

## Innate Civility: Whiteness in Camilla Gibb's *Sweetness in the Belly*

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In a short essay recently published in a 2007 issue of *Granta* magazine, Kenyan writer Binyavanga Wainaina offers advice to non-African authors who might be keen on setting their work on this “other” continent. “How to write about Africa”—meant, clearly, as critical commentary on the existing and myriad literary misrepresentations of Africa, its peoples and their cultures—begins with a pointed byline: “some tips: sunsets and starvation are good.” The article goes on to provide suggestions about choosing titles (“[a]lways use the word ‘Africa,’ ‘Darkness’ or ‘Safari’”); selecting cover art (“[n]ever have a picture of a well-adjusted African on the cover of your book”); describing physical geography (“[w]ide empty spaces and game are critical”); and developing characters (“African characters should be colourful, exotic, larger than life—but empty inside, with no dialogue, no conflicts or resolutions in their stories, no depth or quirks”). Most importantly, perhaps, Wainaina insists that, as author and/or narrator, you must “[e]stablish early on ... how much you love Africa, how you fell in love with the place and can’t live without her” (Wainaina).

Little of what troubles Wainaina about non-Africans’ writing about Africa, it would seem, is present in Camilla Gibb’s 2005 novel *Sweetness in the Belly*. Given the novel’s attentiveness to the social, cultural, and political particularities of its narrative’s time and place, not to mention its overarching problematization of the ways in which identities are “read,” *Sweetness in the Belly* might well be praised for avoiding most of the concerns outlined by Wainaina. Gibb’s extensive, first-hand research and scholarly essays on Ethiopia compellingly suggest, moreover, an author with an awareness of, and sensitivity to, precisely the sorts of concerns which Wainaina identifies.<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, *Sweetness in the Belly* traces the coming-of-age of a “white” girl who is born to

nomadic British parents but raised as a Sufi Muslim in Morocco and who spends several years in Ethiopia before being exiled to England. Clearly, the narrative attempts to challenge constructions of Africa as the monolithic “dark continent.” Rather blatantly critiquing the history of British imperialism, the novel also implicitly engages with *enduring* colonial discourses of “race.” Insofar as the protagonist/narrator, despite her “whiteness” and her British-Christian-English-speaking heritage, becomes a devout Muslim, culturally and linguistically connected to Africa, her story thematizes the notion that who and what “we” become has little to do with “racial” determinism and/or family bloodlines.

Yet, I begin with Wainaina’s article for the direct and indirect<sup>2</sup> ways in which it speaks to Gibb’s text, raising questions about why even the most “impeccably liberal”<sup>3</sup> of white characters ultimately, albeit subtly, reinforces the very values which she explicitly eschews. Impossible to ignore are the tensions between, first, the protagonist’s self-conscious critiques of colonial discourses, racially-inflected social hierarchies included, and, second, her implicit failure to sustain a “resistant” stance to discourses of colonialism and imperialism. How do we cope, as readers, with the subtle turns in the novel which undermine the ostensibly “constructed” nature of its protagonist/narrator’s identity? What does it mean that we are left, ultimately, with a “happily-ever-after” conclusion predicated on her return to the place and the culture of her familial, not to mention “racial,” roots? A careful reading of *Sweetness in the Belly* reveals the extent to which this novel’s adherence to generic realism necessarily perpetuates what Daniel Coleman refers to as the “standardizing ideals” (10) of whiteness. Reinforcing the binaries it seeks to dismantle (self/other, colonizer/colonized, white/black), the novel illustrates the deeply-entrenched nature of colonial discourses: for the narrator and main character of *Sweetness in the Belly*, whiteness is and—despite her best efforts—*remains* a category of privilege.

## I.

The most obvious reading of *Sweetness in the Belly* situates Lilly as a narrator/protagonist who contests the assumptions and values that shaped the colonial enterprise and that, in postcolonial societies, too often con-

tinue to circulate as “natural” or “normal,” well beyond moments of independence for former colonies.<sup>4</sup> In the process of telling her story, Lilly shifts between the main milieu of her youth and the place where she resides as an adult. Her narrative, divided into nine parts, swings pendulum-like between London, England (1981 to 1991) and Harar, Ethiopia (1970 to 1974). From the outset, when Lilly announces that she is a “white Muslim woman raised in Africa,” existing “somewhere between the past and the future, which is not quite the present” (9), the novel unfolds as an explanation of how and why she now dwells in this “in between” space and time, a refugee in her own “homeland.” The opening scene, in which she helps deliver an Ethiopian refugee’s baby in an alley, establishes that Lilly herself is disadvantaged: she lives in subsidized housing (9); she works with “the mentally ill, the drug addicted, the unemployed white, the Asian and Afro-Caribbean immigrants and the refugees and asylum seekers” (8); and, despite living in London for the past seven years, she has not “hitherto had the confidence to be so brazen” as to announce her arrival (7).

