


Transnational Uses of Mafia Imagery in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

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Volume 20 Issue 4 (December 2017) Article 6**Andrea Ciribuco,****"Transnational Uses of Mafia Imagery in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol20/iss4/6>>Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 20.4 (2017)**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol20/iss4/>>

Abstract: In his article "Transnational Uses of Mafia Imagery in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*" Andrea Ciribuco discusses the literary representation of multiculturalism in Zadie Smith's first novel, *White Teeth* (2000). The novel focuses on multicultural encounters in Great Britain in the second half of the twentieth century. This article focuses on one site for these encounters: the character of Millat Iqbal, who joins a gang of teenagers and subsequently a radical Islamic group in his problematic search for identity and belonging. This search is characterized by Millat's tendency to define himself by reference to well-known pop-cultural Mafia figures, whom he admires. This article argues that, in their attention to Mafia narratives in film and television rather than to actual Italian diaspora, these Mafia references are representative of Smith's portrayal of multicultural space. In establishing this postmodern, ironic connection between Millat and the Mafia, *White Teeth* demonstrates how the de-contextualization and re-contextualization of meaning, made possible by global exchanges and communication, may proceed in unpredictable ways to make sense of different intercultural encounters in a globalized world.

Andrea CIRIBUCO

Transnational Uses of Mafia Imagery in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*

The novel *White Teeth*, Zadie Smith's 2000 literary debut, covers half a century of history of multiculturalism in Great Britain. The novel starts with Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal, an Englishman and a Bengali, becoming friends during World War II. It then focuses on their families, as Archie marries Clara, a Jamaican woman, and Samad immigrates to London with his much younger bride Alsana. Their children, Irie Jones and the twins Magid and Millat Iqbal, grow up in multicultural London, and experience to various degrees the reality of a multicultural society as a site of conflict as well as creative encounter. Zadie Smith engages with the reality of multicultural exchange, presenting a variety of first- and second- generation migrants, and of strategies that they come up with to deal with displacement and misunderstanding. The novel has been praised for its understanding of cultural hybridity as an increasingly familiar condition in the late-twentieth-century metropolis, and its exploration of the paradoxes this condition involves (Moss, "Everyday Hybridity" 13). The novel's narrator often employs irony and even comedy, coupled with reflections on multiculturalism: the result is a light-hearted narration depicting "the fault lines and limitations of the multicultural ideal" in a reality where "difference does matter and sameness is sometimes violently pursued" (Tancke, "*White Teeth* Reconsidered" 33). In this regard, the evolution of Millat Iqbal is particularly relevant. As the novel progresses, Millat joins a gang of teenagers and then a radical Islamic group in his search for a way to react against the mainstream. But, surprisingly, this development is characterized primarily by reference to fictional depictions of Italian American Mafia in movies such as those by Coppola, Scorsese and De Palma. While it may seem paradoxical at first, the connection between Mafia movies and Millat's violent reaction to the mainstream draws its logic from iterations of Mafia narratives in popular culture in the postmodern world. It may also have roots at a thematic level in the deeper reasons why Mafia movies continue to exert their fascination on different publics, regardless of relevance to the actual context. Ultimately, these references provide an insight to the possibilities inherent in different artistic depictions of multiculturalism and migration, and their ability to reference each other to construct and add to existent meaning.

