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### Hospitality?

For centuries, society and culture has focused on the topic of immigration. What does it mean to be “from” a place? At what point does a guest become a permanent resident? People have been asking these questions for many years. These questions don’t yet seem to have clear answers. Instead, they lead us to more questions about what it means to offer hospitality. In “After the Century of Strangers: Hospitality and Crashing in Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth*,” Ryan Trimm states, “By extend-ing welcome, the host lays claim to the dwelling as home; offering hospitality identifies the host as the one positioned to offer welcome.” (Trimm 17) This statement is proved to be accurate throughout *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith. The novel follows immigrant families as they grapple with cultural integration and learning about identity. Through characters such as the Chalfens, Smith demonstrates that welcoming someone reinforces power dynamics rather than serving as an act of hospitality.

Trimm’s statement suggests that by welcoming someone, the host makes it clear that they have the power to decide who belongs. In order to welcome someone, they need to be in a position of power that is greater than those being welcomed. This is clear through the Chalfen family’s interactions with Millat and Irie. When the Chalfens offer hospitality to the children, they expect the children to adopt their culture. This suggests that the Chalfens have power over Millat and Irie. They only show them conditional hospitality, requiring them to assimilate into

their culture to be fully welcome. For example, it is clear through the description of the Chalfens that they believe their ideals are the right ones. In chapter 12 it states, “They referred to themselves as nouns, verbs, and occasionally adjectives: *It’s the Chalfen way...We need to be a bit more Chalfenist about this.* Joyce challenged anyone to show her a happier family, a more Chalfenist family...”(Smith 261) The Chalfens see themselves as the ideal family. They believe that anyone who doesn’t follow their beliefs is somehow inferior. Using their name as its own part of speech suggests that they believe they are the model people and everyone should aspire to live by their standards. They don’t plan to be truly hospitable towards Millat and Irie. Instead, they plan to push their ideals onto them.

The interactions between Millat and Joyce give abundant insight into Joyce’s view of hospitality. During their first meeting, Joyce immediately says, “‘Are you going to smoke that?’...’In here? Only, we hate the smell. We only like the smell of German tobacco. And if we smoke it we smoke it in Marcus’s room...” (Smith 266) As early as this Joyce is trying to assert dominance by suggesting that the Chalfen’s way of doing things is the right one. Although she welcomes Millat into her home, he must do things the way she wants. Interactions such as this one continue throughout their time together. Joyce makes it blatantly obvious that she wants Millat to change to fit the way she desires. Chapter 14 states, “And meanwhile Joyce was below deck trying to sort out Millat’s problems with white women.” (Smith 306) She views Millat as a problem that needs to be solved. She feels that if she shows him hospitality he should change who he is as a person.

Throughout the interactions between the Chalfens and Millat and Irie, it is clear that hospitality is used to enhance power dynamics rather than to actually show new people a welcoming environment. The Chalfens show that they are in a position of power by welcoming

Millat and Irie with the expectation that they will alter themselves to fit a different narrative: “*the Chalfen way*.” This is a reflection of what many different immigrant families might face when attempting to be accepted into a new culture. This begs the question of whether true hospitality exists or if it always has an underlying element of power.

## Works Cited

Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth: A Novel*. Random House US, 2003.

Trimm, Ryan. "After the Century of Strangers: Hospitality and Crashing in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*." *Contemporary Literature*, 10 Nov. 2017, [www.academia.edu/35112282/After\\_the\\_Century\\_of\\_Strangers\\_Hospitality\\_and\\_Crashing\\_in\\_Zadie\\_Smiths\\_White\\_Teeth](http://www.academia.edu/35112282/After_the_Century_of_Strangers_Hospitality_and_Crashing_in_Zadie_Smiths_White_Teeth).