Read alongside the well-rehearsed definitions of diaspora offered by postcolonial scholars, Lilly emerges as a rather “textbook” example of a diasporic subject. While her parents, Alice and Philip, were hippy-beatniks who self-identified as “nomads” (10), Lilly’s movements throughout her life, both within and beyond Africa, are instances of “forced dispersal” and “reluctant scattering” (Gilroy 207). In keeping with those scholars who distinguish various modes of mobility, refusing to apply the term “diaspora” to “all movements and migrations between nations, within nations, between cities, [and] within cities, *ad infinitum*” (Braziel and Mannur 7), Lilly’s parents’ journeys must be differentiated from Lilly’s. Alice and Philip travel voluntarily, deliberately avoiding roots: “you put roots down,” says Philip, “and they’ll start growing ... It’s all about the journey” (10). Lilly, however, has no control over her rootless existence. “[B]orn in Yugoslavia, breast-fed in the Ukraine, weaned in Corsica, [and] freed from nappies in Sicily” (10), she has neither agency in the early portion of her life nor fondness for the way in which her parents raise her. Fittingly, she recalls her early years as a “series of aborted conversations, attachments severed in the very same moment they

began" (10). Later, after she is forced to leave Morocco for Ethiopia, and then Ethiopia for England, displacement and dislocation become defining features of Lilly's character; echoing Stuart Hall's reflections on diasporic subjectivity, her identity is shaped by "ruptures," "discontinuities" (234), and "unstable points of identification" (237).

After the most significant "rupture" in her childhood,<sup>5</sup> and with "no home to be sent back to," Lilly is left with two options: embrace her British/colonial heritage, or assimilate to her African/Muslim context. Following the death of her parents, she is raised by two unlikely father-figures, Muhammed Bruce Mahmoud and the Great Abdal—the former a friend of Lilly's parents, described as a "large English convert" who had lived in North Africa "for decades" (12), the latter an acquaintance of her parents and a disciple of the Sufi saint Bilal al Habash (10–11). Together, filling the void left by the murders of Lilly's parents, the two men construct a division of parental labour that positions the Great Abdal as Lilly's "teacher" and "guide," in senses "both spiritual and mundane," with Muhammed Bruce serving as "guardian, visiting [her] regularly and paying for [her] keep" (12). But while both play fatherly roles vis-à-vis Lilly, her stronger attachment to the Great Abdal becomes one of the first markers of her conscious break from her British/colonial heritage. When she is old enough to decide where, and with whom, she would like to live, Muhammed Bruce pointedly shows her Marrakech. He takes her to "restaurants where [they eat] crêpes" and to shops with French names (104–5), but Lilly misses the Bilal al Habash shrine "the whole time" (105). In fact, bewildered by Muhammed Bruce's attempt to ensure that she is making an "informed decision" (105), Lilly is oblivious to "what decision [she is] supposed to be informed about." Evidently, the point is moot: her choice has already been made (105).

As the literal consequences of her choice unfold, so too do the unmistakably allegorical dimensions of her two father-figures: whereas Muhammed Bruce comes to represent a sickly stem between Lilly and her British/colonial roots, the Great Abdal offers fertile soil for her transplantation into North Africa's Sufi Muslim community. Lilly, who sees Mohammed Bruce as a "loveable enigma" (250), may not see the two men in binary terms, but her father figures function within the narrative

precisely as such. The Great Abdal's gift of faith is what accompanies her "over time and geography and upheaval," from "Morocco, to Ethiopia, to England." To the orphaned child who, unlike her parents, cannot fathom why "roots" are "so bad" (10), the Great Abdal offers, via the Qur'an, stability and a feeling of rooted-ness. As Lilly explains, he had

taken me by the hand and said this is a flower and this is a rock and this is a tree. Under his guidance I put down roots word by word. Each utterance prefaced by *bismillah al-rahman al-rahim*, in the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate. The world within the book was whole, and there was an order, a process, a logical sequence of steps. It was the antithesis of the peripatetic life I'd lived with my parents; it was the antidote to their death. (68–9)

The "roots" Lilly "put[s] down" under the Great Abdal's tutelage become therefore paradoxically "portable"—rhizomatic, we might say, in that they spread and sprout wherever she goes. "Listen and repeat," says Lilly, describing the process through which the Qur'an is committed to memory: "[l]ine by line, verse by verse" (68). To understand the "world within the book" is to carry the book within and in so doing forge connections with other Muslims, not only those she meets in Harar and in London but also those she will never meet. Here, Lilly illustrates numerous scholars' theorizing of the embodied nature of diasporic experience: for Paul Gilroy, diaspora suggests a "complex, dynamic potency of living memory" which is "embodied" (212); for Jana Braziel and Anita Mannur, "specific historical moments are embodied" in the diasporic subject (8). Lilly's sense of home and community is connected to no single place; rather, she carries a sense of belonging within her, in the text she has committed to memory. "This," she says, reflecting on the meaning of her constructed lineage, "is the way of Islam; it is passed like a gift through generations. It connects us through time" (69). After she begins teaching the Qur'an to children in Harar, Lilly comes to see herself as a "link in a chain"; through her, the children will be "connected to the Great Abdal, to his father and teacher before him and his father and teacher before him all the way back through the generations" (69).

Unlike Lilly's parents, then, who leave her "haunted" and "hollow" (12), the Great Abdal enables Lilly to feel that she has a purpose and a sense of belonging.

