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“I Am the Sole Author”:

Challenging the Dictionary of the Social Self in Zadie Smith's *NW*

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**Abstract**

In her 2012 novel *NW*, Zadie Smith explores the tension between the notions of identity as based on essentialism and identity as fluid through following the lives of Leah Hanwell and Natalie Blake in their respective struggles to forge their identities in post-multicultural London. I propose that Smith’s characters fall on opposing sides of this spectrum of identity between stasis and becoming, and neither one can achieve the balance between the two extremes. In addition to exploring these ontological questions, Smith challenges the promise of self-sufficiency, individualism, and social mobility in contemporary London—categories which are immersed in neoliberal sensibilities that ostensibly celebrate autonomy, freedom of choice, and the idea that the person is solely responsible for their own existence and place in society, regardless of environment and circumstances. By refuting neoliberal ideals, critiquing extreme multiculturalism, and exploring the role of motherhood in relation to personal identity, Smith questions the possibility of achieving a unified self and cultivating self-understanding. She furthers this critique by challenging the possibility of achieving social mobility while at the same time asking what is lost in the pursuit of social mobility. Thus, I argue that Smith questions the ideal that a person has the sole power to define herself and life amidst the cultural demands of society and the actual barriers of class, race, gender, and education. As well as close readings of

Smith's fictional explorations, this this draws on Smith's own essays and secondary criticism of her works in order to situate these issues in the broader scope of post-multicultural scholarship.

*Keywords:* Neoliberalism, Multiculturalism, Social Mobility, Identity

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## **I. Post-multiculturalism and Neoliberalism in Zadie Smith's London**

"I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me" (*NW* 3 ). Leah Hanwell, one of the narrators of Zadie Smith's 2012 novel *NW*, hears this aphorism on the radio in the novel's opening paragraph. Struck by the motivational quality of the message, Leah attempts to copy the line down on a magazine page. Using a pencil, she is only able to write the beginning few words of the statement and soon gives up, dropping the magazine to the ground, where "world events and property and film and music lie in the grass" (4). This gesture, though seemingly careless, sets up the prominent themes of the novel by showing the futility of self-definition against the forces of contemporary London. The opening scene of the novel introduces one of the central questions that Smith explores in both her novels and her essays: is personal identity static or subject to change and flux? *NW*'s narrative focus hinges around the intersection and conflict between identity politics and neoliberal forces and the opposing constraints that they each have on the individual's self-knowledge and social mobility. Smith's sardonic spin on existentialist philosophy's assertion that "Man is nothing other than what he makes of himself" (Sartre 22) questions the ideal that a person has the sole power to define herself and life amidst the cultural demands of society and the actual barriers of class, race, gender, and education. Smith explores these questions of essentialized identity and self-definition as well as the possibility of truly knowing oneself in her novel *NW*, which follows the experiences of Leah Hanwell and Natalie

Blake in their respective struggles to discover themselves and make sense of their existence in contemporary, multicultural London.

In order to examine these ontological challenges, Smith also questions the neoliberal sensibilities of contemporary Londoners; these include extreme autonomy, freedom of choice, and the idea that the individual is solely responsible for their own existence and social position, regardless of environment and circumstances. In this thesis, I approach neoliberalism as the economics of the free, unregulated market which ostensibly promises that each individual has the potential and opportunity to succeed and achieve social mobility regardless of their socioeconomic status or other environmental factors (Arnett 1-2).<sup>1</sup> While this same society often overvalues its own multiculturalism, which holds that a person is predominantly defined by their hybridity and ethnic and cultural background, by so doing, it reduces the independence of the self and the complexities of identity (a phenomenon that I will here call post-multiculturalism). Leah and Natalie represent the opposing ends of this spectrum between the post-multicultural view of identity and the neoliberal view, yet they are united in their struggle by the paradoxical social pressures of being women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century which demand that they be socially successful as well as embrace motherhood. Smith uses a Biblical framework to examine the contemporary issues around motherhood as part of a broader tradition, which she shows in tandem with her wider cultural critique. Leah's obsession with identity politics and multiculturalism compromises her own understanding of herself and her ability to form relationships, while, in opposition, Natalie's faith in neoliberal promises of social mobility undermines any stability of self. By refuting neoliberal sensibilities, critiquing the glib celebration of multiculturalism, and exploring the anxieties of motherhood in relation to personal

identity, Smith questions the possibility of achieving a unified self and cultivating meaningful relationships.

