously contrived disposition *to look differently at things*. In playing with Alsana's utterance (to look ›close up‹ at something), the voice of an ›implied author‹ must be assumed in the passage, as the prompt ›to look close up‹ at things goes beyond the level of the narrative discourse. It alludes to the construction of meanings and invites a critical examination of what is depicted as ›truth‹ per se, and it may invite an ›implied audience‹ to scrutinize *the act of looking close up*, to see whether it *really* is a *precise* look, whereby in its call to do so, the assumed voice of the ›implied author‹ also performs this critical look without restoring its former meaning that was bound to the

narrative discourse and the context of Alsana's and Clara's exchange. An act of deconstruction is thus performed in the passage. ›Looking close up‹ is a deferral of the former meaning of looking close up and loses its former meaning, is not the same act again. It is a form of scrutinizing that questions patterns of acquiring ›knowledge‹ that have been taken for granted. It instead invites one to look close up at things by questioning their alleged verisimilitude. Bakhtin describes these ›endings as new beginnings‹ in the humorous display of novels, which do not close the text with any ›conclusive conclusions‹ (Bakhtin 1999, 165), but the signifying practices and the position and positionality of an ›implied author‹ within discourse, nevertheless, enter the novel in this way.

The humorous, mocking, tongue-in-cheek manner in the last transitional sentence of the passage, ›[m]ost probably more than blood is required‹, is invoked by an aporetic allusion, indicated by the deixis ›most probably‹. The expression implicates, on the one hand, uncertainty, not-knowing and the powerlessness that is part of it. On the other hand, the expression contains a certitude. It is quite sure that the matter indeed is different, which gives the statement a certain power. The utterance also engenders suspense and thereby transposes and prolongs the humorous effect.

The passage also emphasizes an ironic and multilayered meaning that knots together dominant and resistant language via a humorous and yet meditative caution to *look at* what comes, at the protagonists, in a different way, which does not reiterate stereotypes. In this way, a space is opened up in which the encounter of the two figures can be *looked at* within this conglomeration of different discourses and the deferring meanings, scrutinized by humor in the passage. Archie and Samad, while representing and repeating discursive images, are *shown* in a different and deferring space of representational *re-* and *de*imagining. Let's take another look at the passage:

»Back, back, *back*. Well, all right, then. Back to Archie spit-clean, pink-faced and polished, looking just old enough at seventeen to fool the men from the medical board with their pencils and their measuring tape. Back to Samad, two years older and the warm colour of bread. Back to the day when they were first assigned to each other, Samad Miah Iqbal (row 2, Over here now, soldier!) and Alfred Archibald Jones (Move it, move it, move it), the day Archie involuntarily forgot that most fundamental principle of English manners. He stared. They were standing side by side on a stretch of black dirt-track Russian ground, dressed identically in little triangular caps perched on their heads like paper sailing-boats, wearing the same itchy standard uniform, their ice-pinched toes resting in the same black boots scattered with the same dust. But Archie couldn't help but stare. And Samad put up with it, waited and waited for it to pass, until after a week of being cramped in their tank, hot and suffocated by the airless machine and subjected to Archie's relentless gaze, he had putted-up-with as much as his hot-head ever could put up with anything.« (Smith 2000, 83)

Firstly, an analepsis is construed by the deixis ›back‹. The repeating of the deixis ›back, back, *back*‹ and the italic typewriting of the deixis emphasize theatrical, performative stage direction or filmic camera shifts that indicate a-going-back-in-time. The deixis not only signals an analepsis. It also yields humor. Its humorous underpinning is induced by heightened expectations and suspense while an ›implied audience‹ is simultaneously evoked and addressed. ›Back‹ construes a constative as well as performative element that

is tonal and visual. In ›Back, back, *back*‹, melos, opsis, and lexis culminate. According to Northrop Frye literature as a »verbal structure« »presents a lexis which combines« the two other elements (Frye [1957] 2020, 244). Frye's more traditional account is sustained by Antonin Artaud's approach to art as an intervention that interconnects melos, opsis, and lexis. Artaud is not interested in the question of representation within art, but in the ways ›reality‹ and its meanings can be distorted in art in order to invoke other meanings in what could be called a dialogic encounter with an audience (Artaud 1988, 245). With regard to both Frye's as well as Artaud's approaches, it can be stated that the deixis functions as a merging of melos, opsis, and lexis in the passage, as an inter-art mimesis that induces a space of estrangement, pleasure, and attention within the text. It mimes a film as well as theater, whereby its mimetic repetition can be recognized. The repetition of the deixis functions like a camera perspective, a camera lens, a change of décor on stage or a voiceover in film (or stage) that guides an ›implied audience‹ to another scenery. It is a constative as well as a performative utterance. It has the function of a rotational axis between the narrator's comments and the framing of Archie and Samad (outside of stereotyped images) *before* the insertion of the deixis and the recounting of past events as well as the characters' first encounter *after* the insertion of the deixis. The deixis also functions like a narrative loop that prepares for resignifications in the semantic field of mainstream discourses. The humorous and multiply allusive intonation of ›back, back, *back*‹ does not mime ›reality‹ but gives narrative structure to the deferral and construction of new meanings in the process of its signifying practice of back and forth. Within this analeptic glimpse into the past, we can hear a third voice. It resembles a voiceover in a (war-)film as it is put in brackets (Samad Miah Iqbal (row 2, Over here now, soldier!)) and (›Alfred Archibald Jones (Move it, move it, move it.)) and displays the immediacy and commending tone of an army context, underlining the performativity of the narrated passage, as we at once can also *see*, imagine, the protagonists *run* to their assigned positions. The funny undertone is attached, on the one hand, to the performative aspect of the passage that again is a mélange of melos (the voice-over), opsis (the eidetic effect of the acting figures) and lexis (the narrator's framing descriptions), which are attuned to one another and which are not only part of drama but also of the reading process: While the narrator evokes a past time by the insertion of the deixis ›back‹, the insertion of the voice-over produces the setting of the scene within a past time and the performance of the characters gives evidence to the implementation of its presence. On the other hand, the humorous display is provoked by the mimicry of filmic techniques.

Secondly, the flashback is *shown* non-diegetically by a description (Fludernik 2008, 117). The description, too, functions here as a constative as well as a performative utterance in the narrative discourse. It entails the creation of the past by describing the young looks of the two figures; yet it is not their foreheads or the shape of their hands or their height that are described, but their skin color. The description thus also alludes to a sociopolitical discourse upon which the fiction touches, hinting at other meanings and thus to bodies (sociopolitical entities) and their figuration (narrative figures as well as representations of bodies) in the historically driven discursive configuration of ›race‹ and racism. Yet the appeal to ›race‹ is done in a subtle manner in connection with an account that is funny as it evokes not only racialized significations but also immaturity: ›back to Archie pink-faced and polished; ›back to Samad‹, ›the warm colour of baked

bread«. Here again, the fictional world touches upon discursive ›reality«, opening it up before the eyes of an ›implied audience«. The performance turns into the performative, and vice versa, as might become more prehensible in the following. The passage's funniness combines humor with an empathic affectivity that softens its racialized signification. Through the humorous depiction the racialized signification is put under erasure in a Derridean sense. On the one hand, it is necessary in order to clarify the figures' subject-positions within colonial discourse and its signifying order. On the other hand, it is only used in order to depict its sociopolitical effects and power asymmetries, but in a manner that empathically destabilizes biased assumptions. Both significations, ›backed bread« as well as ›pink-faced and polished«, give a note of aesthetics to their appearance and underline their vulnerability and young age. An empathic element thus emerges from the humorous description. The third voice and the description both also function in different ways as a catalyzer for this humor through which an affective *orientation* in favor of both characters is implemented in the narrative: The third voice's military drill tone is funny as it can engender an *eidetic effect*, so that the figures can almost be *seen* to obey the commands. But it also gives rise to sympathy for the bustling, agonized characters. *Affective humor* thus determines the distance in the relationship of the different narrative levels of the story.

Humor in the novel has been generally understood as a form of (rhetorical) mediation in a triangular form between at least three sides, the speaker/narrator, a character, and a ›listener« (Freud [1908] 2002; Lausberg 1990; Matzat 2014, 77). Depending on the utterance, one line of this relationship (between the narrator and the characters/between the narrator and an ›implied audience«/between the characters and an ›implied audience«; between the figures, the narrator and an ›implied audience«) might be emphasized in the narrative discourse. Here, the distance of the characters to ›implied audience« is reduced as the third voice puts the characters in the limelight, centering them. The third voice simultaneously makes the construing and addressing ›implied audience« see and sense the army atmosphere and also engenders sympathy for the two protagonists while they can be ›watched« performing what is required of them and can be pictured to move hastily and clumsily. The passage thus entails both meanings of performance, a performance that takes place (here, in the text and through the text) as well as in the sense of a *performative act* (Butler 1988), when the possibility of transformation appears in the arbitrary relation between the stylized repetition of acts through time, and ›the possibility of different sorts of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style« (Butler 1988, 520). In the novelistic text both constitutive forms converge through melos, opsis, and lexis in an Artaudian sense. An ›implied audience« is invited to *hear* the characters through two narrative techniques, the creation of a *third voice*, and the narrator's *description*²² of the acting figures within this scenery in relation to the voice. The passage portrays the two characters in a quasi non-biased form.

As discussed earlier, *affective humor*, more than being a form of ridiculing the other, is a form of narrowing the distance to an other. The novel especially can be regarded as a

22 Regarding the relevance of description as a diegetic tool in narrative discourse see Nünning (2007) and Fludernik (2014).

form of becoming familiar with someone else's perspective or situation because of narrative techniques like free indirect discourse, focalization and the establishment of perspective and distance (Matzat 2014, 77 ff.). Here, an ›implied audience‹ is induced that might sympathize with the two protagonists, because they are shown in a sympathetic way as young, ›innocent‹, still child-like, inexperienced and exposed to the rigorous authoritativeness of the military as well as to the atrocities of a ›war‹. This unfolds a space of responsibility, an immediate space of touch, between the characters and an ›implied audience‹ that is independent of the narrator. Yet there is also another thread in the signifying performance of the passage. It is a thread, that goes back to, speaks to, discourse. The affective, humorous portrayal of Archie and Samad sympathizes with them; the scene implicitly also opens up a meditative gap for understanding, that transcends the fictional world.

The implication that the military has the same physical consequences for both of them creates an analogous, eye-level ground for viewing them. Their sociopolitical inequality, marked by their skin color and Archie's gaze, and their equality as soldiers in the army are incongruous, and this incongruity unleashes an empathetic humorous tone. The description reveals a sympathetic narrative perspective, which expresses a sentiment for them rather than against them. It thus functions in a distinct way, beyond the narrator's voice, to ensure the transmission of the passage's humorous rhetoric. On the one hand, the narrator maintains a certain distance to the characters but, at the same time, they affectively narrows the distance by describing them. On a performative level, the description indicates with some affection that the characters are forgivable, that neither of them can really be taken seriously and should be treated with some generous mercy. This teasing narrative tone, produced by the narrator's description, continues, and it continues to take up the formative effect of the concept of ›race‹ and of racism. Its performative playfulness is produced not only by affectivity and humorous allusions, but also by the narrator's description of how the characters behave, *how they act*, by the *observation* of their more immediate, performing site:

»Back to the day when they were first assigned to each other [...], the day Archie involuntarily forgot that most fundamental principle of English manners. They were standing side by side on a stretch of black dirt-track Russian ground, dressed identically in little triangular caps perched on their heads like paper-sailing boats, wearing the same itchy standard uniform, their ice-pinchd toes resting in the same black boots scattered with the same dust. But Archie couldn't help but to stare.« (Smith 2000, 83)

Details in the description of the characters and how their bodies react (itchy uniform; ice-pinchd toes; staring at another, despite all national-imperial ›civility‹, the creation of the ›national‹ self and the othered ›other‹), firstly, interrelate them to each other as subjects with a material body, enhancing an effect of reality in the illusion of the fiction, touching thereby the space between history and fiction; secondly they show bodies that are discursively marked; thirdly, an ›implied audience‹ is evoked as an accomplice of this ›knowledge‹. In this way, ideally, a (conflicting) space of identification is opened up: on the one hand, with the realistic clichés (of how a *white* man from an underprivileged class behaves, how a man of color *necessarily* looks like within colonial discourse, what soldiers

endure in the army). On the other hand, the liminal space between ›fact‹ and ›fiction‹ is softened in the images of the bodies and subjectivities, and with it the possibility of relating the figures to the material world, and thus the possibility of opening up imagination and unlearning. However, since the tone of the narrative voice contains humor and plays with a pleasurable affectivity, it avoids the stench of ironically blaming a side or siding with a figure. Instead it creates a playful proximity to the difference and peculiarity of the characters. A diverse ›implied audience‹ is thus constructed and addressed to simultaneously identify with and distance itself from them, so that a productive aporetic dialogicity is invoked in the text that can deconstructively allude to an ethical recognition of ›the other‹ as ›the self‹ despite all differences.

The passage further develops this trait of sympathizing with and mocking the figures, emphasizing that the two characters are equal on a practical, military level of army rank. Their equality is in stark contrast to their racialized difference underscored by the reference to the first time Archie saw Samad: ›the day when they were first assigned to each other‹; ›the day Archie . . . forgot‹; ›the day [. . .] Archie couldn't help but stare‹.

The induced humor in the description, parodies a prose narrative that is almost a fairy tale in the passage and indicates a random time, ›the day‹. The humorous tone is also stressed by the word ›involuntarily‹. On the one hand, these elements together indicate a future as well as a past time, a coming event in the story that has already happened, a perplexing display of time that increases suspense and is endowed with humor. On the other hand, they allude to an unconscious act that Archie has done, which, combined with the apparently ›knowing‹ narrator, creates a humorous, expectant tension. Furthermore, the phrase ›forgot that most fundamental principle of English manners‹ entails humor due to the comical narrative tone induced by ›most‹. While ›the fundamental principle of English manners‹ could be read in a de Manian ›grammatical‹ sense and could have been part of a manual on ›Life and Manners in Great Britain‹ or could have had a restrained, vaguely mocking undertone in the narrative, the deixis ›most‹ as a maximization and exaggeration produces a cheerful, joyful humorous tone and can, at the same time, be read as ironic as it alludes to forms of *learned*, societal constructed behaviors of social control that have a nation-building effect (›English manners‹). Its ironic humorous tone is once again enhanced by the word ›fundamental‹ that incongruously plays with the construed character of national ›manners‹ by evoking their baselessness and alluding to the emptiness and foundationlessness of purely imaginary constructions of (national) ›manners‹. Furthermore, as the allusion depicts Archie's stare, the foundation of ›English manners‹ is at the same time ironically linked to British imperialism and processes of colonization as will be discussed below.

Archie stares, but he cannot act *otherwise*. The gaze that is captured by the narrator's focalization of Archie and which seems to freeze the other (Samad) to a *thing*, is so strongly implemented in Archie's normalized self-identification that it even seems to supersede nationalized self-understandings and social values (›Archie involuntarily forgot that most fundamental principle of English manners‹), and the imperial British desire to establish egalitarian standards for all its racialized subjects in the army, so that they (naturally) feel obliged to serve empire at their best) (›dressed identically in little triangular caps perched on their heads like paper-sailing boats, wearing the same itchy standard uniform‹, ›same black boots‹). All shall be equal for the purposes of the ›war‹, and yet

are not: The desire to stare, to capture, and fixate the other nullifies the (common) (bodily) experience of the circumstances (itchy uniform; ice-pinched toes), another imperial geographical space that is alien to both of them (on a stretch of black dirt-track Russian ground) and nature (same black boots scattered with *the same dust*). The other remains different, not so much by being another human being but by skin color; the other is different from the self. The depiction of the gaze in this passage fulfills various functions. It humorizes the stare as an errant, neurotic behavior, it exposes the colonial gaze, it offers a decolonizing reading of that gaze, and it lends itself, in effect, to envisioning another humanist understanding of the self and the other in relation to the coloniality of their images that are not absolutely dominated by the discourse of colonialism and that are suggested as the beginning of a friendship. Archie's staring also captures the ignorance and primitiveness of empire. Through a back door in colonial discourse itself, then, the narrative gazes back at the alleged power and knowledge of the many faces of colonialism.

On the one hand, Archie's stare generates humor, because it is weird to imagine someone intensely glaring at someone else who is not very far away. It suggests a loss of control that lies outside of privileged social *tacts*, *touching too much*, and thus a violation of unwritten laws. Staring also implies a sense of embarrassment. It may not be staring as such that is regarded as shameful, but to *get caught* staring. The *act* of staring (and recognizing oneself in it) doubles the humorous effect as an act of having lost control or of being stared at and being on the verge of losing control. It is thus also a signifying play with a possible implied audience. Staring also implies ignorance and not knowing. It shows one's powerlessness – at the sight of an other (whom one desires?) and objectifies the other one stares at, which renders one powerless. The realization of the gaze is funny in relation to the concession that one has to make (to oneself) of being unknowing and powerless and of being caught doing something indecent. Staring thus symbolizes the visibility of incompetence but also of a form of eagerness and a contradictory affectivity (lust, desire, joy, pensiveness, fascination, superiority and/or humiliation, self-awareness – or its opposite – reluctance, helplessness, lostness). As an (aggressive) attempt of curiosity to understand the other, or/and to fix the other as an object of desire, it also emerges as part and parcel of the effects of coloniality – which is not so much connoted with power, but with a form of (uncivilized) ignorance – traits that are regularly attached to the other. Staring, as mentioned in relation to the philosophy of decolonization and Fanon's deconstructive move, has the meaning of fixation within the coloniality of discourse and its materialized effects. The stare, the gaze, is the implication of placing the other (in a subjugated position), of othering. As a discursive effect upon the senses, it determines images of the self and the other through biased forms of differentiation and by processes of negation and projection. In this way, the self and the other are created simultaneously. Based on a quasi rereading of Jacques Lacan's ideas about the formation of the self, in its recognition of the self through the Other, in the mirror stage and a Fanonian deconstruction of the racist gaze within a poetological account that undermines the gaze by laughter and that restores an approach to the other as a form of tentative touch, which orients and opens up the self towards the other, the gaze here seems resignified as a form of decolonial knowledge and decolonizing power. The induced humor is thus a recognition of the

absurdity and tragedy of the gaze that presumes to have ›knowledge‹ and power. Humor becomes an affective expression of deconstruction in relation to a seemingly invincible sociopolitical ›reality‹: the manifestations of the absurdity of racism and othering. The novel alludes to these colonial/decolonial sites of the gaze: Archie's staring at Samad and Samad's response to it. The stare, as imperial gaze, is a sign of the concealment and displacement of coloniality that is worked out in the novel in a Freudian ›joking-it-out‹ sense. But in depicting Archie's gaze, the humorous tone also reveals it and turns it inside out as a form of ›non-knowledge‹ and power-lessness in the experientiality of racialization as a decolonial strategy: The gaze is stared at, studied. The (normalized) subject of ›knowledge‹ (*white* subjectivity) is questioned and their act of ›knowledge‹ production, through which ›the self‹ and ›the other‹ are constructed, is itself objectified by being exposed and *shown*. The passage functions as a mirror vision of decolonial discourse. In this sense, too, Archie's stare has a humorous underpinning. It is a humor of relief and recognition on both ends, of *being stared at*, and *staring back*, as well as the humor of sharing ›the secret‹ of ›knowing it‹, and of recognizing its unmasking. It is thus also a humor of community building. Experiences of pain and defenselessness are transformed into empowerment. It is the ›knowledge‹ and power of decolonial (ancestral, transmitted, not-codified, counter-)discourse that enters the text through humor, laughing out discourses of coloniality. Like Freud's super-ego, (ancestral, transmitted, not-codified, counter-)discourse, through humor, functions as a corrective to the dominant discourse protecting the ego, the othered self *reinstating* the possibility of other relationalities, which are indicated in the novel by the ensuing *friendship*. However, the gaze of colonial power, as inscribed through the discourse by othering (it is Archie who stares at Samad), is also inscribed in the subjectivity and subject-formation of the characters, as can be inferred from how they *act*. The absurdity of the stare is emphasized in the passage by its repetition at the beginning and the end of the passage: ›He [Archie] stared‹ and ›Archie couldn't help but stare‹. In this way, staring at an other is made into something strange. It is portrayed as abnormal and absurd. Not only Archie's staring becomes abnormal, but also the tendency to stare, the idea of ›race‹. Archie's objectifying stare, thus, admits both, the absurdity and the effects of racialized discourse. This clash between the absurdity of staring and its manifestations is what makes the comical as well as tragical, thought-provoking. Moreover, in the humorous context of the passage, tragedy is not equated with something called ›fate‹, as might be inferred at first glance from ancient Greek plays, but rather as historically and discursively embedded – within structures of power-lessness and non-knowledge. *Affective humor* seems to signal a form of acknowledgment and acceptance – in affirmative ways. (Against the backdrop of the construction of ›narratives‹, perhaps Sophoclean tragedies mean to imply exactly the same – that things have a prehistory and are situated?) *Affective humor* dialogizes this experience without shying away from its tragic sides, but also without succumbing to them. It begins at its ruins – here, by opening up a space for reflecting on the effects of racism in ›real‹ life.

The passage then also plays with the reality effect of the novel (it is all fiction – but it seems to reference and mimic ›reality‹), and with the expectations of an ›implied audience‹: Although the figures could be ›real‹ figures and are displayed in an empathetic way, the narrator still distances themselves from the sociopolitical discourse that make

the characters act the way they do, here especially from Archie, by implicitly mentioning that what Archie does, *staring*, is not ›normal‹. The narrator, on the one hand, seems to be critical of the gaze and does not identify with it (as do presumably parts of an ›implied audience‹), on the other hand, by alluding to the ›nation‹ (›English manners‹), they also take along an ›implied (white) audience‹ (and Archie), who might identify with ›Britishness‹ and somehow also with staring, and places them outside a *good, British* form of behavior as if Archie's staring were an isolated incident, like an ›understandable‹ slip.²³ This may be due to an effort not to offend anyone with the critique. It thus ensures that the critical touch is made in a *tactful* way, that it conforms to discursive regulations so that the narrative (and the narrator) is not rejected. As a result, the narrator produces a reliable narrative within their derailing criticism. This caution also creates suspense and enlivens the implication of an audience that, while diverse, is in no way blamed and can remain open(-minded) to the narrative. It is a narrative strategy that allows for the possibility of a space of touch that touches in different ways.

The humorous play with (sociopolitical) discourse also points to the fact that what the narration describes must (still) be a current issue as it is still recognized and understood. The flashback to the protagonists' young age is not to show how racism worked *then*. It highlights and explains *why* and *how* they could meet *at all* and become friends *despite* ›race‹ as a structuring matter of coloniality. Thus, *affective humor* reiterates and at the same time shifts sociopolitical meanings. Humor triggers a form of ›knowledge‹ about sociopolitical norms, subjectivities and their discursive evaluation and brings it into a dynamic dialogic process at the borders of constructive forms of ›non-knowledge‹ and power-lessness. *Affective humor*, by establishing a multiplicity of narrated distance, affective positioning and humorous play, gives a normative framework to the narrative in accordance with the ›laws‹ of touch that determine what is taboo and what can be talked about in what ways (and by whom). It thus signals a play with such discursive norms, evaluations, and affectivity and can be regarded as a means of dialogicity that breaks through discursive barriers of touch as it entails the ludic form of role-playing, and only tacitly implies *resignification*. By influencing the affective mood of the story and thus the narrated distance between sociopolitical norms and their *resignification*, *affective humor* establishes a relationship between the narrator, the characters, and the ›implied audience‹ in the text. Sociopolitical norms and/or evaluations can be dialogically opened up or shifted. This setting of evaluative frames construes a meta-narrative level within the novel that echoes out of it into wider a discourse.

The deconstructive, performative aspect of the story becomes all the more evident as the text allows the other to speak »[...] qui invite à une carnavalisation de la narration de l'histoire« (Fendler 2007, 162). The French term for history means both *story* as well as *history*, and this is indeed what happens in and through *White Teeth*. The literary work supplements historiographic writing/›knowledge‹, another form of ›critical fabulation‹.²⁴

23 Other members of the crew despise Samad as well and insult him verbally on a regular basis by calling him ›Indian Sultan bastard‹ or (because of his ›Queen English‹) a ›poof‹; see (Perfect 2016, 248).

24 The term ›critical fabulation‹ coined by Saidiya V. Hartman means a ›critical reading of the archive that mimics the figurative dimensions of history, intended both to tell an impossible story and to

that is engendered in the infinite and unfinished economy of literature as a structure of non-knowledge and power-lessness, even in the dynamic of the market and of accumulation. The tone of the narration changes by direct discourse. Samad, of course, notices the gaze, and he reacts to it. The colonial discourse that is shown through Archie's stare is challenged by Samad's response and later on by their coming to terms with each other as the only survivors of their five-man tank. It is here, when we hear Samad respond to Archie's stare. What is questioned in *White Teeth* with its analeptic insertions into the past, in fact, is what Meyer calls the novel's »metahistorical« performances, which »[...] question determinist versions of history and develop an ironic comedy of history [...] as a farce« (Mayer 2017, 484). It begins »un voyage dans le temps, sous le ligne carnavalesque« (Fendler 2007, 162). The narrator indicates a date for the event of the encounter that will weld together the two characters' lives; it is April the 1st – Fool's Day:

»It was 1 April 1945. Archie Jones was the driver of the tank, Samad was the wireless operator. Roy Meckintoch was the co-driver, Will Jonson was crunched on a bin as gunner, and Thomas Dickinson-Smith was sitting on the slightly elevated chair, which, even though it squashed his head against the ceiling, his newly granted captaincy would not permit his pride to relinquish. None of them has seen anyone else but each other for three weeks.« (Smith 2000, 84)

The indication of the date as Fool's Day can be seen as a kernel node of the passage and for the ensuing friendship. The subtle, unobtrusive indication of an ironic humor in the date remains ambiguous and manifold. It refers to the characters as (possible) fool-figures, it refers to the situation and to being stuck together for quite a long time and therefore can refer to *being* fooled (by and in the »war«). The date also subtly mocks historiography in two senses: It makes fun of setting specific dates as relevant dates to be remembered, a characteristic of national, imperial, authoritative constructions and institutionalized forms of historiography that mocks their credibility, and it points to the absurdity that is inherent in the selection and archiving of events as »historical«, transmitted, and learned records. Moreover, on the one hand, it adds to the reality effect of the story by mentioning a date in the past to which we only have access through texts. On the other hand, it

amplify the impossibility of its telling.« Cf. Saidiya V. Hartman (2008, 11); while this approach is revolutionary and crucial for looking at archives differently and using their gaps to implement anti-dominant narratives and critiques, it may come with its own problems. Firstly, it can reestablish a dichotomous relation between »factual« and »fictional« text, and thus implicitly reinstate the position of historiography and official archives as superior to, say, literature or oral traditions, as well as a space and textuality of »truth« and »truth-seeking«. Secondly, it can be used counterproductively to normalize the act of »historical archiving«, which is itself steeped in the history of (probably not only) European imperialism and domination. Thirdly, it can evoke the impression that lost histories and genocidal atrocities can be recovered in retrospect, which can also serve to stabilize processes and methods of archiving. Literature, in its widest sense, on the other hand, as another archive, has a similar function of fabrication while questioning the »truth« of it and training the imagination; at the same time, it challenges official archiving as correct and truthful without replacing it. In this sense, literature destabilizes notions of power and »knowledge« (historiography and archiving) by implying the power(-lessness) of non-knowledge, which it evokes as an endless, itself anti-dominant archive.

deconstructs, at the same time, its reality effect in a subtle way by linking it to an official, authorized day of jest. Insofar as it implicitly signifies the factualization of the fiction, it implicitly signifies the fictionalization of historiography. Its humor thus parodies historic statements as well as laughs at the construction of fiction to counter these statements. It is thus a joyful, explosive humor that also undermines its own statement. The humorous play with the date makes the text charged with suspense, implying something important that is about to happen, something that must happen, that *has* happened, on *this* date, since only ›important‹ eventful dates are (historically) registered. By parodying historiography and implicitly pointing to its arbitrariness, the date paradoxically becomes central here in view of the folly that can be seen in the archiving of events, an important event in the narrative: the date of a *friendship* that ensues as a backbone of the novel. It is within this (fooled) frame that Samad speaks:

»And Samad put up with it, waited and waited for it to pass, until after a week of being cramped in their tank, hot and suffocated by the airless machine and subjected to Archie's relentless gaze, he had putted-up with as much as his hot-head ever could put up with anything. ›My friend, what is it you find so darned mysterious about me that it has you in such constant revelries?‹ ›You what?‹ said Archie, flustered, for he was not one to have private conversations on army time. ›Nobody, I mean, nothing, I mean, well, what do you mean? [...] ›I mean merely that it is likely we have another two years stuck in this thing [...] ›And?‹ asked Archie [...] ›And there is only so much of that eyeballing that a man can countenance. Is it that you are doing some research into wireless operators or are you just in passion over my arse?‹ Their captain, Dickinson-Smith, who *was* in a passion over Samad's arse (but not only that; also his mind; also two slender muscular arms that could only make sense wrapped around a lover; also those luscious light green/brown eyes) silenced the conversation immediately. ›Ick-ball! Jones! Get on with it [...].« (Smith 2000, 84)

Humor ensues here by Samad's angry waiting situation and growing impatience with Archie's stare. By calling Archie ›my friend‹ at the beginning, Samad's stifled anger as well as Archie's puzzlement can be ›felt‹, which makes the situation funny and easy to sympathize with them. Also, the oddity of the situation can be sensed, as well as the growing tension in the small space they have to share. The humorous display is, furthermore, accentuated by the dialogue, while both characters are not alone and have to stage their contention as silently as possible: »Both spoke under their breath, for the conversation was not private in the other sense, there being two other privates and a captain in their five-man Churchill rolling through Athens on its way to Thessaloniki« (Smith 2000, 84). The characters are also portrayed as conscientious. They act in accordance with the positions they are assigned to, as if they were in a role-playing game (which they somehow *are – and aren't we always?*): Archie ›was not one to have private conversations on army time‹ and Samad ›not wishing to be seen neglecting his duties, answered [the crackling voice in the wireless] speedily and efficiently« (Smith 2000, 84). Within the ›sensibility‹ evoked by the characters' direct speech and the focalization of the two characters, an immediate sensuous exchange can be detected between them. It is humorous as it has a performative note – the characters are shown in a narrow space and the atmosphere of this space is evoked by a stifled, strong but masked affectivity which makes it funny.

