

ZADIE SMITH'S *NW*: A COMPASS IN SAD MULTICULTURAL LAND

A Thesis  
by  
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## Abstract

### ZADIE SMITH'S *NW*: A COMPASS IN SAD MULTICULTURAL LAND

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Taking Zadie Smith's most recent novel, *NW* (2012), as its subject, this master's thesis engages in a postcolonial analysis of contemporary multicultural life in London. Smith's return to her childhood North-West London neighborhood, which she introduced to the literary world in her debut novel, *White Teeth* (2000), documents a change in mood reflective of "post-catastrophe" England. A more severe social commentary than *White Teeth*, *NW* is preoccupied with human connectedness and social responsibility. Enacting its theme, *NW* privileges character over plot; therefore, this thesis engages in-depth character analyses of Felix, Nathan, Natalie, and Leah. A postcolonial attitudinal history of Empire, framed by Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia*, underlies these four analyses. Major themes developed are the tense present of twenty-first century London, the haunting reality of institutionalized racism, the conflict between roots and routes ("up and out"), and the imperative to attend to spectral communities. In her sobering, troubled portrait of the city's urban neighborhoods, Smith offers hope through a convivial society that values justice and benevolence, and is responsive to others' needs.

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I end with a deep sense of gratitude for every experience that has brought me here. “I look behind me and You are there, then up ahead and You are there, too — Your reassuring presence, coming and going” (Psalm 139).

## **Dedication**

To my grandparents, Thomas and Jean Childress.

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## INTRODUCTION • North West

### I. Zadie Smith: Home, Again

In her introduction of critical essays on the works of Zadie Smith, Tracey Walters calls the novelist, essayist, and short story author one of today's "most successful, well-known Black and British writers" (1). Smith leapt into the international literary spotlight with her highly acclaimed and award winning debut novel *White Teeth* (2000).<sup>1</sup> Smith's subsequent publications include three other fictional works, *The Autograph Man* (2002), *On Beauty* (2005),<sup>2</sup> and her most recent novel, *NW* (2012), which is the subject of this thesis. Smith also has authored a collection of critical essays, *Changing My Mind* (2009); edited several short story anthologies, including *The Book of Other People* (2008); and been a long-time contributor to *The New Yorker*. In fact, prior to the North American release of *NW*, the magazine published an excerpt from the novel entitled "Permission to Enter." Smith joined the faculty of New York University's Creative Writing program as a tenured professor in 2010, and now commutes between Manhattan and London with her husband, Nick Laird, and their two children.

Born in 1975 in Brent, North West London, Smith grew up just four miles from the Queen's Park area where she currently resides for part of each year. Brent is also four miles from the Kilburn High Road and a mere two miles from Willesden, both locations of significance to *NW*. This *home turf* also serves as the setting for *White Teeth*, which logically invites interpretation of Smith's most recent novel in light of her first. Both



works are set in the North West London of Smith's childhood, address life in contemporary multicultural London, and explore postcolonial identification. Despite these similarities, more reviewers contrast than compare the two works. Writing for *The New York Review of Books*, Joyce Carol Oates manages to do both by reading *NW* as a "companion novel" to *White Teeth* (27).

As a companion piece, *NW* reflects changes in Smith, herself, since last she set a novel in Willesden. Now an established literary figure responding to both external and internal expectations, Smith challenges herself to push the boundaries of the novel, as evidenced throughout *Changing My Mind*. Smith brings to *NW* not only increased professional self-consciousness, but also the increased self-awareness that comes with maturity. In an interview with Danish journalist Synne Rifbjerg, Smith said of *NW*, "I wanted to write about midlife and how things become complicated." Above all, though, Smith is now talking to her younger self about *Sad* (and Unfortunate) Multicultural Land.<sup>3</sup> The "cheerfulness and delight" that characterized multicultural politics on the eve of the millennium, and that shaped *White Teeth*'s "Happy Multicultural Land," are noticeably absent in *NW* (McLeod 242; *White Teeth* 384).

In his review of *NW* for *Dissent*, David Marcus credits Smith as one of the first contemporary writers to be labeled an "hysterical realist," but notes her writing's turn from "narrative acrobats" and "exuberant experiment" after the tragedies of September 11, 2001 and July 7, 2005 (68).<sup>4</sup> Marcus quotes Smith's reflection on the necessity of sobering up: "These are hysterical times. Any novel that aims at hysteria will now be effortlessly outstripped . . . Actually, I am sitting here . . . looking at a blank screen, finding nothing funny, scared out of my mind like everybody else . . . Most mornings I

think: death of the novel? Yeah, sure, why not?" (69). Smith's most recent work reflects the twenty-first century's shift in geopolitical mood in interesting ways. Unsurprisingly, an atmosphere of fear and distrust not found in *White Teeth* pervades *NW*. In fact, Oates reads *NW* as a "nuanced portrait of multiracial culture in the throes of a collective nervous breakdown" (27). A more severe social commentary than *White Teeth*, *NW* is preoccupied with empathetic connection, as well as "today's growing inequality" (Marcus 69).

In their responses to *White Teeth*, "critics applauded Smith's ability to address a multiplicity of themes—religious fundamentalism, postcolonialism, hybridity, aesthetics, and multiculturalism—in a single novel, complemented by a touch of humor" (Walters 2). *The Autograph Man* and *On Beauty* continue in thematically similar veins, and, as in *White Teeth*, Smith continues to probe issues of national and cultural identity with racially complex characters. Even though *NW* registers a noticeable change in mood, it maintains thematic continuity with these earlier works. The novel's major themes, as I will argue throughout this thesis, include postcolonial/multicultural identification, haunting, inverse selves, roots/routes, channeling, and a call to awakened consciousness.

Always stylistically and thematically rich, Smith's work lends itself to interpretation through a range of lenses. Frequently, Smith is read alongside other postcolonial and postmillennial writers, such as Andrea Levy and Monica Ali.<sup>5</sup> Smith's engagement with the topics of nationhood, diaspora, cultural alienation, generation, multiculturalism, hybridity, and ethnic identity invites postcolonial analysis; and it is through a postcolonial frame that this thesis will contribute to the emerging body of scholarship on her fiction (Walters 3-5).

Identity politics in Smith's work usually are understood through racial and cultural perspectives, but a small body of scholarship considers gender issues within her novels and short stories (Walters 5). Connecting Smith more closely to the Black female literary tradition, a few transatlantic readings show Smith's work in conversation with that of African American women writers, such as Zora Neale Hurston and Toni Morrison (Walters 5).

However, Smith's writing is most often compared to that of white authors. Reviewers of *NW*, for example, liken this latest novel variously to James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*, Martin Amis's *Lionel Asbo: State of England*, Ben Fountain's *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, Michael Chabon's *Telegraph Avenue*, and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*.<sup>6</sup> Given that Smith's showy maximalist and metafictional play is still present in *NW* (e.g. digression, reference, stream-of-consciousness), the novel invites comparison with some of these works in points of form and style. Other ties run deeper, however, as Smith's NYU colleague, Darin Strauss, notes. He links Smith with Fountain and Chabon in their attention to weighty, "big-ticket" issues: race and fame, personal and civic responsibility, how to maintain a sense of self in an *overwhelmed society*" (Strauss 35, emphasis mine).

Significantly, given these comparisons, Smith's work also contributes to establishing "the Black British canon" (Walters 3-6). At the same time, her novels and short stories blur the line between the Black British literary tradition and the British literary tradition by drawing attention to the complex meaning of Britishness in a "convivial" culture<sup>7</sup> (Walters 3-6; Gilroy xv). In "Remediating Turning Points for Conviviality and Englishness in Contemporary Black British Literature," Anna Rettberg

identifies Smith as one of the novelists positively redefining what it means to be a Londoner, and therefore English, in a multicultural milieu. Smith's work showcases the heterogeneity of the modern metropole through: the "interwoven lives of multiethnic families;" the "hybridity of contemporary youth culture;" and the "quest for a new [national] identity that averts the idea of a colonial, white-dominated Englishness" (Rettberg 180-81). By setting novels in the London neighborhood where she grew up, Smith replaces past literary images (*e.g.* of "traditional, rural . . . landscape") with new ones: new landscapes, new scenarios, and a new "set of stories" characterized by the urban and the multicultural (Rettberg 187-88, 179).

## II. Critical Context

There is, as yet, little published scholarship on *NW*; therefore, I have turned to its reception history, as well as to scholarly articles addressing relevant themes in Smith's three previous novels. Ranging from praise to pan, reviews of *NW* are mixed, but almost all speculate about Smith's authorial intention. Many reviewers apply, as an interpretive lens, Smith's theoretical musings in "Two Directions for the Novel," published as part of her 2009 collection of essays. When combined, the various reviews cluster around a few pervasive themes: geography, class inequality, and a hopelessness befitting a post-9/11 & 7/7 world.

A number of reviewers identify ideas of class/social inequality, climbing, and entrapment. In the *Times Literary Supplement*, Kate Webb argues that Smith's postmodern play with the novel's form is a "freedom that stands in instructive contrast to *NW*'s trapped inhabitants" (19). Webb describes Smith's London as profoundly

pessimistic, a place where people trade utopic dreams for self-preservation (19). Marcus also discusses the hopelessness of *NW*, calling it a story about the trauma of poverty, which turns a gaze toward “the painful immobilities of class” (70). While Marcus does not refer directly to John McLeod’s contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of London*, he seems to echo McLeod’s theories of twenty-first century London fiction as 1) responding to a time charged with tension and fundamentally changed by terror, and 2) documenting the city’s “spectral communities” (e.g. illegal workers, asylum seekers, prostitutes, the poor) (258). Referencing Paul Gilroy’s assertion that, after 9/11, the novel should aim to build new consciousness, McLeod charges today’s writers to 1) probe ideas of a modern “moral vacuum,” and 2) use their creativity to “help us contest and think through the human capacity for violence and cruelty” (254, 257). *NW* accomplishes both. The novel stages face-to-face encounters with representatives from the city’s spectral communities and encourages consideration of the addiction, poverty, and desperation that claim ownership of human lives. The theme of haunting, which I primarily trace through Natalie’s confrontation with Nathan, reckons with the fear and dread in which these communities are held. The shocking and senseless death of Felix also requires reckoning with human cruelty. Reflecting on Felix’s brutal murder in her review, Oates ties *NW*’s violence to the social and economic immobility of its characters: “the ‘fixed coordinates’ of their lives are finally suffocating and lethal” (28).

In stark contrast to the idea of entrapment in the novel is that of the agency available in expansive urban spaces. John Clement Ball, in *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis*, catalogues literary strategies used

by citizen-migrants and their children to “reterritorialise” London (“Immigration and postwar” 222). Vast and complex, Ball explains, the city can only be written about through satire, metaphor, and hyperbole, or by “descriptive downsizing” and “miniaturizing” (*Imagining London* 4, 8). For example, in his review of *NW* for *Contemporary Literature*, David James interprets Smith’s narrative as a sequence of scenes—sometimes “miniature profundities” but more often the “inconsequential moments” of characters moving through everyday life (208). Several scholars writing about Smith’s earlier works point out that even one London postal code (*e.g.* NW) is too complex, *too much*, to represent. Building on the idea of London neighborhoods as overcrowded with overlapping connotations, Laurent Mellet, in “‘Just keep on walking in a straight line’: allowing for chance in Zadie Smith’s overdetermined London,” argues that only in transit can a Londoner discover truths about himself and his city. These in-between and fluid spaces, however, are also where chance intervenes and overwhelms purpose—as, I will suggest, it does to Felix.

Broader theoretical arguments by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* and Gilroy in *Postcolonial Melancholia* frame Mellet’s work. Bhabha argues that the presence of migrants in the metropolitan center splinters the received binaries upon which systems of reference and representation are based (*e.g.* black and white, Caribbean and English) (217). By disrupting and disintegrating these systems, foreignness opens an in-between “third space” that both produces anxiety and allows “newness” to enter the world (Bhabha 219). For Gilroy, this anxiety gives rise to “melancholia,” while the opened, new space gives rise to “conviviality” (90, xv). City life entails constantly bumping into many different types of people, and such interactions, when repeated over

time, yield multiculturalism. Gilroy's conviviality is the result of daily encounters with difference: "the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere" (xv). Gilroy goes on to explore conviviality not as the absence of racism, but as the openness to Otherness that renders nonsensical any notions of "closed, fixed, and reified identity" (xv). Especially when read as a companion piece to *White Teeth*, which is often viewed by scholars in a convivial light, *NW* is naturally understood in terms of cohabitation and interaction—conviviality with local specificity of place (within Willesden). Gilroy's accounts of conviviality and of postcolonial melancholia are central to my reading of *NW*.

Those interested in Smith's treatment of urban spaces often consider her various deployments of multiculturalism, postcolonial identity, and generation, as well as how her works align with or diverge from the larger body of postcolonial fiction. Like Gilroy, Dave Gunning, in *Race and Antiracism in Black British and British Asian Literature*, defines the contested term multiculturalism as the "dominant mode of antiracism in Britain" (150). Interpreting *White Teeth*, Gunning argues that Smith's multiculturalism is characterized by: 1) unpredictability (confused and comic); 2) ethnic identification deriving from reappropriated history; and 3) constant character re-invention (149). All three—unpredictability, historical reappropriation, and self-invention—have carried over into *NW*. In *The New Republic*, reviewer Ruth Franklin posits that *NW*'s characters' quests to construct identities *are*, in fact, their identities—an idea that *The Nation*'s reviewer Alexandra Schwartz also picks up, reading Natalie either as Smith's "vessel" for "self-as-construct" identity politics or as a disheartening, "ominous" commentary on

people today (43, 44, 41). To develop the theme of channeling, I will argue that Natalie is the former—Smith’s vessel for self-authorship and performative identity. I also will argue that Leah is the vessel for the novel and its ideals.

In his contribution to *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*, Kris Knauer uses Gilroy’s model of “intergenerational adaptation” to argue that the primary criterion of a Londoner’s self-identification is generation: “London’s landmark quality is perhaps that its diverse communities are porous and not sealed off from each other,” a characteristic that mainly benefits the second generation, who have more in common with each other than they do with their parents or their ancestral homelands (174). Ball also finds the second-generation, *born-and-bred* Londoners to be fully immersed in the present. Unlike their parents, they experience the city as fluid and dynamic, and therefore risky and tense—as do Felix and Nathan. Referencing theorists like Bhabha and Gilroy, as well as Stuart Hall and Mary Louise Pratt, who portray London as a site of “productive disorder and intermixture . . . stimulating the imagination to roam in both familiar and ‘previously unthought’ directions,” Ball emphasizes the fluid, in-between space open to the second generation for “continuous play” with identity (*Imagining London* 15, 25, 14). Extending this discussion of transcultural and transformative spaces in her article, “The Image of London as Cultural Mosaic in Novels Written by Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Monica Ali and Zadie Smith,” Simona Veronica Abrudan Caciora explores these spaces’ capacity to dissolve, as well as craft, identity. Writing as if she knew *NW*’s Natalie personally, Abrudan Caciora concludes that a hybrid Londoner’s self-definition will directly parallel that individual’s efforts to escape class and ethnicity.



Guides to postcolonial fiction often note the ways Smith reflects, challenges, and diverges from postcolonial conventions. For example, in *A User's Guide to Postcolonial and Latino Borderland Fiction*, Frederick Luis Aldama suggests that postcolonial fiction only works well when readers can easily identify with culturally different characters. Smith lures readers into *White Teeth*, Aldama argues, by appealing to recognizable, universal emotions, like laughter and surprise; then, she pushes readers' "emotive and cognitive limits in newly pleasurable and surprising ways" (106). In *NW*, Smith again appeals to universal, albeit different, emotions like shock, disgust and depression. With *NW*, Smith also stretches readers emotively and cognitively, but she pulls them into a far less comfortable place than she does with *White Teeth*.