*NW* follows the stories of four residents of Willesden, Northwest London: Leah, Natalie, Felix, and Nathan. Divided into five sections entitled “Visitation,” “Guest,” “Host,” “Crossing,” and “Visitation,” the novel employs several different styles of narration, including stream of consciousness, vignettes, and traditional realism. Each section has a different narrator and a different prose style, though throughout the novel, an omniscient, third-person voice occasionally interjects. The second section, “Guest,” which I will not be discussing, follows one day in the life of Felix Cooper, another long-time resident of Willesden, and is narrated in a more traditional, third-person, chronological form. Felix, depicted as one of the few admirable characters in the novel, possesses more self-awareness and social sensibility than either of the two female characters, yet his story ultimately ends in his murder resulting from one of his acts of kindness.<sup>2</sup> Leah and Natalie have a shared childhood, yet their paths diverge: Leah, from an Irish immigrant family, remains in the council estates where she was born and becomes a social worker while Natalie, of Jamaican descent, earns her way into a prestigious college, marries into a wealthy family, and becomes a successful barrister. However, Smith shows both women’s dissatisfaction and inability to form meaningful relationships or understand their own identities—challenges which I argue result from the opposing cultural forces of neoliberalism and post-multiculturalism.

## **II. Identity Politics and the Anxieties of Motherhood: Leah**

Just as *NW* is in a state of dynamic flux, so is each character’s own self-understanding in the novel. While these characters experience the tension between an essentialized identity and the idea of actively forming their own selves, as envisioned in the post-multicultural and

neoliberal sensibilities respectively, their self-understanding is not reliant on their own intrapersonal reflection alone, but also on their interpersonal experiences. Leah remains static as she is stuck in a modality of viewing her life through her past and she is thus unable to escape her council estate either physically or emotionally. By contrast, Natalie is in a constant state of becoming with no sense of a unified self, as she is devoted to her quest to achieve social mobility, allowing herself to be defined by her class, her profession, and her contribution to the market alone. Leah's increasing alienation which precludes any potential intimacy with others is in contrast to Natalie's focus on social mobility and escape from her own interior life. This tension between individual and society is further complicated when factoring in each character's relationship to their childhood home Willesden: Leah is unwaveringly tied to her history in Willesden while Natalie does everything in her power to escape.

The title of this first section of the novel alludes to a Biblical narrative: Mary's visitation to her cousin Elizabeth. Just as in the Biblical story in which both Mary and Elizabeth are with child, both Leah and Shar are in the early stages of pregnancy. Yet their meeting lacks the celebration and joy of the Biblical story and is rather fraught with suspicion and secrecy. Smith uses such imagery ironically to examine the complications surrounding motherhood, showing that such anxieties have not been eradicated by the emergence of birth control and abortion, as their manufacturers would suggest. When analyzed within the Biblical framework of the novel, Leah may be seen as the ironic inversion of Mary and her "scandalous" pregnancy. While Mary's "transgression" is her virginal conception before her marriage, Leah's is her decision to abort the child that she unwillingly conceives. Crushed by the societal pressure to become a mother, yet unwilling to share her condition with her husband, Leah acts in secret in order to preserve what she thinks will bring her happiness. Her actions then become a matter not only of

choice but of honesty and communication. Her husband Michel longs to have children and believes that Leah is genuinely trying to conceive. Leah, however, is so deeply against having children that she falls into deception, a quandary that arises from her emotional shortcomings: her lack of any sort of intellectual intimacy with Michel and her unconscious inability to move forward. Leah's treatment of Michel is a self-serving one in which the reader does not learn much about their marriage except that it is deeply physical yet built on a lack of communication. Thus, Smith shows the illusory nature of the ideals of motherhood and relationships by creating a perverse inversion of the Biblical narrative.

Just as Smith aligns Leah with Eve in the apple tree calligrammatic text earlier in the novel, she aligns her with Mary in her inversion of the Marian conception/visitation story. In her book on the cult and myth of the Virgin Mary, Marina Warner notes the duality of the Eve/Mary relationship, in which Mary becomes the new Eve through her virginal conception: "Eve, cursed to bear children rather than blessed with Motherhood, was identified with nature, a form of low matter that drags man's soul down the spiritual ladder...[T]he closeness of woman to all that is vile, lowly, corruptible, and material was epitomized" (59). According to Warner, in Eve's fall, motherhood becomes no longer a blessing but a curse. Mary becomes the new Eve in that through her son, the fall is reversed, yet the "curse" of motherhood remains, and another dimension is added: the idea that the child could be sacrificed after birth. By positioning Leah in relation to Eve and Mary, Smith illuminates Leah's physical and emotional resistance to motherhood in terms of archetypal religious narratives. Smith once again uses the Visitation story as an ironic, or even perverse intertext. Because of her virginal conception, Mary is traditionally viewed as fertility symbol; yet Leah nullifies her own fertility and instead subscribes to the view that motherhood is indeed a curse.

