

Affective Citizenship:
Gender and Narratives of Affiliation in Multi-Ethnic British Literature

by

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Committee in charge:
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Abstract

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This dissertation explores the vexed or thwarted longing for community shaping multi-ethnic British fiction from the 1970s onwards. I examine the work of five authors—Buchi Emecheta, Zadie Smith, Monica Ali, Alan Hollinghurst, and Jackie Kay—whose writings foreground the affective dimensions of British citizenship and the complex processes of affiliation and disaffiliation by which black, Asian, and queer Britons claim belonging in the imagined community of the nation. At a time when postcolonial literary studies increasingly privileges, without really interrogating, an idealized rhetoric of “conviviality,” the negative, anti-relational, and disaggregating emotions circulating in their works bring into uncomfortable focus the factors that undermine the forging of politicized identities and communities in black Britain. Their writings also converge in a discursive concern with what I call, after Edward Said, “affiliation,” a process in which citizenship claims are facilitated by prosthetic or proxy figures hailing from often remote cultural quarters, ranging from the English ice dancers Torvill and Dean to the American blues singer Bessie Smith.

The alternative kinship structures explored by these writers register the shifting meanings of family in postwar Britain, beginning with the pathologization of the black family in the 1950s and 1960s and coalescing in recent years around a similar stigmatization of the Asian family. The literary treatment of male and female communities of contest in multi-racial Britain also registers authors’ attempts to resolve a crisis of self-definition caused by the rise and fall of “black” as a political identity in the years since the “Windrush” generation of Afro-Caribbean migrants in the 1950s. Drawing on the works of queer and affect theorists, my analysis especially foregrounds the gendering of affiliative communities. While narratives of cross-cultural and cross-historical affiliation

have the potential to disrupt normative ideologies of gender and domesticity, I also show how they indulge a sentimental narrative of women's community predicated on cultural assumptions about women's exemplary capacity for feeling.

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INTRODUCTION

Gendered Communities of Contest

Edgy, uncomfortable, and openly hostile relationships between women figure prominently in Jackie Kay's literary imagination. The Scottish poet and novelist, whose writings in other respects carve out important spaces for intimacy, community, and kinship among women, betrays a peculiar interest in situations where precisely those impulses go awry. Things start off well in her long poem "The Adoption Papers," a semi-autobiographical tracing narrative told from the alternating perspectives of the daughter, the biological mother, and the adoptive mother. Differentiated by font and often interpenetrating one another, their words can initially be hard to keep apart, and this is partially the point. The opening sections establish continuities and overlaps between the three women's psychological responses to the adoption. Kay pictures the biological mother as a young woman, nearly the age of the now grown daughter who seeks her; the two are described as "dead spits" and echo each other's tastes in music and books.¹ Meanwhile, the two mothers are also brought into imaginative proximity. They are both peripatetic figures, presented in mirrored journeys to and from the hospital, respectively. But more importantly they have both committed transgressions, one through a cross-racial romance and the other through a cross-racial adoption. Both acts elicit the condemnation of a racist community.²

By placing the three women on common emotional ground, Kay would appear to open up possibilities of reconciliation, forgiveness, and mutual understanding between them. Given the racial specificity of the three characters (the two mothers are white, whereas the daughter is biracial and identifies as black, her father being Nigerian) this possibility would also seem to sanction a liberal-multicultural narrative of hybridity or community cohesion. But the reader may notice that despite their overlapping voices, neither the daughter nor the adoptive mother actually speaks to the birth parent. Their voices drown out rather than address one another. Encounters with the biological mother never bodily take place but are instead presented in dreams. In the first of these, a nightmare, the adoptive mother imagines that her rival has returned to kidnap her child, leaving her "tweed hat" in the cot in exchange (*Adoption Papers* 19). Within the

¹ Jackie Kay, *The Adoption Papers* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1991) 19.

² The critic most sensitive to the poem's treatment of race and ethnicity is Valerie Popp. Popp explores Kay's emphasis on the materiality of paperwork in order to show how the poem critiques and identifies "improper" alternatives to the racial essentialism underwriting official discourses of citizenship in Thatcher-era Britain. Valerie Popp, "Improper Identification Required: Passports, Papers, and Identity Formation in Jackie Kay's *The Adoption Papers*," *Contemporary Literature* 53.2 (2012): 292-317.

terms of the poem, the biological mother is dangerously unstable, given to infanticidal thoughts and fantastic hallucinations. When her daughter is born, she pledges to “suffocate her with a feather pillow” (13). After burying the clothes she had bought for the child, she sees the ground move and imagines suckling her “baby Lazarus” after she has exhumed herself and flown in through the window (18). In the climactic though again only dreamt reunion between the two, the biological mother throws her daughter’s photograph down a well—a threatening enough gesture in a poem that frequently confounds people with the textual artifacts associated with them. Kay places the birth mother’s infanticidal aggressions in an allusive frame encompassing the *grand guignol* films of Bette Davis, including *Dead Ringer* (1964), where a vengeful twin murders then assumes the identity of her more successful look-alike, and *The Nanny* (1965), where the aging Davis drowns a baby in a bathtub. “Maybe it’s really Bette Davis I want / to be,” the daughter ruminates, “the good twin or even better the bad / one or a nanny who drowns a baby in a bath” (26).³ As Katharine Cockin has argued, the end of the poem reinvigorates the presence and perspective of the daughter, who will not be done away with so easily.⁴ “Her sister said she’d write me a letter,” she says, but as the poem reaches its end it is clear the letter and the reunion will never come (34). So the fragile sisterhood of the three women devolves into mutual anomie and suspicion.⁵

Both Bette Davis and the inter-personal aggression on display in “The Adoption Papers” return in Kay’s *Bessie Smith*, a quirky 1997 monograph written for Absolute Press’s “Outlines” series of profiles on gay and lesbian artists. Foregrounding the tense, antagonistic, often physically violent relationships between Bessie and her female lovers and rivals, Kay probes a contradiction in 1920s female blues culture that Angela Davis has described as follows: “Blues lyrics often construct intragender relationships as antagonistic, as negotiations of encounters between competitors and rivals. At the same time, there are songs that highlight friendship, sisterhood, love, and solidarity between women.”⁶ The

³ For another unexpected intrusion of Bette Davis into black diasporic culture, see Nadia Ellis on C.L.R. James’ fixation on the actress and other white American female silver screen stars. Nadia Ellis, *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015) 44-54.

⁴ Katharine Cockin, “Rethinking Transracial Adoption: Reading Jackie Kay’s *The Adoption Papers*,” *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* 18.2 (2003): 283.

⁵ I say “sisterhood” because the poem self-consciously destabilizes the generational differences and the intra-familial specificity of the three women’s relationships and identities. Kay imagines their closeness in more than just filial terms, opening up possibilities of identification but also mutual attraction and lesbian eroticism, especially between the daughter and biological mother.

⁶ Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage, 1998) 45.

famous private Pullman train serving as Bessie's home-on-the-road figures, on the one hand, as a utopian space of social and sexual possibility where the singer "carried out her lesbian relationships so openly that we all know about them still."⁷ But it is also, as Kay imagines it, a space of envy, antagonism, and cruelty between women. Bessie "often refused to share a bill with any other woman who was singing the blues" (Kay, *Bessie Smith* 98). She torments a lover until she attempts suicide (87). Bessie's niece Ruby Walker, whom Kay places in a feverish (though entirely fictional) lesbian romance with the performer, also endures abuse: Bessie beats her for flirting with a handsome dancer they mutually admire (85). In one of the book's italicized, overtly fictionalized sections, Kay again enlists Bette Davis as a reference point in framing an encounter between the two women as "an early black version of *All About Eve*" (79). Kay imagines Ruby in the role of Eve, the treacherous understudy, with Bessie taking the part of the older Broadway star, Margot, the Bette Davis character. The veiled lesbianism of the Code-era film is rendered explicit in Kay's reimagining of the scene. Bessie catches Ruby "red-handed" in her dressing room "trying to be" her (80). She grabs her by the hair, exclaiming, "I will destroy you, bitch, before I let you be me," before the two share a passionate kiss. The scene, echoing several moments in Kay's 1998 novel *Trumpet* where a shouting match shadows or serves as a prelude to sex, seems paradoxically to credit the women's mutual antagonism with securing their fragile intimacy. A romanticized, televisually mediated show of envy and distrust sparks a sexual frisson and consolidates the women's reciprocal love and coupledness.

I have begun with Kay's vision of fractured female relationships because it gives exaggerated shape to a scenario all too recognizable in black and Asian British literature of the last half-century. The negative, anti-relational, and diabolical emotions circulating in Kay's oeuvre—what Sianne Ngai usefully describes as "ugly feelings"—resonate within a broader fictional field uniquely attentive to gestures of aggression, withdrawal, unsociability, loneliness, backwardness, leavetaking, inhospitality, and bad parenting.⁸ British ethnic

⁷ Jackie Kay, *Bessie Smith* (Bath: Absolute Press, 1997) 89.

⁸ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). Ngai's interest in negative or dysphoric affects brings her into contact with the "anti-social thesis" animating recent debates in queer theory. The terms "anti-social" and "anti-relational" are generally attached to Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman, both of whom advocate an understanding of queer sex that Judith Halberstam describes as "anti-communitarian, self-shattering, and anti-identitarian" and a movement away from "projects of redemption, reconstruction, restoration and reclamation toward what can only be called an anti-social, negative and anti-relational theory of sexuality." See Judith Halberstam, "The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Studies" *Graduate Journal of Social Science* 5.2 (2011): 140. The key texts within the anti-social dispensation of queer theory are Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke

fiction has never taken for granted the possibility of a stable, knowable black or pan-racial community on whose behalf it could speak. Instead, from the pioneering West Indian male authors (Sam Selvon, V.S. Naipaul, George Lamming) onward to Kay, Kazuo Ishiguro, Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith and other black and Asian British writers of the 1980s and afterwards, the thorny and difficult interpersonal relationships shaping literary representations of diasporic life in the UK often bring into uncomfortable focus the factors that can undermine the forging of politicized identities and communities. Consider the atomizing trajectories of novels like Lamming's *The Emigrants* (1954) or Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* (1967), where the figure of the solitary, retiring migrant stands witness to the fragility and inevitable breakdown of pan-Caribbean social bonds on English soil. Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), often positioned in the critical literature as a cheery alternative to these texts, likewise places male migrants at cross purposes with one another or has them succeed at each other's expense, as when, in a recurring joke, seasoned migrants cadge money from the newly arrived never to repay it, or when a smooth talker is goaded into delivering a soap-box speech only to be shouted down by the overlapping voices of hecklers. (To these familiar male communities of contest I will be juxtaposing, in this study's first chapter, the fraught female-female relationships of a lesser-known contemporary woman-authored text: Buchi Emecheta's 1974 novel *Second Class Citizen*.) The anti-social acts glimpsed in early migrant fictions could be said to reach their fullest expression in the late-century works of figures as differently situated as Ishiguro and Smith. In *The Remains of the Day*, Ishiguro submits English hospitality and civility to withering critique, juxtaposing the hyperbolic unsociability of its main character with the secretly authoritarian overtures of courtesy defining an English aristocratic order under the sway of Nazism. Smith's *White Teeth*, too, reimagines World War II and the colonial scramble for power in affective terms. As we will see, Smith pits the social engineering projects of an unlikely array of historical projects (colonialism, eugenics, liberal race consciousness) against a homespun Forsterian agenda of "muddle," failure, and friendship—qualities invested in self-loathing middle-aged fathers and disaffected biracial teens alike.

My purpose in bringing together such unseemly affects is not to uncover their dissident or insurgent energies. My project thus stands in contrast to that of queer theorist Lee Edelman, who leverages the "anti-social" or "anti-relational" against the heteronormative, reproductive imperative shaping today's political unconscious (Edelman 1-32). If anything, the case of black British literature points in the other direction; the anti-social devices explored below need to be understood as highly equivocal and contingent, as capable of reproducing

University, 2003); and Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996). Also see Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

dominant rhetorics of identity as they are of challenging them. My more modest goal here is to foreground the affective dimensions of British citizenship and the complex processes of affiliation and disaffiliation by which black, Asian, and queer Britons claim belonging in the imagined community of Britain. In what follows, I will advance a theory of “affective citizenship” to account for the emotional and behavioral criteria that ethnic minorities are forced to navigate in order to gain inclusion in the British national polity. Building on the work of recent scholars of “cultural citizenship,” this study holds that beyond the formal, legal criteria of citizenship, migrants are also forced to negotiate a cultural obstacle course designed to differentiate between those who are fit and those who are unfit for full civic membership.⁹ I reorient this thesis to consider how a certain emotional literacy looms as an implicit citizenship requirement—a kind of acid test for the making of ethical subjects deserving of full citizenship rights and privileges. Thus, in addition to performing palatable masculinities and femininities, abiding by laws, demonstrating the appropriate work ethic, modeling Western standards of marriage and intra-familial relations, non-white immigrants must also prove their capacity for congenial neighborliness, maternal care, happiness, love, courtesy, anger management, and lyrical expressivity, along with an ensuing appreciation of the agency of (Western) literature. To better understand the idealized citizen capable of internalizing these standards of behavioral acceptability, and to show how they demand a stigmatization and disavowal of migrants’ raced pasts, I will develop the idea of the “therapeutic subject” of British ethnic fiction and analyze the conspicuous feminization of this subject as she emerges in popular millennial accounts of British Asian experience.

Bringing into focus the vexed and thwarted longing for community shaping British ethnic fiction from the 1970s onwards, this dissertation explores the work of five authors—Buchi Emecheta, Zadie Smith, Monica Ali, Alan Hollinghurst and Jackie Kay—who elaborate a vision of cultural citizenship based on the affective bonds, however strained, between individuals within the migrant social matrix. At a time when postcolonial literary studies increasingly privileges, without really interrogating, an idealized rhetoric of “conviviality,” the works of these authors dwell on affective states hardly conducive to the openness and hospitality this term conjures up.¹⁰

⁹ The text I have found most useful for thinking through the contradictions of cultural citizenship is Sunaina Maira, *Missing: Youth, Citizenship, and Empire after 9/11* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009) 76-94.

¹⁰ The term “conviviality” emerges in the work of Paul Gilroy to describe the lived experience of cross-cultural contact that stands apart from and opposes the “melancholia” shaping nativist discourses in neoliberal Britain. Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006). The term, however, has come to denote a certain ill-defined cosmopolitan sensibility implicitly defined in opposition to racialized cultural practices (arranged marriage,

What is striking, nonetheless, is how the articulation of emotional negativity and failed kinship in the literary sphere coincides with, rather than upends, the longing for mutual recognition and community. Like the equivocal, contradictory impulses toward love and aggression on display in *Bessie Smith*, many of the spaces of cross-racial affiliation explored below—for example, the maternity ward and other institutional spaces of women’s empathy in Emecheta’s *Second Class Citizen*—are ridden with contradictions and veiled aggressions. Building on the work of queer and affect studies scholars like Sara Ahmed, Heather Love, Sianne Ngai, Lauren Berlant, Nadia Ellis, Judith Halberstam, Elizabeth Freeman, David Eng, and Anne-Marie Fortier, I bring into focus the conditional, administered freedoms promised to black and Asian Britons capable of demonstrating modes of conduct befitting British liberal democracy.¹¹

religious devotion, extremism) deemed unfit for contemporary Britain. For an example of this mobilization of the term, see John Ashcroft, “Introduction: A Convivial Critical Democracy—Post-Colonial Studies in the Twenty-First Century,” *Literature for Our Times: Postcolonial Studies In the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Ranjini Mendis, and Julie McGonegal (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012) xvi-xxxv. I was led to this article by Phanael Antwi, Sarah Brophy, Helene Strauss, and Y-Dang Troeung, “Postcolonial Intimacies: Gatherings, Disruptions, Departures,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 15.1 (2013): 1-9. My own sense is that a discourse of conviviality echoes and implicitly authorizes governing strategies targeting the affective citizen, such as the Tony Blair administration’s “respect agenda” and the call for “community cohesion” by Blair and Gordon Brown. administrations. As Anne-Marie Fortier claims, these strategies work by differentiating between palatable forms of cross-cultural contact (those that allow for what Fortier calls “bridging” between different racial and religious in-groups) and unpalatable ones (forms of cohesion involving the “bonding” of mono-racial or mono-religious communities). See Anne-Marie Fortier, “Proximity by Design? Affective Citizenship and the Management of Unease,” *Citizenship Studies* 14.1 (2010): 17-30.

¹¹ These following writings have been especially useful in helping me formulate a working theory of affective citizenship. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Heather Love, *Feeling Backward*; Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006); Nadia Ellis, *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015); Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*; Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer*

British ethnic fiction, especially but not exclusively the authors I have chosen as case studies, gives generous play to anti-social behaviors ambiguously located in relation to dominant rhetorics of cultural citizenship, at times defying them, at others colluding with them. In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, for example, the main character Nazneen Ahmed's tortured, obsessive re-playing of her Bangladeshi mother's suicide—which renders Nazneen paralyzed, powerless, and unsociable even years later—makes a place, and an important place, for the Indian subcontinent in the British national imaginary. On the other hand, it tends to romanticize the figure of the inscrutable, suicidal Asian women in ways predicted by Gayatri Spivak's influential critique of representations of sati in colonial discourse.¹² In Zadie Smith's rendering of the self-loathing failed immigrant patriarch, or Buchi Emecheta's depiction of a young Nigerian mother forced to hold her temper and redirect her energies towards matters literary, or Kay's infanticidal mother and duplicitous blueswoman, we discover a range of ambiguous affective states that register at close range the expansion and contraction of black British politicized identities in the years since the influential Windrush generation of Afro-Caribbean writers.

The second concern articulated by the Kay texts above involves the role of prosthetic or proxy figures in the making of citizenship claims for diasporic subjects. The passage from *Bessie Smith* sees Kay turning to both Bessie Smith and Bette Davis as what the author elsewhere calls "imaginary family" members capable of stabilizing or shoring up her own disheveled migrant identity (Kay, *Bessie Smith* 15). In what follows I examine the vagaries of appropriation in the context of diaspora, asking how black and Asian Britons buttress their identities by laying claim to—or "taxing" as Zadie Smith puts it—figures hailing from otherwise remote cultural quarters. In *The Female Complaint*, Lauren Berlant advances a theory of "prosthetic embodiment" in a discussion of white sentimentalism's investment in the laboring black body (Berlant, *Female Complaint* 107-144). For Berlant, American sentimental texts such as the oft-revived *Imitation of Life* foreground white characters' vicarious coming into self-knowledge through a kind of affective hi-jacking of black servants' alterity. Berlant theorizes a process she terms "code crossing," which "involves borrowing the corporeal logic of an other, or a fantasy of that logic, and adopting it as a prosthesis" (141). In Berlant's model, both the white female protagonists of sentimental fiction and the "mulatta" figures of passing narratives attach their hopes to idealized prosthetic bodies that "replace the body of pain with the projected image of safety and satisfaction commodities represent" (112).

Temporalities, Queer Histories (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Anne-Marie Fortier, "Proximity By Design?"

¹² Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 271-313.

The forms of identification Berlant presents in terms of the consolidation of racial privilege can also, as her attention to passing fictions suggests, be sought and found in the self-fashioning strategies of racially-marked subjects. Indeed, the pattern of prosthetic embodiment in black and Asian British writing is prevalent enough to stand as a constitutive feature of the field. In Smith's *White Teeth*, Irie Jones shores up her Jamaican identity with a revisionary if ultimately self-serving mythology of her great-grandmother. In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Nazneen Ahmed's aspirational Englishness leverages the televisual memory of Torvill and Dean in a manner that echoes Monica Ali's own middlebrow designs on Princess Diana.¹³ For Emecheta's Adah, it is the intimate public of forbearing mothers in the maternity ward who prefigure and authorize her own assertion of autonomous selfhood. In these cases, the distant or manufactured "kin" being claimed by the diasporic subject are plucked from the image repertoire of either metropolitan Britain or the British colonial archive. To these already diverse and idiosyncratic objects of identification my final chapter adds Kay and her joyous, fraught, often exasperating treatment of African American musical cultures. Because of her reaching across the Atlantic, and because this will entail a different, more flexible historical framing than one focused solely on the making of multiracial Britain, Kay will likely seem the anomalous figure here. But what can be said of Kay can also be said of Ali, Smith, and Emecheta: that their vision of cross-cultural and cross-historical connection necessarily calls out for a transnational framework for the study of nominally British ethnic, gender and sexual identities. In Kay and Smith, the process of prosthetic identification goes hand in hand with a critique of the racial essentialism underwriting Thatcherite rhetoric on national identity and the family. Nonetheless, we should not assume that the eccentric, far-flung identifications shaping these texts uniformly entail a rejection of a nation-based frame of reference. In *Brick Lane*, for example, I will argue that Nazneen's upwardly mobile entrepreneurialism, exotifying portrayal of Bangladesh and *sati*, and heroization of British Olympic athletes bespeak a troublesome imperial identification.

Since there are a variety of ways in which to make sense of these narratives of affective and prosthetic citizenship, I should specify that my approach will privilege a form of gender analysis inspired by Berlant's theory of the "female complaint." The affective citizen mobilized by the literary texts in question is not always but most often a woman. Why is this the case? Especially in *Second Class Citizen* and *Brick Lane*, but also in *Bessie Smith*, what we see taking shape is a sentimental narrative of women's community predicated on cultural assumptions about women's exemplary capacity for feeling. In *Second Class Citizen*, Adah's experience in the maternity ward registers her desire for

¹³ Monica Ali is the author of a counterfactual novel about Diana and has written a number of op-ed pieces voicing her fondness for the royal family. See Monica Ali, *Untold Story: A Novel* (New York: Scribner, 2012); Ali, "Let Kate Middleton be a princess for our times," *The Guardian* (UK) 30 April 2011.

inclusion in what Berlant might term an “intimate public.” Berlant uses this term to name an “affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an x.” (Berlant, *Female Complaint* viii). In her account, intimate publics provide a kind of textually mediated court of appeal for women, hence her attention to the material circulation of sentimental women’s literature and film as commodities in a feminized literary marketplace. The consumptive, textual dimension of belonging comes into focus in *Second Class Citizen* in the form of the women’s magazines and films that galvanize Adah to demand rights within her marriage. It appears as well in Nazneen’s spectatorial rapture in the presence of British sporting icons, whom she spies on the television and in magazines. Berlant argues that the print and film culture providing women with this sense of virtual community tend to emplot women’s experience in recognizable ways, resolving social antagonisms at the level of satisfying personal tales of hardship and overcoming. “The complaint genres,” she argues, “tend to foreground a view of power that blames flawed men and bad ideologies for women’s intimate suffering, all the while maintaining some fidelity to the world of distinction and desire that produced such suffering in the first place” (Berlant, *Female Complaint* 2). Since they are self consciously delivered from feminist perspectives, neither the novels of Emecheta nor Ali outwardly align themselves with a normative or moralizing sex/gender system. Indeed, in their ultimate refusal of companionate intimacy or romantic coupled secured in heterosexual marriage (both texts end in the breaking apart of romantic relationships), *Brick Lane* and *Second Class Citizen* would seem to refuse a capitulation to socially conservative gender roles. Yet both texts displace romantic love with a romance of the self as upwardly mobile subject; the romance remains, it is just that it is reimagined in entrepreneurial terms.

Methodologically speaking, it should be clear by now that the criticism I hope to model here is one that privileges the formal and figural logic of individual literary texts. What I am identifying in this dissertation, in other words, is a pattern of gendered representations shared by five authors adjacent to but differently situated in relation to a recognizable corpus of black British literature. All the same, the representational maneuvers of Ali, Emecheta, Smith, Hollinghurst, and Kay ought to be understood in terms of their shared, if ambivalent, reckoning with a set of determining historical transformations. That is, the rules of affiliation negotiated by these literary works are not naturally existing but are instead “made” by the historical forces roiling British national culture over the past few decades. In their testing of possibilities for alternate frameworks of kinship and affiliation these authors are, first of all, responding to the shifting meaning of the family in postwar Britain, especially as it pertains to communities of color. In the years since the first large-scale arrival of Caribbean and African immigrants in the UK in the 1940s, the family has continually emerged as the site where citizenship is articulated and cemented. That is, the criteria determining the suitability of black and Asian migrants for inclusion in the national polity has

unambiguously foregrounded questions of household formation, marriage customs, and patterns of gender relations within the family. The immediate postwar period saw the pathologization of black family structures, a history now legible in terms not just of immigration policy but what we might consider the biopolitical shaping of normative discourses of marriage, parenthood, child-rearing, and the like.¹⁴ It is a history also legible in the paper trail of debates within Anglo and black British feminism in the 1970s, chiefly in the attempts of black feminists like Hazel Carby to complicate the western feminist critique of the family (for more on this, see Chapter One). The official surveillance and policing of black families in the 1950s and 1960s has, in the twenty-first century, given way to an all-too-familiar stigmatization of the Asian (especially Muslim) family and its various personae: the tradition bound patriarch, the submissive housewife, the extremist son.¹⁵

The literary treatment of male and female communities of contest in multi-racial Britain also registers authors' attempts to resolve a certain crisis of self-definition caused by the rise and fall of "black" as a political identity in the years since the Windrush generation of Afro-Caribbean migrants in the 1950s. Stuart Hall's influential periodization of black British cultural production in his essay "New Ethnicities" provides a useful entry point to this process. Hall argues that the 1960s and early 1970s in Britain witnessed the consolidation of "black" as a political identity meant to do the foundation-building work of countering racist stereotypes with positive representations.¹⁶ To this Hall juxtaposes the "second moment" of black British expression in the late 1970s and 1980s, which saw a

¹⁴ Thoughtful consideration of the family question in postcolonial Britain can be found in: Ranu Samantrai, *AlterNatives: Black Feminism in the Postimperial Nation* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002); Jordanna Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012); Wendy Webster, *Imagining home: gender, race, and national identity* (London: Routledge, 1998); Ashley Dawson, *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007); Hazel Carby, "White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood," *Cultures of Babylon* (New York: Verso, 1999) 67-92; Nadine Attewell, *Better Britons: Reproduction, National Identity, and the Afterlife of Empire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014); and Anna Marie Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Gail Lewis, "Welcome to the Margins: Diversity, tolerance, and strategies of exclusion," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28.3 (2006): 536-558; Anne-Marie Fortier, *Multicultural Horizons: Diversity and the limits of the civil nation* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Mica Nava, *Visceral Cosmopolitanism: Gender, Culture and the Normalisation of Difference* (New York: Berg, 2007).

