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'A terrific waste': *White Teeth* from recurrence to accretion

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The narrator of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) insists that history obeys a logic of symmetry or repetition: that historical events recur, providing lessons applicable to the present. Other elements of Smith's novel, however, undermine this view, presenting history instead as an accumulation of waste. Examining this bifurcation through passages in which forms of refuse are foregrounded, this essay proposes that the novel stages a dialogue between a *recurrence paradigm* and an *accretion paradigm*. It argues that *White Teeth* develops an account of waste which is attentive to its ecological implications and which ultimately rejects the view that waste can, in any straightforward way, be recycled or returned to use. Through attention to the category of human waste (that is, human life as waste) and the novel's incipient critique of recycling, the essay charts the workings of Smith's accretion paradigm and the challenge it poses to the view of history as recurrence presented by the narrator. The novel's fixation on waste, the essay shows, calls into question arguments that its tone (by contrast to Smith's later works) is predominantly positive or optimistic, and demonstrates the necessity of a re-evaluation of *White Teeth's* social, political and ecological acuity.



‘Waste! That word seemed to sum up the whole of life.’ – E. M. Forster (1978 [1908]: 216)

‘Perhaps, unlike the saying, what goes round does not always come round.’ – Sara Ahmed (2014: 16)

Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000) is told by a narrator who is possessed of certain unshakeable convictions: that history never stays in the past, that the shape of human experience tends toward circularity, and that this fundamental tendency towards repetition is the central insight to be gleaned from the events of the novel. Yet, just as Smith’s narrator proffers a circular conception of history, this model is undercut by other elements of *White Teeth*’s narrative, which suggest a different account of the present’s relation to the past: one in which history is seen instead as an accumulation of detritus, an amassing of waste matter. This model of history, accretive rather than recurrent, bubbles under the surface of the novel’s narrative and its narration, taking overt diegetic form in its repeated foregrounding of numerous forms of waste.

This essay proposes a reconsideration of *White Teeth* in terms of this bifurcation. It argues that the significance of the novel’s narratorial voice lies primarily in its dissemblance: its framing of the novel’s events and themes in ways that carefully occlude the inexorable presence of waste, even while waste continues to accrue in the lives of its characters and on the streets of the late-twentieth-century London in which they live. Waste is omnipresent in the events of the novel, in its characters’ experience and their speech, but is all but absent from its narrator’s extradiegetic ruminations. The gulf separating the preoccupations of the narrator from those of the novel’s other parts shapes the response it delivers to what is arguably its central question: that of the relation between past and present, or the pertinence of history to contemporary reality. History, the novel’s narrator *tells* us, is a circular space in which the past is never wholly finished, and always at least potentially recrudescant. But what the novel appears to *show* its readers is a tendency for history to instead simply mount up, valueless and inert, continuing to exert pressure on the present but by no means offering lessons or insights.

In developing this argument, this essay draws both on the by-now significant body of scholarship on *White Teeth* and on a body of recent critical work that has situated waste as a defining problem of the contemporary. This latter corpus (for example Dini 2016; Foltz 2020; Hawkins 2006; Morrison 2015) has sought to show the extent to which western civilisation is ‘filled with waste; indeed, has *always* been filled with waste’ (Morrison 2015: 4, emphasis as original). As we shall see, *White Teeth* belongs among a body of literary works that ‘refuse to flush away excreta and instead float it

back to the reader' (Foltz 2020: 9).¹ Accordingly, this essay will propose that Smith's novel uses waste to make specific claims about the nature of history that are at odds with claims made elsewhere in the novel. Returning to *White Teeth* in the 2020s, in light of growing awareness of waste as a social, political and ecological problem, reveals preoccupations that go far beyond those that have typically been ascribed to the text. Sifting through *White Teeth*'s discard reveals a novel concerned with the process by which value is lost and matter becomes refuse, and the (im)possibility of returning that matter to use. Inasmuch as it draws our attention to waste as always a problem or an incipient crisis, highlighting waste's insolubility and situating it as a site of threat or abjection, such a reading affords the novel an ecological dimension hitherto seldom appreciated by critics.

To grasp the novel's framings of history, it is thus necessary to first distinguish between a *recurrence paradigm* and an *accretion paradigm*. The recurrence paradigm is a particular historical metaphysic in which one is never *done* with the past, because the past loops around to play out once more in the present. The accretion paradigm, meanwhile, agrees that it is impossible to break free from the past, but its understanding of the mechanism by which this becomes the case differs significantly. Rather than looping around, boomerang-like, to produce a present full of reverberations and echoes, in the accretion paradigm history simply accumulates without ever acquiring value or meaning. The recurrence paradigm, crucially, finds recrudescence in the past, the lessons of which seem to serendipitously find their way into one's hands; in the accretion paradigm, such value is much harder to find, and one has to dig through layers of detritus if any insight is to be acquired. The accretive mode describes history not as comings-and-goings, but as a mounting-up of waste matter—at most, 'a non-identical return, a modified repetition of what was' (Viney 2014: 12). While an understanding of history in terms of the recurrence paradigm is articulated by *White Teeth*'s narrator, the alternative account provided by the accretion paradigm is persistently suggested in the novel by the presence, metaphorical and material, of waste: grimy streets, cluttered homes, wasted lives, and—to borrow a phrase from a

¹ Recent work in literary and cultural studies is supported by a longer-standing orientation toward waste in the social sciences (see, for example, Douglas 1984 [1966]; Rathje and Murphy 1992; Wylie 1959). One contribution studies such as these have offered has been a clarification of the available terminology. In this spirit it may be worth defining my own terms: I use 'waste' expansively, to encompass domestic, commercial, human and animal detritus, and use it interchangeably with various other terms (for example 'garbage,' 'rubbish,' 'discard' and 'trash'). While this habit of usage creates a risk of conflation, it also makes possible the acknowledgement that, for example, human waste (waste produced by human bodies), the waste produced by humans and human societies, and humans *as* waste—not to mention myriad figurative and normative uses of 'waste' and other terms—exist on a continuum and tend, in *White Teeth*, to overlap and coincide.

minor character in the novel's opening chapter—'inexorable shit' (Smith 2000: 21), the inescapable faeces that seems at times to engulf Smith's northwest London scenes. *White Teeth*, that is to say, presents history as detritus by presenting detritus constantly to its reader; against its narrator's model of history as repetition, it calls on the reader to think instead of history as shit.