Cultural hybridity in *White Teeth* is never 'simply' two cultural spaces combining into a "third space," as in Bhabha's fortunate definition (Rutherford, "Interview" 211). This is evident from the range of cultural codes and repositories that are on display in the novel, bringing Asia, Europe and the Caribbean together on a stage where no meaning is taken for granted and every sign may be interpreted differently in its coming into contact with members of other communities. Smith stages the construction of cultural meaning, not as the furthering of an ethnic given, but as a place of negotiation, a tentative process where paradoxes and contradiction pave the way for either surprising agreement or dramatic misunderstanding. Furthermore, *White Teeth* is set in a media-dominated world where popular culture makes cultural elements from distant communities readily available as additional referents. In this view, the novel seems to conform to some of Bhabha's intuitions; not in the sense of "the euphoric claim that the 'third space' between cultures is a wonderful hothouse for unlimited productivity and inventive energy" (Bachmann-Medick, "1+1=3?" 38), but rather in its emphasis on the "third space" as a place where meaning is arbitrarily constructed: "It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable..." (Bhabha, *Location* 37). In *White Teeth*, characters attempt to escape biological and cultural determinism and to construct their own meaning, but are often drawn back to the seemingly fixed image that society has created for them. The transgressive character of hybridity may "break up cultural formations and trigger off transformation processes which question existing orders and which leave open different ways of contextualization" (Wolf, "Cultural Translation" 77). The paradoxical character of hybridity exposes the fragility of seemingly stable cultural ecosystems, investing geographic and symbolic borders with the power to create meaning, while translation—of words, practices, symbols—becomes a daily operation (Wolf, "Cultural Translation" 78). *White Teeth* shows many examples of such processes, which are explored in all their paradoxical, threatening and liberating qualities through different characters of the novel. One of the most evident and surprisingly fertile examples of Smith's cultural translations is the one linking Millat Iqbal to Mafia imagery. In the course of his process of reaction, re-appropriation and violent re-definition of his ethnic identity, Millat fashions his attacks on British mainstream culture after movies like *The Godfather* and *GoodFellas*, which appear as a thematic undercurrent in the novel. References to this kind of imagery may not occupy a

big portion of the novel, but Smith always places them in defining moments, in turning points that define Millat's character. In order to make sense of his rebellion, the author makes use of a powerful imagery—a set of symbols from a very different context and with a complex history—that enters a 2000 British novel about multicultural London only after a few passages across time, languages and cultural spaces.

The cultural history of Italian communities in America have unfolded, since the waves of emigration in the late nineteenth century, as a complex interplay of desire, nostalgia, and aspirations within a wide range of personal and community narratives. This history is intertwined with socio-cultural developments in a recently unified (and highly unequal in its North-South divide) Italy, and the immigration debate in the United States at the time. It involves many factors: the massive and mutating presence of Italian cultural signifiers in the communities, the drive towards cultural assimilation (with its threats and opportunities), the uncertainties about the language, the presence of organized crime and responses to stereotyping and discriminations. In this complex and multi-faceted history, Mafia narratives as popularized by cinema and television have since the late twentieth century grown to overshadow many other aspects of Italian America in the realm of artistic representation. The growing familiarity and mythic status of these narratives have corresponded with a progressive detachment from their actual socio-cultural reality. Going beyond the boundaries of the community, they have become the "myth of the mob... both the glory and the curse of Italian American writing" (Viscusi, *Buried Caesars* x).

While Hollywood had started turning Italian mobsters into evil, fascinating villains since the early days of cinema (Casillo, "Representation" 507), after the 1969 publication of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (and Francis Ford Coppola's 1972 film adaptation) the debate on Mafia narratives acquired a new problematic dimension inside and outside the community. Puzo and Coppola's works "created an identity crisis for Italian Americans throughout the nation. Antidefamation groups denounced Puzo for creating a bad image of Italians in America; young Italian American boys formed 'Godfather' clubs; and real Mafiosi claimed that Puzo knew what he was writing about" (Gardaphé, *Italian Signs* 89). The rest of the world also took notice of the powerful narrative, fascinating audiences and generating several different readings. Coppola's films, together with other cinematic representations of the mob by directors such as Scorsese and De Palma, continued in the following decades to acquire an international audience, testifying to the ambiguous fascination of the "myth of the mob" and to its increasingly weaker links with the socio-cultural contexts that generated it. Such pervasiveness has been made possible by mass media, and has generated countless references, pastiches, re-readings and parodies in several forms and at various latitudes. The references that Smith makes are one example among many, and yet the connection between Millat Iqbal and the Mafia movies that he compulsively watches are indicative of certain themes that are common to this kind of narrative (discourses of patriarchy, Old World vs. New World, assimilation and reaction to assimilation). In the evolution of Millat's character, the themes explored by Coppola and other directors receive a new and paradoxical iteration. Smith's use of and references to Mafia narratives highlight their pervasiveness as symbols in the postmodern world and explore their themes in the context of pop culture and contemporary fiction.