Smith's interrogation of motherhood is furthered by her inclusion of the Black Madonna statue in the church that Leah and Natalie visit in the middle of the first "Visitation" section. As the women approach the church, Smith contrasts the medieval architecture with the marks of modernity surrounding it, "a foreclosed shopping arcade, a misconceived office block" (77); the church is "out of time, out of place" (77). Yet the church possesses a "serenity" that draws both unreligious women into it, curious about its history. Smith highlights the difference between the two women as they interact with the setting. Natalie reads a leaflet about the church while Leah explores it at her own pace, ruminating about why Natalie and she have taken different paths in their lives: Natalie "educated herself on the floor of Kensal Rise Library while Leah smoked weed all the live-long day. Natalie always picked up the leaflets, the leaflets and everything else" (80). Yet while Natalie might be more successful than Leah because of her drive to educate herself, follow the rules, and "pick up the leaflets," Smith questions what she might have missed while doing so. Unable to see the church through her own eyes and without the mediation of social prescription, Natalie merely reads what the leaflet tells her. Smith implies that this is what she has done with her whole life—merely picking up the leaflets that society has put before her and failing to forge an authentic self.

Natalie calls Leah's attention to the statue of the Black Madonna in the church, reading from her leaflet that the statue is the original that was burned during the Reformation. Unable to believe that she had missed the figure, Leah is stuck by the statue and the Christ Child she holds, which "is cruciform; he is in the shape of the thing that will destroy him. He reaches out for Leah. He reaches out to stop any escape, to the right or to the left" (81). Interrogating the role of white Christianity in European history, the Black Madonna offers an alternative narrative, implying that history is not as whitewashed as tradition would have it.<sup>3</sup> Yet while the Madonna

offers an alternative history, she also signifies a compromised motherhood. Looking at the Christ Child, Leah sees not salvation, but only entrapment. Smith shows Leah's fear of motherhood by once again ironically flipping a Biblical story on its head. The Christ Child, shown in the position of his future sacrifice, both anticipates the horror of the crucifixion story as well as highlights Leah's own decision to abort her pregnancies. In foregrounding this cruciform child image, Smith also presents another element of motherhood: in the world in which Leah grows up, a child is likely to be cruelly sacrificed to society.

Interrupting the regular chapter structure of "Visitation" with one of the many mini-chapters labeled only as "37,"<sup>4</sup> the Madonna miraculously speaks to Leah, which can be read as Leah's hallucination or as yet another of Smith's experimental techniques: "How have you lived your whole life in these streets and not known me? How long did you think you could avoid me?...I am older than this place! Older even than the faith that takes my name in vain" (83). Finishing her speech with a series of existential questions addressed directly to Leah, the Madonna aligns herself with a history that transcends the Judeo-Christian tradition of the medieval church. Knepper points out that the Black Madonna is no longer merely a figure of the Virgin Mary, but also of the prostitute Mary Magdalene and Isis, the Egyptian goddess of fertility and motherhood,<sup>5</sup> writing that "speaking from the fabric of unknown history, her narrative reveals the concealed presence of difference and otherness to the hegemonic order, which has been there all along. Otherness is already encoded and encrypted within the fabric of the neighborhood and the world" (120). This ironic relation of geography to history and myth connects the anxieties of motherhood to those of the immigrant and the marginalized, in addition to questioning the dual role of fertility: women have the power to generate life yet doing so

requires them to give up some of themselves and reckon with the consequences of the suffering that their children might face.

While Leah's paralysis at the end of the novel seems to be centered around these anxieties of motherhood, it is also caused by her self-obsession and fatalistic view of life. In these final passages, Natalie attempts to bring Leah out of her lethargy, telling her that she doesn't believe that Leah is despondent because she doesn't want a child. Leah says, "I just don't understand why I have this life [...] You, me, all of us. Why that girl and not us. Why that poor bastard on Albert Road. It doesn't make sense to me" (399-400). Referring to Shar and Felix, who she recently finds out has been mugged and murdered, Leah reveals her belief that she has no control over her own path or destiny, even to the point of abandoning any attempt to change. Yet that it "doesn't make sense" to her is puzzling because of her essentialized view of identity. Smith here prompts the reader to make sense of it as well; she asks why Leah hasn't wound up like Shar or Felix given that she has made little effort not to. By offering no real answer here, Smith aligns herself with neither the neoliberal opportunist nor the identity politics-focused multiculturalist, suggesting that the way to "make sense" of their individual lives lies somewhere between these two ideologies.