The narrator first sets an emotive orientation-frame for how to conceive of Samad's response and the ensuing dialogue between the characters. Although it is a rather sympathetic affective frame in which Samad's reaction is put, it does not glorify him either (as the ›good other‹) (also Sakiz 2023, 31). Samad is portrayed as a ›hot-head‹, but his impatience is not anchored in his character or ›race‹. Rather it is embedded in the endurance of the stare, as well as the suffocating ›airless machine‹, and is therefore construed as a comprehensible reaction. An evoked ›implied audience‹ thus is subjected to a scene that mirrors the double-knowledge of differentiation between the singularity of a voice and its generalized stereotyping. Samad's voice is placed in a gap that opens up between the intelligible singularity of experience and the generalized stereotypes of (colonial) discourse: The other may indeed be, is, a ›hot-head‹, but this is not necessarily related to ›their roots‹, rather it is (also) a (reasonable) sign of fatigue with the colonial gaze. The passage thus creates a narrative platform on which Samad can act without being denoted by his temperament in a naturalized, orientalized guise. Samad is also given a platform on which he can *begin* to speak ›freely‹ and outside the constraints of (colonial) discourse. His ›voice‹ and singularity is brought about through direct discourse. The framing of this voice, a possible intrusion of the ›implied author‹, displays what Bakhtin calls a ›hybrid construction‹²⁵ within his concept of dialogicity and what he regards as a significant trait of novelistic writing per se (Bakhtin 2014, 304 f.). Bakhtin defines a ›hybrid construction‹ as an utterance of a speaker that »contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles, two ›languages‹, two semantic and axiological belief systems [. . .]. [T]he division of voices and languages takes place within the limits of a single syntactic whole, often within the limits of a simple sentence.« (Bakhtin 2014, 305).

On a narratological level, the ›hybrid construction‹ may also be detected in the narrative design that can be attributed to an ›implied author‹. In what Bakhtin calls the ›stratification of common language‹, the different meanings that words carry and that are organized in a specific way within a dominant, unified discourse, the ›implied author‹ can still anchor their own ›sensibility‹ and ›moral intelligence‹ (Porter 2010, 235) and thus impart a slightly different meaning to the words. It is within this ›diversity of speech and not the unitary of normative shared language‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 308; emphasis in the text) that the humorous tone of the story is set in the narrative discourse. The passage focalizes the characters and lets them speak so that a level of more immediate mediation occurs without the narrator's interference. The passage's performative trait is induced by direct discourse and the content of a dialogic exchange. This makes it possible to *see* Samad as an acting and active ›human being‹ who reacts and responds to the gaze, thus delimiting its colonial meaning.

25 Bakhtin's concept of hybridization has influenced postcolonial theory and especially Homi K. Bhabha's understandings of ›third space‹, ambiguity, and hybridity (Bhabha 1994), which has been employed in postcolonial theory to unravel colonial cultural understandings of ›purity‹ and racist understandings of ›mixture‹ (Young 1995; Ha 2010), and has hence become an important concept of postcolonial readings and literary analysis. In narratology in particular, Monika Fludernik has discussed the concept in relation to postcolonial literature, and literary ›contact zones‹, as well as for a reexamination of narratological parameters. Cf. Fludernik (1998, 1999); for an overview on the ›third space‹ as a concept in literary theory, see also Frank (2009).

An ›implied author‹ does not only seem to give voice to the multiple meanings of how the other can be perceived (inside and outside the colonial discourse). This framing also prepares the ground for the ›hybrid construction‹ in Samad's utterance. ›My friend, what is it you find so darned mysterious about me that it has you in such constant revelries?‹, approaches Archie's stare by suggesting that Samad is no longer willing to accept it. The gaze must therefore come to a halt. Through Samad, the gaze of the colonial Other is critiqued. At the same time, Samad's subjectivity is emphasized. ›Samad‹ looks back at the gaze and destabilizes it.

The seriousness of his voice is further accentuated by the irritated tone of his utterance, indicated by the word ›my friend‹. This contrasts with his anger and produces a comical tone. His annoyance with Archie's piercing gaze entails a playful *affective humor* that, through the performative trait of direct speech, has an unmediated, immediate effect, indicating an implied authorial intervention: »[A]nother's speech [...] is at none of these points clearly separated from authorial speech: the boundaries are deliberately flexible and ambiguous, often passing through a single syntactic whole, often through a simple sentence, and sometimes even dividing up the main parts of a sentence« (Bakhtin 2014, 308). Bakhtin speaks of ›a varied play with the boundaries of speech types, languages and belief systems‹, considering them as a ›fundamental aspect of comic style‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 308). However, it is not only the boundaries of discourse that are tackled: ›Is it that you are doing some research into wireless operators‹ takes up another imagery and double gaze of the colonial Other. This utterance, too, contains a ›construct of hybridization‹. On the one hand, it reveals a trace of colonial practices regarding the other, on the other hand, it points to the ›knowledge‹ of the colonized other about these practices. Concomitantly, the utterance ridicules colonizing practices from a position of marginality. It is the gaze of the ›researcher‹, a quasi ›ethnological‹ gaze, that depicts the other as a *thing* to be studied. Through Samad's direct speech, an other signifying process is *told* and *shown* within a decolonial grammar. Samad is well aware of the function(s) that his body provides within colonial discourse. It is either an object to be studied or an object of (sexual, colonial) desire (›or are you just in passion over my arse?‹). The performative trait of Samad's performance thus lies in the exposure of colonial discourse with its stereotypes of the obedient, the unknowing, the silent other. By returning the gaze and addressing the colonial practices that accompany it, Samad's utterance holds up a mirror to colonial discourse and provincializes its unencumbered universalist claim as fraught with desire, as transgressive and contemptible. Both utterances can be regarded as involving different receivers. One, inside the diegesis, is Archie, another resides in the evocation of an ›implied audience‹, and yet another is outside of the diegesis, on a meta-level, which is (colonial) discourse itself. Samad's utterance thus shifts the perception of the other on a discursive level by a mere constative as well as performative utterance. This enacts a performative decolonizing speech and acts through a shift in language, discourse, and imagery.

This form of humor in relation to colonial discourse can be described as satirical and ironic. The absurdity of the colonial practices of the gaze is laughed at in the knowing voice of the other. Samad's well-informed words silence Archie. Archie, caught, is ›flustered‹ and speechless even though he tries to turn the table and mimes ›innocence‹ (›Nobody, I mean, nothing, I mean, well, what do *you* mean?; ›And?‹). However, Archie too

does not represent dominant discourse, as ›the British education system‹ had ›tripped him up with a snigger‹ (Smith 2000, 15). The portrayal of Archie as unlettered (Archie could not ›go to Grammar School because his mother could not afford to buy the uniform‹ (Smith 2000, 90) is a pivotal trait of his character that both gives background to his underprivileged social position and sets him at the margins of colonial discourse. He seems less corrupted by (colonial) ›knowledge‹ and more free in his perceptions (as we shall see further below). Thus, Archie is not just miming ›innocence‹ but, given the fact that he too is a victim of the same discourse that has given a specific subjectivity to him and has subjected him to itself, Archie is actually ›innocent‹ insofar as he is unaware of what he is doing and what it all consequently means.

The meaning of this insight and message, which presupposes an ›implied author‹, also implies an ›audience‹ in the text so it can be understood. The social ›types‹ and ›images‹ (Bakhtin 1984, 438) must be recognized, otherwise humor would not work.

The passage quoted above also raises another issue. It is anchored in the problematization of (colonial) sexual desire, on the one hand, and (queer) sexuality within cis-normativity, on the other. While Samad challenges colonial desire and the sexualization of the objectified body of the other as outlined above, the passage also sensitively deconstructs cis-normativity and the devaluation of othered sexualities within discourse in the voice of ›their captain‹, Dickinson-Smith, ›who was in a passion over Samad's arse (but not only that; also his mind; also two slender muscular arms that could only make sense wrapped around a lover; also those luscious light green/brown eyes)‹. Through free indirect discourse and in focalizing the figure, the narrator expresses Dickinson-Smith's thoughts and feelings. Free indirect discourse offers another possibility of proximity to the other that colonial discourse does not entail: Dickinson-Smith does not desire Samad out of a colonizing longing and lust (maybe, too, but not only). He is in love with Samad. Thus the character of Dickinson-Smith signals a differentiation between sexual desire (embedded in relations of power) (implying a hierarchical relationship) – and ›love‹ (implying – ideally – a non-hierarchical relationship) even in/beyond/along the images and effects of coloniality. To an extent this other layer of dialogicity in the passage also corrects Samad's utterance, ›[...] or are you just in passion over my arse?‹, which, at the same time that it criticizes the coloniality of discourse and its images, can be understood as a devaluation of queerness in a symbolic sense, repeating a stereotype and reaffirming cis-normativity. As we shall see below, Dickinson-Smith is, on the one hand, portrayed as representing British nationalism per se through his social affiliations. On the other hand, this portrayal is ironic, ridiculing nationalist attitudes, which are shown to be class-bound, authoritarian, traditionalist, subjugating, violent, and ultimately destructive. Through this empathetic, ironic humor, the text also shows that Captain Dickinson-Smith's adherence to these authoritative national-familial obligations is in fact against his will. He simply cannot free himself from them; this not only arouses empathy for Captain Dickinson-Smith, ›whose government file included the phrase ›Risk: Homosexual‹‹ (Johnston 2021, 99) but also shows how deeply induced, ›familial‹ orchestrations, sociopolitical settings as well as subject-positions in discourse go into the workings and becomings of the self:

»Against his will, he had been dragged out of his father's college, shaken free of his father's gown, made to fight a war, as his father had. And his father before him, and his father before him, ad infinitum; »traditionally the Dickenson-Smiths were insatiable in their desire to see Dickenson-Smith blood spilled on foreign soil. And on the occasion when there wasn't a war the Dickenson-Smiths busied themselves with the Irish Situation, a kind of Dickenson-Smith holiday resort for death.« (Smith 2000, 89–90)

Dickenson-Smith, however, is different and does not seem to fit in with Britishness, the army or his family tradition, though his difference is not entirely free of colonial desire:

»Poor Thomas had a different kind of lust for exotic ground. He wanted to know it, to nurture it, to learn from it, to love it.« (Smith 2000, 90)

So, not unlike Archie, Dickenson-Smith becomes a marginalized (and sexualized) other of cis-normative national pride. But Captain Dickenson-Smith is in fact the only figure loathed by all four other members of the tank's crew: »They were utterly filled with contempt for him and sickened by his poncey-commander-queer-boy-ways« (Smith 2000, 85). He is a target of various discourses and their effacing effects in the predominant rule of cis-normativity. When the tank is accidentally damaged two days before the official end of World War II (»a day that History has not remembered; »at about 18.00 hours on the 6th of May 1945« (Smith 2000, 91), and while Archie and Samad are allowed to wander around in the »tiny Bulgarian village« (Smith 2000, 91), finally the war enters its outskirts; there is no safe space in war, and the remaining three soldiers are attacked. While Mackintosh and Johnson are brutally murdered, Dickenson-Smith *chooses* his fate and commits suicide, a tragic incident that the narrator sarcastically comments on as »[t]he only Dickenson-Smith to die by English hands« (Smith 2000, 92), ridiculing patriarchal and nationalist, narcissistic attitudes as dumb. But Dickenson-Smith keeps his agency – and decides for himself in the liminal space that is left to him. The novelistic text differentiates between the subjectivity that the »outside«, general discourse professes and a performative execution of subjectivity that an agent handles singularly within it, thus shifting discourse and making it their own. Archie as well as Dickenson-Smith are both *white* figures who, although construed by national as well as colonial discourses, fall sociopolitically outside the benevolence of »the nation« and occupy differently marginalized positions in the national and performative instances of discourse, where historical narrative and »reality« collide, and are differently unfolded within the narrative discourse. On the level of the story thus the novel unravels mainstream discourses and creates a »free space« in which »the self« and »the other« can be seen in a different light. A different access to the question of an ethical response is approached. The passage demonstrates through character function how discourse is »lived out« in a bodily experience of »life«. An »implied audience« is not only positioned as witness to the »scene« but is given an involved position in the story through *affective humor*. It is asked to be an accomplice to the play that is unleashed and to position itself between the mainstream discourses and what is deconstructed in the novel. This is the case not only in the configuration of the three characters Archie, Samad, and Dickenson-Smith in the intersectional negotiation of class,

›race‹ and sexuality. It is also the case between historical (factual) and fictional discourse when historical writing is parodied or made part of the fiction to allude to ›reality‹.

The story of Archie's and Samad's *friendship*, this oscillating journey from one to the other and back, does not merely recount a colonial/colonized encounter. It resumes an aesthetic play that produces decisive moments, touching spaces, where different discourses are negotiated and result in ethical questions. The touching spaces it creates in the texture of the text give substance to the *friendship* and unfold a critical stance regarding (national(-ist)) historical discourses that evolve into the question of how these (or their absence) can influence ›experience‹.

The relation of Archie and Samad may also reflect an allusion regarding E. M. Foster and his friendship to and empathy for Sayed Ross Mahood whom Foster had dedicated his novel *A Passage to India* (1924). Here is thus another trait that shows the involvement of a ›real author‹ behind the scene of writing at the thin limit of history and fiction.

Cut off from the rest of the war and from communication, without a radio, Archie and Samad do not realize for two weeks that it has ended, and alone in the quiet of the village, despite the power of colonial discourse and its effects on subjecthood and hierarchized border-thinking, a ›life-forming‹ *friendship* begins to blossom between them, often presented in the form of dialogues²⁶:

»These were strange times, strange enough for an Iqbal and a Jones to strike up a friendship.« (Smith 2000, 92)

The narrator first sets Archie and Samad into a time-space that signifies a time-out. It is only in an isolation from dominant discourses and their time and space that this relation between the sociopolitically unequal characters can ensue:

»In short, it was precisely the kind of friendship an Englishman makes on holiday, that he can make only on holiday. A friendship that crosses class and colour, a friendship that takes as its basis physical proximity and survives because the Englishman assumes the physical proximity will not continue.« (Smith 2000, 96)

The biting humor of the narrative alludes, of course, to what we have already learned. It pokes fun at Archie's ›British‹ attitude toward the other(-ed): contrary to what Archie thinks and what allows him to engage with Samad in the first place, a psychic proximity seems to exist between them – from one soul to another, as it were, and it will continue. The tone of the narrator is descriptive and yet alludes to the borders that racism and class have built, that give meaning to bodies, that construct and assign meaning to ›difference‹ and to *thought* in general. Here again, the humorous tone of the narrative becomes ironic, echoing a reality effect while maintaining a critical stance towards ›reality‹. This ironic tone unfolds an *affective humor* in relation to an ›implied audience‹ as it has to bear both utterances, one that has a rather somber meaning (Archie and Samad cannot simply be two friends because of class and especially ›race‹), and one that defiantly challenges an awkward social taboo, namely the effects of racism even on intimate spaces like

26 On role of dialogues and crossings in the work of Zadie Smith, see Guignery (2014, 11–12).

friendships. Furthermore, given that the narrator uses the analogy of the ›holidays‹ in the present, rather than situating the issue in the past, it can be argued that they are alluding to a phenomenon that is still quite taboo and reaches into the present.

While Archie is depicted as a *white* Briton from an underprivileged class with scarce access to education, who only vaguely relates to ›the British nation‹, the educated Samad (he studied biology) is construed as the descendent of a national Indian hero, Mangal Pande, a sepoy of the British East Indian Company, who fired the first shot in the Indian anti-colonial armed resistance of 1857 that led to the first Indian war of independence from British colonial rule. The illusion of reality and reference to history (writing) is accentuated through this figure, as a historical character, named Mangal Pande, did, in fact, exist. Mangal Pande is a contested figure in both the British and Indian historical narratives and archives.²⁷ In British accounts, especially those of the period in which Archie and Samad first meet, Mangal Pande is considered to be a ›traitor‹. In Indian historiography Mangal Pande is hailed as a hero and an important figure in the 1857 War of Independence. This almost mythical historical figure, ›the much neglected, 100-year-old, mildewed yarn of Mangal Pande‹ (Smith 2000, 99), is represented in the novel and even constitutes a kernel point of the story. In a humorous, mocking tone, it touches upon ›reality‹, the way the archiving and dismissing of (historical) images of ›identity‹ in the context of colonialism mark subject formations and the construction of images of ›the self‹ and ›the other‹ (Isaac 2005, 41; Maticevic 2015). The humorous tone is induced by an allusion to the ways in which epistemes and discourses operate within the mechanisms of power: The history of Indian independence is metaphorically evoked as a ›100-year-old‹ ›yarn‹, a thread that still plays a vital role in the colonality of discourse and the subjectivities it invokes, which is humorously indicated by the word ›mildewed‹. ›Mildewed‹ has a double meaning and also indicates a double, tragic-comic effect. On the one hand, ›mildewed‹ refers to this forgotten figure and the neglect of colonial history in British historiography, which attaches connotations of sadness and mourning to the word. On the other hand, ›mildewed‹ indicates an ironic-cheerful tone with regard to the fetishization of the figure in Indian decolonial discourse in which the figure is almost ›dissolved‹ through overrepresentation and overuse. While the real figure (Mangal Pande) symbolizes (colonial/decolonized) remembrance and national ›identity‹ (on both sides), in the novel the figure occupies the question of how the narrativity of historiography, its ›yarn‹, signifies ›the self‹ and ›the other‹, how it shapes the materiality of ›life‹ and, in terms of ›lived experience‹, gives meaning to it, how it amounts to ›existence‹, ›the right to life‹, which shape such quandaries and the melancholies of loss (Kershaw 2021, 871 ff.). ›The shadow‹ of (narrated) history and its images in this texture of alterity and ›identity‹ also weaves the structure of the story. And here goes Archie first:

»Well, that is something. Do you know: I remember it from school – I *do* – History of the Colonies [...] To have a bit of history in your blood like that. Motivates you, I'd imagine. [...] We're nobody. [...] Not that I've ever been much bothered, mind. Proud all the

27 See on the totalizing rhetoric of World War II, imperial rhetoric, the heroic figuration of Pande and its reinscription in *White Teeth*, Thompson (2024). See also Sakiz (2023, 32 ff.), and Kershaw (2021, 870 ff.).

same, you know. Good honest English stock. But in your family, you had a hero! [...] ›Yes, Archibald, that is exactly the word. Naturally, you well get these petty English academics trying to discredit him, because they cannot bear to give an Indian his due. But he was a hero and every act I have undertaken in this war has been in the shadow of his example.‹

›That's true, you know‹, said Archie thoughtfully. ›They don't speak well about Indians back home; they certainly wouldn't like it if you said, an Indian was a hero ... everybody would look at you a bit funny.‹ (Smith 2000, 99–100; punctuation in the text.)

Archie's utterances signal his marginalized national ›identity‹ and its instability. He understands himself indeed as ›English‹. But then he also distinguishes between ›the others‹ and himself. Archie distances himself from the rest of ›the nation‹ in the way ›this nation‹ *speaks*. The distinction is emphasized deictically by the use of the pronoun ›they‹ and ›everybody‹. As the scene is set in direct discourse, its mimetic trait is further accentuated and contributes to Archie's singular agency within discourse that, if we follow Michel Foucault's theory of discourse, simultaneously grants him a place of speaking, a subject-position, and subjects him to it. But in the novel, Archie's subjection to the national discourse leaves space for change. The dialogue between the two figures opens up a space for encounters and for the self-reflective negotiation of (historical) discourses. The humorous and mocking display of ›history‹ that the narrator's voice introduces is enriched affectively by the pensive performative character of the exchange. It is this negotiation of historical discourse within the satirical tone of the narrator, on the one hand, and its naïve and yet thoughtful discussion by the characters, on the other hand, that opens the ground for an emerging *friendship*; a gap appears in discourse and imagery that allows for a shift in imagining the other as well as the self in a different way. It is naïve in that both Archie and Samad are, to a certain extent, subject to (national) mainstream discourses. But in the encounter with Samad, Archie has to negotiate what he has memorized and learned from history textbooks, to which art, and here the literary text, forms a challenging counter-discourse (Fendler/Wehrheim 2007, XI). In schoolbooks, the ›Colonies‹ are naturalized. They conceal the violence of colonialism and Britain's involvement in and imperial becoming through it. They also obscure forms of resistance. Both strategies of ›not-learning‹ feed racist and derogatory images of ›Indians‹, which Archie is already acquired at school. And Archie seems to slowly realize that there is a connection between ›the history of the Colonies‹, images of naturalized ›British heroism‹ and ›Indian inferiority‹. And he begins to act differently. The difference, a change in his mind, is indicated by focalization and Archie's description as ›thoughtful‹. Samad too acknowledges Archie's self-distinction and difference. Archie no longer seems to fit Samad's image of ›Englishness proper‹. As a sign of his acknowledgment and trust, indicated by ›Yes, Archibald, that is exactly the word‹, Samad fills Archie in on a decolonial counter-knowledge: ›Naturally, you well get these petty English academics trying to discredit him, because they cannot bear to give an Indian his due. But he was a hero‹. Samad's language distinguishes between ›Archie's Britishness‹ and authoritative discourse that is evoked by the image of scholarly discourse. As Bakhtin observes in *Discourse in the Novel* (1981;2014), the figure of the simpleton and naïve fool is often used in novels to counter discursive, monologized power in order to show the narrow-

ness of authoritative discourse. ›The fool‹ thus becomes the wise person: ›The coupling of incomprehension with comprehension, of stupidity, simplicity and naïveté with intellect is a widespread and typical phenomenon in novelistic prose‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 403). Its function lies in ›robbing‹ authoritative language, ›the language of all who hold power who are well set up in life‹, the ›power to harm [...] by means of a smile or a deception‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 401), mocking its ›falsity‹ within ›novelistic-dialogic situations‹ or ›dialogic oppositions‹ as ›the fool and the poet, the fool and the scholar-pedant‹. Simplicity and incomprehension in the novel interact ›dialogically with an intelligence (a lofty pseudo intelligence) with which it polemicalizes and whose mask it tears away‹ (Bakhtin 2014, 403).

The narrator's satirical depiction of the discourse of history elicits a distance from the characters and thus also engenders a space for the spectacle of the performance and performativity of their dialogue. The characters and their speech are centralized in this way. Within this spotlight an ›implied audience‹ is indicated and left alone with the characters as well as addressed through the characters' immediate speech, which effectuates a more nuanced intimate space of listening within the text. While the humorous tone of the narrator frames the exchange (colonial history) and structures it ideologically and evaluatively, thus setting the scene for suspense and attention, Archie and Samad's speech is noteworthy in that it *reshapes* and *renegotiates* the established (imperial) historical discourse.

The characters are furthermore *presented* as thoughtful, which thwarts the expectation of a ›fool‹ performance. Rather, they both appear as reflective ›speaking humans‹, who in their dialogue rectify and go beyond historically driven, dominant and prejudiced images of ›the self‹ and ›the other‹. Archie reports to Samad; he *informs* Samad about how ›they‹ are, thus reversing the role of a ›native informant‹ in colonial discourse and closing the epistemic gap between him and Samad. Their closeness is intensified by the joint repairing of the radio. On Archie's part this process does not happen without some reserve and shows his embeddedness in colonial discourse and the effort it costs him to escape it, while for Samad it apparently does not require much difficulty to approach Archie since on ›his side of the history‹, at least in this sense ›race‹, does not play an excessive identitary role. Out of his own self-understanding as another ›human being‹ (from a specific privileged class and family background), Samad does not mind to speak to a *white* Englishman, not least because Archie acknowledges his critical stance towards ›British‹ history and because he cannot *see* and has no regard for an alleged ›superiority‹ of whiteness/empire/Britishness. This context is set within a humorous narrative perspective that plays with the contradictions and incongruities of colonial signification. On the one hand, the humorous portrayal is based on the seemingly irreconcilable difference of their (singular) sociality, and at the same time, it reiterates popular stereotypical images of the *white* Englishman and the ›colonized‹ ›Indian‹ other, which are deferred. It also shows their different subject-positions within the coloniality of discourse and its effects. While Archie is quiet and interested but does not talk much, uncertain how to behave towards the (handsome) ›Indian‹ ›other‹, Samad appears sociable and chatty. Archie is shown to be ›very English‹, the antithesis to Samad's confident and open-minded, free-floating conviviality. The scenes are portrayed in a deadpan, cheerful-ironic humor within a distanced but sympathetic descriptive focalization that shows

both, the characters' incongruent behavior, as well as a space of affection between them. The narrator's stunning knowledge of their ›afflictions‹ is also a source of humor:

»No matter how much Archie shunned him, those four days of eyeballing had created a kind of silk-thread bond between the two men.« »It was awkward, an Indian telling an Englishman what to do.« »[B]ecause you are a rare Englishman, Sapper Jones. I consider you my friend. Archie was not sure what he considered Samad, but he smiled gently in recognition of the sentiment.« (Smith 2000, 88, 93, 103)

In this process of solidifying *friendship*, Archie, too, undergoes a process of hybridization. Samad seems to become a part of him:

»Archie had never had a hero [...]. But Samad, [...] had struck the seventeen-year-old Archie full square [...]: here was a friend, here was a hero, in a form Archie had never expected;« (Smith 2000, 109)

And like old, intimate partners, Archie soon even begins to anticipate how Samad reacts: »[I]nstitutively, Archie turned to Samad, expecting one of his speeches« (Smith 2000, 110). And Archie begins to protect his despairing hero, who realizes painfully that the war will not bring him any valiant splendor: »[I]ike a bus Jones. We have missed the bloody war.« (Smith 2000, 105). When a Russian officer finds the drugged Samad with his revolver in his mouth, and Samad, embarrassed, professes to clean it, Archie explains: »That's how they do it« »in Bengal« (Smith 2000, 115). Archie thus recognizes and consciously *uses* a form of othering; he now knows that Samad's racialized body regularly experiences different forms of othering, and he employs it here in order to protect Samad and their *friendship* – in a kind of secret code language of intimacy. This ›historical‹ *friendship*, so to speak, is what leads Archie, almost thirty years later, to call Samad »an unlikely comrade«, and yet »still the oldest friend he had – a Bengali Muslim he had fought alongside back when the fighting had to be done« (Smith 2000, 12).

In retrospect, Archie and Samad adjust their ›memories‹ to the expectations and connotations of the ›war proper‹ and its implications for and inscriptions on their masculinized bodies and biographies. After all, they both survived the dangerous backstage of war more or less by chance because they were together, strolling through the neighborhood. This (backstage of) war and this ›unlikely comradeship‹ within ›coloniality‹ and the structures that racism has built, brings Samad to England, 28 years later, and to the only friend he knows on the ›little island‹.

Unlike Archie, the educated Samad is much more influenced by (decolonial) authoritative discourse and the narrative of history and national pride. He sees himself as a descendant of a hero and tries to follow in the footsteps of this narrative and anti-colonial discourse. Samad regards the war as a chance to become (such) a Pande-hero like his ›great-grandfather‹, who influenced history. Unlike Archie who is shaped by discourse but not anchored in a national narrative (»[w]e're nobody. [...] Not that I've ever been much bothered, mind«), Samad embodies (anti-colonial) national discourses. Following their values and evaluations, he wants to achieve some form of (historical) glory that can

be transmitted – that can enter historical narratives and, at the same time, have an impact on ›reality‹. (National/anti-colonial) discourse is depicted here as a failure of another kind. While Archie and Dickenson-Smith fail to conform to colonial discourse and, to an extent, fall out of its embracing scope, Samad's voice, by adhering to a dominant narrative, develops hyperbolic-tragic features that signify the failure of both mainstream and subversive discourses. This tragic feature of the humorous tonality is subtly detectable in Samad's thwarted dreams. Samad's subjectivity is formed by the desire to achieve something of (historical) value that can be incorporated into the national narrative and passed on to the next generation: »You must live life with the full knowledge that your actions will *remain*»; ›Our children will be born of our actions« »He was expected to come home covered in glory, and then to return to Delhi triumphant. When would he have another chance?» (Smith 2000, 102, 105). But then Samad learns that the war is over. He realizes that he has failed his dream (shaped by discourse, not by his ›free will‹, if there can be such a thing; ›free will‹ the narrative seems to imply, lies more in the interstices of not-knowing and power-lessness than in any kind of ›education‹).

