



The Mis-Education of Irie Jones and Zora Belsey: Education and Black Female Identity in Zadie Smith's White Teeth and On Beauty

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The *Mis*-Education of Irie Jones and Zora Belsey: Education and Black Female Identity
in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and *On Beauty*

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Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of educational institutions on the identity formation of women of color in the novels of Zadie Smith. Through a close analysis of the experiences of Irie Jones in *White Teeth* (2000) and Zora Belsey in *On Beauty* (2005), this thesis examines the ways in which Black female characters negotiate their sense of authenticity in relation to the often conflicting social and cultural contexts they find themselves in. Utilizing theories of identity formation, cultural studies, and postcolonialism, as well as analyzing the history of state multiculturalism and colonialism, this thesis argues that Smith's novels depict struggles unique to the woman of color as she attempts to formulate a sense of agency in the face of conflicting expectations, opportunities, biases, and challenges of a multicultural society. This thesis concludes that Smith's work contributes to ongoing debates about the critical need for representations of the black female experience in literary works, particularly in the world of education, and the role this literature plays in shaping our understanding of identity, agency, and belonging in relation to women of color.

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Introduction

In Zadie Smith's 2008 lecture "Speaking in Tongues," she contrasted the use of a single voice versus what she referred to as a double voice. As she described her own experiences, she cited her college years as a pivotal moment in which she abandoned "the voice of [her] childhood" in Willesden for "the voice of lettered people" at Cambridge University (Smith "Speaking"). Rather than "adding a new kind of knowledge to a different kind" she already possessed, Smith found that developing a double voice demanded a level of "flexibility" that she was unable to maintain over time. She reflected with regret on her inability to keep "both voices alive" as she considered them "both a part of" her identity. As the lecture continued, Smith explained in detail the complex gift of the double-voiced that granted figures like George Bernard Shaw, William Shakespeare, and Barack Obama power in their universality despite any social pressures they may have faced to conform to the standard usage of a single voice. Smith argued that the ability to use multiple voices paves the way for a more fulfilling experience and, consequently, offered "flexibility in all things".

Reflecting on her experiences as a woman of color in the classroom, Smith explained that her understanding of the voice of what she perceived to be the educated stemmed from idealized conceptions of the values she associated with this voice. Adopting a taste for "*Clarissa* and port" gave her a false sense of belonging that did not compare to the ease with which she expressed herself when speaking in her "old voice" with her family: "at home, during the holidays, I spoke with my old voice, and in the old

voice seemed to feel and speak things that I couldn't express in college, and vice versa". Smith later explored this double voice in her writing, examining the difficulty of maintaining a dual identity in a society that increasingly expects people from different backgrounds to speak with a singular voice. This is most evident in the depiction of first- and second-generation immigrant characters who adopt a secondary language in order to better adapt to their environment and achieve social mobility.

By utilizing education as a framework, Smith dramatizes the detrimental repercussions of a lack of representation of young black women. *White Teeth* (2000) examines identity and the concept of Britishness through the life and family history of half-British, half-Jamaican Irie Jones. In this novel, Smith's depiction of state multiculturalism emphasizes the detrimental effects of educational institutions rooted in colonialism on the identity formation of young black women. *On Beauty* (2005) focuses on the experiences of mixed-race Zora Belsey as she uses her academic upbringing to establish her power within Smith's imagined community of Wellington University but struggles to cultivate an authentic voice outside of the realm of her academic milieu. Similar to Smith's own experiences at Cambridge University, Irie Jones in *White Teeth* and Zora Belsey in *On Beauty* must confront underrepresentation as they shape their identities.

It is possible to interpret Smith's novels as rising to the challenge posed by Hazel Carby in her essay "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood" in which Carby emphasizes the importance of giving women of color a platform to speak about their experiences with race, gender, and class, which can only be understood by considering the daily microaggressions these groups of women face. Carby

argues that by writing *herstory* and "ignoring our lives and deny[ing] their relation to us, that is the moment in which they are acting within the relations of racism and writing history" (120). Therefore, it could be concluded that to better understand and perhaps resolve the issues revolving around the lack of representation of women of color in multicultural societies would be to advocate for the inclusion of more women of color on television, in classrooms, or in other positions of visibility. However, as Carby further argues, the inclusion of black women into feminist arguments often takes on a "tokenistic" form, in which the experience of the black woman is generalized as "the total experience of all black women" (Carby 19). Once again, the complexity and variety of the woman of color's role in a postcolonial society is reduced to a literary trope. Smith challenges this tokenization in her novels by examining the intersection of race, gender, and education first in the United Kingdom in *White Teeth*, then in the United States in *On Beauty*. Her work acknowledges the black female experience as shaped by interconnected transgenerational trauma, a point that is emphasized by the way in which contemporary educational institutions continue to reflect the legacy of colonialism. Smith portrays these institutions as ostensibly tolerant, but gradually reveals that they propagate a culture of power that silences and devalues the underrepresented. Through an examination of race, gender, social class, and education, I argue that educational experiences shed light on the construction and deformation of black agency in the classroom. In addition, I contend that it is only via an examination of these aspects that we can better grasp the intergenerational repercussions of colonialism on women of color.

My research draws from Nick Bentley's "Re-writing Englishness: imagining the nation in Julian Barnes's *England, England* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*" (2007), in

which Bentley applies Lacan's structuralist-psychoanalytic theory and Ricoeur's work on narrativization to argue that Smith's work reimagines Englishness in a multicultural context by superimposing symbols of contemporary British identity onto traditional ones. I argue that Smith's reimagined community is not merely an optimistic depiction of multiculturalism; rather, through humor, Smith emphasizes the difficulties minority groups face in a community where Britishness is synonymous with whiteness. I am also expanding upon the work of Julia Siccardi's "'There is such a shelter in each other': women looking for homes in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, *On Beauty* and *NW*" (2020), in which she argues that younger generations of black women find their place in society through social mobility which is often accomplished through a reinvention of their identity. I take this argument one step further and frame it within the context of education in both chapters by analyzing Irie and Zora's fascination with physical, emotional, and intellectual characteristics that they believe are necessary to attain what they perceive to be social mobility. My work further complements Regina Martin's "The Feminist Realism of Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*" (2019) as she argues that an intersection of a variety of factors, including race, gender, and class, influences attitudes regarding the meaning of beauty. In the second chapter of my thesis, I argue that Zora Belsey's academic upbringing severely hinders her capacity to comprehend the meaning of beauty, thereby impeding her ability to actively engage with her surroundings and develop her identity.

Work by critics including Hazel Carby, Homi K. Bhabha, Sneja Gunew, and Richard Handler helps me to consider the impact of multiculturalism on the cultural identity of those who make up the "other," as well as the ways in which state

multiculturalism politics have often ignored organizational problems, history, and political focus. Susan Moller Okin's *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* explores the discriminatory nature of political policies that tend to "treat cultural groups as monoliths" and conveniently ignore that these other cultural groups "are themselves gendered, with substantial differences in power and advantage between men and women" (12). Since the late 1990s, the British media has attempted to reflect the country's desire to be perceived as globalized by depicting minorities more extensively on television. However, the role of the female "other" has remained static and, more worrisomely, silent. Anne-Marie Fortier writes in "Multiculturalism and the new face of Britain" that "the future, and present, of international Britain is male...the recognised, legitimate, internationalist, multicultural speaking citizen is the economically successful, articulate, and creative male subject" (14). Multiculturalism models have not improved but have flourished under the same culture of power as colonialism, with the narrative championing the formerly disempowered man of color who is now empowered with opportunity and a sense of purpose granted by a strong male (and white) leader. In my argument, I address critiques of the gendered dynamics of multiculturalism, educational policy in the United States and the United Kingdom, and the colonial legacy of both nations. While some of the above scholars discuss identity and women of color in the work of Smith, little attention has so far been paid to the significant impact that education has on the development of identity.

In the first chapter, I focus on *White Teeth* in the context of state multiculturalism in the 1990s to explain how Irie Jones constructs her identity in response to the limiting representation of blackness in her classroom. By exploring the history of race, identity, and state multiculturalism in the United Kingdom since the end of World War II, I

analyze how an institution, which has its roots in colonial education institutions, has negatively affected the development of black female identity and agency as portrayed in the novel. I argue that Irie Jones can become a more authentic version of herself by re-imagining her history outside of the colonial lens of her secondary school and focusing on passages that describe the transgenerational trauma experienced by the Bowden women. In the second chapter, I analyze *On Beauty's* depiction of higher education in the United States in order to argue that college student Zora Belsey's academic identity is so disconnected from her authentic self that it hinders her ability to form an identity based on her experiences. In my argument, I highlight the intersections of race, gender, and identity in the academic culture of Wellington University and how they impact the experiences of black women, with a specific focus on Zora's interactions with authority figures. Through a close reading of passages in which she transforms her "voice" when speaking to authority figures versus those she attempts to disassociate herself from, I argue that the characteristics she has identified as valuable within her educational space prove detrimental in her development of an authentic self. As in the first chapter, I argue that the character's exploration and recognition of their history is essential to their ability to develop agency.

The educational experiences of the novel's black female characters demonstrate how colonial trauma perpetuated within these spaces disregards the complex intersectionality faced by women of color. Moreover, it demonstrates the critical need for the representation of the black woman's experience in education. A closer examination of Smith's career as a writer, her writing style, and her experiences in the context of education, both as a student and as a professional, demonstrates the pressures women of

color face in spheres of influence or power from which they are commonly excluded. By expressing trauma as “something one repeats and repeats,” the author suggests that the negative experiences faced by women of color daily are not *individual* but rather collective, repeated instances of postcolonial trauma (Smith *WT* 161). Both Irie Jones and Zora Belsey, struggle with their identities to varying degrees yet, it is their dedication to forging an identity in the face of numerous social pressures that ultimately leads them to feel a sense of authenticity.

Multiculturalism and Education in *White Teeth*

Part Three of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* centers on one of the novel's protagonists, Irie Jones, as she sits in her high school English class on Shakespeare's Dark Lady sonnets. This section of the novel signals a transition from Archie and Samad, the male protagonists of parts One and Two, to the novel's other prominent female characters. In the chapter titled "The Miseducation of Irie Jones," Irie, the half-British, half-Jamaican daughter of Clara and Archie Jones is now a fifteen-year-old secondary school student, obsesses over her appearance while observing her childhood friend and current love interest, Millat, flirt with a classmate. In the background, Mrs. Roody, the teacher, attempts to encourage discussion around the meaning of Shakespeare's Sonnet 127. In this sonnet, Shakespeare describes the appearance of a woman referred to as the "Dark Lady" who does not conform to conventional standards of beauty yet captivates the speaker with her inherent beauty. Irie, preoccupied with the thought that her appearance does not satisfy Millat's Eurocentric standard of beauty, seems to recognize herself in some of the lines of the poems being considered. Firstly, in Sonnet 127, which describes blackness as "beauty's successive heir," and then, in Sonnet 130 in which, Shakespeare describes the Dark Lady's hair as "black wires [that] grow on her head" (Shakespeare Sonnet 127, line 3; Sonnet 130, lines 3-4). When Mrs. Roody invites Irie to share her thoughts, Irie inquires as to whether the Dark Lady is black. Her negative response further deepens Irie's feelings of isolation:

No, dear, she's *dark*. She's not black in the modern sense. There weren't any...well, Afro-Carri-bee-yans in England at that time, dear. That's more a modern phenomenon, as I'm sure you know. But this was the 1600s. I mean I can't be sure, but it does seem terribly unlikely, unless she was a slave of some kind, and he's unlikely to have written a series of sonnets to a lord and then a slave, is he? (226-27)

Mrs. Roody's opportunity to engage Irie, who had, until that moment, been otherwise distracted throughout the entirety of the lesson, is lost as soon as she "redde[n]" in embarrassment as she comes to terms with her teacher's statement that what she had believed to be "something like a reflection" was an illusion she could take no part in (226). No match for Mrs. Roody's authoritative tone on the subject of Shakespeare, Irie loses her momentum as she initially makes an attempt to explain ("I just thought...") before "g[iving] up in the face of giggling" (227). Although Irie attempts to make a meaningful contribution to the classroom discussion as she is initially called on to do, Mrs. Roody makes light of this contribution by labeling her "modern ear" a faux pas in analyzing Shakespeare (227). This exchange is one of numerous that set the tone for the rest of the novel as Irie strives for a way out of the "familiar darkness" that symbolizes the ambiguity of her identity and the belief that whiteness is fundamental to British identity (227).