Muhammed Bruce, by contrast, evokes a very different kind of memory and embodies a link to a past from which Lilly would like to be severed. He reminds her of a time when "Europeans had roamed the earth in pursuit of adventure, largely oblivious to the lives and laws of the people in the countries they picked through like cherries. Spitting out the pits" (250). If Lilly functions in the novel as a "textbook" diasporic subject, Muhammed Bruce "reads" like a composite of key postcolonial theorists' work on the figure of the colonizer. Born Bruce Macdonald, an ordinary, working class, unexceptional man, Muhammed Bruce calls to mind Albert Memmi's suggestion that "mediocre citizens" are the "true partners of the colonized, for it is the mediocre who are most in needs of compensation and of colonial life" (50). "Colonial life" makes possible Muhammed Bruce's lavish living quarters in "an old French building," complete with a "lift man and big marble ashtrays in all the hallways" (104). He keeps an Arab boy who "cook[s] all his food," "wash[es] his feet with warm water," and "[sleeps] like a cat at the foot of his bed" (104). An inversion, in a sense, of V. S. Naipaul's "mimic man," the "colonized" who attempt to adopt the language, culture, and values of the "colonizer," Muhammed Bruce ostensibly converts to Islam, claiming to be "an albino Pakistani, raised in poverty in Lahore" and then "taken in" by the powerful Sheikh Jami (213). But Muhammed Bruce's ambivalence toward Islam—his simultaneous desire for and disavowal of "otherness"—foregrounds his hypocrisy. Quite unlike the pious and ascetic Great Abdal, Muhammed Bruce frequents neither shrines nor mosques: he prefers "sidewalk cafes and dimly lit bars." He often boasts about his "long-standing connections" with important families in Morocco and Ethiopia, and he is "particularly proud of his association with a man named Sir Richard Burton" (46). According to Lilly, Muhammed Bruce "claimed the famous British explorer, who had been the first European to visit the city of Harar, was his great-great-uncle" (46). As she also points out, Muhammed Bruce's pride in the association is problematic, since the "mark" that Burton has left on Ethiopia, specifically through

his *First Footsteps in East Africa: A Journey to Harar*, is hardly positive. Reflecting and contributing to the complex discourses of domination and authority described by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), Burton's Ethiopia is "a paradise inhabited by asses"; he "denounce[s] the people as 'religious fanatics,' 'bigoted,' 'barbarous,' 'coarse and debauched'" (213). That Muhammed Bruce eventually produces a book of his own (dedicated, ironically, to Lilly), *Tales of the Sufis of the Sahara* (391), consolidates his support of the Orientalist tradition. He builds, however, a more immediate and far worse reputation for himself by showcasing, in his day-to-day life, deceit and decadence. Hararis see Muhammed Bruce as "one of the most dangerous pilgrims who had ever set foot on Harari soil" because he once made the "rather great mistake" of hiding "secrets" inside the hollow of a tree in the sheikh's compound (211–12). His "secrets," which include a thick wad of banknotes, a United Kingdom passport, a flask of alcohol, a book (Burton's), and, perhaps most troublingly, "a set of playing cards depicting naked boys" (212), confirm his status not as a committed convert but as a complete impostor. Whereas the Great Abdal functions as a welcome bridge between Lilly and "his father and teacher before him and his father and teacher before him" (69), Muhammed Bruce serves as an unwanted reminder of her biological/colonial lineage.

Not surprisingly, after Lilly is separated from the Great Abdal, his legacies help sustain her and they enable her to rebuild community, whereas her connection to Muhammed Bruce creates tension and, at times, outright conflict. After political upheaval forces her to leave Morocco, she and another of the Great Abdal's pupils, Hussein, arrive in Harar. Although the plan is for the Great Abdal to follow them, his death several months later leaves Lilly orphaned, in a sense, once again. Her bewildering separation from her entire Sufi "family" begins with her arrival at the home of Sheikh Jami (her and Hussein's destination in Harar). While Hussein, who she sees as a "brother" (27), is warmly received by Sheikh Jami (49–50), Lilly is almost immediately sent away to stay with a poor cousin (Nouria) of the sheikh's youngest wife (Gishta). Given the Sheikh's initial reaction to her appearance in his home, Lilly's race and gender would be obstacles enough to his embrace of her: "what

is *she* doing here?” he asks. “A European! In my house!” (49). When, however, Hussein makes an unwittingly misguided attempt to speak on Lilly’s behalf, explaining to Sheikh Jami that she is “the charge of a friend who once visited your greatness, a man named Muhammed Bruce Mahmoud” (49), any hope of acceptance that she may have had is dashed. The sheikh bellows his response, spitting on the floor for good measure. “That man,” he says, “is the last farenji<sup>6</sup> I had the misfortune to encounter! A charlatan!” (49). With three “strikes” against her—she is European/white, a woman, and, perhaps worst of all, closely connected to Muhammed Bruce—Lilly is summarily dismissed, and regardless of the progress she subsequently makes in Harar, in terms of being accepted by local Muslims, her relationship with Sheikh Jami never improves. Some months later, after bringing her Qur’an pupils before the Sheikh to earn his blessing by reciting sections of the text, he reacts, again, with outrage (211).

Yet what the narrative emphasizes is that individuals can successfully transcend the roles into which they are “born.” Focusing less on Sheikh Jami’s attitudes toward her than on those of the Hararis with whom she lives and works every day, readings of *Sweetness in the Belly* reveal that Lilly’s time with the Great Abdal has more than adequately prepared her to overcome the obstacles presented by her race, gender, and colonial lineage. Nouria and Gishta initially assume that Lilly, like Burton and Muhammed Bruce, is an arrogant European whose language, religion, and sense of superiority will render her utterly incompatible with their way of life. As Gishta leads Lilly for the first time through the streets of Harar toward Nouria’s compound, the entire city seems to note, with open hostility, her arrival. Children shout “Farenji! Farenji!” and women bellow comments that make “everyone except [Lilly] laugh” (51). Nouria greets Lilly, moreover, by keeping a “defensive distance” and “wringing her hands”; that “she [does] not look pleased” is an understatement (52–3). Yet in a relatively short period of time, Lilly wins the hearts of her new family members and achieves acceptance from the wider community by being herself—the self which has been shaped by the Great Abdal. The process of “fitting in,” after all, begins for Lilly after her first night in Nouria’s compound, when she begins her morn-