¹⁶ Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 442-451.

new generation of (often female or queer) black and Asian cultural producers aiming to trace the faultlines of minority communities and expose the inadequacy of “black” as an implicitly masculinist, heteronormative portmanteau term. As useful as Hall’s periodization is, there are times when the literary culture in question will push back on the schema he proposes. For example, Jackie Kay stakes out an authorial persona tailor-made for the “second moment” of which Hall speaks, in her claiming of a queer feminist perspective and in her interest in the constructedness of identity. Yet she also polemically spurns the mantle of hybridity and construes the imagined community to which she belongs as a “black imaginary family” in nearly essentialist terms. Recent historians like Nathalie Thomlinson, Joshua Guild, and Kennetta Hammond Perry have taken up the question of the difficult negotiating and re-negotiating of community in black Britain, often in relation to other adjacent movements such as the women’s movement in the UK and the Civil Rights Movement in the US.¹⁷ Because of the transnational palette of identities and experiences summoned by Kay and Smith, especially, the question of how (or whether) to preserve the national integrity of the term “black British literature” looms large. My study participates, then, in a larger scholarly discussion about how to situate black British cultural production in a rapidly globalizing literary culture.¹⁸

The chapters that follow do not march in lock-step with these historical developments, but I have tried to arrange them in a way capable of suggesting the contours of a recognizable historical arc leading from the black feminist debates of the 1970s up through more recent reckonings with multicultural Britain. My first chapter, on Buchi Emecheta’s *Second Class Citizen*, explores the question of women’s empathy and its institutional determinants in the context of welfare state Britain. I show how Emecheta, a Nigerian writer beginning her creative career in London in the 1960s, negotiates with state-sanctioned rhetorics of proper motherhood and the commodified women’s genres that broadcast and popularize them. Emecheta, I argue, presents a narrative of affective citizenship in which the semi-autobiographical main character, Adah, comes to leave behind her anti-social feelings in favor of a literary sensibility born of welfare state principles.

¹⁷ Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London is the Place for Me* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Nathalie Thomlinson, *Race, Ethnicity and the Women’s Movement in England, 1968-1993* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); Joshua B. Guild, “Nobody in this World is Better Than Us’: Calypso in the Age of Decolonization and Civil Rights,” *The Other Special Relationship: Race, Rights, and Riots in Britain and the United States*, eds. Robin D.G. Kelly and Stephen Tuck (London: Palgrave, 2016).

¹⁸ One recent anthology particularly receptive to this question is Gail Low and Marion Wynne-Davies, *A Black British Canon?* (Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). See especially the contribution by John McLeod, 93-104.

In Chapter 2, I reframe Zadie Smith's critique of roots-based, absolutist understandings of racial and national identities to show how it also indicts certain models of history and historical thinking. In an extended close reading of *White Teeth* (2000), I argue that Smith links such forms of racial determinism to teleological, developmental models of historical progress. Chief among these in the novel is the "family tree" and the normalizing work it performs within dominant narratives of British cultural formation. Smith presents a variety of what I call "corrupted genealogies" to expose the racialized myth of cultural continuity, purity, and sameness at the heart of normative understandings of family lineage. In order to bring this dimension of the narrative into focus, I draw attention to Smith's notorious authorial mistake of making the Hindu historical figure Mangal Pandey the great-grandfather of the Muslim fictional character Samad Iqbal. I argue that the critical reaction toward Smith's apparent error replicates the terms of the linear, teleological historiography Smith sets out to critique, and moreover that the cross-religious family romance between Samad and Mangal Pandey presents a powerful counterfactual in the spirit of Smith's critical rethinking of genealogy. I also argue that Smith approaches progressivist histories in terms of the pathologized subjectivities they leave out—the cultural castoffs whose backwardness renders them unassimilable to the temporal logic of modernity. Presenting a critical counter-lineage of Mangal, Samad, and Archie as failed war heroes, Smith participates in a complex set of debates in queer and postcolonial theory about the politics of failure.

In Chapter 3, I analyze the narrative of generational conflict and continuity at the heart of Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* (2003), particularly as it informs the novel's fashioning of female identity. This chapter identifies the female body-in-motion as the figure mediating the novel's recursive movement between 1980s Britain and a remembered past in Bangladesh. Foregrounding the figural grammar of the novel's symbolic scheme, I argue that Ali literalizes the trope of the fallen woman, presenting the kinetic acts of women in the novel's London phase as mirror images of the suicidal body of Nazneen's late mother. Amma's fallenness figures forth an abject or debased femininity that the novel codes as an obstacle to the realization of Nazneen's desires—an obstacle, in short, to her ability to claim a meaningful place in Britain. I argue that Nazneen traverses this obstacle by relinquishing her mother's ghost and forming new identifications to take its place. The role abdicated by Amma is taken up by mass media images of idealized femininity, namely the televisual image of a figure skater. The falling female body, I argue, thus rhetorically grounds two seemingly contradictory possibilities for female identity: on the one hand, an injurious or stigmatized womanhood, and on the other, an empowered femininity based on the promise of mobility, autonomy, and imaginative expressivity.

My fourth and final chapter explores the fantasies of belonging shaping two writers operating from an explicitly queer perspective: Allan Hollinghurst and Jackie Kay. Many of the same ambiguities of affiliation shaping the work of black and Asian British writers, I argue, can be discovered in the unlikely, improvised

alliances seen in Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* and Kay's *Bessie Smith*. In my section on Hollinghurst, I bring into focus what Anna Marie Smith has called the New right's seemingly paradoxical "promotion" of the main character Nick's homosexuality by exploring the terms of his inclusion in a wealthy, homophobic Tory family and the ideological work he performs on its behalf. My analysis will foreground what Hollinghurst continually tropes as Nick's "romance" with the world of wealth and privilege to which the Fedden family grants him entry. In particular, I direct attention to Nick's psychological investments in the family and the family home—two of the central rhetorical topoi of neoliberal discourse in 1980s Britain. The second section of this explores another eccentric longing, this time cross-historical and cross-Atlantic rather than cross-class (although it is partially that too): the Scottish poet and novelist Jackie Kay's fixation and imaginative investment in 1920s American blues culture. Here I explore Kay's complex, often troubling treatment of black women's sexuality in the New Negro renaissance, arguing that Kay partakes in a romanticizing of black folk culture reminiscent of the "vernacular" literary criticism of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Houston Baker. Kay's rendering of diaspora in terms of queer and transgender experience often, if not always, disrupts and envisions alternatives to the normative, state-sanctioned sex/gender systems too often re-centered by the therapeutic communities of feeling visible in the rest of my case studies. Nonetheless, part of what I want to argue is that despite their explicitly queer and transnational reframing, the mechanisms of cross-cultural and cross-historical affiliation at work in Kay's imagination prove every bit as thorny and contradiction-ridden as the modes of imperial and sentimental identification we can track in Emecheta and Ali. From the vantage point of recent debates among Americanist scholars of the New Negro renaissance of the 1920s, Kay's "blues inscriptions" negotiate an enormously complex set of questions about black women's sexuality and possibilities for lesbian community in the roaring twenties, not to mention in late-twentieth-century Scotland.¹⁹ This chapter explores the multiple vectors of this engagement to assess the pitfalls and potentials of Kay's queer cosmopolitan project.

¹⁹ I take the phrase "blues inscriptions" from Ann DuCille, one of the most perceptive readers of blues discourse and the literary culture in proximity to it. Ann DuCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 70.

CHAPTER ONE

Motherhood and Affective Citizenship in *Second Class Citizen*

The burning of Adah's manuscript toward the end of Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* is the final blow in a long string of humiliations suffered at the hand of her abusive husband, Francis. A Nigerian migrant living and working in 1960s London, Adah secretly drafts a novel while on maternity leave caring for her fourth child. Francis declares the manuscript "rubbish" and "said that she would never be a writer because she was black and because she was a woman."¹ Later, when Adah discovers him feeding it into the stove, a "triumphant smile upon his face," her cries of protest reveal just how personal and intimate an affront this is (169). "Do you hate me so much," she asks, "that you would kill my child? Because that is what you have done" (197). Adah's grief for her murdered "brainchild" registers the close association between her literary and maternal labors (166). Her literary creation, written by hand while simultaneously nursing her infant daughter, is for Adah as much a testament to her nurturing powers as to her budding artistic ones. Francis's act of literary sabotage simultaneously articulates a patriarchal disdain for her efforts to raise and take care of their children.

The manuscript episode captures something of the range and complexity of Emecheta's ambitions in telling the story of one black mother's experience in Windrush-era Britain. First of all, *Second Class Citizen* mounts an unapologetic defense of motherhood and family from a postcolonial feminist perspective.² "I write about families because I still believe in families," Emecheta avers in a 1988 essay. "I write about women who try very hard to hold their family together until it becomes absolutely impossible."³ In *Second Class Citizen*, motherhood is central to Adah's identity and to her vision of the better life she wants for herself and her

¹ Buchi Emecheta, *Second Class Citizen* (New York: George Braziller 1974) 168.

² In arguing this, my argument differs sharply from John McLeod's assertion that "filial relationships are rarely enabling in Emecheta's fiction." See John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 103. Whereas McLeod turns Francis's extended family and to Adah's woeful marriage to Francis for evidence of the meaning of family in the Emecheta system, I will be reading family primarily in terms of what Emecheta terms the "cultivation of sisters" and the formation of women's support groups. As I will show, McLeod's argument about family is buttressed by a similarly unwarranted argument about what he construes as Emecheta's nearly racist recoiling from her fellow Nigerian migrants in London. The resources of family that I discuss are to be found squarely within an expansive Nigerian model of kinship.

³ Buchi Emecheta, "Feminism with a small 'f,'" *Criticism and Ideology: Second African Writer's Conference, Stockholm 1988*, ed. Kirsten H. Petersen (Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988) 175.

children. The novel recounts at length, and with great sympathy, Adah's efforts to secure housing, food, childcare, and medical attention for her four children (at the conclusion of the novel she is pregnant with a fifth). "I must have my children whole and perfect," she cries in an argument with Francis (64). Adah's maternal determination is foregrounded in several harrowing episodes where the wholeness and perfection of her son Vicky and daughter Titi are put in jeopardy. Vicky contracts viral meningitis after playing unsupervised in the dangerous, unsanitary backyard of a local child-minder. Titi goes temporarily mute and develops a lasting speech impediment after Francis scolds her for using Yoruba rather than English. These and other occasions where the well-being of her children comes under threat galvanize Adah to confront Francis, demand better treatment, and ultimately leave him. Indeed, what unfolds in *Second Class Citizen* is a certain redistribution of affect whereby Adah emotionally disinvests from Francis and invests in her children: "Yes, I have my children. They are only babies, but babies become people, men and women. I can switch my love to them. Leave this person" (122 emphasis in original). The trajectory toward adulthood implied here ("babies become people, men and women") remakes Adah's children in the mold of fully grown rights-bearing subjects, indeed as exemplary citizens whose rights, in the imagination of the novel, outflank even those of Adah. Their mother's fight for freedom and self-determination is perhaps better thought of as a fight for theirs.

By restoring dignity to the parenting practices of black mothers, Emecheta intervened in a rhetorical climate in which the black family was routinely pathologized as a scourge to the British way of life. As Wendy Webster has argued, in the great period of West Indian and African settlement in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s, "black was not associated with domestic and familial life except through its connections with the white family—connections which were usually seen as threatening" (Webster 47). Racist discourse paradoxically presented black migrants as insufficiently capable of forming families (in the scapegoat figure of the rootless single black male) and hyperbolically reproductive at the same time, with the image of the "teeming" immigrant family regularly invoked as an ominous sign of changing times.⁴ In a memorable scene in Sam Selvon's iconic migrant novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, a scaremongering white reporter interrogates Tolroy's Jamaican aunt upon her arrival at Waterloo Station: "The next day when the *Echo* appear it had a picture, and under the picture write: Now Jamaican Families come to Britain."⁵ Migrants' putatively non-normative family practices became a focal point in popular and academic

⁴ Jordanna Bailkin explores a similar paradox whereby the postimperial British state sought to cultivate family stability by encouraging the reunion of West African husbands and wives in Britain while simultaneously betraying anxieties about "large numbers of children resulting from these unions." Bailkin, 169.

⁵ Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (Toronto: TSAR Publications, 1991) 16.

accounts of Britain's changing racial complexion. As Chris Waters has argued, even the otherwise anti-racist "race relations" anthropologists of the 1950s (Sheila Patterson, Kenneth Little, Anthony Richmond, Michael Banton) "suggested that 'well-adjusted' migrants were those who adopted a western model of the egalitarian family and companionate marriage."⁶ Anxieties about intermarriage and miscegenation predictably focused on the corrupting sexual license of black men. Yet as Webster shows, a complementary hostility was directed at black women, who were found deficient in the essential psychological qualities seen in fit mothers.⁷ "A main symbol of intimacy, emotional well-being, and psychological health—mother-love—was not attributed to black women" (xv). If the specter of the urban black male was all too present in the visual economy of white racism, black women and especially black mothers were conspicuous in their absence in the press and cultural representations. So thoroughgoing was this erasure and stigmatization of black motherhood that it was perversely internalized by some migrant parents themselves. Jordanna Bailkin describes the *de rigueur* (and state-sanctioned) practice among Nigerian and Ghanaian migrants of leaving their children in the charge of white foster mothers in the home counties, the better to deliver them from urban poverty and provide an authentic, if temporary, interface with a pastoral Englishness. If the love and affection that children needed were not to be found within the black family, they could be absorbed, in theory, from white foster mothers within the "host" community.⁸

⁶ Chris Waters, "'Dark Strangers' in Our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947-1963," *Journal of British Studies* 36.2 (1997): 228. Waters turns to Sheila Patterson's influential *Dark Strangers: A Study of West Indians* in London for evidence of this sentiment.

⁷ To some degree, the denigration of black motherhood was a self-fulfilling prophecy, the result of the postwar welfare state's active investment in migrant women as *workers* and not as mothers. To the extent that the state encouraged the immigration of West Indian and African women, it was to fill postwar labor shortages in the National Health Service as well as in the transportation and textile industries. "Rather than a concern to protect or preserve the black family in Britain," Hazel Carby argues, "the state reproduced common-sense notions of its inherent pathology: black women were seen to fail as mothers *precisely because of their position as workers*" (my emphasis). Hazel Carby, "White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood," Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and racism in 70s Britain* (London: Hutchison, 1982) 219.

⁸ Bailkin, 170-174. Significantly, Bailkin shows how the initial enthusiasm about white fostering waned when working class white foster mothers themselves became subject to the same scrutiny and condescension experienced by black mothers. Both were considered bearers of the newfound social evil of the "problem family."

In this context, part of the foundation-building work that a text like *Second Class Citizen* needed to accomplish was to refuse the dominant caricature of the migrant family and to fill in the nearly complete void of complex, organic representations of black motherhood in the national imaginary. In doing so, *Second Class Citizen* provided a novelistic counterpoint to a set of debates within British feminism about the meaning of the family in the context of diaspora. In her influential essay “White Woman Listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood,” Hazel Carby sees the slave-descendant family and its constitutive histories of displacement as unsettling the received analysis of the family in western feminism: “We do not want to deny that the family can be a source of oppression for us,” she writes, “but . . . we need to recognize that during slavery, periods of colonialism and under the present authoritarian state, the black family has been a site of political and cultural resistance to racism.”⁹ Carby shows how the assumptions underwriting the western feminist critique of the family are historically unwarranted in the case of communities of color negotiating a hostile racist milieu. Dependence upon a male breadwinner, for example, is not a reliable index of women’s subordination in an environment where “systems of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, have systematically denied positions in the white male hierarchy to black men and have used specific forms of terror to oppress them” (215). In Carby’s analysis, two otherwise staunchly opposed formations—imperialism and western feminism—could be seen to overlap in their mutual denigration of the black family.

It is important to emphasize that Emecheta’s rendering of the maternal does more than merely counter negative with positive stereotypes, valuing the mundane tasks of home-making that go undervalued within a patriarchal culture and perhaps also within the rarefied bourgeois feminism the novel rejects. In some of its moods, the novel does advance this kind of remedial, recuperative politics of representation. But it would prove more accurate to say that *Second Class Citizen*, in ways consistent with Carby’s argument, *redefines* the family in response to the specific vectors of power shaping Adah’s migrant experience (not just Francis’ patriarchal malevolence, but the structural violence of metropolitan racism as it intersects with a deeply gendered social welfare system) and in order to accommodate a range of West African kinship practices that provide her with resources of strength. Emecheta decenters the male breadwinner by underscoring Francis’s financial dependence on Adah; it is her employment as a librarian that provides for the family’s basic needs, while Francis sporadically pursues a degree in accounting. But the introduction of a female breadwinner is just one among several ways *Second Class Citizen* models dispensations of family along non-patriarchal lines. As I will argue, the novel also continually foregrounds lateral identifications between women—what

⁹ Carby, 214. For an influential account of slavery and/as filial separation, also see Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64-81.

Carby refers to as the “strong female support networks that exist in many black sex/gender systems” and what Emecheta herself has discussed in terms of the “cultivating of sisters.”¹⁰ It is in these ad hoc women’s communities, rather than in the conventional (western) structure of the nuclear family, that *Second Class Citizen* locates the meaning and potentials of kinship. Yet Emecheta’s portrayal of horizontal women’s support structures refuses to idealize sisterhood as an axis of community. As we will see, the extended family networks given play in *Second Class Citizen* often feature edgy, antagonistic relationships between women, almost to the point that aggressivity and discord become constitutive features of the female Nigerian diaspora in London and the Nigerian women peopling Adah’s memories. The unexpected equation of family and anti-social behavior in the novel allows Emecheta to put pressure on and explore alternatives to the rhetoric of reciprocal love shaping dominant articulations of the filial.

Thinking about family in terms of its affective economies helps bring into focus a second imperative shaping Emecheta’s treatment of family and motherhood, one which might initially seem inconsistent with her positive valuation of Adah’s nurturing powers. While privileging motherhood as an essential site of self-realization for Adah, *Second Class Citizen* is by no means indiscriminating of the ideologies of family and domesticity competing for her attention and motivating her actions. Indeed, much of the novel—the pages devoted to what we might think of as the development of her interior life—stands as an indictment of the sentimental ideology of domestic fulfillment advertised in the books and films she consumes, and cultivated in the therapeutic spaces of the post-war British welfare state (the hospitals and doctor’s offices) she traverses. Emecheta repeatedly identifies her younger autobiographical self as a naïve, impressionable subject who heeds the call of the love plots circulating in commodified, mass-mediated women’s genres. As Francis’s aggressions become more and more intolerable, Adah retreats into a consoling fantasy of companionate intimacy wholly at odds with the apparent reality of her crumbling marriage. *Second Class Citizen* explores the seductiveness and lived consequences of this deeply normative fantasy of romantic coupledness, locating its origins not just in a feminized mass culture but also, as I will argue, in the rhetoric of proper parenting circulating in public and psychological discourse on the family at the time. Although the sentimentalism to which Adah is beholden initially provides a salve to her psychological wounds, Emecheta ultimately presents this normative, state-sanctioned domesticity as a further obstacle to, rather than a vessel of, Adah’s agency and freedom. This tension takes aesthetic shape in the generic instability of the novel itself, whose critique of the sentimental is couched within prose that strategically mobilizes sentimental tropes in order to render Adah’s experience accessible to a white, metropolitan readership. The novel invites readers to experience the seductive pleasures of

¹⁰ Carby, 230. Emecheta, “Feminism” 177.

the sentimental alongside the novel's protagonist, only to have us bear witness to the coercive force it ultimately exercises upon her.

This chapter explores the various prescriptions for domestic and maternal bliss Adah is forced to negotiate in the novel, showing how they narrow rather than widen her range of human possibility even as they purport to do the opposite. Emecheta fashions a narrative of women's citizenship in which her protagonist must demonstrate her worthiness of inclusion in the imagined community of Britain by learning to manage her personal conduct and feelings in ways befitting her role as a wife and especially as a mother. Because *Second-Class Citizen* takes conspicuous note of the emotions either prescribed (reciprocal love, happiness, forbearance, lyrical impressionability) or proscribed (anger, aggression, forthrightness) by the therapeutic culture in which Adah is embroiled, my analysis places special emphasis on the affective criteria of citizenship for women and ethnic minorities. Emecheta gives memorable shape to the happiness imperative found in mass-mediated women's fictions and in the maternalist assumptions of the welfare state. This matrix of prescriptive discourse about and for women becomes an important, if seldom explored, target of Emecheta's disapproval. I argue that the novel explores its human costs by tracking the affective adjustments—the sentimental education, as it were—that Adah must undergo in order to fulfill the full promise of British citizenship. In her desperate bid for domestic happiness, Adah must undergo a personal transformation requiring her to “tame her emotions” and reign in an intuitive frankness and aggressivity that Emecheta connects to her Nigerian past (50). The psychic space abdicated by these ugly feelings must be taken up with a range of positive affects (civility, personableness, fellow feeling, maternal care) holding forth the promise of fuller inclusion in the national culture. As the novel proceeds, Adah's pursuit of happiness in the domestic sphere ironically constitutes one of the biggest hazards to her well-being. It raises false hopes of a conjugal reconciliation with Francis—the responsibility for which rests on the shoulders of the supplicant wife and not those of her abuser—and prolongs what is clearly an unsustainable, violent marriage.

The contending rhetorics of motherhood held in tension in *Second Class Citizen* come into direct contact in a sequence taking place in the maternity ward of a hospital, where Adah recovers after giving birth via cesarean section to her third child, a boy named Titi. Her stay in the maternity ward offers Adah a much-needed reprieve from Francis's verbal and physical violence, not to mention his philandering, selfishness, and chronic laziness. The ward is notably filled with an assemblage of kind-hearted women, new and expectant mothers whose camaraderie helps ease Adah's physical recovery. “They were kind, those women in the ward. For the first few days, when Adah was deciding whether it was worth struggling to hold onto this life, those women kept showing her many things. They seemed to be telling her to look around her, that there were still many beautiful things to be seen, which she had not seen, that there were still several joys to be experienced which she had not yet experienced” (111). The

narrator dwells on Adah's increasing emotional investment in the mothers around her, and on her subsequent soul-searching about the state of her own marriage. For each of Adah's new acquaintances seems to enjoy a happier marriage and more attentive husband than she. And, significantly, each openly embraces her new role as a mother.

One woman, clutching her "cherished baby," has finally given birth after seventeen years of marriage to her devoted husband (112). This image of forbearance justly rewarded is accompanied by that of another woman, two weeks overdue, seen cuddling with her "film-star-like husband" like "lovers in the cheap movie pictures Adah had seen at home" (115). This woman, identified only as the "sleek girl" in bed number eleven, is herself an orphan, and views her pregnancy as a path to the close-knit biological family she has always wanted. "She was determined to make a happy home for herself, where she would be loved, really loved, and where she would be free to love... It seemed as if her dream was coming true" (114). Yet another "gorgeous" Greek woman (the other two women go unidentified in terms of nationality or race, and so implicitly signify as white), engrosses Adah with her fashionable nightdress from Marks and Spencer's, an uncomfortable reminder of Adah's shabby, stained hospital-issue gown. Adah listens eagerly to each woman's story, at once humbled and inspired by her tale of hardship overcome and happiness achieved. The healthy bonds of attachment enjoyed by the couples around her throw into relief the love deficit in her own marriage; Francis, unlike the other husbands, only begrudgingly visits her in the hospital and comes bearing neither flowers nor the clean nightdresses she requests. As she gets to know these women, Adah finds her initial bitterness and annoyance ("she got tired of admiring this baby with thick brown hair" [111]) dissolving in a flood of her own tears. "Coming to have her baby in this hospital had opened her eyes a great deal" (120). Specifically, she begins to view herself as a deserving recipient of the care and compassion directed at the other mothers: "Why was it she could never be loved as an individual," the narrator asks, slipping into free-indirect discourse, "the way the sleek woman was being loved?... Why was it that she was not blessed with a husband like that woman who had had to wait for seventeen years for the arrival of her baby son? The whole world seemed so unequal, so unfair" (115).

The soft-focus, dream-like environment of the maternity ward is rounded out by Adah's surgeon and the various care providers tending to her and the other patients. In a novel teeming with state-employed health visitors, doctors, housing officers, and other social workers, the hospital scene offers its most fully-realized representation of the post-war British welfare state in general and the National Health Service in particular. The animating figure here is Adah's male surgeon, who is made visually coextensive with the photogenic husbands visiting their wives and babies. He is a "handsome dark man... a great man. A man who knew how to handle his knife, a man who took a particular interest in all the patients he had operated on. He kept coming to see how Adah was getting on, night and day" (113). In the larger narrative of family underwriting this episode,

the strong, capable paternal figure is the necessary counterpart to the nurturing mother. Indeed, the surgeon emerges as nothing less than a Christ-figure, followed by doctors in residency described as his “six disciples” (115). The surgeon echoes and extends the kindness exemplified by his female patients, investing Adah with the power to “believe with him that she was made for this world and not the next” (113). What another writer might treat in terms of the clinical and impersonal services offered by the hospital, Emecheta envisions as personal gestures of warmth and kindness delivered by charismatic caregivers.¹¹

My interest here lies in Emecheta’s quizzical, always shifting perspective on the therapeutic women’s culture of the hospital. The author’s characteristic tonal complexity makes it difficult to tell whether the hospital is a site of emancipation or discipline, or both. On the one hand, Emecheta renders the maternity ward a crucial, if precarious, site of shared struggle and solidarity among fellow mothers. Adah’s open, intimate verbal exchanges with the women in neighboring beds stand starkly opposed to the coldness and privacy elsewhere associated with England, described earlier as a “society where nobody was interested in the problems of others” (66). The temporary sisterhood emerging in the hospital offers an important emotional resource as Adah builds up the courage to assert greater rights within her marriage. Filling the vacuum of love in her life, as it were, the patients and staff in the hospital model what Leela Gandhi has termed an “affective community,” an alliance defined not in terms of rigid national or racial identities but shared experience, struggle, and affective bonds. In an earlier chapter, Adah had “simply accepted her role as defined for her by her husband” (95). But the compassion demonstrated by the assembled mothers emboldens her to speak back to Francis and to value herself enough to transform the conditions of her existence (110). “It is only when she goes to the hospital to

¹¹ My sense of the surgeon’s charisma and Adah’s apparent genuflection to his authority is informed by Mary Poovey’s discussion of the charismatic state and the paradoxical “disciplinary individualism” it encourages in its subjects. Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). There is much more to be said about this charismatic surgeon, and specifically what the novel presents as his racial ambiguity. He is described as “another handsome dark man, white, but with that type of skin colouring white people usually have when they have stayed years and years in the sunshine, or that artificial tan which white women paint on themselves, to give them a healthy look” (113). On the one hand, the darkness of his skin allows Adah to place his kindness on a continuum with that of other black (mostly fatherly) figures in the text. But the suggestion of cosmetic artifice (his “artificial tan”) renders the surgeon suspicious to Adah. The description of the surgeon’s contrived, ambiguous appearance align him with another suspicious figure in the text, Trudy the day-minder, whose moral failings also take aesthetic shape in the form of her excessive use of make-up.

deliver her baby, and, while there, begins comparing her situation with that of other women,” critic Ashley Dawson argues, “that Adah begins to adopt a more critical and autonomous attitude towards Francis” (Dawson 104). The love binding the women to each other and to their respective partners acquires a curative force seemingly inseparable from the medical services Adah receives.