In her unique interpretation of Smith's first novel, "Streets and Transformation in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and 'Stuart,'" Patricia McCallum focuses on London's angry and violent streets. Reading *White Teeth* through the lens of Smith's short story "Stuart" (1999), McCallum throws light on the novel's thugs and drama. *NW* extends the danger narrative further still. In fact, it turns decisively toward destruction. As *Harper's* reviewer Christine Smallwood astutely observes, "Felix and Nathan Bogle are the first characters in a Zadie Smith novel to be really ruined—to be finally, irredeemably done away with" (89). In another unconventional interpretation of Smith's work, "Chance and Gesture in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*: A Model for Multicultural Identity," Jonathan P.A. Sell argues that identity is entirely a "socially pragmatic strategy" (37). Sell defines "gestures" as representations of identity that may be false, deleted, or changed quickly, depending on the situation; and his thoughts figure prominently in my reading of Natalie.

### III. Approach

Likely guided by the book's title, several reviewers interpret North West London as the "force shaping the narrative" (Hoffert 64). Reviewer Anakana Schofield, writing for the *National Post*, employs maps and directional imagery to extend that interpretation more concretely. Describing *NW*'s plot as "consumed with cartography . . . a psychological ordinance survey map of Willesden and its surroundings," she finds the four character sections to be "redolent of the compass" (Schofield WP17). Borrowing Schofield's metaphor of the compass, I connect each of the four main characters with one of the four cardinal directions, and dedicate a chapter to each. "Strong characters" hold pride of place over *NW*'s plot, which has been called "skeletal" and "almost non-existent" (Lorentzen 22; Moore). Adopting the novel's character-based structure for this thesis, I undertake in-depth analyses of Felix, Nathan, Natalie, and Leah, all of whom grew up at the same time in the Caldwell Housing Estate. I do, however, take the liberty to present the four character sections in a different sequence than they appear in the text: so first Felix•East•"Guest," then Nathan•South•"Crossing," then Natalie•North•"Host," and finally Leah•West•"Visitation." As if singing, "it's a new dawn, it's a new day, it's a new life for me, and I'm feelin' good," Felix heads out confidently into a day of necessary closures and promising beginnings, only to find that his plans will end East of Eden (Fischer 25).<sup>8</sup> Two halves of a compass needle pointing in opposite directions, Nathan and Natalie stand in stark contrast to one another. While Nathan, a homeless, drug-addicted pimp who commits murder in narrative time, could not fall much lower, Natalie is forever climbing upward into greater respectability and privilege. Nathan has

long been spiraling “South,” while Natalie’s upward path orients her “North.” Watching sunsets and wary of the clock’s ticking, Leah is “West.” Though the novel begins with Leah’s story, this thesis ends with her section, because, as I will argue, her encounter with the Black Madonna conveys the novel’s overarching message.

#### IV. Starting East • “Guest”

As an arguably self-contained story, Felix’s section is indicative of his move into the housing estate at the age of eight: he arrived “too late . . . to make good friends. To do that you had to be born and bred [Caldwell]” (*NW* 116). Though not quite a familiar face to the other main characters, Felix is local. Determined to escape his dead-end path by distancing himself from addiction and negative influences, he believes that he is “moving up in the game” with his new girlfriend, Grace (*NW* 181). Regarded by many reviewers as the most endearing character, Felix is also thoroughly postcolonial: second-generation, occupied with the present and looking toward the future, interacting with London’s diverse communities—a savvy, street-smart Londoner. The only character to leave Willesden in narrative time, Felix represents a tragic take on Mellet’s argument that movement between destinations connects characters in new transfers of energy.

“Guest” revolves around Felix’s visits with his father, Lloyd, and his former lover Annie. His interactions with them offer the reader an attitudinal history of Empire, one that thoroughly aligns with Gilroy’s diagnosis of “postimperial melancholia” (90). Because Annie so closely resembles “melancholia” and Felix so closely resembles “demotic multiculturalism,” Gilroy’s essays in *Postcolonial Melancholia*, “On Living with Difference,” “Has It Come to This?” and “The Negative Dialectics of Conviviality,”

became the primary lenses for this project (99). The terms “*passed* past,” “*tense* present,” and “*forever guest*,” inspired by Gilroy’s discussions, along with his own terms (e.g. “conviviality”), constitute the conceptual vocabulary of my thesis.

#### V. Moving South • “Crossing”

Marginalization defines Nathan’s section in *NW*. It is the shortest of the four, and is hijacked by Natalie. As Natalie and Nathan talk, he recounts his mother’s warning: “Everyone loves a bredrin when he’s ten. After that he’s a problem. Can’t stay ten always . . . She was trying to tell me something true” (*NW* 376). Nathan lives out the *thug* script he is handed without making any attempt to rewrite its limitations. He therefore represents the reality of institutionalized racism, as well as London’s “spectral communities” (McLeod 258). His surname, Bogle, even suggests that he is a nightmarish bogymen. He certainly haunts Natalie, and even big-hearted Leah admits avoiding him (*NW* 51). Probing moral consciousness, Smith denies Leah, Natalie, Felix, and, most importantly, her readers, the liberty of looking away from the addiction, prostitution, and poverty that claim authorship of Nathan’s life.

#### VI. Heading North • “Host”

Representing Sell’s ideas about identity as “gesture,” Natalie neé Keisha’s entire story is told in sequential, episodic memories of pragmatic self-invention. Before she is even a teenager, “Keisha experience[s] an unforgettable pulse of authorial omnipotence. Maybe the world really was hers for the making” (*NW* 207). She renames herself, acquires a husband who “looks like he was born on a yacht somewhere in the Caribbean

and raised by Ralph Lauren,” and becomes an accomplished barrister (*NW* 241). With innovating energy, she remakes and insinuates herself into the privileged position of Hostess. However, “ambitious though she was, she was still an NW girl at heart” (*NW* 259). In addition to producing newness on her route up and out, she also produces inconsistency with her roots, which must be resolved. She is haunted by the admonition to *keep it real* until *NW*'s culminating scene.

## VII. Arriving West • “Visitation”

The most multicultural character, inasmuch as she is consistently attracted to difference, Leah is unhesitatingly open to identities and ideas. She is so suffused with Otherness, in fact, that she lacks room for a substantive self. Yet, as such, Leah is uniquely able to channel the conviviality of Willesden. She also is powerfully drawn to the neighborhood's spectral communities through Shar, a drug-addled prostitute. Repeated encounters with Shar leave Leah questioning her significance, privilege, and social responsibility. Carrying her questions to the shrine of St. Mary's, Leah becomes the channel for Smith's call to consciousness. Particularly through Leah, but also throughout *NW*, Smith responds to the challenges of Gilroy and McLeod to use the novel to build new moral consciousness and give rise to a more empathetic responsiveness to need.

## FELIX • EAST • “GUEST”

In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Gilroy explores twenty-first century England as a culture of “melancholia” suffering from “pathology of greatness” (89). Gilroy argues that the country’s continued glorification of “the anti-Nazi war” stems from a post-imperialist longing for a *passed* past: global greatness and hegemony, as well as a national culture homogenous and uncomplicated, “both comprehensible and habitable” (89-90). Gilroy maintains that England has not properly faced, and certainly not grieved, either the “loss of imperial prestige” or the “loss of any sense that the national collective was bound by a coherent and distinctive culture” (90). Because the Empire’s legacy is a “source of discomfort, shame, and perplexity,” it is placed on a backburner and left covered—or, if inconveniently uncovered, rewritten to “present the British themselves as the ultimate tragic victims of their extraordinary imperial successes” (Gilroy 90, 94).<sup>9</sup> However, Gilroy contends, this setting aside, this salving of the painful loss of the *passed* past, this anesthetizing of any responsibility for (and perhaps even any memory of) colonialism’s brutality and horror, fosters a mindset of postcolonial citizen-migrants as “unwanted alien intruders” (90). The guest is forever a guest, forever an Other; such a way of thinking forever prevents the “possibility of healing and reconciliation” (Gilroy 94). In fact, Gilroy argues, the hostility toward difference only cloaks England’s “hidden, shameful store of imperial horrors” and colonialism’s “practical mechanisms of racial hierarchy” (94).

Considered in light of Gilroy's thoughts on a *forever guest*, it is instructive that Smith entitles Felix's section "Guest." It is equally revealing that almost half of "Guest" is devoted to Felix's relationship with Annie, who is aptly described by Susan Fischer in *The Women's Review of Books* as an "upper-class junkie" (25). Together Annie and Felix's characters juxtapose melancholic decay with hybrid vitality, a remnant of the *passed* past with a shoot of the convivial future. Their encounter and the dynamic between them shed light on the state of present-day multicultural England, laboring under its "pathology of greatness."

Though I do not intend to overplay the connections between Gilroy and Smith, I think it noteworthy that Felix remembers his first glimpse of Annie with her "hair tied in a headscarf like one of those women in the war," calling to mind figures like Rosie the Riveter and Ruby Loftus, images from the final days of England's preeminence (*NW* 162-63).<sup>10</sup> Annie's character represents the upper and upper-middle classes who handsomely benefitted from the Empire and, therefore, were keenest on the "redemptive extension of civilization into barbarity" (Gilroy 94). Twice referred to as "Her Majesty upstairs"—albeit sarcastically—Annie is proud to be the great niece of an (unspecified) Earl and of a matriarchal line presented at the Palace (*NW* 160). Descriptions of her "spell-working" accent suggest proximity to Received Pronunciation (RP), to power and prestige.<sup>11</sup>

Yet Annie is not a woman of power and prestige. She is bankrupt and anorexic, an alcoholic and a drug-addict. Annie presents her parties as glamorous gatherings "filled with the great and good" and suggests her social calendar is a string of soirées, but her reality is rather opposite (*NW* 171). Felix describes the "grimy sameness" of Annie's ramshackle flat: "yellowing old playbills and photos" adorn the walls; raglike curtains

hang in the windows; the Belfast sink<sup>12</sup> is cracked; the chaise lounge is “spring-less”; and “small mountains of spent fags and ash” are piled all about (*NW* 160-61, 176). On her rooftop deck, the paint peels to reveal “rain-ruined wood,” and from the “sea of crap” strewn everywhere rises a sun-warmed stench (*NW* 170-71). Even Annie’s clothes are shabby: she must carefully wrap her silk robe to hide its “gigantic rip” (*NW* 165). The remnants of her blue blood are at best parodied: she wears “mother-of-pearl vintage sunglasses” and listens to classical violins while taking a “heavenly” bath (*NW* 160-62). She half-jokingly calls herself decrepit but all-seriously calls herself “delicate” (*NW* 183, 172). She is diminished by age, as evidenced by infertility and the lengthening and deepening of facial lines, grown more noticeable, Felix believes, in just a few months (*NW* 162). Despite her much-practiced posing, Annie is visibly attenuated by time, ennui, and self-destructive behaviors. On his way to her Soho flat, Felix determines that saying goodbye to Annie will be a “restoring of things to their natural, *healthy* state” (*NW* 161, emphasis mine). While harmful to herself, Annie’s habits are dangerous to Felix, whose last hit was “nine months, two weeks, three days” ago and who now attends weekly AA meetings on Tuesday nights (*NW* 122, 176). Felix has come to tell Annie that, for him, the party is over, and to suggest that it should be for her as well. Annie, though, is afraid of any world other than the one she knows. Presumably she suffers from agoraphobia, but Felix diagnoses instead a fear of the unknown and of Otherness: “she wasn’t really afraid of open spaces, she was afraid of what might happen between her and the other people in them” (*NW* 168-69). Annie’s composite is the picture of Gilroy’s melancholia.



As an embodiment of melancholic England, Annie would rather push aside problems and pretend that all is fine—as fine as it was in the *passed* past. Just as with the cold sore on her bottom lip, she paints over signs that all is not well.<sup>13</sup> Anxiety over lost greatness and uncertainty about the future simmer in the metaphorical covered pot and bubble up into resistance to convivial culture—resistance that perpetuates ideologies of racial hierarchies and white supremacy, thereby continually reinvigorating prejudice against the “problems that strangers and aliens import” (Gilroy 103, 94, 115). Annie’s resistance to cohabitation and interaction is obvious: she does not leave her flat. While amazingly ironic given her intimate relationship with Felix, who is of West Indian and African descent, the notion of cross-racial and cultural mixing is repulsive to her. Describing Willesden, which surely she has not visited anytime in the recent past, if ever, Annie declares it to be “very ‘diverse’” and then distastefully adds, “Lord, what a word” (*NW* 168). As for her relationship with Felix, perhaps its physicality is not so ironic in an Imperial light: England desired the laboring bodies of “West Indians, South Asians and Africans inaugurated by the *SS Windrush* and the 1948 Nationality Bill”—as long as the “dusky (post)colonial brethren” remained marginal (*Imagining London* 223). Annie rather defensively explains that she and Felix, though lovers for five years, have never lived together because they are “from quite different walks of life” and “prefer to keep [their] independence” (*NW* 168). Her *sensitivity* raises two interesting questions. Does she feel she must defend her intimacy with a man of color? Given that intimacy, does she need to make clear that he is neither “in” her bed nor permanently inside of her home? Yes, on both counts! Annie’s world is a recreated microcosm of Empire with “Her Majesty upstairs” at its center. As such, Annie would maintain an appropriate colonial

distance from servants and slaves. Although she cannot deny her sexual intimacy with his body, she can deny the person of Felix, and she does so to maintain the power difference between them. Truly, Annie knows very little about Felix, and what she does know about his culture and interests, she discusses in a disinterested, almost disdainful, way.<sup>14</sup>

Annie's belief that she is Felix's better, both in terms of race and class, suffuses their conversation. When Felix tells Annie that he plans to marry and have children with Grace, she retorts: "I could be moldering in some Hampshire pile at this very moment, covering and recovering sofas with some Baron in perfect sexless harmony. That's what my people do. While your lot have a lot of babies they can't afford or take care of" (*NW* 187). Though particularly venomous because she is hurt, Annie's words make clear her sense of superiority. They also allude to an unproductive (infertile) white England that, like Annie, gazes scornfully down upon a reproductive (fertile) England of color—preferring barrenness to succession. Annie twice mocks Felix's colloquial speech, derides Willesden as a "dinky part" of London, and somehow thinks he will find funny her jokes contrasting the rich and the poor (*NW* 173, 180, 168).<sup>15</sup> Surprisingly, given the condition of her flat and wardrobe, Annie fails to acknowledge her own lack of money; instead, she hides behind a rhetoric of grandeur with adjectives like "vintage" and "antique" (*NW* 160).

Annie also behaves disdainfully toward lighter skin Others. She insists that recent inquiries about her claim for council assistance are a ploy to replace her with a "Russian" who will pay more rent than she does—connoting that Eastern Europeans are the latest group of foreigners to supplant white Londoners (*NW* 163). Worse, however, is Annie's

response to a Norwegian man, employed by a sub-agency working on behalf of the building owner, who rings Annie's doorbell during Felix's visit. Upon looking at his business card, Annie addresses him as "Mr.—I can't possibly pronounce that name" (*NW* 166). Proclaiming the Norwegian's accent "funny," Annie goes on to confuse (probably intentionally) Norway with Iceland by asking about the country's bankruptcy (*NW* 166). When corrected, she responds, "I always get the Nordic ones sort of . . ."—trailing off and "tangling her fingers together," making clear her condescension for and disinterest in all countries other than England. While I have no doubt that Annie hardly minds expressing her xenophobia, her prattle attempts to sidestep making a contribution to the building's improvement and repair. Without inconveniencing her already "severely reduced" habits, Annie has no money to contribute (*NW* 163). By belittling the Norwegian, she makes herself appear to hold the upper hand, even though she does not. In short order, Annie also speaks snidely about her rooftop neighbors, a Frenchman and his Japanese partner, mocking their "miso-stained balsamic glaze cod" and suggesting that they snap a photo of their food for the "Jules et Kim" blog (*NW* 174).