ing by praying and then asks to be taken to the mosque (57). She further endears herself to Nouria by teaching the Qur'an to Nouria's children, and establishing a Qur'anic school for boys *and* girls from the surrounding neighbourhood. To be sure, Lilly's teaching brings concrete benefits to the household, since "the parents agreed to pay a small fee" (103), but her more subtle gestures of humility and respect are at least, if not more, influential in "softening" Nouria. Before her first visit to the mosque, for instance, when Lilly is offered two headscarves, she rejects the first as "[t]oo gaudy," choosing instead the "simple veil" (59). Humble though the compound may be, moreover, Lilly never complains about the "few square yards of dirt" with its "small mud-walled building" (53). Without being asked, she finds ways to contribute to the household, helping to prepare food, washing clothing, and taking care of the children. Before long, whatever Sheikh Jami may think of her, both Nouria and Gishta come to see Lilly as akin to a co-wife.

Further reinforcing the notion that Lilly has become African/Muslim, she struggles to fit into English culture and society after she is exiled in London. As she explains, near the outset of the novel, "[m]y white face and white [nursing] uniform give me the appearance of authority in this new world, though my experiences, as my neighbours quickly come to discover, are rooted in the old" (9). Assimilating to London society could make day-to-day life easier for Lilly: doing so would help her avoid those moments when she suffers discrimination and harassment because of her religious beliefs and cultural practices (when she wears her veil to mosque, she endures such comments as, "*Would you look at 'is cunt! A white fu'in Paki!*" [165]). Lilly, however, cannot change who she is and she becomes irritated when others misread her as an ordinary Londoner. At an Ethiopian café, for example, she insists on "*buna*,"<sup>7</sup> not Nescafé, and makes a point of speaking to the proprietress in Amharic (170). As she explains, often in descriptions of her encounters with Robin Gupta, a South-Asian doctor at the hospital where she works, assimilation is not an option. When Robin assumes that she has had "adventures" (171) in Africa, she reacts with silent fury. "*Adventures?*" she says to herself. "Ethiopia wasn't some gap year experience" (172). In one of Robin's many attempts to woo her, he mentions how "intrigued"

he is by the notion that Lilly “come[s] from a family of refugees” (152). Evidently seeking common ground, Robin explains that he too is alone in London: “very few members of my family are here,” he says. “We’re all scattered about” (153). Yet in Lilly’s eyes “[i]t’s not the same thing at all.” She wants to remind him that his family “left by choice” and that he “know[s] where each of them is.” Not only is Lilly “an exile, a landless one, treading on alien soil” (236), she—unlike Robin—has no family, anywhere. In place of her missing family, which she describes as “sites of amputation” (164), the language, religious practices, and cultural traditions of Ethiopia become the centre of her world, essential to her self-preservation, and impossible to give up.

Not surprisingly, Lilly begins to develop a sense of belonging in London after she meets Amina, an Ethiopian refugee whose husband Yusuf has disappeared, likely at the hands of the Dergue.<sup>8</sup> With Amina, particularly after Yusuf is found, Lilly becomes a “co-wife” once again; certainly, with striking parallels to her role in Nouria’s household, she becomes “co-mother” to Amina’s children, taking charge of their Qur’anic education and teaching them Ethiopian/Harari traditions. “Amina and I,” Lilly explains, “live in separate flats, though we share domestic responsibilities, including the children ... We are co-wives, though we lack the common tie of a husband” (27). The two women are united by their shared status “as refugees in the aftermath of the revolution, re-enacting rituals, keeping the traditions of home alive in our council flats” (28). Their first meeting occurs when Lilly acts as impromptu midwife to Amina, the woman who gives birth in an alley. Fittingly, Lilly and Amina bond over the baby, whose forehead bears a mole in the shape of Africa, and who has been fathered not by Yusuf but by a violent rapist in a Kenyan refugee camp (234). Out of extreme trauma and violence is born a new emblem of Africa, a figure of hope ushered into the diaspora by two unlikely co-wives who will reconstruct family and community in their place of exile. The two women establish a community association focused on finding lost Ethiopian refugees (29) and their collective efforts are what effect Yusuf’s and many other refugees’ return to their families.

As in Harar, Lilly’s education in the Qur’an makes it possible for her to teach the neighbourhood children, but it also helps her connect with

Yusuf, solidifying her co-wife position in Amina's household and reaffirming her identity as a Muslim/African. Deeply scarred, emotionally and psychologically, from years of imprisonment and torture, Yusuf struggles to adjust to life in London. Suffering from culture shock and post-traumatic stress disorder, he spends hours "watching children's television with the curtains drawn" (267); though once a poet, he "can't even tell [his children] bedtime stories" (267). Recalling her own experience, upon arriving in London, of feeling "uncivilized in the ways of this place" (236), and reminding herself that one of the harshest "cruelties Yusuf endured in prison was lack of access to the Qur'an," Lilly understands that "[t]o read Qur'an with your family around you is to be home" (235). Using, then, the Qur'an to reach Yusuf, Lilly gently guides him back to a state of normalcy: "I wash my hands," she says, "and cover my hair, take the Qur'an from the shelf, kneel down on the floor and begin the story of the child Moses" (268). The message she means to impart is that "God sometimes puts us in alien and difficult situations, and in time, the adversity of our situation may be revealed to be a blessing in disguise" (268). For comforting him and for taking on the duties he cannot fulfill as a father, Yusuf is thankful. "I'm grateful to you, Lilly," he says. "It is as if you are doing my job in my absence" (268). Co-wife, co-mother and surrogate-father, Lilly rebuilds "home" once again, as in Harar, on the foundations of her religion.