Part of the tutelary influence of the other women resides in their proximity to language. Frequently pictured “buzzing” with speech, they encourage Adah to discover her own voice. Whereas initially she “could not say a word” (111) because of medical tubes placed in her mouth, she is able, with their gentle verbal prodding, to embark on a journey from silence to speech that culminates with a satisfying dressing-down of Francis: “I want a husband now and a father for my children now!” (121). As a site of ethical cultivation, the hospital “recalled her old school’s dormitory,” both being identified as transformative spaces spurring her toward self-possession and social advancement (110). The authoritative but benevolent role played by the surgeon echoes that played by Mr. Cole, the similarly handsome and reassuring male teacher who earlier facilitates Adah’s success at school (and who himself recalls Adah’s beloved father). Underlying all of these associations is a sense of the healing power of love. As my own language has probably already begun to suggest, much of this sequence has the tone and apparatus of a sentimental fiction, stirring up the emotions of readers so that they mirror those of Adah’s fellow ward mates. Indeed, if we are to take the terms of the hospital chapter at face value, the preferred solution to Adah’s domestic problems lies in surrendering to the care and compassion of a loving, preferably handsome husband. The hospital scene confirms the desirability and even suggests the attainability of a sentimental fantasy she has harbored for some time. “No husband would have time to ask his pregnant wife how she was feeling so early in the morning,” she had grumbled upon her arrival in Britain. “That only happened in *True Stories* and *True Romances*, not in real life, particularly not with Francis for that matter. But despite the hard talking to herself, *she still yearned to be loved, to feel really married, to be cared for*” (56 my emphasis). Here, in the hospital, was living proof that such dreams actually could come true.

If the overt sentimentalism of such pronouncements occasionally veers into parody, however, this is because Emecheta deliberately punctures Adah’s fantasy of love by running it up against its logical limits in the manner of a *reductio ad absurdum*. This is the formative stylistic ambiguity of *Second Class Citizen*: at the same time that Emecheta strategically caters to a readership expecting the familiar satisfactions of a romantic upward-mobility tale, she also submits the sentimental project to rigorous scrutiny, particularly its faith in the critical agency of the feelings. Emecheta camouflages this critique in the very language of its object, imagining the therapeutic environment of the maternity ward as one masking a velvet-gloved ambition to contain and subdue a racially-marked single mother the likes of Adah. The title of the chapter containing the hospital episode is “Learning the Rules,” bracketed by “Role Acceptance” and

“Applying the Rules.” This somewhat managerial nomenclature evokes willed acquiescence rather than emancipation, thwarting the narrative of self-awakening outwardly being projected. The chapter both opens and closes in a minor key, suggesting darker outcomes for these otherwise exuberant love stories. Adah emerges from anesthesia after childbirth in a Kafka-esque atmosphere of disorientation and conspiracy, discovering that she is “tied up to the bed with rubber cords, just like the little Lilliputians tied Gulliver” (11). Adah’s convalescence in the hospital embroils her in an exercise of *bonding* that carries both the negative and positive connotations of the word.¹² And the sleek woman in bed number eleven? She dies (presumably in childbirth) and is promptly expelled from the narrative, her exemplary happiness unveiled as rather more fragile and unsustainable than Adah would like to believe.

Above all, Emecheta asks readers to think critically about Adah’s over-involvement in the shining cult of domesticity enshrined by the maternity ward. One way in which the novel accomplishes this is by placing a wedge between Emecheta the writer and Adah her partially autobiographical character. As John McLeod has argued, “Adah is clearly a fictional surrogate for Emecheta,” and yet the novel distances the two in a way “which makes possible the opportunity to regard Adah critically—one which the reader is at liberty to take even if the author seems to avoid direct critical comment” (McLeod 102). In this vein, the narrator often marks the gaps and misunderstandings in Adah’s knowledge that leave her susceptible to an overly romantic view of the other women’s lives: “All Adah could see at that moment was the sleek girl being kissed and loved, and the woman who had had to wait for seventeen years walking round the ward proudly with her child. She did not think of what life was like for a little girl who was aware that she was adopted; that the little girl might sometimes wonder whether her parents ever wanted her? ... As for the woman with the baby son, Adah could not imagine the aches and pains that went with those seventeen years” (115). In this passage, the narrator points to the reality principle lying underneath and destabilizing Adah’s idealizing point of view. If not an unreliable narrator (the novel is delivered in the third person) she emerges as a kind of unreliable focalizing character whose reported understanding of events still has the effect of distorting their manifest meaning. The narrator makes a similar intrusion to comment upon Adah’s self-consciousness about the shabby, blood-stained shawl with which she swaddles Titi. Here the narrator positions herself as Adah’s older, wiser self, replete with a fore-knowledge of how she (they) will mature over time. “If only she could be confident enough to put on a show of indifference, that would have made life much more simple for her friends in the ward and for herself too. But this type of attitude, that of the sophisticated poor, was to be achieved much later. On that December day, to twenty-year old Adah,

¹² I am inspired here by a chapter title (“Adjusting the Bonds of Love”) from Nikolas Rose’s *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (New York: Free Association Books, 1989).

a new shawl was the end of the world” (125). A self-conscious politics of respectability shadows Adah’s material desires, which are themselves inspired by the material props and accoutrements signaling the other women’s happiness. To the narrator the happiness injunction directing Adah’s desires only results in a desperate, ultimately self-loathing desire to disguise her class (and perhaps also racial) origins. By the time Adah has another baby the following year, it appears she still has not learned this lesson: “She was not going to arrive in the hospital as that poor nigger woman. Her baby was going to arrive in style” (159).

Emecheta skewers Adah’s naïve belief that romance, in its most pedestrian sense, will save the day. In the “Feminism with a small ‘f!’” essay, Emecheta notes the western specificity of the premium of marital happiness Adah finds so appealing. “A young woman might dream of romantic love, but as soon as they start having children their loyalty is very much to them... African feminism is free of the shackles of Western romantic illusions and tends to be much more pragmatic” (176-177). Within the terms of the novel, Adah’s pursuit of these “romantic illusions” only leaves her frustrated and alone. From the beginning of her stay in Britain, the mythology of the happy marriage is an alien idea that she must learn and internalize from her British peers. “She was beginning to agree with [her co-workers] that some marriages could lead to happiness, because the girls talked of nothing else but the happy ones. Well, hers was not happy, though she still believed that a happy marriage was an ideal life for a girl” (57). In the hospital episode we have been discussing, Adah is at pains to demonstrate happiness of a sufficient order, and even admonishes herself when she fails to meet her own standards: “She started to feel guilty. She had thought of herself all the time and not those women who were doing their best to be friendly. What was happening to her? At school, she was never really happy, but she did not have this suspicious attitude towards other people” (125).

The debilitating effects of this happiness imperative become especially pronounced after the birth of her fourth child, who gives Adah a new opportunity to demonstrate the values of a fit mother. While on maternity leave caring for this child, Adah attempts to defuse tensions between here and Francis by briefly, and disastrously, reinventing herself in the mold of the “real housewife” of women’s magazines and pulp romance.

She had been reading a great number of women’s magazines, and was surprised to read of mothers saying that they were bored just being housewives. She was not that type of woman. There were so many things she planned to do, and she did them. She knitted endless jumpers and cardigans for everybody, including thick big ones for Francis. It was a way of telling him that that was all she asked of life. Just to be a mother and a wife. (163)

Her “endless” domestic zeal outflanks even that of the women featured in the magazines. In addition to knitting jumpers, she engages in a wide array of

nesting activities: she pledges to attend classes in the “modern way of relaxation birth” (160); she buys a “brand-new pram, a new shawl and a new outfit for herself for when she came out of the hospital” (159); she vows to breast-feed rather than bottle-feed the baby (162); and, perhaps most importantly, she commits herself to a regimen of personal watchfulness and attitude adjustment: “What mattered was that she should not be bothered with unhappiness, because she wanted to radiate happiness to all those around her” (165).

One scene that brings this desire into painful focus involves Adah’s preparations for her stay in the maternity ward. Adah takes steps to ensure Francis will not embarrass her, as he has before, by failing to visit or bring flowers and gifts like the other husbands. “She addressed twenty greeting cards to herself, gave three pounds to Irene, the girl, and told her to post three cards a day after the baby was born. Two big bunches of flowers were to be sent her, one on her arrival, with Francis’s name attached to it *with sentimental words*” (160 my emphasis). In this act of authorial impersonation and ensuing postal theatrics, Adah effectively writes into being an idealized birth scenario, with a starring role for Francis. She ventriloquizes his “sentimental words” and even signs off on his behalf. Viewed in this way, the greeting cards anticipate the spectacular gesture of over-compensation accomplished by the manuscript. By re-centering the voice and stabilizing presence of the male breadwinner, these cards emerge as extensions of, rather than critical alternatives to, Francis’s patriarchal excesses.

The idealized maternal identity Adah aspires to bears a strong resemblance to the one championed by psychologist John Bowlby, in influential mid-century treatises such as *Child Care and the Growth of Love* and *Maternal Care and Mental Health*. Bowlby joined a growing chorus of voices placing the onus of national reconstruction on the mothers who bear the nation’s children. The period of British history in which *Second-Class Citizen* is set, the early to mid-1960s, falls toward the end but still firmly within the period when women were called upon to shore up the shaken social order of the family (seen to be imperiled by divorce, a surfeit of wage-earning women, and a declining birthrate) by exiting the labor force and recommitting themselves to childbirth and childcare. With his prescriptions for “normal motherhood,” Bowlby strongly influenced the post-war British welfare state’s profound investment in motherhood and the family. He did so by seizing upon and giving scientific sanction to popular anxieties about “absent mothers”, which he explored in terms of the experience of child evacuees during World War II. Bowlby argued that without a “warm, intimate and continuous relationship with mother,” the developing child would spiral into anti-social behavior and delinquency.¹³ As Jordanna Bailkin describes, “his studies of evacuees noted that children who were deprived of maternal attention posed a grave threat to the civic body, displaying negative social behaviors such as stealing, delinquency, violence, and

¹³ John Bowlby, *Maternal Care and Mental Health* (London: Penguin, 1950), 11.

sexual misdemeanors” (Baikin 180). His solution to the problem was to advance a set of preventative recommendations for proper parenting. Exemplary among these moralizing recommendations was the principle of speaking to children (even pre-verbal infants) as much as possible. But they also included a set of affective prescriptions for the mother herself, who is enjoined (or ordered) to take pleasure in the services she offers her children. “The child needs to feel he is an object of pleasure and pride to his mother; the mother needs to feel an expansion of her own personality in the personality of her child” (59). The onus upon women to derive pleasure from their formative labors is everywhere apparent in the maternity ward scene. There, Adah willingly submits to the program of what Nikolas Rose calls Bowlby’s program of “therapeutic familism.” (Rose 179). But elsewhere the novel sees Adah taking umbrage at the excessive maternal vigilance demanded by Bowlby: “At home in Nigeria, all a mother had to do for a baby was wash and feed him and, if he was fidgety, strap him onto her back and carry on with her work while that baby slept. But in England she had to wash piles and piles of nappies, wheel the child round for sunshine during the day, attend to his feeds as regularly as if one were serving a master, talk to the child, even if he was only a day old!” (46).

In *Second Class Citizen*, becoming the kind of parent recommended by Bowlby requires Adah to undergo a dehumanizing (and implicitly imperialist) affective transformation that obliges her to police and contain her unsavory or anti-social emotions. As Adah prepares to leave the maternity ward after giving birth to Titi, she reflects on the successes and failures of the ethical education she has gained there. “She must learn to thank people, even for their smiles, and kindly nods. This consoling conclusion, this new code of conduct Adah learned from the hospital and from staying together with other women for thirteen days, was to be with her for a long time” (126). This “code of conduct” appears innocuous enough at first, but takes on a coercive dimension when we consider the kinds of self-abnegation it demands of Adah. *Second-Class Citizen* is full of scenes in which Adah must hold her tongue or tame her emotions in the name of English decorum, collegiality, and restraint. This demand for the racialized citizen’s emotional compliance exemplifies the governing strategies that Anne-Marie Fortier describes as targeting the “affective citizen.” Discussing in an interview the neoliberal British state’s drive for “community cohesion” in recent years, Fortier locates this mode of governmentality in the “policing of the kinds of public feelings that are acceptable and unacceptable—protesting is bad for cohesion, talking about racism is bad for cohesion, meeting your neighbours in ‘meaningful exchanges’ is good for cohesion.”¹⁴ In the imagination of *Second-Class Citizen*, the policing of affect emerges as what Sara Ahmed describes as a happiness

¹⁴ Fortier, Interview with Debbie Ferreday and Adi Kuntsman, *Borderlands* 10.2 (2011), 11.

injunction implicitly grounded in normative ideologies of gender and domesticity.¹⁵

Adah's flare-ups with her neighbors register precisely the kinds of behavior the happiness injunction sanctioned by the welfare state is meant to tamp down. One of the most memorable scenes of intragender conflict in *Second-Class Citizen* occurs between Adah and Trudy, the negligent child-minder charged with taking care of Vicky and Titi. Adah arrives unannounced and discovers her children cavorting in a "slum" of a backyard "filled with rubbish, broken furniture, and ... an old type of toilet with faulty plumbing, smelly and damp." Already enraged, Adah enters Trudy's flat to discover her in a compromising position, and in a state of partial undress, with what appears to be a male client. "There was a pause, during which Adah could hear her heartbeat racing. She was finding it more and more difficult to control her temper. She remembered her mother. Ma would have torn the fatty tissues of this woman into shreds if she had been in this situation... 'Where are my children? You pro—' She stopped herself" (51). In this scene, Emecheta juxtaposes English restraint to Nigerian forthrightness, viewing the former as disabling and inauthentic. Her cut-off locution registers at the level of language the kind of curbing of negative affect required of the aspirant citizen. What we see taking shape here is a certain narrative of acculturation which involves the checking and re-routing of emotions; in order to fulfill the full promise of British citizenship, Adah must undergo a kind of sentimental education and learn to demonstrate emotional compliance with conventional bourgeois affective standards. "In England people locked themselves inside" the narrator later announces, intimating that under the surface of English respect and restraint lies a dispiriting unsociability (66). In the early phase of the narrative exploring Adah's childhood, we learn that the colonial schooling system has already begun the process of curbing her innate emotions and urging restraint, "You had to learn to control your temper, which Adah was taught was against the law of nature" (8).

In the encounter with Trudy, Emecheta gives full play to the Adah's instinctive irascibility and anger, and to ambiguous effect. The scene foregrounds the mutual hatred and suspicion informing the female-female conflicts explored by Sianne Ngai in her discussion of the film *Single White Female* in her book *Ugly Feelings*. On the one hand, Emecheta mobilizes the reader's sympathy for Adah, since Trudy is clearly negligent and a liar. Here we see Adah coming out from under the yoke of an oppressive regime of affective citizenship. One could argue that the conflict between Trudy and Adah shows Emecheta refusing an easy logic of sisterhood bringing the two women together, and perforce offering an implicit critique of a universalizing western feminism. This may be true, but the shaming rhetoric emanating from Adah, including her commentary on Trudy's licentious appearance, somewhat diminishes her moral advantage. Adah's disparaging words about Trudy emphasize her failure of proper feminine

¹⁵ See Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.

modesty, in a way that ironically places Adah in the role of the arbiter of proper women's decorum ("ironically" because Adah's experience in the maternity ward puts her on the receiving end of precisely these kinds of body-shaming). Indeed, with her scarlet nails and lips, Trudy is everything the decorous women in the maternity ward are not. The convalescing mothers with their gleaming night gowns and tales of misfortune provide a sharp contrast to the disreputable figure of Trudy. In channeling the condescending sartorial opinions of the hospital staff, Adah unintentionally becomes an agent of the very order of affective citizenship that she elsewhere chafes against. Even in the act of anti-social behavior, that is, she finds herself enforcing the "social" niceties that that behavior outwardly flouts. In shaming Trudy's improper attitude and attire, Adah effectively steps into the role of the condescending health visitor that she elsewhere abhors. Notably, the hectoring tone she takes also replicates Francis's lecturing about virtuous womanhood in the days before she goes to hospital to deliver her third child. Under general anesthesia awaiting childbirth, Adah has a nightmare about Francis's ridiculous sermon about women's propriety. "What more could a man want than a virtuous wife," Francis announces (108). Decrying the absence of virtue in Trudy, Adah unexpectedly finds herself in agreement with her abusive husband.

On balance, however, Emecheta is unsparing in her criticism of the emotional restraint normalized within British culture. Englishness, despite being rhetorically grounded in an ideology of "welfare," is portrayed in the novel in terms of a failure of mutuality, community, and support. In the imagination of the novel, the failure of communal assistance in England is repeatedly contrasted with the more authentic Nigerian communities of sympathy that Adah remembers from her childhood:

She could not control herself any more. She had had so many things to bottle up inside her. In England, she couldn't go to her neighbor and babble out troubles as she would have done in Lagos, she had learned not to talk about her unhappiness to those with whom she worked, for this was a society where nobody was interested in the problems of others. 67

Emecheta expresses a preference here for Nigerian modes of consoling and commiseration, based upon lateral connections between women and a process of talking-through problems. In "Feminism with a Small 'F,'" Emecheta further explains the nature of Nigerian female support networks. "In the villages the woman will seek the company of her age-mates, her friends, and the women in the market, and for advice she goes either to her mother or to her mother-in-law" (Emecheta, "Feminism" 176). Recognizing the value Emecheta places in combative but supportive female Nigerian communities helps us put pressure on John McLeod's argument that Emecheta tends to pathologize the Nigerian characters in the novel, portraying them as obstacles to Adah's happiness. "The bulk of the horrors of living," McLeod argues, "are created by Nigerians in the

neighbourhood who demand that women live according to the gender restrictions which Adah has been keen to leave behind in Lagos” (McLeod 102-103). It is true that Adah’s female neighbors occasionally delight in her misfortune, singing songs to ridicule her. But just as often they come to her rescue and offer emotional resources for the struggles she undergoes. The memory of Adah’s mother seems to underwrite this possibility of female intervention. In the encounter with Trudy, Adah “remembered her mother. Ma would have torn the fatty tissues of this woman into shreds if she had been in this situation” (51). Even with her temper flaring, Ma emerges as a caring figure here. Her memory is thematically attached to the female support network that, in the present of the novel, empowers Adah to speak back to Francis without censoring herself. For Emecheta, England is a society of “paid listeners... who made you feel that you are an object to be studied, diagnosed, charted and tabulated” (66). By contrast, the Nigerian women in the narrative refute the sentimental education Adah is to undergo, instead modeling a combative sensibility that Emecheta finds generative and enabling. The narrator remembers “the old woman next door who, on hearing an argument going on between a wife and husband, would come in to slap the husband, telling him off and all that, knowing that her words would be respected because she was old and experienced” (66). This passage registers affective alternatives to the emotional indirectness prevalent in England. While Emecheta diagnoses the regime of affective citizenship Adah must negotiate, she also proposes insurgent alternatives to them. The paradox, however, is that Emecheta presents the possibility of care and mutual in the most anti-social of terms (in the form of yelling, fighting, etc.). Sianne Ngai identifies a similar paradox taking shape in women’s films featuring envious or even diabolical female protagonists. Ngai turns to the unhappy bonds of the two main characters in *Single White Female* as evidence that their mutual antagonism does not undo the possibility of women’s community but in fact enables it. “By insisting on the difference between identification and emulation in the context of a complex female-female relationship, *Single White Female* enables us to see how not identifying might be the enabling condition for female sociality, rather than an obstruction to it... this usefully highlightst he primary and (as Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau and others have argued) even constitutive importance of antagonism to collective political formations such as that of feminism” (Ngai 161). From this perspective, we begin to see how the anti-relational gestures of *Second Class Citizen*, however unpropitious they might seem, serve as the basis of the feminism with a small “f” that Emecheta is trying to imagine.

CHAPTER TWO

Failure, Family and Temporality in *White Teeth*

Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* appears to make an open-and-shut case against the romanticizing of cultural roots. The siren song of tradition exerts a strong if deeply problematic hold on the first- and second-generation Britons peopling the novel. Most notably, Samad Iqbal engages in a desperate scramble to recover his family heritage and force it upon his London-born sons. Far from being a voyage of discovery, Samad's quest for spiritual homelands and heroic precursors leaves him only further disillusioned, defensive, and self-loathing. Samad's cross-historical longings focus on the memory of his great-grandfather, Mangal Pande, the Indian sepoy credited by some, and certainly by Samad, as firing the first shot of the Indian Mutiny of 1857. The Pande of his great-grandson's imagination is an idealized, almost messianic figure; he is "the tickle in the sneeze, he is why we are the way we are, the founder of modern India, the big cheese."¹ The romantic reimagining of Pande is accompanied by a troubling celebration of cultural purity. Samad reflects on his great-grandfather in explicitly essentialist terms, presenting him as the original well-spring from which his own identity emerges: "Nothing was closer or meant more to [Samad] than his blood... And there was no stronger evocation of the blood that ran through him, and the ground which that blood had stained over the centuries, than the story of his great-grandfather" (84). Having fought for the British during the Second World War, Samad portentously views his own sacrifices during the war as a continuation of the heroic family lineage anchored in Pande's rebellion against his British commanding officers. Because these sentiments are revealed in a wartime episode in which Samad and his friend Archie capture a Nazi eugenicist, there is some irony, as Ashley Dawson argues, in Samad's lyrical evocation of the timeless racial essence flowing through his veins (Dawson 163). In a novel full of morally dubious genetic scientists attempting to "eliminate the random," the hereditary determinism of Samad's family pride begins to feel eerily familiar (283).

Samad's unreformed Bengali cultural nationalism receives urgent, not to mention hilarious, critique in *White Teeth*. His homophobia, his sanctimonious cleaving to custom and tradition, his backward-facing orientation, his feelings of loss, shame, despair, and self-hatred—all these render him a less-than-ideal subject around which to organize an anti-colonial or queer emancipatory politics. Yet the terms of Samad's characterization resist any easy interpretation. Like V.S. Naipaul's Mr. Biswas and the many fictional patriarchs made in his mold, Samad bears out Gayatri Gopinath's recent claim that "masculine failure is a

¹ Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (New York: Vintage, 2000) 189.

central feature of postcolonial male subjectivity.”² But how might failure, and the negative affects with which it is associated, constitute a refusal of dominant narratives of immigrant acculturation, upward mobility, and cultural citizenship? Reading *White Teeth* through the lens of recent queer theory and Smith’s well-documented critical interest in failure (mostly developed in terms of her affinity for E.M. Forster), I argue in the following that failure emerges as an unexpected axis of community in the novel, drawing the experiences of seemingly remote characters together around their shared proneness to historical injury. Moreover, in Smith’s symbolic scheme failure entails a disruption of normative understandings of time and generational transmission conventionally attached to patriarchal, heteronormative models of the family. Smith gives representational shape to failure as a circularity or repetition compulsion that thwarts developmental narratives of maturation and progress. Building on Sarah Ahmed’s recent work on the stigmatization of the “melancholic migrant,” I see Samad’s backwardness—his condition of being stuck in the past—as an imaginative response to what I call the therapeutic injunction of recent Asian British cultural production, where ethnic minorities are enjoined to “get over” their experience of metropolitan racism. (Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness* 121-159) While exposing the fantasy of origins and the rhetoric of authenticity shaping cultural nationalist constructions of identity, *White Teeth* also refuses the linear, teleological emplotment of immigrant success stories, displacing them with immigrant failure stories. Smith skewers what she calls the “past-tense future-perfect” model of history, showing how it views modernity as the overcoming of implicitly racialized and gendered notions of cultural backwardness.

How can we make sense of the critical purchase of failure in recent queer theory? As Heather Love has observed, the rising visibility, rights, and consumer profile of affluent, white gays and lesbians has coincided with an anxious repudiation of those subjectivities deemed unfit for neoliberal citizenship: “the nonwhite and the non-monogamous, the poor and the genderdeviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected, and a host of unmentionable others” (Love 10). Alongside this stigmatization of unassimilable bodies, we have also seen a growing distaste for older genres and traditions of queer representation, particularly those involving dark, negative, ambivalent, or melodramatic renderings of queer experience.³ It is in this context of disavowal and transcendence that the queer rethinking of failure, and the larger “negative” or “anti-social” turn in queer intellectual and political activity, has taken place. In influential studies such as Love’s *Feeling Backward*, Judith Halberstam’s *The*

² Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) 81.

³ A classic example of such a disavowed text is Radclyffe Hall’s novel *The Well of Loneliness*, although Love’s work on failure has also encompassed figures like Willa Cather, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Walter Pater, and recent films like *Brokeback Mountain* and *Notes on a Scandal*.