Irie's experience in "The Miseducation of Irie Jones" is a turning point in a complex Bildungsroman that outlines the disempowerment of the immigrant experience as well as that of the descendants of postcolonial migrants. Irie's "miseducation" is examined through a series of vignettes in which the protagonist contemplates her identity through her appearance. Finding no representation to validate her desirability nor having the self-esteem to see beauty in herself, Irie eventually turns to her family history to begin to define her identity and establish a sense of agency. In this chapter I argue that *White*

Teeth's depiction of state multiculturalism and its impacts reveals how detrimental it is to the formation of identity and agency among people of color as it fails to acknowledge the ongoing effects of colonial trauma on these communities. Furthermore, I posit that Part Three of the novel serves as a springboard for a larger, more significant conversation on the failure of Eurocentric paradigms on anti-racism and multiculturalism in education and its effects on Black female identity.

Overshadowed by a fierce marketing campaign that focused on her age, ethnicity, and background, as well as the political climate of the 2000s, early reviews reduced Smith's debut novel to a "humorous portrayal of serious social concerns" and an "ethical failure" by harsher critics (Tancke 27). In "*White Teeth* Reconsidered," Ulrike Tancke argues that criticism of Smith's work has been impacted by a misunderstanding of the "narrative mechanisms by which it operates," leading to a misinterpretation of its intentions (28). Critics such as Paul Dawson, Bertold Schoene, and James Wood have argued that Smith's style undermines the seriousness of important social issues and that her omnipresent narrator dominates the narrative, relegating the personalities and development of her characters to a secondary position. However, Tancke argues that Smith employs the "mechanism of narrative deception" to make "uncomfortable truths not just about British multicultural society, but also about the human condition at large" more accessible to the reader (30). This narrative deception, albeit occasionally humorous, allows for observation and, to an extent, appreciation for the unique challenges faced by first and second-generation immigrants. This narrative technique is demonstrated when Magid, Millat, and Irie visit Mr. Hamilton, a World War II veteran to whom they are tasked with delivering gifts for the Harvest Festival. This back-and-forth

not only provides an entertaining intergenerational discussion, but it also marks a shift from a humorous criticism on the empty gestures of multicultural education to a sobering reflection on colonial trauma. Furthermore, Smith's style facilitates a critical assessment of "one's own, commonly held beliefs and widely accepted convictions" (Tancke 29). In writing characters this way, "Smith challenges and eludes a homogenous sense of English culture and identity, even as she so attentively relies on an implicit understanding of the quiddity of Englishness itself" (Tancke 170). Although frequently classified as postcolonial, *White Teeth* is not solely concerned with representing *how* the characters are marginalized but how they navigate multicultural spaces to forge their identity. Focusing on the way in which the narrative describes that "strangers, brown, yellow, and white...have finally slipped into each other's lives with reasonable comfort" is central to the novel and its examination of the complexities of a culturally diverse Britain (Smith *WT* 271). Consequently, significant emphasis has been placed on how characters interact with or respond to experiences that contribute to the formation of their identities. The novel further addresses the issue of identity by arguing that history is an indispensable factor in its formation, an approach that is frequently neglected in multiculturalism policy.

Literary criticism of *White Teeth* and Smith's depiction of a multicultural Britain primarily engage with the formulation of a more contemporary understanding of what it means to be British. Jonathan Sell's article "Chance and Gesture in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*: A Model for Multicultural Identity?" (2006) argues that Smith's treatment of time within the novel allows her to "inscribe identities which are no longer hung-up on historical injustices or immersed in somber, unproductive

introspection” which in turn, offers a more optimistic portrayal of identity in a multicultural Britain (33). Nick Bentley’s article “Re-writing Englishness: imagining the nation in Julian Barnes’s *England, England* and Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*” argues that *White Teeth* openly discusses the concept of Englishness and multiculturalism with the intention of offering a new understanding of national identity. In his article, Bentley adapts Lacan’s structuralist-psychoanalytic theory and Ricoeur’s work on narrativization to define Englishness as a symbolic representation of identity that is composed of a “series of signifiers of the nation that operates within the linguistic field of the list, without necessarily relating to referential aspects of the nation” (486). Ricoeur’s work on narrative added to this theory emphasizes that these symbols cannot work on their own to compose Englishness but, rather, are held together by a narrative that composes this “imagined community” (488). According to Bentley, Smith’s representation of Englishness “reimagines a multicultural interpretive community that corresponds to the kind of plural society presented in the text,” which requires an engagement with Englishness as is rather than a negation of it (498). Janice Linn Watts’ “‘We are divided people, aren’t we?’ The politics of multicultural language and dialect crossing in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*” employs Ben Rampton’s theory on “language crossing” to argue that since ethnic minorities cannot access multiculturalism, they must explore the concept of identity through their usage of language. In this article, Watts contends that rather than propose methods to narrow the gap between former notions of British identity and contemporary ones, Smith demonstrates the “very real restrictions and significant limitations...placed upon immigrant populations” (852). Julia Siccardi’s article, “‘There is such a shelter in each other’: women looking for homes in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*,

On Beauty and NW (2020), adapts Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization to argue that black, female characters that are products of diaspora establish their "home" through "geographical and physical mobility" while the younger generation does so through "achieving social mobility" (224). This social mobility can only be established through a reinvention of themselves.

While much has been written about Smith's treatment of multiculturalism, class, and the identity of immigrants and their children, this discussion has focused largely on the male protagonists of the novel. Curiously, there is a dearth of scholarly attention paid to the obstacles Irie faces in her quest to comprehend and establish her identity. Throughout the majority of the novel, Irie's identity is ambiguous, and she is often overshadowed by her childhood friends Millat and Magid, who struggle to reconcile their Bengali heritage with their British identity. This chapter examines the experience of Irie Jones to argue that educational institutions as represented in the novel have a disproportionately negative impact on the development of black women's agency and identity. Prejudice, discrimination, and a general lack of cultural understanding are all factors that shape the novel's black female characters, both in terms of their sense of self and their ability to take charge of their own lives. A closer examination of the experiences of the Bowden women, particularly the educational experiences of Ambrosia Bowden in colonial Jamaica and Irie Jones in a "multicultural" England, reveals the history of colonial mentality and its negative impact on contemporary Black identity in Britain. By focusing on the intersectionality of race and gender within educational

exchanges, Smith demonstrates the dangers of perpetuating an ideal that effaces colonial trauma.

Before analyzing the representation of education and multiculturalism in the novel, it is essential to understand how “multiculturalism” is best defined in relation to the United Kingdom during the time the novel is set and written. The sociological ramifications of implementing educational systems based on a Eurocentric understanding of diversity is the subject of Stuart Hall's "The Multicultural Question." Here, Hall supposes that, unlike the term multicultural, "describ[ing] the social characteristics and problems of governance posed by...different cultural communities liv[ing]together," multiculturalism "references the strategies and policies adopted to govern or manage the problems of diversity and multiplicity" (209). Hall's work on defining multiculturalism is particularly pertinent because it emphasizes the politicization of heterogeneity that, when paired with the New Labour take on multiculturalism-based education policies in the early 2000s, further "precipit[ates] the multicultural question at the centre of a crisis of national identity" (222). In this multiculturalism model, practices that have been attributed as defining characteristics in certain groups are “to be preserved by their members and safely consumed by others” (Kymlicka 3).

In 1997, the Runnymede Trust, a race equality think tank launched an inquiry on the “threat” that the connotations of multiculturalism pose to British identity. As a result, the Parekh Report, published only ten months after the publication of *White Teeth* suggested that "Britishness, as much as Englishness, has systematic, largely unspoken, racial connotations. Whiteness nowhere features as an explicit condition of being British, but it is widely understood that Englishness, and therefore by extension Britishness, is

racially coded" (Parekh 38). In the British context, "multiculturalism" and its integration into educational policy as a result of demographic changes caused by postcolonialism has led to much debate as it is often associated with "identity politics based on essentialism and claims for authenticity which automatically reinstate a version of the sovereign subject and a concern with reified notions of origin" (Gunew 22). It is important to note that multiculturalism that "deal[s] with the management of diversity" in a legislative context is known as state multiculturalism (24). Within the realm of education, Gunew argues, state multiculturalism is often criticized for 'embracing' difference by enforcing a "hidden norm from which minority groups diverge while failing to recognize prevailing power differentials" (25). State multiculturalism contributes to this prevailing hierarchy by failing to engage with the inequities of colonial history and, therefore, not recognizing the disproportionate power white Britons have within the education system.

Since its establishment in the early nineteenth century, the model for formal education in the United Kingdom has taken many forms. Initially intended for the children of poor and working-class families in Britain, educational practices were later adapted for use in the settler colonies as a way "to cultivate skills, dispositions and social identities consistent with the imperatives of [a] nationalistic ethic" (Sylvester 273). Consequently, "the responsibility of a benevolent colonial government" was to embed British values as the qualities of the intellectual, and thus superior individual (Swartz 19). While presented as altruistic, the exclusive character of the educational opportunities provided to poor and working-class children in the United Kingdom contributed to the perpetuation of hierarchical class structures.

In the colonies, however, curricula designed for native populations also played a significant part in legitimizing the British empire by “incorporating perceived cultural, social, religious, and political distinctions, in addition to physical ones the imperial hierarchy served both to justify and facilitate control” (Paul 13). In India, educational treatises such as Macaulay's 1835 Education Minute advocated an Anglocentric ideology that regarded the Indian culture and language as inferior and, therefore, undesirable, whereas assimilation to British values was considered a success. This cultural paternalism existed in all aspects of colonial life, particularly in policies that championed the establishment of elites within indigenous populations that were native in “blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect” (Macaulay 8). In the West Indies, what began as a subsidy for the education of freed slaves transformed into education for labor effort designed to “justify a social order based on different relationships to labour and, therefore, different relationships to education” (Swartz 63). In the Cape Colony, schooling initiatives resulted in the development of free secular education. Still, inadequate management and cultural biases about indigenous populations ensured that these institutes “generally catered to white children” (38). Although levels of reform, initiatives, and subsidies varied across colonies, what was consistent was a curriculum that promoted values that championed English exceptionalism. It is crucial to note that many of these educational charters were not created only to educate white British subjects, as many affluent English families sent their children back to England for a “traditional” British preparatory education. That is to say that the beginnings of educational institutions in the settler colonies were primarily aimed towards “freed slaves in the West Indies, Indigenous peoples in the colonies of settlement” and aimed to

establish English ideals through the devaluation and eventual erasure of indigenous cultures (31). These policies were primarily proposed and enacted in England, culminating in a conflict between the needs of the indigenous populations and the needs of British migrants who could not afford to send their children abroad for school. Simultaneously, institutions in the United Kingdom prioritized the establishment of moral education for "poor and working-class children" by emphasizing characteristics such as charity and obedience (31). State multiculturalism is a postcolonial product of this Anglocentric approach to egalitarian education.