Though Annie certainly would prefer to think that diversity obtains elsewhere (*i.e.* not in her neighborhood), Otherness knocks at her door, appears in her windows, and sits inside her flat. Her self-isolation in twenty-first century London is futile: she is positioned to live convivially, to see sameness through difference. She refuses partially because she likes the order that categories create. However, both the recent migration trends of European citizens and the birth of third-generation interracial children in England complicate the ability to discern difference and identify Otherness at first glance. As a result, Gilroy contends, modern anxieties "lie in the problem of not being able to

locate the Other's difference in the commonsense lexicon of alterity. Different people are still hated and feared, but the timely antipathy against them is nothing compared to the hatreds turned toward the greater menace of the half-different and the partially familiar" (Gilroy 125).

In light of renewed and expanding prejudices, which have been aggravated by the tragedies of 9/11 and 7/7, Gilroy argues that the supremacist theories underpinning colonial horrors— notions of "racial difference and racial hierarchy"—arise from the cultural subconscious to function as a "stabilizing force" (6). Largely unaware of the superiority complex at play, melancholic England deploys a defense of *-isms*. Clearly, any sense of having progressed beyond racism, of moving to a place of true openness to Otherness is simply not valid, because an "anxious, melancholic mood has become part of the cultural infrastructure" (Gilroy 14). Annie proclaims, "I'm not afraid! I've never been afraid," but without a doubt, she is scared to death (*NW* 185). So she retreats to the old order of things, to titles and relics from *simpler* days gone by. Her memories write themselves into myths to which she returns again and again. "Do you remember?" she asks Felix, but he refuses to "be drawn into [her] fond reminiscences" (*NW* 169). Instead, he challenges her with reality. Felix tries to pull Annie from her *passed* past into the *tense* present, because he wants to share with her his hopes for the convivial future.

Interpreting Annie as a representation of England in the throes of "postcolonial melancholia," pathologically preoccupied with a glorified (albeit now faded) past, opens the possibility of interpreting Felix as part of the nation's transformational energy-from-below (Gilroy 90). This energy is what Gilroy calls "demotic multiculturalism": the everyday, organic<sup>16</sup> intermixture that both distinguishes England and offers Her the hope

of becoming a “better country” (99, xiv-xv). It is this energy that challenges England to confront and to own its colonial past, to feel a little bit of shame, and then play a get-to-know-the-Other game (Gilroy 99). Its goal is a nation that values “hospitality, conviviality, tolerance, justice, and mutual care” (Gilroy 99). Felix and Annie, then, meet in the *tense* present at the crossroad upon which England’s multicultural well-being rests. There, Felix challenges Annie’s melancholic *passed* past with the necessary prescription for a healthier, more “mature” future (Gilroy 99). Explaining why he cannot come around anymore, Felix describes his girlfriend, Grace, as educated, focused, and conscious: “Politically conscious, racially conscious, as in she gets it, the struggle” (*NW* 178-79). Grace is in the moment—present here, now, both aware and active. When Annie retorts with snarky word play,<sup>17</sup> Felix fires back: “What are you doing that’s so amazing? What are you getting accomplished?” (*NW* 179). “He did not want to be cruel” but he *did* want to hold up a mirror to Annie’s existence—to her stasis and her sickness (*NW* 180). He asks her to acknowledge the demons that plague their shared pasts of addiction, but she refuses. Resolute in her melancholy, Annie just mocks Felix’s notion of consciousness: “I like conscious types. They’re so much livelier. I find that most people are in a semi-vegetative state” (*NW* 185). She also mocks his ambitions for a better future: “Life’s not a video game, Felix—there aren’t a certain number of points that send you to the next level. There isn’t actually any next level. The bad news is everybody dies at the end. Game over” (*NW* 181). By refusing serious discussion, Annie denies a hopeful future.

Before their conversation ends, though, Annie glances in Felix’s mirror and sees herself reflected as “the ultimate tragic victim” (Gilroy 94). As “England,” she gives

voice to those who, in their defense of the past, understand the British as “passive ‘captives’ of their imperial project” (Gilroy 94). When Felix wonders why Annie insists on attempting to ruin his life, she coldly replies, “How funny . . . but of course that’s how it must seem to you” (*NW* 188). Claiming responsibility for nothing, she speaks only of *her* devastation. Metaphorically, through the occasion of her neighbors’ dropped lunch trays, Annie moralizes, “Now all that’s left to them is to pick up the pieces. Lunch has been ruined . . . but somehow, somehow, they’ll find a way to carry on” (*NW* 177). Annie’s words are significantly like those from 1939, now mass-marketed into cliché: “Keep Calm and Carry On” (*NW* 177). Annie will carry on, while Felix moves on. Annie will not change, and Felix already has. She remains a vessel of “deep-seated urban decay,” while he is vibrantly in flux, transcending, climbing (“The Streets” *qtd. in* Gilroy 120). Felix has no choice but to leave and not look back, and as he walks away from all that Annie represents, he feels “wonderfully, blissfully light” (*NW* 189).

Felix’s breezy pragmatism does not quite align with Gilroy’s ideal for a man of the “ordinary multicultural,” who should be active and involved (124). For Felix, “the personal is eternal” (*NW* 151). While out and about, he bumps into Barnsey, his father’s neighbor of over twenty years. A “proper old leftie,” Barnsey functions as Annie’s class foil (*NW* 133). Also trapped in a *passed* past, Barnsey is something of an Old Labour loony, whose chatter drifts quickly from greetings and “small talk[,] right to the center of things”—to resources, the community, and the old Class Struggle (*NW* 128). Bemoaning the lack of organization among the younger generation, he prods Felix, “You should be angry . . . Felix, you should!” (*NW* 132). Felix, in response, distills the struggle from the

collective to the personal: “I’m more about the day-to-day” (*NW* 133). To Felix, societal change is an abstraction—not meaningless, but unfathomable.

Felix has long known about societal struggle and racial alienation from his parents: his father a Jamaican migrant and his mother a generation removed from Ghana. Among the last generation able to emigrate freely to London in search of *opportunity*, Felix’s father was “left hanging, outside the door as it were, by an exclusionary national ethos”—by “*ad-hoc* barriers to equal treatment in areas such as employment, schooling, and housing” (*Imagining London* 223). Felix’s parents rallied behind “Black Power,” only to find themselves, three decades later, still wondering about their rights under English law (*NW* 122, 130, 125).

Considering the “familial urban world of recent ‘black British’ writing,” Ball observes that born-and-bred writers often confine parent characters to lesser narratives set in domestic spaces (*Imagining London* 224). “Members of the parental first generation, for whom the promise of an open and accommodating Britain was largely betrayed, are shown in a kind of spatial and psychological retreat. They are nostalgic, cautious voices” (*Imagining London* 225). Felix’s father, Lloyd, is an example of such a parent character: “Yeah, old Lloyd . . . still up in the old estate, in Caldwell, yeah, never left. Still Rasta, yeah” (*NW* 116). Wandering “barefoot and bare-chested” over a “thick, synthetic purple pelt, unchanged in twenty years” with his Reggae “loud enough to rattle the letterbox,” Lloyd seems lost in his long-familiar home (*NW* 117-18). Particularly emphasized by the “NO DOORBELL” Post-it at the flat’s entrance, Lloyd is at a “new level of surrender” (*NW* 117). However, when Felix arrives with a photo-essay of the Garvey House, Lloyd’s inner fight resurges.<sup>18</sup> He fervently recounts the oppression of his younger years,

running up against the color bar and encountering prejudice at every turn, especially through discriminatory policing. When Lloyd looks up from the book's pictures and their memories, he bangs his fist against the wall: "Hard times! You lot don't even know. People now . . . 'The struggle!' . . . I *seen* the struggle" (Gilroy 103; *NW* 123). Felix respectfully allows for his father's frustrated retreat and stasis, but he cannot accept that life for himself. For a time, Felix did choose a path of escapism and *social rut*—"getting deep into the drug thing" (*NW* 146). Having recently picked himself up off the floor, though, Felix exudes the vibrancy of a man given a new lease on life (*NW* 146).

Felix long has made use of his name's Latin meaning (*happy, lucky*), deploying it when a little charm might be advantageous. First chatting up Grace at the bus stop, he exclaimed, "Listen: know what 'Felix' means? Happy. I bring happiness, innit?" (*NW* 134). Now, Felix's buoyant demeanor suggests that he is wearing and projecting his happiness. Who brings more happiness to the match when Felix and Grace serendipitously meet is debatable. Asked about Grace in conversation, Felix replies with a smile, "Never been happier in my life . . . to tell you the truth. Changed my life. I tell her, all the time: you're a lifesaver. And she is" (*NW* 151). The symbolism of her name is obvious. Saved by Grace, Felix is now living in last year's future—a likelihood that, at one time, was only "touch and go" (*NW* 157). Aware that he narrowly escaped a dead-end path, Felix holds the outlook of a new convert—his worldview one of undeserved second chances. Grace's hope has been added to Felix's characteristic happiness. Now almost overflowing with optimism and positivity, Felix wants to share his story of redemption, as evidenced by his exchange with Annie.



Grace also affects Felix's focus and ambitions. She persuades Felix to eradicate the negative from his life and direct his energies into self-improvement. "Never. Ignorant. Getting. Goals. Accomplished," she encourages him, interspersing her words with kisses as she leaves in the morning (*NW* 115). A believer in both hard work and lucky breaks, Grace holds that the "universe" responds to intentionality (*NW* 115). She is adamant that Felix promote himself: "You've got to stop letting people disrespect you," she directs him (*NW* 115). All of Felix's plans seek to earn her favor. Therefore when Lloyd, whose many failed relationships have left him wary of women, asks about Grace, Felix bristles. Lloyd, even more distrusting of women than usual since his last romance ended only the week before (his girlfriend moving out with most of the flat, including the lampshades and bath mat), cautions his son against investing too much (*NW* 118-20). Launching into "suddenly Jamaican" lyrical counsel, Lloyd warns: "The man cyan't satisfy the woman, right? Don't matter how much he gives. The woman is a black hole. I've gone deep into the literature, Felix. Biological, social, historical, every kind of oracle. The woman is a black hole" (*NW* 126). Suffocated both by Lloyd's cautionary lecture and the tropical temperature of his father's flat, Felix hastens to leave.<sup>19</sup> He kisses Lloyd's cheek and flees on as light a note as possible: "You give me jokes," he manages, but "I've got to chip" (*NW* 126). Once outside his father's door, Felix must pause to decompress. "Wip[ing] his face and concentrate[ing] on breathing like a normal person," he acknowledges his abrupt exit as the "path of self-preservation" (*NW* 125-26).

Raised by parents who retreated into "familiar but unchanging" family homes, second-generation children, like Felix, come to see domestic spaces as claustrophobic

and prisonlike (*Imagining London* 224-25). To take another example, in *Transmission* by Atima Srivastava, the protagonist's parents annoy her by "keep[ing] the heat turned up 'full blast' in the Finchley house they never seem to leave, 'as if the *desi* vegetables, Indian videos of trashy films, Indian friends were not enough of a re-creation of the life in Delhi'" (*Imagining London* 222).<sup>20</sup> Seeking autonomy from their parents' spaces, these children "escape in favour of the street—the liberation into future opportunities available in and represented by the city as fluid, transformative *space*" (*Imagining London* 225). London's streets promise all the freedoms and convivial delights of an "urban milieu" ("Immigration and postwar" 232). According to Ball, "The urban street is a multivalent space representing, variously, purposive mobility; leisurely strolling; pleasurable consumption; mingling with and spectatorship of others; and collective, carnivalesque celebration" ("Immigration and postwar" 236).

Multiplex spaces, indeed, city streets sometimes are too pregnant with meaning and memory for lifetime Londoners, according to Mellet. Walking the streets of NW6, Felix's mind swims with the observations of a local to whom "every crack in the pavement, every tree root" is familiar (*NW* 194). From a quick glance inside the windows of the newly refurbished Kilburn Tavern, Felix knows that hardwoods have replaced carpet and that the empty corner once fitted a velvet-covered booth:

Where he had sat with his sisters, six little feet not even touching the ground, earnestly listening to Jackie give her leaving speech. Some new man she'd met who made her free. Lived in Southampton, some white guy. At seven you don't know. He didn't know that freedom was

something you could feel. He thought it was something you simply were.

(*NW* 195)

City streets stage numberless existences: on them, many lives act and interact. Yet, contends Mellet, although names are known and histories are shared, residents often avoid eye contact and sidestep connection with each other (189). When the Khan boy stops Felix in greeting outside Grace's flat, Felix's discomfort is clear. Felix submits to a "laborious, complicated handshake" and a hard shoulder punch of recognition, but smiles thinly while answering polite inquiries about his father (*NW* 116). When Khan recalls Felix's cashiering days at the nearby supermarket, Felix cuts the chat short, "glar[ing] over the boy's head to the empty basketball cage across the street in which no-one had every played basketball or ever would" (*NW* 117). Khan's innocuous recollection draws Felix into some past moment better left forgotten, and so no further clues about those cashiering days are offered. Final niceties relocate the conversation to Notting Hill, a more neutral space than the Albert Road, before Felix indicates that he should be on his way.

"To learn from one's past and *go on with one's life*," Mellet argues, a person must "walk across London and design a new urban pattern allowing for chance" (191, emphasis mine). Getting on with his life is precisely what Felix has in mind as he crosses into West London to swap one English relic for another: Annie for the only MG he can possibly afford—circa 1980 and immobile, with a heavily-rusted engine block (*NW* 142). Eventually, the car will be a gift for Grace, and Felix embraces the challenge of restoration: "He would make it move. Maybe not this month or the one after, but finally" (*NW* 157, 141). The parallel between Felix and the MG is obvious: the fixing up

of each is an offering to Grace. Felix's self-improvements include the beginning of a climb, one rung at a time. Like Natalie, Felix's vertical movement overlays horizontal movement: *going somewhere* is a motion simultaneously up and out, out of Willesden. In fact, it was while waiting for a bus to leave Willesden that Felix met Grace:

And, Fee, remember: I weren't even meant to be there. I was meant to *be* at my aunt's in Wembley. Remember? That's the day I was meant to be looking after her kids, but she broke her foot, she was home. So then I was like: might as well get the bus into town, do some shopping. Felix, please don't try and tell me that weren't fate. (*NW* 135)

A leitmotif of postwar London literature, chance encounters are especially common among second and third-generation characters, so often portrayed as out and about (*Imagining London* 224). Analyzing Smith's other novels, *The Autograph Man* and *On Beauty*, as well as *White Teeth*, Mellet finds one of her "most fruitful themes" to be the drawing together of characters, already in motion, not by chance but by an "anti-random force" (187). Clearly this theme continues in *NW*, especially in "Guest." For Mellet, motion, whether pedestrian or via public transport, is essential: "the point is to travel . . . so as to make [London] less determined, to connect with others and allow for chance and randomness, for the event to happen and life to take on some meaning" (193). Intentional "London wanderings," argues Mellet, not only allow for convergence but also encourage self-reflection: the character in motion "meets people and himself and can freely reflect upon his life" (195, 188). Explaining how motion opens up space, which in turn allows for an "emergence of time" and occurrence of the unplanned, Mellet references Archie and Clara's meeting in *White Teeth*: "the entirely random, adventitious

collision of one person with another” (Mellet 190; *White Teeth* 19). Mellet repeats the word “adventitious” to argue that, within openings of space and time, “the world can do something for you” (190). To me, his argument feels more like one for serendipity, for unexpected gain or blessing, like the meeting of Felix and Grace. The chance convergence at the end of “Guest,” however, is anything but a happy accident and certainly cannot result from fate’s favor.