Queer Art of Failure, Elizabeth Freeman's *Time Binds*, and the late José Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*, we observe an initially counterintuitive enthusiasm for cultural texts and experiences "branded as internally homophobic, retrograde, or too depressing to be of use" (Love 4). With their unpalatable femininities and masculinities, closeted desires, and internalized homophobia, texts such as Radclyffe Hall's much-maligned 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness* represent a stage of queer history many twenty-first-century readers would rather forget. Yet it is precisely the shameful, mawkish, and embarrassing qualities of such texts that invest in them a certain dissidence vis-à-vis today's domesticated "queer liberalism."⁴ "These texts have a lot to tell us," Love argues. "They describe what it is like to bear a 'disqualified' identity, which at times can simply mean living with injury—not fixing it" (Love 4).

Postcolonial studies, meanwhile, has been cautiously receptive to these developments. Alongside an emerging interest in "failed-state" fictions, Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* has been approvingly cited by Love and Freeman.⁵ Chakrabarty's project of "affective history" or what he terms "History 2" is notably launched within an analysis of the rhetoric of lack and failure in the Subaltern Studies collective.⁶ The "loving grasp of detail" encouraged by affective history, with its attention to bodily habitus and emotional response, mounts an implicit critique of methodologies (Eve Sedgwick used the shorthand "paranoid criticism" to describe them) too eager to flatten out and subsume the contradictions of the present in the emancipatory horizons of the future.⁷ Interestingly, David Scott's *Conscripts of Modernity*, itself so eager to move beyond the "problem space" of anti-colonial nationalism, stages another influential turn to failure and tragedy in an extended reading of C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins*.⁸ My sense is that in its dominant forms at least postcolonial studies, with its routine dismissals of Marxism and anti-colonial nationalism, has since the 1980s consolidated itself largely at the expense of political projects it has deemed "backward" or superseded in the wake of the defeats of postcolonial nationalism and the reassertion of imperialism in the 1970s.⁹ By looking

⁴ David Eng uses this term to describe the inclusion of gays and lesbians in the liberal language of rights.

⁵ See John Marx, "Failed-State Fiction," *Contemporary Literature* 49/4 (2008).

⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁷ For a discussion of Chakrabarty's work from the perspective of queer studies, see Freeman, xx.

⁸ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁹ For a materialist mapping of postcolonial studies as an intellectual formation in relation to the shifting political economy from the era of decolonization onwards, see Neil Lazarus, "Introducing Postcolonial Studies," ed. Lazarus, *The*

backward at Zadie Smith looking backward in colonial history, this chapter asks what a reformed postcolonial studies could learn from a considered backward glance toward those disavowed political projects as we grapple with the new imperialisms of neoliberal political economy.

Love's treatment of bad attachments and cross-historical longings is especially useful for my analysis. *Feeling Backward* explores the queer longing for community and kinship across history.¹⁰ Observing the tendency in queer intellectual and cultural production to forge relationships between the living and the dead, Love critiques the rhetoric of affirmation and repair within which these relationships are often bestowed. "Critics imagine that no one would search out the roots of his or her identity if that history were not positive. But we are condemned to the search for roots and for resemblances; we cannot help searching the past for images of ourselves" (Love 47). For Love it is "negative or ambivalent identifications with the past [that] can serve to disrupt the present" (Love 47). What a queer history can and should retrieve are not those figures that give succor to contemporary queer audiences by virtue of rising above or placing themselves beyond the injuries of homophobia and exclusion, but precisely those figures most vulnerable and affected by such humiliations. Among the forms of failure championed by Love is "genealogical failure," by which she means the botched or compromised retrieval of figures from the past. Love turns to Michel Foucault's 1966 essay "The Thought of the Outside"—an essay also discussed to great effect in Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval*—which juxtaposes Ulysses' triumphant return-trip to Orpheus's inability to rescue Eurydice from the underworld. These figures "are legible in terms of a contrast between history as a tale of heroic rescue and 'marvelous adventure' and history as a narrative that breaks off midway and that fails to bring the beloved back from the underworld. Clearly, Foucault throws his lot in with Orpheus, who offers an apt emblem of the practice of queer history" (Love 50).

The possibility of "heroic rescue" figured forth by Ulysses is no doubt how Samad himself would construe his attempt to safeguard his paternal line. But *White Teeth* as a whole is keen to underscore Pande's marginal, stigmatized status within the racial imaginary of colonial historiography. The novel does not heroize Mangal Pande in the manner of, say, the 2005 Bollywood film *The Rising: Ballad of Mangal Pandey*. Instead, Smith presents Pande as something of a cipher in the historical record. For all of Samad's zeal to anecdotalize and perforce secure Pande's rightful place in Indian history, he is chasing a moving target that consistently defies assimilation into a coherent narrative. It is notable, for instance, that for the first half of the book the story of Pande is only hinted at

Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Studies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 1-16.

¹⁰ On queer relationality and historical emotion in the American context also see Christopher Nealon, *Foundlings: Lesbian and Gay Historical Emotion before Stonewall* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

indirectly. And when the 1857 incident does receive a more robust, fine-grained account, it is notably mediated through the narration of not one but two white interlocutors: Archie reads aloud from a hoary colonial history aiming to discredit Pande as a barbaric native.

I will return to the novel's failed genealogy of Pande in a moment, discussing how some have accused Zadie Smith herself of committing a grave imprecision in her treatment of the two relatives' respective religions. But for now I want to explore the kinds of sympathy and interest Smith betrays for Samad as a failure among other failures (notably, Archie) in the 1980s-and-afterwards phase of the narrative. With his down-at-heel demeanor, and his ineffectuality in the workplace and within his own family, Samad is a character drawn straight out of Rushdie/Naipaul central casting.¹¹ In Smith's characterization of Samad there is an emphasis on damage and injury that works to establish an important connection between postcolonial subjectivity and loss. A Bangladeshi Muslim, Samad is a waiter at a dispiriting Indian restaurant catering to white diners ("Lamb Dawn Sock and rice. With chips. Thank you" [49]). The novel dwells repeatedly on his workplace humiliations, often at the hands of his boss, a more-successful cousin who refuses Samad's request for a raise. Samad's fellow waiters know him as a joykill: "You don't smile. You don't eat. You're always on everybody's case" (119). His groveling for tips places him a subservient posture described in a sexual innuendo that he deflects onto others, betraying his own homophobic anxieties about his masculinity: "did you kiss the necessary backside this evening, cousin?" (47).

As objectionable as Samad's homophobia and inflated sense of self are, Smith is careful to view them as psychological responses to metropolitan racism. "And that is what it was like most nights," the narrator tell us. "Abuse from Shiva and others; condescension from Ardashir; never seeing Alsana; never seeing the sun; clutching fifteen pence and then releasing it; wanting desperately to be wearing a sign, a large white placard that said, "I am not a waiter..." (48-49). Gayatri Gopinath's reading of the similar failed patriarch George Khan in Ayub Khan-Din's 1999 film *East is East* is useful here. "An investment in patriarchal authority is not portrayed as natural or intrinsic to Muslim immigrant culture; rather it is shown to be an ineffectual response to both the racism of the British state and the undermining of Pakistani nationalism" (Gopinath 81). As I show in a later chapter, Samad and George model very different responses to these provocations, with Samad emerging as the more sympathetic figure. I do not mean to suggest that Smith insulates Samad from criticism in the novel; *White Teeth* takes a principled stand against Samad's biological essentialism and belief in rigidly conceived identities based on ideals of purity and homogeneity secured by lines of descent. But this critique is mitigated by a strong sense of the social and historical conditions driving Samad's objectionable ideas.

¹¹ The figure of Chanu in Monica Ali's 2003 novel *Brick Lane* is very much cut from the same cloth.

Samad's social vulnerability and resulting spleen put him in the company of an impressive array of losers and sadsacks. Smith's characteristic warts-and-all view of her characters forms an important part of *White Teeth's* satire on what David Scott might call the "revolutionary romance" of cultural nationalism, here recognizable only in grotesque parody. The nickname of Samad and Archie's army division—the "buggered battalion"—underscores the common denominator of failure linking this otherwise diverse group of soldiers. As fractured as these young men are by class background and race (they often bait Samad with racist epithets), the buggered battalion represents a rare moment of transcultural community and cooperation in *White Teeth*. But it is telling that this is an affective community organized around bitterness, loss and resentment—what Wendy Brown might dismiss as "wounded attachments"—rather than any positive affective core.

When we first encounter Samad in the dying days of the war, he is busy reminding his tank-mates of his noble family lineage. But Smith notably describes Samad's tall tales as part of a repertory of failure stories told and retold by Samad and his tank-mates. "The long story of how Samad went from the pinnacle of military achievement in the Bengal to the Buggered Battalion was told and retold to Archie, in different versions and with elaborations upon it, once a day for another two weeks, whether he listened or not. Tedious as it was it was a high-light next to the other tales of failure that filled those long nights, and kept the men of the Buggered Battalion in their preferred state of demotivation and despair" (77). One soldier, Dickenson-Smith, is a young gay man who has been browbeaten into joining the war effort by his imperious father; he later is killed. Another is a grieving widower whose hairdresser wife dies after slipping on a set of hair rollers. Archie's preferred anecdote about himself involves his "Failure to Go to Grammar School because his mother couldn't afford to buy the uniform." This community of lost souls—"freaks and fools with no audience but each other"—recalls what Foucault calls the "infamous men" he encounters in the archives of the Bastille prison and *Hôpital général*. "Having been nothing in history," Foucault writes in his essay "The Lives of Infamous men," "having played no appreciable role in events or among important people, having left no identifiable trace around them, they don't have and never will have any existence outside of the precarious domicile of these words."¹² In her reading of this essay, Love suggests that these men have no history or identity apart from the criminality conferred upon them by the archive. (Love 46-47). With their nearly hyperbolic unremarkability and proneness to injury, Samad, Archie, and the rest of the buggered battalion almost uncannily figure forth the "infamous men" theorized by Foucault. So does Pandey, whose place in the echo chamber of colonial historiography secures him only the outline of an identity: "But like a

¹² Michel Foucault, "The Lives of Infamous Men," in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 3, *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2000) 162-3. I encountered this essay in Love, 46-7.

Chinese whisper, Fitchett's intoxicated, incompetent Pande had passed down a line of subsequent historians, the truth mutating, bending, receding as the whisper continued" (212).

What is interesting about failure in Smith's imagination is its fungible quality, its contagiousness across conventional boundaries of race, class, gender, sexuality, and generation. The choreography of Pande's rebellion and subsequent failed suicide is relevant here, since it haunts later (and earlier, given the novel's recursive temporality) descriptions of both Archie and Samad. Samad petitions the proprietor of his local pub to hang a portrait in his great-grandfather's likeness, and many drinking sessions with Archie turn into impromptu "battles for his reputation." (208). On one of these occasions, Archie appeals to a stack of books he has brought in order to finally puncture through the triumphal myth of Pande offered by his friend. "He couldn't even kill himself properly!" Archie intones (211). One of the books Archie summons describes Pandy as "half drunk with bhang, and wholly drunk with religious fanaticism" (211). He is, to provide some background, protesting the British army's use of new bullets whose casings, greased with animal fat, need to be bitten off before loading—"grease made from the fat of pigs, monstrous to Muslims, and the fat of cows, sacred to Hindus" (210). "Pande shot at his lieutenant and missed him. Then he took out a large sword, a tulwar, and cowardly lunged while his lieutenant's back was turned, catching him on the shoulder... Pande saw the game was up, pointed his enormous gun at his own head, and dramatically pulled the trigger with his left foot. He missed (212). The elements of this narrative, which Fitchett sums up as a logical prelude to "one of the bloodiest failed mutinies of this or any century," filter into descriptions of both Samad and Archie. The war scenes find, Samad, like his great-grandfather, in a drug-induced haze; he has been hoarded supplies of morphine left behind by medics and secretly partakes of them as he and Archie confront the reality of killing Dr. Sick. But it is, strangely, Archie who bears the closest figurative resemblance to Pande. The novel opens with Archie's own failed attempt to gas himself in his car after being divorced from his first wife, eerily anticipating Pande's failed attempt to shoot himself as British soldiers closed ranks. At a later moment in the novel, the link between Archie and Samad is further established when Archie ventures a theory about why (or whether) Pande missed his mark when shooting at his lieutenant. "Why does he miss? Why?... Maybe he was being bullied into going out there and making a row, you know, goaded, by the other guys. And he didn't want to kill anyone in the first place, you know. So he pretended to be drunk, so the boys in the barracks room would believe he missed the shot" (216). Archie's improbable theory doubles as a coded confession: he is really explaining why he himself was unable to execute Dr. Sick.

Archie, of course, is ultimately given another chance to kill Dr. Sick when the scientist makes a surprise cameo at the unveiling of Marcus Chalfen's "future mouse" at the end of the novel. The persistent association between Archie and circularity/repetition makes him the most visible bearer of a backwards or

antidevelopmental temporality implicitly opposed to narratives of maturation and progress. This is perhaps true of every character in *White Teeth* to a certain degree; pages announcing each new section of the novel attach characters to not one but two years of some significance—for example, Archie's section moves recursively between 1974 and 1945. But Archie's circular temporality is given the most heavy-handed treatment. Readers learn that Archie competed in the 1948 Olympics as a cyclist.

What Archie liked about track cycling was the way you went round and round. Round and round. Giving you chance after chance to get a bit better at it, to make a faster lap, to do it *right*. Except the thing about Archie was he never did get any better. 62.8 seconds. Which is a pretty good time, world-class standard, even. But for three years he got precisely 62.8 seconds on every single lap... that kind of inability to improve is really very rare. That kind of consistency is miraculous, in a way. (13)

Archie's miraculous tendency toward stasis and inertia is at some points attached to a provincial English suspicion of geographical and class mobility: "The way Archie saw it, country people should die in the country and city people should die in the city. Only proper" (4). But the more Smith develops this dimension of Archie's character the more dissident a temporary it seems. Even the material props surrounding Archie seem to signal reversal and crossing back rather than forward movement. The Hoover he retrieves from his divorced wife blows outward rather than sucking inward, and Archie literally works for a stationary company devising the best ways of folding paper.

Judith Halberstam's treatment of the temporality of the family is useful for unpacking the meanings of these loopings, foldings, and reversals. Halberstam's concern is how seemingly value-neutral models of generational transmission, lineage, and continuity are yoked to heteronormative conceptions of the family. "The deployment of the concept of *family*, whether in hetero or homo contexts, almost always introduces normative understandings of time and transmission" (Halberstam 72). Halberstam sees opportunities for the disruption of this dominant generational logic in a process of "de-linking" from or forgetting family, possibilities she attaches to low cultural forms—white male stupidity films such as *Dude, Where's My Car?* or cartoons like *Finding Nemo*. This process of de-linking takes shape in *White Teeth* in the scene where Archie first meets his future wife, Clara. At a bohemian New Year's party, less than a day after his divorce and subsequent suicide attempt, Archie sees Clara descending the stairs and immediately decides to begin a new life with her. "He had unhooked the old life, he was walking into unknown territory." Somewhat ironically, the wheel comes full circle when Archie and Clara's teenage daughter Irie also begins to fantasize about de-linking from what she views as the suffocating domestic environment of her nuclear family. On the bus on the way to the "future mouse" reveal, surrounded by the feuding extended Jones-Iqbal family, Irie expresses a

desire to leave her family before for the vague promise of a blank space or *tabula rasa*, which then materializes as the clean, antiseptic space of the exhibition room. What Irie learns, perhaps, is how difficult—if not impossible—it is to escape the boomerang logic of generational transmission. Yet the circularity and backwardness of *White Teeth*'s temporal scheme seem yoked to a dissident rethinking of the meaning of family. "What I have realized," Samad says, "is that generations... they speak to each other, Jones. It's not a line. Life is not a line—this is not palm-reading—it's a circle. And they speak to us. That is why you cannot read fate; you must experience it" (100).

The teenage character of Irie provides an intriguing counterpart to Samad, since both characters are drawn backwards by the centripetal force of history. Because so much of the interest that attaches to *White Teeth* is its juxtaposition of multiple imperial circuits—the subcontinental and the Caribbean—it is important to consider whether the problematic "roots" discourse voiced by Samad is also attached to Irie's retrieval of Jamaicanness. We have seen how Smith treats Samad's claiming of Pandy in terms of a none-too-savory circularity and repetition compulsion. But what of the Caribbean and especially Jamaica, which scholars like Deborah Thomas have also treated in terms of a specious doubling-back to the past in the service of a multi-racial creole nationalism in the years after independence?¹³ Since Samad's backwards feelings were attached to a desire to reassert his masculinity and insert it into a male lineage, will Irie's relationship to the past yield different results for being gendered differently?

If Samad is interested in making a patrilineal breakthrough to the past, then Clara uses the memory of her great-grandmother to shore up her own shaken second-generation immigrant identity. Towards the end of the novel, Irie is fed up with her family and runs away to her grandmother Hortense's house. She becomes an amateur historian, sorting through her grandmother's extensive collection of photos and memorabilia. "In cupboards and neglected drawers and in grimy frames were the secrets that had been hoarded for so long, as if secrets were going out of fashion" (330). Her engagement with the past, in keeping with Samad's, is textualized as an encounter with narrative fragments. And like Samad and the visible disability that he garnered in the war and that ties him to the grotesque body of Pandy, Irie's relation to the past is also somatized. A key scene in this regard is one where Irie fixates on a photo of Charlie Durham, the white colonial lover of her great-grandmother. Smith draws the scene up as follows:

The more she read, the more that picture of dashing Capt. Durham aroused her natural curiosity: handsome and melancholy, surveying the bricks of half a church, looking worldly-wise despite his youth, looking every inch the Englishman, looking like he could tell someone or another a

¹³ Deborah Thomas, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

thing or two about something. Maybe Irie herself. Just in case, she kept him under her pillow. And in the mornings it wasn't Italianate vineyards out there anymore, it was sugar, sugar, sugar, and next door was nothing but tobacco and she presumptuously fancied that the smell of plaintain sent her back to somewhere, somewhere quite fictional, for she'd never been there. Somewhere Columbus called St. Jago but the Arawaks stubbornly renamed Xaymaca, the name lasting longer than they did. *Well-wooded and Watered*. Not that Irie had heard of those little sweet-tempered pot-bellied victims of their own sweet tempers. Those were some other Jamaicans, fallen short of the attention span of history. She laid claim to the past—her version of the past—aggressively, as if retrieving misdirected mail. So *this* was where she came from. This all *belonged* to her, her birthright, like a pair of pearl earrings or a post office bond. X marks the spot, and Irie put an X on everything she found. 330-331

On the one hand, Irie's engagement with the past is presented in implicitly feminized, tactile, sensual terms—as the taking of history and “keeping under her pillow.” The emphasis on dynamic, embodied cultural memory rather than the usually dry, abstract materials pre-occupying historians, seems to cut against the initial whiff of naivete and nostalgia shaping Irie's plundering of the archive. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor distinguishes between textual archives and embodied practices of memory, arguing that “the archival sustains power” whereas the sensual performances associated with cultural memory upend or question the perspective from which history is written.¹⁴ We ought to note, in addition, how her relationship to the past is facilitated by other female figures (Hortense), in a way that consolidates Irie's relationship with her above and beyond their shared interest in the figure of Durham. Smith positions Irie and her great-grandmother as co-conspiring secret sharers, even as Irie faults the secretive nature of her own parents.

Yet this qualities of Irie's historical sleuthing are qualified and ultimately overturned by the naive imperialist nostalgia she evinces. Critics like Supriya Nair have argued that Irie's close relationship to the Jamaican past, finally made real in the look into the future at the end of the novel, shows that “ancestral cultures can be claimed and not always to baneful purposes” (Nair 10). Yet it is hard not to see how Smith puts pressure on Irie's historical vision by rendering the Jamaica of her mind a pastoral theme park of the past. It is not the past, we should note, but “*her* version of the past” (emphasis mine). Her view of Jamaica as a “well-wooded and watered place” partakes of an imperialist nostalgia connected to her simultaneous fantasy of being swept off her feet by Captain Durham. The Jamaica Irie has in mind is simultaneously littered with colonialist

¹⁴ Diane Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

iconography and strangely unblemished by history—a “blank space” she can occupy freely without the encumbrance of history. It is unclear whether her view of Jamaica is more like Columbus’s or the Arawaks, both being reduced to gross caricatures. The specificity of Jamaican history helps us identify yet more problems with Irie’s romanticized view of the past. Deborah Thomas has argued that the development of the dominant Jamaican Creole nationalism involved the cynical appropriation of the memory of the Arawaks for the purposes of consolidating a hegemonic post-Independence culture (Thomas 1-26). Nadia Ellis extends Thomas’s argument to suggest that creole nationalism was itself premised on a form of connoisseur-like cultural salvage: “national culture’ was being explicitly forged out of bastardized materials, poaching from and then disenfranchising the black masses. Not attending to slavery’s ghosts, the new coalition of politicians, almost all of them middle class, worked to create a national culture that was ostensibly inclusive but jettisoned the dance and music emerging out of creolized Africanist traditions (Ellis 159). Irie’s conspicuous mixed-race identity, in other words, is not accidentally attached to the view of Jamaica she authorizes. In this, Smith seems to be critiquing the rhetoric of hybridity, paradoxically not because of its departure from the truisms of nationalist rhetoric but because of its drive to replenish them and put them to political use.

Let me pause here to place Smith’s treatment of generation and family in historical relief. Thinking about the politics of race and ethnicity in the specific context of post-war Britain reveals further complexities in the “root canal” connecting Samad and his great-grandfather. On the one hand, Smith makes it clear that Samad’s cross-historical, transnational retrieval of Pandey defies the bounded insularity of certain conceptions of British national culture. In a chapter heading, Smith quotes the Tory MP Norman Tebbit, who in 1990 famously identified international cricket tests as occasions to determine the loyalties of non-white immigrants: “The cricket test—which side do they cheer for?... Are you still looking back to where you came from or where you are?” (103). Samad’s backward glance at his great-grandfather refuses Tebbit’s call for immigrants to erase their foreign pasts in the name of forging new British identities. His rhapsodic family pride thus has to be considered in light of the rise of racist ideology within New Right political discourse. The recurrent troping of blood in *White Teeth* is connected at several points to Enoch Powell’s famous “Rivers of Blood” speech of 1968, in which he ties the future of Britain to its racial purity, and suggests that “rivers of blood” will flow if non-white immigration is allowed to continue unchecked.¹⁵ It is also important that Smith frames Samad’s “Pandyology” as an attempt to reclaim his great-grandfather out from under the heel from colonialist historiography.

¹⁵ “Like the Roman,” Powell pronounced, “I see the River Tiber foaming with much blood.” The speech later became known as the “Rivers of Blood” speech. Enoch Powell, Conservative Association Conference, 20 April 1968, Birmingham.

Yet in other respects the genetic determinism shaping Samad's view of his family history precisely echoes the terms of British immigration law in the half-century after the British Nationality Act of 1948. As many scholars have noted, the postwar years saw the legal construction of British citizenship tied ever more securely to questions of family and kinship. In the Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968, and most decisively in the British Nationality Act of 1981, immigrants' rights of entry and abode were established increasingly by virtue of family lineage rather than place of birth. This was seen most dramatically in the 1981 act, in which the principle of *jus soli* (or birthright citizenship) was replaced definitely by the principle of *jus sanguinis* (the right of blood). What this meant was that one no longer became a British citizen simply by virtue of being born in Britain. Instead, citizenship was to be conferred only by virtue of familial descent from an existing British citizen or naturalized British subject.¹⁶ Britain was thus reinvented as tight-knit family, to be distinguished from other national families. In practice, the 1981 Act implicitly established whiteness as a prerequisite for British citizenship, as it was far more likely for white aspiring immigrants to be able to claim British fathers and grandfathers as their ancestors. Thus the legal formation of British citizenship in immigration discourse was predicated on the same Victorian family values elsewhere resurgent in Thatcherite social conservatism. What becomes especially clear is the role of the paternal line in securing a bounded, coherent national culture. Indeed, after the Immigration Act of 1971 it became common procedure to use the terms "patrial" and "non-patrial" to designate legitimate and illegitimate claims to citizenship rights. What to make of Samad's fervent devotion to his own patrial line then? Crippled by feelings of displacement and deracination, Samad can only allay his racial anxiety by securing a paternal precedent for his own identity, and this in many ways echoes the gendered narratives of national belonging encoded in the immigration acts. This is not to say by any stretch that Samad is a racist in the mold of Enoch Powell, for his patrial line originates in India rather than England. But it is characteristic of Zadie Smith to trace the persistence of essentialist models of identity across conventional political and racial divides.

Many of the problems Smith associates with conventional genealogy become visible in the shorthand of the traditional family tree. In the section of the novel devoted to Irie, the character in the novel closest to Zadie Smith in age and racial background, readers encounter a grotesque parody of a family tree that satirically draws attention to the rhetoric of racial purity such diagrams usually encode. (281). This image maps the maternal, Jamaican side of Irie Jones's family history. Through it we can trace her relationship to her mother, Clara Bowden, and beyond to her grandmother Hortense and great-grandmother Ambrosia. But Smith lampoons the scientific objectivity and certainty usually

¹⁶ For a discussion of family in relation to British immigration law, see Samantrai. Also see Ian Baucom, *Out of Place Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) 12-13.

aspired to in family trees, guesstimating dates and numbers (for example “way back when – Lord knows” or “unknown issue”) and flaunting the arbitrariness of what the graph makes visible and invisible. Smith’s corrupted family tree draws attention to the gaps and fissures in the historical record, suggesting that Great Uncle P., for example, copulated with “God knows how many women” between “1890ish-1960ish.” It is also notable that this family tree suspends the usual hierarchical distinction between married and unmarried heterosexual couples. In Smith’s version of the family tree, marriage is denoted with the customary “equal” sign, but the explanatory key notably naturalizes and normalizes proscribed forms of reproduction and caregiving (for example, “brought up by grandmother”).¹⁷

It is worth considering the cultural work that traditional family trees perform in consolidating and sexually and racially pure notions of community. How do they code certain forms of family arrangements as “natural” and others as being unworthy of inclusion? In many ways, family trees are not equipped to represent queer intimacy because each vertical bloodline requires a procreative act of heterosexual reproduction—in other words, requires an intersection with a horizontal line—in order to exist. Anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli notes, for example, that family trees “do not indicate the love, desire, affect, or intimacy that exist between [people], nor do they document nonsexual corporeal relations. There is no standard icon for ‘intimacy,’ ‘desire,’ or ‘love.’”¹⁸ Smith, in her unconventional shorthand for non-normative intimacies, outlines a more expansive, inclusive model of family and the cultural practices that bring families into being. At a basic level, then, the project of *White Teeth* is to elaborate those intimacies and informal bonds (for example, the cross-racial friendship between Archie and Samad) that family trees conventionally subordinate and leave out.