While *White Teeth* focuses on the lives of first and second-generation black and brown immigrants' struggle to navigate a society still coming to terms with its heterogeneity in the 1980s, Smith's choice to move across three different time periods illustrates the cyclical nature of immigrant trauma. By incorporating the consequences of a deeper history on the lives of black female characters, Smith challenges the meaning and origin of British identity. The protagonists in *White Teeth* are perpetually at odds with the preconceptions that have been foisted onto their identities through the legacy of colonial education. As a consequence, individuals are not given the opportunity to construct their identities; rather, they are coerced into conforming to the cultural archetypes of their ancestry. As scholars like Kathleen Paul and Anne-Marie Fortier have demonstrated, British identity and pride are rooted in its imperialist identity. Though multiculturalism-based initiatives have attempted to rework the British image as more inclusive, many of these efforts have been made at the cost of minimizing or outright rejecting the effects of its colonial history. While multiculturalism-based campaigns have sought to redefine Britain's image as more inclusive, they have often done so by

downplaying or dismissing the effects of the country's colonial past, which is at the heart of British identity and pride.

In light of its history, the meaning of Britishness and how ethnic minorities locate themselves within this definition is a hotly contested subject, especially when political policies that enforce heterogeneous ideas are imposed in institutions such as schools. Antiracist initiatives in the context of multicultural education tend to alienate and, in some cases, vilify difference by "essentia[lizing] the "black subject" and reinforc[ing] a bipolar black/white dichotomy" (Modood 308). Although a significant portion of *White Teeth* focuses on the Britain of the 1980s and 1990s, the novel demonstrates direct connections of modern Britain to its colonial past to underline the impact trauma, disadvantage, and marginalization have had on the identity of people of color. Assuming that colonial institutions, in their most fundamental form, can be characterized as institutions of power where a particular race, gender, and class have a significant advantage, the representation of state multiculturalism in the novel is an extension of these oppressive structures that perpetuate trauma for the protagonists and their descendants.

Through its depiction of colonial trauma's history and its effects on multiple generations of the same family, the novel takes a critical stance against state multiculturalism. In the case of the Bowden women, trauma is intergenerational and originates from Ambrosia's experience in colonial Jamaica. Notably, their story is not told in chronological order but rather as a series of recollections that emerge as the Bowden women confront their traumatic past. The way such a complex history is conveyed in the novel speaks to the women's inability to reconcile their past, symbolizing

the fragmented nature of their memory. Though the impact of this colonial past is addressed throughout the novel, it is presented in greater depth after Clara Jones and Joyce Chalfen discuss the topic of Irie's intelligence and its genetic origin.

The Chalfens, parents to Irie and Millat's classmate, Joshua, praised in their community as intellectuals are tasked to host after-school study sessions as part of an "arrangement" with the school to reform Irie and Millat's propensity for mischief. Irie's infatuation with the Chalfens' way of life prompts her mother, Clara, to be concerned about the Chalfens' potentially harmful influence on her daughter's sense of identity (251). Clara, feeling obligated to express her appreciation and eager to learn more about the Chalfens, has an uncomfortable encounter with Joyce Chalfen, which leads her to remember her family's tragic colonial past to explain her daughter's intelligence, which "nurture just won't explain" (293). Joyce's assumption that Irie's home environment could not possibly have been a factor in her superior intelligence parallels the educational paternalism Irie and Millat experience when the Headmaster of Glenard Oaks decides that after-school sessions at the Chalfens will help them realize their full potential. Joyce follows up her line of inquiry by asking Clara to make a decisive statement on the origin of Irie's intelligence which causes Clara to relive symptoms of her family's colonial trauma as she reflects on Captain Durham's negative role in her family history: "Now, out of interest—I mean, I really am curious—which side do you think Irie gets it from, the Jamaican or the English?" (292). Joyce follows up her line of inquiry by asking Clara to make a decisive statement on the origin of Irie's intelligence which causes Clara to relive symptoms of her family's colonial trauma as she reflects on Captain Durham's

negative role in her family history: “a family memory; an unforgotten trace of bad blood in the Bowdens” (293, 295).

Interestingly, Joyce emphasizes that it is sheer “curiosity” which has led her to ask this question which might have otherwise been deemed offensive. It is Joyce’s lack of inhibition in asking someone, a stranger to her, regarding her heritage and the origin of her intelligence that demonstrates the native effects of educational paternalism. In this passage, Joyce, feeling superior to Clara, asks a potentially damaging question with the sole desire to satisfy her need for knowledge. Though her question implies that she is curious to know Clara’s thoughts, her previous assumption regarding the role that Clara must have played in the development of Irie’s knowledge demonstrates that Joyce has reached this conclusion regardless of how Clara’s own opinion may differ. As Clara “look[s] up and down the line of dead white men” depicted in the portraits of the Chalfen ancestors, she is reminded of her own ancestry, and her reluctant reaction to Joyce’s question on the origin of Irie’s intellectuality reveals a great deal about her perspective on her family’s relationship to her grandfather, Captain Charlie Durham (293). His legacy as a “Muscular Christian,” stands in stark contrast to the vilification he receives from the Bowden family, whom they remember as “Whitey” and a “Djam fool bwoy” (293). In answering Joyce’s question, Clara minimizes Captain Durham’s role in her family’s traumatic past but does not remain completely silent on the topic. Instead, she identifies the 1907 Kingston earthquake as the event that “knocked the Bowden brain cells into place” and changed the course of the Bowden family’s success (293). Clara feels compelled to remark that it is her own English heritage by way of her grandfather, Captain Charlie Durham, and the “good English education” he provides her grandmother

as the source of the family's seemingly unusual intellectuality. However, this scene also leads to the recounting of "a family memory; an unforgotten trace of bad blood in the Bowdens" (293, 295).

Later it is revealed that the 1907 Kingston earthquake was also the day Ambrosia, Clara's Jamaican grandmother is able to break free from a pattern of abuse and achieve greater control over her own destiny. Clara's attempt to gloss over her tragic family history with a quip on the origin of her family's intelligence demonstrates how the Bowden women have become conditioned to respond to trauma by downplaying its role in their lives. However, a mention of the earthquake demonstrates Clara's understanding that the internalized trauma of Ambrosia's abuse is still a very present part of her identity, despite the fact that she feels reluctant to share this information. As Joyce's pleasure in being "proven right" confirms, her question is not genuine curiosity but rather a desire to reaffirm a racist assumption she had previously formed about Irie and her potential for intelligence (294). Clara's ability to identify this racial microaggression compels her to remain silent, but she nevertheless feels guilt for passively agreeing with Joyce's assessment of her ancestry. The fact that "Clara bit[es] her own lip once more, this time in frustration and anger" is indicative of her feelings of guilt and humiliation for lying to make herself more attractive to Joyce (294). Although Captain Durham is an integral part of an oppressive system that forces the Bowden women to look within themselves for strength, he is not the ultimate source of their tenacity and intelligence. However, as evidenced by Joyce's reaction to Clara, these characteristics only appear plausible when associated with a white male figure. Smith provides context for Clara's reluctance to speak of her past by detailing Captain Durham's connection to the Bowden

women. However, Smith also seems to invite the reader to evaluate their own perspectives on the nature of cognitive and non-cognitive traits and the role that trauma and genetics play in developing these characteristics.

In the section entitled “The Root Canals of Hortense Bowden,” the circumstances and repercussions of the ‘special’ interest Captain Durham takes in Ambrosia exemplify the silence and shame experienced by victims of colonial trauma and its transgenerational effects. After “one drunken evening” leads to her pregnancy, Captain Durham decides to ‘improve’ her through an English education in “Letters, numbers, the Bible, English history, trigonometry” (295, 296). While dubious of his motives because there is “always a reason” for an Englishman to express interest, her mother begs that her daughter “be thankful for gen’russity” (295). The mother's disregard for her daughter's skepticism is symptomatic of colonial indoctrination. Furthermore, her conviction that Captain Durham's status as an Englishman guarantees that his access to her daughter will result in a positive change is problematic. She decides that “a hansum, upright English gentleman” like Captain Durham could only have her daughter's best interests in mind and is either uninformed or intentionally unaware of the abuse he has subjected her daughter to (295). In addition to his academic teachings, there is also the more questionable one in “anatomy,” in which he repeatedly exploits her body and her perceived ignorance. These educational sessions are meant to “elevate her” so that she might understand that “in her heart, she was a lady, though her daily chores remained unchanged” (296). Yet, it is apparent that Captain Durham's interest in Ambrosia stems from his desire to continue abusing her.

In the case of Ambrosia Bowden, a successful education is intended to assimilate her to Anglocentric values, but this approach completely marginalizes the oppression she has experienced and will continue to experience due to her race. Promises that “their secret child would be the cleverest Negro boy in Jamaica” leave Ambrosia with a misunderstanding of social hierarchies, her future, and that of their child (295). After all, it is abundantly evident from how Captain Durham treats Ambrosia that he has no intention of claiming the child as his own. As a result, he makes an effort to make up for this by providing her with education, but he continues to conceal from her the truth about her position within society. Rather than taking responsibility for Ambrosia, Durham entrusts her to the care of Mr. Glenard, who is regarded as “a good Christian gentleman” (296). Although her mother implies that Captain Durham's departure is due to Ambrosia's pregnancy, she reiterates that Ambrosia “could do wid some improvin’,” exhibiting the normalization of English superiority and the assumption that this 'opportunity' will improve rather than continue to influence her life negatively. This is part of Mr. Glenard's interest in Ambrosia, who is “of the opinion that the natives required instruction, Christian faith, and moral guidance” but who was also enchanted by the “pretty, obedient girl, willing and able round the house” (296). This complex and self-serving introduction to education leaves Ambrosia confused about religion and morality, and she mistakes Glenard's assault on her later in the chapter for an “attempt[t] at an education” (299). Parallel to her connection with Captain Durham, Ambrosia's notion of “a little education” is synonymous with the abuse she suffers at the hands of two men who claim to have a vested interest in her advancement (298). Mr. Glenard, who is crushed at the scene when an earthquake strikes Kingston, is remembered as a hero of educational advancement, and

never held responsible for his crimes (299). Mr. Glenard's legacy is left in the establishment of Glenard Oaks Comprehensive, the school Irie currently attends, which describes itself as a "shelter, workplace, and educational institute used in its time by a mixture of English and Caribbean people" when in reality, the former "workhouse" was built with the money that he earned as a "successful colonial" who had made his future overseeing tobacco farms (251). The school's pamphlet emphasizes Sir Glenard's desire to do "something for the people" rather than addressing the former workhouse's history of imperialism and oppression (252). In contrast, Ambrosia is left with a traumatic experience disguised as an educational opportunity whose ramifications are transmitted to subsequent generations of Bowden women who endure colonial aggression in their own lives.