The tragedy of this dream is shown not only on the abstract level of Samad's subject formation and in its tragic-comic sides but, also on a material level and the effects it has on his body. Samad's right hand is badly injured in the war, yet not as expected within national imagery and discourses representing a ›glorious, brave military deed‹ but by an accident (»a bastard Sikh, Sapper Jones«, whose »gun went off and shot me through the wrist« (Smith 2000, 89). Chance, then, is presented not only as a, *the* model for the functionality of ›life‹ but also as the machinery of its dysfunction – with material effects. On an abstract level, it signals the absurdity of ›knowledge‹ in ›life‹, of fixed concepts and ideas, and of the belief of having power over the development of things (in war, for example). In another, material way, it signals the effects on the body and the formation of subjectivity, giving way to the assumption of ›non-knowledge‹ and power-lessness as an insight of and into ›life‹. Samad is marked by the grotesquery of both colonial and decolonial discourses. This is underlined by the fact that Samad works as a waiter in London to support his family, relying on his left hand. However, what has ›disabled‹ him, what has hampered him, are the discourses that have defined his (subject-)position as either an anti-colonial hero or an inferior other. The grotesqueness of such notions is inscribed in his body in three intersecting ways: Samad's body is violated and scarred, it is racialized (in London, he is henceforth ›the Indian‹), and he loses his privileged class affiliation due to colonial-independence-partition, migration, and working in an ›Indian‹ restaurant where he is looked down upon and exploited (also by other people of color, particularly the restaurant's owners). The only surface of identification that is left to Samad is ›Islam‹, which also echoes a tragic-comic humor as it is also bound to (colonial and decolonial) social constructions and their vague and ambivalent meanings, and (again) a failed dream – that ›education‹ will bring some form of fame and glory. But this depends on the overall social conditions, in particular for the pariah – and for ›the migrant‹, one of which is the effects of racism.

While Samad's grotesque figure thus initiates the site of a mirror and critique of colonial discourses and the intersectional effects of ›race‹, class, ableism, it also signifies a failure within anti-colonial nationalist and migratory-classist discourses. Its always failing, derailed acts explode the ›truth‹ of different authorized and mainstream discourses.

It is a frayed voicing that is part of the other's ›reality‹. In this way, the effects of the doctomic and binarist pairing of colonizer/colonized are shown but also suspended. However, ›Samad‹ is not just the depiction of a stereotype and a figuration for the display of a battle of all possible discourses, he also represents singularity performing ›his own experiences‹ in-between these discourses, which are neither romanticized nor victimized. Rather, Samad moves in between these discourses in making his decisions, weighing »all the physical and metaphysical consequences« (*à propos* ›Poppy‹ as the teacher-figuration of temptation for Samad) (Smith 2000, 133) (– and don't we all do that all the time? In good times and in bad?). In this way the ridiculing that is inscribed in his character can also be seen as the possible acts of an animated ›person‹; they do not single him out as ›the other‹. Rather, the humorous hyperbole that surrounds Samad is generated as a discursive by-product by which ›everyone‹ is in a (different) way inscribed. Instead of inferiorizing him, the shadowy gloom against which he struggles and that engulfs his figure, also entails and begs the question of the ethical by playing with ›shame‹ – can one really disregard someone whose dreams could not come true and who is, instead, in all possible senses injured, marked by ›life‹? At the same time, the figure of Samad *can* be seen as a *failed* figure, the way he perceives himself as he cannot abide by ›the laws‹ of the discourses around him, but he *can* also be seen as a figure with a successful, fulfilled ›life‹: he has found a friend for ›life‹, he has a more or less functioning foe-friends marriage (›Samad pressed Alsana's hand. She kicked him in the ankle. He stamped on her toe. She pinched his flank« (Smith 2000, 130), he has two sweet sons, and with his best friend Archie, some (other) unforgettable war memories, almost memories of felicity, almost holiday-like ones rather than ›normal‹ war memories of open wounds and dead bodies (– okay, at least not so many. . .). Maybe thus, in the end, Samad and Archie are the lucky ones who have acquired more valuable things than what commercials, ›education‹, or enlightened middle-class ›life‹ models promise. One possible message that the two characters might convey may be that the definition of *failure* in the ›experience of life‹ might be more linked to the narratives and discourses that surround and usurp us, rather than to ›life‹ and ›truth‹ as such – and that it may rather open up other chances, and, materially speaking, other doorways (to wherever. . .).

These incidents of acting and deciding that, according to Derrida, are decisive and yet maddening moments, seem to make all ›living beings‹ equal– a realization that is both liberating and comical as if the quintessence of life were laughing at protocols, laughing at ›laws‹, laughing at ›existence‹ per se. Thus it is Samad's funny, *all too human* choices, *all too human* decisions that are laughed at, not his difference or, in other words: everyone's insane, illogical negotiations of the various aspects of ›life‹, which are inscribed in significations and meanings in the structures of not-knowing and power-lessness, are funny in an insightful way. And that is what makes everyone equal and every form of participation ›in life‹ funny in a tragic sense. It is in this light that we can read Samad's catastrophic decisions: to marry by birth assignment (but don't they love each other – ?), to have a love affair with his son's teacher, to suffer for his sin by sending one of his twin sons to Bangladesh to become a ›good Muslim‹, a son who will return as a ›civilized‹, almost-European atheist (and probably socialist) intellectual. All of this is ridiculous because it shows that it is not really possible to control ›life‹, that things are not predictable, that it is not possible to gauge one's own reactions and agency. . .).

In short, *this* seems to be the ethical muddle that Zadie Smith, inspired by E. M. Forster, describes. And maybe it is not so bad, just ›life‹ – within structures of power and ›knowledge‹ and power-lessness and non-knowledge.

In this respect, Samad's grotesqueness corresponds with Archie's character. While Samad is initially privileged by ›class‹, Archie initially seems privileged by ›race‹. Both privileges, however, are of no use to the characters in the long run. What they develop might be a desirable ›life‹ – a ›life‹ in friendship. Perhaps this is the achievement of *White Teeth's* gentle humor. It moves between all sorts of dominant norms and values, keeping the really essential ones, those that touch us and by which we are touched, as well as those that shyly and intimidatingly touch normalized norms – and may break them free.

What Matters? – *White Teeth* On the Level of the Narrative Discourse

Underneath this bizarre and funny grotesquery that ›life‹ as the carnivalesque materialization of discourses seems to be, lies the tragic-comic question of *what matters* – in the sense of *what is important* and in the sense of *how something affects the materiality of* and *in ›life‹*? And – in light of such forlorn insanity and negativity, as it all often enough seems to be, the questions seem to come up, *how ›we‹ face each other* and the ›othered‹ other *when ›we‹ face each other* and the othered other, and thus *how this matters and materialize*? Questions that may be the underlying query of literature per se and that the two characters seem to run (in slow-motion) to meet.

Stuck with Archie in a ghostly war on the outskirts of a ›Bulgarian village‹, Samad, stoned, sees his chance to finally become a hero, when he learns about a French ›Doctor‹, a Dr. Marc Pierre-Perret, who has worked with the Nazis in an eugenics project, a ›sterilization program, and later the euthanasia policy. Internal German matters. He was one of the very loyal‹ (Smith 2000, 106).

It is interesting here that the Nazi ›Doctor‹ is not German, instead of making use of a German stereotype, racism and its quest to distinguish between livable and unlivable human beings is presented as a *pan-European* project in more recent modern history. ›The Doctor‹ is hiding in a nearby house, painting the ›Bulgarian countryside‹, seeking repose in art, which makes art, too, lose its innocent place in relation to power, (sociopolitical) terror, and the search for a subject-position. ›The Doctor‹ is nicknamed ›Dr. Sick‹ by the children of the vicinity. »Dr. Sick was as good as his name, sitting in an armchair in front of the wood-burning fire. Sick. Huddled in a rug. Pale. Very thin,« (Smith 2000, 115). The nickname is a double reference to both ›the Doctor's‹ condition and his actions. Suffering from ›diabetic retinopathy‹, he excretes blood through his eyes and has red, blood-tinged tears.

The figure of ›the Doctor‹ shakes the foundation of what is understood as (Western) ›civilization‹ and ›education‹, representing its hidden, violent, colonial, and colonizing sides – inside and out. However, ›the Doctor‹ is not represented as evil per se. In fact, his sickness humanizes him as a pitiful figure and is, simultaneously, a synonym for his deeds, which may indicate ›self-hatred‹; ›sickness‹ can be understood as the exclusion of what is regarded as undesirable, as an abjection in ›the self‹ and what is projected onto the other in order to efface the unruly, the undermining of (imagined) boundaries and

the sign of heterogeneity (Kristeva 1982 a; Pentony 1996; Covino 2004; Duschinsky 2013). The designation ›Dr. Sick‹ in the context of *White Teeth* is thus complicated by a double bind. It symbolizes the grotesque and the banality of horror. On the one hand, the figure of horror is linked to ›sickness‹ as an undesirable, abnormalized state. On the other hand, ›sickness‹ is resignified as the desire to *extinguish* what is rejected in favor of what is considered as ›pure‹ and normative, based on dichotomous and binary thinking, and on fantasies of superiority that always amount to nothing less than fascist political dynamics and ideologies. It circumscribes the arbitrariness of borders and is a form of *out-spacing* that draws the line to the other, who is conceived as despicable and in *this* sense untouchable. ›Dr. Sick‹ seems to represent the personification of this process. Both meanings of ›sickness‹ are provocatively linked to this figure, who in a dilemmatic way embodies a sense of pity as well as of horror. Read along those lines, ›sickness‹ evokes again Hannah Arendt's idea of the *banality, ordinariness, and thoughtlessness* that makes evil possible (1963), suggesting that there is no ›ingenuity‹ behind cruelty but only a meager conformity, which makes it so dangerous – a relation of the self to itself, at the other's expense, the prefix *ex-* again as in *exact*, that Derrida problematizes and critiques as that, which *per se* culls, weeds, rejects, eliminates. It also reveals the violent and disgusting site of the functionality and bureaucratization of fascist thought and of (*any* and *all*) such ideologies, the ›false pathos‹ of discourse in Bakhtin's sense through which a sense of responsibility for oneself and the other (*as* part of one's self) horrifyingly disappears, making room for blatant, legalized evil as (everyday) politics and normalized practices of (social and bodily) lethal senses of othering and exclusion. (But it is not *normal*. This is the residue that remains and speaks back to *us* out of the text, like an echo – one that will always haunt *us* – *all*). It is reminiscent of how Maya Angelou links the ›evil‹ done in the name of the ›good‹. In a lecture at the conference *Facing Evil*, Maya Angelou invokes the material outcome of epistemes and discourses with regard to the other in a planetarian manner in pasts and presents, as if asking for another future, by saying:

»Throughout our nervous history, we have constructed pyramidal towers of evil, of times in the name of good. Our greed, fear and lasciviousness have enabled us to murder our poets, who are ourselves, to castigate our priests, who are ourselves. The lists of our subversions of the good stretch from before recorded history to this moment. We drop our eyes at the mention of the bloody, torturous Inquisition. Our shoulders sag at the thoughts of African slaves lying spoon-fashion in the filthy hatches of slave ships, and the subsequent auction blocks upon which were built great fortunes in our country. We turn our head in bitter shame at the remembrance of Dachau and the other gas ovens, where millions of ourselves were murdered by millions of our-selves. As soon as we are reminded of our actions, more often than not we spend incredible energy trying to forget what we've just been reminded of.« (Angelou 1988)

In Maya Angelou's thoughtful and poetic analysis, any dichotomy between ›us‹ and ›them‹ seems to vanish, yielding in an arresting way to a ›we‹, to what *we* are capable of, implicitly asking what *we* can do, how *we* can face responsibility – for each other. In the pronoun *we*, the *other* and the *self*, *they* and *we*, *you* and *I*, become one – forever connected entities, beyond all borders, languages, and discourses. Maybe it is this *we* that clangs

through the words of Hannah Arendt and Maya Angelou, that somehow, frighteningly and ambiguously, also appears here in the shadowy figure of ›Dr. Sick‹. Through gallows humor, the narrative explores the liminal threshold between humor and the unbearable, a saddening, beyond crying form of humor – ›laughter‹ shot through with anguish.

In a poker game with the Russian officer who has been ordered to transfer ›Dr. Sick‹ ›to Poland‹, where he is to be handed over to ›the authorities‹ (Smith 2000, 107), Samad, slipping into role-playing, catching up on unfulfilled desires, declares himself an officer and Archie as his Lieutenant, and trades what they have won for ›the Doctor‹. An absurd comic impasse occurs when Samad *pays* for ›the Doctor‹, a Nazi criminal, determined to kill him in order to have done something (meaningful) in war. Archie, on the one hand, covers for Samad's deception and, on the other hand, tries to persuade him to let ›the Doctor‹ go. Archie's efforts backfire when Samad assertively declares that Archie is indeed right and that *he*, Archie, should kill ›the Doctor‹, as this has been a European war on values (Smith 2000, 119). But out of a marginalized position in the discourse of the nation, Archie is not used to identifying himself with anything as broad as ›a nation‹ or philosophical ›values‹; he cannot consider ›history‹ and ›historical narratives‹ or their transmission as important if it were for the sake of his potential children, as Samad does: ›I can't see the difference‹ [between heroic deeds and profane ones] ›When you're dead, you're dead‹; ››Our Children!‹ sniggered Archie, simply amused. The possibility of offspring seemed so distant‹ (Smith 2000, 102). Archie, however, eventually gives in to his friend's request. He is willing to kill the evil that ›his country‹ has fought to eliminate (with the help and lives of its colonized subjects). And off they go. While Samad stays in the safety of the car, Archie walks out of the car with ›the Doctor‹, but then, on the way, orders ›the Doctor‹ to stop, to have a thorough look at him. It is not history or some ideology or learned philosophical values that makes Archie do this, but simply the desire to face ›the Doctor‹, the personification of evil, who is at his mercy in that moment:

›[B]ecause he wanted to see evil, pure evil; the moment of the great recognition, he needed to see it – and then he could proceed as previously arranged. But the Doctor was stooping badly and he looked weak. [...] And Archie'd never seen a man so crumpled, so completely vanquished. It kind of took the wind out of his sails. He was tempted to say *You look like I feel*, for if there was an embodiment of his own pounding headache, of the alcoholic nausea rising from his belly, it was standing opposite him now.‹ (Smith 2000, 534)

In a space of confrontational encounter, the passage here introduces the question of ethics in a narrative fold within the diegesis, the storyworld, through direct discourse. Who is allowed to live and who or what can decide over ›existence?‹ A subtle humorous tone accompanies the text, making the question of ethics a more profane and mundane one, a part of bodily processes, a question of the everyday. This deposes the question from its, ›lofty intellectual‹, theoretical heights, as Bakhtin would say. It makes the everyday into ethical decision-making, which is always relational and in ›the face‹ of the other within instantaneous and specific spaces and times. It is triggered through a focalization of Archie and the free indirect discourse that follows it. Humor is invoked as Archie compares his state of intoxication and hangover with ›the Doctor's‹ frightened concern

regarding his own fate. Through this impossible, naïve comparison, though, Archie understands not so much ›the Doctor‹, but another ›human being‹ in a predicament, someone else who is not only directly standing in front of him, facing him, but someone whom he has the power to kill. The scene that is created inbetween Archie and ›the Doctor‹ tacitly evokes a witnessing vantage point and bolsters the implication of an ›audience‹ and its involvement and complicity with the scene as well as with the question of ›crime and punishment‹ through the performance-character of the scene. From Archie's perspective, ›the Doctor‹ all of a sudden becomes the threatened one, whose ›life‹ hinges on Archie's decision, rather than the brutal, cold, abusive ›scientist‹-criminal. The confrontational trait of the space is constructed through the difference between the two characters, who seem to represent the two ends of the European discourse on ›race‹, class and the role and value of what ›education‹ should comprise of, as well as its effects in the material dynamics of the sociopolitical specter. ›The Doctor‹ represents science, and it is the narrative of scientific objectivity, hailing from the past, and ideas of the ›Enlightenment‹ (religious othering and the beginning of imperialism) that has allowed him, within a Nazi episteme, to control and annihilate life. Through Archie's character the highly discursivized question of ethics is brought down to an empty space where ›ignorance‹ and ›freedom‹ reside next to each other. Archie is not acting out of an ethical discourse though. He rather ›lives‹ its impulse in the performativity of its context. Archie can only see ›the Doctor‹ at *this moment* of their confrontation. To kill or not to kill, that is the question for him. It is a decisive moment of encounter for Archie, however, he seems only vaguely aware of the import of what is at stake. Archie can only see ›the Doctor‹ as an individual in a miserable situation. But by subtly identifying with him (›You look like I feel‹), Archie unleashes impulsively an ethical relation with ›the Doctor‹ that ›kind of took the wind out of his sails‹.

This moment in the novel comes close to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's suggestion of the ethical relation as a (virtually counter-intuitive) impulse that ensues reflexively out of an *aesthetic education*. In her rereading and restaging of Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794), Spivak problematizes ethics by taking it out from the discourses of politics (Kant) and epistemology (Lévinas) and placing it in ›the nestling of logic and rhetoric in fiction‹ (Spivak 2012, 317). Thus read, ›Archie‹ can be seen to represent the struggle with an ethical reflex that disrupts colonial as well as anti-colonial discourses. This is all the more interesting as Archie is displayed as ›uneducated‹ in an official sense. Archie has rather acquired ›knowledge‹ from fictional narratives. A roguish humor erupts from the text that shows and delinks two forms of ›knowledge‹-formation: one form of ›knowledge‹-formation that comprises mainstream and colonial ›knowledge‹ constitutions, which more or less systematically inculcate people with specific sets of ›knowledge‹, inducing regimes of ›knowledge‹, and another form of ›knowledge‹-formation that consists of random forces of ›knowledge‹ production, emanating, more or less unwittingly, from the niches of ›the arts‹. The scene stresses on the one side, the complicity of power-alignments and dominant, authorized forms of ›knowledge‹ and education. On the other hand, it explores the boundaries and limits of not-knowing and power-lessness. Archie cannot deny ›the Doctor‹ a last cigarette and a last conversation, although he is well aware that this could be a strategy of ›the Doctor‹ to get away, which he *knows* from fictional narratives, because he has

»seen the movies« and »because this was a tactic of Movie Nazis«, and »Archie should have known; he spent the first four years of the war watching flickering Movie Nazis at [his hometown cinema] the Brighton Odeon.« (Smith 2000, 535)

The implication of (fictional) narrative as a form of ›knowledge‹ flickers between Archie's funny solemnity, reflected in the narrator's free indirect speech that is contrasted with the severity of the situation in the temporal space of World War II and the end of the Nazi regime. From this bifurcation of Archie's thoughts and the narrator's tongue-in-cheek factual report (indicating the time in-between, decades later, otherwise it would just cry numbly, I assume . . .) results a grim, incongruous humorous tone. The humorous tone keeps a close distance to Archie, which, with a wink, produces an affectionate sympathy for him. This creates the possibility of a space and a stage, and the potential complicity of an ›implied audience‹ that also has to decide is raised. Archie appears as a familiar ›face‹, a friend, almost family. ›The twinkle‹ also unleashes an affectionate teasing form of anticipation. It is as if the novel expects an ›implied audience‹ to abide by and observe Archie's performance, not knowing and power-less as to what will happen. The twinkle, thus, organizes a space between the narrator and an ›implied audience‹ as well as signifies a meta-discourse beyond the text on an extra-diegetic level, where ›Archie‹ as a ›character-type‹ can be further understood and shifted from someone uneducated to someone who may be ›knowing‹ and wise in his own way. Furthermore, narrativity, here in the sense of cinema, is, on the one hand, thematized as a pedagogical and formative discourse. On the other hand, its mimetic stance, its closeness to, even reflection of, ›reality‹ is strengthened as ›the Doctor‹ indeed acts like characters in ›films‹. However, since the tone of the narrative maintains an affectionate humorous display in a close focalization of Archie, it retains a (self-)deconstructive feature: While it thematizes the pedagogical place of fiction in ›life‹, it withdraws from an affirmative or declarative utterance regarding the validity of art. However, the humorous allusion is sufficient to confront and contest the ›truth‹ of philosophical and scientific ›knowledge‹ that has a privileged place in the formation of discourse but often presupposes dominant sociopolitical conditions and values that are not further questioned: Throughout the novel Archie is portrayed as uneducated, but not as unaware and unthinking. Samad's rigorous education in biology and ›the Doctor's‹ highly cultivated and malevolent ›knowledge‹ are confronted with another ›knowledge‹ that comes from the power-less narratives of fiction and the liberating space of non-knowledge, which provides a niche of ›freedom‹ in the subject where they can merge ›knowledge‹ gained from fiction and ›counter-intuitive, conflictual ›affective labor‹ in the ›nestle of rhetoric and logic‹ (Spivak 2012, 317) within the impulse of the moment when a decision has to be made. The reference to fictional narratives as enabling discourses seems naïve and in a humorous tone emphasizes Archie's apparent ignorance. At the same time, the allusion to the formative aspect of fiction opens up a thoughtful humorous play with the value of fiction versus objectifying scientific as well as philosophical discourses. The affective, humorous tone that enables a sympathetic proximity to Archie also valorizes Archie's ›simplicity‹ for its *otherwise* philosophical wisdom, gained from artistic, fictional narratives and conditions of power-lessness. It is affective in the sense that it arouses empathy for him and makes space for a contemplative attitude towards the question of ›knowledge‹, ›education‹, and structures of power as well as ›non-

knowledge, power-lessness, and the *productive unstructure* that emanates from these two elements in surprising ways. Once this ›stage of performance‹ is created, it unfolds into a performative, a ›witnessed‹ ›spectacle‹ that remains unprogrammed.

This problematization of an *ethical impulse* through Archie's power-less and unknowing ›knowledge‹ must be seen in context, however. It would be too simplistic to see it represented by a *white* male figure; Archie acts in a context where, as Samad puts it, ›your‹, European forms of annihilation are discussed and displayed. On an extra-fictional and meta-narrative level, it is not for nothing that Samad stays in the car, and is distanced from the scene and discussion since it is not ›his‹ discourse but rather one that threatens his ›right to live‹ and ›existence‹ as well. The novel leaves *white* Europeans of *Christian* descent to deal with the ghosts (in every possible sense) of ›their‹ discourses. (This is not meant to excuse anyone else: Other ›regions‹, systems, and other peoples certainly have other crimes and atrocities to deal with – in modernity often not unaffected by the structures and ideologies of colonialism, coloniality – decolonization, nation-building, and the general *will to power* – that may also contain structures of evil in the name of good).

Just when it appears that ›the Doctor‹ is getting away with his strategy and Archie is despairing, powerless, not knowing what to do, how to decide, *chance* comes to his rescue: »Please, just stop talking, *please*, so I can – ‹ he yells »I've got a coin!« (Smith 2000, 539). Again, through a humorous play with the naivety of an unlearned Archie, a question is raised about the undecidability that any (ethical) question poses. It is metaphorically allegorized by the ›flipping of a coin‹.²⁸ Archie wants the coin to decide. The idea of chance as a determining possibility, another structure that defines ›being‹ as well as the play of the plot, also critically foregrounds another question, namely that a decision, any affirmative act, is not an end in itself but enables other stories. In the last chapter, an *authorial* voice, it seems, refers to the ramifications of decisions and the ends of novels by declaring:

»But first the *endgames*. Because it seems no matter what you think of them, they must be played, even if, like the independence of India or Jamaica, like the signing of peace treaties or the docking of passenger boats, the end is simply the beginning of an even longer story.« (Smith 2000, 540)

This voice is different from the humorous playful tone of the narrator. It is an ironic, more explicit reference to historical and political issues. The end of a decision that structures a story as well as history, narratives, it seems to say, is also the beginning of dialogicity and (just) another step within time and the unknown. Metanarratives are not a one-way street, and whether they are anchored in (a *Christian*) ›God‹, ›science‹ or ›history‹, they more often than not serve to legitimate decisions along embattled structures of power, which either way affect and change narratives and narrative discourses within the available time and space, but not forever and not in a totalizing way. Either way, decisions

28 Archie's flipping coin is often read as emblematic of the novel's postmodernist traits, and seen as a deployment of the notion of ›chance‹; while ›truths‹ are indeed questioned in the novel, especially with regard to discourse itself, the flipping coin may also indicate the arbitrariness of decisions as well as Archie's sociopolitical background. Cf. Hong (2007), Paproth (2008, 10); see also Sell (2006); Jang (2020, 629).

are not fully controllable and within a specific power, overriding ›knowledge‹. It is this slice of non-knowledge and power-lessness in the quest for ›knowledge‹ and power that cuts through their material and also decides how things can further evolve. Acknowledging this involvement of non-knowledge and power-lessness in all steps taken, in any encounter, is a sign of the openness of things, of *affirmative* openness, as an attitude of expectation towards the unknown in the ambiguous valley of hope, determination, and un/certainty.

As Archie reaches for the coin to see the result of what has been decided upon, ›the Doctor‹ shoots him in the leg: ›The bullet had passed straight through, just missing the bone, but leaving a shard of the cap embedded deep in the flesh‹ (Smith 2000, 540). With that the chapter ends, while the narrator's chatty voice reports of how the loud shot made Samad, still sitting in the jeep, ›jump‹:

»He slapped dead an insect that had been winding its way round his wrist, looking for enough flesh to bite. Lifting his head, he saw in front of him that Archie was returning: bleeding and limping badly, made visible, then invisible, illuminated, obscured, as he wound in and out of the headlights. He looked his tender age, the lamps making his blond hair translucent, his moon-shaped face lit up like a big baby, head first, entering life.« (Smith 2000, 121 f.)

This scene contains a subtle, imperceptible humor in the description of the killing of the insect, a ›soft representation‹ of the non-human in Smith's work (Bingham 2022, 455). It induces a halt – a pensive moment about how to respond to a face that has committed and helped to commit abuse and murder. The scene also asks where we need to rethink our relation to the other(s) of our self as part of our existence. The grimly humorous tone is made even more bizarre by the light and fluffy tone in which it is delivered, which, at the same time, captures the overload of the moment with mixed, affective, and unanswerable questions. It also mocks the young male characters who must play the male masculine hero. This question is contained in a sentence that evokes a very ordinary image of a very common, everyday human act – impulsively slapping and killing an insect just because you feel annoyed by it, while everywhere in the four niches of the book's pages, the invisibility of genocides (of enslavement, of colonialism, of decolonization, of world wars, of Nazi epistemology, of the Shoah) seems to silently wait for some kind of reference. This comic scenery with its serious theme and grim undertone arises specifically from the focalization of the insect ›that had been winding its way round his [Samad's] writs, looking for enough flesh to bite‹. In view of the crimes committed, Archie's alleged murder, and the arising question of how to conceive of it all, the narrator is content with a detailed description of the smallest acting entity they can find, hiding away behind it and thereby bringing the tense atmosphere, as well as the serious question of ethics, imbued in-between the self and the other, once again, and in its manifold meanings, implicitly into the fore as if from another (humanimal) perspective.

It is only at the end and crux of the novel, and 47 years later, that Samad, proud of Archie and their little secret, has to learn how this *endgame* turned out. Archie did not kill ›the Doctor‹ after all; he could not do it:

»For fuckssake, why did you do that?« said Archie furious grubbing the gun off the Doctor, easily and forcefully. »It's tails. See? It's tails. Look. Tails. It was tails.« (Smith 2000, 540)

Despite having been shot in the leg, Archie is indignant, to be sure, but nevertheless, according to the dictates of the coin, lets »the Doctor« go, as we learn in the novel's final chapter.

Is this good or bad? Is it tragic or is it humorous? Or some combination of all of those?

Endgames and Beginnings

The many traits of the story come together in the last chapter of the novel and in the middle of »London«. The setting is a room, an exhibition hall, in the fictional *Perret*-(yes! *Perret*!) Institute in Trafalgar Square, where all the main characters, major and minor, are, for a variety of reasons, inside and outside the building. The Trafalgar Square as well as the main building are »occupied« by these figures from the periphery of the city. But the main event that has brought them together at this time and place is the »Millennial Science Commission«, which is about to present a mouse genetically programmed to die on New Year's Eve. Marcus Chalfen and Samad's twin son Majid are part of the scientific group and have invited Archie's and Samad's families to the event. There are also several groups in the room who want to sabotage the event. One of them is Millat, Samad's other twin son, who more out of TV-knowledge about »Muslims« than out of a sincere identification with »Islam« or fundamentalist Islamic aspirations, has brought with him a pistol to shoot the researcher who, instead of the Almighty, wants to decide upon the future of an »existent«, the mouse. »Non-knowledge«, in its narrower sense of *ignorance* (political malpractice) and powerlessness (or the abuse of religion and youth), is here taken to mean *absolute* »knowledge« and power in the name of God, which, especially from the perspective of Islamic law, at least, should amount to nothing less than blasphemy. It turns out that the main researcher behind the project is exactly the vicious »Doctor« whom Archie did not kill, a revelation that does not *not* come without its own deliciously comic »irony« in the narrator's endearing voice, linking the two characters and showing their multiple historical affiliations, on more affective related grounds: »[A]n old man weeping tiny tears of pride. Red tears. Tears Archie recognizes. But not before Samad recognizes them« (Smith 2000, 532), the very same »Doctor« who never got a trial because Samad so desperately wanted to become a hero according to the national, anti-colonial discourse that construed his desire to participate in »history«, which they both, in effect, did (good or not good?). *Recognition*, and not only the »Doctor«, is the trigger-word that construes and determines the humorous accord of the scene.

»Captain Samad Miah, who pauses for a moment on the threshold, peers through his reading glasses, and realizes that he has been lied to by his only friend in the world for fifty years. [...] And then, with a certain horrid glee, he gets to the fundamental truth of if, the anagnorisis: *This incident alone will keep us two old boys going for the next forty years.* It is the story to end all stories. It is the gift that keeps on giving.