Smith shows the radical difference between the two characters in Natalie's strident response to Leah's question: "'Because we worked harder,' she said, laying her head on the back of the bench to consider the wide open sky. 'We were smarter and we knew we didn't want to end up begging on other people's doorsteps. We wanted to get out'" (400). While Natalie's opinion shows her unwavering faith in the neoliberal values of self-sufficiency and the promise of social mobility, it also implies that she and Leah possess some sort of quality that enables them, through their intellect, to be the kind of people that do "get out." Commenting on this

exchange, Jesse van Amelsvoort plays on the words “roots” and “routes” in order to show Leah’s and Natalie’s opposing views of social mobility and opportunity. Drawing on Paul Gilroy’s concept of a convivial society, in which prejudices and inequalities are eradicated,<sup>6</sup> he claims that “Finding a way up is not only a question of individual success or failure but also a function of society and of community . . . If routes were determined only by hard work and not by roots, Gilroy’s convivial society could be achieved more quickly” (430). Thus, he suggests that what someone is able to do in their life (their route) is not merely a product of the choices they make, but also their environment and heritage (their roots). While Leah only relies on her roots to define her and determine her path, Natalie puts all of her faith in an unrooted route into the future—mentalities that mirror the messages of identity politics and neoliberal economics respectively. Leah cannot contemplate being responsible for her own existence. In contrast, Natalie’s self-reliant philosophy paradoxically depends on agency through freedom of choice while being rooted in an essentialist view of human identity, as she believes their intellects are what allow them to “get out”.

### **III: Neoliberalism and Alternative Freedom: Natalie**

“Host,” the third section of the novel, is constructed in 185 numbered vignettes, and may largely be read as Natalie Blake’s thoughts. Born in the council housing of Willesden as Keisha Blake and eventually changing her name to Natalie (a gesture reminiscent of Smith’s own name change), as part of her escape from the community in which she grew up, Natalie befriends Leah after saving her from drowning during a pool party when they were young girls. Of Jamaican descent, Natalie is ostracized by the Irish Hanwells until this theatrical “event” (201), thus setting her up as the race-sensitive, goal-oriented character that she is. Motivated to escape from Willesden in a way that Leah is not, Natalie earns a scholarship to a prestigious college, becomes

a successful lawyer, marries into a rich family, and has the expected two children, all the while growing apart from Leah. Throughout this section, told in fragmented vignettes, Natalie's own self-fragmentation is revealed. Even though she has achieved all of her goals and, at least superficially, overcome her racial and socioeconomic barriers, she is still unsatisfied with the achievements and relationships that result from her life choices. This discontent eventually prompts her to turn to online hookup culture in order to satisfy her boredom and needs. Smith shows with Natalie's story that even when social mobility is achieved, neoliberalism's promise of satisfaction through material consumption and success is merely an illusion.

"Host" invokes both the traditional role of the host in hospitality as that who possesses the power to invite guests into their home at their own choosing based on familiarity, as well as another religious image: the Eucharistic Host. Hosting is maintaining a position of power, yet in the Catholic tradition, the host is a symbol of self-giving sacrifice. Natalie's social rise is the manifestation of her becoming a "host," yet in order to do so, she does sacrifice herself, not in the sense of sacrificing for the good of the other, as did Christ, but in that she loses any sense of a self or an "I" in order to succeed in society. Throughout "Host," the narrator refers to Natalie as "Natalie Blake," which creates her character as an impersonal one.

Smith's narrative technique in this section of the novel creates a separation between the reader and the narrator in that the reader cannot fully understand the workings of the narrator's mind. The novel creates the challenge of psychological connection that the characters face with each other as well as with the reader, suggesting that *NW* denies the reader the satisfaction of determinacy and the insight that realism offers, and rather brings the reader into the experience and confusion of the narrator. Smith replaces the comfort of the traditional form with the discomfort of existential isolation—a technique indebted to modernist obscurity, again showing

her use of many literary traditions. The dynamic relationship between narrator and reader is most explicit in the “Host” section, in which the reader must piece together the more obscure fragments of Natalie’s story.

Smith uses fragmentation as an experimental feature in her prose both in the numbered, isolated vignettes of Natalie’s section as well as in the content of the narration. Both types of fragmentation show Natalie’s incomplete understanding of herself and her life, as her life becomes reduced to a series of choices in order to achieve material success and overcome the social and racial barriers with which she grows up. Thus, Smith denies her the sort of coherent fullness that would result from a linear, traditional narrative. Even Natalie’s marriage is reduced to an inhuman interaction between two beings who might find each other mutually fulfilling. Vignette 106, “Parklife,” deconstructs Natalie’s and Frank’s relationship as well as their humanity, critiquing the mercenary nature of their marriage:

Female individual seeks male individual for loving relationship. And vice versa.