History as repetition: *White Teeth's* recurrence paradigm

The question of the function of *White Teeth's* omniscient narrator is one that has only infrequently been taken up in readings of the novel.² The best-known treatment has been James Wood's influential critique of 'hysterical realism', in which narratorial interventions are identified as a key ingredient of a new genre, to which Smith's novel belongs, composed of expansive, ambitious novels that 'continually flourish their glamorous congestion' (2005: 167). Wood is particularly suspicious of moments in *White Teeth* when Smith delivers 'announcements on the authorial Tannoy' (2005: 178): when the narrator seems to speak over, or speak for, the characters. Elsewhere, Ulrike Tancke frames tensions between the narrator's account of the events of the novel and the characters' own experiences in terms of a dichotomy in which the 'ironic and comical' is set against the 'poignant and profound' (2013: 30), but this rather restrictive binary fails to fully account for the deeper-rooted differences between the narrator's interventions and her characters' experiences and stated views.³ Most recently, Benjamin Bergholtz has foregrounded Smith's narrator in order to interrogate the status of fundamentalism in the novel. *White Teeth's* double-bind, Bergholtz argues, lies in the juxtaposition of its penetrating critique of its characters' fundamentalist visions (Islamism, 'Chalfenist' scientism, Jehovah's Witness eschatology, animal liberationism) with the presence of a narrator who is no less convinced of the rightness of her own rigid view of the

² In identifying the novel's narrator as an omniscient one, I am following Paul Dawson's account of omniscience in contemporary fiction. Dawson defends the use of the term from charges of inutility, arguing that, although omniscience takes various forms, the concept maintains its coherence due to the tendency for these forms to overlap and reinforce one another (2009: 145–6). Proposing a move past definitions of omniscience in terms of the knowledge ascribed to the narrator (whether the narrator is genuinely, as the word suggests, 'all-knowing'), Dawson argues that omniscience is defined by what the narrator *does* rather than what they know (2009: 148; 2013: 19–20, 54–5). On this account, omniscient narration refers to 'a certain type of narrative in which a heterodiegetic narrator, by virtue of being an authorial proxy, functions as an extradiegetic character, setting up a communicative rapport with the reader' (2009: 149). For an extended discussion of omniscience in *White Teeth*, see Dawson (2013: 124–130).

³ In using the pronouns 'she' and 'her' to refer to Smith's narrator, I am suggesting that the character be understood as in some sense a representation of Smith herself. As Dawson observes, when reading contemporary omniscient narration it is often difficult to distinguish between narrator and author, because the narrator's voice appears continuous with that adopted by the author in critical work or in interviews (2013: 14–18). Dawson's central example is Jonathan Franzen, but this tendency is no less in evidence in Smith's work.

world (2016: 541–2). This paper contends that the distinction Bergholtz identifies is, in fact, one with broader bearing: a reading of the novel as marked by a tension between the author's vision and the narrator's framings is necessary not just to understand its engagement with fundamentalism, but also to understand its conception of history. To appreciate the narrator's role, it is not enough to note that she interjects and offers her own, aphoristic and somewhat smug, interpretations of the novel's events. It is additionally necessary to note that these passages have a particular *content*, one that returns repeatedly to claims of historical recurrence and repetition.

For an illustrative example of the narrator's commitment to this recurrence paradigm, let us turn to her ascription of momentous historical weight to the visit by Magid and Millat Iqbal and Irie Jones to the elderly racist J. P. Hamilton, their assigned Harvest Festival beneficiary, as it coincides with the boys' father's journey to secretly liaise with Poppy Burt-Jones, the children's music teacher:

Unbeknownst to all involved, ancient ley-lines run underneath these two journeys—or, to put it in the modern parlance, this is a rerun. We have been here before. This is like watching TV in Bombay or Kingston or Dhaka, watching the same old British sitcoms spewed out to the colonies in one tedious, eternal loop. (161)

Smith's narrator, speaking of a compulsion to repeat that is specific to the migrant experience, weighs the language of 'original sin' and, finding it too harsh, settles instead on 'original trauma', which more accurately describes 'something one repeats and repeats' (161). Here and elsewhere, this repetition is framed in terms that suggest Freud's well-known account of repetition as a response to traumatic experience, presented in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1961 [1920]). Looking for evidence that the pleasure principle—the instinctual or rational pursuit of maximal pleasure and minimal pain—could not explain all human behaviour, Freud turns here to the 'compulsion to repeat' (Freud 1961 [1920]: 13). An individual who exhibits repetitive behaviour reveals the flaw in the pleasure principle, as they repeat experiences which are unpleasant or traumatic, and so willingly relive that which they know cannot lead to pleasure. Freud's example is of an infant (in fact his own eighteen-month-old grandson) who repeatedly casts aside a wooden reel, saying *fort* ('gone'), then pulls it back toward him, saying *da* ('there'), which Freud takes as acting out the absence and return of his mother (1961 [1920]: 8–10). Indeed, *White Teeth*'s narrator goes on to frame Samad Miah Iqbal and his best friend Archie Jones's eternal visits to O'Connell's Pool House as returns, 'like Freud's grandson with his *fort-da* game, to the same miserable scenario' (244). As Tancke observes, 'it is precisely through the powerful gesture of authorial

omniscience that the reader is invited ... to read the characters' experiences through the lens of violence and trauma' (2013: 31). Traumatic pasts, the narrator insists, engender repetitive presents.⁴