By providing additional context on what happens to Captain Durham, the novel allows Ambrosia's tale to transition from a story about her abuse to reclaiming her individuality. While she is no longer the naive woman Captain Durham took advantage of, his love for Ambrosia is likened to the way "the English loved India and Africa and Ireland...badly" to emphasize what "happens upon stolen ground" can never lead to an uncomplicated ending (299). As expected, Captain Durham's desire to return for the "educated Negress" he wished to "marry" is thwarted by the governor of Jamaica (300). His insistence that "there were no spaces on his boats for black whores or livestock" (300) demonstrates how education functioned as a colonial instrument rather than a liberation mechanism. Ambrosia's educational background does not offer her the opportunity to advance as her mother hoped but, rather, leaves her aware that she is still seen as less than human. It is not Captain Durham and Mr. Glenard's educational interest

in Ambrosia that aids in her progress. It is her choice to seek this education on her own terms, in this case, religion, so that she finds the strength needed to make a life that is of her own choosing. Ambrosia's development of agency is best exemplified by her decision to “fetch [her] knowledge from afar” by turning to religion rather than "love" in a bid to take control of her own development (301). Decades later, Irie's “miseducation” challenges her understanding of identity and compels her to explore the history of her ancestors, Ambrosia and Captain Durham, and to seek guidance from extraneous sources to discover who she is.

It is essential to understand the racialization of British identity as the United Kingdom retreated from imperial power in the wake of World War II in order to place the damaging narrative produced by Eurocentric and ethnocentric schooling into its proper historical perspective. Policies such as the British Nationality Act of 1948, passed in part as a response to post-war labor shortages, resulted in a rise in postcolonial migration and a shift in demographics that reached its peak between 1948-1971 and ignited a dispute on the meaning of Britishness. The introduction of the term "citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies" extended to those of formerly colonized nations, further maintaining that “there was no ‘natural’ link between the colonies and the United Kingdom” and promoting the belief that, unlike those in the commonwealth, true Britons could be “assumed to be white, Christian, conservatives and the true custodians and owners of the title ‘British’” (Paul 22, 23). It is also crucial to note that this assumption extended to white citizens regardless of their Commonwealth affiliation; a white Jamaican or Australian would have been deemed “more British than other” citizens with indigenous heritage (22). Terminology such as the use of the word “British stock” in reference to

those “responsi[ble] of maintaining the Britishness of the imperial community,” along with entrance requirements, further emphasized a unique distinction in what it meant to be British (26, 44).

While this racialized approach to questions of national identity legitimized the dynamic of “white governors and black governed,” politicizing these biases polarized public opinion on how to modernize a post-imperialist Britain while maintaining influence over formerly colonized nations (Paul 13). After all, citizenship-based policy “represented another attempt to ensure the maintenance of a strong and united empire/commonwealth to serve as the basis for Britain’s international political aspirations (18). A nation that perceived itself “as a beacon of liberalism, tolerance, and egalitarianism” saw a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment and violent racist riots in the 1950s and 1960s, particularly aimed at the “non-White, colonized, working-class bodies” of people of color, particularly those of African descent (Perry 4). The cultural paternalism found in the colonial education model shifts to one that seeks to establish differences between the colonizer and the formerly colonized. In a 1968 speech, that later became known as the “Rivers of Blood” speech, Enoch Powell criticized mass immigration, likening it to “watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre,” and admonished the British government to reconsider its actions or risk violent retaliation from its ‘true’ citizens (Powell). Earlier gestures of ‘benevolent’ paternalism were not so evident when non-White bodies were not only residing in the United Kingdom but thought to be benefiting from a system instituted to advantage the “British,” that is to say, white Britons. Studies on the assimilation of the children of immigrants to the British education system revealed difficulties in adjustment due to cultural biases, racism, and

lack of preparation for the British curriculum. In the 1960s and 1970s, educational policies attempted to regulate, disperse, and contextualize immigrant children to normalize their presence and soften public reception. Nevertheless, within these immigrant communities, particularly among Afro-Caribbean adolescent boys, issues around "educational failure...indices of social disadvantage and exclusion" dominated (Modood and May 306).

Two major inquiries into the educational system's failures produced the Rampton Report (1981) and the Swann Report (1985) which are notably in close proximity to the setting of Irie's experiences at Glenard Oaks. In the Rampton Report, the Special Committee on Race Relations and Immigration identified a pattern of underachievement in the West Indian Community. It was determined that "intentional and unintentional" racism, poor pre-education, a lack of English proficiency, Eurocentric teaching materials, and a lack of cultural awareness on the part of the administration were major contributors to this result. In conclusion, Rampton suggested modifying the system to incorporate more cultural education, reading/language support, better funding, meticulous record-keeping, and more regulated procedures to better prepare students for the future. In addition, special emphasis was placed on the necessary training for educators and administrators to effectively accommodate diverse ethnic and socioeconomic groups. The Swann Report expanded on the findings of the Rampton Report by concluding that IQ is not a measure of achievement (or, in this case, underachievement) and that racial discrimination and prejudice were the sources of many of the problems identified by the Rampton Report. Furthermore, it concluded that education for all, rather than modifications to the education of one ethnic group, was essential for improvement. These

modifications would, according to the Swann Report, "enable, expect, and encourage members of all ethnic groups to participate fully" in the creation of a more harmonious society. Nonetheless, this education approach failed to specify who would be responsible for establishing and accounting for the proposed "framework of commonly accepted values, practices, and procedures" required for its success ("Swann Report").

Early depictions of multiculturalism in the novel indicate that educational institutions are committed to a superficial form of state multiculturalism that exists within a range of cultural assumptions with which the majority is comfortable. Samad Iqbal, Magid and Millat's father, demonstrates this point early in the novel when he objects to a pagan harvest festival and speaks out against it at a PTA meeting at the children's former school, Manor School. Mrs. Owens, the school's headmistress, rejects Samad's suggestion to add more Muslim holidays to the calendar because the Harvest Festival has already been added as "part of the school's ongoing commitment to religious diversity" (Smith *WT* 108). When Samad rebuts with details about Christianity's enormous influence on holiday celebrations at school, Mrs. Owen sarcastically responds that "removing Christian festivals from the face of the earth is a little beyond [her] jurisdiction" (109). Mrs. Owens further asserts her authority over the issue by proposing a vote that is almost unanimous to keep the Harvest Festival. While discussions on representation are taking place in educational institutions, the culture of power dictates that the majority maintains strict control over these conversations.

The administration's lackluster commitment to multiculturalism has a ripple effect in the classroom, which adversely affects the students. Manor School's music instructor, Ms. Poppy Burt-Jones, is looking to broaden her curriculum by "experimenting with

some Indian music" (128). The emphasis on the term "Indian" in this scene reflects Ms. Poppy Burt-Jones' determination to represent this type of music in a manner familiar to her, that is, one that is consistent with her understanding of Indian culture. Although her misguided understanding of what "Indian" means is implied by the inflection of her voice, the students have no qualms expressing their understanding of Indian culture explicitly through an insensitive display of what it sounds like to them. When the students mock Indian music stereotypes in response to her plan, she becomes angry and declares that it isn't "very nice to make fun of somebody else's culture" (129), oblivious to her own cultural insensitivity in wanting to engage with Indian culture in by packing a hugely diverse culture into a standard monolith most convenient to her understand of it. The students, unaware of how they had offended another culture, responded by looking down at their feet, as they were "aware that this was the most heinous crime in the Manor School rule book" (129). Poppy Burt-Jones adds Millat to the conversation to bolster her argument, but she receives an unexpected response: "Millat thought for a moment, swung his saxophone to his side and began fingering it like a guitar. "Bo-orn to run! Da da da daaaa! Bruce Springsteen, miss! Da da da da daaa! Baby, we were bo-orn—" (129). Westernized and more in tune with his British identity than his Indian heritage, Millat's response to her question on the music he listens to in his free time leads to a negative reaction as his "face fell, troubled that his answer did not seem to be the right one" (129). While the classroom's reaction shows how multiculturalism has been superficially imposed on classroom culture, Millat's fear of disappointing his instructor shows how harmful state multiculturalism is to students of color.

As the children transition from Manor School to Glenard Oak Comprehensive, the goal to welcome and celebrate multiculturalism remains, but so does the educator's inability to meet the diverse needs of the student body. The school is described as a former “workhouse” whose aim to “unite” children from a variety of “rules, beliefs, [and] laws of engagement” under one institution results in a “complex geography” of students “of every conceivable class and color” (241, 243). Coincidentally, these students only find a semblance of unity in harmful engagement with each other, in this case, through smoking. Even though the students are described as “Babelians of every conceivable class and color speaking in tongues,” demonstrating the school’s diversity, the inevitable division between the students is seen in the way these sub-groups inhabit “their own industrious corner” (243). References to school data such as the “Brent Schools Report 1990: 67 different faiths, 123 different languages)” and the desire to “unite” the student body alludes to the institution's special interest in demonstrating multiculturalism (241). At the same time, Glenard Oak’s inability to “unite a thousand children under one Latin tag” is seen as a failure, and language such as “suppress,” “splinter,” and “factionalize” imply that the student’s unwillingness to assimilate to the school’s values are a perpetual point of concern (241). While Glenard Oak advertises itself as a diverse institution, its devotion to multiculturalism as policy undermines its success. Part of these failures, like in colonial education, stem from a Eurocentric approach to education, culminating in a rejection of otherness. Moreover, the intention to rebuild British identity while simultaneously refusing to recognize its colonial past and its repercussions hinders its sustainability. At its most fundamental, multiculturalism is concerned with simplifying and commercializing complex ideas about “otherness.” This ambition to foster a sense of

belonging across communities alienates individuals whose history, ancestry, and generational trauma disqualify them from standard notions about British identity.

When social variables like race and gender are considered, a more restricted definition of multiculturalism arises. In "The Multicultural Wars," Carby notes that looking at multiculturalism through the intersection of race *and* gender reveals that "because the politics of difference work with concepts of individual identity rather than structure of inequality and exploitation, processes of racialization are marginalized and only given symbolic and political meaning when the subjects are black" (Carby 12). In the case of Irie, a significant portion of her inner conflict involves unspecified feelings of otherness. She lacks a sense of self-identity and cultural context, contributing to her sense of being "without reflection" (222). Her mother, Clara, struggles in silence with the painful Bowden history so as not to affect her daughter's identity, which has the unintended consequence of erasing it. While understandable, her motives contribute to Irie's feelings of ambiguity regarding her identity.

In "The Miseducation of Irie Jones," Irie expresses her feelings of otherness through her unhappiness with her appearance. In her dreams, Irie sees her aspirations of a thinner physique posted at "a lamppost equidistant from the Jones residence and Glenard Oak Comprehensive," referring to the role her family life and school life have in her identity. She laments that the "European proportions of Clara's figure" have skipped her in favor of a physique that does not conform to Westernized beauty standards (221). Her yearning to be desired is consistent with her enduring romantic attraction to Millat Iqbal. But Millat, who is "always with the white girls," reflects his affinity to European beauty standards, which only serves to reinforce Irie's low self-esteem (238). To make matters

worse, Millat makes it a point to continuously remind her that, due to the nature of their relationship, he cannot feel romantic feelings toward her: “you’re different. We go way back. We’ve got history. You’re a real friend. They don’t really mean anything to me” (225). Although “history” in this passage functions as a reminder of the friendship between the two teenagers, it does not make up for the history necessary to clarify her identity.