With an argument similar to Mellet’s, Ball directs attention to young protagonists “on the move and on the make in the metropolitan cityscape—dynamically interacting in the public spaces” (*Imagining London* 224). Focusing on street-smart, second-generation characters like Felix, Ball shows causality between mobility and hope. Almost as if writing specifically about Felix (or Nathan, as we shall see next), Ball argues that, “any hope (even when it is tragically wasted), and any real sense of engaged metropolitan belonging, are with the mobile young” (*Imagining London* 225). Ball’s digression points to a darker side of mobility, highlighting the “tragically wasted” potential among London youths in motion, as is the case in “Guest.” In Ball’s complex, realistic view of city life, he addresses the “risk” of “urban existence” (*Imagining London* 225). Along with the freedoms and convivial delights of an urban milieu also come less positive attributes: “the alienating crowd, the perils and pathos of homelessness, the fear of getting lost, and dangers from hostile others” (“Immigration and postwar” 232, 236).

Felix’s encounter with Tyler and Nathan portrays these menacing aspects of the city, as well as the danger inherent in travel and chance interactions. Sitting across from Tyler and Nathan en route to Kilburn Station, Felix finds himself mistakenly assumed to be their friend by a “white woman, hugely pregnant and sweating” and hoping to rest in

the seat where Nathan's feet are propped (*NW* 193). Despite her misassumption that the three hoodie-wearing black men are mates, Felix tries to help. Since Nathan seems lost in a "private delirium," Felix taps Tyler's knee instead (*NW* 190, 193). Tyler's response is one of unjustifiable antagonism: "Why you touching me? . . . Why you asking me. Why don't she ask me?" . . . "Why you tryna make it your business? Who you callin' blud? I ain't your blud" (*NW* 193). To prevent conflict, Felix gives up his seat to the uncomfortable woman. Tyler and Nathan, however, also rise and murmur curses behind Felix before shoulder-charging him as the carriage doors open (*NW* 194). A few minutes later, when Felix turns onto the Albert Road toward Grace's flat, he is shoved to the ground and mocked for no longer being the "big man on the train" (*NW* 197). Felix essentially turns the other cheek: "A feeling of pity came over him; he remembered when being the big man was all that mattered . . . They could have his phone. They could have the lone twenty in his pocket if it came to that . . . Everything he cared about was elsewhere" (*NW* 197). But when the thugs demand his zirconia earrings, a present from Grace, Felix resists and in that moment of resistance, he is fatally stabbed (*NW* 197-98). Whether random or fated, the unfortunate encounter of these men in transit ends with blood spilled on London streets.

McCallum argues that Smith's London streets are full of energies that "bristle with the potential to set off contingent and unexpected violence" (487). Like Mellet, McCallum sees Smith's work as showcasing London's conviviality and the fortuitous encounters that can accompany a coming together of many people. However, also like Ball, McCallum recognizes a darker side to unpredictable encounters. She contends that "multicultural, multiracial, intergenerational streets" are latent with anxiety and,

therefore, might erupt with violent emotion at any time (McCallum 486). To her, London streets are more likely “sites of incipient anger and fury” (McCallum 487). McCallum further contends that “multiple misrecognitions” contribute to the tensions between people in motion (496). Only aware of each other in passing, strangers are interpreted through initial impressions and surface-level guesswork: for example, the pregnant traveler’s misassumption that Felix must be acquainted with the other young black men sitting near him on the Tube (McCallum 496). Tom, the bumbling, Hugh Grant-type who sells Felix the MG, also misrecognizes when he asks for marijuana. Felix responds with a sigh and the Serenity Prayer<sup>21</sup> before more lightly adding, “My girl thinks I’ve got an invisible tattoo on my forehead: PLEASE ASK ME FOR WEED. Must have one of them faces” (*NW* 150). Felix’s invocation of serenity to accept the unchangeable suggests that he is all too familiar with the tensions created by stereotypical, received ideas of Otherness. It is truly tragic when Felix’s life ends only hours later in street violence—violence perhaps triggered by misassumption and misrecognition. The reader can do nothing but pause in shock at his sudden and senseless death.

Marcus opens his review of *NW* by reflecting on Smith’s transition from the hysterical realism of *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man* to a sober realism in *On Beauty*. Smith shifted from “exuberant experiment” to “empathy,” Marcus argues—her more recent fiction intending to generate understanding of “how somebody felt about something” (68). Marcus goes on to categorize *NW* as yet another stylistic transition to “sociological realism,” depicting “the mechanisms and experience of today’s growing inequality” (69). Considering the novel as a whole, I agree with Marcus: “*NW* is, at heart, a tenement novel,” a story of lives shaped by limitations (70). It exists, however,

in distinctly conceived parts, and, like *New York's* reviewer Kathryn Schulz, I see "Guest" as able to stand on its own, a novella within the novel.<sup>22</sup> As such, "Guest" is more a work of sober than social realism. In eighty-five pages, Smith develops a genuinely likeable character and kills him, and his death continues to haunt the reader.

*Reader: wake up! Reader: care!*

In "Visitation," a fight escalates when Leah's husband, Michel, waylays a man he believes threatened her. Leah watches the other pedestrians turn away from the scene: "in the corner of her eye she observes a young white couple in suits crossing the road to avoid them. *No one will help*. She puts her hands together in prayer" (NW 92, emphasis mine). This turning away, while instinctive, is callous nonetheless. The Forsterian imperative to connect, widely documented as the theme of *On Beauty*,<sup>23</sup> also seeps into *NW*. Smith's message, at least in part, is still one of connection and empathy. Now, however, her tone is more accusatory; her text is more a call to action. Smith prods her readers to reappraise their responses to cruelty and violence and, further, to consider how their own insensitive disregard contributes to such problems (McLeod 257)

She does this powerfully. The surprisingly "firm punch" to Felix's side is an equally firm and surprising punch to the reader. In five short lines, that punch leads to Felix's final, unutterable, cry for Grace.<sup>24</sup> Immediately, the 98 bus rumbles by, opening its doors to collect a running girl waving a bus ticket above her head, and "Guest" ends (NW 198). For the reader, there are no comforting words. Neither are there words for Lloyd and Grace. Later, when Natalie reads about the slaying on Albert Road, she sees them: "On a tatty sofa a Rastafarian gentleman sat holding a picture of his adult son. Beside the father sat a beautiful young woman, clutching the left hand of the father



between her own. There was a depth of misery in both these faces that Natalie found she *could not look at in any sustained way*” (NW 393, emphasis mine). Again, Smith makes clear connection’s limits and compassion’s boundaries. *Reader: care!*

In her interview with Rifbjerg, Smith explained that Felix is based on Felicité in Gustave Flaubert’s *A Simple Heart*. Writing “Guest” began as something of a personal challenge for Smith. Could she move an audience to care about the death of a “fantastically ordinary” character? Could she develop Felix’s story in such a way that readers truly would “feel that someone’s been lost?” While Smith initially conceptualized Felix’s novella as a “dare” to herself, her gambit was made real by an “epidemic of stabbings in London, usually, of young black boys by young black boys.” As tragic headline after tragic headline appeared, Smith found herself daily opening the paper with her heart in her throat, afraid she might see the name of her younger brother, or the names of other family members or friends. She also was painfully aware that, for many of her countrymen, the horror of these stabbings was lost either in everyday-ness or elsewhere-ness. For Londoners, Mancs, Brummies, and Scousers living where these stabbings occurred, desensitization took hold, as exemplified in *NW* by the pitiless matter-of-fact assessment of Felix’s murder by the kid on the BMX racer: “Someone got juked innit” (NW 360). For city-dwellers safe within posh, well-insulated pockets, and certainly for those in the remote countryside, the problem was simply elsewhere. The news articles themselves created further distance by attending to “everything except the misery and the particulars” (NW 91). Offering just the who-what-when-where, papers permitted readers to react without real emotion, with unsympathetic reflections like the one in *NW* that so eerily foreshadows Felix’s death: “one youth knifed another youth, on

Kilburn High Road. They had names and ages and it's terribly sad, an indictment of something or another and also not good for house prices" (NW 91). Determining a different sort of reporting necessary to awaken public consciousness to the very real suffering surrounding each young man's death, Smith addressed the epidemic of stabbings in her own way—each knifing should feel like a life lost, rather than be dismissed as a "social incident." "The person who has been killed," she said in the interview, "is not a youth but a human being with a history, with family, with sisters, brothers, friends. The boys who are killed are preparing for their A levels, are just beginning their lives, are just moving on to the next stage."

I would suggest, based on her comments to Rifbjerg, that Smith's literary experiment became personal. During the writing process, author and sister were joined by the reality of London streets and, together, composed a text that points out into the world. A second-generation Other, full of hope, moving up to a new level—a genuinely nice guy trying to make good and bring happiness to other people, Felix becomes a welcome guest to the reader. Then, he is abruptly taken away. I believe Felix's murder resonates as much with Smith as with her readers. Arguably his death is the *turn*, the Aristotelian *metabole*, that sets up the rest of the novel inasmuch as the mood then switches from hopefulness to despair. Because I rely heavily on *Postcolonial Melancholia* for my reading of "Guest," Felix's death hurts that much more: it extinguishes an instance of Gilroy's hope for a convivial future.

### NATHAN • SOUTH • “CROSSING”

The “Crossing” chapter brings to light an uncomfortable worldview represented by the marginalizing and marginalized character of Nathan Bogle. Having the shortest of the four character sections, Nathan struggles for ownership of even this space, with Natalie Blake walking alongside him through every page. Nathan’s vie for self-authorship speaks to the broader culture’s presumption that it knows who he is and what he has to say. The thug character he represents is immediately recognizable, prefigured by the racist culture of postcolonial Britain we have seen analyzed by Gilroy. Even from age ten (in a memory recounted by Natalie), Nathan seems to be bad news. His bratty taunt—“You don’t even know”—embarrasses Natalie and Leah, who do not understand his finger pointing at their crotches and his question about their holes (*NW* 203). Smith anticipates her readers’ familiarity with the punk kid who turns into a hustling-to-get-by-pissed-off-volatile-street thug. She also anticipates her readers’ desire to keep him at a safe distance.

The brevity of “Crossing,” then, accommodates the limitations of the ambient culture, even as it artfully reflects and critiques those limitations. By confining Nathan’s story to the few hours he spends with Natalie, Smith permits her readers to stand at a comfortable distance, buffered by Natalie’s hard-working, “girl done good” character to whom, likely, they can more easily relate (*NW* 70). By alluding to Nathan’s character and to his past in the other sections, and from the perspectives of the other characters, Smith develops just enough of the thug narrative for readers to interpolate cultural

preconceptions and prejudices and write Nathan Bogle into the haunting figure his name suggests. Of Scottish and Northern English origin, the word “bogle” denotes a frightening phantom of black color (*OED* entry “bogle”).<sup>25</sup> Whether nightmarish bogymen or shadowy ghost, Nathan is more easily, more comfortably forgotten: case in point, in his review of *NW*, James identifies only three main characters, leaving Nathan *off his list*.

James likely would read “Crossing” as an extension of “Host,” as part two of Natalie’s story, especially since it begins with Natalie’s disoriented return to Caldwell Housing Estate. Walking alongside the estate’s back boundary wall, Natalie hears Nathan call her given name: “Keisha Blake. Keisha Blake. Hold up” (*NW* 361). The two then remain together throughout the section. Toward its end, Natalie tells Nathan she needs to be alone, but he insists that these pages belong to him, not to her: “I ain’t in your dream Keisha. You’re in mine” (*NW* 381). An uncertainty over who is telling the story raises interesting possibilities about the story being told. One possibility, posed by Schwartz, is that Nathan and Natalie are “inverse figure[s]”: Nathan is Natalie’s “double with a fate that, had things played out differently, could have been hers” (45). Interpretation of the two characters as alternate selves seems especially clear when their names appear side-by-side: “They crossed over, Natalie Blake and Nathan Bogle” (*NW* 372). Quite possibly, Smith’s well-known wordplay is at work: Reader, *n.b.*, *note well* the brief intersection of these two lives, this crisscrossing of alternate realities. A second interpretation arises from the possibility that Nathan is, *in fact*, a bogle—at least in narrative time. Natalie, in her state of suicidal collapse, is haunted by anxieties over her “inconsistencies,” anxieties to which Nathan gives voice (*NW* 70).

Symbolically, Nathan lifts Natalie over the housing project's surrounding wall, and Caldwell is opened to detailed observation and metaphor for the first time, three hundred sixty-one pages into the novel. At last, Caldwell becomes more than just "the old estate": more than just the place to which Felix returns for brief visits with Lloyd; by which Leah passes daily; and from which "Nat lives just far enough to avoid" any reminder (*NW* 70). "Crossing" brings the only extended description of the tenements where Felix, Leah, Natalie, and Nathan grew up, and which casts shadows over their adult lives. As Natalie and Nathan move through the estate, the specter of Caldwell takes form.

At its center, Caldwell is a "basin" surrounded by five towering blocks named for philosophers likely to appear on university reading lists: Smith, Hobbes, Bentham, Locke, and Russell; a white Canon now inhabited by Others (*NW* 362).<sup>26</sup> Within these towers, many different lives belie the architecture's sameness, in which "here is the door, here is the window. And repeat, and repeat" (*NW* 362). From the balcony of Natalie's old flat (where her mother, sister, nieces, and nephew still live), hangs a drying duvet cover (*NW* 359). From other balconies, here and there, pop flashes of flowery color (*NW* 362). Still others foreground cracked windowpanes held together by brown tape (*NW* 362). Sheer net curtains speak to the porous privacy of people who are all "connected by walkways and bridges and staircases" (*NW* 362).

Passing by Natalie and Nathan, a little girl of about four repeatedly kicks the same dented can as she walks (*NW* 365). Beside her, a boy only slightly older, swishes a long branch, intent on striking all the objects in his path (*NW* 365). Natalie and Nathan, along with Leah, once used branches like this to jam open the estate's elevator doors (*NW* 203).

Returning to Caldwell, Natalie remembers the boredom of childhood here (*NW* 365).

Still bored, Nathan topples beer cans set atop the boundary wall as the two continue to wander (*NW* 366).

On his *home turf*, Nathan begins a confession narrative of sorts, his words intimating both guilt and regret: “I’m flying,” he tells Natalie. “It’s either fly or give it up tonight”; “Should have gone from here time ago” (*NW* 362, 364). His need to leave is both immediate and old. Had Nathan already gone from Willesden, he would not now need to dissociate himself from Tyler and the fatal contretemps on the Albert Road. Nathan stayed in the basin of his birth, however, until “bad luck” washed him into the streets.<sup>27</sup> He almost escaped Caldwell through trial with Queen’s Park Rangers, but injury cut short his dream of becoming a footballer: “Bad tendons. I played on. No-one told me. Lot of things would be different . . . I don’t like to think about them days, to be truthful. At the end of the day I’m just out here on the street, grinding. Bustin’ a gut, day in day out. Tryna get paid. I done some bad things Keisha”—things bad enough that his mother will no longer open the door to him, things bad enough that even Leah, who is “always trying to save somebody,” admits that she “ducks into a shop, or crosses, or gets on a bus” when she sees him on the High Road (*NW* 366, 369, 67, 51). Smith, however, forces her readers to confront Nathan’s “bad things.” By including his story, she does not allow them to ignore this man who is more easily, more comfortably forgotten.