But Smith also seems to have in mind how the familial and racial necessarily become aligned in conventional genealogical discourse. The way family trees work is by allowing their viewers to tidily keep separate the different racial heritages of one’s family. They also allow armchair genealogists to identity the depths of their racial heritage, with the hopes that they will lead back to pure and unambiguous origins. The danger of this conception of racial history is that it understands racial difference in explicitly biological terms, rather than cultural, social, or economics. And giving race and racial “characteristics” a basis in blood and biology is dangerous business – and this is the nature of many of the critiques of ancestry.com, or the Skip Gates TV project “Finding Your Roots.”) In the section of the narrative surrounding the diagram, Irie compares her own

¹⁷ The significance of the family tree was brought to my attention by Supriya Nair, “Dented History in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*,” *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 7/1 (2010): 1.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Povinelli, “Notes on Gridlock: Genealogy, Intimacy, Sexuality” *Public Culture* 14/1 (2002) 216. Also see Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006) 83.

haphazard Jamaican maternal line to the neat, orderly, and well-documented family tree of the Chalfen family. Whereas the Chalfen family tree bespeaks an anxiety to secure family precedent by tracing lines of sameness and homogeneity back as far as they will go, Irie describes her family tree as “more of an oral tradition.” Her mother Clara “could only state definitively that her own mother was born at 2:45 on January 14, 1907, in a Catholic church in the middle of the Kingston earthquake. The rest was rumor, folktale, and myth” (280). By drawing attention to the fictional, artificial basis of family trees, Smith emphasizes how they can function as self-fulfilling prophecies of filial coherence, allowing their makers to screen off undesirable elements and screen in desirable ones. But in other respects the fictionality of genealogical history also allows Smith to articulate a more generous, accommodating definition of the family itself. While *White Teeth* is unwilling to let go of the notion of family per se, it presents a variety of what we might think of as “corrupted genealogies” or “queer lineages” to expose the racialized myth of cultural continuity, purity, and sameness at the heart of normative understandings of family lineage.

Thinking about families as corruptible fictions offers one point of entry to some of the controversies that have emerged around *White Teeth*'s revisionist account of the Indian revolt of 1857. Many critics have called attention to Smith's apparent error in making the Hindu historical figure Pandey the ancestor of a self-identifying Muslim fictional character. As novelist Tabish Khair argues: “Samad is a firebrand—if not fundamentalist—Muslim much of the time and the skeptical reader in me could not reconcile this fact with the name of his historically authentic great-grandfather. For Mangal Pande is not just a Hindu name, it is a twice-born, pure-as-snow Brahmin one. It is difficult to imagine the descendants of the Mangal Pandes of India converting to Islam, let alone a firebrand version of it.”¹⁹ Smith's apparent mistake seems especially egregious in light of the sectarian, communalist violence accompanying Partition in 1947, which resulted in upwards of one million casualties. It is a mistake that, moreover, appears to replicate the kinds of slippages and generalizations characteristic of racist epithets like “Paki,” which—as *White Teeth* elsewhere makes very clear—ignore and override the differences between Britain's various Asian communities. Samad himself is the victim of such mislabelings; in the war sequence his tank mates repeatedly call him “sultan” despite the fact that he is Bangladeshi. Much of Smith's satire on liberal multicultural discourse targets its oblivious confusion and equation different ethnic others.

Nonetheless, there is a way in which the critical reaction toward Smith's apparent mistake replicates the terms of the linear, teleological historiography *White Teeth* sets out to critique. When Khair and other critics object to what they perceive as Smith's contamination of Mangal Pandey's family bloodlines, they implicitly suggest that there is a more pure, linear genealogical trajectory from which *White Teeth* has erroneously deviated. I prefer to read Samad's unlikely

¹⁹ Tabish Khair, “The Death of the Reader” *Wasafiri* 21/5 (2006) 1.

connection to Mangal Pandey as what the Scottish poet Jackie Kay has termed a “fantasy relationship.” Kay, whose collection of poems *The Adoption Papers* also turns a lens on questions of family lineage, describes how the experience of growing up black in a white adoptive family in Scotland forced her to seek out imaginary relationships with African diasporic artists and intellectuals through books and records bearing their images.

In an interview, Kay describes how such affiliative relationships compensated for the filiative ones her adoption rendered unclaimable:

I think that it is very important when you are black and you grow up in an environment that isn't, to find people that you can relate to imaginatively if you like. So I did have a number of different fantasy relationships with various black people from around the world, you know, Nelson Mandela, Angela Davis, Bessie Smith or Louis Armstrong or Ella Fitzgerald.²⁰

Samad places Mangal Pandey on his familial pedestal in much the same way, to ambiguous effect. While in some respects this unlikely family romance shows Samad indulging in exactly the kind of roots-based, absolutist understandings of national identity that Smith rejects, in other ways it emphasizes the artificial, manufactured, and malleable nature of family structures. Smith seems to find this second set of possibilities very appealing. I am not saying Smith telegraphs an awareness of her error or even acknowledges it as such within the book. But the mistake is in many ways a felicitous one in keeping with Smith's critique of bloodlines and rigid conceptions of kinship. Samad's claiming of distant kin makes a place, and an important place, for India in the imagination of post-imperial Britain. Moreover, in establishing a spurious patril line extending far beyond the boundaries of the British nation-state, *White Teeth* outflanks the parochial little Englandism consecrated in British immigration law. Khair argues that the novel's confusion of religions hints at a hidden narrative involving Pandey's “conversion” to Islam, but that the novel does not provide the necessary apparatus for this narrative to take shape. On the contrary, I would argue that the unnarrated story of Pandey's conversion to Islam emerges as a powerful counterfactual (a “what if” narrative) that the novel invites readers to take very seriously. What if Mangal Pandey actually was the grandfather of a Muslim waiter in 1990s Britain? There are few writers as well placed as Zadie Smith to write such a story.

²⁰ Jackie Kay, interview with Maya Jaggi and Richard Dyer, *Wasafiri* 14:29 (1999): 55.

CHAPTER THREE

In the House of Falling Woman: Figuring Femininity in *Brick Lane*

Early in Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane*, readers join Nazneen Ahmed in the company of her nosey new friends, Razia and Mrs. Islam, who parade the latest gossip about their neighbors.¹ Nazneen has only recently arrived in London from Bangladesh as part of an arranged marriage, but she is becoming familiar with the kinds of opprobrium her neighbors direct at women seen to transgress bounds of propriety and convention. In this case, Razia and Mrs. Islam malign an unnamed local woman who has recently committed suicide by hurling herself from her council flat. Suicide being an unspeakable act in Islam, they imply rather than state outright that the woman had taken her own life. But Mrs. Islam clearly views suicide as a deserving fate for a woman already, in her opinion, marked by shame and disgrace. "You have to bear in mind," she insinuates, "she had no children ... after twelve years of marriage" (12).

Nazneen remains silent during the exchange, but later, mirroring the suicide victim by "open[ing] a window and lean[ing] into the breeze," her thoughts return to the conversation:

The woman who fell, what terror came to her mind when she went down? What thoughts came? If she jumped, what thoughts came? Would they be the same ones? In the end, did it matter whether she jumped or fell? Suddenly Nazneen was sure that she had jumped. A big jump, feet first and arms wide, eyes wide, silent all the way down and her hair wild and loose, and a big smile on her face because with this single everlasting act she defied everything and everyone. (23)

This lyrical depiction of the female body-in-flight brings into focus several of my main concerns in this chapter. Nazneen's main rhetorical question—did the woman accidentally fall or purposely jump?—registers an ambiguity about women's agency that will continue to structure the novel. Razia and Mrs. Islam understand the woman's suicide as a disgrace in keeping with her failure to bear children; it is "the worst thing, for any woman," Razia remarks (12). Yet Nazneen imagines the suicide as an exuberant act of defiance. Ali frames the suicide, and Nazneen's fascination with it, in terms of the kinesthetic sensation experienced by a body moving through air. The woman's falling body becomes a vehicle for Nazneen's own fantasies of freedom and liberation. It functions as a kind of prosthetic device through which Nazneen can vicariously experience the fall itself, which she imagines as an escape from domestic entrapment. Here and throughout the novel, as I will argue, the falling or thrown female body rhetorically

¹ Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (New York: Scribner, 2003). All further citations are to this edition of the novel.

grounds two seemingly contradictory possibilities for female identity: on the one hand, an injurious or stigmatized womanhood, and on the other, an empowered femininity based on the promise of mobility, autonomy, and imaginative expressivity.

The episode is also noteworthy in that the woman's suicide only becomes legible indirectly, as it is refracted through the narration of others—a narration here marked as partial and biased.² Between the unspeakable scene of the suicide and Nazneen's reimagination of it lie multiple levels of mediation, each imparting its own meanings and associations to the event (according to the time scheme of the novel, for instance, Nazneen's reverie occurs several days after the conversation with Razia and Mrs. Islam, during which time she notably encounters other charged images of the female body). In fact we soon discover this scene is itself an intermediary episode in the story of *another* woman's suicide—that of Nazneen's mother. This telescoping of images of women from Nazneen's past and present is characteristic of the psychological narrative of grief and mourning advanced by the novel. As we will see, the questions Nazneen asks of the anonymous woman ("What terror came to her mind when she went down? What thoughts came," etc.) also show her grappling with the mystery of her own mother's death.

In this chapter I locate Nazneen's negotiation of femininity in her ambivalent identifications with this figure of the moving female body. My analysis foregrounds what we might consider the figural grammar of the novel's symbolic scheme, one organized to a substantial degree around the kinetic—i.e., the spinning, falling, lurching, or thrown—female form. In the first part of what follows, I account for the psychological hold this figure exercises on Nazneen by directing attention to an element of the novel that has so far received very little scholarly attention: her deeply fraught relationship with her late mother.³ I argue

² Notably, the woman's story emerges through the narration of other *women*. *Brick Lane* presents Mrs. Islam as perpetuating patriarchy through her surveillance of other women's behaviors.

³ So far, most feminist analyses of the novel have tended to dwell on Nazneen's navigation of domestic and urban spaces. I aim to complicate and extend this scholarship by drawing attention to the novel's recursive movements across temporal as well as strictly spatial divides. See, for example, Sara Upstone, *British Asian Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 167-189; Francoise Kral, "Fictional Contexts, Actual Contexts, and Virtual Contexts in *Brick Lane*, by Monica Ali," *Commonwealth* 28.1 (2006): 109-118; and Garrett Ziegler, "East of the City: *Brick Lane*, Capitalism, and the Global Metropolis," *Race/Ethnicity: Multidisciplinary Global Contexts* 1.1 (Autumn 2007): 145-167. For other approaches to Nazneen's diasporic femininity, see Yasmin Hussain, *Writing Diaspora: South Asian Women, Culture and Ethnicity* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005) and John Marx, "The Feminization of Globalization," *Cultural Critique* 63 (2006), 1-32.

that the novel's piecemeal, oblique representation of Amma's life and death ultimately lends her a particular embodied form, albeit one that takes shape primarily in the bodily gestures of proxy figures within Nazneen's more immediate field of vision. The female body-in-motion serves as a mnemonic trigger for memories of Amma and other unresolved experiences from Nazneen's traumatic childhood in Bangladesh. Amma's fallenness figures forth an abject or debased femininity that the novel will code as an obstacle to the realization of Nazneen's desires—an obstacle, in short, to her ability to insert herself into the imagined community of Britain. In the second part of this chapter, I argue that Nazneen traverses this obstacle by relinquishing her mother's ghost and forming new identifications to take its place. The role abdicated by Amma is taken up by mass media images of idealized femininity, namely the televisual image of a figure skater. These moving images, as it were, perpetuate even as they transform the choreography of fallenness initially modeled by Nazneen's mother.

I.

Since one of my concerns is the trajectory of Nazneen's character arc, I should begin by briefly summarizing the novel's plot. Early scenes of the novel dwell on Nazneen's loneliness and homesickness in the days after she first arrives in England. At first, her sadness appears to be directed toward her buffoonish husband Chanu, an older man whose self-opinion and career ambitions desperately overshoot his limited qualifications. But as the narrative proceeds, we discover that Nazneen's grief has deeper origins. When Nazneen and her sister Hasina are still children, Amma (their mother) commits suicide under mysterious circumstances, perhaps—we are never sure—in response to domestic abuse.⁴ For most of the novel, the sisters are barely able to discuss, much less understand and mourn, the loss of their mother. Ali presents her suicide and its aftermath only in brief, fugitive glimpses, rendering it a kind of primal scene at once central and invisible to their adult psyches. For Nazneen, the loss of Amma is aggravated by her geographical separation from her sister, who elopes at the age of sixteen and is subsequently banished from the family. Hasina's presence in the novel takes the form of the letters she all too infrequently dispatches to her worried sister. The novel sustains a parallel between Nazneen's story in London and Hasina's in Dhaka, partially by looking backwards in order to explore their mutual anguish toward their deceased mother. The slow retrieval of Amma's story is an important plot catalyst; as Nazneen begins to grapple with her death, she also begins to act upon heretofore suppressed desires. In the novel's second half she begins to take control of her life, or, in the language of the novel, begins to "kick against fate."

⁴ *Amma* means "mother" in Bengali. Although the character's name is "Rupban," I will continue to refer to her as "Amma" because this is how she is addressed by Nazneen and Hasina.

Now a mother of two, she finds employment as a garment worker, providing the bulk of the family's income after Chanu loses his job. This in turn introduces her to a hunky younger man, Karim, the leader and mouth-piece for a local Muslim organization. Faced with a choice between Karim and her husband, Nazneen negotiates a third path: she assertively ends the affair even as she denies Chanu's demands to return the family to Bangladesh.⁵ These developments form part of an upward mobility narrative that propels Nazneen toward an entrepreneurial future; after her husband returns, alone, to Bangladesh, she starts a new garment company with Razia.

Part of what makes Nazneen's such a moving story is her struggle to claim for herself an autonomy and a material security unavailable to her mother and sister. To a significant degree, Ali presents Nazneen's achievement of voice and agency in terms of the transcendence of her mother's victimized, beset womanhood. The novel's opening scene, describing Nazneen's birth, establishes Amma as a browbeaten, grief-stricken figure. Faced with the prospect of a stillborn baby (Nazneen initially has trouble breathing), she reacts with a resigned fatalism that will become her signature: "Whatever happens, I accept it. And my child must not waste any energy fighting against Fate" (3). In the novel's somewhat schematic figuring of fate vs. agency, Amma embodies the fate against which Nazneen's budding agency will need to distinguish itself. The fate to which Amma submits is grim enough; her husband is presented as a jealous, weapon-bearing figure of violence, who routinely disappears for days at a time on sexual errands (71). Amma's response, as she puts it in a conversation with her sister Mumtaz, is to "suffer in silence" (70). And it is as a figure of suffering and sacrifice that Amma makes her strongest claim on the young Nazneen's imagination. Amma is presented as either unable or uninterested in questioning the gendered power dynamic which keeps her in a position of subservience.

The novel gives shape to Amma's subaltern status partially by establishing a clinical perspective on her body and bodily functions. The scene describing Nazneen's birth encourages a focus on Amma's lower body as the site and sign of her earthiness and underdevelopment. More specifically, her subalternity emerges as a failure to *know* her own body. In the birth scene, Amma confuses her labor contractions with an impending bowel movement (1). This bodily misrecognition anticipates a similar one later in the novel, when Nazneen, on her first unaccompanied excursion outside the flat, misconstrues her need to urinate as a flush of (possibly sexual) exhilaration: "a leafshake of fear—or was it excitement?—passed through her legs" (35). The birth scene mingles reproductive and digestive functions; when her contractions arrive, Amma is plucking a chicken for a family feast. Her husband runs from the latrine, "his business unfinished," to attend to his screaming wife (1). This gut-level picture of

⁵ Her romantic choice between a passionate political activist and staid but kind-hearted husband is reminiscent of Bimala's choice between Nikhil and Sandip in Rabindranath Tagore's *The Home and The World*.

rural villagers sharply differs from the images of idealized bodies that will later capture Nazneen's attention. The emphasis on Amma's lower stratum renders her not a grotesque figure so much as a self beholden to the body's demands. This stands in contrast to the ideal situation favored by the novel: a body beholden to the demands of the self. The acrobatic femininity that Nazneen will eventually prefer is one that imaginatively compensates for Amma's ethnic bodily profile.⁶

What becomes clear as the novel proceeds is the gravitational pull Amma's memory exerts on Nazneen's thoughts, even when Nazneen does not explicitly appear to be thinking about her. In one sense, Amma's story goes profoundly under-narrated considering the strong psychological influence she holds over her daughters. Very few pages are devoted to the events, let alone the thoughts and feelings, precipitating her suicide. Yet the novel records her spectral presence—indeed, it is saturated with it—by continually filtering Nazneen's thoughts and perceptions through a set of images connected with the memory of her mother. At the level of style, Amma's absent presence is rendered in a Woolfian prose wherein certain props and verbal cues from the past enjoy a presentness from which the novel derives many of its most powerful, if disquieting effects.⁷ The novel's first explicit mention of Amma's suicide offers an illustration of the claim she makes on Nazneen's subconscious. Nazneen and

⁶ I am influenced here by María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo's account of how twentieth-century modernization theory and the revolutionary narratives that ostensibly critique it are both predicated on the pathologization and transcendence of peasant subjectivities. See Saldaña-Portillo, *The Revolutionary Imagination in the Americas and the Age of Development* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁷ Ali has written about Woolf's influence on her work, describing what she considers their mutual interest to "catch at thoughts and feelings, the immediate perception of things." Ali, "After Woolf" *The Guardian* 27 May 2006. Placing Woolf among Ali's literary forebears corrects a certain tendency to view *Brick Lane* as a Zola-esque exercise in literary naturalism—as a salt-of-the-earth immigrant narrative of primarily sociological rather than literary significance. I see this tendency especially in Alistair Cormack, "Migration and the Politics of Narrative Form: Realism and the Postcolonial Subject in *Brick Lane*," *Contemporary Literature* 47.4 (2006): 695-721. I want to be clear that I am not presenting Ali as an heir of Anglo-modernism. But I do see affinities between Ali's impressionistic emphasis on the mind at the moment of perception and what Raymond Williams has termed the "metropolitan perception" of émigré modernists in early twentieth-century London. Certain scenes in *Brick Lane*—for instance, Nazneen's first solo foray into the streets of East London—directly recall the kinds of urban anomie we encounter in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. See Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989), 44-45.

Chanu are out shopping for a sari. “The pink with yellow is very nice,” Nazneen says, in a phrase that triggers the memory that follows. Chanu grumbles about the relativity of taste: “You ask if the pink and yellow is nice? What shall I say? I can say that it is nice or not nice, and how could I be wrong?” (26). Nazneen gets the last word: “I think it is nice, but I don’t mind.” Both the emblem of the sari and the terms of their squabble (“is it nice?”) carry, on the facing page, into a memory of Mumtaz discussing Amma’s funeral. “Your mother was wearing her best sari,” she says, “*I think that’s nice* don’t you?” (27 my emphasis). The visual/tactile cue of the sari and the remembered phrase “I think that’s nice” serve as points of access to the past. It is worth noting, however, that Nazneen does not appear to undergo any conscious epiphany or moment of recognition here. The memory of her mother is briefly summoned and confronted, only to vanish quickly from view. At this stage in the narrative, Nazneen is not psychologically equipped to square herself with the implications of her mother’s death.

For the most part, Amma enters the narrative field by proxy, in the form of bodily gestures performed by other characters. What I mean by this is that the otherwise disembodied character of Amma is *re-embodied* in the kinetic acts of the women (and representations of women) serving as objects of visual interest for Nazneen in the London phase of the narrative. These gestures echo and extend a repertoire of postures and movements associated with Amma’s death. In order to bring this dimension of the novel into focus, we first need to address Ali’s presentation of Amma’s suicide. In the same flashback, Mumtaz describes the experience of discovering Amma’s lifeless body after she has committed suicide. This event occurs in pre-independence Bangladesh (then called East Pakistan) when Nazneen and Hasina are small children, but it is notably retrieved in reminiscence only after the narrative re-joins the adult Nazneen in 1980s London. Mumtaz lingers on the mysterious fallen posture of Amma’s body: “[she] found her leaning low over the sacks of rice in the store hut, staked through the heart by a spear. ‘She had fallen,’ said Mumtaz, ‘and the spear was the only thing holding her up. It looked . . . It looked as if she was still falling’” (27). Since this flashback is deliberately abrupt, the physical and spatial arrangement of the scene may need some clarification. As later confirmed by one of Hasina’s letters to Nazneen, Amma had taken her own life by impaling herself upon a spear propped up between sacks of grain (325). What is immediately striking about Mumtaz’s recollection is its avoidance of the usual “crime scene” topoi—bloody wounds, accusing eyes, mouths gaping in horror. Instead, she draws attention to the peculiar posture—more sculptural than gruesome—of Amma’s body upon the spear. When Mumtaz describes Amma as “fallen” and “falling” she contributes to a pattern of imagery already introduced by the anonymous suicide victim earlier discussed. By treating Amma’s death under the rubric of fallenness, Ali obviously draws on a historically fraught language of gender representation involving the figure of the “fallen woman.” I will address the stakes of this high risk strategy in a moment. But for now I want to explore how Ali effectively *unmetaphors* or literalizes the trope of the fallen woman, her ambition to flesh out Amma’s

otherwise abstract condition of social vulnerability and stigmatization. Amma's fallen body, as it is presented here, accomplishes something of a double gesture; it is a static figure that nonetheless conveys movement. The spear suspends Amma in mid air, arresting but also preserving—freeze-framing, as it were—her downward momentum. Mumtaz's use of the present progressive tense implies that Amma has not just fallen but is "still falling," levitating in a state of perpetual suspension. There is the sense that, having been interrupted, the gesture is unfinished, still awaiting completion. It is also worth noticing the close association between domestic work and the physical instruments Amma deploys to kill herself. The sacks of grain are echoed in an early kitchen scene in which Nazneen is first seen preparing daal, then accidentally cuts her finger while chopping an onion.

Amma's suicidal plunge establishes a symbolic pattern organized around the female (or feminized) falling body. *Brick Lane* assembles an imagined community of women, and emasculated men, around their bodies' common proneness to vertical descent or aerial suspension. Amma's fall is mirrored by the novel's many flung or downwardly mobile bodies, which together recursively construct the original trauma of her death. Among the more explicit of these figures are the anonymous suicide jumper that we've already discussed (12-13); the World Trade Center workers that Nazneen sees plunging to their deaths on television on 9/11/2001 (271); the female figure skater (the English Olympic gold-medalist Jayne Torvill) Nazneen observes on the television; and, in an embedded memory of Nazneen's childhood in Bangladesh, a town eccentric who falls to his death in a village well.⁸ Another flashback concerns "Mustafa the cowman," whose punishment for kidnapping a child involves being crucified on a tree, his feet "dangling a few inches above the ground" (72). Mustafa's body, like Amma's, is suspended in the air, "like a wooden puppet with some broken strings" (72). It is notable that Ali gives these plunging and suspended bodies a recognizable literary provenance: Chanu's employer is a man named Mr. Dalloway, and it is not hard to see how Ali might have had in mind either Septimus Harding's suicidal fall in *Mrs. Dalloway*, or the suicide of Virginia Woolf the person. Towards the end of the novel, Karim and the Bengal Tigers deliberate over the ethics of Jihad suicide bombers (176, 199). And the urban landscape of Brick Lane, where a "television aerial dangles from a window like a suicide," is likewise radioactive with the fallout from Amma's death (59).

Fallenness and womanhood are deeply imbricated in *Brick Lane*. On the one hand, Ali seems to have in mind the conventional meaning of the fallen woman—the socially vulnerable woman of reduced means, whose turn to

⁸ Makku Pagla is feminized in the novel by his excessive interest in *reading*, an interest that sets him apart from, say, Hamid's emotional asperity and chest-beating. He is also feminized by his imaginative proximity to Amma, who identifies with him as an outsider figure and openly laments his death.

prostitution is seen to threaten “normal” family and work arrangements.⁹ In the imagination of the novel, Nazneen’s sister Hasina is one such woman. Her teenage “love marriage” appears to promise the freedom and happiness that Nazneen’s arranged one precludes. But, as her letters describe in excruciating detail, she is brutally beaten by her first husband and sexually abused by her employer. A second, abortive marriage also ends in tragedy, leaving Hasina to fend for herself in extremely straightened circumstances. After more-or-less disappearing from the narrative, she re-emerges to tell her sister that she has found refuge in a Christian charity called “The House of Falling Women.” This phrase offers a convenient shorthand for Ali’s inventory of socially vulnerable women. In the often fractious community of Tower Hamlets where Nazneen lives, there are several women who, though they are not sex workers, are effectively “fallen” in the eyes of the community’s many gossipers and self-appointed moral arbiters, namely Mrs. Islam. Nazneen’s friend Razia, for example, courts controversy merely by taking English classes. Another neighbor, Jorina, opens herself up to public scrutiny by taking a job to supplement the earnings of her feckless husband.