Millat's father Samad desperately tries through the course of the novel to balance his Bengali and British selves—he is a proud Muslim and a man of science at the same time, a British soldier who claims to be a descendant of the Indian revolutionary Mangal Pande. In 1973 he arrives in England, "a middle-aged man seeking a new life with his twenty-year-old new bride," looking up his old war comrade Archie Jones, "because he was the only man Samad knew on this little island" (Smith, *White Teeth* 12). Proud and well-educated, Samad struggles in his role as a waiter in an Indian restaurant owned by his cousin. He is a product of colonial exploitation in his adherence to English-imposed cultural framework—his English significantly appears to be of a more standard variety than most British characters in the novel. At the same time, he holds on to traditional religious and patriarchal values, to which his wife Alsana often offers common-sense counterpoints. He is on many levels tied to a colonial past that makes him unable to react and find his place in late twentieth-century Great Britain. His twin sons, Magid and Millat, bring Samad's contradictions to the extreme in their multiform adherence and rebellion to their father's tenets and to the social, historical, and cultural processes that brought him to London. Reflecting on patterns of masculinity and ethnic determinism in *White Teeth* (and the Iqbal males in particular), Gustar remarks: "The need to distinguish themselves due to their sense of impotence is already doomed to repeat their impotence. Caught, as they are, by a sense of emasculation in the context of psychic colonisation, they are prepared, all three, to repeat the sins of the father, to re-enact the same kind of violence, if that is what it takes to be seen as a man" ("Tempest" 336). The Iqbals share with many other characters in the novel a will to escape the dis-

placement imposed upon their lives by colonialism and migration, only to find out that while cultural meaning may be adapted and rewritten in the third space, the negotiation that follows is difficult.

In this process, there is a polar opposition between the opposing strategies the twins come up with to face the difficulties of cultural negotiation. Magid chooses extreme assimilation to British habits and manners, going as far as desiring a British name. He asks his classmates at school to call him Mark Smith, and a bewildered Samad reacts: "I GIVE YOU A GLORIOUS NAME LIKE MAGID MAHFOOZ MURSHED MUBTASIM IQBAL!... AND YOU WANT TO BE CALLED MARK SMITH!" (Smith 151) For this and other small acts of rebellion, Samad sends Magid back to Bangladesh to learn about his ancestral land and the religion that his father would have him follow as ardently as himself. Disappointingly for Samad, Magid comes back a brilliant young scientist, who will participate in a project of genetic engineering that precipitates the events of the final part of *White Teeth*.

Millat's rebellion against his background and upbringing is somewhat different, following a confused pattern that transforms him from a street thug to a member of a group of young Muslim fundamentalists. The whole process originates in his awareness of the stereotypes projected onto him in England:

He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelled of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; or gave all the jobs to his relatives; that he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or a filmmaker; that he should go back to his own country; or stay here and earn his bloody keep; that he worshiped elephants and wore turbans; that no one who looked like Millat, or spoke like Millat, or felt like Millat, was ever on the news unless they had recently been murdered. (232)

Stereotyping is related to failure to engage with the complexity of social reality, as well as codifying power and exclusion in society. It is a process intent on warding off everything that may be perceived as alien and deviant to the norm, by positing the existence of an Other, onto whom meaning is projected: "fantasies of desire, longing, envy and seduction," often with a view to "compensating for some perceived deficiency of cultural identity or estrangement from inherited cultural values" (Pickering, *Stereotyping* 51). Millat perceives such fantasies as attempting to simplify his existence by using labels, easy associations (curry, turbans, elephants) and a crystallization of the social order ("he could be a dentist or a shop-owner or a curry-shifter, but not a footballer or a filmmaker"). Even in liberal Britain, in cosmopolitan London, this process turns him into an Other who, for the sake of cultural stability, needs to fit into a linguistic category so that he may fit into a social category: "stable cultures require things to stay in their appointed place. Symbolic boundaries keep the categories, giving cultures their unique meaning and identity. What unsettles is 'matter out of place'" (Hall, "Spectacle" 236). Millat will precisely become "matter out of place," from the point of view of British society and his parents alike. At the end of this very passage, he participates with a group of friends in the burning of Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* that took place in Bradford, Yorkshire, on January 14 1989, following claims on the novel's blasphemy.