And so in London, as in Harar, Lilly defies others' expectations of her, subverting assumptions about how identity, family and community are formed. The "Sheikh Jamis" of Ethiopia presuppose that Lilly, like Muhammed Bruce, is the worst incarnation of a "farenji," a deceptive European whose embrace of Islam amounts to little more than play-acting. Worse still, she is a "farenji" *woman* who, in her teaching of Qur'an, encroaches on a role traditionally reserved for men. Just as her whiteness, however, is misread in Ethiopia, so too is her connection to Africa misread in England. The "Robin Guptas" of London, upon hearing that she has spent time abroad, assume that she has had a backpacking getaway, a short-lived, tourist retreat rife with adventure. But what readers discover over the course of *Sweetness in the Belly*, along with those characters who allow Lilly into their lives and hearts, is that her genealogical

roots do not define her. When Amina asks Lilly to chart her family tree, the result is hardly conventional. As Lilly recollects,

[a]t the far left of the page I positioned the Great Abdal as father to Hussein and me. Next to him, Muhammed Bruce Mahmoud. I drew a dotted line across the paper, as if marking footsteps west to east across the Sahara. At the far right-hand side I wrote “Nouria” . . . . I connected her to me on the page as older sister, as I did her cousin Gishta. I wrote the names of Nouria’s children beneath hers, precious to me, children I cared for and taught. (32)

Less a tree with roots and branches than a rhizomatic web of shoots and vines—echoing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s metaphor for the postcolonial/postmodern subject’s multiplicity and heterogeneity—Lilly’s map illustrates her belonging to a diasporic Muslim community, some members of which have been forcibly dislocated and scattered but all of whom share a sense of kinship based on their common beliefs, values, and experiences. Once Lilly has finished her family tree, Amina intervenes, adding her own and her children’s names: “[y]our co-wife,” she declares, “[a]nd your co-wife’s children” (32). While Amina is delighted with the end-product, Lilly is dismayed; to her, “it looks like a rubble-strewn field” with “not an ounce of blood shared between [her] and anyone” (32). Amina’s response hinges on the notion that “blood” is irrelevant. “Okay,” she says, “so yours is not a map of blood. But can’t you see? This is a map of love” (32). Coming where it does, early in the novel, Amina’s statement effectively summarizes the narrative that will unfold, simultaneously foregrounding the central theme of it.

Is it possible, however, that the reason most readers are able to see and applaud Lilly as a figure who transgresses “rules” about identity—the reason we can accept her as a “Muslim woman raised in Africa” (9)—is that she never loses the crucial vestiges of whiteness which, arguably, make her palatable to a “western” audience? As Alfred J. López argues in his introduction to *Postcolonial Whiteness: A Critical Reader on Race and Empire* (2005), “[i]t would seem a simple enough assumption that the end of colonialism ushers in the end of whiteness, or at least of

its unrivaled ascendancy”; certainly, seeing *Sweetness in the Belly* as a novel that subverts colonialist, racially-inflected social hierarchies, readers might well assume that Gibb’s project precisely mirrors this “simple enough assumption” (1). “Yet,” as López goes on to say, “the cultural residues of whiteness linger in the postcolonial world as an ideal, often latently, sometimes not” (1). Indeed, in *White Civility: The Literary Project of English Canada*, Daniel Coleman asks how we can “critically examine the reproduction of *Canadian* whiteness in relation to the real project of its civility” (9, emphasis added), suggesting that “whatever civil ideals” may be espoused in (multicultural) Canada—equality, diversity, liberty—“whiteness still occupies the position of normalcy and privilege” (7). For Coleman, “Canadian civility,” “based on a British model of civility” (5), is “contradictory and ambivalent” (10): “at the same time that civility involves the creation of justice and equality, it simultaneously creates borders to the sphere in which justice and equality are maintained” (9). As a project, Coleman says, Canadian civility is “able to organize a diverse population around the standardizing ideals of whiteness, masculinity, and Britishness” (10) even as it presents itself as rejecting or undoing these categories of privilege. Coleman’s *White Civility* may be, for the most part, a “historical project,” critically re-examining Canadian literary history with a view to understanding “how the norm or centre came to be assumed as normative and central” (5). His theorizing of whiteness, however, sheds crucial light on the ways in which colonial discourses—particularly those related to the intersecting vectors of race, power, and privilege—are so deeply-embedded in the “postcolonial” psyche that we not only assume white privilege to be “natural” and “normal” but in fact mistake the perpetuation of such privilege for resistance to it.

How else can readers make sense, returning to *Sweetness in the Belly*, of Lilly’s reaction to Nouria’s daughters’ absuma [a ritual of female circumcision], and Lilly’s similar response to the aesthetic values of the women with whom she lives in Harar? When Rahile and Bortucan undergo their rite of passage from childhood to womanhood—a rite they enthusiastically request—Lilly is stunned. As the midwife “tug[s] at the folds of skin between Rahile’s legs and swiftly run[s] a metal