The otherwise abstract forms of stigmatization experienced by these women are given visual expression in the figure of the female body-in-flight. But, more importantly, the privileged place of fallen bodies in the novel’s symbolic scheme helps bring into focus the *melancholic* nature of Nazneen’s thwarted and prolonged process of bereaving her mother’s death. At the heart of *Brick Lane* are questions about the mysterious work of grief and bereavement. Nazneen’s sub-conscious orientation toward and curiosity about the various fallen bodies around her—I say “subconscious” because these bodies never trigger a straightforward reckoning with Amma or her death—bespeak her inability to work through or even acknowledge the grief seething inside her. Compared to the relatively successful mourning process that allows Nazneen to openly contemplate the absence of Hasina, this failure to contemplate her mother’s suicide bears the distinct imprint of melancholia in the Freudian sense. Mourning, in Freud’s influential account, designates a finite response to the death or loss of a loved one—a kind of psychic settling of accounts between mourner and mourned.¹⁰ Its pathological other is melancholia, which by contrast signals a

⁹ Here I draw on Amanda Anderson, *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), and Holly Allen, *Forgotten Men and Fallen Women: The Cultural Politics of New Deal Narratives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Trans. and Ed. James Strachey, Vol. 19 (London: Hogarth, 1961), 237-258. Among many recent studies of melancholia in literary and cultural studies, the ones I have found most useful are Greg Forter, “Against Melancholia: Contemporary Mourning, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*,” and the Politics of Unfinished Grief,” *differences: A Journal of*

hatred toward the lost object that short-circuits the work of mourning. The mutual hostility between Nazneen and her mother is made clear in a somewhat heavy-handed dream sequence late in the novel. By this point in the narrative, Nazneen has also lost an infant son to illness. Amma appears in a dream to torment Nazneen, demanding that she accept the blame for her own son's death. "Now say this to yourself, and say it loud, 'I killed my son. I killed my son'" (323). While in this case Ali makes the aesthetically questionable move of placing Amma firmly within Nazneen's nightmare, where she is recognized for who she is and bitterly scolded in turn by Nazneen, the more common situation in *Brick Lane* calls for her to encounter other women whose falling bodies *intimate* the spectral presence of Amma without reminding Nazneen of her per se.

When, for example, Razia and Mrs. Islam gossip about the female neighbor who has committed suicide, they trigger in Nazneen an anxiety originally caused—but also deferred and distorted—by the violent force of Amma's death (12-13). The anonymous woman's suicide serves as a kind of intermediate trauma that repeats the original trauma of Amma's suicide. The psychic work performed here resembles what Freud has called "repetition compulsion," famously demonstrated by the fort-da game described in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.¹¹ Freud describes a case history involving a small child who compulsively throws his toy out of the crib, only to reel it back in and repeat the process. For Freud, the pleasure the child derives from this otherwise painful and traumatic action (the disappearing toy evokes the threat of maternal abandonment) resides in the prospect of "mastering" the trauma by re-playing it over and over. In Nazneen's case, each time she encounters a falling body she re-lives the moment of her mother's suicide with the hopes of achieving a different outcome. "What terror came to her mind when she went down?" Nazneen asks herself of the anonymous woman. "What thoughts came? [...] In the end, did it matter whether she jumped or fell? Suddenly Nazneen was sure that she had jumped" (23). The pronoun "she" has a double referent; Nazneen's reflections on the anonymous woman double as speculations about her own absent mother. To use a literary-critical rather than psychoanalytic term, scenes like these enable a "delayed decoding" of cues already in circulation within the narrative.¹²

Feminist Studies 14.2 (Summer 2003): 134-170; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge 2006); and Daniel Kim, *Writing Manhood In Black and Yellow: Ralph Ellison, Frank Chin, and the Literary Politics of Identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). See also Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Trans. and Ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961).

¹² See Ian Watt, *Conrad in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 168-200.

Nevertheless, these uncanny repetitions of Amma's death do not afford Nazneen an opportunity to work through her unresolved grievances in a straightforward or unambivalent fashion. Indeed, Nazneen has internalized her mother's loss to such an extent that, for most of the narrative at least, she does not even realize what has been lost. As Freud puts it in the original "Mourning and Melancholia" essay, the loss has been "withdrawn from consciousness," and it is partially the invisibility of the loss that makes it impossible to move beyond.¹³ One of the ways Ali explores the internalization of Amma's ghost is by rendering Nazneen herself a vertiginous figure who is prone to falling. Near the beginning of the novel, Nazneen negotiates a slippery stairwell: "She took the steps two at a time until she missed a ledge and came down on her ankle against an unforgiving ridge. She caught the stair rail and *did not fall* but clung to the side for a moment, then continued down, stamping as if the pain was just a cramp to be marched out" (33 my emphasis). The trope of falling recurs in another of Nazneen's urban excursions: "No longer invisible, Nazneen walked faster and looked only at what she had to see to walk *without falling* or colliding" (36 my emphasis). Nazneen nearly falls but doesn't; her body momentarily assumes the falling posture of her suicidal mother only to right itself and regain control. The ambiguity of these image lies in the way they both summon and reject the bodily figuration of Amma's death. Nazneen's moment of vertigo briefly places her among the novel's ensemble of subaltern fallen women—it shows her

¹³ For a discussion of this arresting phrase see Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 174. In *Gender Trouble* and especially in *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler traces Freud's attempt, in later works like *The Ego and the Id*, to rethink the framework initially proposed in "Mourning and Melancholia." According to Butler, Freud's sharpening of this hypothesis increasingly made the original distinction between mourning and melancholia untenable. What if the act of incorporation associated with melancholia enabled rather than precluded normative mourning? "Letting the object go," Butler argues, "means, paradoxically, not full abandonment of the object but transferring the status of the object from external to internal" (134). The internalizing of the lost object at once compensates for and disguises the original loss, thus un-blocking the work of grief. Moreover, once resuscitated within the mourner's psyche, the lost object provides the very foundation upon which the ego is constructed. *Brick Lane* offers a rich account of a mourning process precipitated by just such a melancholic "hanging on" to the lost love. This process is, in the imagination of the novel, intimately linked to what Butler (via Freud) calls the "consolidation" of conventional gender identities. In Butler's tour de force reading of Freud, heterosexuality emerges out of the "prohibition" of an always already lost (and hence ungrievable) homosexual love. The more modest argument tested here holds that Nazneen's femininity emerges in large part out of her unconscious identifications with either Amma or the "proxy" figures taking her place.

momentarily succumbing to the centripetal pull of Amma's and Hasina's models of abject womanhood. But her regaining of balance forces us to rethink and perhaps expand the range of political potentials Ali invests in the falling female body. In the next section, I explore the unexpected role this rhetoric of fallenness plays in the novel's powerful narrative of female self-fashioning.

II.

I have been describing the various states of subalternity and social vulnerability that Ali organizes under the rubric of fallenness. I now turn to the fantasy of self-making by which the novel delivers Nazneen from those states, one based on the promise of a certain feminine ideal perpetuated in mass cultural forms. Let me begin this discussion by directing attention to perhaps the novel's most perplexing image of falling. Near the beginning of the novel, Nazneen finds herself "held" by the image on the television. It is 1985, and the image in question is that of the English figure skaters (technically "ice dancers") Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean, performing a routine similar to the one that had earned them a gold medal at the Sarajevo Winter Olympics a year earlier.¹⁴ Nazneen, unfamiliar with the sport, looks on in wonder as the spectacle unfolds:

A man in a very tight suit (so tight that it made his private parts stand out on display) and a woman in a skirt that did not even cover her bottom gripped each other as an invisible force hurtled them across an oval arena. The people in the audience clapped their hands together and then stopped. By some magic they all stopped at exactly the same time. The couple broke apart. They fled from each other and no sooner had they fled than they sought each other out. Every move they made was urgent, intense, a declaration. The woman raised one leg and rested her boot (Nazneen saw the thin blade for the first time) on the other thigh, making a triangular flag of her legs, and spun around until *she would surely fall but didn't*. She did not slow down. She stopped dead and flung her arms above her head with a look so triumphant that you knew she had conquered everything: her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who slid over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her. (20 my emphasis)

¹⁴ A section heading several pages earlier announces that the scene transpires in 1985. Since Torvill and Dean's most famous performance was their gold-medal clinching "Bolero" dance at the 1984 Olympics, and since the routine represented in the novel bears a close resemblance to it, it is not altogether clear whether Ali has that widely remembered routine in mind but simply mistakes the date, or whether she alludes to another (possibly even fictional) performance from 1985. No explicit mention is made of the Olympic Games.

The skaters figure forth a romantic ideal to which Nazneen's thoughts often return over the course of the narrative. Torvill's sequined, spinning body makes a special claim on her attention. For she models a femininity that, at this early stage in the novel, Nazneen can only dream of—one based on the promise of mobility, bodily command, imaginative expressivity, and a personal freedom that trumps but, notably, does not seem to preclude romantic intimacy. As she watches the performance, and later as she replays it in her mind, Nazneen enlists Torvill's image in an elaborate script of female empowerment. The seemingly death-defying pirouette Torvill executes is an act of spontaneous self-making that Nazneen does not fully understand (she attributes the skaters' movements to an "invisible force," and the audience's synchronized response to "magic") but nonetheless finds deeply compelling.¹⁵ Part of the appeal lies in her costume's suggestion of a sexual license unavailable, or not yet available, to Nazneen: her skirt "did not even cover her bottom." But what really transfixes Nazneen are the spatial and sensual potentialities of her moving body—its ability to move and feel as and when it wants. In Ali's representation of the performance, Torvill moves with a danger-courting speed and abandon. On more than one occasion the passage signals the possibility of bodily harm: Torvill spins "until she would surely fall but didn't"; she "stop[s] dead" at the end of the dance; and the ominous "thin blade" of her skates echoes the sharpened point of the spear upon which Amma kills herself. But while this sense of danger and risk is crucial to the scopophilic pleasure Nazneen derives from the dance, Torvill ultimately manages to keep harm at bay. The ideal womanhood on display here is one capable of "conquer[ing] everything: her body, the laws of nature, and the heart of the tight-suited man who slid over on his knees, vowing to lay down his life for her." It is a moving image in more than one sense.

What is immediately striking about Ali's representation of the skaters is how it reimagines the image repertoire—the postures, props, and visual cues—associated with Amma's suicide. The sculptural posture of Torvill's body echoes Amma's in its suggestion of an arrested downward movement; the arrangement of the former's legs (she is presented as a flag spinning on an axis) echoes and extends the latter's thrown form upon the spear. But like Nazneen's momentary stumble in the stairwell, Torvill's pirouette involves an achievement of bodily control suggestive of emotional purpose and direction. It is presented as a fallenness disavowed and overcome, but interestingly one in which the

¹⁵ The "invisible force" orchestrating the skaters' movements again foregrounds an ambiguity about the agency of their bodies. Do they move of their own volition or are they powered by an authority outside of their remit? Ali's representation of a Bengali film poster that Nazneen encounters on the street also dwells on the "invisible force" drawing two lovers together. "Some invisible force was keeping them (only inches) apart" (34). In both cases, the invisible force could be construed as a spectral maternal presence (a kind of "harpy" in the Woolfian sense) come back to haunt Nazneen.

constitutive trace of injury and abjection is amplified rather than wished away. In her recent study *Feeling Backward*, Heather Love discusses this process of resignifying stigma in terms of late-twentieth and twenty-first century engagements with queer history. Commenting on D.A. Miller's recent history of the Broadway musical, *Place for Us*, Love observes how "contemporary gay identity is produced out of the twentieth-century history of queer abjection: gay pride is a reverse or mirror image of gay shame, produced precisely against the realities it means to remedy. In the darkroom of liberation, the 'negative' of the closet case or the isolated protogay child is developed into a photograph of an out, proud gay man."¹⁶ In these terms, Jayne Torvill emerges as a "photo-negative" of Amma that simultaneously preserves the terms of her stigma—i.e., her fallenness—and invests them with radically different political meanings.

Nonetheless, for all the allure of this episode, the symbolic positioning of women here is quite complex, since we also have to account for Nazneen's status as a longing, highly impressionable female spectator. While exploring the prospect of a mobile, unfettered female subjectivity in the figure of Torvill, the passage also assumes what Mary Ann Doane, referring to a troubling strain in 1940s women's films, has termed "women's susceptibility to the image" and "naiveté in relation to systems of signification."¹⁷ This lyrical celebration of the active, moving female body in some ways requires Nazneen's passive, stationary body as a point of contrast. Nazneen, frozen in front of the television with a pile of dirty dishes in her hands, is utterly transfixed by the televisual imaginary; she heeds the call of the image in a manner that raises important questions about women's supposed collusion with and proneness to mass media spectacle. In a later scene, Nazneen peruses an English magazine featuring a picture of Torvill and Dean. Ali again draws on the trope of fallenness to describe Nazneen's emotional overinvolvement in the image: "Nazneen *fell*, somehow, into that picture and caught hold of the man's hand" (63 my emphasis). Doane identifies both the reading of fanzines and the fantasy of crossing the fictional threshold to fulfill a woman's "spectatorial dreams" as recurrent features of Hollywood weepies intended for a female viewership (Doane 1).

The racial optics through which Torvill's image is apprehended also bears consideration. What does it mean for Nazneen, who has recently arrived in England from Bangladesh, to fashion her own femininity upon an icon whose meaning—especially in the nationalistic context of the Olympic Games—is so heavily overdetermined by prevailing conceptions of (white) Englishness? Nazneen's trouble comprehending the image before her (she mispronounces the sport's name as "ice e-skating") throws into relief her foreignness and cultural

¹⁶ Heather Love, 19-20. Elsewhere in this book Love treats the desire for cross-historical retrieval of queer abjection in terms of a Foucauldian "reverse discourse" (2).

¹⁷ Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 1.

difference. The national specificity of Torvill and Dean's victory is worth noting in this regard. Like the televised wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana in 1981, Torvill and Dean's Olympic campaign in 1984 presented to a global audience a seductive, portable image of Englishness at a moment when England's and Britain's diminished roles on the global stage were becoming painfully apparent.¹⁸ Their gold medal was understood as a triumph for England on par with the "victory" in the Falklands two years earlier. That Ravel's "Boléro" provided the music for the routine added a certain piquancy; here were two white, English athletes in that whitest of competitions appropriating what was already an appropriation of Latin American expressive culture (the boléro has both Spanish and Cuban origins). Ali's further appropriation and re-staging of the performance begs several difficult questions. Whose fantasy is this? What does it mean to claim it?

We can complicate Nazneen's spectatorial relationship to Torvill and Dean by taking into consideration the athletes' working class origins. I have been describing the skaters as English, but theirs was a working-class Midlands Englishness (they are both from Nottingham) at some remove from the generic London Englishness trumpeted in media coverage of the Olympics. Part of the appeal of Torvill and Dean to many Brits had to do with their hardscrabble beginnings. In this sense, Nazneen's fascination with the duo does not represent a cross-class romance so much as a horizontal class identification with them.¹⁹ More importantly, Ali refuses to present Nazneen's affinity for Torvill as a migrant's deferential capitulation to white imperial culture. Ali "creolizes" Torvill by emphasizing the non-Western frame of reference through which Nazneen fantasizes about her. In Nazneen's viewing of the magazine photo, Torvill's body is rendered "spangled, silver and blue. Her legs were as long as the Padma. She was a fairy-tale creature, a Hindu goddess" (63).²⁰ This description notably un-

¹⁸ For an account of British political culture in the 1980s and its melancholic attachments to the memory of British imperial greatness, see Baucom. For a contemporaneous account of the "new empire" being erected in the British imaginary in the 1980s, see the essays collected in Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (New York: Penguin, 1992). In developing these ideas I have also been influenced by the idea of "national fantasy" developed in Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

¹⁹ I owe Dan Brayton for pointing this out to me.

²⁰ Interestingly, Nazneen describes Torvill as a Hindu goddess, even though she is herself an observant Muslim. While on the one hand this further underscores Nazneen's impressionistic absorption of cultures other than her own, it also presents her faith as being flexible and accommodating rather than rigid and fundamentalist. I should also point out that Torvill and Dean had a reciprocal interest in Indian culture. In the 1984 World Professional Figure Skating

Anglicizes Torvill; Nazneen apprehends the photo in highly personal terms rather than in the terms of a hegemonic British or English culture.

This allusion to fairy-tales, one of many in the novel, suggests one way of understanding the empowerment script at the heart of the novel. The working title of *Brick Lane* was “Seven Seas and Thirteen Rivers,” a phrase which serves as the opening to many Bengali children stories.²¹ In her first letter to Nazneen, Hasina warmly recalls the role of such stories in their childhood: “You remember those story we hear as children begin like this. ‘Once there was a prince who lived in far off land seven seas and thirteen rivers away.’ That is how I think of you. But as princess” (12). The sex-gender system of fairy tales, in which heterosexual romance and marriage mitigate social antagonisms of various kinds, has clearly shaped Nazneen’s understanding of love and intimacy. This is why the mass cultural forms that capture her attention all tend to feature impassioned, if imperiled, heterosexual couples. The film poster Nazneen spies on the street features a “hero and heroine [peering] at each other with epic hunger. The scarlet of her lips matched the bandanna tied around his forehead.” Torvill and Dean figure forth a heterosexual dyad similarly amenable to Nazneen’s initially indulgent sentimentalism.²² Notably, however, the end of the narrative sees Nazneen at least partially disabused of this rhapsodic romanticism. Her adulterous relationship with Karim, almost parodically realized in the language of the pulp bodice ripper, leaves Nazneen as unfulfilled as her marriage with Chanu. Foiling Chanu’s fantasy of diasporic return, Nazneen

Championships in the USA, the duo performed a remarkably orientalist routine to the tune of “Song of India,” a performance featuring marigold-colored harem pants and poses drawn from the *Kama Sutra*. The “Song of India” is the Indian merchant’s aria from the Rimsky-Korsakov opera *Sadko*, suggesting that the performance was further influenced by a well-known piece of Russian musical orientalism. While *Brick Lane* does not present Torvill and Dean as being engaged in a neo-colonial aesthetics, the Dhaka phase of the narrative does show evidence of American commercial neo-imperialism in the guise of a Britney Spears poster.

²¹ The precise genealogy of this phrase is difficult to pin down, but an influential early iteration of it can be found in Rabindranath Tagore’s *The Crescent Moon*. The *Thakurmar Jhuli* (Grandmother’s Bag) is perhaps the best known collection of such stories.

²² This sentimentalism has been an increasingly prominent feature of Ali’s work, even as its romantic foci have tended more and more toward mainstream Englishness. Ali’s latest novel, *Untold Story*, is a counter-factual narrative focused on the life of Princess Diana. In a *Guardian* op-ed piece appearing around the time of its publication, the spring of Prince William’s marriage to Kate Middleton, Ali defends the future Queen from charges of social climbing, noting that she will soon undergo a “process of self-invention” similar to Nazneen’s in *Brick Lane*. See Ali, “Kate Middleton.”

pieces together what Gayatri Gopinath terms “a new notion of ‘home’ ... that breaks with the patriarchal gender arrangements that characterize diasporic nationalism” (Gopinath 56).

Critics less sympathetic than Gopinath have expressed frustration with the novel’s upbeat conclusion, which to them seems out of keeping with the rest of the novel’s patient sense of the worldly determinations circumscribing human freedoms.²³ There are two scenes these scholars usually draw attention to. One involves Nazneen dancing alone in her flat to the tune of Lulu’s version of “Shout!” on the radio (366). In the other, Hasina takes Nazneen to an ice skating rink. Nazneen protests, “you can’t skate in a sari.” Razia replies, “This is England. You can do whatever you like” (369). For critic Tabesh Khair, the hollowness of Razia’s statement is confirmed by the kinds of racial profiling endemic to the post-9/11 “war on terror”:

I had just finished reading *Brick Lane* while waiting for the airport authorities to let me know whether I could board a plane to Heathrow in order to catch a connecting flight from there. In the past this would not have been a problem. But, unknown to me, the rules had been changed in London a few days back and now some passport holders were required to have a valid visa even to catch a connecting flight back from the same airport in England ... ‘This is England’, the protagonist replies, ‘You can do whatever you like.’ Perhaps. Perhaps.²⁴

Khair rightly draws attention to the *unequal* availability of Britain and Britishness to immigrants differently marked in terms of race, class, and religion. But it is important not to equate Ali’s opinions about national identity with Razia’s, or any other character’s. To my mind, what is regrettable about the political vision of *Brick Lane* isn’t Razia’s enthusiastic patriotism so much as the over-simplified, schematic terms in which her claiming of citizenship rights is juxtaposed with what Ali terms the “going home syndrome” that cripples Chanu (16). Chanu is described in terms of his indulgent sense of victimization, leading him to theorize the “tragedy” of immigration in terms of a Samuel Huntington-esque “clash between Western values and our own” (78). Since Ali presents Chanu’s position

²³ James Procter, “New Ethnicities, the Novel, and the Burdens of Representation,” in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*, ed. James English (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 118; Hussain, 98; Sukhdev Sandhu, “Come Hungry, Leave Edgy,” *London Review of Books* 9 October 2003, 13. Sara Upstone offers a useful discussion of and rejoinder to these critical dismissals. See Upstone, 169.

²⁴ Tabesh Khair, “Laeserens foedsel – og doed,” *Information*, 25 November 2004, 12. Quoted in Mike Phillips, “Migration, Modernity and English Writing – Reflections on Migrant Identity and Canon Formation,” in Low and Wynne-Davies, 17.

in such cartoonish terms, it is no wonder that the assimilationist view of Razia and Mrs. Azad comes to seem politically preferable. However, the entrepreneurial route Razia takes toward citizenship is notable for its rejection of community: “Will the community feed me? Will it buy footballs for my son? Let the community say what it will. I say this to the community.’ And she flicked her fingers” (66). This false ethical choice between community and individualism is in many ways a product of neoliberal ideology, whose devastating effects Ali is in other respects so keenly attuned to.

But the lack of complexity in the disagreement Ali engineers between Razia’s and Chanu’s views of immigration is compensated for by the many qualifications attending Nazneen’s negotiation of Englishness at the end of the novel. Razia’s statement—“This is England. You can do whatever you like”—intimates a new beginning for Nazneen, a kind of *tabula rasa* upon which Nazneen can inscribe a new identity. Yet the *mise en scene* of the skating rink encircling Nazneen suggests a more complicated, if not darker possibility. “Nazneen looked at the ice and slowly it revealed itself. The criss-cross patterns of a thousand surface scars, the colors that shifted and changed in the lights, the unchanging nature of what lay beneath.” The thousand scars on the surface of the ice again enmesh Nazneen within the legacy of her mother’s traumatic death, suggesting a dream for the future erected on an unchanging history of stigma and suffering.

CHAPTER FOUR

Queer Affinities: Alan Hollinghurst and Jackie Kay

In my analysis of Emecheta, Smith, and Ali, I have selectively drawn insights from scholars working at the interface of queer and affect studies. But this particular alignment of theory and primary texts runs the risk of heterosexualizing British ethnic literary culture while universalizing or metaphorizing theoretical claims whose sexual specificity—and particularly their relationship to queer sex—is crucial to their meaning and intellectual payoff. What we also need to recognize is that in literary historical terms, the representation of the contact zone of post-imperial Britain has from the start received many of its most striking articulations from the perspective of gay and lesbian cultural producers—beginning with Colin MacInnes, and moving onward through Andrew Salkey up through the groundbreaking cinematic and theatrical experiments of Isaac Julien and Hanif Kureishi. In order to address these concerns, we turn now to the work of two very differently situated writers, Alan Hollinghurst and Jackie Kay, both of whom nonetheless return queer sex to the formula of affect and cultural citizenship that we have been tracing so far. And while both authors stretch the parameters of representation to include social actors heretofore invisible or representable only through euphemism and indirection, I will also argue that the racial optics of these queer representations are by no means immune to the problematic rhetorics of cultural citizenship on offer in the texts we have discussed thus far.

Friend of the Family: Domesticating Queerness in *The Line of Beauty*

The expulsion of Nick Guest from the Fedden home at the conclusion of Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) exposes once and for all the homophobia of the conservative elites Nick had considered his friends.¹ It unmasks Britain's ruling classes, as Sarah Brophy has recently argued, as "a political formation which can only locate him and his sexuality as a monstrous affront to upper-class white propriety."² Gerald's hypocritical dressing-down of Nick in the novel's closing pages aligns the "tolerant" Feddens with the gay-baiting and outright homophobia of characters like the Tippers or Barry Groom. But in another sense the scene is striking precisely because of how sharply it undoes, and thus makes retroactively apparent, the condition of mutual complicity and collusion enjoyed by Nick and the Feddens up until this point. For

¹ Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* (London: Picador, 2004).

² Sarah Brophy, "Queer histories and postcolonial intimacies in Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*" in Rachael Gilmour and Bill Schwarz (eds.), *End of Empire and the English Novel Since 1945* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2011): 184-202.

most of the narrative, Nick's queerness is perfectly in sync with the Thatcherite value system embodied by the Feddens; his modeling of a disease-free, lawful, white, middle-class homosexuality poses no obstacle to his symbolic inclusion in the family. In the imagination of the novel, homophobia co-exists with an equally disturbing process involving the domestication of queerness, and the related differentiation between "good gay" and "bad queer" subjectivities. It is this complex mechanism—the construction of what Lisa Duggan has termed "homonormative" social alliances—that exercises Hollinghurst's literary project more than the issue of homophobia per se.³ From this perspective, the most worrisome part of Nick's relationship to the Feddens is its happy beginning and middle rather than its unhappy end.

In this chapter I bring the Fedden's seemingly paradoxical "promotion" of Nick's homosexuality into focus by exploring the terms of his inclusion in their family and the ideological work he performs on its behalf.⁴ My analysis will foreground what Hollinghurst continually tropes as Nick's "romance" with the world of wealth and privilege to which the Feddens grant him entry. In particular, I direct attention to Nick's psychological investments in the family and the family home—two of the central rhetorical topoi of neoliberal discourse in 1980s Britain. In his treatment of the property-owning family, Hollinghurst engages with overlapping strands of state discourse on family values and property ownership, in addition to a thriving "heritage cinema" rhetorically grounded in the sumptuous country home. By holding queerness and the family household in apparently contradictory conjunction, Hollinghurst traces the faultlines of a New Right whose homophobia in many ways *depends* on the figure of the homosexual as its ideological point of closure—the necessary scapegoat in its manufacturing of moral panics about the supposedly imperiled nuclear family. Moreover, I identify a structural similarity in the novel between Nick's "good homosexuality" and the "good ethnicity" demonstrated by the Ouradi family's immigrant entrepreneurship.