By centering the classroom scene on the analysis of Shakespeare’s “dark lady” sonnets and the topic of desire, Irie is forced to confront her emotions of alienation, culminating in an uncomfortable encounter with the teacher over her interpretation of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 127. Smith skillfully highlights the necessity of representation by selecting a text riddled with ambiguity, as scholars continue to debate the identification of the “dark lady” figure. While Irie’s classmate, Joshua Chalfen, volunteers that “the Elizabethans were very keen on a pale skin,” much to the pleasure of Mrs. Roody, Irie’s assumption that this could be made in reference to a black character is not entirely out of the question (225). After all, Shakespeare is also one of the few Elizabethan-era authors who included a leading black character, such as in *Othello*, in their work. Language such as “I’m sure you know” and “I mean...I can’t be sure, but it does seem terribly unlikely” coming from a person of authority causes Irie to question the validity of her assumption (226). Irie’s attempt at recovering her agency becomes futile: “I just thought...like when he says, here: *Then will I swear, a beauty herself is black...* And the curly hair thing, black wires—” (227). Mrs. Roody’s choice to make Irie the day’s “principle” rather than aid her in her search for representation within the classroom is chalked up to an ordinary

occurrence in her life, further exemplifying the way in which education plays a harmful role in the development of identity in the classroom (227).

Mrs. Roody's choice to reinforce that "Joshua is quite right" reveals that an invitation to analyze the Shakespearean sonnets is only extended to those who intend to engage with it according to the instructor's rules (227). Interestingly, Mrs. Roody not only takes pride in labeling Irie's mistaken interpretation as "modern" to emphasize that she is looking at a literary text traditionally seen as valuable with a 'distorted' view but also dismisses Irie's attempt to see herself within the curriculum. While Mrs. Roody notes that immigration of "Afro-Carri-bee-yans" is a "modern phenomenon," her understanding of history, particularly in the case of Black British history, is shaky at best (226). After all, by the 1980s, academic scholarship had already established Black presence dating back to at least Roman times. In the 1930s, G. B. Harrison suggested that the Dark Lady could be a reference to Black Luce or Lucy Negro, a brothel owner in Clerkenwell. Duncan Salkeld's *Shakespeare among the Courtesans* (2012) furthered this connection by linking Black Luce to her landlord, Philip Henslowe, the builder of the Rose Theater and owner of a rival acting troupe. Mrs. Roody assumes categorically that this Elizabethan-era poem could not feasibly describe a black woman, reflecting the racialization of national identity in the 1940s and 1950s. Yet, historical scholarship indicates that this is yet another baseless cultural assumption. To Irie, literary representation moves beyond her need to be reflected in history; rather, it engages with her yearning to be seen as desirable to the male gaze. In addition, the possibility that features of her physical appearance could be regarded as a topic of literary quality pushes

her to believe that she, too, deserves to be desired despite falling short of the Westernized ideal. Mrs. Roody's correction, therefore, reaffirms her feelings of disappointment.

The educator's choice to deny Irie the possibility of an alternative interpretation of the poem narrows the scope of power within the classroom and establishes a lasting hierarchy throughout the novel. This seemingly small moment in her day-to-day life shifts Irie's perspective from being at odds with her identity to no longer having an identity. While the "history" between Irie and Millat lies in their connection as childhood friends, she finds more visibility and solidarity within this friendship than she does within a classroom that is supposed to reflect the "constructive" nature of her school (225, 251).

When Irie, Millat, and Joshua are caught "in the very act of marijuana consumption," they are taken to the headmaster for discipline and are once again reminded that "the whole *ethos* of Glenard Oak" is to have their best interests in mind (251). The headmaster's approach to educating Irie and Millat echoes the pervasively paternalistic nature of Captain Durham's special interest in Ambrosia Bowden's education. His choice to move away from what he believes to be "behavior chastisement and toward constructive conduct management" comes in the form of a visit to the home of Joshua Chalfen, a young white classmate, under the assumption that "a stable environment, and one with the added advantage of keeping you both off the streets" (251). The phrase "off the streets" reinforces the headmaster's assumption that, as young people of color, it is to be expected that they are destined to a future of undesirable behavior unless they are reformed by the school's good intentions. Interestingly, despite the fact that Joshua is found with Irie and Millat, it is they who receive the harsher part of the punishment since it is determined that Joshua's "street knowledge" of marijuana must

indicate that he is not engaged with the activity to the extent that Irie and Millat must be (251). Their perceived 'troubles' are chalked up to "family environment or personal hassles" (251). Still, the headmaster spends little time attempting to understand the origin of their misbehavior and instead reminds them that they "have a lot of potential" and their actions "are damaging to that potential" (251). The headmaster's out-of-touch perspective can be explained, in part, by his lack of these essential implicit and explicit understandings of English society.

Irie and Millat, as evidenced by the origins of Glenard Oak, are "modern phenomena" that must now conform to the values of society in order to be successful. In other words, they must adhere to the values of conventional conceptions of Britishness while acknowledging that they can never entirely abandon their past and assimilate. Therefore, Glenard Oaks Comprehensive serves as a metaphor for multicultural education in Britain: egalitarian in theory but neo-colonialist in practice. State multiculturalism celebrates otherness by enforcing its existence, ignoring the hybrid nature of the descendants of immigrants who may no longer feel tied to the part that these policies insist they play in society. In "Multiculturalism and the New Face of Britain," Anne-Marie Fortier explores what is at stake in this reimagined society: "the new multicultural Britain is imagined as inhabited by subjects who choose and move between identities/communities...paired with the view that ethnic minorities are also ascribed identities which must not only be recognised as equal, but which must also stay in place as 'other' in order to claim the multi of multiculturalism" (Fortier 7). In this instance, the student's possibility for success is contingent upon the tutelage of an older, more conventional white household, reinforcing paternalistic tendencies characteristic of

colonialism. The headmaster portrays Glenard Oaks as Irie and Millat's "escape" from the cycle of disadvantage that he has assumed they are a part of based on his own misconceptions of the identity woes faced by these two students (251).

Beyond Glenard Oaks, Irie's interactions with the Chalfen family reveal more about the ways in which she has become estranged from her own identity. Irie idolizes the Chalfens and spends her time "assessing [them] as a romantic anthropologist" (267). Using the term "anthropology" to describe Irie's interest in the Chalfen family is particularly effective because it highlights her observation of the family and their contribution to shaping her identity beliefs. Furthermore, it interestingly serves as a reversal of historical roles as anthropology was a tool for acquiring colonial "knowledge" on indigenous populations. In an interview about the novel, Smith noted that "the reason Irie gets to the centre of the book is not really about her, but about a certain idea of indeterminacy...about the centre always being slightly displaced" (107). Irie continues to look to the identities of others as she attempts to reconcile her own conflicted feelings about her own identity. She seeks representation of her identity in the literature she is reading at school, but when she is unable to find it, she turns to the observation of those whom she believes embody the spirit of English identity in order to better comprehend what she might aspire to. These sentiments are reinforced by the headmaster's assertion that her time with the Chalfens will put her on the path to success. The Chalfens exemplify conventional ideas of British culture due to their middle-class status, whiteness, and education. Her intense feelings for the Chalfen family stem from the fact that they represent a kind of "purity" in the idea of Englishness that she herself lacks. Irie knows she is not and will never be able to meet the expectations of the Chalfen family,

but she is excited to "wear" their identity while at their home because it gives her a sense of belonging. In this exchange, Joyce Chalfen plays the role of the "white English wo[man] who uphold[s] values and ideologies of [the white English bourgeoisie form]...portrayed as being both stifling and selfish, driven by a dogmatic adherence to material preoccupations and prejudices" (Loh 171). Rather than recognizing that Millat and Irie come from a different culture and background than her own, she treats them like plants, believing that with enough "nurture," they can be cured of any undesirable traits (267). As do the headmaster and Captain Durham, Joyce explains that her interest in the two students stems from the fact that she "hate[s] to see potential wasted"; Jack Chalfen, one of Joyce's children, adds that it's also because "[the headmaster] knows most of the Chalfens are four hundred times smarter than him," a statement that links intelligence to "potential" (268). Chalfen's focus on IQ echoes antiquated beliefs on the role that a high IQ plays in an individual's capacity to succeed.

As with Ambrosia Bowden's experiences with Captain Durham, her English education has not only conditioned her to believe that the Chalfen family fits within the normative values of English identity but also to believe that, in order to create a successful life for herself, she should align herself with their beliefs. Nonetheless, Irie exhibits guilt by hiding her relationship with the Chalfens from her family. She calls it a "terribly mutinous act" until her mother, Clara Jones, learns of her connection to the Chalfens and reaches out to them to introduce herself. Although at this point in the narrative Irie is uninformed of the colonial trauma her family has endured and their educational experiences, the fact that she repeats and encounters similar patterns to that of Ambrosia Bowden not only demonstrates the cyclical nature of trauma but also

highlights the role that these forms of education play in the formation of identity and agency in black women. Under the tutelage of Joyce Chalfen, Irie successfully adopts some of the qualities attributed to the Chalfens' success; however, "the more progress Irie made in her studies, attempts to make polite conversation, or her studied imitation of Chalfenism, the less interest Joyce showed in her" (277). This sentiment reflects Ambrosia Bowden's experience in the classroom, where the male figures who initially take such an interest in her inevitably lose that interest once she gains a sense of agency. By approaching state multiculturalism in a manner that does not engage with or even acknowledge the past, multiple characters actively deprive Irie of the opportunity to forge an identity that is consistent with her experience.

Smith makes a compelling case for how the educational opportunities and challenges faced by persons of color have affected their socioeconomic standing, professional achievements, and, most crucially, their sense of self-worth. Though state multiculturalism aims to bring more awareness to the cultural diversity of contemporary Britain, the voices of ethnic minorities have been systematically repressed within an educational system based on the preservation and elevation of Anglocentric ideas and culture, often forcing students to seek knowledge independently or abandon their rich cultural legacy entirely. The fundamental problem with this educational system is how it seeks to impose multiculturalism on a framework whose foundations are based on imperialist ideologies without acknowledging the effects of these ideologies on people of color. In *White Teeth*, these educational institutions play an extensive role in the development of character identity, often to the detriment of black female characters as they attempt to navigate their role within society. It is Smith's engagement with this topic

that reveals that beyond championing a curriculum that attempts to celebrate difference, it is imperative to acknowledge the past and the impact it has had on generations of people of color and on the purpose and role of education in a postcolonial society.

Academic Culture and the “Other” in *On Beauty*

Midway through Zadie Smith’s third novel, *On Beauty* (2005), the narrator makes a critical revelation about the authenticity of the identity Zora Belsey has presented until this point in the novel. Exploring several facets of the Belsey family’s life in Wellington, the novel interweaves the family's experiences from one narrative perspective to the next. In this process, the subject of identity and how each character constructs it based on their experiences is a recurring theme throughout the novel. In addition to marking a pivotal passage in the deconstruction of her academic identity, the novel’s portrayal of Zora’s inner turmoil gives insight into the complex theme of race, gender, and identity particular to black women in institutes of higher education:

She found it difficult, this thing of being alone, awaiting the arrival of a group. She prepared a face—as her favorite poet had it—to meet the faces that she met, and it was a procedure that required time and forewarning to function correctly. In fact, when she was not in company it didn’t seem to her that she had a face at all...And yet in college, she knew she was famed for being opinionated, a ‘personality’—the truth was that she didn’t take these public passions home, or even out of the room, in any serious way. She didn’t feel that she *had* any real opinions, or at least not in the way other people seemed to have them. (208-9)

In this scene, Zora waits for the arrival of her friends as they prepare to attend a poetry night at a local club as a part of an off-campus classroom assignment. A moment of introspective contemplation outside of the Wellington University campus enables Zora to acknowledge that the "opinionated" identity she has crafted, however performative, is driven by a fear of lacking the substance, or "real opinions," she identifies in her peers. In the hope that her college experience will bring forth an epiphany regarding her authentic

self, Zora “prepare[s] a face” that embodies the characteristics she has come to associate with the ideal “*Wellingtonian*” (208, 417). Nevertheless, her desire to develop a set of principles is undermined by her belief that she ought to aim for “real opinions” because “other people seemed to have them” (209). In the same way that she routinely schedules “meetings about her future with important people” and is concerned about what “could have a very adverse effect on her future,” Zora’s brief but illuminating moment of self-reflection causes her to become anxious. Her mind quickly turns to the topics that might come up in conversation with her friends, and she even admits that she keeps a list of these topics on her person to “lend herself the appearance of substance” (209). Zora, unable to shake the belief that going to college will help her figure out who she is, settles on the idea that one’s sense of self is tied to one’s capacity to form an opinion. Therefore, the development of authenticity can only be inspired by what Kanika Batra refers to as a “rude jolt,” or an uncomfortable realization, through which the character is able to formulate a sense of self (Batra 1025). In the case of Zora, it is through her relationship with an external force in the form of Carl, an outsider to Wellington, that she is able to understand and come to terms with the superficiality of her persona, which facilitates eventual self-realization.