Smith's narrator makes the case for a recurrence model by interspersing her own didactic observations into descriptions of events in the lives of her characters. At times these interruptions have the effect of cutting against the novel's vaunted humour, such as when the realisation strikes Alsana Iqbal and Clara Jones, 'the way history will, embarrassingly, without warning, like a blush' that the Kilburn park keeper Sol Jozefowicz is likely to be a Holocaust survivor (79). These words appear within dashes in the novel to signal a narratorial intervention, while at other points parentheses are used, such as when the novel's guiding symbolism of teeth is invoked by the narrator in support of the recurrence paradigm. Parenthesizing on the death of Sir Edmund Glenard in the 1907 Kingston earthquake, she declares that this is a history that will inevitably rear its head once more: '(These are old secrets. They will come out like wisdom teeth when the time is right.)' (306). Another parenthetical interjection insists on the need to trace Clara's distrust of the Chalfens to her grandmother's experiences in Jamaica: '(for if this story is to be told, we will have to put them all back inside each other like Russian dolls, Irie back in Clara, Clara back in Hortense, Hortense back in Ambrosia)' (356). If, at times, though, the narrator intervenes to corroborate the characters' views of history, at other times she interrupts in order to reject them. For example, towards the novel's end Millat, having told his brother Magid that KEVIN, the Islamist group to which he belongs, will remain implacably opposed to genetic experiments they see as blasphemous, declares: 'And that's the fucking end of it' (464). The narrator, though, is undeterred, interjecting: 'But contradictory to Millat's understanding, this is no movie and there is no fucking end to it, just as there is no fucking beginning to it' (464). By denying the possibility of either end or beginning, the narrator seemingly proposes instead an ontology of undifferentiated repetition. In each of these passages where Smith 'frustrate[s] the reader with authorial interruptions' (Bergholtz 2016:

⁴ In this regard, *White Teeth* seems to prefigure post-9/11 fictions such as Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), in which the compulsion to repeat is central to the novelistic representation of trauma's aftermath. In a 2002 interview, Smith describes her work explicitly as an engagement with generational trauma and the lingering effects of the Second World War (2002b: 105–6). It is surely significant, though, that the only readers of Freud in *White Teeth* are the Chalfen family, who boast a string of psychiatrists in their well-mapped-out family tree (354) and are proud to say their offspring have experienced 'their oedipal complexes early and in the right order' (313). Indeed, Joyce Chalfen explicitly invokes the language of trauma to diagnose Millat and Magid's shared condition (434, 436). Far from accepting the Chalfens' view of themselves as paragons of psychoanalytic insight, though, the reader is likely to share the view of Alsana's niece Neena, who sees through the family's paternalistic liberalism to report that they are 'crazy, nutso, raisins short of a fruitcake, rubber walls, screaming-mad basket-cases' (351).

555), claims are made for a view of history as shaped by recurrences, for a circular temporality, and for the past as providing the key to understanding the present.

The recurrence paradigm advanced by the narrator in these interpolations is a syncretic worldview, one that gestures toward an array of perspectives that have understood history in cyclical terms, from the ancient Stoics' theory of eternal return, in which all but the gods are periodically destroyed and recreated, repeating perfectly in an endless cycle (see Long 1985), to the culturally-omnipresent ouroboros myth, which dates at least to fourteenth-century BCE Egypt, depictions having been found in the tomb of Tutankhamun (Hornung 1999 [1997]: 78). Yet while these ideas have numerous complex and sophisticated precursors, in the hands of the novel's narrator they become a banal smoothing-over of history's vicissitudes, a reduction of multiple varying temporalities to a single mode. When the narrator asserts that 'old secrets' will reemerge 'like wisdom teeth when the time is right' (306), for example, recurrence is presented as the revelation of a hitherto-concealed truth once the 'right time' is reached. The narrator's framing here resembles nothing more than *White Teeth*'s characters' own attempts to impose order on their experiences: Marcus Chalfen through his faith in genetics, Hortense Bowden's Jehovah's Witnesses through millenarianism, KEVIN through religious puritanism and, most markedly, the trite yet soothing mantras espoused by Samad Iqbal, such as when he insists to an unconvinced Archie that 'the generations ... they speak to each other, Jones. It's not a line, life is not a line ... it's a circle, and they speak to us' (119). Like the characters' efforts, though, the narrator's strategy for order-making is an incomplete picture, one not borne out by the novel's events, in which a different model of history predominates.

The repetition paradigm is a *comforting* model of history in which nothing is gone for good, nothing is without its lessons, nothing goes to waste, and nothing is wholly new or unfamiliar. If history has all the lessons needed to guide action in the present, then any potentially threatening qualities of the new are pleasantly dulled; at the same time, if history always rhymes, its mystery too is smoothed over. This may be why this model of history as recurrence is challenged in *White Teeth* by one in which the past, present and future each retain their own incomprehensibility, their capacity to trouble and throw us. In contraposition to its narrator's commitment to a past that speaks smoothly and simply to the present by echoes and rhymes, *White Teeth* elsewhere enframes a past that puts pressure on the present simply by *accretion*.