Schwartz observes that in “Crossing,” Smith “has all but absconded,” marking a noticeable shift from her previously influential presence in the novel (44). Smith steps aside so that Nathan can speak with authority, and his words are powerful: “Everyone loves a bredrin when he’s ten. After that he’s a problem. Can’t stay ten always . . .

There's no way to live in this country when you're grown. Not at all. They don't want you, your own people don't want you, no one wants you" (*NW* 376). Natalie hears this as a cop-out. "Be responsible for yourself! You're free!" she challenges (*NW* 382). From Nathan's point-of-view, he is convinced otherwise: "I ain't free. Ain't never been free" (*NW* 382).

Nathan's words eerily echo Gilroy's argument in *Postcolonial Melancholia* about London's "lost, damaged, and disoriented young men," the born-and-bred boys "trapped in the vulnerable role of perpetual outsider" by institutionalized racism (126, 123).

Gilroy is indignant about the willingness to be blind to historical causes: "Several generations after the Trojan horse of new commonwealth immigrants was first wheeled into England's clean, peaceful, unsuspecting streets, the latter day descendants of those original invaders provocatively maintain the alien cultures of their ancestors" (125).

Positioned as secondary and lesser, these descendants are "made angry and miserable by the everyday effects of white supremacy . . . its petty humiliations" and its "routine frustrations" (Gilroy 126). Nathan represents the young black and brown Londoners whose hopes have become disillusion. Marcus describes Nathan as "a man of acute danger but who also has never been given a chance—a man who, despite our 'age of freedom,' has found that there is 'no way to live in this country when you're grown'" (73). Nathan's violence "only makes explicit what was already implicit in [his] tragic and marginal position" (Gilroy 122). He is dangerous because he is despairing.

Looking back at the past four decades, Gilroy traces shifts in the responses of the born-and-bred boys to their marginalization from the 1970s Rastafarian "poetics of human rights and justice" to the recent focus on "right forms of masculinity," expressed

through power over one's body, one's wife, and one's children (Gilroy 127). Particularly germane to Nathan's character are Gilroy's observations on the oppressed youth of the late 1980s and the early-to-mid 1990s, because this is the time when Nathan came of age. During those years, Gilroy identifies a trend toward embracing American hip-hop culture and its emphasis on jumped-up ghetto as a reaction against "inequality and exclusion" (127). Feelings of "paralysis" among poor-alienated-young-black men gave rise to a radically individualist ethic of getting out by getting paid. Pleasure in the moment; bigger, better bling: hip-hop became a "culture of play and excess," as well as a glorification of law breaking and gangsta violence (Gilroy 127).<sup>28</sup> By the end of the 1990s, for many Britons, hip-hop's danger and decadence had become cartoonish, exaggerated to the point of being laughable (Gilroy 127). For illustration, Gilroy points to the emergence of Sasha Baron Cohen's Ali G, who first satirized hip-hop's consumerism and violence in 1998. Gilroy contends that Ali G was a "subtle reply" to Britain's rising "speculations about the pathological characteristics of black culture" and to increasing concerns over "'black on black' violence" (134). "American thug life" may have been, and may still be, "ridiculously inappropriate to the more innocent habits of marginal young Brits," but what happens to those men who already bought in? (Gilroy 134). What happens to those grown addicted to destructive behaviors in response to inner city poverty and oppression? Like Nathan, they often are the shunned.

Throughout *NW*, Smith references aspects of popular culture easily recognizable to readers born during the mid-late 1970s, as were Felix, Leah, Natalie, and Nathan. At ten years old, Leah's Hollywood heartthrob is Harrison Ford and Natalie's favorite bands are Cameo and Culture Club. In college, Leah mourns the death of Kurt Cobain. Three



years later, Natalie's future husband, Frank, discusses the death of Biggie Smalls, arguably an epitome of jumped-up ghetto.<sup>29</sup> Given Smith's penchant for chronicling pop culture, her attention to the music playing in the background of her characters' lives,<sup>30</sup> and her specific mention of Notorious B.I.G., it is not incongruent with the text to suggest the characters' familiarity with Biggie's "Things Done Changed."<sup>31</sup> Just turning twenty and having recently lost all hope for a football career, Nathan would have heard lyrics like, "If I wasn't in the rap game/I'd probably have a key knee deep in the crack game/Because the streets is a short stop/Either you're slingin' crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot/Shit, it's hard being young from the slums" (Notorious B.I.G.). According to the song, the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* for black boys growing up in housing projects has two entries: "dealer or athlete." There are others, of course, and Nathan had the potential to pursue other paths. Leah recalls that he played the drums "quite well" (NW 70). As he walks with Natalie, Nathan mentions being "good with numbers" in school, and Natalie replies, "You were good with everything. That's how I remember it" (NW 366). Perhaps the football scouts complicated matters with the allure of professional sport. Likely, though, no one ever talked with Nathan about Plan B. Even if someone did, it was for naught: ever the *bad boy*, Nathan eventually got himself expelled, a fate long presumed to be just a "matter of time" (NW 218).

As Natalie and Nathan walk, he softly sings the chorus of "If I Ruled the World (Imagine That)" from Nas's best-selling "mafioso rap album" released in 1996 (NW 374; *If I Ruled the World (Imagine That)*). Like Nathan, Nasir Jones grew up in public housing and became a teenager just as hip-hop culture was exploding on a worldwide stage (Nas). Other celebrities also hail from the Queensbridge Houses in which Nas was

raised: most of them are either rappers or NBA players; a few are producers of music or film, and one is a boxer (*Queensbridge, Queens*). However, many more inmates than celebs come from Queensbridge, and arrests for possession with intent to sell are common. In February 2009, for instance, a drug sweep of the project led to the arrest of fifty-nine people (Lee). These Queensbridge stats bear out the truth of Biggie's lyrics and echo Nathan's sense of limitation. While not overemphasizing the influence of hip-hop on Nathan's character, I want to point out that the music gives voice to struggles caused by marginalization. For a time in Britain, hip-hop held appeal to damaged, disoriented young men who had grown up unwelcome in their national home. When this simulacrum of American culture proved ineffective as means to "racial uplift"—far too incongruous, as Gilroy suggests, with British black life to undergird British black nationalism—disaffected youth began to turn toward Islam (127).<sup>32</sup> The key point is that when people find themselves to be outsiders, they seek forms of belonging: and the groups toward which they gravitate often reflect the "political, philosophical, and cultural" signs of the times (Gilroy 126).

Smith covered similar ground with her character Millat in *White Teeth*. Gunning discusses Millat's discovery within the "Raggastani subculture" both of a place of belonging and of an identity through which to respond to oppression (*Race and Antiracism* 132). Gunning argues that Millat and his friends do not rebel as teenagers in a "spontaneous assertion of an adolescent identity" but as angry young men reacting to "the actually existing phenomena of racism and violence" (*Race and Antiracism* 131-32). Their identification with the Raggastani is a "conscious determination to ensure that 'no one fucked with any of them any more'" (*Race and Antiracism* 132). In a separate

discussion of Millat, from *Racism, Slavery, and Literature*, Gunning takes up the character's later decision to join KEVIN, the Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation ("Ethnicity Politics" 53). Millat does not embrace Islam out of "religious piety" but for the same reasons he embraced the Raggastani subculture ("Ethnicity Politics" 54). "Rather than having to negotiate for themselves the difficult consequences of belonging to an ethnic minority," Gunning argues, young men like Millat turn to either a "'life-style' resolution" or a "proscriptive identity" (an image composite engendered by the eclecticism of convivial London) ("Ethnicity Politics" 53, 52). These resolutions and identities come from cultural millieux, but the motivations for them come from history, the place "where the conflicts of the powerful and the powerless come into being" ("Ethnicity Politics" 55). Here, Gunning echoes Gilroy, challenging England to confront its *passed* past, to acknowledge that "ethnic absolutism" justified and sustained Empire, and to reflect critically on contemporary racism as the product of Imperial domination and the extension of brutality into the present (Gilroy 99, 94).

Earlier I argued that Annie's character represents England's debilitating preoccupation with glorifying that *passed* past. She is an ailing body politic, whose cure lies in realizing the creative capacity of multiculturalism; yet, she persists in worrying herself over Otherness (Gilroy xiii, xii). With an anxiety akin to hostility, she refuses to accept children and grandchildren of postwar migrants as English, even if England is the only home they have ever known (Gilroy 103). As a result of this attitude, institutional racism pervades "legal and governmental agencies," especially the criminal justice system, and "racist violence" is an ordinary feature of life (Gilroy 103-04). It follows, then, that fear and hatred perpetuate themselves.

Given the above analogy in which cultural cancer metastasizes in the social body, we might also diagnose other physical ailments, or wounds, as caused by culture. Three times Smith describes—but offers no explanation for—a discolored mark on Nathan’s neck. At Kilburn Station when her mother buys a travel card from Nathan, Leah notices an “odd patch of white skin on his neck” (*NW* 50). Months later when Nathan is with Natalie, she detects the same spot, a “coin-sized blotch of white skin” at his neck’s nape (*NW* 370). When the two reach Hornsey Lane Bridge, he pauses to scratch “at the sore on his neck” (*NW* 383). Mentioned twice is a wound on Nathan’s cheek: again at the Kilburn Station encounter, where Leah sees he has “been sliced, deeply, on his cheek, not long ago,” and later, when the waylaid Felix notices a scar crossing the cheek of one of his attackers (*NW* 50, 197). The facial disfigurement functions as an essential identifier; the white spot does not. Yet, Smith draws and redraws attention to this descriptive detail.

An online search for “skin discoloration” led me to *vitiligo*. According to the National Health Service (NHS) website entry on “Vitiligo,” it is a condition in which patches lacking pigment develop, usually on the face, neck, and hands. While vitiligo’s cause is unknown, research suggests that some people are genetically predisposed to develop the white spots and also that stressful events or injuries may trigger their appearance (*Vitiligo*). Vitiligo is not contagious, but the depigmentation may spread across an individual’s skin, acting like an autoimmune disorder; and, as the condition spreads, some people experience itching [*Frequently Asked Questions About Vitiligo (FAQ)*].

If physical health can be disrupted by cultural disorder, diagnosing Nathan with a form of vitiligo raises interpretive possibilities. As a black man born in London, Nathan

is thrown into a preexisting situation of racial stratification and cultural prejudice.<sup>33</sup> He grows up poor, as Marcus so aptly puts it, “living in the type of public housing familiar on both sides of the Atlantic, where the buildings have regal names but also cracked-cement lawns and boarded up windows” (70). Likely, his father was abusive: Leah’s mother remembers that Nathan “beat his father to a pulp . . . *Though that man had it coming or something like it*” (NW 51, emphasis mine). Nathan knows about trauma—mental, emotional, material, and physical. He also reacts to his stressors in such a way as to create more stress, in a sense, attacking himself. Nathan acknowledges that these are self-destructive choices. Speaking of his long-felt need to leave such a crippling environment, he repeatedly says, “This ain’t the place I want to be . . . Spent nuff time in this place . . . Sometimes I don’t get myself. Who’s chaining me? No one” (NW 362, 364). However, there are chains, as both Gilroy and Gunning point out. Nathan has agency, but under constraints. *Race* should be “insignificant,” Gilroy argues, “at least when compared either to the hazards involved in urban survival or to the desperate pleasures of the postcolonial city: ‘sex and drugs and on the dole’”—but it is not, because of *racism*’s continued prevalence in England (96). Nathan’s character evidences an oppressive, injurious system. The white blotch on his neck suggests a persistent, present wound that, likely, is spreading and worsening. If cultural sicknesses mar the body, then Nathan is a marked man, branded by his culture.<sup>34</sup>

As Smallwood explains, while “*NW* places personal transcendence tantalizingly out of reach” for all its characters, the novel casts even dimmer light on the prospects of “the black men who huddle in its doorways and phone boxes and bus stops” (89). Here Smallwood sounds much like Marcus, for whom Nathan is dangerous because he was

never given a chance. Highlighting the last sentence of the novel's first paragraph—"Fenced in, on all sides"—Marcus asserts that *NW*'s primary concern is entrapment (*NW* 3). "We are not the sole authors of the dictionaries that define us; in fact, we are not, even in part, the authors of who we are," Marcus argues, again referencing language from the first pages of *NW* (70). External forces define and confine. Lives are squeezed into claustrophobic spaces, and squeezed tighter still by prejudice and stratification. "There is nowhere to go if you come from Northwest London. Adulthood is not empowering; it is the land of the un-free," Marcus contends, echoing Nathan's lament that he has never been free (Marcus 71; *NW* 382).

Natalie, on the other hand, emphatically refuses this claim. "We're all free!" she insists, unwilling to accept that life hands out scripts, that one cannot be one's own author (*NW* 382). "But don't you remember[?]" she asks, as she begins to challenge Nathan with the opportunities he spurned (*NW* 376). Nathan stops her cold: "What do you know about my life? When you been walking in my shoes?" (*NW* 376-77). Natalie then shifts her line of questioning to matters present and personal; to the mounting evidence that Nathan is hiding, and that he is the man who threatened Leah. Natalie's interrogation becomes increasingly aggressive:

Who were those girls? Why are we hiding? Who was that girl, the little one, in the headscarf? What's her name with you? . . . What do you do to your girls? You send them out to thieve? You pimp them out? Do you phone women up? Do you threaten them? . . . You hiding from someone, Nathan? Who're you hiding from? . . . Answer the question! (*NW* 371, 375, 381-82)

Her questions fly like those of a cross-examiner, but Natalie is pushing *against* the truth. Nathan's truth is too true for her; it hits too close to home. She must prove that she cannot possibly be his inverse self; that they are different—too different—to ever be the same (Schwartz 45). Natalie “wanted to get out. People like Bogle—they didn't want it enough” (*NW* 400). Different ambition, different work ethic: she could never be him.

Nathan emphatically refuses her claim. “Don't pretend you're a nice girl Keisha. I know you from time. Know your family. Cheryl.”<sup>35</sup> “Who are you, to chat to me?” (*NW* 364, 377). Acting somewhat as a cross-examiner himself, Nathan challenges Natalie with her past: with her birth name, her family, her childhood, and her roots. Smith's play with the root/route homonym in *White Teeth* is called to court again in *NW*: Natalie has spent her lifetime moving away from her starting point. Nathan reminds her of what she escaped. He calls out to her from her past—and, in doing so, I would suggest, he saves her life.

As she stands on “Suicide Bridge” looking out over the city, Nathan stands behind her, calling “Keisha?” over and over (*NW* 169, 384). Looking through latticed barbed wire, Natalie finds her view fractured into rhombi: “St. Paul's in one box. The Gherkin in another. Half a tree. Half a car. Cupolas, spires . . . It was impossible to get any sense of the whole” (*NW* 384). The segmented images mirror the episodic narrative form of Natalie's section; they reflect her tidy compartmentalization of her past. This past calls out to her from Nathan's mouth, “Keisha,” “I've known you from time” (*NW* 384, 364). Nathan's words pull Natalie into a synoptic moment in which all the fragments of her past have, at present, a singular purpose—to position her for the future. Her past had

always prepared her for her future. “She was strong! Even relative weakness in Caldwell translated to impressive strength in the world” (*NW* 263).