Understanding Zora’s transformation from “the essential bridge between Wellington’s popular culture and her parents’ academic culture” to the more authentic sense of self that she adopts by the end of the novel provides an interesting perspective on the detrimental role that an emphasis on intellectualism in academic realms plays in the formation of identity in Black women (77, 438). In this chapter, I argue that Zora Belsey’s focus on aligning her characteristics to what she perceives to be the expectation

at university grants her power in situations with academics and fellow students but renders her powerless when she must reflect on her identity, feelings, or thoughts outside the academic context to which she has become so attuned. Zora's struggle to apply what she has learned to her life outside of academia is emblematic of the identity crisis plaguing today's academic institutions; that is, the focus on academic excellence does not address the complexities posed by a more diverse student body, leaving Zora feeling empowered in intellectual dialogues when she addresses a white audience but helpless when she is forced to contend with her black identity outside of this context.

In "Authenticity, Moral Values, and Psychotherapy," Charles Guignon argues that "authenticity has nothing to do with such romantic ideals as getting in touch with a deep inner self or rising above the herd...since our own life stories are inseparable from the wider text of a shared we-world, authenticity can be nothing other than a fuller and richer form of participation in the public context" (281). With this definition in mind, I argue that Zora's inability to forge an authentic identity stems from her preoccupation with meeting the expectations of others rather than reflecting on her own experiences. Zora's actions must be mediated or validated by an academic authority for her to accept what she is experiencing as genuine. However, this expectation leaves her in a perpetual state of dissatisfaction. Anticipatory anxiety about what the future may bring forces her to divert her attention from the truth of her reality and instead focus on tasks convinced that "scoring points or getting rewards" (Guignon 284) will compensate for the fact that she has no authentic identity and has not been equipped with the tools to develop her narrative identity. As Guignon posits: "We throw ourselves into the turbulence of day-to-day chores and they-roles to avoid confronting something we find threatening...what we

are fleeing from in everydayness is...the responsibility of making something of our lives" (Guignon 282). Zora has, on the surface, carefully cultivated an image of academic success. However, a closer look at her introspection throughout the novel reveals that she is obsessively consumed with the anxiety that there is something she has missed, which is indicative of her fragile sense of identity.

Zora is one of the few non-faculty characters closely associated with Wellington University, but despite the abundance of criticism directed at academic institutions, the majority of this research concentrates on the faculty of the university and the identity of the institution, rather than the formation of agency and identity in Zora. Recent criticism of *On Beauty* has primarily focused on its portrayal of academic discourse and aestheticism. Kathleen Wall's "Ethics, Knowledge, and the Need for Beauty: Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* and Ian McEwan's *Saturday*" utilizes Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* as a framework to argue that a character's ability to engage "with beauty and its representative in the social world--art" is intrinsically connected to their ability to notice others or alternative perspectives (Wall 758). In "Kipps, Belsey, and Jegede: Cosmopolitanism, transnationalism, and Black Studies in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*," Kanika Batra critiques the portrayal of the Black Studies department, which she argues is represented as "disconnected to social reality and actively participating in the perpetuation of social inequality" which undermines the success that Black Studies has had in institutions of higher learning. Dorothy J. Hale's "*On Beauty* as Beautiful?: The Problem of Novelistic Aesthetics by Way of Zadie Smith" (2012) posits that *On Beauty* utilizes "aesthetics of alterity" in order to "stres[s] its relativity and social constructedness" rather than being a fictional representation of Scarry's philosophy on

the “fundamental qualities of beauty” as suggested by Kathleen Wall’s article (Hale 815). Regina Martin’s “The Feminist Realism of Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty*” argues that an understanding of the way factors such as “race, class, culture, national identity, age, and body size” intersect is imperative in establishing theories regarding art and beauty (Martin 583).

Notably, the Belsey children’s level of racial self-awareness correlates with their level of social integration in the Wellington academic community, particularly in the case of the youngest child, Levi, and the middle child, Zora. Raised in a bi-racial, multi-ethnic household, the Belsey children are significantly impacted by their exposure to intellectuality and have shaped their identities in accordance with differing conceptions of their authentic selves. While these constructed personas function adequately inside the bounds of the Wellington communities, they are unprepared for dealing with individuals who are deemed to be outsiders. Levi, the youngest of the three Belsey children, develops what his older sister, Zora, dubs a "street" personality, much to the dismay of the rest of his family, and seeks to connect with young, black men whom he believes to be indicative of the 'street' lifestyle he has associated with what it means to be Black (63). His choice to purposefully detach from the Wellington intellectual world makes him more empathetic to crucial social injustice concerns, despite the fact that other members of his family frequently mock him for his sense of fashion and language usage. Levi is raised as what the narrator describes as "soft and open, with a liberal susceptibility to the pain of others," the Belsey children have been socialized to be sympathetic to social injustice, yet this trait is “particularly pronounced” in Levi, who is not hampered by the "hard ideological shell" of higher education (355). Though Levi's decision to escape to

Boston on the weekends in order to feel "half normal, half sane, half black" in a more diverse community exposes him to new experiences, his narrow conception of what authentic black identity is supposed to entail creates a problem (192). However, by relying on Felix, an Angolan immigrant, and Chouchou, a Haitian immigrant, for authentic depictions of blackness, Levi leaves himself open to the possibility of changing his perspective. Through his interactions with Chouchou and Felix, as well as his research into Haitian history, he becomes "overwhelmed by the evil that men do to one another. That white men do to African-American black men" (355). It is interesting to note that the atrocities of slavery and colonization appear to surprise Levi, who, up until this point, appears to have limited knowledge of the history of slavery, despite the fact that it is an extremely important part of his mother's family history and how they came to inherit the family home. This realization of an unspoken history causes what Kanika Batra calls a "rude jolt" that enables Levi to "perceive the inextricable connections between blackness, diaspora, citizenship, and institutions" (Batra 1085).

Conversely, Zora, the middle child, relegates Levi's desire for authenticity outside of the Wellington community as an insult to "people less fortunate" than them and "the worst kind of pretension" (*OB* 85). Yet, her desire to assimilate into the culture of higher education at Wellington seems intrinsically linked to her desire to separate herself from her black identity. In contrast to her brothers, Zora's decision to remain within the safety of the Wellington community allows her to thrive in an environment that favors knowledge over action. Later in the narrative, Zora encounters a "Haitian protest thing" outside the window of one of the university's offices (376). While she is aware of the fundamental issues of "minimum wage" and "being shit on by everybody all time," she is

apathetic to the cause, choosing to close the window rather than engage with what unfolds (376). Preoccupied with her own personal development, Zora has trouble mustering the enthusiasm to participate in societal efforts.

Jerome, the oldest of Howard and Kiki's children, is an undergraduate student at Brown who aligns his identity with his recently acquired Christian beliefs. Described as a "young black man of intelligence and sensibility," by his mother, Jerome plays the role of the more culturally attuned and "poetic" Belsey, much to the chagrin of his father, with whom he shares a shaky relationship (5). After all, it is his sentimental temperament that motivates one of the novel's initial conflicts when he makes the sudden decision to announce his engagement to Victoria, the daughter of his father's professional nemesis, Monty Kipps. Although his relationship with Victoria is short-lived, it is his infatuation with the Kippses way of thinking, which is completely opposite to his own family, which informs the creation of his identity. In the same way that Levi must depart from home to downtown Boston to experience life on his own terms, it takes Jerome studying abroad in London and spending time with the Kippses to feel comfortable opening himself up to ideas outside of those valued by his father. Jerome derives a form of vicarious pleasure from subjecting the beliefs his father instilled in him to the scrutiny of Monty Kipps, who views them as "typically liberal, academic, and wish-washy" (44). By doing so, Jerome creates the necessary space to reconstruct ideas that are fundamental to his identity. Zora's academic expertise and cynicism give her an edge in understanding complex situations, but they also leave her less able to feel genuine emotion in comparison to her brothers. In this sense, the academic community propagates and rewards a culture of

ideological knowledge but neither encourages nor compels Zora to create an opinion or a set of beliefs regarding what she is witnessing.

In the case of Zora, it is her willingness to achieve academic success through whatever means necessary which brings her praise and power within the Wellington community. It is her “*awl* business” type of attitude that garners the attention of faculty and her peers at the university, like that of Smith J. Miller, Howard’s academic assistant, who notes it is this skill that sets her above others her age: “Compared to the other freshmen, she was lakh a text-eating *machine* - ah mean, she strips the area of sentiment and goes to *work*...she’s *awl* business” (145). Miller posits that it is her ability to “ri[p] apart” what’s in front of her to “see how it works” is attributed to what will take her “a long way” in the future (145). It is her serious, “machine”-like approach to her coursework that makes her a “satisfying student,” denoting that this approach is of value to Wellington (144). Though the language employed in this passage likens her analytical skills to acts of violence, her propensity to “swoon” at the feet of authority figures indicates that these characteristics are praised as they are being exercised within the confines of what is deemed acceptable within the Wellington community (70, 66). Paired with an almost comical level of “persistence,” Zora’s tendency to “compile petitions and...ultimatums” often annoy or intimidate others into giving her what she wants: “When the city of Wellington served Zora with (in her opinion) an undeserved parking ticket, it was not Zora but the city – five months and thirty phone calls later – which backed down” (369).

Nevertheless, her mechanical approach to the acquisition of knowledge is depicted in the novel as what impedes her from reaching authenticity. While her work

ethic and intelligence are rewarded within the Wellington community, her continuous desire to *appear* intellectual often results in a missed experience. During a family outing to see Mozart's Requiem, her mother, Kiki, makes an observation on Zora and the way she encounters a new experience:

A glimpse to her right revealed Zora concentrating on her Discman, through which a recording of the voice of a Professor N. R. A. Gould carefully guided her through each movement. Poor Zora – she lived through footnotes. It was the same in Paris: so intent was she upon reading the guide book to Sacre-Coeur that she walked directly into an altar, cutting her forehead open. (69-70)

Zora looks towards the guidance of those she perceives as authorities on a subject in order to better understand what she is experiencing. However, in doing so, she denies herself the opportunity to experience what is in front of her. In the case of the family excursion to Paris, this results in physical injury, and, in the case of Mozart's *Requiem*, it ends in her missing the opera in lieu of a vicarious experience from Professor Gould's analysis through her Discman. Off-campus and outside of her comfort zone, Zora struggles to participate in the "we-world" as she lacks the confidence to formulate thoughts without the validation of authority, despite the fact that her analytical skills and ability to acquire knowledge earn her tangible rewards on campus in the form of praise and good grades.