History as shit: *White Teeth*'s accretion paradigm

White Teeth's waste matter may be most apparent in its London sites: upon first moving to Willesden Green, Clara is left with the impression of a district divisible into 'the

trees' and 'the shit' (47); when a tree collapses on the Joneses' house during the Great Storm of 1987, it must first uproot itself 'from the dog shit and the concrete' (226); Irie knows a bridge near her home as 'pigeon-shit bridge' (459); and the Trafalgar Square statue of Henry Havelock sits on a 'plinth of pigeon-shat stone' (503). Yet where better to begin to map *White Teeth*'s accretion paradigm than Cricklewood Broadway, site of its opening vignette, where Archie Jones sits on an early morning in 1975 in a car slowly filling with exhaust fumes? The central thoroughfare of Cricklewood, a northwest London neighbourhood that, perhaps, doesn't quite match Willesden Green for leafy comfort nor Kilburn for multicultural authenticity, is the first of *White Teeth*'s many bespattered landscapes. Archie watches as a flock of pigeons deposit a consignment of shit on the walls of Mo Hussein-Ishmael's butcher shop, infuriating its proprietor (4). For Mo, the morning that Archie hopes will be his last is no different from any other, spent trying in vain to fend off the pigeons and their droppings. He tackles this unenviable task with a mantra on his lips: '*The shit is not the shit ... the pigeon is the shit*' (5, italics and underline as original). And he is correct, if only unknowingly: Cricklewood Broadway not only drowns in actual excrement, but figures more broadly as a *shitscape*, one in which all Mo can see is 'discarded armchairs and strips of carpet, outdoor lounges for local drunks; the slot-machine emporiums, the greasy spoons and the minicabs—all covered in shit' (5). The scene in which Archie prepares to die is filled with wreckage and waste. The shit is indeed *not* (just) *the shit*, because the excrement is just one element in a landscape full of refuse variously inert, human and commercial.

It is not just the Cricklewood streets that are filled with waste, though. Archie's domestic life with his first wife, the desperation of which has driven him to attempt suicide, is a chaotic one in which Archie's love for his spouse gathers dust 'with the rest of the bric-a-brac and broken kitchen appliances' (8). Not least of his problems is a vacuum cleaner that insists on 'spewing out dust instead of sucking it in', creating mess and grime rather than clearing it from view (9). Irredeemably cluttered domestic spaces in Archie's life, then, simultaneously allegorise and materially contribute to his own anxious misery. Strikingly, even when Archie breaks free from marital disharmony and, having abandoned his plan to kill himself, finds himself surprisingly at home at the hippie commune where he first meets Clara, he realises disorder has followed him, though now he is able to look on it more fondly: 'Detritus of every variety—animal, mineral, vegetable—lined the floor ... Inside the rooms, in certain corners, could be witnessed the passing of bodily fluids: kissing, breast-feeding, fucking, throwing up' (21). Not only street scenes, then, but also homely spaces, are presented as decidedly shitty ones.

In the accretion paradigm, though, waste is not introduced to be lamented or celebrated. Rather, a cataloguing of waste is pursued in order to develop an account

of history. In many of the passages in *White Teeth* that fixate on grimy accumulations and grotty excrescences, the novel's more perceptive characters are able to frame what they describe in terms that relate specifically to the past and its meaning. Arguing that some pasts are better not delved into, Alsana identifies personal histories with bodily excretions to insist that 'not everybody wants to see into everybody else's sweaty, secret parts' (77). Later in the novel, Irie ponders on 'the *purest definition* of memory' (emphasis as original), concluding it has something to do with 'the street you were on when you first jumped in a pile of dead leaves' (458). Ruminating on this evocative experience, though, she notes the likelihood of finding a 'newly laid turd underneath the cover of soggy leaves' (459). Shit is found, Irie reluctantly acknowledges, even amongst pristine childhood memories. Irie's father Archie shares her consciousness of the close connection between filth and the awareness of the past when he observes that a goldfish is a preferable pet to a mouse for reasons both excremental and temporal: they are 'cleaner—with shorter memories' (521). Cleanliness, in these passages, is closely associated with forgetfulness, and remembering the past with dirt, sweat and shit. The only clean hands are those unstained by the remembrance of history. This conception of history, grasped through tactile encounters with waste and grime, is the novel's counterpoint to its narrator's simple and spotless view of history as elegantly recurrent.

It is Samad Iqbal, though, who serves as the focal point of the passage in which the accretion paradigm is most starkly drawn and its ecological significance best evoked. Adoringly watching his new paramour Poppy Burt-Jones conduct the school orchestra in a recital of *Swan Lake*, Samad thinks the children's performance is 'more reminiscent of ducks waddling through an oil slick' (153). As Andrew Ross has observed, depictions of 'seabirds mired in petrochemical sludge' (1994: 171) are a central component of a visual repertoire by which the ecological movements of the later twentieth-century set themselves apart from earlier conservationist orientations. The oil spill and its consequences for marine life is a staple of ecological imagery, a visceral and unambiguous signifier of anthropogenic environmental devastation suffered by other-than-human life, moving from high-profile spectacles such as Exxon Valdez and Deepwater Horizon into the consciousness of even those, like Samad, who may be otherwise unmoved by ecological notions. After musing on this image, Samad moves to consider the teacher's presence before the children, who cannot appreciate her beauty, which he deems above all 'a terrific *waste*' (153, emphasis as original). The language of discard and refuse runs through Samad's thoughts in this passage—he is unable to accept, for example, 'that something of such beauty should be at the *disposal* of those too young to know what to do with it' (153, emphasis added). As the music ends, it is as though the ducks have 'finally succumbed to the environmental disaster' and the conviction that he must pursue

Poppy returns ‘with the persistence of vomit’ (153). That Samad returns to ‘disposal’, to bodily excreta, to a mucilaginous ecological catastrophe, and above all to the word ‘waste’, frames this as a central passage for a consideration of *White Teeth*’s accretion paradigm. Here, the *inexorability* of waste that is present throughout the novel—its all-encompassing quality and the near-impossibility of cleaning up what has been spilled—is made especially apparent in the pathetic picture of birds trapped in spilled oil.