Like the fox Nathan sees “slinking through” the bars of the cemetery gate, Natalie moves deliberately through the bars of Caldwell, every intentional step taking her further away from her roots (*NW* 369). Standing on the bridge, however, she understands her past not only as a part of herself but also as full of purpose. As Smallwood explains,

While the character stands still, her mind travels to retrospection and is rewarded with self-discovery . . . There is not one image here, nor is there static aesthetic contemplation . . . Natalie carries all that past—the fast-food place she frequented as a kid and the betting shop and the old stores and all the dead bodies of NW—with her, and will carry it lighter the less tightly she holds. This is a self-knowledge that dispels . . . (90)

Natalie can hold her past more loosely because, ultimately, she is held less tightly by it. Nathan’s past is considerably heavier. If his past is calling to him from Natalie’s mouth, then he knows his roots are an Achilles’ heel. His last words to Natalie are, “You’re a fucking liability” (*NW* 385).



### NATALIE NEÉ KEISHA • NORTH • “HOST”

Suggesting that Nathan is not real also invites the suggestion that Natalie is not *keeping it real*—that she is more interested in pretense than authenticity. Perhaps the charge to keep it real is straightforward enough when all aspects of a person’s life cohere, but few lives are that simple. Certainly for Natalie Blake, the notion of being *true* or authentic raises the questions: to what and to whom? Her roots? Her blackness? Caldwell? Poverty? Her aspirations? Her priorities? Her work ethic? Her education?<sup>36</sup> Her profession? Keisha Blake? Natalie De Angelis? Or the woman who is all of these, Natalie Blake? For one whose past and present are so unlike, so disparate, is keeping it real even possible? How does one account for selves so different that they contradict each other?

As has been mentioned, roots/routes are a criterion of authenticity with which Smith plays in *White Teeth* and *NW*. Natalie’s cultural and historical roots are in the Caribbean and in Caldwell. Natalie’s parents, Gus and Marcia, are Jamaican migrant citizens. Gus appears only once: Natalie is eleven, and he stands on the balcony smoking worriedly, anxious that the phone is not ringing with calls for a plumber (*NW* 205). By Natalie’s mid-twenties, Gus has moved back to Jamaica, where he is slowly building a home to which Marcia can one day return—although, when his daughters see a “palm tree growing out the bathroom” in his pictures, they are unpersuaded by these plans and reminded of their father’s “optimism and incompetence” (*NW* 309). Marcia, like Felix’s father Lloyd, primarily appears within the security of her domestic space.

There she is sovereign; she rules. For example, Natalie and Cheryl's bedroom door will have no lock, Marcia decrees, because "people who wants locks got something to hide" (NW 221). When Natalie returns as an adult to visit her mother, Marcia resembles an oracle for the surrounding estate, sharing stories of illness and loss, recounting births and whereabouts.

Natalie is not especially close to either parent:

[P]arental legacy meant little to Keisha Blake; it was her solid sense that she was in no way the creation of her parents . . . Indeed, a non-existent father and/or mother was a persistent fantasy of hers, and the children's books she most enjoyed always began with the protagonist inheriting a terrible freedom after some form of parental apocalypse. (NW 211)

Natalie's strongest tie to her parents' Caribbean culture is through food. Schwartz observes that "Smith is writing in the great tradition of English novelists who home in on meals, with their ready markers of class and culture" (39). On the one hand, reflecting her present status and its preference for the fashionably Continental, Natalie orders *Prosecco* and *linguine con vongole* when dining out, and serves "extremely good coffee" alongside berry and *crème fraîche*-topped lemon tarts at her dinner parties (NW 275-77; 97-99). On the other hand, her cravings most often reflect her working class, Jamaican roots, and are an unconscious longing for *home*. "Going in search of the food of her childhood," Natalie weekly visits the "African minimart to buy things like yam and salted cod and plantain" (NW 330). When she works as a paralegal, Natalie tends to grab the same quick Jamaican lunch, "pattie, fish dumpling and a can of ginger beer" (NW 288-89). For a picnic with Leah and Michel, Natalie bakes a Jamaican ginger cake. When

Frank needlessly reminds his wife of his wheat allergy, Natalie snaps, “It’s not for you,” even as she silently admits that the cake is not really for Leah or Michel either (*NW* 307).

Natalie’s ideal for female beauty, her cousin Tonya, has obvious roots in the girls’ shared racial culture. From childhood, Natalie envies Tonya’s skin, “never ashy but always silky”—skin that, while supple, never appears oily or prone to outbreak (*NW* 289). Tonya’s teeth are “huge, white, even” and often on “display in a giant smile” (*NW* 289). Her body shape is proportionally like that of a “super-heroine in a comic book,” not “‘margar’ [‘thin’] as the Jamaicans say” (*NW* 289). Always skinny, Natalie embraces the curves that pregnancy finally brings to her “dull straight lines” (*NW* 323).

Other than the value she places on black beauty and the comfort she takes in the foods of her childhood, most of Natalie Blake is directed upward and away from her black, tenement roots. In fact, Natalie is remembered as a *coconut* (*brown* outside but *white* inside) by one of her Brayton schoolmates, and even her good friend Leah reluctantly concurs (*NW* 11, 71). Natalie would not agree: she is not trying to be white; she is trying to be successful. To that end, Natalie would insist upon her strategic deployment of Blackness. Certainly, she makes professional use of her race, but she might as well, since she will be treated by her colleagues as a token in any case. Despite Natalie’s hope that her “good work” will be noticed because it is exactly that (*i.e.* good work), she receives her first invitation to join a defense team because of her color (*NW* 278). The star tenant<sup>37</sup> carefully positions Natalie in the courtroom to reinforce his argument that the trial is *not* about race (*NW* 278-79). In the Middle Temple, as one of very few non-white pupils called to the Bar, Natalie understands that she inspires “patronage” and embraces the role of “protégé” (*NW* 255-58, 297). Out of court, too,

Natalie sometimes finds it conveniently comfortable to foreground her Blackness: on occasion dressing in a way that makes her feel “African,” even though her “long ochre skirt,” “brown vest,” and “glittering sandals” are not from Africa, and her accessorizing hoop earrings and bangles are only African “conceptually” (*NW* 306). In other instances, she finds a nod to her color en vogue, as when she and Frank decorate the walls of their Queen’s Park home with African masks and abstract art (*NW* 325). Natalie plays up the commodity-value of her Blackness in a white culture.

Of far greater concern to her than any sort of *authentic black experience* is the more concrete and appealing experience of being rich. Natalie Blake marries and works her way into a lifestyle of luxury. She completely forgets what it is like to be poor, a fact that strikes her during one of her stops by the African minimart. There, while watching a woman “emptying her pockets onto the counter, offering to relinquish this and that item” to afford her purchases, Natalie realizes that being poor is a “language she’d stopped being able to speak, or even to understand” (*NW* 330).<sup>38</sup>

Poverty was Natalie’s first language. When the phone did not ring with news “of pipes leaking or backed-up toilets” for Gus to repair, anxiety filled the three-bedroom, one bath flat into which the five family members were crowded (*NW* 205, 221). Natalie began reading as a hobby primarily because the pastime was “relatively inexpensive”: the unanticipated praise she received for reading “baffled” her (*NW* 208). In a somewhat linear progression, Natalie’s fondness for this hobby was interpreted as intelligence, and became aptitude, which became academic success, which led to meetings with careers officers and university acceptances, which led to “metamorphosis” and, eventually, to Frank and the Inns of Court (*NW* 208, 227-28; 239; 241-43). Regardless of “revisits” to

the council flat in which her family lives “hand to mouth,” Natalie can no longer identify with their struggle (*NW* 294-96, 330). She can no longer imagine being unable to purchase what she wants. Taking in the grandeur of Natalie’s Victorian house and the expanse of her well-manicured lawn, Leah wonders just how much her friend has forgotten: “To live like this you would have to forget everything that came before. How else could you manage?” (*NW* 70). On this particular visit, Leah feels certain she, too, has been forgotten, “cast off,” by Natalie, who comes across as “a little imperious” and bored by her company (*NW* 73, 69, 70). Feeling she is only an “old obligation” to her lifelong friend, Leah wonders about Natalie, “Who is she? Who is this person? This bourgeois existence,” not keeping it real (*NW* 69, 75).

It seems Natalie should ask these same questions of herself. Of all the character sections, hers is most shaped by Smith’s didactic Narrator, whose omniscient voice maintains that Natalie Blake lacks any sense of self and always has. Smith’s narrative form also works to produce Natalie’s incoherence. “Host” is a catalogue of one hundred eighty-five episodic memories: some no longer than a tweet, and all cleverly subtitled. “The effect, naturally, is fragmentary,” notes Franklin. “We are piecing together the story of [Natalie’s] life, not at all unlike the way she perceives herself to be piecing together her own identity out of disparate fragments” (Franklin 54).

Together, these diverse snapshots form the impression of a woman struggling with issues of identity, even in childhood. A completionist by nature, young Natalie was surprised to find her ability to focus praised by adults; and, again, their positive reinforcement perpetuated more praiseworthy behaviors, such that Natalie “began to exist for other people” (*NW* 207-08). Always wanting to please and impress, however, soon

leaves Natalie feeling inauthentic. Collaborating with her church friend, Layla, to compose a song, Natalie watches their teenaged reflections in a mirror. “She is real. You are a forgery,” Natalie thinks to herself. “You are making it up as you go along” (*NW* 221). In contrast to Leah, whose openness to experimentation seemingly makes her more self-aware, Natalie believes herself to be hollow. After revealing her bisexuality to Natalie, Leah adds gratefully, “You’re the only person I can be all of myself with” (*NW* 246). Moved to tears by Leah’s comment, Natalie understands she is crying “not really at the sentiment but rather out of a fearful knowledge that if reversed the statement would be rendered practically meaningless, Ms. Blake having no self to be, not with Leah, or anyone” (*NW* 246). By the time Natalie is in her thirties, the Narrator informs us that she has become “unsuited to self-reflection” (*NW* 300).

I am unpersuaded by this: as a teenager, Natalie knew she was “making it up” as she went along, *acting* in the moment. It seems that Natalie understands more about coherent identity and self-authorship than the narrative voice or the narrative form would lead the reader to believe. In the vein of scholarship by Sell, I would suggest that Natalie rationally deploys multiple identities. Considering both *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*, Sell contends that Smith’s characters are performative and pragmatic, and therefore, paradoxical and (ultimately) unknowable. In his argument, Sell references the logical paradox discovered by British philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell [*n.b.* “Russell” is honored by a towering tenement in Caldwell housing estate; his building is Nathan Bogle’s childhood home (*NW* 363)]. Russell’s paradox undermines the whole of mathematics by showing its basic principles to be contradictory (Sell 36). Correlating mathematical theory with character development, Sell argues that Smith creates entities

(like Natalie Blake), who essentially remain undefined because of contradictions, inconsistencies, or (Leah's term) "hypocrisies" (*NW* 70).

On Natalie's way up and out, she sheds the parts of herself that do not align with her ambitions: most obviously, while at university, she changes her name from Keisha to the more white-sounding Natalie.<sup>39</sup> Michel, also a climber,<sup>40</sup> endorses Natalie's decision to leave her birth name behind: "You changed your name . . . It's like: 'Dress for the job you want not the one you have'" (*NW* 71). Natalie senses that some shedding of self is necessary for lower class black females to advance. Natalie keeps close tabs on Michelle Holland, the only other Brayton girl who "went up" to Bristol.<sup>41</sup> Michelle grew up with even fewer advantages than Natalie: "Father in jail, mother sectioned," she was raised by her grandmother in the "brutal high-rise towers of South Kilburn, which had nothing to recommend them" (*NW* 250-51). When Michelle, a "math prodigy," leaves Bristol halfway through her final year, Natalie concludes that Michelle has "been asked to pass the entirety of herself through a hole that would accept only part"—and could not (*NW* 251). Natalie, the text strongly implies, determines not to make this same mistake. Natalie also receives similar advice as a (law) pupil: to distance herself professionally from her past and "avoid ghetto work" lest she be confused with her clients (*NW* 284).<sup>42</sup> Even when Natalie finds that she is "no longer an accidental guest at the table—as she had always understood herself to be—but a host, with other hosts," she clings to the distance from the concrete where she was raised (*NW* 257). As noted earlier, Natalie's Queen's Park home is "just far enough to avoid" the old estate (*NW* 70).<sup>43</sup>

Despite Natalie's very intentional efforts to leave behind her *black* name and her Caldwell roots, she paradoxically maintains the identity of KeishaNW, most obviously in

the email moniker she uses for the personals listings. KeishaNW is not a role Natalie Blake performs in front of family, friends, or colleagues. To them, Keisha Blake of Caldwell simply does not mesh with whom Natalie De Angelis has become: a “highly educated black woman,” a well-paid lawyer, the wife of a successful broker, and a commanding presence with her chin held confidently upward “like a queen in profile on an ancient coin” (*NW* 327, 301, 67). KeishaNW and Natalie Blake have different publics, private from each other.

Natalie first heard the phrase “I don’t know you anymore” from her family when she interviewed for Bristol (*NW* 230). At age thirty, she is known by them even less. When Natalie complains to Leah that her professional accomplishments mean nothing to Marcia, Leah explains that Natalie is difficult for her mother to understand. Likely Leah also gives voice to *her* disconnect with Natalie when she says, “You have your work. You have Frank. You’ve got all these friends. You’re getting to be so successful. You’re never lonely” (*NW* 321). Although Natalie tries to envision herself as the woman Leah describes, the reader is led to infer that she cannot. Natalie’s silent reply deepens her paradox: a divide exists between others’ representations of Natalie’s identity and the reality of her identity itself, particularly with its conflict between roots and aspirations (Sell 36). Natalie’s route up and out makes it appear she has left behind an undesired past. And yet, she repeatedly returns to that past, “with the result that [her] true identity is cast into doubt while the possibility of defining identity at all is ruled out altogether” (Sell 36). According to Sell then, while outsiders may believe they know Natalie Blake, in actuality, they cannot know her, nor can she know herself.



Sell also argues that such unknowable characters noncommittally assume identities as if donning masks: usually assuming the most advantageous identity for the occasion (36-37). These assumed identities, or gestures,<sup>44</sup> might be “entirely false representations of identity,” but, Sell argues, they “sustain us when the going gets tough. In other words, identity becomes a socially pragmatic strategy” (37). Hence Smith’s description of Natalie Blake in drag: “Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each required a different wardrobe,” and each required a different way of being in the world (*NW* 333). KeishaNW is also Natalie in drag, with her specific outfit and way of being: “gold hoops, denim skirt, suede boots with tassels, the hair bobble with the black and white dice, and her work clothes in a rucksack on her back. Catching herself in a huge gilt mirror in the hall she found herself convincing” (*NW* 346). Natalie’s “identity is never more than a particular configuration of gestures at a given moment in time” (Sell 38).

The notion of identity as gesture, Sell contends, is particularly apt in postcolonial, multicultural London with its fluid, in-between spaces open to migrants and their children for “continuous play” with identity (Sell 40; *Imagining London* 14). Here, Sell gestures to Bhabha’s argument that the migrant is never fully assimilated and continues in a state of untranslatable liminality, always somewhere in-between guest and host (Bhabha 224).<sup>45</sup> Sell also notes, however, that “man’s capacity and need to present different identities is universal and as old as man himself” (37). Sell goes on to quote from *Leviathan* (1651) by Thomas Hobbes (yet another philosopher enshrined in one of Caldwell’s blocks): “a *person*, is the same that an *actor* is, both on stage and in common conversation” (37). If identities are and have always been performative, then human

lives can be understood as a series of calculated gestures (Sell 38). Collectively, these gestures may or may not combine to create a coherent narrative; regardless, the narrative is neither the individual's private identity nor the private identity perceived publicly—by mothers, sisters, friends, colleagues, husbands, narrators, or reader audiences (Sell 38). Natalie's contradictory personae co-exist within her narrative because each persona serves a specific, rational purpose. She changes her identity at will, morphing into whomever she needs to be to succeed.