›Archibald!‹ He turns from the doctor towards his Lieutenant and releases a short, loud, hysterical laugh; he feels like a new bride looking at her groom with perfect recognition just at the moment when everything between the two of them has changed. ›You two-faced bugging bastard trickster misamata, bhain-chute, shora-baicha, syut-morani, haraam jadda ...‹

Samad tumbles into the Bengali vernacular, so colorfully populated by liars, sister-fuckers, sons and daughters of pigs, people who give their own mothers oral pleasure« (Smith 2000, 532 f., all emphasis in the text)

The scene of Samad's sudden discovery is shown in a humorous way by the use of a close focalization of Samad's acts and thoughts, through indirect discourse as well as by direct speech, which express his shock; here, Samad's ›laughter‹ (in contrast to the potential ›laughter‹ of a – possibly empathetic – ›implied audience‹) does not signify humor, but the pain of betrayal and the ›irony‹ of disbelief that accompanies it. This multifarious sentiment and its bittersweet humor are indicated by the description of Samad's ›laughter‹ as ›short‹, ›loud‹, and ›hysterical‹, a ›laughter‹ that cannot decide from which senses and thoughts it emerges or should emerge and that encompasses all the antagonistic and undecidable sites of the moment. While the humor and the shock go hand in hand and invoke suspense through Samad's ›pause‹ on the ›threshold‹, the ›peer through his reading glasses‹ – the thorough look intensifies Samad's simultaneous disbelief and realization – the dramatic turn is halted by the humorous consolation of the narrator's two-voiced indirect speech: ›[H]e feels like a new bride looking at her groom with perfect recognition just at the moment when everything between the two of them has changed‹. Samad's thoughts are embedded in the narrator's description, and it is this ›third‹ voice of the narrator that may rise to a hysterical, humorous tone while, at the same time, maintaining Samad's state of shock. The construction can be regarded as an authorial allusion, as the comparison exhibits an allegorical, political meaning. The elicited images of a ›new bride‹ and ›her groom‹ evoke humor through allegory, playing with notions of cis-normativity and the marginalization of queerness. These images signify and travesty the intimate closeness of Samad's and Archie's friendship by comparing it to a romantic relationship, an allusion that equates relations of ›love‹ by transgressing normative ideas of cis-romanticism and queerphobic othering, as well as exclusive meanings of ›love‹ and ›friendship‹. The function of the description is not so much to ridicule the two characters or their friendship, but to affectionately emphasize their intimacy. At the same time, the queering of the characters shows the arbitrariness of normalized sexualized, gender norms. ›Looking at the groom in perfect recognition when everything between them has changed‹ not only evokes the harshness and brutality of the betrayal and its deep intersubjective meaning with regard to what happens next, to a foreseeable, different future (in which Archie and Samad will no longer be friends), it also depicts Alsana's critical injunction and advice to Clara to look closely at her ›love‹ relation, to question it, to try to get to the bottom of all the supposed certainties. There seem to be none, or are there? At any rate, Samad is simply realizing what Alsana already knew and practiced: that she was not fooled by masculinist ideals. The close, empathetic portrayal of Samad is further intensified by the focus on his hurt thoughts. *Only* is the magic word, the deixis, that carries the weight of the disappointment as well as its humorous rendering since it emulates the

deeply felt sentiment of disappointment but also its infantilizing depiction, which softens the dramatic and humorous tone of the scene and heightens its dramatized humor. This affectively aroused humor is further evoked by the words ›the fundamental truth‹ and ›anagnorisis‹ as well as the description of Samad's shock as ›horrid glee‹. Samad's ›horrid glee‹ complements Alsana's insight to ›look-close-up at something‹ and Archie's ›stare‹ as well as Samad's belief in Archie's naivety. All of these forms of *staring*, and systems of *belief*, fragment and betray their ›truths‹. No ›truths‹ and no gaze appear to be sustainable, not even this one in the moment of its revelation. The signification of ›anagnorisis‹ is threefold, it plays on the threshold of the fictionality of fiction and the factuality of fact, and vice versa, it unleashes an *affective humor* at the threshold of tragedy and comedy, and it evokes and addresses an ›implied audience‹ that, together with Samad, can see *what really happened*: that the (any) fundamental truth is corrupted by the moment of its disclosure, as a ›pathos‹, in Bakhtin's words, as a lie, as a construct, »[t]hat the cornerstone of their friendship was made of nothing more firm than marshmallows and soap bubbles. That there is far more to Archibald Jones than he had ever imagined« (Smith 2000, 532). Affirmatively speaking, this also means that no one and nothing, no context, is reducible to how we might perceive it. While the anagnorisis unfolds the tragic element of this revelation in the face of Samad's grief, its humorous thread is unleashed by the narrator's indirect speech and the humorous, inapt description of their *friendship* with candy and potage as ›not more firm than marshmallows and soap bubbles‹. The metaphoricality of the comparison (the squishiness of marshmallows and the evanescence of soap bubbles with mock-amity) is incongruous with the pain of loss, yet congruous with regard to the sweetness of *friendships*, thus accommodating a bittersweet affectivity of loss, disillusionment, and longing. Humor is also induced by the antagonistic use of ›fundamental truth‹ and ›anagnorisis‹, which, moreover, construes and simultaneously addresses an ›implied audience‹, making the scene humorous from a position of observation that goes beyond its immediate ›presence‹ and invites a response, asking for a third party to decide whether this mess can (ever) be resolved. Humor works here as a rhetoric of dialogic deconstruction, a rhetoric that ultimately lies in the pleasure of the unfinished. This is not only the pleasure of the joy that follows the humorous description but also the pleasure of the sorrow that accompanies it, and of the infinity that is exposed in such undecidable moments, revealing the boundless abyss of ›non-knowledge‹ and powerlessness at the heart of space, time, *you* and *I*, all ›events‹, and ›life‹ as such. In the end, death, appears as an inevitable and yet insoluble sign (although we cannot (yet) know what it may mean). Humor, then, plays at the liminal nature of not-knowing and the wisdom and relief that accompanies it, ›it is the gift that keeps on giving‹. As Mathew Bevis argues, humor, »as a P. S., as a desire to say ›And another thing . . .‹, is often an insistence that good things do *not* come to an end. Comic endings always seem to imply a future« (Bevis 2013, 109). The threshold-trait of the transition from tragedy to comedy also arises from the incongruity between Archie's *apparent* cunning and Samad's *perception* of Archie as incapable of hiding anything. Archie, as ›the fool character‹ and Archie as the naïve character in Samad's more literal perception, turns out to have been the figure who fooled Samad and his beliefs – his belief in Archie, as well as his belief in what formed their *friendship*, and their belief in what was important and mattered. Anagnorisis plays with the incongruity of expectations and the uncertainty of certain-

ties, and thus with the contingency of meanings. ›Knowledge‹, a firm, shared belief, as the force that gives birth to friendship, *seems* not only to have disappeared but actually never to have existed. Samad's shock erupts into a wave of dejected negativity. In the end, everything seems to be a lie, no matter where you look for some support (the ›nation‹, ancestral pride, ›education‹, anti-colonial heroism, ›war‹, ›religion‹, the belief that you can change fate and have a friendship), there seems to be nothing that you can hold on to – everything seems to ripple through your fingers like water (or sand). A humorous evocation arises precisely from the empathy that Samad's hyperbolic, somewhat narcissistic litany enforces in the narrator's indirect report. The term ›anagnorisis‹ refers not only to the tragic moment of the instance but also to an ironic and humorous display on two levels, on the level of the narrative discourse as well as on a self-reflexive meta-level. Firstly, the narrator's use of ›anagnorisis‹ alludes to the *moment* of Samad's discovery and shock. Secondly, it is a denotation that blurs the line to the ›fictional‹, as a constructed text without any claim to ›truth‹. This moment of revealed constructiveness, in turn, made into a ›fact‹, a ›factualization‹ that occurs because a secret has been unveiled in the narrative and has taken place. ›Anagnorisis‹ also refers to something ›factual‹ that is about to change the course of the narrative and its meanings, and the imagination of an ›implied audience‹ that had been invoked in the unfolding of the narrative as a witness to the characters' performances and ›lives‹.

The evocation of an ›anagnorisis‹ also implies reflection within and beyond the fictional text, again at the liminal seam of the narrative discourse and a meta-level. It signals that all narratives may be fundamentally untrue and entail moments of ›anagnorisis‹. Finally, ›anagnorisis‹ refers to the tragic moment of a deception but also to its ironic, humorous site. In this way, the ›anagnorisis‹ of tragedy is transformed into the disruptive parabasis of comedy, linking the semblance of tragedy and comedy even more. The humorous display of the ›anagnorisis‹ is achieved through the deployment of Samad's indignation, and his ›tumble‹ into ›the Bengali vernacular‹, and the use of (misogynistic) abusive language; a depiction that shows Samad is out of his mind and that stands for an unworldly, young age or a very intimate relationship that can no longer be disturbed by anger and insults. Nonetheless, Samad is not shown as a ridiculed figure but as a ›speaking human being‹, because the Bengali framed in Samad's expressive English announcement ›you two-faced buggering bastard trickster‹ is given space and is not just recounted by the narrator; the narrator translates and thus doubles Samad's outrage as well as its humorous display. The sincerity of the scene, despite or rather along with its drollness, and its touching moment is further enhanced in the text by Samad's Bengali outcry, showing both his dismay and his closeness to Archie as he addresses Archie in his mother tongue as if Archie would understand, (which Archie probably does as he ›knows‹ that Bengali is a part of his friend and nothing incomprehensible between them). Just »one page« before this ›anagnorisis‹, Archie is chatting with their mutual friend, Abdul-Mickey, the owner of the bar where they meet regularly. In this conversation Abdul-Mickey speaks of Muhammad Ali as ›the greatest of all times, past, present, future‹ (Smith 2000, 532) and describes him as *definitely his mentor*. Archie, worlds apart from the ›anagnorisis‹ (and not just one paragraph), concedes to himself that for him Samad was ›the mentor‹ as the narrator lets us know:

»For him, it's always been Samad. You can't tell Mickey that, obviously. Sounds daft. Sounds queer. But it's the truth. Always Sammy. Through thick and thin. Even if the world were ending. Never made a decision without him in forty years. Good old Sam. Sam the man.« (Smith 2000, 532)

Archie apparently speaks of the forty years of consolation *after* the fraud he has committed, without telling his friend, or at least *not mentioning it* (maybe having forgotten to mention it, so it was actually and strictly speaking not *real* fraud since he had let the coin decide, and since Samad wanted him to decide upon the fate of ›the Doctor‹). Archie's reflections, especially as they are presented in close indirect discourse and voiced without the interfering interference of the narrator, enable an intimate and unmediated approach to his touchy thoughts about Samad, and, at the same time, preserve and transpose his affectionate, almost romantic disposition toward Samad, whom he holds in high esteem as the passage shows. However, Archie's thoughts also represent a humorous side as they entail a cis-normative, male anxiety to be seen as ›queer‹ (a potential danger to images of cis-›masculinity‹ apparently). Yet, the narrator's relentless revelation of Archie's most secret thoughts also unleashes a space for reflection in which ›queerness‹, is thematized as a form of critique and as an abjected, excluded, and hidden form of ›love‹ that is positively affirmed as an expression of ›lived‹ masculinity and *friendship*. The humorous display of Samad's Bengali vernacular, at the same time, not only countersigns this image but also effects an affective specter of empathy and compassion for him. Thirdly, the unresolved and ambiguous allusion to a play on words with ›the end of all stories‹ and ›gift‹ creates another humorous evocation. While ›the end of all stories‹, alarmingly signals the end of Archie and Samad's *friendship*, it engenders an empathetic suspense. ›It is the story to end all stories‹ in conjunction with ›[i]t is the gift that keeps on giving‹ can be read as teasing allusions to whether Archie and Samad's *friendship* will withstand this revelation, suggesting that this may be the end of the story (as well as the end of their *friendship* and the novel). At the same time, the second sentence, concurrently, raises hopes that this might not be the case, as the end of stories unleashes other stories – and as *friendship* can also be understood as a ›gift‹ – that does not expect anything in return. It is just there, an in-betweenness, accumulated and accumulating by itself, an antithesis to the capitalist, market-based, understanding of the word ›gift‹ as a *thing*, a *present*, something *presentable*, something you *buy* to make someone happy. Rather, *friendship* – all deception aside – is ›the gift‹ that ›keeps on giving‹.

At the same time that Samad becomes aware of his friend's betrayal, Archibald senses movement in the hall and reacts to it instead of losing time explaining himself:

»But even before this, or at least simultaneous with this [Samad's realization and scene], while the audience looks on, bemused by this old brown man shouting at this old white man in a foreign tongue, Archie senses something else going on, some movement in this space, potential movement all over the room [...] and sees that Millat will get there first; and Millat is reaching like Pande; and Archie has seen TV and he has seen real-life and he knows what such a reach means, so he stands. So he moves. So as the gun sees the light; he is there, he is there with no coin to help him, he is there before Samad can stop him, he is there with no alibi, he is there between

Millat Iqbal's decision and his target, like the moment between thought and speech, like the split-second intervention of memory or regret.« (Smith 2000, 533)

With the change of the scenery and the shift of focalization focused on Archie, the humorous rhetoric develops through the depiction of the character's *acts*, Archie's performance is scrutinized, *shown*, through the description of his actions (stunts, indeed!). At the same time that Archie's movements are recounted in the narrator's close, staccato rendition, the humorous angle is completed by the description of Archie's *senses*, which are rendered in the form of a void, like the calm before the storm, that makes room for them to take place, addressing an implicated audience (›he is there with no alibi‹, ›like the moment between thought and speech‹, ›like the split-second intervention of memory or regret‹) and which also results from his being aware of the moment with all his senses: his eyes, his ears, his ›life experience‹ as well as his experience of and ›knowledge‹ as an avid reader of cultural products such as films (›some movement in this space, potential movement all over the room [. . .] and sees that Millat will get there first; and Millat is reaching like Pande; and Archie has seen TV and he has seen real-life and he knows what such a reach means‹). As Archie seems to act in a fraction of a second, the description is held in discontinuous, successive, short intervals that simulate the brevity of time, of the decision-making and of the swiftly executed series of actions that seem to be happening all at once, as in a film, mimicking and ironizing the ›mode of operation‹ of the visual media. The humorous tone is not only induced by the staccato of thought, senses and actions, indicated by the short sentences and the repetition of the deixis ›so‹ and ›there‹ (›So he moves. So as the gun sees the light; he is there, he is there‹) but also by the juxtaposition of Archie's action with the insinuation of his thoughts, which also encompass sorrow regarding the past and a concern with regard to what his past deed/decision might trigger ›today‹, which is evoked by the conjunction of the terms ›memory‹ and ›regret‹: ›like the split-second intervention of memory or regret‹. There is also a third, split, voice: that of the narrator, which accompanies the description as part of the indirect discourse: ›so he stands. So he moves. So as the gun sees the light; he is there, he is there with no coin to help him‹. The description again seems to mockingly mimic a camera lens. The humorous rendition is evoked in Archie's thoughts and actions, on the one hand, and the narrator's depiction of them, on the other hand, which ironize and disrupt the flow of Archie's performance, creating an implicit second opinion, in which it is not clearly discernible whose voice is speaking, the narrator's or Archie's: ›and Millat is reaching like Pande; and Archie has seen TV and he has seen real-life and he knows what such a reach means‹, ›So as the gun sees the light; he is there, he is there with no coin to help him‹.

The description also functions as a multifaceted humor that targets different issues and explodes their straightforward meanings: it mimics Archie's cinematic mimicry as well as, more generally, the ways in which one might always already mimic something seen, experienced, read and thus implicitly declares ›life‹, ›reality‹ as a repetition, as a mimicry of images, of what one thinks, of what one has learned to regard, as ›right‹. It mimics and parodies action movies, and it renders a mimicry of Archie's actions, which induces a reality effect of the scene (and the novel), making the performance of the ›actually performing Archie‹ comical as Archie is visualized performing these actions in *reality*, and then again his performance is alienated as acts of mimicry of a visual medium, tele-

vision, which is itself ›unreal‹ and can be regarded as a medium of mimesis and mimicry of ›life‹. It sounds like a descriptive repetition of a repetition (›Archie‹ is cycling . . .) where ›reality‹ and mimesis dissolve into the reality effect of the novel and become ›real‹ through the narrator's visualizing report. It is as if the scene, Archie's performance – is described to an ›implied audience‹, equipped with ›knowledge‹ of the narrator that increases the humorous display as well as the realistic effect by doubling them. It is further informed by a meanwhile complacent ›implied audience's‹ acquaintance with Archie's unusual, jocular preference for using a coin to make decisions. Archie is guided by a conglomerate of his alert senses, informed by experience but also by (narrative) ›knowledge‹. While it is an ›anagnorisis‹ that brings Samad the ›fundamental truth‹, it is followed by a ›peripeteia‹ – as if the novel itself were suggesting that this is, at least and after all, what is expected of a ›good‹ narrative, by humorizing itself. The ›peripeteia‹ is initiated by the shift of focalization to Archie, which prepares and implies a further shift in the sequence of events taking place. This implementation of anagnorisis and peripeteia not only self-mockingly signifies the construction of fiction but also mocks the construction of literary writing according to specific, recognizable rules and the chopping-up of fiction into genres within literary studies. Both forms of normativized discursive (mainstream) dynamics (the use of strategic elements in literary writing, such as anagnorisis and peripeteia, which are usually classified as elements of ›tragedy‹), are defamiliarized through the self-reflexive, comedic and humorous framing of their use in the novel. As if in the void of a trance, induced by the concentration of all his senses and thoughts, ›like the split-second intervention of memory or regret‹, Archie realizes that something is about to go wrong again, and he begins to act. He impulsively throws himself between Millat and ›the Doctor‹. The anagnorisis that has prepared the change is followed by a peripeteia in which Archie is the (focalized) character of the action. This self-denoting characterization of the novel reads like a self-mocking, authorial level that infiltrates the novel and undermines the sincerity of the plot in a hyperbolically humorous way. However, through the hyperbole, it also carves out a space, a niche, for a zone of reflection:

»So Archie is there, there in the trajectory of the bullet, about to do something unusual even for TV: save the same man twice and with no more reason or rhyme than the first time. [...]

But it would make an interesting survey (what kind would be your decision) to examine the present and the divide the onlookers into two groups: those whose eyes fell upon a bleeding man, slumped across a table, and those who watched the getaway of a small brown rebel mouse. Archie, for one, watched the mouse. He watched it stand very still for a second with a smug look as if it expected nothing less. He watched it scurry away, over his hand. He watched it dash along the table, and through the hands of those who wished to pin it down. He watched it leap off the end and disappear through an air vent. *Go on my son!* thought Archie. (Smith 2000, 540–42)

While in the first part of the passage the narrator's voice can be detected, mocking Archie as well as visual media, the passage's central message is an ethical intervention, a call for responsibility, albeit in a humorous form, an attempt to avert a bad deed from happen-

ing, without much planning, philosophizing or reading, without much ›reason‹, ›logic – in ›rhyme‹ with the context.

Archie's impulsive act, this time, is not only informed by cultural ›knowledge‹ but also apparently by anxiety, triggered by remembering, a fear maybe of regretting *something*, perhaps that his *friendship* may be in danger. Archie's humorous action is thus paralleled by an indeterminate affectivity, the anxiety to lose something dear, a concern that this *something*, might affect the ›life‹ of his beloved friend in bad ways. This time he is not the young ›boy‹ anymore, the not so much older ›Doctor‹ called him back then to intimidate him. Archie has not only ›seen TV‹, meanwhile, but also ›real life‹, in good and bad ways, war, *friendship*, family. Archie has a *sense* of what seems right. And Archie is with the mouse he calls ›my son‹ in his thoughts. Archie acts out of ›non-knowledge‹ and powerlessness, but his performance, affective equilibrium, and thoughts seem to be based on a kind of empathy. He can *identify with the other*, which is indicated by his intense observant focus on the mouse, in a more or less narrator-free indirect speech that entails understanding: ›He watched it stand very still for a second with a smug look as if it expected nothing less. He watched it scurry away, over his hand. He watched it dash along the table, and through the hands of those who wished to pin it down. He watched it leap off the end and disappear through an air vent. Go on my son!‹.

Though this *facing* of the mouse sounds naïve, and it sounds funny, it also unleashes a touching and knowing, almost mystical tone, as Archie *feels with the mouse*, and as the mouse is placed in the spotlight, facing an ›implied audience‹. The mouse seems to represent *the face of the other*, which seems sufficient to *understand* what may not be understandable as such, without much reasoning and without much ado. Facing the other is different from ›staring‹, and different from ›looking at someone close up‹. It seems to be an intense concentration in which all thoughts and affectivity are combined in a given moment, and in which the self and the other seem to dissolve, and for split-seconds become one, understanding something, before again resolving into two different entities. Facing the mouse can be seen as an affirmative mockery of a Levinasian reading of the face of the (wholly) other. But it can also be seen because of its mockery, which neither suggests nor imposes any ›truth‹, as an invitation to reflect on the face of the (wholly) Other at the other end of the hierarchy: an ›animal‹ as the other other of the ›human‹, which Archie's address transforms into a humanimal, questioning, from the ground up, the idea and separation of the self and the other. With ›Go on my son!‹, Archie visualizes and announces, parallel to the visualization of ›the face‹, the effects of an ethical relationship that denounces a vertical hierarchy. Archie faces the mouse, understands what this sudden change of circumstances means for the mouse (cut and run!), protects it by not giving it away or catching it, and releases it into freedom like a ›good‹ parent. Informed by a sense, unknowingly and without any power or ›authority‹, Archie nevertheless, *acts as a humanimal being*. He saves the life of ›the Doctor‹ (once again), but he also saves Millat from committing a crime, saves his *friendship* with Samad – it would have been one of the consequences of his former *historical* decision if Samad's son had ended up being the Pande in the end who killed ›the Doctor‹ – and frees the poor mouse from its glasshouse when he falls on it. But Archie does not do any of this with deliberation, intention, or much thought. He ›simply‹ acts out of *concern*, out of an awareness for his loved ones, and out of an impulse, a sense, imbued with *attunement to the moment*, to do

the ›right‹ thing at the ›right‹ place – to save people from harm or injury. The scene not only leaves the story open-ended (what happens to the mouse? Will it survive its calculated death? Speculations: Yes, it will because along the way it eats some cheese that fell from Hortense's buttered bread, which contains a substance that [...]). No, because its fate is already pre-programmed, but at least it dies in the dignity of freedom, or is eaten by a hungry cat that happens to be passing by, except that the cat looks into the mouse's eyes and recognizes the *traces* of medical treatment that it has also endured, and leads the mouse to where others have already gathered in a tavern to [...] – and maybe it's Derrida's unlucky cat, who, after he dies, whatever that means, wanders around in infinity in search of him, as it still has some questions, and there are some other aspects it wants to discuss with him, – where the mouse also finds itself. Or: Not that it died punctually on New Year's Eve well, it did die, but Marcus had played a little trick because he really did not want to kill the mouse but could not say so he aloud, and so had programmed the mouse to a fake death, but when the mouse woke up, it, well, I don't want to go into that, but in any case, it finally found itself in infinity, where it felt very, very lost and started to look for an abandoned side street, where, to its surprise, it also found a lot of artists and drug dealers, but then accidentally met Derrida's cat in a dog's bar, almost at the end of the street, from whom it learned all about deconstruction and got very excited, determined to return to the measurable time again, preferably to the earth, to find Marcus and tell him all about it [...]).

The end also implies the possibilities of how things can end, which includes the ›exclusion of the unpredictable‹ and, perhaps, of (m)any possibilities of ›futuraity‹, which all seem possible, in terms of infinity (or literary writing – imagination). At the end, the story accentuates a bunch of undecidable endings. While Millat and Magid, because they are indistinguishable twins, are both sentenced to community service, which they will serve as »gardeners in Joyce's new project, a huge millennial park on the banks of the Thames«, seven years later, Irie lives in the Caribbean with her grandmother Hortense and Joshua, who becomes her lover, while their daughter writes »affectionate postcards to *Bad Uncle Millat* and *Good Uncle Magid* and feels free as Pinocchio, a puppet clipped of paternal strings?«.

Archie's and Samad's *friendship* not only survives the plot, with its anagnorisis and peripeteia, as it were, but seems to have deepened and now officially (they meet in their favorite bar) also includes Alsana and Clara. History is liberated and stands for counter-narratives, everyday narratives, the dates of events that structure ›lives‹, rather than for mainstream discourses that build nations. It is liberated through time and the music of joy in the anticipation of the grammar of language and imagination, and not only in a figurative sense as if humor were peacefully playing with a harp:

»And could it be that it is largely the criminal class and the elderly who find themselves wanting to make bets on the winner of a blackjack game, the one played by Alsana and Samad, Archie and Clara, in O'Connell's 31 December 1999, that historic night, when Abdul-Mickey finally opened his doors to women?

But surely to tell these tall tales, and others like them would be to spread the myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect. And as Archie knows, its not like that. It's never been like that.« (Smith 2000, 541)

It is always different – and maybe also beautiful – at least sometimes?

Structures of Knowledging and (the Matryoshka Dolls of) Othering

Of crucial importance to the dynamics of the novel and the lives of the characters, especially the younger, third generation, is the evocation of Jewishness in the novel (Lambert 2003; Furman 2005; Itakura 2009; Tolan 2013). Jewishness is invoked through the character of Marcus Chalfen and his family. As a Jewish Londoner, Marcus is also marked by migration, diaphora, and othering. The Chalfens are the »third generation, by way of Germany and Poland, née Chalfenovsky« (Smith 2000, 328); their very name, *Chalfen(-ovsky)*, signifies the traces of violence and violent uprooting. It is a name that signals the experience of otherness – »difference« – as othering – and thus may also signify an openness to the other. The figuration of the Chalfens entails a threefold structure in the novel, one that symbolizes an established middle class »Britishness«, yet symbolizing an *other* »Britishness« as well as one that *others* »Britishness« in an empowering sense. It is one embedded in and emerging from the past, but, nonetheless within the continuing structures of antisemitism, as one of the oldest if not *the* oldest form of racism and othering, long before and after 1492 in »Europe«. In the novel, Jewishness also means an archive of strategies of resistance and is an anchor and shelter for other othered people in the novel's contemporary present.

The Chalfens are portrayed as a middle-class family, which is part of their appeal and glamour in the novel; this is especially so for Irie. But they are shown as middle class with a casual difference: The Chalfens, in contrast to other (non-Jewish?) middle-class families »who shrugged their shoulders and coughed up the cash for a private education«, send their children to the nearby public school, even though they do not need to – but apparently consider themselves part of the outlawed community, »daring to take the ideological gamble« (Smith 2000, 313). As a consequence of the gamble, they not only have to deal with these two dysfunctional, imperfect families and their lost children, especially Irie and Millat, and later on, Millat's twin, Magid, and not only become their second home (Jang 2020, 623 ff.) but also, in quite charming ways, merge into a larger family landscape with a common grandchild (Irie's aforementioned doodling daughter).

The »Britishness« of the Chalfens, especially Marcus', appears as a disguised form of survival, a movement, however controlled and (un-)conscience, to achieve some kind of »normalcy« and to live on. Jewishness itself, in its assimilated form, is not exempt from antisemitism. Rather, as with the other forms of racism displayed in the novel, the effects of antisemitism on the life and history of the Chalfen Family are presented within a complex, affectively charged humorous rhetoric. This humor retains an affective angle towards the Chalfens, but also a mocking trait, which appears as an anti-essentialist rhetorical strategy deployed by the novel's overall narrative voice.

Jewishness, as a consequence of always being in the midst of virulent latent and manifest forms of antisemitism – is displayed within three distinct and yet interrelated frameworks: inner retreat, social withdrawal, and intellectualism. Chalfen-intellectualism subtly emerges as a resistant critique and counter-narrative on the shores of ›non-knowledge‹ and power-lessness. These withdrawals and resistances are the preserve of the family's language, of (Freudian) psychoanalysis as well as of erudition and ›science‹. In addition to their countervailing and self-sustaining quality, these traits of resistance serve as and have the function of soft weapons and protective suits of Jewish narratives of survival. In this way, Jewishness within a European society is presented as still quite an isolated and solitary experience of othering. The text demonstrates how Jewishness is deeply intertwined with the family unit, serving as a sanctuary against antisemitic remarks and hate speech. In its linguistic manifestation, this resistance is symbolized in the meaning and function of the *family name*. The family name is transformed into a system of thought and a way of life. *Chalfenism* thus becomes a lifestyle, symbolizing a language that can only be spoken and denoted by its chosen members as if it contained a secret code that no one outside could ever understand:

»The Chalfens had no friends. They interacted mainly with the Chalfen extended family (the *good genes* which were so often referred to: two scientists, one mathematician, three psychiatrists and a young cousin working for the Labour Party). Under sufferance and on public holidays, they visited Joyce's long-rejected lineage, the Connor clan, *Daily Mail* letter writers who even now could not disguise their distaste for Joyce's Israelite love-match. Bottom-line: the Chalfens didn't need other people. They referred to themselves as nouns, verbs and occasionally adjectives: *It's the Chalfen way, And then he came out with a real Chalfenism, He's Chalfening again, We need to be a bit more Chalfenist about this.*« (Smith 2000, 314; all emphasis in the text.)

Antisemitism, with its *otherwise* orientalizing forms (Wille 2011) that places Jewish Europeans somewhere outside of ›Europe‹, is presented as a common and sociopolitically callable trait that is found, in the very close proximity of the Chalfen's immediate environment, in the midst of their neighboring *white Christian* family.