This passage is *White Teeth*’s clearest engagement with the ecological problematics of contemporary wastescapes—with an era marked by ever-growing mountains of food waste, ‘forever chemicals’ and interminable microplastics (see, for example, Barnard 2016; Barnes et al. 2009; De Silva et al. 2021). Here Smith evinces an awareness of the role of waste in the enactment of ‘slow violence,’ of the temporally attritional, accumulative quality of pollution (Nixon 2013), which does not neatly form a temporal circuit but instead accretes and intensifies, and disproportionately targets the already marginalised and minoritised. By imagining oil-soaked birds in proximity to children, and situating this scene within a (stilted) pedagogical encounter that is also the site for the beginning of a love affair, the accretive and generational quality of waste and ecological devastation—the possibility that waste ‘disposed of’ today in reality simply continues to build up out of sight—is brought to the fore. Smith’s scene reminds us, too, that reckoning with ecological catastrophe requires a paradigm shift in approaches to waste and industrial by-products: greenhouse gases, for example, cannot be said to recur (as this would imply there is an intervening time when they are *not* with us), but rather must be seen to accumulate. While *White Teeth* has not typically been read as a work of ecofiction or ‘cli-fi’, this passage suggests that the novel’s representation of history as waste is inseparable from an acknowledgement of ecological realities.

The bugged and the mad: *White Teeth*’s human waste

As Rachele Dini (2016: 10–14; 2020: 489–95) and Mary C. Foltz (2020: 10–11) have each argued, reading for waste in contemporary literature demands we also think about wasted *lives*, the prospect of characters’ designation as surplus or consignment to the scrapheap. Such an experience of life *as* waste—as has been notably theorised by Zygmunt Bauman, among others—is as persistently present in *White Teeth* as its inexorable pigeon shit. For Bauman, global socioeconomic transformations have led to more and more of humanity arriving at the condition of ‘human waste’, rendered disposable in a ‘liquid’ consumer culture saturated with waste and ‘impending wastage’ (2004: 7). As John Scanlan observes, such a designation can be both self-reinforcing and inescapable: those consigned to the status of ‘social trash’ are marginalised while simultaneously being damned for their marginality (2005: 46).

Denigrated and downtrodden characters are a persistent feature of *White Teeth*'s scenes. They are what David J. Alworth (2015: 63), in his discussion of William S. Burroughs' work, calls 'wasted subjects', 'wasted' in the sense that they are often drug-addled or -addicted but also in the sense that they are undergoing processes 'of unformation and decomposition', failing to cohere and blurring the boundary separating human life from waste. First chronologically among the novel's human wreckage is Archie and Samad's wartime tank unit, nicknamed the Buggered Battalion for their shared status as the outcasts and rejects of the Allied forces.⁵ They are one of innumerable tank regiments 'dotted over the waste of Europe like resilient cockroaches' (85), their travels 'hampered by large clods of earth' torn from the landscape by bombs (109). As Archie and Samad know, by the summer of 1945, the 'real war' is the air war, and ground troops like themselves are all but redundant (86–7). Their sense of their own irrelevance is reflected in the condition of their comrades, who range from romantically doomed to merely incompetent: their commander comes from a long line of soldiers to have died in battle (89–90), while co-driver Roy Mackintosh, when meeting his own fate, will evacuate his bowels with a vehemence that shocks Archie (93). Amidst all this, Samad, consigned to the Buggered Battalion following the loss of the use of his hand, each day tells the story of his injury, and his audience of 'freaks and fools' respond with their own stories of failure and perdition (90). As Justin Omar Johnston has argued, the Buggered Battalion constitutes a 'coalition of abject figures' who find themselves 'abandoned or left to die because they are seen as not fully human' (2021: 99). Any sense Archie and Samad may have of their own role in the sweep of history is forgotten, and their condition of historical irrelevance is inseparable from the presence of dirt and shit, just as the men's doomed journey cannot be separated

⁵ The word 'buggered', used here to mean 'worn-out' or 'wasted' but also carrying the meaning of 'anally penetrated', could be taken as evidence for a fixation with the posterior and its emissions throughout *White Teeth*—a certain *anality*, akin to that identified by Norman O. Brown (1973 [1959]) in the work of Jonathan Swift. Anal or gluteal metaphors suffuse the characters' language: when Archie is wrongly addressed by a Russian soldier as 'Captain', the young Private tells him he's 'got it arse-ways-up' (107), and elsewhere in these passages Samad's preferred term for the absurdity of the end of the war is 'playing silly buggers' (111, 118). Later, Millat and his friends offer an array of homophobic terms of abuse to the ticket seller at King's Cross, including 'shit-dick,' 'arse-bandit' and 'toilet trader' (231). Samad calls the Indian author R. V. Saraswati an 'English licker-of-behinds' (287), while Archie, in the unfamiliar confines of the Perret Institute, a world away from the grime of O'Connell's, thinks the room 'so well designed you wouldn't want to *breathe* in it, no matter fart in it' (520, emphasis as original). One may even wonder whether 'fundamentalism,' doubtless a key term of the novel's closing sections and perhaps, as Bergholtz (2016) proposes, of the whole text, is significant as much for concealing the colorectal euphemism 'fundament'. *White Teeth*'s recurrent metaphors are, as Isabel Carrera Suárez (2012) has noted, embodied ones, but alongside Suárez's focus on teeth and blood we ought to additionally examine what Mikhail Bakhtin sets aside as the 'bodily lower stratum' (1984 [1965]: 20): the sphere of bodily metaphors to which defecation and flatulence, the experience of being 'buggered' or finding oneself 'arse-ways-up', are central.

from the wreckage they must pass through, nor Mackintosh's ignominious death from the simultaneous filling of his underpants.