It is interesting to note that the narrator does not link Millat's participation in the protest to his faith, but to his acknowledgment that "suddenly people like Millat were on every channel and every radio and every newspaper and they were angry," so that he "recognized the anger, thought it recognized him, and grabbed it with both hands" (Smith 232). The matter of recognition is indeed very important: mutual recognition prompts Millat to join the rage of people who "looked like him," and therefore take part in a protest against a book that he admittedly has not read. The issue is representation, the desperate need for a voice, an image and a purpose that would counter the image projected on British Asians by racist stereotypes. In this phase, Millat is not particularly religious; rather, he is the member of a youth gang who are very conscious about their ethnic appearance as performance. Smith identifies Millat's group as belonging to a street culture named Raggastani, speaking "a strange mix of Jamaican patois, Bengali, Gujarati, and English" and wearing flamboyant Nike outfits reminiscent of hip-hop influences (231). Their performance reworks influences from disparate sources, including their Asian backgrounds and Western media: "Allah featured, but more as a collective big brother than a supreme being, a hard-as-fuck geezer who would fight in their corner if necessary; kung fu and the works of Bruce Lee were also central to the philosophy; added to this was a smattering of Black Power (as embodied by the album *Fear of a Black Planet*, Public Enemy); but mainly their mission was to put the Invincible back in Indian, the Badaaass back in Bengali, the P-Funk back in Pakistani" (232). Watts has identified in Millat's speech from this section several influences from Jamaican patois and African American culture. He "performs a racial and linguistic identity that is not his own in order to assert a sense of dominance and to overcome the restrictions imposed upon him by his own Benga-

li-English identity" and appears "very much aware of his own levels of performativity" (Watts, "Divided People" 856). Millat's linguistic and cultural performance has the objective of avoiding the process that would put him into an appointed place in British society, and it is heavily dependent on a whole array of media—music, TV, cinema—which are made available to him in the 1980s. The author underlines that, to Millat, mass media representations are more real than his own upbringing, by juxtaposing Allah and Bruce Lee. Media representations are then re-used to create a new group identity that would ideally counter the stereotypes imposed by the mainstream and give a "face" to "people like Millat" by using elements that are available in pop culture.

The myth of the mafia is one of the sets of imageries available to Millat through mass media, in the forms of both home video and hip-hop music. Hip-Hop, which Millat includes among his influences, has a long history of employing Mafia imagery as popularised by American cinema (Forman, "Represent" 72). Gangster figures are often used in hip-hop to represent masculinity; the imagery may be "drawn from the real-life gang battles over economic control of drug markets in communities from Los Angeles to Seattle," while "a more polished role-playing of gangsterism is found in hip hop appropriations of mob styles seen in Hollywood movies such as the *Godfather* trilogy" (Perry, *Prophets* 131). Smith's use of ethnic imagery and cultural signifiers is a second- or third-hand one, and yet it underlines one of the most important themes in gangster epics: definitions of manhood and fatherhood. The narrator links Millat's fascination for the Mafia with his search for a definition of masculinity: "Millat really learned about fathers. Godfathers, blood-brothers, pacinodeniros, men in black who looked good, who talked fast, who never waited a (mutherfuckin') table, who had two, fully functioning, gun-toting hands. He learned that you don't need to live under flood, under cyclone, to get a little danger, to be a wise man. You go looking for it. Aged twelve, Millat went out looking for it, and though Willesden Green is no Bronx, no South Central, he found a little, he found enough" (Smith 218). Millat ends up creating his own father figure from a ready-made model of immigrant opposition and masculinity, after Samad's perceived failure to meet his standards of fatherhood. Samad, a frustrated and overeducated waiter in an Indian restaurant, is explicitly compared with the characters played by Al Pacino and Robert De Niro. Their "two, fully functioning, gun-toting hands" are compared to Samad's hands: in fact, his right hand is a paralyzed "broken thing, gray-skinned and unmoving" (12), while with the left, he serves the British customers of the restaurant. Mafia movies depict an eminently male-dominated society where power is exerted through honour killing. The Mafia appears to the Western public as a group where "masculinity can be explored, expressed and asserted because it can be positioned as both 'like us' and 'not like us'" (Larke-Walsh, *Screening* 161). It offers safe distance from the contemporary viewer, while at the same time "playing out the contemporary contradictions or difficulties of a society... where masculinity has lost its sense of certainty in its own rightness and immutability" (Larke-Walsh, *Screening* 161). This element appeals to Millat—who instinctively emphasizes the "father" in "Godfather" as a model of assertive, violent masculinity that he could not find in the emasculated Samad. As the narrator puts it towards the end of the novel: "All his life [Millat] wanted a Godfather, and all he got was Samad" (Smith 506).