The humorous tonality of the passage entails a hidden tragic site against which the Chalfen language constitutes a safe space. The passage remains in a strained humorous mode that brings itself to a standstill, inducing the ugly face of antisemitism as a normalized sociopolitical vein that Jews must endure and live with. The humorous rhetoric thus also harbors sorrow, which emanates from its reflective zones that subtly hint at antisemitism as a prevailing sociopolitical stance and is a reminder of its violent history and its still palpable effects. Humor allows to address these issues without freezing Jewishness and the singularity of the Chalfen Family into an essentialized paradigm that would make any utterance outside stereotyped models impossible.

Although the passage is thus embedded in a humorous rhetoric, evoked by brute statements about the alleged self-sufficient seclusion of the Chalfen Family that may come across as narcissistic, and caricature them in a funny way, there are other unspoken meanings intermingled in-between the lines. The idea of ›*good genes*‹ is set against the implication of the concept of ›race‹ that is part of antisemitic thinking and its embed-

dedness and history in European depictions of ›science‹ and ›the nation‹, which began with the ›Reconquista‹ and the images of belonging through (non-Jewish, non-Muslim) ›blood‹, and which are also part of later racist implications in the histories of linguistic/philological studies and the natural sciences. These are mirrored in the continuation of such notions in the 18th century, which found their abhorrent modern guises in the atrocities of European (also German) colonialism and the fascist politics of the Nazis that are not so far removed in time and space (modern ›Europe‹) from the presence of the Chalfen Family. ›Good genes‹ as such a charged expression, is juxtaposed with the everyday antisemitism of the Conner-clan, while *their* ›Britishness‹ is evoked by the superficiality of *their* ›knowledge‹ and portrayal as ›Daily Mail‹ writers. With the invocation of *good genes*, the concept of ›race‹ through which Judaism as well as Jewish Europeans have been othered in different and also genocidal ways throughout European history, is used in an empowering and resilient self-pride imagery that counters antisemitism with its own weapons. Not only the ›Britishness‹ of the Conner-clan is made an ordinary and undistinguished lifestyle, but so is their antisemitic attitude. Secondly, as a consequence of the first family-shelter-retreat Jewishness is *attouched* to (Freudian) psychology as a kind of family sport and second religion; what the buzzword ›Enlightenment‹ is for European (post-)Christians, is ›psychoanalysis‹ for Jewish Europeans, the novel seems to suggest with a wink. Behind the humor, though, lies the very question of ›knowledge‹, the subject of knowing, power and powerlessness. Who, which subject knows (and has – or does not have – power)? The one who believes in the doxa of the Enlightenment and its assumed axioms? Or the one who believes that there is something else that this ›knowledge‹ ignores and by which it is controlled? This is not only another approach to ›knowledge‹ as a process of concealment and repression, but one that tentatively challenges the ›Enlightenment‹ itself, shedding light on its shady sides; the novel at least seems to celebrate this subversive level of psychoanalysis as empowerment as well as an *automatized* political guerilla war against sociopolitical oppression and (self-)denial. At the same time, the humorous tone of the passage empathetically mocks psychoanalysis. It is mocked by its own maxims, which are lovingly lampooned. They appear as tautological and standardized dogmatism, as orthodox beliefs and as a regime of self-fulfilling ›truths‹ that negate the diversity of possibilities. The novel *reopens* them through an affectionate, humorous ridicule:

»And not only were they bright children, they were happy, not hot-housed in any ways. Their only activity (they despised sport), was the individual therapy five times a week at the hands of an old fashioned Freudian called Marjorie who did Joyce and Marcus (separately) on weekends. It might appear extreme to non-Chalfens, but Marcus had been brought up with a strong respect for therapy (in his family therapy had long supplanted Judaism) and there was no arguing with the result. Every Chalfen proclaimed themselves mentally healthy and emotionally stable. The children had their oedipal complexes early and in the right order, they were all fiercely heterosexual, they adored their mother and admired their father, and, unusually, this feeling only increased as they reached adolescence.« (Smith 2000, 313)

The Chalfens' Jewish ›identity‹ is so obviously and prominently drawn back to ›Freud‹ that this already evokes a catchy humorous trait; but the name ›Freud‹ also stands for erudition, *cool* difference, as well as the entanglement of the contemporary, still vulnerable, Jewish diaspora throughout ›Europe‹ and the world; ›Freud‹ is also a name associated with the revolutionary notion of the illogical character of logic, a name that denies a privileged status to ›reason‹ (code word for ›Enlightenment‹) in an uncanny way, using the very science that has been heralded since the European Enlightenment. This makes ›Freud‹ a bull of acumen within European thought, countering and queering it, and at the same time and for the same reason, a hero within much of poststructuralist-influenced and postcolonial thought, to which this novel undoubtedly belongs.

Thus, the invocation of ›Freud‹ in these passages in the Chalfens' Family illustrates once again the ambiguity of Jewishness in contemporary ›Europe‹, and also shows its closeness to, or at least a transparent connection with, the other not-so-›British‹ subjects in the novel.

The humor with which psychoanalytic ›truths‹ are mocked here, nevertheless, follows an affectivity of care. It expresses concern for the Chalfen Family while at the same time ridiculing their attitude toward psychoanalysis. A threefold mockery is at work here: Not only does the narrative voice ridicule the ›law‹-like formulas of psychoanalysis and Marcus Chalfen's unquestioning belief in them as a kind of *ersatz religion*, but it also mocks its own narrative perspective since it can and does only laugh at stereotypical images and not at any essence behind these (Jewish) names and characters. The trait of care that accompanies the narrator's voice results, on the one hand, from the sympathetic, teasing tonality and, on the otherhand, from the proximity, the distance to the characters and their way of life that this voice entails.

These Freudian psychoanalytic approaches anchor the struggles of the psyche in the smaller unit of the family and, interestingly enough, avoid taking into account history or the larger sociopolitical influences and aspects that can also affect the psyche and the self. This limitation in theorizing the psyche within psychoanalysis may already indicate processes of antisemitic silencing that are reflected in these rather elusive Freudian analyses limited to the smaller unit of the family. On the other hand, this smaller scale of analysis allows Freud to make general assumptions about the human psyche that implicitly depathologize Jewishness (or prevent it from being pathologized); in this way, psychoanalysis appears as a feature of righting wrongs in an epistemological as well as scientific realm that runs counter to the violent concept of ›race‹ as a category of ›knowledge‹ production. Psychoanalysis also appears as a counter-writing, as a science of ›non-knowledge‹ and power-lessness per se. Therein lies the compassion and ›knowledge‹ of the narrative voice, which also signals a *knowing*, understanding ›real/implied author‹ who can send the structuring narrative voice in that direction.

Behind this double structure of caring and mocking narrative voice, then, lies a subtly discernible ›knowledge‹ of Jewishness as a racialized and othered form of marginalization. It is presented here as if from its own site of experience: Jewishness appears as a form of marginalization in the struggle to forget and deny its own marginalization and, at the same time, to fight against both marginalization and its own forgetting; this is evident in the characters' references to high ambitions and aspirations or the neurotic pattern of doing everything right, but also in the ethical dimension that accompanies their

thinking and, in the case of the Chalfens, manifests itself in a politically liberal stance. Not only is the emphasis on ›learning‹ as an important trait of Judaism accentuated. Due to the harmful structures of antisemitism, Jewishness is presented as a retreat into the realm of intellectualism and the scientific search for ›truth‹: ›Rows were rare, playful and only ever over political or intellectual topics (the importance of anarchy, the need for higher taxes, the problem of South Africa, the soul/body dichotomy), upon which they all agreed anyway‹ (Smith 2000, 314).

It manifests itself in the way this unconsciously working desire is channeled into a determined pursuit of accomplishments and achievements for the sake of ›understanding‹, for the sake of ›the good‹. This is reflected in both Marcus Chalfen's character and Freud's aspirations. And yet, behind this ›knowledge‹, which seems to be the motor of the affectionately mocking, humorous narrative tonality, lies another ›knowledge‹ that reveals the tragic dimension of the humorous tone, which also gives rise to this *knowing* attitude, namely the long history of persecution of Jewishness that, in modernity, reached its genocidal culmination in the Shoah, and perhaps the question of how to live on with this knowledge – perhaps by surrendering ourselves to a realm of non-knowledge and powerlessness. The seclusion of the Chalfen Family and their attitude towards a family language, as well as their intellectually sophisticated attitude, even rigor, towards injustice, take on a different meaning from such a point of view, encompassing the irreparable site of the tragedy that hovers in the air and accompanies every utterance.

However, the Chalfens must also live through and with philosemitism in their midst. There is no post-antisemitism or post-racism; rather, living with and in the middle of antisemitism and racism is shown and emphasized in all its complexity.

Joyce Chalfen's *white* Catholic exoticized aesthetic imagery of Jewishness represents this dilemmatic place that Jewishness as a form of ›orientalist fascination‹ (Kirkpikl 2017, 122 ff.) has to endure and is trapped in. It is peculiarly similar to Archie's naïve, affectionate fascination with Samad (and Clara), and is connoted as Jewish/›Oriental‹ masculine beauty and radiance (which Joyce later easily transfers to the ›Muslim‹ Millat):

»And that's Dr Solomon Chalfen, Marcus's grandfather. He was one of the few men who would listen to Freud when everybody in Vienna thought they had a sexual deviant on their hands. An incredible face he has, don't you think? There's so much wisdom in it. The first time Marcus showed me that picture, I knew I wanted to marry him. I thought: if my Marcus looks like that at eighty I'll be a very lucky girl!« (Smith 2000, 353)

Joyce is attracted not only to Marcus, but to what he represents as a Jewish man with (learned) descent: a different kind of ›wise‹ beauty, a quest for ›knowledge‹ and exoticism.

The humorous aspect of Joyce's words also evokes reflection, as an image of ›wisdom‹ is created in relation to a ›wise‹ Jewish ›face‹. A ›wise‹ Jewish ›face‹ may also suggest a form of not-knowing that comes from powerlessness and suffering; it is a ›face‹ that has seen, experienced painful events. ›Suffering‹ appears here as an other form of ›knowledge‹ and power, inscribed in ›the face‹, marking the body with a form of inaccessible illumination that may come from the always struggling, negotiating inner self. Thus, at the same time that the name ›Freud‹ generates a comic evocation, it subtly touches upon

another history, a history of exclusion that also marks the interior of ›Europe‹ and is intertwined with the experience of Jewishness. This secret touch that the dialogue evokes, then, is not only on the level of the text and its internal allusions but also on an ethical level, resulting from the description of ›the face‹ of ›Europe‹, in both senses of the word: the underrepresented Jewish ›face‹ of ›Europe‹ and ›the face‹ of ›Europe's (internal) violent history, all of which are marked as traces of endured pain. Pain emits back as ›culture‹ and ›beauty‹ from ›the face‹ of the elderly man who has sought his way to find some kind of validating ›knowledge‹ in the widths and depths of the unknown and powerless (unconscious) psyche – perhaps because there were (and are?) not so many other ways to find some kind of self-sustenance. At least Marcus Chalfen's character has also embraced ›science‹ as a (survival) path through life.

What triggers Joyce's interest in Marcus is not only a fascination with Marcus's Jewish otherness and intellectualism, but also a state of social security, all of which cannot be separated from antisemitic images that are reflected in the ambiguous, slightly mocking voice of the narrator, who stands in close proximity to Joyce's thoughts:

»Her husband didn't just make money, he didn't just make things, or sell things that other people had made, he created beings. He went to the edges of his God's imagination and made mice Yahweh could not conceive of: mice with rabbit genes, mice with webbed feet (or so Joyce imagined, she didn't ask) [...].« (Smith 2000, 311)

The significance of Marcus Chalfen's occupation for Joyce is emphasized by the little word ›just‹; he not only makes money, which is relevant anyway, revealing a striking touch of antisemitism; Joyce's inclination toward the other, thus, more so than in Archie's case, also has an economic side. But this trait is further hyperbolized when Marcus is linked to an exotic intellectual masculinity: Marcus earns his money as a rival to *his* God, to ›Yahweh‹; he brings things into being, animating, creating existence. Othering occurs here through the non-*Christian* naming of God. This othering of Judaism seems to be the predecessor and model for the othering of the Muslim other in the name of God: The racialization of religion is indicated by the other(-ed) names for God, ›Yahweh‹ and ›Allah‹). Othering thus does not even stop before the Almighty. An unnamed, normalized status of (atheistic) *Christian* divinity is thus presented as ›God‹ pure and as a part of the cultural repertoire from which Joyce speaks. The narrator presents and repeats this normalized image and ironizes it through humor. The teasing tone of the narrative, while exposing the standardized assumption, also presents it as a singular act inherent in the affective economy of Joyce's desire; her relation and attraction to the other are not questioned as such, but the images they entail are unfolded in the narrative voice of a knowing ›implied author‹. Apparently, this philosemitic trait of Joyce's fascination with Jewishness is seen and rejected by Marcus's mother, who »[...] was not sure, was she?« (Smith 2000, 321) of Marcus's choice. Read in this way, Joyce's affection is based on a discursive economy that is a bizarre attraction based on the idea of otherness and exoticism. What also points in this direction is her treatment of Marcus. She accepts Marcus's display of affection for her, but in a manner that is more tolerant than passionate: »Joyce took the kisses like a girl indulging her best friend's younger brother« (Smith 2000, 321), and she also advises Irie to choose someone ›safer‹ (than Millat, for God's sake) (a well-earning, good-natured,

well-meaning, lost, brilliant thinker like Marcus): »[...] I used to like the troublemakers [Millat] when I was your age, but you learn later, you really do. Danger [young handsome Muslim men] isn't really sexy, take my word for it. You'd do a lot better with someone like Joshua« (Smith 2000, 321).

Joyce's son Joshua appears as a kind of distilled, assimilated, not to say ›civilized‹ version of ›Millat‹ who still harbors and radiates that other, more ›authentic‹ danger of the exotic to which Joyce is still attracted: »[...] the years seemed to fall like dead skin form Joyce and she bent across the table like a schoolgirl. ›God, he [Millat]'s gorgeous, isn't he? Like Omar Sharif thirty years ago. Funny Roman nose. Are you and he ...?« (Smith 2000, 320).

By hinting at a possible love affair between Joshua and Irie, Joyce bumps Joshua into this *dangerous dark* side of life, and she draws Irie into the ›normalcy‹ of middle-class whiteness (mixed with a fascination for Jewishness), trying to keep the shot of exoticism in the family. Millat remains an eye candy, and for Joyce's own aesthetic-erotic pleasure; he has a place at the threshold of her heart and home, always tolerated at the limits and liminal of some repressed affectivity. Despite this straightforward and obviously suspect reading (Black, beautiful and intelligent – each other has its own place while Irie and Millat must share theirs, which is only a gradual, gendered degree of difference), the scene, as well as Joyce's unyielding affection and ›love‹ for these lost others, has a touching site, because her attraction, despite the historically determined, corrupted discursive signifiers and material, bodily effects, has an innocent, naïve flavor and in this sense seems ›authentic‹, genuine, *truly felt*. This side of the passage attains its apogee in the figure of Omar Sharif, who joins this out-of-joint family and its adjunct members from the reality of the reel, showing the decisive role of cultural representations. Just as Joyce's naïve prattle perfectly parodies and mocks *white* middle-class femininity, which remains completely unaware of the damage of othering:

»The headmaster told me he was a Muslim boy. I suppose he should be thankful he's not a girl, though, hmm? Unbelievable what they do to the girls. Remember that *Time* article, Marcus?«, ›But boys like that want the tall blondes, don't they? I mean, that's the bottom line, when they're that handsome.« (Smith 2000, 320)

The scene demands (and should get) a thrilled laugh because it presents such a familiar rhetoric. It generates a double humor. From the beginning, when Joyce sees Millat in her house, she is amazed and attracted, but also caring: »Joyce, partially recovered from the vision of Millat Iqbal, gathered herself together sufficiently to play her designated role as Mother Chalfen. [...] Joyce's big milky-blue eyes were all on him« (Smith 2000, 318). Albeit, her care also carries the burden of whiteness, which is woven into a specific form of ›knowledge‹ that she takes for ›truth‹ and which, in fact, prevents her from gaining access to Millat: This is not only the case when Joyce universalizes and normalizes assumptions about ›attractive women‹ that Millat must like, who are portrayed as *white* and ›blonde‹ (like Joyce), but also when she later tries to comfort Millat, who becomes a rather ruthless, always welcome guest in her house, using a language that is thoroughly permeated with the imagery of anti-Muslim/anti-Asian racism and that functions as ›knowledge‹ and reflects the function of ›knowledge‹ as a means of controlling and putting the other

in place; Irie actually intervenes in this process, telling Joyce that Millat (and Magid) are fine: »How about we all try a policy of non-involvement for once? A little laissez-faire?« (Smith 2000, 436). The other always seems to be either an object of erotic attraction or a fetish that requires some form of benevolence (or both), but sometimes, despite this language a truly loved one:

»For Joyce truly loved him and wanted to help him, but her advice was long and complex. She had read up on the subject. And it appeared Millat was filled with self-revulsion and hatred of his own kind; that he had possibly a slave mentality, or maybe a colour-complex centered around his mother (he was far darker than she), or a wish to his own annihilation by means of solution in a white gene poop, or an inability to reconcile two opposing cultures ... and it merged that 60 per cent of Asian men did *this* ... and 90 per cent of Muslims felt *that* ... it was a known fact that Asian families were often ... and hormonally boys were more likely to ...« (Smith 2000, 375)

Unlike Archie, whose ›knowledge‹ is based on cinematic representations and thus on a form of ›knowledge‹ that is more casual and unconstrained, Joyce builds her point of view on ›real‹ ›knowledge‹, on books and statistics and scientific treatises, on the one hand, and on the anthropological (colonial) gaze, on the other. The most dangerous thing about this ›knowledge‹ is that it is established within a realm, considered learned, studied, and therefore ›true‹. In this sense, Joyce appears as a victim of the very system of ›knowledge‹ that establishes her as a subject of ›knowledge‹ and power, both of which are rendered illusory.

The parody of a *white* speaking position, so familiar to Black experiences and experiences of color generally, is generated and testifies to a shrill hyperbolic zaniness. On the other hand, there is also a subtext beneath this image of a loving and well-meaning *white* middle-class woman who is simply unaware of the weaponry her language carries – but because her affection and ›love‹ is nonetheless acknowledged – she is not only tolerated in the other's household but has become an essential, defining part of it. Joyce's ›love‹ and affection for the (›Oriental‹) other, beginning with her Jewish husband and ending with her dark guest, the newcomer, the new stranger, Millat, misled and mispronounced as it may be, leaves enough space for enclosure within the other's enclave and for an encounter on more or less equal terms that is affectively generated. In this way, even Joyce's figure, in its displaced *white* representations and formulas, and its acceptance in this unruly circle, modified by the empathetic and slightly mocking narrative voice, is somehow touching and thoughtful. Joyce's sexual, maternal, and aesthetic ›love‹ can also be read as an atonement for all the historical and structural brutality of which she is, but refuses to be, a part. Her attraction to the ›good‹, ›interesting‹ parts of the exoticized images of the other is well-intentioned, and this is acknowledged as well. The novel makes space for her to enter and give shape to the story. She is made an important part of its world. Like Archie, Joyce's role and embeddedness in whiteness is complicated by such affectionate representations and mark the uniqueness of her character, although she is never separated from a *white* subjectivity and positioning, which is evident in her unawareness of certain discourses. This combination of affectivity and bemusement in the depictions of the Chalfen household also includes moments of silence and pause that provide an

opportunity to go beyond the scenes and look at something else in a double sense. On the one hand, the role and history of Jewishness in ›Europe‹ and its relevance for other people of color is emphasized, and an alternative possibility of encounter is hinted at. As the third-generation immigrant children meet and thrive in this Jewish-British house, Jewishness appears as a central and pivotal home (history) for ›Europe‹'s others, where they can seek their past and present, and from where they (can) launch a possible future ›Europe‹ (a possible different attitude toward the world?). And they seem to be welcomed by the Chalfens. Chiasmic points of contact, intellectual as well as affective and socio-familial, take place between the Chalfens and what will become their permanent ›guests‹.

On the other hand, this new form of being and bonding is not presented as a completed process, but as one that is still threatened by an unpredictable outcome. More than twenty years after the novel's publication, this strange threshold scenario remains a dominant site of current political developments. The wise and (knowing) narrator mentions this in an aside, depicting the possibilities, aporias, and limits of an amalgamated metropolitan neighborhood (see also Sakiz 2023, 29). It is as if a combination of Nietzschean, Fanonian, and Plessnerian attributions of ›laughter‹ would frame the narrator's lamenting observation in a slightly resigned tone. Their humor is imbued with pain and absurdity. Despite better ›knowledge‹, images of different racialized conceptions of ›authenticity‹ (including the *white* one) dominate the political sphere:

»This has been the century of the strangers, brown, yellow and white. This has been the century of the great immigrant experiment. 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. Children with first and last names on a direct collision course. Names that secrete within them mass exodos, cramped boats and planes, cold arrivals, medical checks. [...] Yet, despite all the mixing up, despite the fact that we have finally slipped into each other's lives with reasonable comfort (like a man returning to his lover's bed after a midnight walk), [...] there are still young white men who are *angry* about that; who will roll out at closing time into the poorly lit streets with a kitchen knife wrapped in a tight fist.« (Smith 2000, 326–27)

The pleasure of the other, who is allowed to join the cultural forces of the nation, on the surface of the streets, still uncanny, unusual, and perhaps exciting to regressive forces (on all sides?), is circumscribed by double internal (there is no way back) and external (there is no way in) fears and threats.

Such fears and threats are well mirrored in the character of Marcus Chalfen, who is not only a scientist, and thus someone who, despite psychoanalysis, helps ›Europe‹ maintain its objective beliefs of becoming a better place, but who also falls victim to those same beliefs. Of all people, Marcus, without his ›knowledge‹, has become a follower of the Nazi eugenicist whom Archie, with his aesthetically engendered ›humanist‹ thinking, had spared from death. This is the ›laughter‹ of horror that resides in the tragic and is perhaps only depicted in the unfurled folds of the novel: »Ah, but I have a mentor, you see«, Marcus explains to Irie. He has a large photograph of his mentor on the wall of his office:

»And mentors are a whole other kettle of fish. [...] Grand old Frenchman, a gentleman and a scholar. Taught me practically everything I know. Seventy-odd and sharp as a whip. But you see, with a mentor you needn't credit them directly. That's the great thing about them.« (Smith 2000, 337)

This arrangement of horror and disgust has unbearable ramifications. In the literary text, it can only be translated through the interplay of the tragic and the sarcastic: ›Life‹ is formed by historically determined, sociopolitically intolerable structures. The sarcastic-tragic appears as a form of tragedy that goes beyond itself. It reaches a position of awkwardness in which ›knowledge‹ itself must be suspended. The sarcastic adheres to the tragic as a kind of sticky residue that makes every moment after the historical event (of trauma), at least in the instances that the literary text reflects, as such bleak and absurd. It is introduced into the passage by an indirect, not further commented upon allusion to ›the grand old Frenchman, a gentleman and a scholar‹. This innocent remark by Marcus evokes a sense of horror that lies in the supposition of who this Frenchman might be, and plays with Marcus' unawareness and the suspicious trace of an ›implied audience‹ that is about to witness the whole scene and from which the narrator spares nothing, laughing out loud, in pain, numbed from the drunken strangeness of life. The humor is charged with a different, contradictory affectivity, of fear, of empathy for Marcus, and of a zaniness resulting from felt powerlessness. And yet the sad smile that comes after the more or less digested news accompanies the text, points to this moment, reflects on it, and clings to its absurdity as a remnant. In this way, the novel at least remembers and reminds us of the extent to which, and the ways in which, repressive thinking and structures of thought that still unblinkingly embrace a homicidal mindset, are part of and can represent the most intimate, even scientific, and academic fields of the sociopolitical realm. Its humor is a ›knowing‹ humor, which is half helplessness and half a courageous wink that says things must go on anyway. In this way, humor creates a space of remembering and brings ready-made ›knowledges‹ to a halt. At the same time, Marcus' character takes on another empathetic color; he becomes someone who is shown in all his vulnerability. This vulnerability has both a singular and a collective side. On the one hand, the passage is a reminder of the political vulnerability that comes with being Jewish; on the other hand, Marcus, despite his ardent studies and highly qualified education and ›knowledge‹, remains a victim of the effects of the European ›Enlightenment‹ and the axiomatic belief in an understanding of ›science‹ that is no longer questioned. This is because, as the passage seems to imply, the horrors and history of antisemitism and racism are not critically processed. The passage also implies a self-critical endeavor that reveals the (tragic) entanglements of marginalized subjectivities within the ›master's‹ universe.

At the same time, as an unconscious form of ›non-knowledge‹ and powerlessness, the novelistic text is interwoven with an image. It is a poster that Marcus has hung on his wall and that seems to look at Marcus, seems to caution him. And yet Marcus, who knows the poster and does not know the poster, looks at it and overlooks it at the same time; only unconsciously, perhaps, does he ›know‹ what it means:

»A big poster of Einstein in his American icon stage – Nutty Professor hair, »surprised« look and huge pipe – subtitled with the quote *God does not play dice with the world.*« (Smith 2000, 336)

There is a very charming allusion to two points in this passage, harboring a sweet, refreshing humor that seems to cover the tragic with a warm and affectionate smile in close proximity to the characters, especially Marcus, Irie, and Archie (is Archie a God then? Is it wrong to play God with a dice? Is it okay to play with a dice if you are not God (Archie might ask)?). It alludes to the diegetic world and the narrative plot, to a core point in the story as well as to a meta-level outside the text: The Einstein poster, on the one hand, shows how Marcus' view of science is to be understood and where he sees himself, namely in the long tradition of Jewish European thinkers. On the other hand, the passage is framed by a popular »knowledge« that seems wiser than Marcus' educated search for »truth«. It is no coincidence that the poster shows the words of Albert Einstein. The evocation of Einstein as a great thinker whose »face« has become a fetish for the emptiness of capitalist intellectualism, laughing knowingly at it, speaks to Marcus behind and beyond this market image, reminding him to think about the ethical meaning of science, more specifically genetics, and its »tradition«. In this way, the passage interweaves history and real figures with the fictional world through the description and design of Marcus's intimate office space. Marcus has to find his way through all these historically driven images, processes of signification and (false) »knowledge«. At the same time, the poster's inscription, in a sad playfulness and against the historical tragedy that frames modern European politics as well as Marcus' character on the brink of some kind of »madness«, brings together the well-intentioned humanism of Archie, Irie's father, and the well-intentioned, unsuspecting humanism of Marcus. Nazism, or more generally fascism, as a threat seems to form the backdrop of this scene as the characters exchange this information without being aware of it at the time. Yet it is the lives and vulnerability of these two characters, Black and Jewish, that are staged here on the dangerous display of these »humanisms«. The realm of the natural sciences appears as a free playground for two extreme versions of scientific humanism(s), one that wants to save lives and one that wants to save itself and eliminate others. But in *White Teeth*, both seem to be wrong; rather, within this form of rationalized and instrumental »humanism«, »knowledge«, and ignorance seem to shake hands. In both cases, the scientific machine turns against the lives of others, in the case of the Frenchman within fascist ideology, and in the case of the foregrounding humanistic science to which Marcus falls prey, this humanism finds its victim in mice as promising, objectified living material for laboratory experiments to overcome (human) misery (by producing it otherwise).²⁹

29 Ledent draws here a line between religious and scientific obsessions to find »truth« by »eliminating the random« in Marcus', Hortense's, and Millat's adventures with faith and »truth«. Ledent (2016, 86). See also in this regard McMann (2012, 619 ff). McMann stresses the line that is drawn between the atrocities of the Nazi regime and eugenics, and the progressive claims of Marcus Chalfen, which reside in a diametrically other, *humanist*, tradition but still remain unaffected by the harm it nevertheless causes.

The characters of Marcus and Magid, Millat's twin brother, complicate this trait in postcolonial terms and seem to open up a world beyond what we – unfortunately – are less accustomed to – a vision of the future for the (global?) masses. Marcus, a (convinced) scientist, and Magid, an aspiring lawyer and poet, fall in love intellectually. This friendship is formed while Aslana is already panicking that she might lose her son Millat to this accomplished family, exclaiming frantically, »I am not knowing them from Adam and Eve!« (Smith 2004, 344), which she in fact does – an ingenious humorous allusion to the similar, if not identical, Jewish-Islamic origins and thinking, despite very different histories that the narrator alludes to spicily and with loving irony as if they were anticipating another European ›Toledo‹ era, hopefully one on equal grounds.

The two men become friends through an exchange of words, ›real‹ letters, love letters, Irie is disappointed to discover, »[w]ithin two months they had filled a volume at least as thick as Keats's« (Smith 2000, 365). The friendship between the two interposes itself between Irie and Marcus, but also opens up another path for Irie on her way to an inner self via her grandmother's kitchen.