The arrival of Carl Thomas, who eventually enrolls at Wellington University as a discretionary student, destabilizes her sense of identity and causes her to reevaluate her position on authenticity. When Carl, a "street poet" she encounters during the Mozart concert, later attempts to make conversation by asking her about "the *Lacrimosa* part" of the opera, she dismisses his knowledge since "he reminded her of the young boys she used to mentor in Boston" and because she has grown accustomed to listening to

"intellectuals" (135). The first conversation Carl and Zora have after meeting at the concert is particularly of interest because it outlines how she understands and interacts with the "other" outside of her academic environment. First, she assumes that he must be part of the swim team due to his speed at the pool; then, when she once again confronts him about "stealing" her swimming goggles, she "pushe[s] her wallet deep into her tote bag and discreetly zip[s] it up" in concern that he may attempt to steal her wallet. In contrast, Carl attempts to formulate a connection with Zora based on what he perceives to be shared characteristics with the Belsey family, their race. Though he praises her status as an "educated sister," he is more in awe of her aspiration for education, going on to note that it is through an education that one can achieve social mobility: "that's the prize, education. We all gotta keep our eyes on the *prize* if we're gonna rise, right?" (135). Zora's access to the institution of higher education to which Carl aspires, however, sets them further apart and makes it more challenging for her to establish common ground with Carl. Rather, she concludes that he interacts with her in order to "put off the moment when she passed through the gate and out of his world" because "he seemed to want to slow her down" (135). Zora interprets the gate into Wellington as a physical divide between their domains. Intent on outlining the differences between the two of them, she misses the opportunity to be present and develop a connection with someone outside her comfort zone. Later in the novel, when Zora develops romantic feelings for Carl, she struggles to reconcile her desire for human connection with her desire to present an intellectual persona. To better comprehend the trajectory of this conflict, it is necessary to consider how a school that values the "liberal consciousness," as represented in the novel, can produce a star student who enjoys success within the Wellington community but

struggles to find meaning beyond her academic potential. A closer examination of the classroom's power structure reveals significant truths about the academic community's dynamic.

In "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," Lisa D. Delpit argues that accessibility within an educational context is only possible to those who understand the implicit rules of the "culture of power" (282). It is, therefore, necessary for institutions to make these rules explicit to those unfamiliar with them to allow for upward mobility. This "culture of power," which Delpit divides into five main rules, describes the importance of understanding who is allowed to establish rules and who is allowed to participate within them. Understanding that the "traditional Wellington interpersonal skills — avoidance, denial, politic speech, and false courtesy — ha[ve] their uses," Zora demonstrates her comprehension of the culture of power by employing these rules when in dialogue with key stakeholders in these communities (114). In discussion with Dean Jack French, for example, she exemplifies this knowledge through her use of coded language. After being denied entry into a poetry class led by Professor Claire Malcolm, Zora approaches the dean of the university to discuss her concerns. She begins her appeal by citing that it is "circumstances beyond [her] control," namely her father's affair with Claire, as the primary reason why she is not allowed into the class (144). Approaching this matter with what she calls a "concern" about being "unfairly prevented" from taking the course not only implies that Claire's actions deviate from a conventional sense of what is ethical but also suggests that Zora believes this is a shared understanding (144). Although the case of her father's affair with Claire is crucial to the story's development, particularly regarding the relationship between her parents,

Zora has no qualms about addressing this ostensibly private and highly sensitive matter in order to achieve her objective. Dean French, upon recognizing Zora's aptitude at utilizing "language like an automatic weapon," feels immediately overpowered by her approach to the conversation and a loss of control as he remarks that "this is not the way things went in his office" (145).

Ironically, her ability to weaponize language is in direct opposition to her purpose, which is to demonstrate that she is prepared to enroll in a poetry class in which she will be required to use language more creatively. Dean French finds himself focusing on her use of the words "stymied," "vendetta," and "inappropriate" as she continues to explain why she disagrees with Claire's evaluation of her eligibility for the class (145). In her lecture titled "Speaking in Tongues," Smith mentions employing what she believes to be the "voice of lettered people" during her college years in order to align more closely with the persona she desired to project. While she claims a lack of courage prevented her from acknowledging that "not all lettered people must be of the same class, nor speak identically," it is essential for the survival of biracial children to "cross borders and speak in tongues" (Smith). Zora's propensity to weaponize language when addressing authorities reflects her efforts to project an image of sophistication while also ensuring her continued survival in the Wellington community. While Zora's ability to employ language as a weapon allows her to dominate authority figures such as Dean French, it also demonstrates a denial of her blackness. In other words, when she is not using this language to further her own agenda, she uses it to set herself apart from others. When Levi speaks in a manner that Zora has associated with his "street" persona she corrects his use of grammar, utilizing her vocabulary to reiterate the different ways they use

English: “It’s the worst kind of pretension, you know, to fake the way you speak—to steal somebody else’s grammar. People less fortunate than you. It’s grotesque. You can decline a Latin noun, but apparently you can’t even—“ (84). This persona is not supplementary to her true identity but rather superimposed upon it.

Zora strives to align Dean French with her cause by defining the laws of the academic realm through language, according to how she has come to understand them. While identifying these standard exceptions demonstrates that she is familiar with the norms and objectives of academia, her limited comprehension of these regulations precludes her from understanding the intricate manner in which they are implemented on campus. At this point in the novel, her interest in the poetry class is less apparent than the challenge that being rejected from the course inspires. The belief that she is using this information against him in a way that is analogous to "a pigskin filled with blood" and that she is "batt[ing] around his office" is yet another indication that Dean French perceives Zora's language as hostile, despite the fact that her vocabulary and tone might not ordinarily be characterized as antagonistic (146).

Throughout the novel, conversations among the faculty at Wellington suggest that students' perceptions of academic culture diverge significantly from their actual manifestation. Therefore, Zora’s ability to build her own rules inside this space is constrained by her ignorance of the exceptions to these norms. The dean remains silent as she makes her point, leading her to believe that he agrees with her plight, but, in reality, he cannot wait for the conversation to end. Zora takes the conversation a step further by labeling this decision as “*personal* discrimination” against her and, to make her point, lists her academic achievements as proof that Claire’s choice is personal rather than

based on appropriate justification: “I am in the top three percentile of this college, my academic record is pretty spotless—I think we can both agree on that” (146). It is at this point that Dean French attempts, once again, to regain power of the “murky discussion” through a reminder that as a “*creative-writing class*,” it is not her academic achievements that are at stake but rather her ability to perform creative work (146). In order to generate a sense of camaraderie, Dean French utilizes the pronoun “we” in his weak description of what a creative-writing course entails (147). Interestingly, Zora employs a similar strategy earlier in the conversation, which is intended to imply that they share common knowledge. However, he is never able to describe how he has come to comprehend creativity, which further separates the two and prevents them from reaching a consensus.

In presenting her academic achievements, Zora emphasizes her ability to perform according to set standards rather than produce creative ideas, which she deems unrelated to succeeding in the course. Dean French's suggestion that Zora “must, to a certain extent, adapt” to a nondescript universal understanding of the word “creative” seems counterintuitive, as it involves the expression of something beyond the academic realm, an area in which Zora is well-versed, but which is limited by Claire’s subjective definition of creativity. His interpretation of creativity is wordy and ambiguous, but more crucially, he implies that creativity is associated with a level of authenticity that Zora does not possess. The assumption that she lacks the creativity to perform further implies that she lacks something of value in her community. Dean French's unwillingness to impart these additional standards of engagement, which limit Zora the opportunity to exchange ideas effectively, is demonstrated, albeit subtly, by his inability to express himself coherently, if at all, and his inclination to resort back to a sense of common

knowledge that he employs to placate Zora. In response to his vague definition of creativity, Zora immediately “scrambl[es] around” in her bag and produces printed copies that attest to “a record of publication,” but in response, Dean French notices what “seemed to be prints of things” but he limits his conjectures there (147). However, his lack of engagement with this conversation empowers Zora to suggest that his alliance with Claire is, in essence, his tacit approval of her father's affair in an effort to encourage him to side with her.

Incapable of obtaining verbal confirmation of what she already believes to be true, Zora threatens to bring this matter before the advisory board for reconsideration. This marks a turning point in the conversation. Dean French finally takes “a moment to examine” what she has presented, only to conclude that “twenty years of playing this game left him in no doubt that Zora Belsey had a full hand,” finally digressing to Zora’s potential superiority in the argument (147). The use of the word “game” to describe this interaction hints at the imbalance of power present; it also implies that knowing the rules of the game is crucial to “winning” the exchange. While Zora's academic upbringing and her father's familiarity with these “games” have conditioned her to understand these rules and rely on them to achieve her goals, her lack of “life experience” prevents her from recognizing the exceptions. Earlier in the novel, Howard Belsey notes that Zora seems confused about her place in the world and the dynamics of power at Wellington University, treating those in authority with equal parts contempt and admiration. Similarly, Zora's criticism of Dean French and her determination to obtain what she desires diminishes when he commends the effort she has made to communicate with him. He then “stand[s] up and walks slowly around the table, and then perch[es] on the front of

it," bringing the conversation to a symbolic close as he reclaims control of the space and is able to look down on her from a position of apparent superiority. Dean French's commendation of her honesty and eloquence in expressing her position on the issue and his affirmation that she is indeed "a great asset to [the] institution" provide her with the confirmation she needs to end the conversation without further action (148). By assuring Zora that she possesses qualities that he and, by extension, the academic institution values, he successfully deflects the conversation away from providing a solution to the problem. Subtle gestures replace Zora's confident sentences and stiff body language due to her success and, more importantly, acknowledgment of her effort. The "colour rising proud in her face" is accompanied by a more subdued tone of voice; the words "I try" suggest a more quiet demeanor than was previously displayed (148). In a striking reversal of roles, Dean French is now the more confident one, interrupting Zora before she can finish expressing her concerns. He is "succeeding at last at winning that little contest," and his victory is evidently boosting his self-assurance (147). In an effort to avoid conflict, he pledges to "settle things to everybody's satisfaction" which amounts to promising to consider things from Zora's perspective (148). After the conversation, Zora leaves feeling accomplished and validated as someone who exemplifies Wellington's core values, while Dean French leaves intending to do everything in his power to keep the issue from being escalated to his superior.

Yet, her proficiency in the "Wellington language" and her ability to successfully navigate the social scene within the academic community immerse her so much in the immediate context that they essentially prevent her from forging an authentic point of view (262). In this process, Zora concludes that the qualities represented by this group

identity are ones she should aspire to, despite the negative connotation of their actions. At her parents' anniversary dinner, for example, her father, Howard, notes that she finds it "extraordinary that [a trio of philosophy graduates] should be capable of gossip or venal thoughts," describing her as so "hopelessly naive" that she should miss that one of these graduates was more interested in looking down her shirt than engaging in intellectual discussion with her (111). When speaking to Carl, she justifies her father's affair, assuming that it is "basically mandatory" for "a sophisticated guy" to have an affair since "intellectual men are attracted to intellectual women" (138). By positioning herself outside of this "intellectual" identity, Zora cannot formulate a perspective on the individual actions of this group and is thus able to justify their actions on the basis that their behavior is in accordance with the intellectual persona. Therefore, despite the fact that it may be within her character to sympathize with her mother's feelings of betrayal or to notice and reject the lascivious male gaze of the Philosophy graduate, she is unable to form an opinion on these actions without feeling as though she is going against her principles.