The Godfather myth comes with its own idea of fatherhood. One of the most successful critical readings of both novel and film sees them as the story of a family's triumph against a hostile world, creating a fiction of the mob as father-son relationship. In the text, "Don Vito Corleone and his sons show us a wide range of the forms that father-son relationships can assume" (Viscusi, *Buried Caesars* 49). The father is a stable centre of power, and the son is highly responsive to the call of blood, standing together with his father against common enemies, until the time comes to replace the father, without Oedipal conflict, but continuing his struggle. Exposed to this highly pervasive myth, Millat fashions himself as a successor to it, translating the myth from its iconic locations (he mentions South Central, the Bronx) to his London neighborhood Willesden Green.

Later in the novel, Millat is approached by a fundamentalist organization based in his neighborhood, the "Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation." Characters usually refer to the group as KEVIN, acknowledging that they have an "acronym problem"—indeed, Smith presents them as more awkward than evil in her deconstruction of ethnic and religious tensions. The KEVIN member approaching Millat is Hifan, an old friend of his from his Raggastani days who has dropped the flamboyant Nike outfits in favor of a much more sober black suit. Interestingly, Millat is drawn to pay attention to Hifan because of his outfit, but not because of the sobriety that it originally intended to convey: "Hifan is the don. Look at the suit . . . gangster stylee!" Millat ran a finger down Hifan's lapel, and Hifan, against his better instinct, beamed with pleasure. 'Seriously, Hifan, man, you look wicked. Crisp'" (Smith 294–95). Millat identifies the suit as one of the markers of gangster identification in the cinematic world (Larke-Walsh, *Screening* 70), and therefore gives credit to Hifan as "the don," eventually joining his organisation. Hifan's appearance helps Millat make his decision, although the main

reason appears to be group identity: "So: there's a fucking spiritual war going on... About time—we need to make our mark in this bloody country" (Smith 295). Millat's KEVIN membership does not have to do with religion—he does not read the leaflets that other members hand to him—but with ethnic rage, and the need to "make a mark" in Britain. It sums up his uneasiness with racist stereotypes projected onto him and his father, and as a call to action, it seems to redeem Samad's inaction. As a patriarchal fantasy of power and violence, fundamentalism appeals to Millat precisely for the same reasons that Mafia movies appealed to him, and as a result he conflates the two things. He pictures himself as "the first into battle come jihad, cool as fuck in a crisis, a man of action, like Brando, like Pacino, like Liotta" (445). Smith creates for him a synthesis out of contrasting stimuli, in which religion and gangsterism both express a desire for affirming identity in a violent fashion.

Smith refers to the Mafia myth as she understands it to be the triumph of Old World tradition over the New World. In *The Godfather and American Culture* (2002), Messenger lists a series of oppositions, between Old World and American pluralism, which are asserted in *The Godfather*. On one hand, we have a traditionally constrained world, in which good and evil are separate and recognizable: they are, respectively, inside and outside the family. On the other hand, we have a pluralistic world in which the border between good and evil is blurred. In the Old World, Puzo and Coppola present us with a mythic, ritualistic idea of destiny and individual responsibility—which compels everyone to act their own destiny, identified, and burdened by blood ties. "In this vein," Messenger argues, "the liberal pluralist society appears paralyzed by tolerance, forms, and consensus in comparison with the latent fury of Old World fatalism, which suddenly in paroxysms of violence can vanquish its foes like a slumbering beast awakening to feed" (*Godfather* 41). At the beginning of *The Godfather*, a man called Amerigo Bonasera is sitting in front of Don Corleone: as the very first images of the film appear, we hear him say "I believe in America. America's made my fortune, and I raised my daughter in the American fashion" (Coppola, *The Godfather*). As we soon discover, he has come to ask Don Corleone to avenge his daughter, beaten by a group of boys whose sentence was later suspended by a judge. Before granting him the favor, the Don reminds him about the customs of his world, and the reasons why he should trust in his protection rather than the laws of the state ("and if by chance an honest man like yourself should make enemies then they will become my enemies, and then they will fear you"). A version of ancient, pre-immigration morality is enforced in the host country. This affirmation of a mythical Old World that succeeds where America fails is a form of reverse assimilation.