Archie, Samad, and comrades do not exhaust the novel's catalogue of walking cadavers, though. Another character, in fact, merits particular consideration in this light. Described first as 'a black voodoo woman with a red face whose territory stretches from Kilburn to Oxford Street but who performs her spells from a bin in West Hampstead' (174), Mad Mary is introduced soon after Samad's ecological rumination discussed above, and is near-univocally described in language that connects her to waste. When she confronts Samad and Poppy in Harlesden, and the latter describes her as being homeless, Samad hyperbolically corrects her, claiming Mary actually occupies 'quite a significant structure' made from stolen wheelie bins (176). While Samad advises a refusal to engage, Poppy pities Mary—and makes the fatal mistake of looking in her direction. Mary's rhyming harangue is a single-minded denunciation of ethnoracial admixture tinged by Black Nationalist sentiments:

BLACK MAN! DEM BLOCK YOU EVERYWHERE YOU TURN! ... BLACK MAN! ... DE BITCH SHE WISH TO SEE YOU BURN! ... *What 'as dem ever done for us body bot kill us and enslave us? What 'as dem ever done for our minds bot hurt us an' enrage us? ... WHAT'S DE POLLUTION? ... WHAT'S DE SOLUTION, BLACK MAN?* (177)

Her designation of Samad as a 'black man' is ironic, given he avoids Harlesden out of a fear of anyone darker-skinned than himself, and is reluctant to accept that Poppy lives in a district he associates with the prospect of 'a gangster's four-inch knife in his back' (164). Samad and Poppy, brought together amidst Samad's vision of pollution and waste, now confront in Mad Mary a figure of human wreckage who speaks in terms of pollution and who, Samad suspects, sees in him a kindred spirit. Samad impresses a weeping Poppy by calmly making common cause with her, speaking the language of Gandhism and multicultural harmony, and going so far as to place a reassuring hand on her shoulder (179). Katina Rogers has argued that Samad's moment of receptivity and hospitality toward Mad Mary is one in which a generative complexity is acknowledged, in place of a banal cosmopolitanism in which differences are imagined to be easily put aside (2008: 54). Mad Mary's ire is but temporarily stanching, however: 'dumbstruck only briefly' by Samad's gesture, she turns her aggression against a group of churchgoing bystanders (179). While all the novel's characters are surrounded by refuse, Mad Mary goes the furthest in acknowledging this and positively identifying with her status as human waste. In this regard she stands as an exemplar for the other characters: this, her appeal to Samad seems to suggest, is the source of the threat

she poses. In spite of this unusual knowledge, though, she remains irredeemable, unrecyclable, unable to recrudescence.

Indeed, while seeking to catalogue wasted human lives as keenly as it charts urban muck, *White Teeth* does nothing to suggest that its human waste can be returned to use or re-ascribed value. Archie and Samad's lives remain shaped by their membership of the Buggered Battalion, to the point where the central drama of that chapter of their lives returns at the novel's end, in a recurrence that offers no lessons and only the grimmest of irony. When recurrences do occur, it is not because characters have been reinvigorated or found new purpose. More often it is because, as human waste, they simply linger. Clarence and Denzel, for example, who are Archie and Samad's fellow denizens of O'Connell's Pool House, are introduced as octogenarians in 1984 (187), then, some eight years later in the novel's narrative (and some 260 pages), are reintroduced as 'Denzel, who had not yet died' and 'Clarence, who was also, by God's grace, hanging on in there' (448). They are able to reappear in the pages of the novel, bearing no fresh insights, still more decrepit and belligerent, because in O'Connell's they never went away: not recurrence, but the accretion of human waste as one component of *White Teeth*'s trash heap.

The inexorability of waste: *White Teeth*'s critique of recycling

The argument posed thus far for the priority given in *White Teeth* to the accretion paradigm, in which history is apprehended as an accumulation of waste, will perhaps have called to mind the foundational work of Walter Benjamin, whose account of history is frequently invoked in contemporary work in waste studies (for example in Dini 2016; Gidwani 2012; Hawkins 2006). Benjamin famously develops an account of 'modernization as an incessant accumulation of debris' (Highmore 2002: 61), in which the constant demand for the new has mountains of waste as its byproduct. In his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (written in 1940), Benjamin envisions an 'angel of history,' represented by Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, who sees history as 'one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet' (1999b [1968]: 257). Against this landscape of destruction, Benjamin proposes the *chiffonnier* or ragpicker, a figuration borrowed from the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, as a model for the cultural historian: to understand both what has been done and what possibilities remain, the historian ought to trawl through the debris of modernity, collecting whatever scraps may be pieced together anew (Le Roy 2017; Wohlfarth 2006). Waste, viewed through this Benjaminian lens, is a clue to histories of violence, devastation and grief, but it is through these connotations—that is, through its capacity to speak to forgotten or concealed histories—that it acquires recrudescence.

value. Benjamin offers something akin to the notion, described by William Viney, that ‘the advent of waste is rich with revelation, a thing of pedagogical potential that allows the everyday, the hidden or the unexpected to be suddenly unveiled’ (2014: 30). As Benjamin describes his own practice: ‘the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them’ (1999a [1982]: 460). His ragpicker is ultimately a utopian figure, standing for a methodology that finds revolutionary potential in lost or forgotten historical fragments.