The beautiful mysterious friendship between the two men, across age and space, is another encounter between Dhaka and London that defies the regimes of coloniality and bears a trace of hope for two so analogous and so supposedly hostile, but in any case, racialized ›religions‹ and ›ways of life‹. It bears the imprint of a ›Jewish-Muslim‹ friendship across and beyond all borders, touching all those ›laws‹ of alleged enmity and presumed irreconcilable differences. The functionality of *difference* itself seems to be questioned here. *Difference* here does not mean incompatibility, nor different histories and forms of othering, nor endless postponements, but *bonds*, essential bonds of kinship across all these divides and against all odds. *Differences* are there so that bonds can be made, it seems to suggest. In this sense, this bond opens the imagination to other possibilities within and beyond our time-bound conceptions. The initially literal encounter evolves into a heartfelt, close ›Jewish-Muslim‹ friendship, in the midst of which the narrator places the words of a male *Christian* poet – an order that resonates with a perfect, and so necessary, harmony between the three monotheistic, male masculinities; along with this chime, a feminist, teasing, celebratory humor is almost palpable:

»John Donne said«,

it goes on, and one senses the narrator's mischievous smile right under each word,

»more than kisses, letters mingle souls, so they do«;

and so Magid, the poet, writes:

»[...] When you delve into the mysteries of inherited characteristics, surely you go straight to the soul of the human condition as dramatically and fundamentally as any poet, except you are armed with something essential the poet does not have: the truth. I am in awe of visionary ideas and visionaries. I am in awe of such a man as Marcus Chalfen«

and so, Marcus, the scientist responds with no less vigor:

»You must get to England as soon as possible, early '93 at the very latest. I'll stump up some of the cash myself if I have to. Then we can enroll you in the local school, get the exams over and done with [...] and while you are at [the University] you can hurry up and get older, get to the bar and provide me with the kind of lawyer I need to fight in my corner.« (Smith 2000, 366–67)

This is another ›oriental‹ Europe that emerges from the spaces of the London marginalia. Marcus and Magid are two orientalized subjectivities, always already set in opposition to (Christian) white masculinity, who learn to support each other, in the middle of their Christian cousins, who almost enviously would not mind joining them. (And it is hoped that they will).

The Jewish-Muslim friendship, in the strict sense of the two religions, however, has an indeterminable duality. On the one hand, it seems to be superficial and not really important. It is never mentioned or discussed among the characters or otherwise in the novel. On the other hand, it comes across as an unwritten yet essential feature that foregrounds their identification with each other and allows for a subtle form of ›understanding‹ based on experiences of otherness. This subliminal meaning of the text is particularly evident in the humorous, teasing tonality of the narrator's voice, the reference to Alsana's and John Donne's words that frame the encounter and its thorough development into an ardent friendship. Friendship seems to indicate the value of a common ›good‹, which is an otherwise humanistic plan based on the faculty of sensing a kinship with another ›culture‹ or ›religion‹ beyond space. Here too, the violent and tragic, historical features behind this scene of unity make it possible to look at this alliance between Marcus and Magid in a humorous way that, at the same time, weeps in one of its corners. Its humor is based on the ›knowledge‹ of unbearable histories and their aftermath, which are mentioned through humorous allusions and again without being directly addressed. These are the experience of the colonization of vast areas of the world, here especially India, with all the misery, injury, and damage it has caused; the Shoah, as an atrocity and genocide after a long history of internal colonization; and the tragic political formations that are part of modern Jewish-Muslim history, as seen in (and reduced to) the interrelation of Israel-Palestine. The humorous aspects of this friendship touch on taboos and unspeakable and untouchable things, touches on them without further questioning, as if the grief were too heavy to bear. The affectionate, disguised humor surrounding these figures plays on the threshold of such miseries, which separate them because of their differences, yet also unite them because of their pain. Pain carries not only trauma, but also includes other forms of ›knowledge‹ that reside in and come from the experience of grief and sorrow.

While it is necessary to reflect with sorrow on the the reality of political events, the humorous tone opens up the possibility of other, joyful configurations of interactions (in another world – in the imagination – and from there, into the ›real‹ future) and thus has a moving side that lurks on the edges of its humorous tendencies.

This time, even more than in the case of Archie and Samad, two different colonized subject-positions and roles are imagined as ›kins‹ within a transcultural, transnational, and transhistorical specter.

The humor here also arises from the deluded, romantic character of the ›love‹ letters. At the same time, they operate on a meta-level of narrative since there is so much truthful affection and mutual respect in them, something that might give rise to the desire that it might be true, that something fresh and indeed ›deluded‹ might really exist as a ›real‹ and ›authentic‹ experience. It also reads like a hidden and (socially) forbidden trait of homoerotic ›love‹ that takes shape in intellectualism rather than sexuality, extending the meaning of eroticism and ›love‹ into a sphere of touch in which the cognitive and reflective realm is foregrounded as a form of sensuality (which is precisely not ›sexual‹ but still loving).

It is also intriguing, however, that the Muslim character is the younger newcomer to the European world, following in the footsteps of his Jewish mentor-friend. Both Marcus and Magid are driven by the desire for perfection, perhaps in a Freudian sense, to compensate for (historical) evil and to have control over a (better future) ›life‹ (symbolized by the fight against cancer and a ›life‹ without pain (Marcus) and an accomplished political order in which no one suffers anymore (Magid)). Both, however, take the path to achieve this ›truth‹ by following the logic of the ›sciences‹ and systems of ›knowledge‹, which came with the promise of an ›enlightened‹ ›Europe‹ – one that is allegedly purified of the barren weight of affectivity and the ethics that it, too, may indicate. They become in this sense of subversive mimikry, more ›English than the English‹ (Baglama 2019, 83; Wille 2011). Audre Lorde's warning voice that the *Master's tool* may not *dismantle the Master's house* (1979) seems to resonate in-between the lines here.

Both Marcus and Magid are the ones who are betrayed and who do not know whom they are following: Marcus knows nothing of his mentor's past, and Magid blindly follows the West's notions of linear ›development‹. The realm of science appears within the humorous portrayal of this friendship as an illusion of and about ›knowledge‹ but it also represents a mechanism within structures of power that defines what ›knowledge‹ is and that gives materiality to the sociopolitical. Something that is subtly questioned through the humorous tonality of the narrative. The ›knowledge‹ of a ›purified‹ ›science‹ appears as a dangerous, lethal lie, regardless of the motivation behind it. In contrast, Archie's working-class ›knowledge‹, as well as Samad's and Hortense's postcolonial ›knowledges‹, which emerge from critiques of Western ›knowledge‹ systems rather than elitist, (globalized, European) education, appear as fluid understandings of a ›knowledge‹ that is not ›purified‹. Such dynamic understandings of ›knowledge‹ in the making are ›life-giving, caring, political, and that view the present from the recognition of something else, the past, their pasts, and other ›wisdoms‹ – an understanding of ›knowledge‹ dangling between ›knowledge‹ and non-knowledge, power and powerlessness – for shaping the future. The future is thus presented and negotiated in the interstices of the past-present of narrative dialogues and transnational, transcultural, and ›transethnic‹ encounters within humorously evoked textual openings. On a meta-level, these not-knowing ›knowledges‹ warn against an understanding of ›knowledge‹ that operates by ignoring the historical and political frames of the sociopolitical. These are the same frames that the othered have to deal with and take up in order to restore and seek healing possibilities of the injurious *his*-torical traces in their selves as well as in the sociopolitical. Here, in this negotiation of past atrocities and future paths, images of Jewishness can be

perceived and recognized as part of a postcolonial world in the making, and thus, as part of the power of powerlessness that comes from the possibilities of not knowing.

Unfolding Spaces 'n the Economy of ›Non-Knowledge‹ and Power-lessness

The characters in *White Teeth* – all three families – occupy a space in the novel, which is a cosmos for itself within the anonymous folds of the city. This fold-in urban space of London functions not only as a reality-invoking space of unimaginable encounters but also as a non-metaphor for the intense and fleeting encounter of different subjectivities in a ›lived reality‹. It is thus a space that is universalist and anti-universalist in its uncontrollable labyrinthine form. The city can also stand for the rapturous work of humor as well as a for a space of touch.

Humor, like the city, is also a place of decision-making; in its tendency to evoke specific tonalities, it can also be understood as an attitude that places an insight in a particular way. Its decision-making structure is dependent on the past and independent in its application, liberating meaning and releasing it into the wider space. Decisions, the trajectory of history and a story, also signal beginnings and endings, which are also at the center of humor (and the city): »[...] like the signing of peace treaties or the docking of passenger boats, the end is simply the beginning of an even longer story« (Smith: 540 f.). The narrator's humorous allusion to factual independence and the intricate interdependencies that override both state and singular independence sheds light on unpredictable events and the intersection of conflicting and fleeting lines. ›Decision‹ can be understood as a concept that is inscribed in spaces of encounter, concurrence, and entangled, dilemmatic, aporetic instances that are also unwittingly instances of touch in their multiple meanings. At the intersection of different narratives, an ›implied audience‹ is constructed, informed by whatever narratives and epistemes the text displays, with the ability to perceive one image in relation to another, an endgame in relation to the future. By making its choices from the witnessing and complying standpoint of (a narrative) discourse, an ›implied audience‹ is called upon to weave meanings and, ideally, from this inherent position, to read and transpose the narrative into another – (wider) texture of ›reality‹. The invocation of an ›implied audience‹ symbolizes the proliferation, the weaving, of ongoing stories and textures. Different subjectivities are also inscribed within such (historically determined) contexts. This may be why *White Teeth* begins in a secluded space in the city and begins with Archie's attempted suicide. In any case, Archie understands himself as one of the city's inhabitants, and so he decides to end up in the city:

»But even as his breathing became spasmodic and his lights dimmed, Archie was aware that Cricklewood Broadway would seem a strange choice. Strange to the first person to notice his slumped figure through the windscreen, strange to the policeman who would file the report, to the local journalist called upon to write fifty words, to the next kin who would read them. Squeezed between an almighty concrete cinema complex at one end and a giant intersection at the other, Cricklewood was no kind of place. It was not a place a man came to die. It was a place a man came in order to go other places

via the A41. [...] The way Archie saw it, country people should die in the country and city people should die in the city. Only proper. *In death as he was in life* and all that. [...] It made sense that Archibald should die on this nasty urban street. He wanted to do it before the shops opened.» (Smith 2000, 3–4)

The text's humorous display of Archie's suicide attempt is based on images of the city as well as on Archie's odd decision to commit suicide in a seemingly inappropriate place (is there an appropriate place for suicide?). The city in *White Teeth* seems to explore and unleash an imagery of interlocking aporetic illusions and disillusion. The city conceptualized in the ›liberal, global age‹ as the smallest representational unit of a globalized world is shown, on the one hand, as a space of disillusionment in which the facts of racism wield authority behind a well-intentioned, self-sustaining imagery that places the other on the outskirts of thought and the city. The city allegorizes »[...] a space in racialized terms, which in turn allows for people to be literally put in place« (Amelsvoort 2018, 424–25). On the other hand, the city is the place of touch, the place of possibilities to come, the place of (new) relations. It not only entails different sides of the *other* but also captures the transformative, and performative potential, and influence of the othered other in this space. The image of the city also harbors and negotiates the idea of hospitality and the roles of ›hosts‹ and ›guests‹. *White Teeth* tackles this aspect of the dichotomous idea of ›guest‹ and ›host‹, which remains absurdly entangled within historical experiences of colonialism and their aftermath. As Ryan Trimm argues, »[h]ospitality as trope foregrounds the problem of home and dwelling, thus figuring prominently in postimperial metropolitan texts« (Trimm 2015, 146). This is also the case with *White Teeth*. The novel shows a double ›knowledge‹ of the (colonial) symbolic order and its effects *within* and *on* subjectivity that are not only discussed but also destabilized in and through the text. In this sense, it may be related to other novels, which foreground this question of the materializations of racisms in the mesh of ›life‹ (Trimm 2015, 145 ff.). But this is not a ›new‹ phenomenon. It can also be read as a reference to the past and a problematic of long standing. In the case of *White Teeth*, for example, it can be read, as an intertextual (and transregional, diasporic) parallel to James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) in which Baldwin problematizes the invisible structures of racism, and how to deal with them through the implication of address as a decolonial strategy and narrative tool so that anti-racist critique and the existential struggle against racisms cannot be devaluated by the transparent normalizations of whiteness. As Richard Sennett demonstrates, Baldwin's narrator does this by addressing explicit and implicit readers in his text. While the text addresses the narrator's 14-year-old nephew, it also places another reader within the realm of dominant discourses in the text by ironically advising his young nephew, the next generation, on how to read this text and informing him of the affectivity that accompanies these readings: »I hear the chorus of the innocents screaming, ›No! This is not true! How bitter you are!‹ – but I am writing this letter to you to try to tell you how to handle *them*, for most of them do not yet really know that you exist« (Baldwin qtd in Sennett 1990, 193). Sennett refers to this implied second reader in the rhetoric of the text as ›the familiar device of the reader-over-the-shoulder‹ (Sennett 1990, 193), through which racist attitudes simultaneously are revealed as well as interrupted.

In this sense, *White Teeth* transcends the colonial trajectory of racism by satirizing the wor(l)d »in the teeth of the most terrifying odds« (Baldwin 1993, 10). The above passage in *White Teeth* thus *unfolds* incongruous threads and addresses a diverse audience: It subtly plays with images of the city and its meanings, touching on the secluded place of ›the migrant‹ and the other in the city, which is diametrically opposed to the celebrated, sound image of ›the (Western) metropolitan city‹ as the liberal-minded place of ›the (Western, white) intellectual‹ and the glamorous place of ›cosmopolitan diversity‹. In contrast to this image *White Teeth* hints at the secluded and rundown places where ›migrants‹ and ›other people‹ predominantly live, and which in effect mirror the intersecting categories of ›race‹ and ›class‹ in the niches of London. Notwithstanding this critical stance, these places are also used for empowering representations. They »[...] vividly articulate the small-scale cross-cultural encounters« that are »going on in these ordinary places, spaces and non-places« (Jain 2016, 16). These places are thus also empathically and teasingly captured as having their own merits, singularities as well as possibilities, and paths for the future.

The place that seems to metaphorically and materially correspond to this image of a ›no place‹ and ›no place a man came to die‹ is the place of the other, ›a nasty urban street‹, where the ›Hussein-Ishmael, a celebrated halal butcher‹ is also located. As Nicole Waller, drawing on the work of Kathrine McKittrick and theories of maroon fugitivity and freedom, concludes, space in such a context »highlights the transitional and provisional« that embrace »a radical placelessness« (Waller 2022, 51, 66) as a form of space in the progress of becoming. The narrator's humorous undertone depicts different notions simultaneously, pointing to various issues at once: On the one hand, the passage refers to a remote part of ›the city‹ of London, characterizing it as a ›no kind of a place‹. On the other hand, it points to Archie's mistaken understanding of this place as ›in the city‹ and his sense of belonging to this place, which evokes humor as it is so incongruous with its neglected location. But it also hints at and staggers a humorous display, which implicitly characterizes it as a *cross-road to other places* that not only emphasizes the first description of a ›no place‹ but also gives it a different meaning, as it is humorously and discordantly portrayed as the place that opens up other routes. The humorous calculus is induced by the allusion to ›real‹ roads, which plays with the image of the road in its literal sense as well as with its associated senses within the evocation of ›other places‹. Yet, it is also Archie's ›place‹ as the place of despair, and a place of the city he lives in and he feels he belongs to, a strange place, ›[s]queezed between an almighty concrete cinema complex at one end and a giant intersection at the other‹, where Archie »wanted to be perfectly quiet and still, like the inside of an empty confessional box or the moment in the brain between thought and speech« (Smith 2000, 4). The humorous description of how Archie *feels and thinks* is metaphorized as moments in-between actions and movements that are full of meanings (›empty confessional box‹; ›the brain between thought and speech‹). These allusions to the ›perfectly quiet‹ and ›empty confessional box‹ also entail a poignant affective description, sad, affectionate, as well as mournful, which centralizes Archie's despair. At the same time urbanity, as well as solitude, and the desire to abandon life at the cross-roads to death, induced by a literal sense of death and the metropolitan place of death, show a humorous focalization of Archie's self-pitying sentiments and the ›reality‹ of the ›city‹ with its places marked by and echoing abandon-

ment. The humorous undertone of the narrator also adds depth to the humor evoked that presents these thoughts, but there is also an other voice lurking in the narrative report that seems to overshadow the narrator's, and that seems to be informed by different political senses of ›this place of nowhere‹, and that can be registered as the voice of an ›implied author‹. This voice lends a more serious tone to the narrator's tell-tale narrative through a dual implication of such a ›no kind of place‹ as the place of ›a celebrated halal butcher‹. Archie has parked his car at the ›delivery area‹ of *The Hussein-Ishmael* butchery owned by Mo Hussein-Ishmael, »a great bull of man with hair that rose and fell in a quaff, then a ducktail« (Smith 2000, 5). Mo tries to save the place by beating the pigeons with a meat cleaver »in an attempt to halt the flow of dribbling purple« (Smith 2000, 5). Again, the voice of an ›implied author‹ seems to link Mo's attitude to cricket, »the Englishman's game adapted by the immigrant«, to his presumed thoughts »and six was the most pigeons you could get at one swipe« (Smith 2000, 5). The mood of their narrative tone is ambiguous. On the one hand, it allegorizes the figure of the butcher with the act of killing, a doubling that might emphasize a reality effect regarding the authenticity of the figure, and that at the same time nullifies its authenticity by the hyperbolic exaggeration of the stereotype. This is achieved by presenting Mo as a simple man, the image of a butcher (who does not think much). In this way, though, the character escapes a ›well-intentioned portrayal‹ of a ›migrant‹. An ›implied audience‹ is construed and addressed through the report and is asked to deal with the ›impure‹ picture of the ›migrant‹, on the one hand (can it laugh? Should it laugh?), and the act of killing, on the other hand – unless the so construed ›audience‹ is vegetarian, it must also presuppose and negotiate its own ethics within this scenery. Thus, the Muslim butcher, in his staging of killing, comes close to what an abject image implicitly evokes (taking a standpoint towards the processing of ›meat‹ – and what it used to be – as well as ›filth‹ – and thus taking a stand towards not liking pigeon excrement and eating ›meat‹). So, a grotesque scenery is induced by negativity; and in this vein, no ›good-migrant‹ is evoked with whom it would seem easy to identify. The grotesque description of the scenery is also affective through the negative description since it evokes disgust in which, however, an ›implied audience‹ is involved and has (the task of) positioning itself. Unlike Archie, for whom the place is an empty no-place, the narrator's focus on Mo emphasizes that Mo actually understands himself as part of this place, that he regards the place as full of life, and that he cares for this place in his own way by trying to save it from the pigeons' excrement. Mo's care for the place is accompanied by an empathy that removes his grotesque representation as a disgusting, simple fool and allows him to be seen as an (other) ›human being‹ (in close proximity to the ›self‹):

»Mo wiped the sweat off his forehead, snorted, and looked out over Cricklewood, surveying the discarded armchairs and strips of carpet, outdoor lounges for local drunks; the slot-machine emporiums, the greasy spoons and the minicabs – all covered in shit. One day, so Mo believed, Cricklewood and its residents would have cause to thank him for his daily massacre; one day no man, woman or child in the Broadway would ever again have to mix one part detergent to four parts vinegar to clean up the crap falls on the world. [...] He was feeling really very Zen about this – very goodwill-to-all-men – until he spotted Archie's car.« (Smith 2000, 5–6)

The narrator, by focusing on Mo and through free direct discourse, fills out these grotesque and repulsive images, showing that Mo believes he in fact belongs to ›London‹ and to ›the world‹. *White Teeth* thus begins with a ›London‹ in which life and death, self and other, are juxtaposed in a setting that seems to analogize the dichotomies. It is not the glamour of London that is invoked, but another London in which ›the other‹ is located and lives, the other's world in all its meanings. The presentation of this juxtaposition is again presented in a multi-layered, affectionate, and humorous cast as the *Lebenswelt* of ›simple‹, ›ordinary‹ people, and the juxtaposition of dramatic, sad circumstances, and the comic accumulation of their interference (that ›life‹ and ›death‹ and self and other seem to be): Archie is in the very serious position of committing suicide, so an underlying, tense thrust of empathy is evoked with a ›dying man in a space of nowhere‹, a sociopolitically neglected migrant enclave: ›Cricklewood was no kind of place. It was not a place a man came to die. It was a place a man came in order to go other places via the A 41‹. This place of ›possibility‹, thus, of ›luck‹, in the niches of the other is underlined by a signification that evokes ›otherness‹ as well as by the indication that Archie was indeed lucky that the universe actually cared about him:

»These pigeons had an instinct for the Unlucky [the place of the butcher and Archie's suicidal car], and so they passed Archie by. For, though, he did not know, [...] luck was with him this morning [...] the positions of the planet, 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.« (Smith 2000, 4)

The other is invoked in an overarching but aporetic sense, encompassing both, that which is so much part of, next to, ›life‹, and that which is excluded, in a place of nowhere, as part of death, ›shit‹, ›nature‹, animals, ›God‹. This transcending of ›the other‹ finally stops within the novel's baroque urban *Lebenswelt*, as the figuration of the Muslim (*halal*) butcher ›Mo Hussein Ismail‹ and his son as references of othered others, as personified allegories, as it seems, of death and life, power and powerlessness, ›knowledge‹ and non-knowledge, who find Archie's car on their property:

»Archad [Mo's son] shrugged. ›I shouted through the car window and told the guy to move on and he says, ›I am gassing myself, leave me alone‹ like that‹. ›No one gasses himself on my property‹, Mo snapped as he marched downstairs. ›We are not licensed‹. Once in the street, Mo advanced upon Archie's car, pulled out the towels that were sealing the gap in the driver's window, and pushed it down five inches with brute, bullish force. ›Do you hear that, mister? We're not licensed for suicides around here. This place halal. Kosher, understand? If you're going to die round here, my friend, I' am afraid you've to be thoroughly bled first.« (Smith 2000, 7)

The grotesque and comic humorous tone of the passage is almost entirely effective through direct discourse and thus its speech acts. *Affective humor* is expressed negatively, through absence, first, in the sober utterances of Mo, who, instead of showing mercy to someone on the verge of committing suicide, expresses concern about the legality of

the act on his property under (British) law (›we are not licensed‹) and the act of suicide under Islamic law as a legally forbidden act, an act that is the opposite of the *halal*, permitted act of *legally* killing, which is Mo's job. Mo's utterances show a factual, unaffected language that sustains different meanings and makes it uncertain whether Mo has a dry sense of humor or really means what he says, which would be funny in either case. A rhetorical meaning (in the more traditional sense of rhetoric) would render his remarks as a mockery of Archie's suicide attempt and would be a humor of superiority, the humor of power. A grammatical (literal) reading would make his utterance funny because it would be so absurd to remind someone who is committing suicide that their act is not legally supported, which would ridicule Mo's character. The humor is thus based on the grammatical syntax of the sentences and the illocutionary mode, but it generates two unfixable (literal and figurative) meanings and different allusions. This is what de Man called the convulsion of grammatical and rhetorical meanings within grammatically coherent, illocutionary utterances (de Man 1979, 8–10). It is the structure of linguistic meaning itself, which cannot be controlled, that comes to the fore and constructs a thoughtful humor that, in this third sense, does not have Archie or Mo as the target of ridicule, but the absurdity inherent in language and its locutionary as well as illocutionary performances; humor here becomes a meta-locutionary act. Mo's utterances thus employ a multi-layered ironic tone that can be read rhetorically, grammatically, or meta-critically. These different meanings within an illocutionary statement evoke an affectivity of puzzlement and signify, beyond their immediate meanings, a parody of legal, ›law‹-abiding language and an ironizing of language. They also enact Bakhtin's idea of a frayed dialogicity, not only on the level of individual words, but also on the level of speech acts. Second, the humorous tone of the passage derives from the incongruity of the character's attitude: Mo is portrayed as a ›migrant‹, a precarious position, but he is also prefigured as brutal (towards the poor pigeons). At the same time, he is portrayed as a ›law‹-abiding character, saying ›[w]e are not licensed‹ – at least when he has to address a *white* character: ›[d]o you hear that, mister? We're not licensed for suicides around here‹. Mo's speech shows a ›migrant's‹ ›knowledge‹ of *white* people's adherence to ›the law‹, however absurd it may be at times, evoked and ironized in the idea of a place-license for suicide; and it shows that ›the migrant‹ also defines himself in the social configuration of ›the law‹ to make himself intelligible. It is also a performance of heteroglossia: Mo chooses a normed and conventionalized *white* British way of speaking while at the same time performing a hybrid understanding of ›the law‹ that also includes Islamic (and Jewish) rules. Third, the humor arises from a change of role in the representational repertoire. Here, it is not a *white* man who is ›law‹-abiding and tries to protect his ›property‹, but a man of color who defends his (however neglected) ›property‹ and has no mercy on the (imperial) Other. This also shows that the construction of whiteness as superior does not count for Mo. Rather, within his orbit, Mo adheres to his own definitions of ›law‹, ›suicide‹, killing, ›order‹, and ›humiliation‹, as well as of ›a good place in the city‹. Insofar as orderliness and the position of the keeper of order represent a role usually associated with whiteness, this role is also mirrored and parodied in a displaced form through Mo as the figuratin of the other, who has to endure (and live quite well with) this constructed order. The parodic humor construes, affectively and humorously addresses an ›implied audience‹ that may sympathize with Mo's obsessive tone because

of this recognition, this reading, and Mo's unaware ›simplicity‹. In the passage and the encounter between the *white* British Archie and the ›migrant‹ Mo, Archie becomes the other. This is also indicated by the fact that Mo explains the circumstances to Archie in bad grammar (›[t]his place halal‹), as if Archie cannot speak English properly, which in turn signals another parody of *white* postures of racialization and othering. To make sure that Archie understands him, Mo translates *halal* to Archie and (an ›implied (white) audience‹? Remember, we are still in the seventies. . .) as *kosher* ›[k]osher, understand?‹, which, on the one hand, highlights the mockery, but also shows, on the other hand, how Mo has learned what he considers to be ›correct‹, ›British‹ behavior; Mo acts out how ›they‹ speak, reiterating the words and tone without recognizing or acknowledging them as markers of racial superiority. It is thus his unaware and confident parody that unleashes the humor. On the one hand, it sheds light on the way ›migrants‹ are spoken to. On the other hand, it implicitly shows that Mo is not one bit impressed by it in the sense of a racist rebuke and placement. Rather, Mo ascribes this attitude to the way *white* ›Englishmen‹ speak, without being ›personally‹ affected by it. He simply applies it back as a heteroglot deployment, (this is the way ›they‹ speak) as a kind of translation to make himself understandable. The passage thus shows a ›simple‹ ›speaking human‹ act within different configurations of meaning, from which a dynamic image of an ›autonomous‹ and ambiguous ›migrant‹ emerges, shifting the racialized stereotype of inferiority and victimization without generating another, namely that of a ›good migrant‹.

The passage also plays with the racialized and marginalized position of two (other) social groups: ›the Jews‹ and ›the Muslims‹, situating ›the Jews‹ as a historical antecedent of this position of marginalization. »Hospitality as a claim to antecedence, an already-in-place positioning that denies attempts of the new to establish itself« is shown within the historical roots of antisemitism, racism, and othering. Although »[i]n this trope of antecedents, the new is permanently epiphenomena« and a »peripheral and harmful entity, one threatening the established and essential«, »White Teeth, most particularly through this stress and second generations, moves away from the new and its associations with guests through a revision of hospitality. This rewriting refuses the linear and simple temporality of precedence in favor of a complex understanding of time (and space) unraveling the claim of the prior and the host« (Trimm 2015, 147). It also centralizes antisemitism, making the entrenched patterns of this ›ancient-new‹ against which the novel writes, part of European history, everyday life, metropolitan niches, ›the present‹.

Mo may represent a kind of (un-mystified) future. He reverses the ›hospitality‹ of the colonizer and makes it his own. Mo is also aware of his ›predecessors‹, using the word *kosher* to explain *halal*— a word he expects *white* people to be more familiar with because of an ancient Jewish British presence. However, the utterance also indicates how obvious the words are to him and that he expects that both words might be completely unknown to Archie (and the ›implied audience‹), so he wants to reassure himself by asking again, ›. . . understand?‹ and, just in case Archie did not, explicitly explains the unappetizing meanings of *halal* and *kosher* in this context, in a way that should nullify any exoticization of the other: ›If you're going to die round here, my friend, I'm afraid you've to be thoroughly bled first‹. As it is Mo himself who says these words, employing a disgusting image (at least if you are vegetarian/vegan or have never thought about the living origins of ›meat‹), they do not replicate a form of othering out of disgust for Judaism or Islam

(and their people. . .). The image of a bleeding animal in the hands of a butcher is horrifying, and it calls into question the acts of producing ›meat‹, but (ideally) on a more unifying, general level that does not exclusively fixate and point the finger at Mo or the ›Jews‹ or the ›Muslims‹ as the only butchers and immoralists. Rather, it is the animals that speak silently, and another form of othering is implicitly invoked. The grotesqueness of the passage is comic in the presentation and performance of Mo, and it is also tragic in the presentation of another, inferiorized, absolute othering, the (capitalist) ›human‹ counterpart called ›animak‹, and that functions like a slap in the face (in the face of incredible and unbearable violence and pain). The pigeons' ›shit‹ rain seems to stand here as an animalized response to this economy of reproductive mass killing. The passage thus plays with meanings and social heteroglossia, where it is Mo, a figuration of the other, complicated by his craft, which grants him a position of power (over the production of meat) and benevolence (as a butcher for the people, killing pigeons for the city – accidentally – saving Archie from suicide), who knows something Archie may not. In Mo's centrifugal utterances, which parody an authoritative tone, dominant social meanings are reflected. Moreover, because the utterances take the form of direct speech, they emphasize Mo's ›knowledge‹ of the various (marginalized) social groups, as well as Archie's possible ignorance of them, without the interference of an explanatory narrator. The direct discourse gives Mo's utterances a more nuanced immediacy and sovereignty. The humorous tone is underscored in the direct discourse by Mo's allusion to the meaning of legal and illegal killing, which locates and implicates BIPOC as ›implied readers‹ in evoking an ironic mockery of othering that also humorously makes room for difference and its ›normalcy‹ as well as a sense of solidarity and empowerment. The parody of role reversal becomes even more apparent when Mo more or less throws Archie off his ›property‹, using a form of speech that, if the context were unknown, could be depicted as the utterance and attitude of a *white* man speaking to an (effeminized) man of color:

»All right, all right‹ said the butcher, freeing himself from Archie's fingers and brushing himself clean, ›move along now. I've got meat coming. I'm in the business of bleeding. Not counselling. You want Lonely Street. This Cricklewood Lane.‹ (Smith 2000, 7)

It is not only what the butcher says that plays with role reversal and evokes humor but also how he acts: Mo frees himself from Archie's fingers and brushes himself clean, as if Archie's fingers were dirty and as if his own ›business‹ were not a rather messy affair. It is an act from the colonial as well as classicized repertoire of images of supremacy, reminiscent of racialized forms of conceiving the other as abject, dirty, signifying (supremacist) ignorance, and the concealment of one's ›own despicable‹ desires and notions projected onto the image of the other.