*New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani writes that the “ghost of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* haunts *NW*” (C1). Kakutani cites the stream-of-consciousness style particularly prevalent in Leah's section, along with both Leah and Natalie's “sense of isolation and nostalgia for a past that seems more vital or vivid than the present” (C1). While I do not read either *NW* character as romanticizing her past, I do see Clarissa Dalloway's preoccupation with self-presentation in Natalie Blake. Desires for security and respectability motivate them.<sup>46</sup> Both women marry intentionally, with money in mind. To Natalie, Frank is “too full of himself and vain . . . not her scene at all, and yet the silent and invisible bond between them strengthened, for who else but Frank De Angelis—or someone exactly like Frank De Angelis—could she ask to accompany her on the strange life journey she was preparing to undertake?” (*NW* 247). Both women also are obsessed with their roles as hostess. Young Natalie was fascinated by Mrs. Hanwell's teatime etiquette and serving trolley, “three tiered with swiveling wheels of brass”—tokens of Englishness not part of the Blake household (*NW* 202). Here, though, aside from a shared moment of suicide ideation, Clarissa and Natalie part ways: Clarissa was born privileged; Natalie was not. Clarissa, more like Leah, never acts to remedy her

ennui. Natalie, on the other hand, personifies ambition. Natalie's climb to the status of postcolonial hostess makes her an insider and a proprietor, one who belongs and can extend hospitality to those who do not.

While most of Natalie's performances do not have deep roots, her addiction to "good work" does. When her daughters were young, Marcia insisted that whatever they undertook would have to be done twice as well "just to break even" (*NW* 213). Taking her mother's words to heart, Natalie added to them her own intense will and desire for expensive things (*NW* 208).<sup>47</sup> She did not desire to live like the people in Caldwell—like her family, in an overcrowded tenement flat full of the "feeling of lack" (*NW* 295). Much of Natalie's life is a planned route up and out of the council estate, a planned escape from its limitations. Three years before she could sit the General Certificate of Secondary Education exams (GCSEs), for example, Natalie met with her Head of Year to discuss them (*NW* 212). When she studied for those exams, she handwrote all of her notes twice, as if writing an initial draft and then a revision (*NW* 236). Her challenges were considerable, but so were her rewards as she stepped from one rung to the next: undergraduate degree, passing the bar, her pupillage, and her tenancy (*NW* 267, 297). When she is finally a barrister, Natalie further climbs her way into high profile cases that require beginning each workday early and finishing it late (*NW* 303, 306, 320). Having always worked hard to make herself something (and still working hard), Natalie is adamant that she deserves everything she has.

Schwartz frames her review of *NW* with Smith's interview of Jay-Z prior to the opening of the Barclays Center in downtown Brooklyn, the rapper's home. Over lunch with this local-boy-done-good, Smith asks Jay-Z if he can legitimately "still rep his

block” (Schwartz 36; “The House that Hova Built”). Several paragraphs later, she answers her own question with her description of “Niggas in Paris,” a track off Jay-Z’s 2011 collaboration album with Kanye West.<sup>48</sup> “You feel a strong pull in both men toward sheer abandon, pure celebration,” Smith writes of the song. “Didn’t we earn this? Can’t we sit back and enjoy it?” she asks, before concluding, “Who cares if they’re keeping it real?” Smith’s commentary sounds like that of her most recent heroine’s. “Why am I being punished for making something of my life?” Natalie demands to know. “I work hard. I came in with no reputation, nothing. I’ve built up a serious practice . . . I’m not going to apologize for my choices” (*NW* 311, 399). If keeping it real really means keeping it the same, then Natalie Blake would ask, please, to be excused.

For all of her striving to live differently, however, return visits to Caldwell leave Natalie feeling guilty. The flat is now more crowded than when she left: her sister, nephew, and two nieces are in her childhood bedroom; her brother Jayden is still in his; and her mother is in the third (*NW* 295-96). The hallway is nearly impassable because of the laundry hanging to dry along each wall, and “on every surface there balanced things upon other things with more things hanging off and wrapped around and crammed in” (*NW* 308). Natalie’s family lives off a “fan of credit cards” each with a “chaotic history” (*NW* 295-96). It is after a visit, during which these cards are discussed, that Natalie leaves paralegal work and returns to the Middle Temple offer of tenancy, and the money to be earned in commercial law. As she becomes financially successful, she tithes five percent of her income to her family and another five percent to non-profits (*NW* 303). She also undertakes “pro bono death row cases in the Caribbean islands of her ancestry” (*NW* 303). On the one hand, these charitable acts smack of noblesse oblige. On the

other, Natalie feels genuine pangs of guilt that she tries—unsuccessfully—to assuage (*NW* 303).

Fear of being judged by her family and old friends also haunts Natalie. Some of the judgment is real, such as when Layla accuses Natalie of being “fake” and “showing off”: “You always wanted to make it clear you weren’t like the rest of us,” she chides (*NW* 332-33). Other criticisms are imagined, perhaps arising out of Natalie’s longtime fear of disapproval. When Natalie defensively declares that she will not apologize for her choices, Leah sighs, “Oh, God, Nat, who’s asking you to?” (*NW* 399). Similarly, when Natalie suggests to her sister that she is punished for having made something of her life, Cheryl retorts, “Oh my days. Who’s punishing you, Keisha? Nobody. That’s in your head. You’re paranoid, man!” (*NW* 311). Natalie’s oversensitivity likely also stems from misperceptions of jealousy: the Narrator reminds readers that “ruthless comparison” is the modus operandi of all female relationships (*NW* 250). Natalie tracks the achievements of women with whom she never even speaks, so why would other women, especially friends and family members, not track hers? (*NW* 250). Certainly these women are aware of Natalie’s climb: even Shar knows Natalie as “up herself” (*NW* 11). I find it significant that, while the highly educated and accomplished Natalie Blake is not always well-received by others, KeishaNW is what “everyone’s seeking” (*NW* 340).<sup>49</sup> As noted, Natalie “began to exist for other people” when she was a child (*NW* 208). KeishaNW both supplies popular demand and meets personal need: everyone wants a BF 18-35, and Natalie wants to make everyone happy (*NW* 340). Therefore, she performs the role, even though doing so will introduce chaos into her carefully crafted life.

With Frank's discovery of the email correspondence between Keisha and "wildinwembly" on his wife's computer, the whole of Natalie nee Keisha De Angelis nee Blake is threatened with collapse (*NW* 353-54). Anticipating the failure of her life's project—her climb out of Caldwell, her acquisition of wealth and status, her ascension to hostess—Natalie breaks down. She walks out of her million-pound home, away from her "expensive" husband and her "perfect" children, with nothing except the oversized T-shirt, leggings, and ratty bedroom slippers she is wearing (*NW* 300, 68, 360). Her hair is wild, her eyes are swollen, and her throat is raw from shouting with Frank (*NW* 360). Wandering *NoWhere* in particular, she arrives at her particular *NoWhere*, just outside of Caldwell. As she walks aimlessly along the estate's wall, she makes a "queer keening noise, like a fox" (*NW* 360).

Another leitmotif in Smith's work, the "keening fox" also appears in, among other stories, "Hanwell in Hell" (2004). Its narrator, Clive Black, hears what he believes to be a child crying in the park, "really just a green square, with beautiful Georgian properties looming white and expensive overhead" ("Hanwell in Hell" 118). Clive's companion, Hanwell,<sup>50</sup> corrects him: "That's a fox," he says. "They scream that strange scream" ("Hanwell in Hell" 118). Walking toward the "piteous wail," Clive and Hanwell find a fox "collapsed on its knees upon the ground," not visibly maimed but clearly suffering ("Hanwell in Hell" 119). In her article "From the Dispossessed to the Decolonized: From Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* to Zadie Smith's "Hanwell in Hell," Sharon Raynor interprets the yowling fox as representing the displaced diaspora: "The fox had been displaced from its home . . . was alienated from where it truly belonged"

(150). The fox, then, conveys the experience of migrants, the *forever guests* who, demoralized by everyday marginalization, long for home.

In “Visitation,” Leah makes a more nuanced observation about London foxes. During an imagined conversation with her father (also a Mr. Hanwell), Leah brings up the *recent* “epidemic” of foxes in people’s gardens: “that is, they were always there, in the same numbers as they are now, but now it is called an epidemic” (*NW* 57).<sup>51</sup> Leah seems to suggest that the vermin fox is not problematic until the migrant is nearby—in the garden, so to speak. Annie, for example, continues blind to half a century of cohabitation until she finds Otherness knocking at her door, appearing in her windows, and sitting inside her flat—and, even then, she peers at her guests from behind shades.

I previously likened Natalie to the fox Nathan spies at the cemetery gates: “Oi, look at the fox! Slinking through,” he says, shining his phone’s flashlight at the creature. “Sneaky animals . . . If you ask me, they run tings” (*NW* 369). It is true that Natalie successfully slipped through the bars of Caldwell and into a position of power and prestige. Now, leaving the Queen’s Park home into which she has climbed, Natalie displaces herself a second time. As with the fox of “Hanwell in Hell,” her keening is an expression of longing for home, or the metaphoric extension of home: a self, a center, a ground. Disoriented and distraught, Natalie crosses from her section into Nathan’s: “Host” ends with Natalie walking out of Queen’s Park, and “Crossing” begins with her arrival “into where Willesden meets Kilburn” (*NW* 359). Overwhelmed, Natalie can only think about putting one foot in front of the other (*NW* 360). Eventually, she finds herself alongside Caldwell’s wall. As she contemplates hoisting herself over and returning to the place out of which she worked so hard to climb, a haunting figment-figure from her past

calls out, “Keisha Blake. Keisha Blake . . . You trying to break back in?” (*NW* 360-61). Nathan Bogle’s words hit close to home, closer than someone on the outside could possibly know. Earlier I suggested reading Nathan as a phantasm or a ghost, which his surname invites. Likely he is a man, but it is possible that Natalie’s mind creates a figment on which to focus her disconnected thoughts as an initial step toward regaining some clarity.

Either as figment or as figure, Nathan crosses from the opposite side of the street to haunt Natalie De Angelis with the possibility of her failure. Leaping up onto the boundary wall, he reaches his arms down to Natalie<sup>52</sup> and pulls her over into Caldwell, the *auld hell* of her childhood. “Bogy,” a “quasi-proper name for the Devil,” derives from the same etymology as “bogle” (*OED* entry “bogy”). It is not without significance that Bogy helps Natalie “of the Angels” cross into Keisha Blake’s *auld hell*. She was raised here. Her mother still lives in the flat where she grew up. Just recently, she brought her children to visit their grandmother for the morning (*NW* 348). Natalie has walked into and out of Caldwell many times, but on this night, she is brought by Bogy into her childhood hell and haunted by her deepest fear: the failure of her lifetime climb out of these oppressive towers into a “perfect” life (*NW* 68). Nathan Bogle embodies that failure. He did not escape their limitations. He did not want to get out, at least not enough (*NW* 400). Natalie, of course, never wanted anything else (*NW* 400). Natalie Blake and Nathan Bogle are two lives pivoting from the same center: two children who grew up marginalized in Caldwell, penned in by five towers and a wall. Natalie Blake and Nathan Bogle are each half of the same compass needle pointing in opposite



directions: one determined, one resigned; one moving further up while the other slips further down.

Referenced earlier in this thesis are the estate children who strike a chord with Natalie: the girl kicking a can as she walks and the boy hitting randomly about with a stick (*NW* 365). Natalie remembers their antsy search for something, for anything, to do. Restlessness is in her roots, and it leads her to introduce disorder in response to boredom. Almost defending Natalie's sexual indiscretions, the Narrator posits a "connection between boredom and the desire for chaos. Despite many disguises and bluffs perhaps [Natalie] had never stopped wanting chaos" (*NW* 365). Natalie recognizes her own desire for chaos in Marcus, the teen who refuses to put out his cigarette in the children's playground area. Joining with other upset women, presumably also mothers or grandmothers, Natalie challenges Marcus with courtroom élan (*NW* 335-39). She attacks relentlessly<sup>53</sup> until a moment of eye contact with him causes her to stutter (*NW* 339). While Natalie quickly recovers and continues her argument with a point just above Marcus's shoulder (surely a much-practiced professional skill), the stumble is telling (*NW* 339). Natalie identifies with Marcus, with the bored tenement kid creating disruption needlessly, *just because*. This identification lays bare her hypocrisy: in a single moment, Natalie's disparate parts are revealed and her whole is undermined.

Natalie's hypocrisy is again laid bare as she moves through *auld hell* with Nathan. Standing together amidst the towers, Nathan asks, "Which one was you again?" "Locke," Natalie replies, naming both the building in which she grew up, and the philosopher who argued each man is born a "tabula rasa" (a "blank slate") and becomes the sum of his experiences (*NW* 363). A Locke girl, Natalie carries her experiences of a

Caldwell childhood and adolescence, years spent mischievously subverting boredom and pushing limits. Natalie could break her connection to Marcus by looking away, but she cannot break her connection to Nathan so easily. “I’ve known you from time,” he reminds her. “Don’t pretend you’re a nice girl Keisha” (*NW* 364).

However nice or naughty, though, as a Locke girl, philosophically speaking, Natalie can author her own soul. She *is* “the sole author of the dictionary that defines [her]” and therefore *can* exist as a performer of multiple, contradictory personae (*NW* 3). Passing through *auld hell* with Bogy requires both Keisha *NW* and Natalie Blake, an incongruous duality walking side-by-side, co-existing for the first time in the novel. Natalie cannot survive here without Keisha; Keisha cannot break out again without Natalie.

At a spot where the housing estate’s wall is partially destroyed,<sup>54</sup> the pair exit Caldwell (*NW* 366-67). Taking “Shoot Up Hill,” they cross into Fortune Green.<sup>55</sup> They keep “climbing, past the narrow red mansion flats, up into money”—up into the suburban world to which Natalie has grown so accustomed, up until “the world of council flats lay[s] far behind them” (*NW* 371-72). Climbing up and out is what Natalie Blake knows best, and as she and Nathan walk, she crosses back into her self-preserving way of being (*NW* 399). If Nathan’s voice calling “Keisha” does not trigger Natalie’s synoptic moment on Suicide Bridge, then her mother’s voice does: “our people hardly ever do that” (*NW* 235). Statistically, Marcia was correct, and to deviate from anyone’s expectations had always filled Keisha with anxiety (*NW* 235, 323). The import of her moment on the bridge is in its clarity, not its catharsis. Natalie understands the shaping nature of her past, but then she responds to its limitations as she always has. She ignores

Nathan's outstretched hand and walks away from Bogle as fast as she can (*NW* 378).

Natalie's liability to Nathan is her refusal to acknowledge his existence. Not only does she leave behind the idea of failure, which he embodies, she locks it away—turning him into the police for murder (*NW* 401).

*NW*'s heroine will continue to morph herself to fit the situation, toggling among her contradictory personae to suit each moment. While it is Natalie who dials the number of the Kilburn Police Station, it is Keisha who talks: the novel ends with “Keisha Blake, disguising her voice with her voice” (*NW* 401). Surely Smith crafted those final words with a sly smile. Natalie can never be known—perhaps not even by her creator. Or, perhaps she is known intimately by that creator.