blade down over them,” Lilly cannot “help but cry out”; she loses “all sensation in the lower half of [her], watching in horror as the blood [begins] to creep over the side of the bench” (75). Her horror could be explained by the fact that she was raised in the absence of women who might have taught her about *absuma*. According to Dr. Aziz, Lilly’s lover in Harar, *absuma* is a “local custom,” moreover, which practitioners “attribute to Islam in order to justify it.” There is, Aziz goes on to say, “nothing in the Qur’an that suggests [it] is necessary ... Or even desirable” (87). Illustrating, in part, what his medical training has shown him—namely, the health risks associated with *absuma*—Aziz also reveals here what his education, in more general terms, has taught him: Islam is hardly a homogenous religion, practiced uniformly in all places.<sup>9</sup> A similar rationale might apply to Lilly’s negative response to the prospect of having her gums dyed black, a “beautification” ritual that Nouria and Gishta try to share with her; it seems possible, if not likely, that Lilly has had no previous experience with this particularly Harari ritual. But while she will not allow needle and black near her mouth (133), Lilly does somewhat inexplicably accept having her hair coloured, her body hair removed, and her ears pierced. It would seem, then, that her pristine gums and, much more so, her reaction to the girls’ circumcisions deliver to readers a white character with strategically limited “Muslim” or “African” values. Gesturing back to Wainaina’s article—to his mention, specifically, of “mutilated genitals”—Lilly’s “impeccable liberalism” demands a lengthy, graphic circumcision scene that foregrounds her horror and revulsion. *Absuma* may not be—indeed is not—a ubiquitous practice in Islamic societies, yet, using Coleman’s terms, Gibb’s treatment of *absuma* becomes, nonetheless, a reminder of the “contradictory and ambivalent” (10) nature of white civility: “categories of privilege,” Coleman argues, are always engaged in “the activities of self-invention, reinvention ... and adaptation, even as they try to avoid observation or detection as anything but fixed” (10). The narrative, as if anticipating that “we” can only accept Lilly as a “Muslim woman, raised in Africa” (9) as long as she retains subtle yet crucial vestiges of white superiority, delivers a white character whose identity is conveniently selective in its “otherness.”

Tellingly, moreover, whether expressed through her rejection of “barbaric” local customs or in her fierce embrace of more “civilized” religious practices, Lilly’s superiority *vis-à-vis* the people with whom she lives in Harar is a constant. Compared to her Harari friend Sadia, for instance, Lilly is a far more pious and devout Muslim. Whereas Sadia, who “[doesn’t] even fast during Ramadan” (131), is able to experience romance with guilt-free abandon, giggling and cooing as she describes the sexual pleasure she has experienced (363), romantic love, for Lilly, brings about a grave crisis of conscience. “Nothing in [her] life,” before meeting Aziz, “had ever interrupted [her] religious practice”—not “grief, not illness, not dislocation” (99). After she meets him, she is unsettled and distracted, her religious beliefs “challenged” by her attraction to a man (99). Eventually, not long before she is forced to leave Ethiopia, Lilly has sex with Aziz, but not without remorse and guilt. She regrets that they did not wait until they were married and could follow the appropriate traditions. Of the sarong he has used to wipe the blood from her thighs, she says, “[i]f this had been our wedding night, he would have taken that piece of cloth and draped it over a large bowl of sweets that he would present to my mother that morning” (370). In place of her mother, she supposes, Nouria and Gishta would accept the gift and “run out into the streets waving the sarong and ululating loudly so that everyone could celebrate the proof of my virginity” (370). Underscoring her regret, Lilly repeats: “[i]f this had been our wedding night” (370, emphasis added).

Although, then, both Sadia and Lilly engage in transgressive sexual acts, the text positions Lilly as the “superior” of the two: because she alone grapples with feelings of guilt, she is more morally-upright. In London, Lilly’s “superiority” continues, this time in the dynamic between her and Amina. Smooth as their “co-wife” arrangement is, for the most part, the two women disagree about the extent to which “old” cultural customs and traditions should be retained in their “new world” household, and they differ in terms of their respective approaches to Yusuf’s struggles to adjust. Amina, unlike Lilly, is not only willing but eager to assimilate to English culture. Finding excuses not to go to mosque, she seems “increasingly less interested in maintaining the ritu-

als of the past” (140). Amina is particularly pleased when her children adopt “western” ways and quickly loses patience with her husband’s lingering cultural shock and enduring symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. As in Harar, in relation to Sadia, Lilly comes across less “of” her Ethiopian, Muslim community than “above” it and its members. Dismayed by an incident at an Ethiopian café, when Amina’s daughter Sitta becomes petulant, asking for food from McDonald’s (170), Lilly confronts Amina about Sitta’s attitude. Amina, as Lilly explains, “tells me I’m trying too hard. All I have to do is let Sitta be Sitta” (173). Even, Lilly asks, “if that means Barbies and hamburgers?” Amina’s reply ends the conversation: “[e]specially if that means Barbies and hamburgers” (173, emphasis added). But following the birth of Amina’s son Tariq, the two women argue at length, with greater force, and in the presence of Yusuf, who sides with Lilly. Amina is staunch in her decision to not follow the practice of *ulma*<sup>10</sup> and to not bury the placenta: *ulma*, she says, is “totally unrealistic. I have to work!” And the placenta burial, for her, is “just a silly superstition ... There is no need” (240). Lilly, commenting on Amina’s shift in attitude, laments the fact that “[s]omewhere in the last seven years need became superstition, tradition became voluntary, and then ritual further degenerated into a subject of some embarrassment” (240). But, in the aftermath of the argument, because Yusuf knows “somehow that part of [her] still remains in the old world, unwilling to let go, while Amina is ‘moving with the time’” (241), he “appeals” to Lilly, taking her into his confidence and sharing his disappointment with her. As a rift grows between Amina and Yusuf, the bond between Lilly and Yusuf is strengthened. Of the two women, only Lilly—seemingly self-appointed keeper of Qur’anic and Oromo traditions—is able to understand, fully, his sense of loss and grief.