Puzo and Coppola, as Viscusi notes, "addressed the problem of Italian subordination in the United States by constructing a version of the world in which Italian Americans are in charge. Its ideology is Caesarism, even as its reality is criminal marginality" (*Buried Caesars*, 197–98). It is darkly fascinating as it is a violent assimilation, doing away with the discursive quality of multiculturalism and presenting an immigrant environment where monolithic cultures clash with each other and where ancient patriarchal codes of honor are still enforced. One basic element of *The Godfather* is an ancient and visceral attachment to family, but "if the family is to be preserved, assimilation into American culture must be avoided, and this can be done only if the exact opposite happens; that is, if America assimilates into the culture of the Don and his family" (Gardaphé, *Italian Signs* 94). This underlying structure makes the Godfather myth highly translatable and recyclable, so much so that Smith can use it to frame the rebellion of her character. This is the sense of belonging that Millat is looking for. In KEVIN he finds the sense of belonging, order and power that he had seen immigrants have only in movies: that is why he equates being in KEVIN to "being in real-life Mafia" since, he says, "I understand we understand each other" (Smith 371). In that mutual understanding, rigidly coded for what concerns both external appearance and moral behavior, lies what ultimately Millat is looking for. As he reflects on how much of the Islamic lifestyle he wants to embrace, Millat considers breaking up with his girlfriend because he cannot have, with her, the same relationship that he reads about in Muslim propaganda. The sort of comparison that he makes is quite revealing: "But he minded about Karina Cain, because she was his *love*, and his love should be his love and nobody else's. Protected like Liotta's wife in *GoodFellas* or Pacino's sister in *Scarface*. Treated like a princess. Behaving like a princess. In a tower. Covered up" (374). He sees the religious argument for 'covering up' women as compatible with his fascination with Mafia movies within a patriarchal fantasy of 'protection' and control, turning his girlfriend into a "princess" and a mobster's girlfriend at the same time, subjected to the rule and gaze of a single man. Gangsterism and religious fundamentalism, no matter how different from each other in reality, may become two complementary things, once the former is stripped of its original context, turned into a highly-mythicized narrative, and then spread throughout the world for audiences to visualize it in their own ways.

There are obvious contradictions between being a Muslim fundamentalist and an admirer of Mafia movies, nor does everyone in the novel understand how Millat may conflate the two things in his bat-

tle for masculinity and self-representation. His "brothers" explicitly forbid him to watch gangster movies, considering them to be part of the same American pop culture that distracted Muslim youth from following their values. Millat acknowledges, then, as he fails to conform to the appearance and rites of the fundamentalist ethnicity that he claims to be fighting for, that his militancy is due to anger against the surrounding environment rather than an extreme embracing of his heritage: "Worst of all was the anger inside him. Not the righteous anger of a man of God, but the seething, violent anger of a gangster, a juvenile delinquent, determined to prove himself, determined to run the clan, determined to beat the rest. And if the game was God, if the game was a fight against the West ... he was determined to win it" (368). In Millat's mind, the myth of the Mafia is the myth of a lost and violently reconquered identity—and his rebellion is rooted in both the Mafia myth and radical Islam. In an attempt to eliminate his fascination, he changes his viewing habits, tearing up his video rental membership card, and even throws away the family VCR. In the end, he realizes that Mafia imagery surrounds him, and that he is acutely respondent to it: "was it his fault if Channel 4 ran a De Niro season? Could he help it if Tony Bennet's 'Rags to Riches' floated out of a clothes shop and entered his soul?" (368). This is about the pervasiveness of Mafia imagery, as much as the specific power that it can have on Millat in his search for ethnic identity.