Notably, Benjamin appears repeatedly, if obliquely, in Smith’s oeuvre, typically as a theoretical touchpoint for characters who serve as guides or mentors to her protagonists. In *The Autograph Man* (2002a), Benjamin’s photograph and a print of the *Angelus Novus* appear together on a character’s bedroom wall (2002a: 126). In *Swing Time* (2016), the protagonist’s mother litters sentences with references to ‘the Angel of History’ in what her daughter perceives as a show of faux-intellectualism (2016: 31). Most recently, in an essay marking the 2016 election of Donald Trump, Smith declares: ‘the history of human existence is simultaneously the history of pain: of brutality, murder, mass extinction, every form of venality and cyclical horror’ (2019: 38). Benjamin would likely not concur with Smith’s positing of pain as a transcultural universal, preferring to situate its differential emergences as the products of socioeconomic arrangements, yet Smith’s tone nonetheless seems an avowedly Benjaminian one. There are important differences, though, between Benjamin’s aesthetics of ragpicking and Smith’s accretion paradigm. The *chiffonier* is a redeemer, responsible for putting waste back to use; by contrast, Smith’s innovation is to suggest that value *cannot* be recovered from waste in this way. If Benjamin’s project was one that made claims for the value of the denigrated and discarded, this is not so in *White Teeth*, where waste seldom re-enters circulation. Ben Highmore has argued that Benjamin’s work can be taken as suggesting ‘a “trash aesthetics” that ... might be thought of in terms of “recycling”—an ecology of everyday experience’ (2002: 65), yet recycling is precisely what is impossible for the Joneses and Iqbals. Nowhere does the novel’s waste provide the sort of surprising value found in refuse by Benjamin, or by artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters (see Leslie 2010: 241–3). Unlike the waste surveyed by Benjamin’s angel of history, there is no revolutionary potential in *White Teeth*’s detritus, which simply, inexorably, mounts up.

Indeed, hopes for the recovery of waste are at times a subject of mockery in the novel. Joyce Chalfen, for example, views her family’s adoption of Irie and Millat, who she half-jokingly describes as ‘the two who’ve been corrupting [her] eldest son ... Josh’s *bad crowd*’ (318, emphasis as original), as a project of recycling the human waste of their son’s school. Accordingly, the Chalfens are vituperated by Alsana as ‘Chaffinches—little scavenging English birds pecking at all the best seeds’ (344). Chaffinches, named

for their habit of picking through discarded chaff for edible grain, put waste to use in ways which, Alsana perceives, are insidious and dispossessive. This designation, with its echoes of Archie's self-deprecating designation of his own family as mere 'chaff' (99), suggests recirculation and revaluation are not part of the novel's view of waste. In these passages, Smith characterises projects of recycling as at best misguided and, at worst, directly oppressive to the human waste they seek to recuperate.

With this incipient critique of recycling in mind, *White Teeth's* ecologies are revealed as at once bleaker and more sophisticated than they are typically taken to be. In contemporary ecological thought, a move beyond recycling has been proposed by Samantha MacBride's important study *Recycling Reconsidered* (2011), which critically assesses claims made for the recycling industry in the contemporary United States and contends that recycling has had, at best, a minimal impact on conservation, pollution reduction, and energy savings. Despite the increasing volume of waste recycled, MacBride finds the practice has yet to observably reduce rates of extraction of raw materials (2011: 8). These problems cannot be solved by more or better recycling; rather, obstacles to a sustainable approach to waste management originate within a set of ultimately individualistic ideas and practices that the recycling movement has failed to question (2011: 10). Nor is this awareness of the inexorability of waste a new insight: in their discussion of the findings of the Tucson Garbage Project, published more than 30 years ago, for example, William Rathje and Cullen Murphy sought to disprove 'the myths of biodegradation'; that is, the commonly held belief that matter in landfills quickly becomes harmless humus. Landfills, Rathje and Murphy contend, are not 'vast composters' as commonly imagined, but rather closer to 'vast mummifiers' (1992: 112).

These insights from social-scientific work on waste indicate the futility of what Timothy Morton has called the 'Away-fantasy': the mistaken belief, for example, that when one flushes a toilet its contents are transported to 'a totally different dimension called *Away*, leaving things clean over here' (2013: 31, emphasis as original). Ecological awareness, Morton argues, demands acknowledging that waste, from radioactive materials to human excrement, is never disposed of, but only ever moved elsewhere. Informed by Morton's work, Brian Thill has suggested that waste's ineradicability, its 'immense strength and durability, having reached every corner of our planet and troubled or killed so many of the things it touches' (2015: 10–11), is in fact one of its defining features. This acknowledgement, and the crisis it causes for dominant approaches to waste, is one that is central to *White Teeth*, where attempts to resolve problems posed by discard prove insufficient and beget more problems; and all the while, the waste continues to accrue. Not only is the Chalfens' chaffinch-like attempt to recirculate waste made a subject of mockery, the novel's other human waste also

fails to recrudescence or reacquire value. Mad Mary is provided only the briefest respite from her marginality, Denzel and Clarence remain in O'Connell's, wasting away, and Mo Hussein-Ishmael knows his task is a thankless one: his shopfront can be cleaned of pigeon shit, but a new deposit will inevitably follow. In ways that evince an awareness of the damaging vanity of the 'Away-fantasy', *White Teeth*'s London wastescape is one in which any prospect of recycling is foreclosed.