Archie, who occupies the place of the other in the setting of the ›migrant‹ enclave, also functions as an inversion in the representational repertoire of the grateful, unaware, and pathetic, out-of-place, racialized ›migrant‹:

»Archie dragged his head off the steering wheel. And in the moment between focusing on the sweaty bulk of a brown-skinned Elvis and realizing that life was still his, he had a kind of epiphany. It occurred to him that, for the first time since his birth, Life had said

Yes to Archie. [...] In between gulps he thanked Mo profusely, tears streaming down his cheeks, his hand clinging on to Mo's apron.» (Smith 2000, 7)

Humor is evoked by the narrator's focalization of Archie through free indirect discourse that conveys Archie's impression of Mo as ›a brown-skinned Elvis‹, but also his joy of having survived. The humor is heightened by the play on the image of the instructor of death per se, the Muslim ›halal butcher‹ (the association with a suicide bomber may be allowed), who saves a (white) man from suicide – not out of a sense of duty or benevolence (as it might have been perceived had it been the other way around), but out of the pragmatics of a moment in his busy everyday life. Archie's suicide is just badly timed in Mo Hussein-Ishmael's butchering schedule, plus it is *haram*. What is doubted, then, is the idea of humanism that is presumably at stake in the (colonial) contact zone. Rather, it seems to be the narrative of power that rules the encounter between the self and the other – most probably on all sides of the divide. This may be what the humorous tone sadly wants to bring to the surface.

Yet, the encounter with the other that Archie has sought, these spaces of touch, touching the other, thematically, affectively, and epistemologically in terms of an opening up of meanings, implied in these juxtapositions at the beginning of the narrative, generates other meanings. This liminal space between life and death can also be conceived as a space between ›the (living) self‹ and ›the (unknown) other‹ represented by death.³⁰ The play with death includes Archie's suicide attempt but also the butcher's place, which is a legal place of killing. It alludes not only to the devalued lives of the pigeons but also to the abandoned and neglected place of the other in the city. However, Mo's performance and speech act reframes this image of death assigned to him and his place.

The *halal* butcher, who is loyal to and observant of (British as well as Islamic) law, is transformed into a savior, more or less against his will and without any good intentions or desire. The place of the other, where Archie has chosen to die, is full of vibrant ›life‹ and, inevitably, death, but it saves Archie's ›life‹. It also shows Mo's concern for his place and his rootedness in this place from which he attacks the pigeons: (home is the place where one attacks the other?).

The space of death becomes life. Life and death are depicted as intertwined, with no beginning or end. The other is turned into a (space of) the self. Entrusted with another ›life‹, Archie meets his second ›love‹, his future wife, the beautiful Clara Bowden.

Entangled Positions and The Still Language of Racism

Archie's best friend is a person of color. He is married to a Black woman and yet he still cannot strip off the meanings attached to racialized images and processes of othering

30 In *Aporias* Derrida ponders upon the border to the ›unknown‹ that death as the unknowable other per se signifies within different scholarly texts and (European) philosophy; he thereby takes the term ›Marrano‹ (as the other that falls out of discourse) at the end of the book as an entry point that links ›death‹ to a process of endlessness, *infinity*, rather than to an end; cf. Derrida (1993 a).

that also situate and normalize his own unmarked subjectivity within the economy of whiteness; at the same time, Archie seems not to be unaware of the constructed character of ›race‹ but cannot find a way to cope with it.

As a *white* figure connected to the other on various intimate levels, though, he is subject to a particular ›treatment‹ in the form of quiet and pitiful resentment within the broader *white* community that is on display through his workplace (Taheri 2018, 115). Archie, seemingly good-hearted, does not notice or pay much attention to it. This whimsical insensitivity seems to emphasize Archie's naivety. But it also leaves room for him to be seen as ›wise‹, as he does not even seem to think that there is something wrong with the way he lives (as he does not look at himself or the world around him, from an expected *white* perspective) or that ›race‹ might have something to do with the way he is treated or the way people (or he himself often) behave. *White Teeth* addresses racism and its effects in this context, also within an intersectional, gendered lens that does not excuse or exclude *white* women:

»Oh Archie, you are funny, said Maureen sadly, for she had always fancied Archie a bit but never more than a bit because of this strange way he had about him, always talking to Pakistanis and Caribbeans like he didn't even notice and now he'd gone and married one and hadn't even thought it worth mentioning what colour she was until the office dinner when she turned up black as anything and Maureen almost choked on her prawn cocktail.« (Smith 2000, 69)

Archie is befriended with people of color (›Pakistanis‹) (›For God's sake‹, all the same, what's the matter), and finally even marries a Black woman without warning ›his community‹: ›hadn't even thought it worth mentioning what colour she was‹. But it is not only skin color that causes suspicion. ›Race‹, the marker that sets the boundaries of sociability and access, is already read in the superficiality of ›food‹ and the making of the ›right‹ friendships, not only when the border is crossed ›legally‹ through marriage. Maureen has already shunned him because he ›behaved strange‹, ›always talking to Pakistanis and Caribbeans like he didn't even notice‹.

Archie does not behave (enough) like a *white* person, which means that he does not protect ›his community‹ by adhering to some implicit, fixed borders. He violates those lines, as if on purpose, by not noticing them, by touching them in conspicuous ways. To celebrate the news of his impending paternity Archie is excited (and learned from a *white* ›knowledge‹ system) about the possibility that, according to the physician, the baby might actually have ›blue eyes‹; an eye color that is associated exclusively with whiteness (empire should have known better – and immediately discarded the idea of ›race‹). ›Blue eyes‹ here ridicules biased, racialized assumptions, and unspoken anxieties: »He couldn't imagine any piece of him slugging it out in the gene pool with a piece of Clara and winning. But what a possibility!« (Smith 2000, 67).

So Archie dashes out for ›cigars‹ and comes back with ›some Indian sweets‹ and happily offers them around, but Maureen as well as another colleague, Noel, are picky about tasting the ›Indian‹ sweets Archie has bought:

»Going to have a kid, ain't I? Blue eyes, would you credit it? I'm celebrating! Thing is, you can get fourteen types of dal, but you couldn't get a bloody cigar in the Euston Road for love nor for money. Go on, Noel. How about this one? Archie held up a half-white, half-pink one with an unwelcoming odour.

»Erm, Mr Jones, that's very ... But it's not really my cup of ... [...] Just them Pakistani foods aren't always ... I've got a bit of a funny ... Noel pated his stomach and looked desperate.« (Smith 2000, 67)

The humorous portrayal of Archie's (not quite *white*) fatherhood-announcement is juxtaposed with his misreading of whiteness and his disregard for those invisible borders that racism has long since established (i. e. knowing where the ›correct‹ shopping areas are, and ›the sensitivities‹ of *white* colleagues). The co-workers are anxious both to distance themselves from ›this food‹ and to avoid offending Archie, thus playing out a literally and allegorically delicate situation at the material and symbolic boundaries of racism, which has also structured the idea of who belongs to humanity and who does not (and what food).

Moreover, while Archie is trying to celebrate the announcement of his forthcoming fatherhood with a ›cigar‹ following a cis-male, masculinist image of ›manhood‹, the London district is already occupied by the other and different kinds of *dal*, in which the masculinist ›cigar‹ no longer has a place. This may be an indication of a subversive authorial humor that only subtly appears between Archie's utterances through the evocation and juxtaposition of ›cigar‹ and *dal*. ›Cigars‹ symbolize not only *white* male masculinity, but also ›civilization‹ and ›culture‹ within brute structures of coloniality (– never mind, then, that ›cigars‹ are also firmly rooted outside of ›Europe‹, which may say something about modern European ›culture‹ and ›civilization‹; besides, *dal* is much healthier – any kind of *dal*, but whatever). Noel (and later Maureen) have no appreciation for the other sweets with the strange smell from next door. They are ›too foreign‹, ›Pakistani‹, and cause upset stomachs and other kinds of discomforts.

In a less funny and ›innocent‹ way, Archie is also excluded from official activities at his workplace. Archie's ›company director‹ with the odd name ›Kelvin Hero‹, a name that seems to ironize and laugh at the boss's authority and racist behavior, calls him into his office. Implicitly, he tells Archie not to attend an official work dinner because his wife is Black (and beautiful). Mr Hero's racist and sexist implications show the ambiguous image with which the (female) other is burdened. Racism is implied in the performance and direct speech of the characters; it speaks for itself, and in a way that blatantly reveals its horrific meanings. The (female) other seems to symbolize not only ›inferiority‹, powerlessness, but also, in a sexist way, ›superiority‹, and power, the Other's fear of their own desire:

»You puzzle me, Archie,‹ said Mr Hero. ›Mr Hero,‹ said Archie. ›Sit down there, Archie,‹
›Right you are, Mr Hero,‹ said Archie.« (Smith 2000, 70)

Archie's unknowing repetition, ›Mr Hero‹, ›Right [...] Mr Hero‹, endows the performance of his answers with a destabilizing undercurrent that threatens to explode the authority of ›Mr Hero‹ in Archie's favor – a point discussed in more detail below. It

almost does so, as the supremacist thrust of the conversation and the oblivious sexism and racism give it a tragic, sad twist. The subversive humor is hampered but nonetheless contains within itself a thought-provoking call to take a look at the unethical spaces that seem to knock at the reading process, and the ways it points to the instability of ›the self‹ and the desire for ›the other‹. The passage shows how the subconscious workings of racism are always saturated with ethical quests, which manifest themselves in the emptiness of the conversation and in an uncomfortable affectivity of unease and guilt that surfaces physically as ›sweating‹ in the one who exercises (commits?) them – here, all signs of some kind of unaware and instable ›knowledge‹ that this behavior and set of beliefs might be fundamentally wrong. Archie, in his almost absolute lack of bias, represents the other side, the bad conscience and the ethical ›face‹ that is hidden and concealed in racist discourse:

»Kelvin wiped out a streak of grimy sweat from around his shirt collar, turned his silver parker pen over a few times in his hand, took a series of deep breaths. »Now, this is quite delicate and I have never considered myself a racist, Archie ...«

»Mr Hero?«

Blimey, thought Kevin, what an eye-to-face ratio. When you want to say something delicate, you don't want this eye-to-face ratio staring up at you. Big eyes. Like a child's or a baby seal's; [...] Kelvin tried a softer track. [...]

»I respect you. You are not flashy, Archie, you've never been flashy, but you're

»Sturdy« finished Archie, because he knew this speech.

Kelvin smiled [...] »Right, yeah, sturdy. People trust you, Archie. [...] And I'm trusting you, Arch, to take what I've got to say in the right way.«

»Mr Hero?« (Smith 2000, 71)

Archie's ›Mr Hero?‹ come like an ironic punch that blatantly brings to light ›Mr Hero's‹ racist attitude and tone. Moreover, the word ›hero‹ appears in stark contrast to the utterly unheroic and craven performance of ›Mr Hero‹, further emphasizing the incongruous, ironic trait of the name's quasi-theoretical and practical meanings, and implications. The ›irony‹, however, is not bitter but quite joyful as Archie indeed has no idea what ›Mr Hero‹ is up to, and because his answer is given in the form of a casual question, which is the most minuscule and undermining form of non-knowledge and power-lessness. It could be understood in de Man's sense as an indication of pure pragmatics of form as well as an undermining rhetorical quest that questions the ›real‹ intentions and meanings behind what is said, and therefore is comical. But it also seems to evoke the question as Derrida's ›she*‹, in the form of *NichtWissen* und *OhnMacht*. The text thus plays with the meanings inherent in the word ›hero‹ and the performance of ›Mr Hero‹, on the one hand, and the grammar and form of the question, on the other hand, igniting an uncanniness that pervades the unbalanced and uncomfortable atmosphere of the ›conversation‹. It remains a monologue of racist assertions circumscribed by their own violence and presumptions. These repressed and hidden meanings of racism are projected onto Archie, making it difficult for ›Mr Hero‹ to look him in the face, especially since Archie's face is looking back at ›Mr Hero‹ as if reading his face as well and, incidentally, reflecting back to him the falsity of his unbearable assumptions; Archie's ›innocent eyes‹, which could

be understood as the un-knowing and power-less trait of his position before ›Mr Hero‹, nevertheless seem, at the same time, to force ›Mr Hero‹ to respect Archie. They seem to assuage his bad conscience, but also to show him the possibility of another, unbiased approach, which makes him feel uncomfortable. Although authority and power are on ›Mr Hero's‹ side, the ›eyes of the other‹ remind him of yet a different powerless power and authority beyond his faculty to imagine, suggesting the limits and fallacy of his ›knowledge‹ and power. Archie, however, is not only the figuration of a ›good‹ white consciousness. He also embodies a ›good‹, ›forgiving‹ consciousness of color that centers him in an ethical quest to accomplish three functions: Firstly, ›Archie‹ undoes the rhetoric of blame and the guilt of blaming; secondly, ›Archie‹ shows that it is possible to act differently from the set norm. Finally, ›Archie‹ represents the (lived, experienced, and desired) possibility of a promise, of another world in which neither ›race‹, nor gender, nor class exist – a world free from the mechanisms of power. Rather, the unknowing powerlessness of ›being in the world‹ prevails as ›real‹ wisdom, as desirable and *possible*.

»I could have lied to you Archie. [...] I could have fished around in my arse and pulled out a juicy one – but you're a big boy, Archie. [...] you'd put two and two together –
 ›And made four‹
 ›And made four, exactly, Archie. You would have made four. Do you understand what I'm saying to you, Archie?‹ said Mr Hero.
 ›No, Mr Hero,‹ said Archie.» (Smith 2000, 71)

›Mr Hero‹ alludes to Archie's other, *white* ›knowledge‹, he wants him desperately to understand ›himself‹, his debt to the unwritten and unmarked rules of whiteness that regulate the economy of racism from (almost) invisible shores. But Archie is beyond ›Mr Hero's‹ reach. He has already seen the depths of other choices. Archie cannot see the configurations and boundaries set by the rules of racism that he is supposed to understand.

The naïve, the fool, in their unconscious and inappropriate actions, as well as in their failure to understand, undermines and challenges ›reason‹, ›common sense‹, the logic of conventionalized, phallogocentric ›truths‹. And it is this elusiveness, this good-natured sturdiness of Archie and the evanescent simplicity of his monosyllabic question that evoke the wounding and dilemmatic humor of the situation and speak back to ›Mr Hero's‹ racist assumptions, which are quietly and inadvertently unmasked in the knowing, silent ›laughter‹ in-between the lines of the passage, a ›laughter‹ that remains in the background and captures the sad theater in the foreground:

»[A]s I say, it's not that I'm a racist, Archie ...
 ›A racist ...
 ›I'd spit on that Enoch Powell ... but then again he does have a point, doesn't he? There comes a point, a saturation point, and people going to feel a bit uncomfortable, ... you see, all he was saying –
 ›Who?‹
 ›Powell, Archie, Powell, [...] your attitude is a little strange‹
 ›Strange?‹
 ›You can see the wives don't like it because, let's face it, she's a sort, a real beauty – incredible legs, Archie, I'd like to congratulate you on them legs – and the men, well,

the men don't like it 'cos they don't like to think the're wanting a bit of the other when they're sitting down to a company dinner with their lady wives, especially when she's ... *you know* ... they don't know what to make of that at all.

›Who?‹

›What?‹

›Who are we talking about, Mr Hero?‹ (Smith 2000, 72)

›Who are we talking about, Mr Hero?‹ is the essential question, that generates the humor and shatters the meanings and imagery of the racist talk, asking whether it is *really* Clara who is being talked about, or rather *white* supremacy, scrutinizing the uneasiness of the dialogue. Is it Clara or is it ›Mr Hero‹ and what he represents that ›we‹ are talking about? Is ›Mr Hero‹ talking about his secret sexual desires? Is he talking about ›race‹ and its justification, because he is afraid of losing his ›self(-identity)‹? Is this what he actually wants to say, as his sweating and discomfort seem to suggest? Does he know that there is something fundamentally wrong with what he is implying and that he, in fact, *respects* Archie for what he does, for his way he thinks and lives his ›life‹? The uncomprehending question of the unaware and unknowing workings of humor parses and presents phallogocentric, gendered, and racialized assumptions in the logics of racism. ›Mr Hero‹ tries to remind Archie of their shared ›good‹, the privilege of whiteness, which Archie cannot even grasp (can he?). ›Mr Hero‹, however, knows that there is a boundary that separates ›us‹ from ›them‹ and that this line must be maintained so that that ›position‹ and ›privilege‹ is not threatened.

To silence his conscious (it's good to have one! That means you can still distinguish between ›good‹ and ›not so good‹ senses), ›Mr Hero‹ first tries to bribe Archie:

››Look, Archie,‹ said Kelvin, the sweat now flowing freely; [...] ›Take them, Archie. There's fifty pounds' worth of vouchers in there, redeemable in over five thousand food outlets nationwide.‹ [...] Kevin thought for a moment he saw tears of happiness in his [Archie's] eyes. ›Well, I don't know what to say. There's a place I go to, pretty regular like. [...] Have a few meals on me.‹ [...] ›Ta very much.‹ ›Think nothing of it, Arch. Please.‹ [...] He [Archie] had just reached for the handle of the door when Kelvin snatched up his Parker pen once more and said, ›Oh, Archie, one more thing ... that dinner with the Sunderland team ... I talked to Maureen and I think we need to count down on the numbers ... we put the names in a hat and yours came out. Still, I don't suppose you'll be missing much, eh?‹ [...]

›Right you are, Mr Hero,‹ said Archie, mind elsewhere; praying to God that O'Connell's was a ›food outlet‹; smiling to himself [...].‹ (Smith 2000, 72–73)

Archie is happily touched by this offer from ›Mr Hero‹ because he reads it as a sign of generosity. This is both painful and hilarious. ›Mr Hero‹, in turn, is somehow awed, sweating profusely at Archie's incredible naivety, which indicates that it must have ignited in him some sort of ethical sense, some ethical sensibility – and that he might therefore also be grateful to have someone naïve around, someone you can look into the eyes and be reminded of the lines you are crossing, all of which is implicit in ›Mr Hero's‹ ashamed and tired ›Think nothing of it, Arch. Please.‹ ›Mr Hero's‹ sweating, and weary attitude thus also suggests the possibility of hope that an ethical impulse might exist that ›Mr Hero‹

simply cannot allow to surface at this moment; instead, he chooses to manage the discomfort of its concealment.

Archie, on the other hand, is simply enjoying his ›life‹ and his friendship, and has no problem admitting it (›Right you are Mr Hero‹, said Archie, mind elsewhere; praying to God that O'Connell's was a ›food outlet‹; smiling to himself). Archie is happy. His happiness evokes an ambiguous humor of joy, pity, sympathy, and disbelief, but it also opens up a space for further reflection on the tragedy of dominance and racism and their multiple, pernicious, manifest, and inherent effects in an everyday workplace. But this humor also extends to the liberating ›benefits‹ of not knowing and being powerless, rather than relying on false ›knowledge‹ and its harmful power. It allows you some space to build another world in order to live something *different*, unimaginable, beyond the economy of established, mainstream ›knowledge‹ and power. Archie's naivety not only opens up the imagination but also shows that living another world outside of the economy of ›knowledge‹/power is already taking place – a special niche – and there are inexorably many – within the realm of ›knowledge‹ and power.

The ›performative function‹ of the novel, then, is not only a ›machine of cultural representation and reproduction‹ (Stein 2004, 42). It also displays a performative critique of the macro and micro forms of the sociopolitical structure – and, what is more, exhibits other, unseen, possibilities of encounter and togetherness beyond the known.

Ironically, the status of marriage, which provides both female characters with a ›home‹ in a figurative and material sense, also alienates them from themselves, making them ›wives‹, people who belong to other people (›men‹) rather than to themselves, but conversely liberates the ›husbands‹ from ›their wives‹:

»Clara understood that Archibald Jones was no romantic hero. Three months spent in one stinking room in Cricklewood [from where they had just moved in to Willesden] had been sufficient revelation. [...] And if you are saddled with a man as average as this, Clara felt, he should at least be utterly devoted to *you* – to your beauty, to your youth, that's the *least* he could do to make up for things. But not Archie. One month into their marriage and he already had that funny glazed look men have when they are looking through you. He had reverted back into his bachelorhood: pints with Samad Iqbal, dinner with Samad Iqbal, Sunday breakfasts with Samad Iqbal, every spare moment with the man in that bloody place, O'Connell's, in that bloody dive. She tried to be reasonable. She asked him: *Why are you never here? Why do you spend so much time with that Indian?* [...] always the same answer: *Me and Sam? We go way back.* She couldn't argue with that. They went back to before she was born. No white knight, then, this Archibald Jones.« (Smith 2000, 48)

The account of Clara's thoughts is infused with a humor that ironizes her simplicity and simultaneously shows Clara as ingenuous. One senses a smiling narrator behind the sentences. Naivety appears as the *naivety of pathos* as a belief in dominant images. Here, in the characterization of female figures, it is not so much centripetal discourses that are thematized, but something that seems deeper and older, the images themselves, images of ›femininity‹, ›masculinity‹, ›wifehood‹ and ›husbandhood‹. The ›beauty‹ that ›women‹ are supposed to bring with them and the ›place, a house‹ that ›the men‹ are supposed to

give them do not seem to work – at least not for long. And Clara is just learning to decipher them as utterly false. ›She tried to be reasonable‹ ironically alludes to and reverses the supposed irrationality of ›women*‹ and the rationality of ›men*‹, as it seems rather ›irrational‹ for Archie to go out with Samad, and Clara tries to reason with Archie about it, but Archie does not understand such a logical point. In the same vein, ›[s]he couldn't argue with that‹ repeats and ridicules a phallogocentric, cis-masculinist disposition about ›reasonableness‹ while at the same time Archie's response, ›Me and Sam? We go way back‹ almost cynically distorts and satirizes the age difference between Clara and Archie, rather than being an appreciative tone regarding the friendship between Archie and Samad and mocks their quasi-ideal coupled demeanor. ›No white knight‹ is also a satirical humorous allusion to Archie's *white* subject-position in a number of ways. It not only alludes to his (›nice‹ but) apparently barely articulated romantic gestures towards Clara, for which she seems to yearn. (And should she yearn for them at all? *White Teeth* seems to ask, smiling amusedly and knowingly. Or is it all a myth? And if so, what desire drives them? (›Death‹, Freud might have said without knowing why. Or culture? But why? ›Shakespeare? Why so? A vocation to finally sense oneself? Maybe. Sounds pedestrian. Self-love – one that goes beyond oneself? Much better! A good fix. A lot of potential here ... Let's go with that. ...). So he is ›no white knight, then, this Archibald Jones‹. The sentence sounds matter-of-fact and even a little mocking, but in a peculiar and affectionate way, which is indicated by the deixis ›this‹, ›this‹ Archibald Jones. Furthermore, ›no white knight‹ can be read in a forked, double-voiced understanding, in which *white* signifies, on the one hand, an unmarked position that perpetuates racism and its effects, and, on the other hand, ironically, a ›white knight‹ who does not save ›his own people‹ and thus does not adhere to the dictates and configurations of racism. ›Simplicity‹ is revalued through the humorous meanings that the figure of Archie signifies, as an openness to the realm of the infinite possibilities of non-knowledge and power-lessness, as an invitation for imagination. Moreover, the utterance seems once again to honor Archie's *white* difference and singularity from the dominant mainstream and to solidarily acknowledge his *attachement*. It can be read as an ethical tribute and bow to his unknowing naivety and refreshing difference. This trait seems to come from a ›third voice‹, another form of ›knowledge‹ and recognition that transcends the narrator's chatty voice.

»Clara, Clara, love, [...] We've got the Ick-Balls coming round tonight, and I want to get this house in some kind of order – so mind out the way. [...]

»You said the Iqbals are comin' to dinner. I was just thinkin' ... if they're going to want me to cook dem some curry – I mean, I can cook curry – but it's *my* type of curry.« (Smith 2000, 52)

While Clara has her own images of ›Indianness‹ (and curry), which may also be informed by a *white* imagery, she can also relate to them from a different *history* and an other racialized, marked subjectivity, and ›difference‹ that is evinced by her polyphonic Caribbean English, which sets her apart as an *other othered* in the novel, and at the same time, charmingly normalizes her difference as another ›speaking subject‹. Clara's hybridized ›non-knowledge‹ of this blurred distinction is implicit in her conflation of ›Indian‹ and ›cook-

ing curry« with »my type of curry«, as well as in the fact that in contrast to Archie's »Ick-Balls«, she pronounces the name »Iqbal« correctly as the spelling suggests:

»For God's sake, they're not *those* kind of Indians«, said Archie irritably, offended at the suggestion. »Sam'll have a Sunday roast like the next man. He serves Indian food all the time, he doesn't want to eat it too«. [...] He gave her an affectionate kiss on the forehead, for which she bent downwards a little.

»I've known Sam for years, and his wife seems a quiet sort. They're not the royal family, you know. They're not those kind of Indians«, he repeated, and shook his head, troubled by some problem, some knotty feeling he could not entirely unravel.

Samad and Alsana Iqbal, who were not *those* kind of Indians (as in Archie's mind, Clara was not *that* kind of black), who were in fact, not Indian at all but Bangladeshi [...].« (Smith 2000, 54–5)

Racism manifests itself in the »knotty feeling« that Archie cannot really unravel. Archie thus physically *feels* the unresolved and paradoxical reactions he receives, especially so as he does not »blend in« with the other in order to appear »different«, and fancy, or to fall out of whiteness, in order to provoke and look »interesting« or »correct« and »ethical« – as the unapproved but still tolerated good *white* consciousness on the fringes of colonial discourse. He does not *use* the other for his own agenda of political and/or social demarcation, he is shaped by them, woven with them, but so much outside any centripetal discourse that he has no idea, beyond »the knotty feeling«, how much the concept of »race« matters.

Archie tries to distinguish his beloved »others« from the generality of »their actual« homogenized »groups«, which is indicated by the deixis »*those*« and »*that*«. The italicized font accentuates in a telling way all those empty derogatory signifiers attached to particular racialized subjectivities and »cultures«, and yet there is also the laugh of recognition and amusement at this behavior behind it and its tragic material outcomes.

Again, an implied authorial »presence« seems to hasten to make clear that these categorizations are in fact Archie's and not Clara's or the narrator's. This can be seen in the parentheses that exempt Clara from »*that* kind of Black« in Archie's imagination. This »third voice« also points out, in a somewhat matter-of-fact way that »Indians« (»who are, in fact, not Indian at all«, but never mind) was a generalization for people because of an assumed (racialized) appearance based on indifference and disinterest in any »actual« (cultural) »roots/routes« or *history* and Britain's role in such an interesting shared past. The humorized factuality of this false assumption and its merging with disinterested ignorance is induced by the deixis »in fact« and »at all«. The humorous tone becomes quite charming, empathetic, and funny as one »sees« the characters nevertheless acting as lovers in this desolate world while their interchanged, unconventional bodily disparity is hinted at: Clara bending down a little for Archie to kiss her on the forehead (a sweet, *fatherly*, for God's sake!, kiss, but maybe one that is the epitome of »love«, who knows).

On the one hand, Archie cannot move beyond his racialized images in which the other is somehow still trapped; on the other hand, Archie himself is shunned by his fellow *white* Londoners because of his suspicious contacts:

»Archie felt bad for Clara that it wasn't a bigger reception. But there was no one else to invite [besides Samad and Alsana]. All other relatives and friends had declined the wedding invitation; some tersely, some horrified; others, thinking silence the best option, had spent the past week studiously stepping over the mails and avoiding the phone.« (Smith 2000, 51)

The satirical, cynical underpinning of the passage is raised in the voice of an ›implied author‹ and overshadows the narrator's more factual account and Archie's oblivious observation. It emerges from the paradoxical attitude conveyed: the refusal of the ›wedding invitation‹. People were invited, but they did not come. A rather intimate and important celebration, a wedding, is not only not attended, it is deliberately not attended: ›tersely‹, ›horrified‹, and ›thinking silence the best option, had spent the past week studiously stepping over the mails and avoiding the phone‹. Archie is shown to *know* things and thus, to some extent, to perform naivety as a kind of shelter and shield against ignorance and racist violence and rejection. In this role, he, too, has become more or less a pariah. As a *white* person, he has become an outcast within *white* society. However, this contrasts sharply with the significance he occupies in the novel, which in turn values his role.