How, readers may wonder, is this possible? How is it possible that Amina, who has spent years pining for Yusuf and searching the globe for him, her husband, cannot empathize with his psychological wounds? How is it possible that she, who has experienced the most violent of atrocities herself, expresses less compassion for her husband than Lilly does? As the novel draws to a close, the list of ways in which Lilly is “better than” or “superior to” her adoptive families, both in Harar and



in London, becomes absurdly long and at times contradictory. She is a more devout Muslim than Sadia and a more committed Ethiopian than Amina—yet not so Muslim or Ethiopian that she can condone *absuma* or endure blackened gums. She also shows more compassion and patience toward Yusuf than Amina does, and she illustrates stronger resolve when it comes to resisting assimilationist pressures in London. What Lilly does not have, it would seem, is Amina's innate hope and flexibility. Chastising Lilly for being "so bitter sometimes," Amina yells, "[y]ou behave as if life is finished. You remember when you asked me if I thought you were losing your mind? You did not lose your mind, but you did lose something. You lost hope" (155–56). But even here Lilly enjoys a position of superiority. Amina, after all, has a family and, at the conclusion of the novel, she is preparing to relocate them to Canada. The family was once "forced into exile" but now, "several years on, they are ready to make choices about how and where they live" because "they are no longer refugees" (400). Lilly, by contrast, has nothing: no husband, no children, no future to look forward to, no reason to hope. The suggestion is that she suffers more than any other character.

Yet if, at the close of the novel, Lilly is so "alone," then the argument that *Sweetness in the Belly* is a text which advocates for identity, family, and community as *constructed* (rather than biologically or "racially" determined) swiftly begins to unravel. As Amina and Yusuf prepare to go, Lilly decides to remain in London. This is an odd decision for a "co-wife" and "co-mother." Explaining her decision to stay, she says that England is "the only logical place, where the roots of my history, as alien as these might seem, are actually buried. My journey ends here" (400). The woman who has vehemently eschewed her "roots" is now, rather suddenly, keen on grafting herself onto them.

Part of the reason Lilly decides to stay is because of Robin Gupta; their love story, however, repeats another subtle pattern of Lilly's privilege which first presented itself in Ethiopia. As the narrative makes abundantly clear, while living and working with Nouria and Gishta, Lilly is as poor as they are: she is accepted as their "co-wife" because, in terms of material wealth and possessions, she, like them, has little more than the shirt on her back. But the crucial difference between the

women is that Lilly alone is literate, well-educated, and fully-versed in Qur'an. However humble and materially impoverished she may be, she occupies a position of unambiguous superiority *vis-à-vis* the people of Harar by virtue of her education, and this superiority is underscored by the fact that her lover in Harar, Aziz, is also highly educated. That he, moreover, is educated in *western* medicine, outspokenly rejecting traditional healing practices and determined to undertake further studies abroad (119), raises more questions about Lilly's ostensibly constructed identity and her position in the community. Why is it that in Harar, and again in London, she is drawn to men privileged by their education and profession? And why is it that, again in both contexts, Lilly is only ever a *figurative* co-wife but never an actual participant in a polygamous marriage? In her ultimate realization that England (not Ethiopia) is "home" and that a (monogamous) relationship with *Doctor* Gupta is possible, the thematic complexities of the "diaspora" novel are distilled into a distinctly "western" fairy tale—a kind of *Cinderella*, "rags-to-riches" metanarrative whose "happy ending" hinges on the promise of "true love" from a "Prince Charming."

The "western" tale, of course, that Gibb intertextualizes is not *Cinderella* but *Alice in Wonderland*: Lilly's mother is named Alice, Lilly herself periodically ruminates on the meaning of the story (182, 248, 317), and, most significantly, the novel's epigraph is drawn from Lewis Carroll's work.

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.

"Oh, you ca'n't help that," said the Cat: "we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.

"You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here." (3)

The epigraph's repetition, and hence foregrounding, of "madness," is surely meant to guide our reading of *Sweetness in the Belly*; less clear is how exactly the "madness" motif should inform our interpretation of the text. Perhaps the entire world is "mad" and, traveling through the "rabbit hole," as Lilly suggests in a London portion of the novel, is

a metaphor for being born into a ubiquitously “mad” world (248). If, as Lilly also surmises, “Alice, through the looking glass, [has] become Lilly,” it becomes the daughter’s task to succeed where her parents—“Philip from Basingstoke and Alice from Dublin, two people who died in search of different lives” (317)—failed. Lilly must find a way to negotiate the “madness” of the world by reconciling all that divides it in two: “male and female, dead and alive, black and white, misguided and Muslim” (317). She must come to terms with her colonial “roots” and embrace her complex, hybrid self. Equally plausible, though, is a reading of Africa, specifically, as a place of “madness.” In this case, the epigraph might be read as a gesture toward Lilly’s parents’ journey to Africa as a descent into “madness.” Experiencing the “hidden pleasure” offered by chewing qat,<sup>11</sup> Lilly notes that the drug seems to “take [her] through a cloud and down a rabbit hole where [she] was a child and two people named Alice and Philip dressed up in funny costumes and spoke in riddles for [her] amusement” (182). Insofar as the “rabbit hole,” then, might represent the conduit to the continent to which Lilly’s parents brought her, a place characterized by the “madness” of poverty, famine, conflict, and eventually civil war, England, by contrast, becomes a place of peace, rationality, and order.