Conclusion: Reading for waste

This essay has posited a tension in *White Teeth* between two modes of apprehending history: a recurrence paradigm that imagines history as evenly circular and usefully recurrent, and an accretion paradigm that imagines history not as circling but as endlessly, senselessly amassing. It has proposed that *White Teeth*, to borrow a phrase from Smith's influential essay on lyrical realism, 'plants inside itself its own partial critique' (2011 [2009]: 76), with the accretive mode of history articulated in varied parts of the novel functioning as the critique of the recurrent mode advanced by its narrator. This tension is a vital part of what Astrid Erll has described as the novel's 'highly reflexive mode of literary remembering' (2006: 177): its development of a critical commentary on the politics of memory and of history, in which two divergent approaches are juxtaposed. This reading of Smith's novel has several benefits. First among these is its ability to bring to the fore a fixation on waste as an unacknowledged continuity between *White Teeth* and certain works that have been identified as its forebears: 'maximalist' novels like Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996) and Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), but also, for example, the work of Hanif Kureishi, with whom Smith can be said to share what Sukhdev Sandhu has characterised as an 'urban messthetics—the idea that dirt, confusion and contamination define urban life' (2003: 245–6).⁶ While waste has been foregrounded in studies of each of these authors' work, and each has been read at times alongside *White Teeth*, the fact that Smith's novel shares their commitment to the investigation of waste matter has been notably absent from these appraisals.

A second insight gleaned from a reading of *White Teeth*'s wastes, one that is closely related to the first, is to make possible a reading of Smith in terms of the broader revival of critical interest in waste that has occurred over the last decade and a half. This body of work has conceived of waste as a key vector for environmental devastation, and as

⁶ Readings of DeLillo, Pynchon and Wallace in terms of waste include Dini (2016: chapter 5) and Foltz (2020: chapters 1 and 5). Stefano Ercolino's *The Maximalist Novel* (2014) notably situates *White Teeth* alongside these three authors and other purveyors of what Ercolino identifies as a distinctive contemporary genre. For a polemical reading that situates Smith firmly in Kureishi's shadow, see Thomas (2006).

in some sense emblematic or microcosmic of broader social or philosophical problems that are no less inexorable. Additionally, as Rachele Dini has suggested (2020: 481), work in literary waste studies has often focused on white and male authors (including the aforementioned Pynchon, DeLillo and Wallace), so turning to Smith contributes to a necessary widening of the nascent literary waste studies corpus.

A final, and perhaps most important, consequence of reading *White Teeth* in terms of waste lies in the capacity of such a reading to correct certain aspects of the critical record as it pertains to Smith's oeuvre as a whole. Critics have at times taken for granted a narrative of Smith's career characterised by a move from relatively optimistic and lightly satirical earlier work to later work that is both darker and more politically astute. Her fourth novel, *NW* (2012), for example, is taken to pursue a different set of thematics than those found in her earlier work, reflecting its publication at a time marked by the 2008 financial crisis, the imposition of austerity in the United Kingdom, growing hostility to multiculturalism, and heightened awareness of the effects of climate change (for examples of such readings, see Bracke 2018: chapter 3; Marcus 2013; Pirker 2016; Quarrie 2023). On this reading, *NW* is frequently set against *White Teeth*, which is presented by contrast as a primarily affirmative or celebratory work, reflecting a political optimism that by the 2010s seemed outdated. Eva Ulrike Pirker, for example, argues that *NW* and 2013's *The Embassy of Cambodia* 'mark Smith as an author who has moved away from humorous and ironic approaches to spaces determined by race-, gender- and class-related projections, and who explores the limitations that these pose for individuals' (2016: 72). A reading of *White Teeth* not for its humour or irony, though, but for its attention to refuse and wreckage, provides evidence for the presence in the earlier novel of the qualities Pirker and others claim to find only in Smith's later work. Similarly, while Cynthia Quarrie (2023: 482) proposes that *NW* is shaped by an atmosphere of creeping ecological catastrophe, displaying the disjoint temporalities of the Anthropocene, it is possible to contend that *White Teeth*—in which, as we have seen, Samad's lovesick lament collapses into an desolate scene of ecological devastation, waste piles up from start to finish, and the charm of rhythmic temporalities is thrown into doubt by an awareness of history as shit—provides a glimpse, ahead of time, of this element of Smith's vision.

Looking to *White Teeth*'s engagement with waste, then, clearly evinces its ecological sensibility, its politics, and its understanding of the relation of each of these to broader and deeper-rooted crises. To the extent that *White Teeth* is a novel that conceives of history as waste, it is also one that frames human experience in pessimistic terms, one that refuses to read its times in a hopeful light, and one that understands the impact of trauma and does not try to skirt the omnipresence of violence. Smith has herself

made self-deprecating claims similar to those of Pirker and others, indeed beginning to do so very soon after *White Teeth*'s publication: in a 2001 essay, she finds the novel's sentiments to be already to some degree swept away by a post-9/11 tide (Smith 2001); later, in the aforementioned essay on Trump, she acknowledges 'that [her] novels were once sunnier places and now the clouds have rolled in' (2019: 37). Whereas these critics, and indeed the author herself, find in Smith's later work a political incisiveness that was absent in her first novels, this essay has sought to show that this critical acuity is indeed present in *White Teeth*, visible if only we delve into its grimier passages, explore its accretive tendencies, and wander its detritus-strewn urban wastescapes.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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