Low-status person with intellectual capital but no surplus wealth seeks high-status person of substantial surplus wealth for enjoyment of mutual advantages, including longer life-expectancy, better nutrition, fewer working hours and earlier retirement, among other benefits.

Human animal in need of food and shelter seeks human animal of opposite gender to provide her with offspring and remain with her until the independent survival of aforementioned offspring is probable.

Some genes, seeking their own survival, pursue whatever will most likely result in their replication. (270)

Smith here breaks down both Natalie's humanity and the myth of the bliss of marriage by making her relationship into an internet ad, suggesting that if a marriage is merely an interaction between two people, then those people need not be more than mere genes. Also questioning the role of motherhood that she problematizes throughout the novel, Smith shows that, in this commercial view of marriage, women are reduced to producers of children. Despite her education, Natalie is only able to escape the social barriers that she was born into because of her marriage to Frank, a "high-status person of substantial personal wealth" (270), yet she must provide a child as payment for such social mobility, thus completing the transaction.

Though Natalie seems to achieve success, her personal fulfillment is at stake. Smith challenges neoliberalism's promise that anyone can achieve social mobility by presenting Natalie struggling to move up the social ladder because of her social class, race, and ethnicity. Her educational opportunities are limited, and she must marry a wealthy man in order to become successful, showing that she is required to play into the market in order to attain any material success. Jesse van Amelsvoort interprets Natalie's predicament as a critique of a new sort of racism in postcolonial England: "Natalie's story can be read as a story of socioeconomic betterment in which a young, black woman finds a place in the Inns of Court, a symbol of British statehood; however, such a reading leaves out the ways in which class and social mobility in postcolonial Europe is often racialized" (430). His claim, that the struggles which Natalie must go through to achieve this "betterment" should not be ignored, supports Natalie's own idea that "we worked harder" yet also proposes that she should not have had to work harder than other groups in order to accomplish such a betterment. Van Amelsvoort argues that in postcolonial Europe, racism is directed inward instead of outward and that "In our current moment of migration and change, 'there' has become 'here'" (429), thus claiming that "nationalism turns

into racism at home” (429). Therefore, Natalie’s confrontation with this type of racism is not necessarily eclipsed by her social mobility. Natalie experiences this “inward” racism in addition to barriers related to class. Not only does she not belong in the middle class largely owing to her race, but also because of her socioeconomic roots in the housing estates. Even when she earns her way into a prestigious college, she is viewed as part of a “diversity scheme” (259). She is seen as a commodity and a convenient comfort for her white, middle-class colleagues and classmates, who through “accepting” her can convince themselves that they are champions of multiculturalism and diversity.

In the final lines of the novel, in which Natalie expresses her view that “we worked harder,” Smith shows Natalie’s deep-seated opinion that people can shape their own lives based on what they do and what choices they make, regardless of their environmental factors. While this seems to be true in her own life, she loses sight of why people want to be successful: to be happy. Caught up as she is in “getting out” and taking advantage of the radical personal freedom in which she believes, she ultimately alienates herself from herself, her family, and her friends, creating her own philosophy of false happiness: “It occurred to Natalie that she was not very happily married. Happiness is not an absolute value. It is a state of comparison. Were they unhappier than Imran and Ameeta? Those people over there? You?” (NW 298). During this brunch outing, Natalie and her friends talk about globalization and current affairs, while Natalie internally muses over her own emotional state. Smith shows that Natalie’s competitive mentality extends even to the point of comparing and competing with the reader by addressing and drawing them into the narrative with her concluding “You?”. Later in the scene, Natalie’s narrative voice is replaced by a third-person omniscient voice, which reminds the reader of the real reason for her desire for money and success: “The money was not for these poky terraced

houses with their short back gardens. The money was for the distance the house put between you and Caldwell” (300). Natalie is not driven towards something but rather away from it. Unwilling to let her race or social class define her, she uses her agency and freedom of choice to achieve social mobility. However, while doing so, she contradicts herself by viewing her identity as merely defined by her social class. Yet this class rejects her and will always view her as an outsider because of her race—she is always the “local vibrancy” (300)—and she thus faces an impasse: she succeeds in becoming materially successful yet is dissatisfied and alienated by the result.

#### **IV: “Crossing”: Forging a New Path for the Self**

Further questioning “false consciousness” in England, Smith argues in her recent “Fences” essay that “for many people in London right now the supposedly multicultural and cross-class aspects of their lives are actually represented by their staff—nannies, cleaners—by the people who pour their coffees and drive their cabs, or else the handful of Nigerian princes you meet in the private schools”, concluding that “the painful truth is that fences are being raised everywhere in London” (27). Though London may have a diverse population, Smith’s critique is that segregation is still rampant throughout the city, and that while Londoners may praise their culture as multicultural, a true diversity has not yet been achieved. Smith aligns her critique of current multiculturalism and neoliberalism with her exploration of the pressures surrounding motherhood, each of which result in manufactured empathy and false solutions. While abortion and contraception are designed to offer a solution to the anxieties of childbearing and motherhood, Smith shows that the matter is more complex and that women, whether they pursue motherhood or careers, are targets of the market and are viewed as mere functional commodities—either producers of children or contributors to the economy. Leah’s and Natalie’s

struggle with being women is not one in which they face traditional female oppression, but instead one in which they must navigate a new landscape of irreconcilable issues.