Set primarily in London from 1983 to 1987 (the period of Margaret Thatcher's second term as prime minister), *The Line of Beauty* tells the story of Nick Guest's "romance" with the rich and powerful family of Tory MP Gerald Fedden. As the novel opens Nick has just come down from Oxford to study English at UCL. At the suggestion of his Oxford friend, Toby Fedden, Nick rents a room in the family's lavish Notting Hill estate. The Feddens treat Nick with affection and consider him an auxiliary family member; he house-sits for them,

³ Lisa Duggan, "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism" in Russ Castronovo and Dana D. Nelson (eds.), *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalize Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002).

⁴ Anna Marie Smith presents the counter-intuitive claim that the otherwise homophobic political culture of Thatcherism channeled its homophobia through a selective tolerance for disease-free, law-abiding, upwardly mobile white male homosexuals. See Smith, *New Right Discourse on Race and Sexuality: Britain, 1968-1990* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

joins the family in social gatherings, and acts as something of a babysitter-confidante for Toby's sister, Cat, who has a history of self-harm. When Nick falls in love with Leo, a young black council worker, the Feddens acknowledge and encourage the relationship: "You know, my dear," says Rachel Fedden, "you can always bring friends here if you want" (127). But as the narrative jumps forward to 1986, and as the AIDS crisis lends new meanings to Nick's gayness, fissures begin to appear in this improvised family unit. The reader pieces together that Leo has succumbed to the virus, and that Nick has been unable to confront his death. His new boyfriend is the Lebanese multi-millionaire Wani Ouradi, who bankrolls a vanity art magazine conceived and edited by Nick. Wani passes as heterosexual and demands Nick keep their relationship a secret. They are not the only ones hiding secrets—it is revealed that Gerald Fedden has been having an affair with his much younger assistant, and moreover that he has been lining his pockets through "creative accounting" (442). The media firestorm surrounding Gerald's scandal also swallows up Nick, whose relationship with the family prompts headlines of a "Gay Sex Link to Minister's House" (468).

At the heart of the novel is what the narrator describes as Nick's "fantasy of belonging" to the Feddens (78). What readers are asked to understand, and in some sense to experience vicariously, is the enormous aesthetic and material appeal of the family's luxurious lifestyle, its social connections, its political influence, etc. Nick's status in the household is suggested not just by his surname, but also by his first name with its echoes of F. Scott Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway and Anthony Powell's Nick Jenkins, both being impressionable observers moving in a world of elite privilege. Although the novel is narrated in the third person, our view of events is conditioned from the start by Nick's lyrical celebration of the family home: "Nick was in residence, and almost, he felt, in possession. He loved coming home to Kensington Park Gardens ... He loved letting himself in at the three-locked green front door, and locking it again behind him, and feeling the still security of the house" (5). The term "possession" bears consideration here, since it registers an ambiguity about Nick's relationship to the home: he possesses access to the house and its spoils but is also clearly possessed *by* it—with all that term's connotations of passivity and submission, not to mention spectrality. The liminal positioning of Nick in the doorway is also deeply resonant. At several moments in the novel (his initial rendezvous with Leo in the garden, a Hampstead Heath swimming expedition with Wani later on), Nick is presented as both literal and figurative gatekeeper, as if part of the allure of the house were his own ability to control other people's access to it (36, 181). Nick often fantasizes about leading Leo on clandestine guided tours of the house while the Feddens are away. This becomes a point of contention at the end of the novel, as Gerald insinuates that Nick, partially by leading scandal-seeking paparazzi to the Feddens' doorstep, has figured as a Trojan horse of sorts,

permitting alien elements (including Cat's black and working class boyfriends) entry into the house.⁵

Hollinghurst devotes long passages to Nick's connoisseurial appreciation of the house, often realized in sensory inventories of its carefully curated material contents: "Above the drawing-room fireplace there was a painting by Guardi, a capriccio of Venice in a gilt-rococo frame; on the facing wall were two large gilt-framed mirrors. Like his hero Henry James, Nick felt that he could 'stand a great deal of gilt'" (6).⁶ Hollinghurst presents the Fedden home as something of a museum, with Nick as its knowledgeable docent. Indeed, Nick leverages his cultural capital as Oxford-educated intellectual and amateur art historian (he is the son of an antiques dealer) to smooth over his evident class difference from the Feddens and to justify his presence in their company. The Fedden's accumulation of what Pierre Bourdieu calls "symbolic capital" (paintings, sculptures, furniture, a sizable record collection) is an important way in which they consolidate and advertise their class advantage.⁷ In the absence of ties of actual kinship, "taste" is the common currency between Nick and the Feddens, even if Gerald's is more gestural than genuine. When Lionel Kessel gives Gerald and Rachel a Gauguin painting as an anniversary gift, Gerald can only think of it in terms of its insurance value. He and Rachel make vague murmurs of appreciation, seeing the generosity of the gift as a sign of a reinvigorated stock market, but it is Catherine who points out that the painting, "Le Matin aux Champs," is "actually about hardship and poverty" (364). Nick's role here and elsewhere is effectively to translate the Fedden's otherwise illegible belongings for them so that they might enjoy them more.

By foregrounding Nick's "mythology of the house," Hollinghurst critiques New Right political rhetoric on home ownership and owner occupation (6). Through a cocktail of "right-to-buy" legislation and tax relief, Margaret Thatcher famously encouraged working-class Brits to purchase their council flats, selling back to them what they had in a sense *already* owned collectively through taxation.⁸ Thatcher sought to open up public housing, like everything else, to market forces. The promise of home ownership, a carrot dangling in front of

⁵ For more on gay men as "Trojan horse" figures see Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Post-war Britain* (London: Continuum, 2004), 80. This discussion was brought to my attention by Brophy, 188.

⁶ Dion Kagan notes the special resonance of the Guardi painting. "Guardi chronicled the onset of Venetian decadence toward the end of the eighteenth century, which parallels Nick's perspective on 1980s London... We might also think of his relationship with the Feddens as paralleling the Renaissance system of artistic patronage." See Kagan, "Homeless Love: Heritage and AIDS in BBC2's *The Line of Beauty*," *Literature-Film Quarterly* (October, 2011), footnote 11.

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1984).

⁸ Peter Riddell, *The Thatcher Decade* (London: Blackwell, 1989): 114-116.

those industrious and responsible enough, became an alibi for the state's selling off of social services, while simultaneously building working-class allegiance to the great capitalist enterprise. Meanwhile, in the cultural sphere, Thatcher's "ownership society" saw its cinematic realization in so-called heritage films such as *Another Country* (1984), *A Room With a View* (1986), *Chariots of Fire* (1981), *Maurice* (1987), *Howards End* (1992) and many others. These films, often set in the imperial British past, tend to feature exquisite country homes seemingly impervious to the vicissitudes of history.⁹ For this reason, left analysis of heritage cinema has typically understood these films' rose-colored view of the past as a retreat from the pressing political problems of the present—growing inequalities of opportunity, unemployment, political unrest, AIDS, etc. Heritage films memorialize a white imperial British past (even as they tend to render imperialism invisible) in symbolic compensation for Britain's long slide from global dominance in the post-war years. Their return to a Victorian sexual politics likewise sees these films recoiling from the "permissive" sexual culture associated with the perceived excesses of the 1960s. Carefully and elaborately styled in period detail, the country home in all its fineries stands as the visible symbol of a simpler, better time in British (really English) history.

Why would Hollinghurst choose to work within the very idiom he sees as symptomatic of the social vices under his scalpel? When Nick informs people that he and Wani are preparing a film adaptation of Henry James's *The Spoils of Poynton*, many of his interlocutors claim ignorance about James and annoyingly ask Nick if he has seen *A Room with a View*. And Hollinghurst himself is the author of a review of *Maurice*, in which he objects that "the society Forster is criticizing becomes almost involuntarily an object of veneration."¹⁰ In recent years, however, many theorists and cultural producers have returned to the scene of heritage to pursue queer and feminist projects. In an influential article, Claire Monk argues that the sexual identities represented in heritage films are actually "shifting, fluid and heterogeneous" rather than uniformly conventional.¹¹ She turns to the memorable scene in *A Room With a View* where Mr. Beebe, George, and Freddy frolic in the nude after sharing an outdoor bath. While not explicitly homoerotic, the episode nonetheless opens up a possibility for the transgressive reinscription of gender and sexual identities. In this vein, Richard

⁹ See Andrew Higson, "Re-presenting the National Past: Nostalgia and Pastiche in the Heritage Film" in Lester Friedman (ed.) *Fires Were Started: British Cinema and Thatcherism* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1993): 109-129; and Stuart Hall, "Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage,' Re-imagining the Post-nation" *Third Text* 49 (Winter 1999-2000): 3-13.

¹⁰ Alan Hollinghurst, "Suppressive nostalgia" *Times Literary Supplement* (6 November 1987): 1225.

¹¹ Claire Monk, "Sexuality and the Heritage" *Sight and Sound* 5:10 (Oct. 1995): 33-34.

Dyer understands the visual repertoire of heritage film as being potentially indispensable for those “inspired by a gay or sexually liberal political agenda.”¹²

Any Woman’s Blues: Jackie Kay’s Bessie

In *Bessie Smith*, Jackie Kay opens with an autobiographical interlude, a scene of *Bildung*, involving the formative shock of discovering the blueswoman’s music and image at age twelve. Kay recalls being transfixed by the sleeve of *Bessie Smith: Any Woman’s Blues*, a record in heavy rotation in her household. “Her image on the cover captivated me. She looked so familiar. She looked like someone I already knew in my heart of hearts” (Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 9) Bessie’s uncanny familiarity had to do with both her skin color and Kay’s own looming sense of racial isolation in 1970s Scotland.¹³ Born to a Scottish mother and Nigerian father in 1961, the author was adopted by a white couple in Glasgow as an infant, an experience recounted in her long poem “The Adoption Papers.” In that work, and again in *Bessie Smith*, Kay explores the urgent longing for community provoked by her experience of adoption and of growing up as a racial minority in a predominantly white milieu. As an adolescent, Kay answered her lived marginality with a compensatory fantasy: an “imaginary family” peopled by black cultural and political luminaries like “Nelson Mandela, Angela Davis, The Soledad Brothers, Cassius Clay, Count Basie, Duke Ellington,” and of course Bessie (15). In the absence of an organic, local black community to which she can lay claim, Kay credits these non-biological kin, and especially Bessie, with her own belated coming into racial self-knowledge. “Whenever I impersonated her in front of my mirror with my hairbrush microphone, I had a sense of something, at the edge of myself, that I mostly ignored; the first awareness of myself being black.”¹⁴ Bessie’s blues, for all their other pleasures, could perform an aggregating, identity-conferring function for the divided or uprooted racial subject. They could invite Kay to think of herself as part of the imagined community of the black diaspora past and present.

For the listener on the threshold of adulthood, the earthy sexual frankness of this “libidinous, raunchy, fearless blueswoman” could also suggest appealing possibilities of gender and sexual individuation (15). The Bessie retrieved by Kay is a defiant, empowered woman whose explicit treatment of women’s sexuality carved out a space for forms of embodied womanhood in excess of the narrowly domestic or reproductive. Kay writes of Bessie, Ma Rainey, and other classic female blues performers as “revolutionary” proto-feminists who “took control of their own image and... relentlessly told the truth about no-good men” (66-67). What is particularly important for Kay, a writer who has done much to expand the

¹² Richard Dyer, *The Culture of Queers* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

¹³ Here and moving forward I will use the performer’s first name to convey the intimate terms of Kay’s engagement with Smith and other imaginary kin.

¹⁴ Jackie Kay, *Bessie Smith* (Bath: Absolute Press, 1997) 14.

range of diasporic representations to accommodate queer and transgender perspectives, is how Bessie's self-possession and agency express themselves through her open and unconcealed homosexuality. *Bessie Smith* constructs a narrative of sexual freedom that pits the nearly utopian queer counterpublics of traveling blues shows, rent parties, and buffet flats against, on the one hand, the heterosexual orthodoxy of ideologies of racial uplift in 1920s America, and, on the other, the normative sex-gender systems of Kay's own time and place. Kay's Bessie is a figure of robust sexual appetites who, though married to a man, was "never hung up about her relationships with women" (40). "She was totally free in this sense," Kay continues, "completely uninhibited and never once stopped indulging her own desires" (100). The adjectives here telegraph a sense of Bessie as an exemplary desiring subject or author of her own sexual narrative, and this perhaps even more than her ethnicity becomes the basis of Kay's fascination with her. The primal scene of racial recognition enabled by Bessie's record sleeves is echoed, in both "The Adoption Papers" and a nearly verbatim scene in *Bessie Smith*, in a corresponding moment of sexual emergence lubricated by Bessie's music. Kay recounts how as a teenager she and a girlfriend would lip-sync Bessie's vocals and pantomime her choreography as "a way of expressing our wild emotions for each other" (Kay, *Bessie Smith* 79). In this triangulated encounter, Kay and her friend vicariously express their desires for each other through the mediating vessel of Bessie's voice. The inauguration of the sexual self, as with the racial self elsewhere, depends on the blueswoman as a kind of instrument or device allowing the girls' feelings to take shape.

In foregrounding the first person narrator's intimate, if imaginary, bond with Bessie, autobiographical intrusions like this register a longing for queer community across time that has recently been focalized within gay and lesbian literary studies. Kay's retrieval and resituating of her queer predecessor resonates with the recent work of Carolyn Dinshaw, Heather Love, Christopher Nealon, Lauren Berlant, Elizabeth Freeman, and other scholars interested in the vagaries of cross-historical identification in queer writing. These theorists explore how the experience of marginality drives a project of queer cultural salvage aimed at forging alliances between the abject or stigmatized identities of the past and those of the present. Kay's interface with Bessie exemplifies precisely this kind of "impossible" cross-historical encounter. One point to be emphasized then is that accessing Bessie from the vantage point of late-twentieth-century Scotland requires not just transgressing national boundaries but identifying and reclaiming Bessie as a queer progenitor; the "imaginary black family" Kay describes is also at some level an "imaginary queer family." The haptic metaphor shaping Kay's treatment of this process recalls Dinshaw's account of the queer historian's ambition to "touch the past." In a memorable tableau, she pictures her younger self caressing the family's well-worn copy of *Any Woman's Blues*: "I put her down and I picked her up. I stroked her proud, defiant cheeks. I ran my fingers across her angry eyebrows. I soothed her" (9). There is a sexual frisson here, but what is more important for my purposes is the way this private, ritual-

like scene indulges the promise of intimacy and closeness that motivates Kay's turn to the blues in the first place. The desire to bring Bessie nearer, into the present but also into what is here imagined as the inner world of a child who fondles and "soothes" Bessie's image as one would a doll—reveals something of the figural complexity of the intimacy that obtains between Kay and her subject. Bessie is proud and strong but simultaneously fragile and vulnerable enough to require the quasi-maternal ministrations being acted out by the young Kay. The passage is notable for training the reader's focus not on Bessie but on the ambiguous spectatorial or hermeneutic position of her late-twentieth-century claimant. As we will see, the animating figure in Kay's blues-focused writings, including her novel *Trumpet*, is often not the blueswoman herself, but the twentieth-century female writer (either Kay's autobiographical self or her many meta-narrative surrogates) charged with the custodianship of her memory.

What does it mean to reach out and claim Bessie from late-twentieth Scotland? Given her many afterlives, *which* Bessie is being claimed? Put differently, what is the received understanding of Bessie Smith—as signifier, as representation—that makes the desire for intimacy and the devotion she inspires in these episodes seem so powerful and self-explanatory? My initial drafts for this chapter envisioned Kay's blues writings as a queer corrective to the vexed, failed, and contradiction-ridden affiliative gestures animating other British ethnic fictions. The fidelity to sentimental female complaint scripts, the improvisatory fudging of history, the obeisance paid to neoliberal narratives of entrepreneurial womanhood—all these would be refused by Kay's queer cosmopolitan engagement with Bessie. But the more one probes Kay's treatment of the blues the more it begins to rehearse, rather than refute, the problematic models of identity on offer in Emecheta, Smith, and Ali. In their joyous, fraught, sometimes exasperating treatment of African American cultural forms, Kay's blues-focused writings imagine community and kinship across national boundaries and in doing so self-consciously disrupt insular and exclusionary nativist ideologies in Thatcher-era Britain.¹⁵ Moreover, Kay's rendering of diaspora through a queer lens often, if not always, disrupts and envisions alternatives to the normative, state-sanctioned sex/gender systems too often re-centered by the therapeutic communities of feeling we have been tracking. Nonetheless, part of what I want

¹⁵ Samantha Pinto offers a useful reading of Bessie Smith along these lines. "Kay's work," she argues, "challenges us to perform feminist revisions of diaspora and its critical futures through her geographic, historical, gendered, and queered interruptions of the recognizable routes of the black diaspora" (20). Here reading emphasize the 'circulation' of black cultural commodities, while also redirecting attention to women's performance (which she terms "night work") as an alternative site for diasporic culture beyond the male-centered intellectual tradition ("day work") around which the field is usually oriented. Samantha Pinto, *Difficult Diasporas: The Transnational Feminist Aesthetic of the Black Atlantic* (New York: New York University Press, 2013) 18-43.

to argue is that despite their explicitly queer and transnational reframing, the mechanisms of cross-cultural and cross-historical affiliation at work in Kay's imagination prove every bit as thorny and contradiction-ridden as the modes of imperial and sentimental identification shaping this study's fictional sample so far. From the vantage point of recent debates among Americanist scholars of the New Negro renaissance of the 1920s, Kay's "blues inscriptions" negotiate an enormously complex set of questions about black women's sexuality and possibilities for lesbian community in the roaring twenties, not to mention in late-twentieth-century Scotland. This chapter performs an extended close reading of *Bessie Smith* in order to explore the multiple vectors of this engagement, the better to assess the pitfalls and potentials of Kay's queer cosmopolitan project.

One of the key features of *Bessie Smith* is Kay's romanticizing, even exoticizing representation of the rural American south. Bessie is presented as springing organically from a black folk culture marked by its authenticity, vitality, and unambiguous refusal of an exploitative northern white voyeurism. For a writer otherwise polemically aware of the cultural constructedness of gender and sexuality (in texts like *Trumpet* and "The Adoption Papers"), here the author shows a surprising willingness to take the authenticity-effects of southern vernacular culture at face value. "That's what I liked about the blues," she writes. They were "the opposite of fairytales; these were grimy, real, appalling tragedies... I found the blues so exciting because the characters were real 'characters'" (10-11). Kay repeatedly juxtaposes the gritty realness of the south to the deracinated, soulless, inauthentic culture of the north. "The people in the North were all pretense. The people in the South were real, genuine. It was all in the cooking." (25). Bessie's Tennessee birthplace is presented in ethnographic detail, with an emphasis on the spontaneity, hospitality, and merry-making Kay renders intrinsic to the black rural experience: "people got drunk and ate pigs feet ... it was totally wild" (10). Kay downplays the fictionality or artifice of the blues as an art form and foregrounds instead its reportorial immediacy, its capacity to capture history as it unfolds and provide a living record of black struggle within a racist culture. "Blues songs and real life weren't all that separate," Kay writes. "These songs were not simple entertainment. They told terrible true stories... a kind of history we don't find in the books" (20). The blues are presented as offering an unfiltered lens unto history: "these songs were telling it like it is" (34). Nowhere is this ability to "tell it like it is" more apparent than in the songs of Bessie Smith herself, who is presented as an unflinching truth-teller who pulls no punches in her lyrical treatment of no-good rotten men. The operative adjective used to describe her musical and public persona is "raw." "Bessie Smith's raw unplugged voice," we learn, "dragged you right down to a place you had never been" (13). Kay describes Bessie in terms of her pure and uncontaminated access to a living black vernacular folk culture rooted in southern soil. This last detail is important. Although Bessie is presented as a peripatetic wanderer—a "blues traveler," as Kay puts it—she is also tethered to a stable southern geography. Many of the book's most arresting sequences involve the narrator's

overtly fiction (and italicized) speculations about Bessie's Tennessee birthplace. A recurring tableau sees her "standing on Ninth Street in the 81 Club in Atlanta, Georgia," one of the venues where Bessie began her career as a performer (42). As Samantha Pinto has argued, in this text "Bessie spends very little time in Harlem."¹⁶

The formula taking shape here is what Diana Fuss, in her discussion of African American literary critics Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has termed a "romanticization of the vernacular":

A powerful dream of the vernacular motivates the work of these two Afro-Americanists, perhaps because, for the professionalized literary critic, the vernacular has already become irrevocably lost. What makes the vernacular (the language of "the folk") so powerful a theme in the work of both Gates and Baker is precisely the fact that it operates as a phantasm, a hallucination of lost origins. It is in the quest to recover, reinscribe, and revalorize the black vernacular that essentialism inheres in the work of two otherwise anti-essentialist theorists.¹⁷

Fuss is careful to distinguish between the familiar biological essentialism of racist discourse and the fetishization of the vernacular on display in Gates and Baker. "The key to blackness," she continues, "is not visual but *auditory*; essentialism is displaced from sight to sound" (110). African American folk culture still has a knowable essence, it is just rendered immaterial and disembodied. In *Bessie Smith*, the performer's voice is invested with an authenticity and transparency that account for much of the pleasure the narrator takes in it. "Her voice was so raw and fresh and different from any other singing voice I'd ever heard" (13). In "The Red Graveyard," a poem from Kay's collection *Other Lovers* that also serves as an epigraph to *Bessie Smith*, the speaker remembers Bessie in terms of a vengeful aural presence circulating through the family home. "Her voice claims the rooms. In the best room even, / something has changed the shape of my silence. / Why do I remember her voice and not my own mother's? (7).

But what is most surprising about the celebration of the vernacular in the Kay system is how it actually coexists with a residual rhetoric of racial (biological) essentialism. When Kay speaks of assembling an "imaginary family" to compensate for the lived experience of black British marginality, she imagines the shared blackness of its members in terms of the "bond" of common "bloodlines." "All black people could at some point in their life face racism or racialism (I could never understand the difference) therefore all black people had

¹⁶ Pinto, 20.

¹⁷ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989) 90. I was made aware of this discussion by Daniel Kim's equally illuminating discussion of Ralph Ellison and the contradictions of vernacular discourse. Daniel Kim, 110.

a common bond. It was like sharing blood” (15). One might argue that in grounding blackness in the social experience of racism Kay qualifies and contextualizes what may appear to be a backhanded (that is, anti-racist) appropriation of the biological essentialism she obviously opposes. After all, a principled opposition to biological essentialism is at the very heart of “The Adoption Papers,” which explores how the discourse of interracial adoption in the UK rehearses the problematic language of descent and racial inheritance shaping Thatcherite rhetoric on the family. Even in *Bessie Smith*, Kay treats a white teacher’s racist assumptions about her using the language of blood and lineage: “We were doing the dances Bessie could do so brilliantly, such as the Black Bottom and the Charleston. I remember not being able to get my steps right and my teacher saying, ‘I thought you’d be good at this. I thought you people had it in your blood’” (70). But at the same time, Kay also invests African American blackness—and the blues, understood as its cultural expression *par excellence*—with a cultural wholeness and purity capable of stabilizing or shoring up the disheveled hybridity of her own black Britishness. In her famous poem “So You Think I’m a Mule,” Kay offers a trenchant critique of the liberal multicultural rhetoric of hybridity and what she understands as its dehumanizing imputation of cultural confusion, contamination, or deficiency. “If you dare mutter mulatto, / hover around hybrid, / hobble on half-caste, / and intellectualize on the / “mixed race problem”, / I have to tell you: take your beady eyes off a my skin; / don’t concern yourself with the dialectics of mixtures; / don’t pull that strange blood crap / on me, Great white Mother. / Say I’m no mating of a / she-ass and a stallion, / no half of this and half of that, / to put it plainly, purely, / I’m black.”¹⁸

Kay’s strong preference for “black” over the various epithets signifying hybridity is echoed in the privileging of black American folk culture in *Bessie Smith*. Kay imagines the blues in terms of its racial authenticity, its southern center of gravity, its vernacular pre-history in American hemispheric cultural forms such as Voo Doo, and its aesthetic difference and irreconcilability with the watered-down, commercialized northern cabaret culture with which it is often conflated. *Bessie Smith*, in short, recuperates the blues as an autochthonous, organic black cultural form. From the perspective of black British cultural studies, this reclaiming of a racially authentic expressive culture introduces a wrinkle into the periodizing framework articulated by Stuart Hall’s influential essay “New Ethnicities.” Hall construes the “first moment” of black British culture, in the 1960s and early 1970s, in terms of the hard-won fusing of a politicized multi-racial coalition under the banner of “black.”¹⁹ To this he juxtaposes the “second moment” in the late 1970s and 1980s, when a new generation of (often female and/or queer) artists and cultural producers began to trace the faultlines of black

¹⁸ Jackie Kay, “So You Think I Am a Mule?” *Writing black Britain, 1948-1998: An interdisciplinary anthology*, ed. James Proctor (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) 203.

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, “New Ethnicities.”

communities and upend the implicit masculinism and related realist aesthetic of the earlier moment. Because of her abiding attention to gender and sexuality, and because of her own triply marginal cultural location as a black, lesbian Scot, it is tempting to locate Kay in the “second moment” as drawn up by Hall. But Kay’s attempt to anchor her own identity in an unambivalent black American cultural ground bespeaks a fidelity to the project of earlier, allegedly superseded models of black identity.