But Archie's interactions with BIPOC characters are thus shown and marked as an exception and a *self-positioning* rather than a direct result of ›multiculturalism‹. It is a dilemmatic and risky state of affairs that is represented in the novel by an almost cynical, satirical humor that critiques sociopolitical behaviorist structures marked by the historical configurations of coloniality (and gender bias). Thus the humorous tone is mixed with sadness and disillusionment. It evokes joy and serenity, as well as satirical allusions that can be understood as interventionist performances of *denormalization* and deferral of conventionalized meanings, displacing and *resignifying* them. Thus, there is a performative quality in their prompting us to consider and envision the possibility of another world in which these meanings do not matter (and will not have materialized themselves).

The Laugh of the Medusa

While Archie and Samad's *friendship* begins outside of the UK and London, Clara and Alsana's *friendship* takes place in London and is initially more or less ›forced‹ upon them because of their husbands' *friendship*. Thus, the structure of the narrative already succumbs to a gendered pre-structure into which ›woman*‹ is woven. This is already evident in the very organization of the novel itself, where *Archie* and *Samad*, as well as their children, *Irie*, *Magid*, and *Millat*, are chapter names, while Clara and Alsana are somewhere between the pages. Nevertheless, this *prestructure* may be employed in *White Teeth* to dis-mantle, mirror, and *resignify* such sociopolitical patterns from within.

One could say, with Hélène Cixous, that feminist* ›laughter‹, if there is such a thing, structures the novel ›from above‹, from a feminist implicit authorial instance and thread that seems to dissect signification itself through the braiding of a humorous rhetoric and its explosive, affective, and epistemological work within the narrative. On the one hand,

a feminist authorial subjectivity critical of masculinist, *white* norms and assumptions and sensitive to queer, feminist, Black, Jewish, anti-racist, postcolonial, and decolonial epistemologies, weaves the story together and scrutinizes intersectionally different signifying practices. On the other hand, the two main female protagonists within the narrative discourse, Clara, Alsana, and also Alsana's niece Neena, work out the rest within the novel.³¹

In her famous, aforementioned text, *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1976), Hélène Cixous describes a ›feminine text‹ as subversive quasi ›by nature‹, essentializing an attitude that speaks out of necessity in relation to *pregiven* dynamics of signification in which male, *white*, middle-class subjectivities are privileged. According to Cixous, »[a] feminine text cannot fail to be more than subversive. It is volcanic; as it is written, it brings about an upheaval of the old property crust, carrier of masculine investments; there's no other way. There's no room for her if she's not a he« (Cixous 1976, 888).

The crust is the normalcy of a symbolic order enmeshed in structures of coloniality under which *White Teeth* also begins to emerge; but the novel makes the crust crumble by breaking new ground, using humor as an instrument for rewriting normalized images and formulas,

»[...] in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the ›truth‹ with laughter. For once she blazes her trail in the symbolic, she cannot fail to make of it the cosmos of the ›personal‹ – in her pronouns, her nouns, and her clique of referents. And for good reason. There will have been the long history of gynocide. This is known by the colonized peoples yesterday, the workers, the nations, the species of whose backs the history of men has made its gold; those who have known the ignominy persecution derive from it an obstinate future desire for grandeur; those who are locked up know better than their jailers the taste of free air. Thanks to their history, women today know (how to do and want) what men will be able to conceive of only much later.« (Cixous 1976, 888)

In *The Laugh of The Medusa*, Cixous sees, against the backdrop of her own Jewish Algerian background, the thread of a feminist resignification in line with postcolonial and decolonial strategies of writing that invade, invent, and restructure the language and rhetoric that are part of the political-›personal‹:

›I say woman overturns the ›personal‹, for if, by means of laws, lies, blackmail, and marriage, her right to herself has been extorted, at the same time, as her name, she has been able, through the very movement of mortal alienation, to see more closely the inanity of ›propriety‹, the reductive stinginess of the masculine-conjugal subjective economy, which she doubly resists. On the one hand, she has constituted herself

31 The arrangement of stereotypes that Smith deploys is sometimes read in a straightforward rather than symbolic manner, which flattens the complexity of her critical effort; this is also the case with the female figures of her novels. As Nicklas points out, though, »Smith's ›veil‹ often is a caricature which entices the reader to look behind the act of estrangement inherent in the distorting mirror used by the author. At the same time, Smith is quite averse to the idea that belonging to a certain social group involves being closer to the truth.« Nicklas (2013, 130).

necessarily as that »person« capable of losing a part of herself without losing her integrity. But secretly, silently, deep down inside, she grows and multiplies, for, on the other hand, she knows far more about living and about the relation between the economy of the drives and the management of the ego than any man. Unlike man, who holds so dearly to his title and his titles, his pouches of value, his cap, crown, and everything connected with his head, woman couldn't care less about the fear of decapitation (or castration), adventuring, without the masculine temerity, into anonymity, which she can merge with without annihilating herself: because she's a giver.« (Cixous 1976, 888)

While in *White Teeth* Archie's and Samad's figurations are used to expose and resituate gendered, cis-masculinist frames through an intersectional advance, and while *White Teeth* follows a deconstructivist mood, it equally does not essentialize a feminist or cis-feminine agenda or imagery. In line with Cixous' invitation to shift the (linguistic) ground for the possibility of another language and thinking, *White Teeth* laughs at authority, even its own, so that what may come into view is the *possibility of giving*, of facing the other as other without assimilating it into »the self« or constructing it in any other way, to acquire a »self«. This, at least, seems to be the common ground on which Clara and Alsana connect. Clara and Alsana bond out of a felt necessity as their husbands are so close, but then they develop their own form of *friendship* within this trajectory:

»Partly because Mrs Jones becomes pregnant so soon after Mrs Iqbal and partly because of a daily proximity [...] the two women begin to see each other. Hesitant in the beginning – a few lunch dates here and there, the occasional coffee – what begins as a rearguard action against their husband's friendship soon develops. They have resigned themselves to their husbands' mutual appreciation society and the free time this leaves is not altogether unpleasant; there is time for picnics and outings, for discussion and personal study; for old French movies where Alsana screams and covers her eyes at the suggestion of nudity (»Put it away! We are not wanting to see the dangly bits!«) and Clara gets a glimpse of how the other half live [...]: The other half who have *sex*. The life that might have been hers had she not been at the top of some stairs one fine day as Archibald Jones waited at the bottom.« (Smith 2000, 73–74)

Alsana's and Clara's *friendship* thus arises out of an arbitrary »life-situation«. Their different racialized backgrounds are there and not there either; »identity« does not play a decisive role in the development of their *friendship*, yet it does structure who they »are« in a sociopolitical sense.

Both women marry out of socially structured conditions, not out of a sentiment of »love«, though Clara wishes it were so and clings to the idea, and perhaps it is »love« then.

Clara and Alsana meet for the first time after Archie and Clara's wedding ceremony, where Samad Miah Iqbal and »his submissive wife« were witnesses to the marriage ceremony and Clara's »only wedding guests«:

»[T]wo Indians, both dressed in purple silk. Samad Iqbal, a tall, handsome man with the whitest teeth and a dead hand, who kept patting her on the back with the one that worked.« (Smith 2000, 50)

Clara's thoughts, expressed in indirect discourse and hybridized by the narrator's mocking voice, evoke a humorous scene through the casual description of ›two Indians‹, both (and not just the woman) dressed in ›purple silk‹, a color and fabric associated (in ›the West‹, no doubt) with femininity* (– whatever that might be anyway). Playing on dry humor, this image triggers a mixed affectivity and reflects prejudices and resentments that have inadvertently traveled to (racialized) ›camps‹ as well. It also reflects the distance Clara has felt toward the Iqbals, despite the *white teeth* she recognizes as an attribution of Samad's handsomeness. Clara complacently lets the ›Indians‹, as the Bengali Iqbals are teasingly and hopelessly also called by Clara, know and lovingly shares with them what they already know, namely: How (Britisch) ›Jamaicans‹ ›think‹ about them. It is a nontoxic way to encounter someone when you shares the same grounds of power (=non-power). With an ›implied white audience‹ Clara's remark laughingly and deconstructively shares and reflects racist prejudices and thought patterns, implicitly asking why clothing colors are (an envied?) problem (just do it!). What kind of (gendered and racialized) color line is indicated in standardized *white* European/Western thought? This touches on and opens up the unwritten ›laws‹ of understanding ›sobriety‹ and ›solemnity‹ and what they may signify (– gentility? And is this the only way to show it? Does it not sound wrong?) It also points, with a sad smile, to the loneliness of marginalized people and the difficulty of creating another patchwork family and ›community‹ in the *nowhere land*, where you suddenly, somehow, end up – (with people in purple silk, or mostly very plain (– *very, very plain indeed!*)), and how random that ›family‹ is, just like the ›real‹ one you are born into.

Humor as feminist ›laughter‹, a ›laughter‹ reminiscent of Cixous' Medusa, occurs in a more direct way in an encounter between the three female characters, Clara, Alsana and Neena. The scene is set in a fictional location in London and thus evokes a disorienting degree of verisimilitude in the novel. It is a lunch and picnic scene that takes place in London's Kilburn Park (an actual Tube station) and depicts a meeting between Alsana, Clara and Alsana's niece, Neena. The chapter consists of a dialogue between the three picnicking women. Both Clara and Alsana are very pregnant. While the characters are portrayed as having a good time chatting, eating, enjoying themselves, and having secret intellectual exchanges (Clara ›is the recipient of a secret (kept secret from Alsana and Archie) lending library of Neena's through which she reads in a few short months, Greer's *Female Eunuch*, Jong's *Fear of Flying* and *The Second Sex*, all in a clandestine attempt, on Neena's part, to rid Clara of her ›false consciousness‹), their conversation thread twice veers into unsettling territory.

It is as if Medusa is revealing her secret liaison with them, as if she is unobtrusively touching them on the shoulder, cautioning them to be aware and to do their best. Alsana is about to talk about her marriage to Neena and how hard it is for her to get close to her husband. But she is also very happy that way: ›Now, every time I learn something more about him, I like him less‹. Alsana even defends the arranged marriage, dismissing her niece's modern thoughts and question of how she could marry without knowing her husband: ›Because, *Miss Smarty pants*, it is by far the easier option. It was exactly because Eve did not know Adam from Adam that they got on so A-OK‹ (Smith 2000, 78). What is one to say? (*There may be some ›truth‹ in that lottery-marriage. . . ? That it incidentally also deconstructs some rigid religious images of female* sexuality (names it at all). . . that it wisely emphasizes the role of not-knowing for real marriage kicks?*) The dry but playful sense of humor that

accompanies Alsana's remarks, which turn marriage into an endless adventure, a leap into the unknown (assuming one remains unknowing about the other), and the realms of powerlessness, speaks for itself despite its decisiveness. In its sorrowful and cheerful meanings, it also opens up a thoughtful side that raises the question of whether ›knowing the other‹ and ›knowing things about the other‹ – even in an intimate relationship – is possible at all, and whether it actually brings closeness or rather imperceptibly increases disinterest and distance (does one even *know* oneself, whatever that entity may mean? And does one have the power to look thoroughly through oneself in a radiographic mode? Freud may have been the one who did just that, and what *he found*, well, is a lot to digest . . . we are still chewing on it . . .). Alsana continues in this vein, lamenting in a rather resigned manner, and ends her speech with a chaste remark: »Getting anything out of my husband is like trying to squeeze water out when you're stoned«, Neena laughs »despite herself«, correcting the phrase: ›Water out of a *stone*.« (Smith 2000, 78; Ledent 2016, 85). Alsana's comment is also funny because it conjures up a very different image, incongruous with her serious and sad remark, that echoes the description of a ›real‹ image of young Samad, stoned to the ears, in the ›war‹ (– a secret that the narrator will soon share with their ›implied audience‹). Humor seems to function here as an affective shield. It shields from the sorrow that Alsana's words actually entail by evoking joy as a kind of distraction. Moreover, it not only shields Alsana from pity. It also shields ›life‹ as such as if to suggest the ambiguous, uncertain, and pitiful sides that are inevitably part of it and will remain part of it, no matter how hard one tries, with whatever models – some ends will never quite fit. And that is why Alsana talks about it without being completely overwhelmed by her insight. She just *knows without* knowing. Alsana's lament has the effect of a talking cure, cleaning out the wastebasket of her psyche, and it shows the power (and luxury) of her companionship, friendship, and bond, in all powerlessness, and the power to find a way through ›life‹ in its unknowing and powerless moments, within and without.

Alsana goes on, and her flood of words seems to mimic some (hopefully outdated) masculinist speech acts regarding the mystification of the female* gender. It is not so much a reversal of such attitudes as a proof that they do not concern her in the same way, that femininity* was (is?) a never-ending mystified subject in dominant mainstream discourses – and from time to time, astonishingly, perhaps also in not-so-mainstream ones – (if it is talked about at all). It touches on the secret ›laws‹ of discourse that Clara is just about to open up to herself, supported by Neena, the secret princess of feminist* resistance in the novel. But Alsana seems to *know* of all this anyway, without being particularly, literally, *affected by it*:

»Yes, yes. You think I'm so stupid. But I am wise about things like men. I tell you – Alsana prepares to deliver her summation as she has seen it done many years previously by the young Delhi lawyers with their slick side partings – ›men are the last mystery. God is easy compared with men. Now. Enough of the philosophy, samosa?‹ She peels the lid off the plastic tub and sits fat, pretty and satisfied on her conclusion.« (Smith 2000, 78)

Alsana nonchalantly brushes off the mystery of masculine* pride with a samosa, too busy enjoying herself and too content to be puzzled by it for longer than seems necessary

(three minutes?). To her, male masculinity seems a given. *Nature* is used here in a more metaphorical, aesthetic sense as its own metaphor, as something to enjoy (or not) and not to worry about too much. Unlike Archie, who has learned things from the cinema, Alsana has learned her part from the theater of ›reality‹, she has observed how educated ›men‹ with slick haircuts, lawyers who obey (their) ›laws‹, behave, and she mimics their rhetoric in a sphere of unknowing and without obvious power (unless you are a goddess*, power always has a purview, it will always remain limited); for Alsana, this is her free and liberated world where discourse (with its predetermined ›knowledge‹) has no power over her (mind). Thus, while using the same rhetoric, Alsana says something different, something that is inconsistent with the ›law‹-abiding speeches of cis-masculinist or dominant thought. She uses the same rhetoric and gestures to *expose* dominant discourses and their *unwritten* ›laws‹, not intimidated or impressed in the least. But Neena cannot let it go, pre-occupied with intellectual and erudite care and heroism. Unsatisfied, she pushes the discussion to the extreme, and to the question of male ›masculinity‹ from its assumed very beginning, construing it as and tying it to the sexes in a more biological sense, missing the metaphor of ›nature‹ by a hair and triggering a humorous and affective abundance at a limit that finds expression in laughter as well as crying:

»Shame that you're having them‹, says Neena to her aunt, lighting a fag. ›Boys, I mean. Shame that you're going to have boys‹. [Clara:] ›What do you mean?‹ [...] ›I mean, I just think men have caused enough chaos this century. There's enough fucking men in the world. If I knew I was going to have a boy‹ – she pauses to prepare her two falsely conscious friends for this new concept – ›I'd have to seriously consider abortion.‹ Alsana screams, claps her hands over one of her own ears and one of Clara's, and then almost chokes on a piece of aubergine. For some reason the remark simultaneously strikes Clara as funny; hysterically, desperately funny; miserably funny; and the Niece-of-Shame sits between the two, nonplussed, while the two egg-shaped women bend over themselves, one in laughter, the other in horror and asphyxiation. [...] Clara cannot stop the tears from squeezing out of the corners of her eyes. She cannot work out, at this moment, whether it is crying or laughing.« (Smith 2000, 78–79)

As if a ›real author‹ does not want to spare a certain academic feminist* smugness from its mockery, sympathize with working-class women*, and mock hegemonic feminist* discourse, they let the other, supposedly unknowing and unlearned women* speak and act. While Alsana and Clara seem to echo two opposing reactions, they both reflect instances of shock, but they are shocked by different aspects and consequences of Neena's question. Alsana may be shocked for religious reasons because the idea of abortion itself, and ›the murder of innocents‹, as she later remarks, is so far from her approach to ›life‹. This idea seems so insane to her that she would not want to be exposed to it and, theatrically, even tries in vain to prevent Clara from hearing it, which also shows that she does not take the question too seriously and is not really upset. At the same time, the gravity and weight of Neena's question is further tempered by Alsana's humorous portrayal as her gesture has a dramatic effect that is heightened by the comical description of her choking on a – delicious – ›piece of aubergine‹.

Clara's ›laughter‹, however, mirrors Cixous' ›laughter‹ of Medusa. It is an ambiguously sad, joyless, and hysterical ›laughter‹ of misery and despair, but it may also reflect the pleasure she actually has with her two friends. Clara seems to welcome Neena's objection about what to do with ›men‹, and, at the same time, seems to laugh it off as Neena is talking about unborn, barely imaginable babies, so the question seems quite absurd to her. Both Clara as well as Alsana also seem to sympathize with Neena's disregard for ›men‹ but simultaneously reflect the tragedy of a feminist* desire that literally drives them to the point of developing ›mad‹, self-destructive thoughts, but that, in doing so, also goes beyond sex, questioning social norms and the theater of gender roles (in war and peace). Clara's ›laughter‹ also corrects Cixous's ›laughter‹ of the Medusa in the sense that Medusa may not have been as self-confident as she comes across in Cixous's text. She may have rather laughed out of the experience of a limit that is indistinguishable from grief, and out of a faint hope that it might still be possible to change things.

Plessner's understanding of ›laughter‹ as an experience of the limit seems to be lurking around the corner here, reminding us of a threshold space that the mind can no longer process and that interrupts not only the flow of meanings but also that of the body, touching body and mind in a striking way and pointing to the brokenness that accompanies existence – as well as experience. But Clara's reaction may also point to a sign of ›understanding‹. Clara understands without knowing and without knowing whether she is crying or laughing. The passage thus also goes beyond Plessner's reading and links both crying and laughing to striking or stroking forms of touch as experiences of a limit; it shows the space of not-knowing and powerlessness that is *attouched* to the life-worlds, to the experiences of femininity* and, in the novel as a whole, to the experiences of vulnerability and otherness.

The second turn in their social gathering and conversation is again triggered by a question from Neena about Archie and Samad and how they met and became friends. Alsana and Clara mention their participation as British soldiers in the Second World War. While Clara believes she married Archie out of ›love‹ and considers him a hero, Alsana married Samad in an arranged marriage and is more ›rational‹, and suspicious of his heroism. Frowning, she urges Clara to face ›the truth‹ and see her husband for what he ›is‹.

The passage allows for a subtle reference to different spaces of touch, and how they are produced in the narrative, and how humor as an economy of affectivity is created and operates in the passage. Spaces of touch appear as affectively charged packages of meaning that are exchanged between the characters, intoxicated by friendship and conviviality (and also more unmetaphorically, by delicious ›Indian‹ food). On the one hand, these are created by the dialogues of the characters, by what is said in a direct style and by the character-bound, internal focalization. On the other hand, they appear in the narrator's reported speech and a succession of external/internal focalizations. The dialogic form between the characters on the level of narrative discourse reflects the affective ambience between the three and gives meaning to their performance. The reported speech fills the humorous ›affective gap‹ between the dialogic sentences, marking them. And it also carries an affectionate, humorous narrative mood, conveyed by the narrator's voice, invoking and addressing an ›implied audience‹:

»Alsana throws her head back, a dismissive gesture. »Oh, in the war. Off killing some poor bastards who didn't deserve it, no doubt. And what did they get for their trouble? A broken hand for Samad Miah and for the other one a funny leg. Some use, some use all this. »Archie's right leg« says Clara quietly, pointing to a place in her own thigh. »A piece of metal, I tink. But he don really tell me nuttin«. »Oh, who cares!« Alsana bursts out. »I'd trust Vishnu the many-handed pick-pocket before I believed a word those men say.« But Clara holds dear the image of the young soldier Archie, particularly when the old, flabby Direct Mail Archie is on top of her. »Oh, come now ... we don know what —« Alsana spits quite frankly on the grass. »Shitty lies! If they are heroes, where are their hero things? Where are the hero bits and bobs? Heroes — they have things. They have hero stuff. You can spot them ten miles away. I've never seen a medal and not so much as a photograph.« Alsana makes an unpleasant noise at the back of her throat, her signal for disbelief.

»So look at it — no, dearie, it must be done — look at it *close up*. Look at what is left. Samad has one hand; says he wants to find God but the fact is God's given him the slip; and he has been in that curry house for two years already, serving up stringy goat to the whiteys who don't know any better, and Archibald — well, look at the thing close up ...« Alsana stops to check with Clara if she could speak her mind further without causing offense or unnecessary pain, but Clara's eyes are closed and she is already looking at the thing close up; a young girl looking at an old man close up; finishing Alsana's sentence with the beginning of a smile spreading across her face, ... folds paper for a living, dear *Jesus*«.« (Smith 2000, 81; emphasis in the text)

The humorous tone of the passage is touching in ambiguous affective ways, pointing to several things at once, at the level of the narrative discourse between the characters as well as at the level of the narration and its implications with which it organizes an »implied audience«. The dialogue is held in a humorous tone, realized through a tagged direct style that marks both characters in a funny way. On the one hand, this maintains the (humorous) narrative mood and, on the other hand, it plays with stereotypes. The humorous implications are embedded in Clara's accent, which gives the text a warm, giggly tone, and in Alsana's insistence with which she addresses her friend. Alsana's disapproving attitude toward Hinduism that is expressed in a frank manner, is another sore of humor. While, on the one hand, it violates a sense of tact and shows her naïve speech act, it also excuses her by revealing her (other) position in discourse. But it also playfully alludes to the traumatic history of the Indian decolonization process, which tore the country into fragments, so that Alsana's disparaging remark appears as a reminder of these anti-colonial wars and the pain, which has manifested itself in language in this hurtful way. It may also have the function to disapprove of any kind of glorification of this other place called *home* that comes with its own nightmares and structures of neglect, violence, and othering. Clara's Caribbean accent allows for a humorous portrayal that elicits sympathy for her. It creates a link to the stereotypical image of how »Jamaicans« speak, and at the same time, gives space to this accent and what she has to say. Here, it is *attached* to a female protagonist of the novel. In this way, Clara can also be shown in her uniqueness and singularity beyond any stereotypes. Again this humorous, affectively ambiguous process reveals the entangled (colonial) histories that are mirrored in language and discourse on a day-to-day basis; it also dignifies the characters and their (*her**) stories even if they do

not appear as educated and do not speak the way ›one‹ should speak, opening up discourse to include their experiences and, on a meta-level, the possibility of grasping the pain and trauma other people have to live with, besides the stereotypical, racist and classist prejudices that configure other(-ed) experiences. The humorous portrayal of the characters indicates that it is not an analogous representation of ›Jamaicans‹ and ›Bengalis‹, but a teasing, affectionate one that fondly considers and exposes perfect(-ly) (fine) imperfections without fear of doing harm. The logic of the stereotype is thus deconstructed by the affective-humorous effect of the text, which touches on various images, stroking some and striking others, shifting them on the chessboard of discourse. A deconstructive procedure emerges between the narrative discourse and the instance of an ›implied audience‹ through Clara's external focalization, which suddenly shifts from the character's direct speech to a character-bound focalization in an intensifying, internal form (Bal 2009, 148): ››Archie's right leg,‹ says Clara quietly, pointing to a place in her own thigh. ›A piece of metal, I tink. But he don really tell me nuttin‹‹. It is in this shift of perspective that the humorous rhetoric on the different textual levels of the narrative can exude a specter of paradoxical affectivity, which expresses the complex vulnerability of the characters and their affective world, their thoughts and utterances.

This is suggested here by the word ›quietly‹ and Clara's pointing to a spot in her own thigh. This nimble and fine textual choreography may also wish for an ›implied audience‹ to pause and contemplate.

Humor once again undoes the closure of the idealized portrayal of the characters as the *perfect other* or the simulated *good other*. The narrator's voice, on the one hand, hints at Clara's ›love‹ for her husband (›But Clara holds dear the image of the young soldier Archie . . .‹) and, on the other hand, quite frankly reveals what Clara might be thinking while having sex with her much older husband (›particularly when the old, flabby Direct Mail Archie is on top of her. ›Oh, come now . . . we don know what –‹)

The paradoxes presented herein also touch on psychologically reassuring traits, suggesting that it is still okay to think that way, and that the ›love‹ she feels is not diminished by it, on the contrary, ›love‹, that funny thing, can be imagined as a ›state‹ that is all-encompassing and sometimes perhaps lenient as well.

The humorous play on stereotypes and humorous sensibility thus works against stereotypes through the voices and the behavior of the characters, through what they perform in these ›touching spaces‹ created in the narrative between the narrator's voice, the characters' direct speech, and the witnessing of a possible ›implied audience‹ that it inevitably evokes.

The humorous narrative tone also shows Alsana and Clara's *friendship* as a space of touch, as a space of trust. It is realized through a rhetoric that maintains an external focalization in relation to direct speech. The focalization explicitly refers to the characters' actions, to their performative attitude, which presents humorous instances within a dry narrative presentation that is incongruent with how they act. This incongruity genderizes humor as reflected in Alsana's astute perspective on her husband: ›Alsana throws her head back, a dismissive gesture. ›Oh, in the war. Off killing some poor bastards who didn't deserve it, no doubt. And what did they get for their trouble? A broken hand for Samad Miah and for the other one a funny leg. Some use, some use all this‹; ›Alsana spits quite frankly on the grass. ›Shitty lies! If they are heroes, where are their hero things? Where

are the hero bits and bobs? Heroes – they have things. They have hero stuff. You can spot them ten miles away. I've never seen a medal and not so much as a photograph.‹ Alsana makes an unpleasant noise at the back of her throat, her signal for disbelief.›

It is as if they were talking about and problematizing discursive issues, but these are shown to be rather intimate everyday problems, which also indicates their closeness. Because both characters have a voice, they can speak back and challenge mainstream *white* British or Western norms (as well as their husbands', another kind of mainstream within). Here it is expressed in Alsana's straightforward exclamation that marks her character: ›to the whiteys who don't know any better‹. On the one hand, Alsana is speaking back to an ›implied (*white*) audience‹, suggesting that there are things beyond ›their‹ ›knowledge‹, and that she perceives it as incomplete. However, implicit in the words ›don't know any better‹ is not so much an accusation as a forgiving tone that excuses this behavior, suggesting that Alsana does not expect more of them and believes they might have acted differently if they had known better.

In this quite confident tone, the stereotype of the ›submissive‹ and ›backward Muslim wife*‹ is undone in a disarmingly humorous way that may make future restaurant patrons laugh and keep it in mind for the next time they encounter a ›subjugated‹ Muslim woman*. The other, in their ›otherness‹ and difference, can be perceived, at least by an ideal ›implied audience‹ who can hear this as an equal, in that, to quote Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, through the narration and the fact that Alsana has been given a voice, *the conversation flows from both sides*. The humorous narrative angle allows the characters to speak back to the mainstream discourse alongside and beyond any stereotypes. The characters' voices diminish the stereotypical representation as well as any stereotypical images that the ›audience‹ might bring with them. Rather than marking the characters, the stereotypes are modified and sent back to discourse from which they originate (via colonial history).

On a meta-level, humor offers a field of touch that renders difference unimportant to understanding and may even subtly ask an ›implied audience‹ to alter its images of the other. At this level, an incongruity of humor is performed. Additionally, there is also an ›implied audience of color‹ that shares the ›knowledge‹ of the narrator and the characters and can laugh and enjoy the congruency of the humor performed.

Despite the fact that Alsana and Clara belong to different religions (both, at least historically, quite imperial) that are often seen as warring, they discuss an intimate subject, which shows their closeness. This is also evident in the way how Alsana *acts*. She *looks* at Clara before deciding to utter her words. She does not want to offend Clara, which indicates her affection for her. Her concern is thus transferred to an ›implied audience‹. After looking at her Alsana decides not to say what she wanted to say in order not to disturb her friend, which is signaled by the word ›but‹: ›but Clara's eyes are closed‹. The passage also shows that Alsana is a respected friend. Alsana's words have influenced Clara's thinking, touched her. In the midst of a funny story, there is this subtle performance of *friendship* and warmth that has developed from a chance encounter between two people with very different backgrounds in a new environment, who become a new ›family‹: Clara has closed her eyes in a meditative way. She has taken up the words of Alsana ›to look at it close up‹. And it is in this moment of absorbing her friend's words that Clara seems to realize something else.

In a withdrawn way, she looks at Archie ›close up‹ and recognizes another instance of an encounter that has touched her deeply in a reorienting way. In a transposed speech that changes the focalization to a tagged direct style, the ›implied audience‹ is placed in a close narrative distance and can feel Clara's realization of an im/possible ›love‹ at the same time as she does. The moment of realization is expressed in a humorous way, intensifying the narrative distance in direct style, as Clara, smiling, exclaims: ›folds paper for a living, dear *Jesus*.‹ There seems to be a crudeness in this realization that amuses Clara. Clara, a young, beautiful Black woman, has fallen in love with an old, poor *white* man. The socio-historical boundaries and *normalizations* around ›race‹ class, age, and the meaning of ›love‹ – are subtly deferred by the indication, firstly, of Clara's happy smile and secondly, by her utterance: ›folds paper for a living‹ and an emphasis on the word ›Jesus‹ as if to say *I cannot believe I am in love with someone like that* and at the same time that such is ›life‹. It is an affectionate, humorous, liberating invitation to all possible impossibilities beyond the limits of our first-hand imagination, encouraging us to think that it is possible to have another world through slightly different shifts in our ways of imagining things (around us). Clara's smile, in this sense, also indicates the process of *unfolding* in the endless matter of non-knowledge and power-lessness that ›life‹ seems to involve in order to arrive at some form of understanding – somehow.