The numbered vignette 158, “Conspiracy,” relates Leah and Natalie’s shared struggle with motherhood and their opposite reactions to the perceived pressures of having children in order to be viewed as valuable, contributive members of society:

Natalie Blake and Leah Hanwell were of the belief that people were willing them to reproduce. Relatives, strangers on the street, people on television, everyone. In fact the conspiracy went deeper than Hanwell imagined. Blake was a double agent. She had no intention of being made ridiculous by failing to do whatever was expected of her. For her, it was only a question of timing. (321)

By using the phrase “to reproduce,” Smith shows that this ever-present pressure to have children is of a functional and economic nature—they are being “willed” into having children so that they can be productive in the eyes of the culture. While Natalie succumbs to social pressure to have a child only in order to climb the social ladder and complete her marriage, in contrast, Leah rejects this pressure even to the point of negating her own fertility. However, these choices can be viewed as another instance of the prevalence of otherness in life—a child itself is radically other than the mother while paradoxically being as close and intimate as possible. By showing that each woman rejects the idea of having a child for its own value, Smith demonstrates how they each choose to reject the “other,” in this case a child, rather than seeing the inevitable otherness as a potential for emotional growth.

Natalie, who “had become a person unsuited to self-reflection” (300), relying on her job, her mobile phone, and her busy life to offer her all the engagement she needs, does not have the same experience of motherhood as do her friends, who tell her that having a child is “like

meeting yourself at the end of a dark alley” (323). Yet Natalie feels little of this self-reflection in her experience of motherhood. Her first birth is reduced to a drug-induced experience that reminds her of her past days of partying: “She put her earphones in and danced around her hospital bed to Big Pun. It was not a very dramatic event” (323). What for many women is a “dramatic event,” to Natalie is merely another step to achieve the social position that she desires. Though she resists connecting to her children, Natalie’s alienation from herself is partially reduced by her interaction with her them. In vignette 161, entitled “Otherness,” she has a faint glimpse of this self-reflection in her daughter: “[S]he almost thought she possibly felt it. She looked into the slick black eyes of a being not in any way identical with the entity Natalie Blake, who was, in some sense, proof that no such distinct entity existed. And yet was not this being also an attribute of Natalie Blake? An extension? At that moment she wept and felt a terrific humility” (323-24). In a rare vulnerable moment, Natalie sees herself not as member of a social class (who she knows, what she does) but rather as a being in relation to another. Though bored with her life, marriage, and even her children, Natalie experiences a genuine self-awareness in this confrontation with her child.

The dissatisfaction she feels surrounding her lack of belonging is shown in her decision to turn to online hook-ups at the end of “Host.” This is also evident in her wandering throughout London in her slippers in the penultimate section of the novel, “Crossing.” Though Natalie’s crossing is a physical one in which she traverses neighborhood barriers and physical landmarks with her childhood friend Nathan Bogle, her crossing back to her previous self “Keisha” is an example of how Smith foregrounds spatial crossing in the novel. In this section, Natalie’s lack of identity is made most evident: “Walking was what she did now, walking was what she was. She was nothing more or less than the phenomenon of walking. She had no name, no biography, no

characteristics. They had all fled into paradox” (360). By showing Natalie morphing into the mere phenomenon of walking, Smith gives an extreme example of what she has been building up to in the “Host” section: Natalie has no identity but is merely a reflection of what she does and who she knows. Yet Nathan Bogle calls her out of her reverie, identifying her as “Kiesha Blake.” Both the reappearance of a childhood friend from Willesden and his addressing her by her previous name offer her some sort of anchor on which to rebuild her sense of self.