In fact, given that the epigraph follows a short prologue in which Harar is introduced as foreboding and threatening, the text implicitly leads readers to link “madness” with the city described in the novel’s opening pages. Setting the stage for the narrative, the prologue presents a frightening tableau of Harar on the cusp of dawn, with night departing “on the heels of the hyenas” who “hear the sun’s approach as a hostile ringing, perceptible only to their ears,” driving them “back, bloody lipped and panic stricken” (1). Over the course of the night, they have “feasted on the city’s broken streets,” devouring “lame dogs in alleyways and licking eggshells and entrails off the ground” (1). The language of this passage is dark and violent, rife not only with references to the hyenas’ “bloody” jaws, “anguished cries” and uninhibited “cannibalism” (1–2), but also to Harar itself as a walled city that has been “broken,” its ancient gates “splayed open now” and no longer able to protect its inhabitants from creatures of the “wild earth” (1–2). As ambiguous as

the epigraph, the prologue provides no clear indication of what the hyenas symbolize (the encroachment of modernity? the insidious influence of the “west”? the Dergue rebel forces who provoke civil war and cause famine?). But regardless of how we choose to nuance our interpretation of it, the prologue perpetuates the one-dimensional image of Africa as the “dark continent.” It matches Wainaina’s suggestion that, however “you” choose to nuance “your” description of it, Africa must be “doomed.” Harar and its surrounding landscape are depicted in animalistic terms, with scavengers at the fore against a backdrop of “volcanic fields,” “desert,” and “black hills” (1). Virtually void of people, this vision of Ethiopia, set alongside the quotation from *Alice in Wonderland*, leaves little room for speculation about where “madness” resides. Who in their right mind would willingly remain in, or intentionally return to, such a place? The answer to this question is: *not Lilly*, whose very name calls to mind a delicate, white flower, ill-suited to dry savannah.

While there is no question that *Sweetness in the Belly* attempts to challenge colonial discourses of “race” and identity, the novel ultimately illustrates that these discourses are too deeply-entrenched to be easily and effectively deconstructed, especially in the context of a realist narrative: in the end, whiteness remains, as it must, a category of superiority and privilege. An ostensibly uprooted/diasporic white character returns, as she apparently must, to her roots because the potent promise of a fairy-tale ending are too seductive for even Lilly to reject. For much of the novel, Lilly may well be interpreted as a character whose identity is “African,” “Ethiopian,” “Muslim,” and, more generally, diasporic or “rhizomatic,” but the final image of the text substantially undermines such a reading. Upon first arriving in Harar, Lilly notices a plant growing out of a single rubber boot. “What,” she wonders, is a “single Wellington boot doing sitting in this compound in a remote Muslim city in Africa?” (66). When she asks Nouria’s son what the plant is “for” and he shrugs, Lilly is comforted: “[i]n this impoverished world,” where everything has its “use,” she finds “this one frivolous gesture reassuring” (66). To what extent, readers must ask, is Lilly reassured because the boot is emblematic of her English heritage, if not a symbol of herself? Lest we miss the metaphorical significance of the boot and the plant (*with roots*)

within it, the final paragraphs of the novel revisit the motif as Robin presents Lilly with a housewarming gift of two Wellington boots. While Lilly laughs at the fact that the boots “don’t match,” Robin says, “[t]hey will in your garden”: “[h]ow very peculiar,’ your neighbours will say. ‘How very English’” (408). No longer single, no longer alone, Lilly has found a happily-ever-after ending in London, the place where she belongs, with a “Prince Charming” (or, perhaps better phrased, a “Doctor Charming”). How “very English” indeed—and how very telling.

## Notes

- 1 See, for example, Gibb, “Baraka Without Borders,” “Believing Women,” and “Deterritorialized People. In these and other essays, Gibb, who holds a PhD in Social Anthropology from Oxford University, explores and examines Harari religious and cultural practices, past and present, in the contexts of both Ethiopia and the Canadian diaspora. In 1994 and 1995, she conducted anthropological fieldwork in Harar.
- 2 One of Wainaina’s specific pieces of advice, for example, is that authors should “[d]escribe, in detail ... mutilated genitals” and consider hyenas as “fair game”; as it happens, and as I will discuss, female circumcision and hyenas figure prominently in *Sweetness in the Belly*.
- 3 Wainaina suggests that authors who write about Africa should “[e]stablish early on that [their] liberalism is impeccable.”
- 4 As one of Gibb’s Ethiopian characters points out, Ethiopia was never actually colonized by any European power: “[w]e have this pride,” says Dr. Aziz, “in the fact that we are a country that was never colonized” (289). I read the novel through a postcolonial lens, however, because—formally colonized or not—its setting and characters are imbricated in the discourses of imperialism and colonialism.
- 5 Lilly’s parents are murdered in Tangier when she is eight years old.
- 6 “Farenji” is a derogatory Amharic term for “foreigner.”
- 7 “Buna” is Ethiopian coffee. Gibb provides a detailed description of how it is prepared and served midway through the novel (186).
- 8 The Dergue was the communist military group in Ethiopia, led by Mengistu Haile Mariam, which ousted Haile Selassie in 1974 and ruled until 1987.
- 9 At the risk of stating the obvious, Islamic communities, worldwide, are not homogenous. Three Muslim groups (Sunni, Shi’a and Sufi) are dominant, but practices vary widely according to geographical and cultural location. Certainly, female circumcision is not a practice common to all Islamic communities. For more detailed discussions of the immense variation between Islamic communities, see Eposito, Holt, Lambton and Lewis, and Lapidus.

10 “Ulma,” as Lilly defines it, is the mother/child’s forty-day “period of seclusion after birth—baby feasting on milk, mother feasting on honey” (16).

11 “Qat” is a flowering plant and, when chewed, a stimulant.

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