Despite coming across as confident and assertive in her everyday interactions with people, Zora struggles internally as she tries to establish herself as an adult while also maintaining her place in Wellington's social hierarchy. She wakes up on the first day of her sophomore year at Wellington feeling "wrong" and "no different" than she did when she was in elementary school (129). Since Zora's sense of self is contingent on how others perceive her, her belief that "time is not what it is but how it is felt" has stripped her of any sense of identity: "sophomores had appeared to be an entirely different kind of human: so firm in their likes, opinions, loves, and ideals" (129). Zora envisions herself as

a "sophomore" by focusing on the qualities she aspires to possess in a manner similar to how she views "intellectuals." As a result, she views the passage of time as crucial to developing a perspective independent from her academic training. In the "Politics of Recognition," Charles Taylor argues that the perception of the other plays a significant role in the comprehension of the self: "identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others" (Taylor 25). Nonetheless, this way of identity formation can be especially harmful when the sole focus of identity is based on the perception of the other, "imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and diminished manner of being" (25). Trying to "put herself in her peers' shoes" or "gunning for something" of an identity by constructing her perspective of what she feels she ought to strive for impedes her capacity to build an identity. The "bohemian intellectual" identity that she aspires to cultivate is mostly based on qualities that she believes are prized by others: "courageous; graceful; brave and bold" (OB 129). Rather than participating in her "we-world" to formulate a sense of self that exemplifies the characteristics that she values, she positions this discovery from the perspective of the other: "She asked herself the extremely difficult question: *What would I think of me?*" (129). In descriptions of Zora's internal processes in the novel, she is shown as excessively dependent on manufactured notions of the "perfect" person as she strives to improve herself by adopting the norms and routines of others she admires and those that her university experience has taught her to value: "this was part of the new Zora Self-Improvement Program for the fall: wake early, swim, class, light lunch, class, library, home" (129). As dictated by her self-improvement plan, she goes to the swimming pool, still affected by conflicting feelings about her status as a sophomore student. Transitioning from a space

of introspection to extrospection once she dares to enter the swimming pool, Zora regains the sense of confidence she is seen to possess when in the company of others. She makes it a point to “rac[e] various women in the pool...her will to carry on...depending on how well she was keeping up with her unwitting competitors” (130). The comfort she experiences swimming underwater as opposed to above it is synonymous with the ease with which she presents a persona rather than her authentic self: “it is much harder swimming above the surface than beneath it. You have to carry yourself more” (130). When above water, she is vulnerable to the opinions of others around her; beneath it, she has the privacy she craves to fully explore who she is without fear of judgment. In contrast, Carl’s command of the swimming pool as he performs moves she “had often dreamed of doing” mirrors the authenticity which he exhibits and one she wishes to have (131). Again, this misrecognition of the other leaves Zora feeling obligated to be in competition with others for the sake of reward rather than the personal growth she hopes to gain through this routine. Some of Zora's other endeavors are motivated by her desire for reward, such as when Claire asks her to use her knowledge of Wellington's power culture to advocate for Carl's enrollment in Claire's poetry class. Zora is inspired to "address the faculty members of Wellington College with a barnstorming speech" rather than by Claire's conviction that "it's a beautiful thing to do" (262).

In lieu of a social identity, Zora has crafted her persona around a “recognizable identity,” which means that she bases her self-image on what Kwame Antony Appiah describes as “the performance of [a] role” based on her “assumptions of intentional conformity of the expectations” related to this role (Appiah 66). This theoretical approach to identity is recognizable in her father, Howard, and his relationship with the *other*.

Howard, for example, continuously looks to challenge, deny and put himself in conflict with others. When Claire challenges Howard's belief that his work at Wellington University plays an impactful role in the dissemination of ideas, he challenges her understanding of the word "belief" yet is described as "shattered" by her assumption (119). According to Claire, it is "his academic life" that has shaped his identity: "Howard was only human in the theoretical sense" (Smith 225). Considering that Zora actively aspires to be like her father, it could be argued that his warped obsession with academia has influenced his identity and negatively impacted her sense of identity.

Throughout her interactions with others, Zora emphasizes the importance of intellectual pursuits and academic success as opposed to physical beauty, yet, as her relationship with Carl develops, and she fails to impress him with her intelligence, Zora becomes increasingly reliant on her external appearance to appeal to him. Zora relies on her wardrobe to portray the "brave and bold" identity she has constructed in her mind as she begins her sophomore year despite not feeling any more mature or intellectually grounded than she did at the end of her freshman year. However, despite her reserved demeanor, her choice of attire makes her feel even more alienated from herself than before: "This was not what she had in mind when she left the house. This was not it at all" (129). At the swimming pool, she divides the gym's population into athletes and "the other people not fit enough for the gym," placing herself in the latter group when she admits that she, too, is among the "misshapen people...floating around, hoping" (129). Zora's clothing attempts and fails to conceal her insecurities but is also designed to appeal to those around her. Though Zora experiences some insecurity regarding her weight, by extension, this is also insecurity regarding any characteristics that stray from her ideal of

beauty. This ideal ostracizes women like her mother, who she believes “doesn’t do herself any favours” due to her weight (139). The belief that her mother's weight gain contributed to the inevitable dissolution of her parent’s marriage reveals the source of her appearance-related insecurity. Yet, unable to prevent “go[ing] the way of her mother” as Claire notices her propensity to gain weight like her mother, Zora adopts a more provocative style of dress in an attempt to seduce Carl and present a more confident version of herself. However, her efforts are perceived as awkward and inauthentic. The "tight white top" she wears when visiting Carl once he is employed at Wellington University's archive is met with surprise as he is "taken aback by the large amount of cleavage he [is] confronted with," remarking that the "silly shawl-like thing" Zora is wearing is something she is "forced to keep rearranging" (375). Much like her own identity, Zora must continuously rearrange her sense of personhood in order to gain the affection of those she admires. Carl presents a particular challenge in that he is someone she longs to impress but is also someone whose “language” she is not yet able to speak, making for awkward, unnatural exchanges between the two of them. Not as romantically invested as Zora is, Carl appears to lose respect for Zora and her sudden change in appearance as he "smacked her playfully on her big butt" as she leaves his office (378). This conflicting presentation of identity is further noticed at the end-of-year party when Zora shows up in a dress that is “a bad color...had no back...was the wrong material for her lumpy body and...too short” along with a pair of heels she struggled to walk in (408). Annoyed at his sister’s choice of footwear, Jerome comments on how her choice of dress is inconsistent with the persona of feminism that she actively attempts to represent: “I don’t get you. Aren’t you meant to be a feminist? Why would you cripple yourself like

this?" (408). While she professes to feel powerful in heels, her failure to reconcile contradictions in her persona and other aspects of her identity, such as her appearance, demonstrates her lack of experience interacting with variables beyond her intellectual capacity. Her attire choices are not as easily defended as both sides of an academic dispute, causing her and others to experience moments of discomfort.

Zora engages in an inner dialogue in which she attempts to define her identity, a process that is informed by her intellectual pursuits and motivated by the reward system established in academic environments. However, her unwillingness to connect with the other on an equal basis hinders her from experiencing the miracle of relationship building: "whereby interiority opens out and brings to bloom the million-petaled flower of being here, in the world, with other people" (211). Interestingly, this is a quality also noticeable in her father, Howard, who Jerome describes as "someone who says *no* to the world" (236). When Claire initially persuades Zora to advocate for Carl's seat in her poetry class, an opportunity for human connection presents itself. However, her desire for recognition causes her to misunderstand this opportunity as merely another assignment for which effort yields a reward. As her romantic feelings for Carl develop, she finds that the potential of shaping a relationship of her own design and bringing someone to whom she is physically drawn into a space she feels in control of replaces the hope of praise as the driving force behind her "working constantly" for what she perceives to be Carl's benefit, his opportunity for social mobility. Bringing him to university, however, exposes him to the potential to form relationships with other students, and, sure in himself, Carl does not hesitate to start a relationship with Victoria, the daughter of her father's intellectual nemesis. Zora's actions, which reveal the superficiality of her character and

stand in stark contrast to the impression she has so carefully constructed up until this point, are precipitated by her disappointment in her discovery of the relationship.

According to Charles Taylor, “we define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us” (Taylor 33). Fueled by anger that she describes “never in her life” to have experienced, Zora is unable to recognize herself as she drags Carl by the hood of his clothing, “physically dragg[ing] him out down the hallway and out of the party” (411). It is an act of violence motivated by her envy that also serves as a demonstration of her might and what she is truly capable of: “Everyone had always told her she was ‘big girl’—was this why she was big? So she might drag grown men by their hoods and throw them to the floor?” (412). Finding herself in direct conflict with Carl and recognizing that she “had never been spoken to like this in her life,” Zora's emotions oscillate between disappointment, wrath, hurt, and disbelief as she strives to come to terms with a moment of truth she is incapable of acknowledging.

Zora, conditioned by the academic microclimate she has thrived within until this point, resorts to weaponizing her language in an attempt to damage Carl, reminding him that he will never be “a *Wellingtonian*” because he lacks “what it takes to belong” (417). Despite her best efforts to wound his ego, recognizing her for the unethical and superficial person she truly is only serves to hasten his revelation of the truth:

People like me are just toys to people like you...I'm just some experiment for you to play with. You people aren't even black any more, man—I don't know *what* you are. You think you're too good for your own people. You got your college degrees, but you don't even live right. You people are all the same...I need to be with *my people*, man—I can't do this no more.” (418)

Identity and morality are inextricably interwoven for Carl. Though Zora argues that Carl does not possess the intellectuality to comprehend the gravity of his actions or the depth of his ingratitude, it is precisely her focus on crafting a “recognizable identity” rather than seeking authenticity which leads to her vilification. In the same manner that Claire noticed Howard losing some of his humanity through his obsession with the intellectual, Carl sees something similar occurring to Zora’s identity. Whatever racial solidarity Carl assumed they shared when they first began to interact is eclipsed by her behavior, linking her lack of ethics to her aspiration for whiteness. Most crucially, it reveals the group of “intellectuals” whom Zora holds in the highest regard and considers above reproach to be dishonest and lacking in humanity: “you people don’t behave like human beings, man—I ain’t never *seen* people behave like you people” (417). By the end of the novel, Zora is no longer inhibited by her blind commitment to her ambiguous conception of ‘the intellectual,’ and is granted the opportunity to spare the careers of two of the faculty members at Wellington through what her father dubs “epic acts of unselfishness” (438). No longer motivated by the eventual reward of her actions, Zora finds “genuinely unassailable moral superiority,” which gives her the sense of fulfillment she longs for, allowing her to attain “authentic temporality” (Guignon 284).

The novel's depiction of university life raises a question about whether the spread of intellectual culture by universities plays a crucial role in shaping the identity of Black women. *On Beauty* satirizes liberal arts education by highlighting instances in which bureaucracy, politics, ideology, rivalry, and human nature take precedence over its more noble objectives. The liberal arts education exemplified by Wellington University elevates students who have acquired knowledge deemed valuable by the institution but is

insufficient to establish an authentic identity. Zora must leave her comfort zone, academia, in order to achieve the type of fulfillment she seeks. The novel asserts that the only way to achieve authenticity is to take part in the events and activities of everyday life.

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