As she walks with Nathan, continually crossing from neighborhood to neighborhood, Natalie has a series of revelations about her life and her choices. She feels an inescapable “suburban shame” (364), realizes that her boredom with the middle class aligns with her “desire for chaos” (365), and grasps a new understanding of Nathan’s life experience as peculiarly different from hers, despite their shared past. Rejecting his Black Power politics and his criticism of London culture, she tells him: ““Answer the question! Be responsible for yourself! You’re free!”” to which he responds, ““Nah, man, that’s where you’re wrong. I ain’t free. Ain’t never been free”” (382). Here once again Smith complicates the ideas of freedom and social opportunity, while condemning neither character’s conception of their reality. Though they share a background, their lives have significantly diverged, and evidence would show that Natalie is correct in her philosophy that they are all free and responsible for themselves. Yet Nathan’s experience proves otherwise. Smith comes full circle to the phrase, “I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me,” that Leah hears on the radio in the opening pages of the novel, yet she fails to give an answer to whether she believes that Natalie or Nathan is correct, implying that the matter is more complicated than their black and white conceptions of it.

Natalie’s final realization in her journey with Nathan centers on the value of her life. The final crossing in the section is over a bridge, which Natalie sees from a new perspective: “Natalie

had forgotten that the bridge was not purely functional. She tried her best but could not completely ignore its beauty” (383). Given her own dedication to the functionality of her existence, this line suggests that Natalie has made progress in her view of herself to the extent that she can begin to see her own beauty and identity rather than merely her productivity and social class. Yet she must cross this bridge to reach that point, and in doing so, she nearly jumps off, thinking of this suicidal act as a legitimate choice in which to “rupture” the arc of her dissatisfied life: “She could see the act perfectly clearly, it appeared before her like an object in her hand—and then the wind shook the trees once more and her feet touched the pavement. The act remained just that: an act, a prospect, always possible” (385). As Nathan again calls her to “step down,” Natalie’s choice to obey him and live is deliberately left obscure. Whether Nathan, or the wind in the trees, or Natalie herself changes her mind, neither the reader nor Natalie are given any conclusive insight: “She did not know what had been saved exactly, nor by whom” (385). Just as an “event” brought Leah and Natalie together across social and racial divides when they were children, this possible “act” serves as an “event” that brings Natalie to a new awareness of herself. Though Smith does not offer a radical shift in character or a cathartic moment of revelation for Natalie, this crossing of the bridge shapes the possibility for more authentic fulfillment in her life. Yet here again Smith fails to answer the question of “authorship,” giving the reader the option to believe that either Natalie has saved herself or has been saved by some outside force.

In the final scene, Natalie rescues Leah from her depression by telling her that she suspects that Nathan is one of Felix’s murderers, and the two women finally come together with a shared purpose. Calling the authorities to turn in Nathan, their heads are “pressed together over a handset,” reminding them of their childhood adventures. The two crucial lines in this closing

paragraph illuminate Natalie's final synthesis: "Natalie dialed it. It was Keisha who did the talking... 'I got something to tell you,' said Keisha Blake, disguising her voice with her voice" (401). By combining both of Keisha/Natalie's names, Smith implies that she has reached a place where she no longer must choose between her past or her present and that she has achieved a sort of hybridity in her "crossing."

Smith examines the phenomenon of voice and different types of speech as a symbol of class in London in her essay "Speaking in Tongues": "Whoever changes their voice takes on, in Britain, a queerly tragic dimension. They have betrayed that puzzling dictum 'to thine own self be true'... Something's got to give—one voice must be sacrificed for the other. What is double must be made singular" (134-35). Keisha/Natalie experiences this exclusionary expectation throughout her life, forced to give up one voice and name in order to achieve the other. Yet here at the end of the novel, she rebels against this binary opposition showing that she does not need to be only Keisha or only Natalie but can be both. This final paragraph exhibits the possibility that both fluid, self-created existence and anchored, essentialized being can coexist. Smith supports this conception of selfhood in her essay "On Optimism and Despair," saying, "If novelists know anything it's that individual citizens are internally plural: they have within them the full range of behavioral possibilities. They are like complex musical scores from which certain melodies can be teased out and others ignored or suppressed, depending, at least in part, on who is doing the conducting" (41). To Smith, at least for Keisha/Natalie, the self does not have to be consistent, but can be changeable while remaining itself. Yet, it needs something "conducting" it, and that something is oftentimes not the individual alone, but a myriad of other factors, such as community, race, gender, class, and intellect.