Millat progressively becomes aware of the contradictions in his allegiance, as well as the fictional quality of his imaginary. He thinks his "most shameful secret" to be the fact that the opening line of *GoodFellas* forms in his mind whenever he is about to open a door. He claims that the line "As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster" presents to him, taking in front of his eyes even the same font that it had "on the movie poster" (368). Millat's attempt to "fix" this proves to be even more revealing, as "[his] mind was a mess and more often than not he'd end up pushing upon the door, head back, shoulders forward, Liotta style, thinking: *As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a Muslim*. He knew, in a way, this was worse, but he just couldn't help it" (368–9). Millat, under inescapable cinematic influence, tries to reframe his aspiration for Hollywood-like gangsterism in an Islamic fundamentalist context, by having his embracing of Islam follow the same script as Ray Liotta's Henry Hill. It is important, to this purpose, to note that he rarely refers to the characters with their own names, but uses the actors' names (De Niro, Liotta). As Millat's conscience is formed through confused and contrasting notions of Islam, gangsterhood, Bengali and Western identity, Smith plays with the opposition between reality and media. Millat mimics the rites and customs of Italian American ethnicity as construed by Scorsese or Coppola, without actually having an insight into that form of ethnicity ("he kept a white handkerchief in his top pocket, he always carried dice, even though he had no idea what a crap game actually was..."). This explicitly involves the renunciation of other indicators of his ethnicity in favor of Italian American cultural staples: "he could cook a killer seafood linguine, though a lamb curry was completely beyond him. It was all haraam, he knew that" (369). It is the romanticized enactment of an ethnic identity that exerts his fascination over him, rather than the reality of cultural practice, and he is eventually aware of it. The way in which the author foregrounds it is a comment on the performative aspects of identity as well as the availability of different cultural signifiers in the era of mass media. The novel climaxes exactly on Millat's failed attempt to imitate Michael Corleone, to live up to his assemblage of tradition, anger and pop culture. If a father like Don Vito Corleone requires a son who is able to live his heritage up to the final consequences, the author explicitly works on the rift between a cinematic ideal of the gangster and the novel's reality of late twentieth-century.

Millat's group attempts an attack on a press conference, the presentation of a genetically engineered mouse. Magid had a part in the project, and so Millat chooses to be the one who performs the attack. Millat is hiding, with a gun in his hands, and thinking about Al Pacino as Michael Corleone finding himself in the very same situation. Millat had interpreted his life through fiction until that very moment. The gun had seemed to him familiar, even though he was carrying it for the first time, for having seen so many of them on TV: the narrator comments on this occasion that "there aren't any alien objects and events anymore" (526), since cinema and TV created the possibility for everyone to feel familiarity with every object and context. Yet, this perceived vicinity with the myth proves illusory, as the difference between the myth of the *Godfather* and the (novel's) reality of London is re-established. Millat felt his fate to be like cinema: both fate and cinema represent in the narrator's opinion "an unstoppable narrative, written, produced and directed by somebody else" (526). Yet, what differentiates Millat from the gangster is the fact that Millat in his post-modern condition cannot live the experience first-hand, since he has already lived it all through fiction, and fiction only. He "never saw action," the narrator remarks shortly afterwards. His only reference is in film, and it is a Michael Corleone who, no matter how many times the viewer "re-winds, freeze-frames and slow-plays" the action, will always "burst out of the men's room and blast the hell out of the two guys at the check-

ered table." The Corleones' actions have, in both novel and film, the gravitas and inevitability of mythical characters: Mafia is portrayed as "a natural force in the Sicilian world from which Vito Corleone comes, a world he attempts to re-create in his new home in America" (Gardaphé, *Italian Signs* 90). Millat attempts to harness the same kind of force, only to realize that his links to it are purely fictional. He realizes the hard way that Michael Corleone will always live up to his destiny of mythical murderer—"he never does anything else but what he was going to do" (Smith 527). That is, he kills Sollozzo and McCluskey, flees to Sicily and comes back ready to take on the family business. Millat is a more complex character: his author did not intend him to be a myth but the re-elaboration of a myth. He had tried to re-enact his very own version of the war that the Corleones waged on America. Elements from the Mafia myth had shaped him, and fueled him. They proved to be re-usable in his situation—but only to a certain extent. *White Teeth* is not like *The Godfather*: its characters do not live their destiny to attain the status of a myth. They are immersed in a context in which the grand narratives, the blood ties and the rituals of the past have relative value; they are constantly re-read and re-written, as cultures come to coexist in spite of their differences. Every cultural translation is an iteration; but, as every translation, it does not simply repeat the source—it alters, misrepresents it by changing its context and adding to its signification.