One important dimension of Kay’s vernacular sensibility is her amplification of Bessie’s raw, ostentatious, convention-defying sexuality. As I have argued, Bessie’s sexual persona takes center stage in *Bessie Smith*. The singer’s command of multiple partners of both sexes, the frank, sex-positive eroticism of her lyrics, the combative upending of patriarchal assumptions—all these affirm the singer’s credentials as a queer icon and feminist pioneer. But there is of course a substantial risk involved in isolating, even in celebratory terms, the raw sexuality of a woman of color in this manner. Kay’s nearly hagiographic portrait of Bessie as feminist/queer hero places the author on one end of the spectrum of scholarly opinion about the meanings and politics of black women’s sexuality in the New Negro renaissance in early-twentieth-century America. Hazel Carby and Angela Davis have made perhaps the most influential arguments on behalf of the dissident feminist potentiality of women’s blues. Davis, in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, argues that Bessie, Ma Rainey, and Billie Holiday wrested representational control from a previous generation of male blues performers, and “affirmed working-class black women’s sense of themselves as relatively emancipated, if not from marriage itself, then at least from some of its most confining ideological constraints.” (Davis 12). “The representations of love and sexuality in women’s blues,” she argues, “often blatantly contradicted mainstream ideological assumptions regarding women and being in love. They also challenged the notion that women’s ‘place’ was in the domestic sphere” (11). Davis also draws attention to the community-generating work of female blues performance, which she treats in terms of coded forms of women’s mutual advice. This form of community stands opposed to the socially conservative bourgeois black women’s club movement sanctioned by the National Council of Negro Women and other similar organizations. Carby, whose book *Cultures in Babylon* echoes Kay’s literary imagination in its interest in the imaginative traffic between black British and African American cultures, argues similarly that female blues singers articulated dissent against patriarchal norms and asserted “female sexual autonomy” by seizing control over the terms of their own representation.²⁰

²⁰ Hazel Carby, *Cultures of Babylon* (New York: Verso, 1999) 16. Two other important recent studies of the sexual politics of New Negro musical culture bear consideration here, in that both seem to confirm the conclusions of Davis and Carby. In *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret*, Shane Vogel argues that the queer countercultures of the Harlem Renaissance stood opposed to the normative

A dissenting opinion can be found in Ann duCille's 1993 book *The Coupling Convention*. DuCille's argument holds that the critical celebration of female blues singers' capacity for sexual self-fashioning is related to and provides justification for the problematic vernacular essentialism of Gates and Baker. DuCille is particularly interested in re-contextualizing female blues performers within the primitivist, voyeuristic white marketplace for black culture often associated with white patrons like Carl Van Vechten. "Problematizing Carby's observation that these blues women invented themselves as sexual subjects," DuCille argues, "I want to suggest that the many colliding ideologies, colluding imperatives, and conflicting agendas of the era make it difficult to determine definitively who constructed whom in the cultural kaleidoscope of the 1920s and 1930s" (72). In DuCille's view, the sexual personae being claimed by performers like Ma Rainey and Bessie fulfilled the expectations of white northern audiences bearing lurid fantasies about the bodies and putatively unrestrained sexual license of black women. By figuring forth what Kay repeatedly terms "raunchy" sexual proclivities, the female blues performer was in fact very much *not* in control of her own sexual representation; she was responding mechanically to the dictates of an exoticizing, prurient white male gaze. DuCille sees a special irony in viewing Bessie as the "privileged signifier of the genuine, authentic, pure black experience" (72). For Bessie's "particular manifestation of the blues is, arguably, an appropriative art form that blends the material and techniques of traditional African American music with the presentational modes of popular *white* American musical theater, most specifically minstrelsy and vaudeville" (72).

DuCille's intervention somewhat ruffles Kay's implication of the blues' separateness and insulation from the ethnocentric, commodifying connoisseurship of white audiences in New York. It is true that Kay acknowledges the role of an impinging primitivist ideology in the shaping of both the aesthetics and circuits of reception of the blues. In its beginnings, as Kay rightly point out, the minstrel tradition which gave way to the blues was a deeply racist form of entertainment featuring white performers in blackface. Kay calls

sexual ideologies of African American progressivism or uplift at the time. In *Prove It To Me*, Erin Chapman also sees a dissident potential in the African American musical culture of the 1920s, arguing that it buttressed its sexual freedoms against the ideologies of "race motherhood" calling on black women to perform palatable domestic and maternal identities in support of the cause of middle-class black social advancement. See Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009); Erin D. Chapman, *Prove It On Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular culture in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Eric Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," *Hidden From History: Reclaiming the Gay & Lesbian Past*, ed. Martin Duberman, Martha Vicinus and George Chauncey, Jr. (New York: Meridian, 1989) 318-331.

attention to the special humiliation awaiting black performers who, once they were deemed worthy of themselves performing as minstrels, were obliged to blacken their own faces with paint. “Black on black,” Kay writes. “As if it wasn’t possible to be a genuine black face in entertainment; you had to wear some kind of mask” (28).²¹ The commercialization of the blues also receives scrutiny in Kay’s discussion, although again in a way that preserves the integrity of the 1920s female tradition she privileges. “The picture has come back recently in stereotyped romanticization of the old bluesmen. Now they are being used to sell beer in television and cinema ads, sitting on that sepia porch with the bad-fitting brown suits” (63-64). It is this older, rural, male tradition that provides fodder for advertisements, not the stylized, theatrical female-centered form exemplified by Bessie. In fact, Kay argues, “the image of the blueswomen is the *exact opposite of the bluesmen*. There they are in all their splendor and finery, their feathers and ostrich plumes and pearls, theatrical smiles, theatrical shawls, dressed up to the nines and singing about the jailhouse” (64 my emphasis). This remarkable formulation shields the stylized women’s blues of the 1920s from the ideological encroachments of an implicitly white consumer culture, even when, arguably, it was precisely this feminized tradition that captured the imagination (and commercial clientship) of the northern musical marketplace.²²

Kay underscores Bessie’s refusal to negotiate with the commodifying primitivism of the Harlem party circuit of legend, and marshals a well-known anecdote about Bessie and Carl Van Vechten to this effect. Readers encounter the story in one of the book’s overtly fictionalized, italicized sections. Bessie finds herself “*on alien territory*” at the well-appointed home of the author of *Nigger Heaven* and begins to drink heavily. As she prepares to leave, Fania Marinoff, Van Vechten’s wife, exclaims: “*You’re not leaving without kissing me goodbye, and leans forward to kiss her*” (105). Bessie’s refusal of her advances clinches Kay’s sense of her imperviousness to the furtively hostile liberal race consciousness of Marinoff and the “*whole sea of white faces staring at her*” (104). “*She knocks the small woman down, saying ‘Get the fuck away from me!... Polite society shook its small white head, horrified*” (105). My point here is not to question the veracity of the anecdote, but rather to ask how the wedge Kay places between Bessie and the convivial contact zone of Harlem sanctions or authorizes the problematic romance of the vernacular discussed earlier. Whereas Ann duCille locates the blues in the mass cultural production of black women as sexual objects, more recently Shane Vogel has identified the Harlem cabarets of

²¹ There is another reference to minstrelsy and blackface in Bessie Smith that seems more quizzical if not reluctant in its critique. Kay describes how “Ma Rainey would come on with greasepaint powder on her face” (36). But the text registers barely any surprise at this, nor does Kay pause to address how Ma Rainey might have felt about the experience.

²² Erin D. Chapman provides a useful discussion of what she terms the “sex-race marketplace” negotiated by women blues performers. See Chapman, 81-84.

the late 1920s as generative spaces for forms of queer, cross-racial intimacy at odds with the gendered politics of respectability shaping black progressivism at the time.²³ Both accounts, in other words, destabilize the rigid boundary Kay erects between southern sexual freedom and an exploitative northern primitivism. But again and again Kay is clear on this point: Bessie's distinctive style and presence is not a result of white bohemian tastes but a principled rejection of them. "Bessie smith gave many performances in 'whites-only' theatres where she changed neither the style of her music nor its contents. She refused to 'water herself down'" (74). The white audiences Kay figures as an exterior irritant to Bessie's blues are identified by duCille as internal to and constitutive of its very language of representation. By presenting the blues as an authentic expression of black experience and not as the result of patterns of cross-racial imaginative traffic, Kay prematurely resolves the contradictions of the Harlem Renaissance and the cosmopolitanism with which it is associated. To my mind, purging the blues of its actually existing hybridity also results in a lost opportunity in the autobiographical project of *Bessie Smith*, giving Kay few tools with which to address her own racial hybridity much less that of postcolonial Britain.

The pre-history Kay constructs for the blues consolidates the boundary between authentic and inauthentic experiences of race by locating Bessie's origins in organic, vernacular or indigenous cultural forms substantially pre-dating the vogue for cultural difference in the Harlem Renaissance. "The 'classic' blues singers followed in the royal footsteps of the Voodoo Queens and they signaled the emergence of a new type of record. A blues for women" (64). Kay cites Mary Placksin's discussion of Voo Doo culture in order to argue that Bessie is the "direct descendent of the Voo Doo queens of the 1800s" (32). Placksin describes Marie Laveau, Sanite Dede and other Voo Doo queens as "free women of color, glamorous and haughty showwomen, shrewd and clever business women" (33).²⁴ "The Charleston and the Black Bottom dances, too, are anchored in the rebellious ceremonies of African slaves in the American southeast. In another italicized section, Kay cites a lengthy passage from English jazz musician and writer Humphrey Lyttelton to this effect: "It is clear that these latter people, known as Gullahs or Geechies, had a powerful effect on the style of the local piano men... They danced cakewalks and cotillions... the Gullahs would start out would start out early in the evening dancing two-steps, waltzes, schottisches; but as the night wore on and the liquor began to work, they would start improvising their own steps and that was when they wanted us to get-in-the-alley, real lowdown...it was from the improvised steps that the Charleston dance originated" (71). What needs to be gauged here is how this genealogy, unexceptionable as it may be on its own terms, obscures the Charleston's crass commercialization in the 1920s, when the dance became a worldwide craze after being introduced to New York audiences by the Ziegfeld Follies. What Kay presents as the vestigial

²³ Vogel, 1-18.

²⁴ See Sally Placksin, *Jazzwomen 1900 to the Present* (London: Pluto, 1985).

trace of slave revolt might also be construed as a deracinated mass cultural form satisfying the voyeuristic curiosities of “flappers” and other bohemian whites. Such a recognition enables a very different vantage point on Kay’s childhood memory about performing (or not performing to her teacher’s satisfaction) the Black Bottom in school. “I remember being in a school show when I was eight. We were doing the dances Bessie could do so brilliantly, such as the Black Bottom and the Charleston. I remember not being able to get my steps right and my teacher saying, ‘I thought you’d be good at this. I thought you people had it in your blood’” (70). Kay’s critique of the teacher’s racism is searching and powerful. We ought to notice, however, that the shame experienced by the young Kay is partially the result of her *sharing* of the teacher’s assumption that the Black Bottom is part of her cultural heritage, and that she is somehow being unfaithful to this heritage because she is unable to perform the dance. That is, Kay values the opportunity to perform the Black Bottom as a sign of her own racial authenticity, rather than rejecting that call for racial authenticity as a form of race-baiting in its own right.

One of the ironies of *Bessie Smith* is that despite the obvious pleasure Kay takes in Bessie’s animosity toward primitivism and its visible figureheads (Van Vechten, Marinoff), Kay’s own figuration of Bessie is occasionally pursued through a primitivist, ethnographic frame of its own. The vernacular authenticity that Van Vechten sought and found in Bessie and African American expressive cultures in general is in many ways the same vernacular authenticity Kay discovers in her. In her almost hyperbolic rawness, uncouthness, and freedom from the corrupting, stultifying norms of civilization, the Bessie of Kay’s imagination can sometimes appear a noble savage. Kay dwells on Bessie’s sui generis quality, her unschooled innate talent. What Kay values most about the singer is her ostentatious down-to-earthness. “Even when she was rich and famous and dressed in ermine coats,” Kay observes, “she disliked black people who put on airs and graces, who were what she called ‘dicty’ blacks” (25). *Bessie Smith* abounds in passages featuring Bessie in the kitchen, cooking for her entourage while on tour. Many of these passages perversely appear to indulge mammy stereotypes, connecting her musical creativity with her maternal capacity to feed and nurture those around her: “She’d sing her life to herself while cooking and stirring, humming the melody till it sounded as good as the stew tasted” (123). Bessie’s violence, often on display in these pages, also suggests a kind of elemental, intuitive physicality that stands in contrast to the effeteness of Van Vechten’s social circle.²⁵ What makes the violent confrontation between Bessie

²⁵ The other key moment of violence in the text involves the time Bessie “fought off the Ku Klux Klan single-handedly” (106). There is much to say about Kay’s foregrounding of Bessie’s “fearsome temper.” The book clearly champions Bessie’s defiance and combativeness. But all too often these scenes of violence position Bessie as a pre-verbal or inarticulate subject who expresses herself with her fists rather than her words: “When she was wild she hated words. Only the

and Fania Marinoff so satisfying is the way the former thumbs her nose at the condescending “civilizing” gestures of her hosts and their white guests: “Polite society shook its small white head, horrified” at Bessie’s violence. For Kay, there is a dignity and grace to be found even in Bessie’s violence.²⁶ Kay often refers to Bessie as “Queen” or “Empress,” even as she is at pains to emphasize her ordinariness and popular appeal. “She was *the people*,” Kay succinctly claims midway through the book (72). The author secures a royal pedigree for her subject, repeatedly positioning her as the heir to the Voo Doo queens of the 1800s. At the same time, however, Kay is pictured as being authentically of the people. The fantasy sustained by *Bessie Smith*, then, is not just that of royalty sustained and reproduced, it is a fantasy centered on the figure of the commoner-become-royal, a familiar enough narrative of upward mobility in the era of Princess Diana.²⁷ Kay pictures the mature, successful Bessie “lying awake ... dreaming about what to buy her sisters. From poor to rich, like a fairytale” (100). The gritty realism that Kay attributes to the blues can apparently stretch to accommodate the fairytale after all. Bessie is of the people and above them at the same time.

The gender coding of Kay’s thumbnail genealogy of the blues raises further questions about the relationship between Bessie’s performative self and the dominant gender and reproductive ideologies of the time. Kay emphasizes the matrilineal connections between Bessie and her cultural forerunners and mobilizes a maternal trope in her rendering of the female blues community of the 1920s. When Kay anchors Bessie’s blues in the customs of the Voo Doo queens of the 1800s, she positions them as symbolic mothers giving birth to subsequent African American musical forms. The blues’ Voo Doo lineage is introduced within a larger discussion of the tutelary role of Ma Rainey in Bessie’s life, in a manner that transfers the mantle of motherhood from Marie Laveau, Sanite Dede, and Marie Saloppe directly onto Rainey. “Ma Rainey is now known as the ‘Mother of the Blues,’” Kay writes (32). Herself the descendent of a grandmother who was also a stage-performer, Rainey “was the matriarchal head of the original blues family” (33). Kay approvingly cites Christopher Albertson’s (Bessie’s best-known biographer) estimation that “Ma never taught Bessie how to sing. She was more like a mother to her” (37).

action of fists would do.” In these moments, Bessie literally cannot “tell it like it is,” as much as Kay celebrates this aspect of her persona.

²⁶ Kay’s securing of a royal lineage for Bessie resonates with Hayden White’s argument that it is the nobility rather than the savagery of the noble savage that needs to be emphasized. See Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) 131.

²⁷ It is worth recalling that Princess Diana was an aristocrat, the sister of Earl Spencer. This significantly qualifies Tony Blair’s repositioning of Diana as the “people’s princess” upon her death.

The positioning of Ma Rainey as Bessie's surrogate mother forms part of an expansive maternal trope used to address, among other things, Bessie's orphanhood and personal experience of maternal loss. Her experience of orphanhood partially mirrors Kay's adoption narrative as both are developed in terms of parental abandonment. An italicized interlude written from the perspective of Bessie at age nine announces, "*Ma mama done dead. Ma papa done dead*" (22). Kay presents Bessie's orphanhood and longing for family as central to the affective power of her music. To the extent that Bessie holds a nostalgic appeal for northern black audiences, this is in part because her music is itself motivated, as Kay presents it, by an attempt to stage an imaginative return homeward—to repair her own broken family through the agency of her art. As the monologue of the nine-year-old Bessie continues, she expresses a conspicuous reverence for hearth and home, as the young singer vouches to redeem her mother's suffering through her own upward mobility. "*Mama died because she was poor. She didn't get enough. She didn't get enough of anything and she gone and died. I gonna help my family if it's the last thing I do before I die*" (23). Later, as Bessie prepares for a performance, she "even saw her dead mother standing for a single moment behind the bar. After singing the blues, she knocks down one drink, then another, full of the terrible longing for herself, for her family, for Chattanooga" (42). This episode eerily anticipates the ending of the book, where Kay imagines Bessie's life flashing before her eyes after suffering fatal injuries in a car crash. Bessie's first thought is of her mother: "She suddenly remembers, as the car slowly, slowly hits that truck, that her mother herself was dead before she ever sang on stage and that all her life she's made her mother up in places where she didn't really exist. Her mother has come with her all along, in and out of all those tents, in and out of all those studios" (141). The cumulative effect of these passages is to recenter the maternal among the psychological impetuses driving Bessie's music and identity.

Bessie's anguish over the loss of her mother and spiritual displacement from her home profoundly colors the narrative, which often treats the gravitational pull of family in terms of Bessie's occupying of actual or imagined domestic spaces. Granted, much of *Bessie Smith* presents the "blues traveler" as an itinerant or peripatetic figure who loved the "exhilarating freedom of being on the road... Travel was in her bones and in her blues" (31). Yet, as I hinted earlier, Kay just as frequently positions Bessie in the home and kitchen. In a chapter entitled "Ruby on the Road," which introduces the pivotal character of Ruby Walker (about whom more soon), we learn how Bessie recreated a home-on-the-road in the form of a private Pullman train chauffeuring her and her crew from performance to performance. "In the Pullman, there was privacy, autonomy and plenty of space. You could have your own food, often cooked by the Empress herself. Bessie Smith made stews for her entire troupe, pigs feet or southern specialties" (82). The Pullman functions literally as a mobile home, fulfilling the alimentary cravings of a homesick crew but also solving the basic problem of accommodation for black travelers on the road in a hostile racist culture.

“Traveling life on the train was easier than before. For one thing, they didn’t have to confront racism on the road so often” (82). What is most important for my purposes, however, is how in Kay’s view Bessie’s music performs the same “homing” function as her cooking; both strive to recreate the prelapsarian world of life before the Great Migration northward. Both have a backwards orientation that parallels Kay’s backward “longing” for Bessie herself. “Stylistically, this orientation emerges in a memorable singing style which audibly draws out each syllable almost to the point of atemporality:

It’s all in the length of her pause. It’s the way she hangs on to those notes when they are gone. Like she’s hanging on to the little girl she was, or the very back of herself, or her grandmother’s long, large hand. She is full of longing, full of trouble, restless, wandering up and down the long arms of the clock. When she sings on stage, part of her is travelling, reaching back into every hurt that’s every happened. Her voice is a poplar tree singing. Swaying in the Southern Breeze. (43)

As drawn up here, the blues is a fundamentally nostalgic cultural form channeling the cultural memory of slavery and the traditions of resistance against it. But Kay’s fusing of this narrative of recovery with one of familial reconstruction tends to sentimentalize and domesticate Bessie’s otherwise unassimilable “raw” sexuality. If Bessie is a figure who can punch Fania Marinoff or single-handedly defuse a Ku Klux Klan attack, she is also a daughter who loved her mother. “She is desperate for love,” Kay writes. “Possibly, her mother dying when she was so young intensified this quest for love” (121). And if Bessie is positioned as a loving daughter in this episode, elsewhere she emerges as a grieving mother in her own right. In a chapter of the book devoted to Bessie’s tempestuous marriage to her abusive husband Jack Gee, Kay describes how Gee kidnapped the couple’s son, Jack Junior. Bessie experiences maternal loss from the perspective of both the mother and the child.

In her book *Prove It On Me*, Erin Chapman provides useful tools for situating *Bessie Smith’s* persistent maternal/domestic frame historically. Chapman examines New Negro progressivism in the early twentieth century in terms of what she terms “race motherhood,” an ideology placing the burden of racial advancement upon black women in their capacity as mothers. In the wake of the Great Migration, middle class, black leaders such as Alain Locke and Hubert Harrison took to New Negro publications to counter racist stereotypes with a program for racial advancement stressing African Americans’ moral fitness for civic inclusion. One of the ways they achieved this, according to Chapman, was by “binding black women’s identities to motherhood” (Chapman 57). “Whether they were mothers rearing their own children or childless women supporting themselves, black women were expected to devote the whole range of their energies and talents to the betterment of the race’s opportunities through the successful reproduction and training of the next generation. They were,

essentially, to mother the race” (Chapman 57). The premium of black motherhood in New Negro progressivism throws into relief the dissident, non-maternal, non-reproductive, queer femininities that many see as central to the female blues culture of the 1920s. The vernacular tradition of criticism taken to task by DuCille tends to locate the transgressive potential of blueswomen in their claiming of sexual license and refusal of the yoke of motherhood and domesticity. DuCille paraphrases Sandra Lieb’s argument that “such feminized subjects as motherhood, reproduction, children, and family relations are missing thematically from the repertoires of blues artists like Ma Rainey” (DuCille 71). For DuCille, vernacular criticism celebrating the authentic, “raunchy” sexual personas of Rainey and Bessie tends to bracket these concerns, allowing them to hastily dismiss literary figures who do give play to these concerns in their work—figures like Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen. But Kay’s rendering of Bessie seems to have it both ways; that is, she presents Bessie as simultaneously flouting and confirming the sentimental culture of motherhood championed by New Negro progressives. Kay’s rendering of female blues culture in matrilineal terms, and her emphasis on Bessie’s experience of maternal deprivation recenter the structure of the family and perforce show some fidelity to the “race motherhood” theorized by Chapman. In its valuation of family, motherhood, and domestic ritual (and we should remember that Kay’s interest in jazz and the blues is always tied to her loving relationship to her own parents), Kay’s work can seem more like the work of Fauset and Larsen as presented by DuCille than the raunchy, transgressive, queer blues tradition it outwardly wants to be. These elements of Bessie Smith are all in keeping with the attempt to claim an “imaginary family” with which we began.

CODA

The arguments advanced in this dissertation cohere in the premise that literary artists concerned with the making of multi-racial Britain have since the 1970s betrayed an eccentric interest in the affective coordinates of British cultural citizenship. From Emecheta's story of migrant settlement through Ali's neoliberal paeon to English femininity, the achievement of civic inclusion emerges in the present literary sample as a kind of sentimental education aimed, in subtle but unambiguous ways, at the domestication and incorporation of the migrant subject into an administered set of civic rights and responsibilities. It is in the nature of their representation of this process that many of the most telling stylistic and ideological differences between these writers begin to emerge.

I have tried to establish something of the historical and theoretical purchase of affective citizenship, even as I have privileged the figurations available in creative literary texts as the primary materials of my analysis. But it is worth dwelling, in closing, on the disciplinary specificity of my approach and the textual factors that warrant it. I have spoken of the feminized "therapeutic subject" called into being by Emecheta and Ali—that is, the migrant subject capable of containing or sublimating unpalatable emotions in the service of inscribing herself into British national culture. Why is literary studies, of all the available critical approaches, well suited to understanding such a process? The answer is that the exemplary therapeutic subject is so often figured as a *writer*. The governing ethic of *Second Class Citizen*, *Brick Lane*, and *White Teeth* is a form of sympathy or lyrical impressionability that has historically been associated with the production and consumption of novels. When we read Emecheta's novel, the book we are reading is itself the product of the romanticized experience and internalized reading habits of Adah—it is a symptom of the sentimental culture in which she immerses herself. If the maternity ward is a site for the production of such sympathy, it is also a laboratory for Adah's emerging literary sensibility. Emecheta's seeming faith in the ethics-building enterprise of sympathy is simultaneously a celebration of the cultural wherewithal and civilizational pedigree of the writer. But as I argue in my first chapter, this traps Emecheta in a set of contradictions; Adah's faith in the literary only further embroils her in a colonial set of assumptions at precisely the moment the novel wants to deliver her from her African past.

What Daniel Kim has termed, in the American context, the "literary politics of identity," thus becomes a load-bearing if seldom explored problem in British ethnic fiction, and one that is crucially related to the affective calisthenics we have been discussing (Kim 11-13). In the context of my own argument, what we see taking shape in the novels under scrutiny here is a certain fidelity to the agency of western literature as a proving ground for the emotional repertoire of

the fit British citizen.¹ In her recent book *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism*, Jodi Melamed explores the political costs of such a fidelity, especially for writers hailing from the far side of the new civilizational divides created by Islamophobic discourse. In a reading of Azar Nafisi's *Reading 'Lolita' in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, Melamed argues that Nafisi "propagate[s] neoliberal notions of global humanity by portraying literary sensibility (appreciation for the Great Books, multiculturally enhanced) to be a legitimate criteria for separating good Muslims (potential members of a global multicultural public) from bad Muslims.² Literature is in these terms essential to the reinvented civilizing mission of neoliberal economics.

We can see this mission informing even the nimble and self-aware model of authorship on display in *White Teeth* and *Brick Lane*. For Smith, the considered novelist is one capable of exploring the fitful, unpredictable, "muddled" perspective of a Samad Iqbal, with his willful heart and lapses of rational judgment. This is a preference that Smith has spelled out in non-fiction pieces on the craft of the novelist, who must be open to failure in the same manner as the heedless characters peopling her own works.³ A more pronounced model of neoliberal literary connoisseurship emerges in *Brick Lane*, even if the middlebrow literary genre Ali places on her pedestal—principally, the fairy tale—founders under the weight of the emancipatory potentials she invests in it. As announced early in the novel, Nazneen's fantasy of empowerment is fueled by indulgent tales of princesses awaiting their romantic fortunes. And the becoming real of this fantasy in the novel's final pages is connected, significantly, to Nazneen's therapeutic working through of her mother's death. The aesthetic, affective, and ethical forms of self-making fused together here provide a satisfying cocktail for the reader entrusted with appreciating them, but they

¹ A compelling recent study of the positive valuation of literariness among West Indian writers can be found in Peter Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). Kalliney's interest lies in the appeal to writers like Wilson Harris, V.S. Naipaul, Chinua Achebe, and others of the modernist belief in "aesthetic autonomy"—the idea that literature is exempt or stands outside worldly considerations of politics, economics, or racial injustice (Kalliney 6). Two now canonical works in postcolonial literary criticism that might also extend this line of questioning are Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994) and Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).

² Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) 162.

³ Zadie Smith, "Fail Better," *The Guardian*, 13 January 2007. For more on the way E.M. Forster influences this line of thinking, see Smith, "Love Actually," *The Sunday Times*, 4 September 2005.

ultimately beg the question of our own involvement and intimacy with the affective criteria affirmed by the books we read.

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