Smith ends the novel in *medias res*, leaving many aspects of the story unanswered. Her “Notes on *NW*” offers some relief to the ambiguity and even anticlimactic nature of the ending. She writes that an unconscious inspiration for the novel was Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure*: “I’ve always loved the ‘problem play’ as a form, which I think of as a situation in which not everyone ends up happy, nor everyone bleeding or dead. Problem plays seem closest to the mixed reality of our lives. ‘Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall’—that line is embedded deep in *NW*” (249). In another interview she says, “The things which tire me in fiction are a kind of fake aphoristic wisdom or this obsession with judgement. I think comic novels are always about judgement one way or another. But the question is, is there another way of being in the world rather than judging it all the time?” (interview with Jane Zwart). Read in tandem, both these statements illuminate Smith’s project in *NW*: she wishes not to judge her characters but rather to explore what it means for them to exist in their environments. They receive no ethical moment of triumph at the end of the novel, but rather continue muddling through their lives in the best way that they can, neither rewarded for their virtue nor punished for their sins. In this exploration, though she does not judge her characters, Smith critiques the culture in which they live, implying that it is the culture that forms the individual rather than the individual that shapes the culture. Thus, her critique transcends the writing, proving her to be not just a powerful novelist but one of the most important public intellectuals of our time. As her critical views have changed in response to the fluctuating global and economic dynamics, she has shown her forward-looking vision, leaving her readers to wonder what she will next critique, or even predict, amidst this constantly changing political and cultural landscape.

## Notes

1. In his essay “Neoliberalism and False Consciousness Before and After Brexit in Zadie Smith’s *NW*” James Arnett claims that Smith shows the obstruction of neoliberal economics and politics on the individual’s experience: “Charting the distinction between knowing and feeling is what permits her to frame the dilemma of contemporary subjectivity as the tension between the ability to intellectually perceive one’s subjugation to capitalism and the affective experience of nevertheless feeling like a free subject under the aegis of neoliberalism’s identity-empowering ideologies” (1).

2. At the conclusion of “Guest”, Felix is on a train and across from a group of young men who have put their feet up on the seats, taking more seats up than necessary. A very pregnant white woman asks Felix to ask one of his “friends” to move his feet, assuming that they are all together since they are all black. Even though they are not his friends, Felix asks them to move their feet and they grow angry at him for involving himself in business that is not his. Finally, Felix gives up engaging them and offers his seat to the pregnant woman. Later that night, the group of young men jump Felix in an alley, steal his earrings, and stab him to death. His murder complicates the racial tensions between the black and white community as well as centers pregnancy in Felix’s section of the novel.

3. Though Black Madonnas appear throughout churches in Western culture, many of their origins remain unclear. Warner points out that this mystery, while most likely resulting from explainable physical events, creates the opportunity to view the Virgin Mary in a new way, shifting the purely Western perspective of Mary into the broader notion of the female goddess: “Some images are carved in ebony, but another theory about their color is even more prosaic: that the smoke of the votive candles for centuries has blackened the wood or the pigment, and

when artists restored the images, they repainted the robes and jewels that clothed the Madonna and Child but out of awe left their faces black. Awe, however, did not arise from simple veneration of their sacred image—many icons have been wholly repainted many times—but also probably because the mysterious and exotic darkness of the countenances has rapidly inspired a special cult. In Catholic countries, where blackness is the climate of the devils, not the angels, and is associated almost exclusively with magic and the occult, Black Madonnas are considered especially wonder-working, as the possessors of hermetic knowledge and power” (280-281).

4. The number 37 appears throughout the book and seems to lend some sort of obscure quality to the narrative. Though the mystical association of the number is one of opportunity and connection, Knepper explains its significance in the text: “Thus, the number 37 may represent a call for unanticipated unity and fortuitous connection, but its actual presence in the narrative calls attention to the disrupted communal fabric of the neighborhood, particularly through economic disparity.” (119) As Knepper explains, the events that take place in the “37” chapters are those of the interjection of the Black Madonna’s speech, Leah’s abortion, and Shar’s visitation.

5. Smith also explores this alternative tradition of female goddesses in her 2005 novel *On Beauty* with a painting of the Haitian goddess Erzulie.

6. Van Amelsvoort defines Gilroy’s convivial society as “the antidote to exclusionary measures taken and logics operating in postcolonial Europe” (van Amelsvoort 420). The convivial society will engage “with this variety of voices rather than ignoring or actively countering them. Tolerance and openness are central tenets of convivial society, which is informed by certain social spontaneity” (421). Yet this conviviality is inhibited by the postcolonial melancholia (as Gilroy calls it) that results from Britain’s sorrow at the loss of its

empire. This melancholia is directed toward the immigrants and diaspora populations who do not fit into the nationalistic view of England. John McLeod, in *Beginning Postcolonialism*, argues that nationalism results from the Western myth of the nation, in which borders are fixed and exclusion is necessary: “Gilroy invites us to ponder if forms of dissidence derived from Western modernity can really be suited to the task of transforming an unequal prejudicial world. As we noted previously, the nation is first and foremost a Western idea, on which emerged at a certain moment in Western history due to specific economic circumstances. How enabling is it, ultimately, as a tool for anti-colonial nationalist movements that are attempting to challenge their subservience to Western views of the world” (125)? To Gilroy and McLeod, the nation is not a unitive tool but rather a divisive one which necessarily creates divisions and exclusions.

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