The scientists' press conference is where all the characters ultimately meet, on New Year's Eve in the year 1999, marking the arrival of the new millennium with their doubts and regrets, hopes and desires. The novel ends as Millat is about to shoot the scientists, and Archie attempts to stand between him and his target: "Millat is reaching like Pande; and Archie has seen TV and he has seen real life and he knows what such a reach means, so he stands. So he moves" (533). While the TV-like nature of the event permeates the characters' perception of it, it is important to note how Millat is linked to his ancestor, the failed revolutionary Mangal Pande—a reference usually associated with Samad in the novel. Millat wants to write his name on Western history, because he is caught in the colonial cycle that has emasculated and depowered his father (Gustar, "Tempest" 341). The Pande reference seems to hint that the force of heritage may always prove too strong, and that Iqbal-led revolutions are always doomed. Yet, the novel's ending as a whole seems to point to a wider conclusion.

White Teeth ends on that scene as in a freeze-frame, but the narrator imagines life in the future, at a time the narrator (and author) could not know. In that version of the future, Irie Jones is raising the daughter that she had, possibly from Millat, or from Magid—the narrator is intentionally vague on that point. But Smith does not give in to "the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect" (541)—choosing an open ending with a note of hope. As the example of Millat has shown, *White Teeth* engages with the re-contextualization allowed by cultural translation, but it does not posit the Third Space as a place of infinite and felicitous creation. Rather, it takes into account the distortions, refractions and difficult negotiations that the transfer of meaning entails. In creating the character, Smith performs an operation of cultural translation, and the result is indeed a translation: the meaning it carries across is not unharmed in the process, and its rendition is provisional, and open to different and contradictory readings. The Mafia references are evidently and purposely distorted: they are quite removed from the original narratives, and even more from the original context that gave birth to the fictional representations referenced by Smith. They come from popular culture rather than reality, a product of a globalized system of reference translated into the multicultural contemporary environment. Yet, even if these narratives are used for postmodern parody, it is possible that Smith caught a very deep sense of their more unsettling implications, and their evil fascination both for the Italian community in the United States and for global audiences.

By associating the Mafia with the temptation of radicalism through the figure of Millat, Smith comes up with paradoxical representation grouping together a various range of violent responses to immigrant assimilation. As she shows how Millat's rage against the mainstream is fueled by uncertainties about father figures and the reaction to imposed stereotypes, she also provides him with a catalyst that can explain all these factors simply by evoking myths and symbols. Just as the deep reasons for Millat's anger are the same during his Raggastani phase and his KEVIN phase, the Mafia references provide a constant source of imagery of patriarchal stability, violent affirmation and counter-assimilation. Smith also makes very clear that these references are grounded in the fictional world, and have no link with reality—all the more so as Millat finally fails to 'become' Michael Corleone. Yet, the connection is also fertile as, to a contemporary readership, it provides immediate and symbolically powerful access to the mechanics that lead Millat to react violently to the stereotypes projected upon him and attempt to establish and construct a suitable identity. In a novel that problematizes multiculturalism through postmodern irony, the connection between Millat and the Mafia is an example of how the de-contextualization and re-contextualization of meaning proceeds in unpredictable ways as different cultural frameworks are conjured in the text, but at the same time establishes patterns which

create immediate and unexpected comparisons between previously unrelated worlds. In the end, this kind of reference is set aside and exposed in its fictiveness, while the open-ended novel considers the possibilities of a new millennium, and a multicultural world whose challenges include giving up the heavy burdens of colonial history and embrace new forms of meaning-making.

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