Smith's 2008 lecture “Speaking in Tongues” begins with words that would flow easily from Natalie's lips: “This voice I speak with these days, this English voice with its rounded out vowels and consonants in more or less the right place—this is not the voice of my childhood. I picked it up in college, along with the unabridged *Clarissa* and a taste for port” (132). Smith references *her* multiple voices to segue into a broader topic, an interest in performing her Blackness alongside her other personae (*e.g.* Cambridge graduate, best-selling novelist, New York University professor, denizen of both Manhattan and Queen's Park). She invokes a utopia of multiplicity in which people move among a myriad of worlds (racial, class, linguistic, geographic, *etc.*) without penalty or the stifling admonition to keep it real. When Smith left Willesden for Cambridge, she knew only multiculturalism: a “colorful” place “of this and that combined, of the synthesis of disparate things” (*Changing My Mind* 132-33). Lacking experience with homogeneity, Smith assumed her new college voice would simply join

with the voice of her childhood: that she would speak with both voices interchangeably, even simultaneously. That is not what happened. “Now [this ‘lettered’ voice] is my only voice, whether I want it or not,” Smith explains. “I regret it” (*Changing My Mind* 133). Perhaps the occasion of Smith’s return to Willesden with *NW* was part personal exercise: an endeavor to recover her multivocality. Certainly, it was her second experiment in the advantageous combining of her own contradictory personae, SadieNW<sup>56</sup> and Zadie Smith, walking side-by-side toward literary success.

## LEAH • WEST • “VISTATION”

In her review of *NW*, Oates identifies Leah as a “paragon of multicultural idealism” (20). I would add that Leah is also a paragon of Gilroy’s conviviality (xv). With the exception of her years at the University of Edinburgh, Leah has never lived anywhere other than Willesden. Cohabitation and interaction with many different people—with myriad identities and diverse backgrounds—have made multiculturalism an ordinary aspect of Leah’s life (Gilroy xv). At age thirty-five, Leah still sees the world Smith saw as a child: the “colorful” place “of this and that combined, of the synthesis of disparate things” (*Changing My Mind* 132-33). More “faithful in her allegiance to this two-mile square of the city” than some people are faithful to their families, Leah unhesitatingly accepts her neighborhood’s multiculturalism and hybridity (*NW* 6). As the loyal local, Leah’s embrace of her community and its plurality aligns with the scholarship of Christine Sizemore. In her article “Willesden as a Site of ‘Demotic’ Cosmopolitanism in Zadie Smith’s Postcolonial City Novel *White Teeth*,” Sizemore draws heavily upon Gilroy’s idea of conviviality, but also stresses the importance of interactions within the local setting. When traditionally unfamiliar people repeatedly bump into each other in specific, familiar places (e.g. the bus stop, the corner shop, the chippy), “the discourses of localism and place . . . counter discourses of racial identity” (Sizemore 68). Leah embodies the possibility of a “multicultural nationality that is no longer phobic about the prospect of exposure to either strangers or otherness”—an identity only attainable through “everyday exposure to difference” (Gilroy 99).

The heterogeneity of Willesden is well-suited to Leah's personality. By nature, she is a "generous person, wide open to the entire world . . . she befriend[s] everyone without distinction or boundary" (*NW* 210). When the girls "went Brayton," Natalie marveled at Leah's abilities to radiate "universal good feeling" and drift effortlessly between teenage cliques: Leah's friendship with "the hopeless cases did not alienate her from the popular and vice versa" (*NW* 243, 210). Leah is a "shape-shifter" with a gift for "moving among worlds" (Schwartz 39).

More than merely open to Otherness, Leah is attracted to difference. An Anglo-Irish redhead, freckled and pale, Leah must hide from the summer sun behind "long white linen" (*NW* 3, 9, 19-20, 40). In sharp contrast, her husband, Michel, is "very dark" like his Guadeloupean father and Algerian mother (*NW* 25, 265). Leah's childhood crush, Nathan Bogle, and her longtime friend, Natalie Blake, are both second-generation Caribbean, and Leah's section of *NW* is shaped by a visit from Shar, a "sub-continental" with whom she is fascinated (*NW* 19).

As mentioned, Leah was always more adventuresome and open to experience than Natalie. During her teenage and college years, Leah experimented with personal identity and played with categorical constraints. She swung from a wardrobe of "black jeans/black boots/black t-shirt" to one of dirty olive combat trousers; from looking like a "minor Berlin artist" to a "warrior for the planet" (*NW* 239). As if following her clothes, Leah's interests shifted from existentialist philosophy to environmental protest (*NW* 236-37, 240). Her musical tastes spun through Salt-N-Pepa, Joy Division, Nirvana, and into techno (*NW* 209, 216, 235, 236). Leah also questioned her sexuality. Before the girls left for university, Leah shocked Natalie with her thoughts about attraction to both sexes: "I

don't think women can really be beautiful. I think they can be so attractive and you can want to shag them and love them and blah blah but I think really only men can be completely beautiful in the end" (*NW* 218). During a visit to Bristol, Leah further shocked Natalie by spending the night with Alice, a girl whom Leah did, in fact, find "beautiful" (*NW* 218, 245-46).<sup>57</sup> Leah's sexuality remains fluid at thirty-five, as evidenced through the sensual language that encapsulates her thoughts when she directs Shar into the kitchen: "[Leah's] big hands on the girl's narrow shoulders. She watches Shar's buttocks rise up and against her rolled-down jogging pants, the little downy dip of her back, pronounced, sweaty in the heat. The tiny waist opening out into curves" (*NW* 7).

In keeping with Leah's seamless and solicitous character, "she is porous to spiritual experience": a quality addressed in *NW*'s opening scenes (Enright). "You're a spiritual person," Shar says to Leah. "There's something spiritual inside of you" (*NW* 16). Given her own ambiguous spirituality,<sup>58</sup> Shar's words have a prophetic aspect, as though she sees something in Leah she does not yet see in herself. Indeed, religious Otherness has always appealed to Leah's receptive nature. Young Leah often attended Kilburn Pentecostal with the Blake family "not because she was in any sense a believer, but rather motivated by the generosity of spirit described above" (*NW* 216). Taking the bus with her mother, Pauline, to the Tube station, Leah imaginatively loses herself in the red bindi of another passenger: "emerging into a more gentle universe, parallel to our own, where people are fully and intimately known to each other and there is no time or death or fear" (*NW* 48). Similarly, Leah finds herself being drawn to "The Black Madonna," the shrine of Willesden (*NW* 82).

Leah's visit to the shrine is for Natalie's benefit: in order for the De Angelis children to attend the school of Frank and Natalie's choice, the family must adopt a church. To help them, Leah leads Natalie to "St. Somewhere," where Pauline attends once a month (NW 72-73). The friends' journey to the Vicarage with Natalie's "Lilliputians" (Leah's word) is nothing short of a pilgrimage:

— Auntie Leah! Auntie Leah! Mummy says SLOW DOWN.

Leah stops, looks back. There is no-one and then round a corner Nat appears, sighing dramatically . . .

— Lee, you sure this is right? Doesn't look right.

— End of this road. On the map it sort of winds round and back on itself. Pauline said it's hard to find.

— . . . Kids, stay close, stay in. It's like walking the hard shoulder on the motorway. Nightmare. Kennedy Fried Chicken. Polish Bar and Pool. Euphoria Massage. Glad we took the scenic route. This can't still be Willesden. Feels like we're in Neasden already.

— The church is what *makes* it Willesden. It marks the parish of Willesden . . .

The road winds. They find themselves on a thin strip of pavement with a bollard at the end, clutching the children as the cars zoom by either side . . . In a pause between cars they run as one animal across the wide road, and then release each other, panting, hands on knees . . . [Leah] turns away, lifting her head slowly, and spots it first: an ancient crenellation and spire. (NW 76-77)



Their perilous trek over, the women and children wander through a shaded Victorian graveyard before passing through the “heavy wooden doors” of St. Mary’s, now both an Anglican parish and a “‘National Shrine’ for English Catholics” (Fr. Nicholas). While Natalie proceeds through the medieval church as a “congenital autodidact,” pompously reading aloud from an informational leaflet, Leah slips out of earshot to escape her friend’s quasi-lecture (*NW* 79-80). Responding to the church in her own, more sensory, way, Leah reaches her hand to feel a marble monument, remarkably cool despite the sunrays falling across it (*NW* 80-81). Moving “instinctively,” she finds herself in front of Our Lady of Willesden (*NW* 80). Leah’s eyes take in the swaddled Christ Child who, with arms outstretched, “is cruciform; he is the shape of the thing that will destroy him” (*NW* 81). While Leah gazes at the Madonna and Child, Natalie’s words drift back into earshot: the original Lady was destroyed during the Protestant Reformation; this “jet limewood” Marian was carved from a tree that grew at the original shrine (*NW* 81; Fr. Nicholas). This “Black Madonna,” more powerful than traditional Madonnas, possesses the “gift of serendipity” and the ability to “resuscitat[e] dead babies” (*NW* 81-82). Also, “Wilsdon” means “spring at the foot of the hill”; and the church’s “holy well,” which draws from this spring, is “thought to possess ‘miraculous’ qualities (especially for blindness<sup>59</sup>)” (*NW* 81; Fr. Nicholas). As Natalie drones on, Leah stands surreally transfixed before the shrine: the Child’s arms seem to reach for her, the Madonna seems to call to her. Suddenly overwhelmed, Leah faints (*NW* 81-83).

Leah’s collapse might be explained in physiological terms: she is weak from her abortion less than forty-eight hours before; she is overheated by the summer day; and she is exhausted by the long walk to the church (*NW* 77-79). Feeling lightheaded after

running across the busy street, Leah remembers the medical advice to “take it easy” (*NW* 77). Her collapse might also be psychological: perhaps Leah is discomposed by the possibility that this Madonna could revive in her the child she does not want to birth and raise (*NW* 81). Yet the scene also carries a spiritual tone, as if this moment were ordained—as if, in traveling from her home to this holy place, Leah became a pilgrim, an awaited visitor. Like untold thousands before her,<sup>60</sup> she comes burdened with questions about her life’s meaning and direction.

Despite all her adolescent experimentation with identity, Leah never developed a stable sense of self and purpose. Although she likes the existentialist sound of the phrase on the radio, “I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me,” she is unable to jot the words down for remembering (*NW* 3). Symbolically, her “pencil leaves no mark on the magazine pages” where she scribbles. Wanting her life to be of some lasting significance (but not through motherhood), Leah is uncertain how to leave her mark. Nearing middle age, she grows increasingly more stagnant, often retreating into the communal hammock of the shared garden where she and Michel live: a space of safety and sameness, “[f]enced in, on all sides” (*NW* 3, 21, 55, 398). Leah’s “stasis,” as Natalie calls it, is no new thing (*NW* 345). For example, just after telling Natalie about her engagement to Michel, Leah sighed, “I’m just slowly dying of boredom” (*NW* 287). Leah’s preoccupation with aging and death also extends far back. She chose to study philosophy because of a single line in the university’s prospectus, “Philosophy is learning how to die”: “she was scared of dying and thought it might help” (*NW* 36). When Leah imagines talking with her deceased father, she wants desperately to hear him say “don’t worry it’s nice here,” but he does not (*NW* 58). Anxious of the future, Leah dreads

forward motion, though marital partnership forces her thoughts unwillingly in that direction. Michel's rhetoric on momentum is passionate: "I am an African. I have a destiny. I love you, and I love where we are going together! I'm always moving toward my destiny, thinking of the next achievement, the next thing, taking it higher, so we, so both of us, can make that next [step]" (*NW* 32-33). Even as he speaks, though, Leah's mind floods with its own rhetoric of apprehension: "Which way is forward? Tick, tock . . . Born and bred. Same streets. Same girl? Next step" (*NW* 31). Why, she already has asked herself, "must love 'move forward?'" (*NW* 28). Michel, like Natalie, is obsessed with climbing up and out. He welcomes the future because he sees it as full, whereas Leah fears the future because she sees it as empty.

Leah's repeated encounters with Shar lead to further doubt about her life's meaning and direction. Although she sarcastically doodles "I AM SO FULL OF EMPATHY" while her Team Leader rants over a misappropriation of funds,<sup>61</sup> Leah is, in fact, very empathetic (*NW* 34-37). Similarly, when Natalie half-mocks Leah, describing her as "always trying to save somebody," her words ring true (*NW* 67). Perhaps Smith's wordplay is at work again in Leah's name. "Leah" is an anagram for "heal," and reaching out to others—especially those who need help—is Leah's way of being in the world. As a child, Leah always spoke with the homeless: not only to say hello or ask about their needs, but also to engage in conversations with them (*NW* 210). When Shar pounds on Leah's front door, "screaming PLEASE and crying," looking like a "woman in a warzone," Leah instinctively helps (*NW* 6-7). Even when she knows she is being scammed, Leah credits Shar's despair: "she was desperate enough to come to the door," desperate enough to lie, desperate enough to thief (*NW* 25). The two women continue

to meet throughout “Visitation”: in a sweetshop, on Willesden Lane, on Brondesbury ridge (*NW* 23-24, 44, 60).<sup>62</sup> Eventually, Leah gives her number to Shar: “Let me help, maybe I can . . . I work with, I’m connected to, a lot of charities, through work . . .” she stumbles over words as she looks into a weeping, “catastrophic purple yellow black eye” behind folds of black hair (*NW* 61). Despite Shar’s insistence that Leah leave her alone—“I’m an addict . . . I ain’t got your money, yeah? I’ve got a problem”—Leah persists, eventually visiting the dilapidated house where Shar squats (*NW* 61, 46). There, she pushes leaflets from the “Professional organizations offering professional help” through the letter slot (*NW* 62-63).

Leah’s motivations to rescue are several: her generous spirit, her innate tendency to care, and her sexual attraction to Shar, as well as perhaps a sense of white guilt. Gradually, Leah is developing awareness of her privilege. Certainly Michel reminds her of it: “Of course, your skin is white, it’s different, it’s more easy, you’ve had opportunities I didn’t have” (*NW* 32). Race and class privileges play out over time for Leah: growing up she seemed unaware of the advantages she enjoyed which Natalie did not.<sup>63</sup> Now, increased consciousness gives rise to questions about her life compared to Shar’s: how it is that Shar’s position is so different from her own, and why (*NW* 399).

In response to the questions Leah brings to St. Mary’s, the Black Madonna poses her own: “How have you lived your whole life in these streets and never known me?” “Don’t you know that I have been here as long as people cried out for help?” (*NW* 83). In order to clarify Leah’s life purpose and to direct her path, Our Lady of Multicultural Willesden reminds Leah of her roots. Of the four main characters, Leah is the only one whose family tree extends back beyond herself in Willesden: she is “Leah Hanwell of

this parish[,] [o]nly daughter of Colin Hanwell, *also of this parish*” (NW 79, emphasis mine). Leah is of Willesden and her life is an embodiment of its multicultural character, of its many layers and contradictions.<sup>64</sup> Suggesting purposiveness, even destiny, for Leah’s openness, sincerity, and shape-shifting ability to connect people, the Madonna asks, “How long did you think you could avoid me?”

Through Leah, Smith discloses the complexity of Willesden. “Visitation” is rich with neighborhood depictions, as noted above on Leah’s walk to St. Mary’s or, to take one other example, on her walk “[f]rom A to B redux” (NW 42). In chapters nine and ten, Smith writes and then rewrites the same trip through London. “From A to B,” chapter nine, is merely a set of directions from Yates Lane to Barlett Avenue: “Turn left . . . Head southwest . . . Turn right” and so on until the “Destination will be on the left” (NW 41). “From A to B redux,” chapter ten, brings to life the experience of this two-and-a-half mile route through crowded, diverse North West London:

Sweet stink of the hookah, couscous, kebab, exhaust fumes of a bus  
deadlock . . . I give you good price, good price . . . Empty cabs on account  
of the sunshine. Boom-boxes just because . . . A hundred and one ways to  
take cover: the complete black tent, the facial grid, back of the head,  
Louis Vuitton-stamped, Gucci-stamped . . . paired with tracksuits, skin-  
tight jeans, summer dresses, blouses, vests, gypsy skirts, flares. (NW 42-  
43).

Leah’s sensory experience of St. Mary’s church is no different from her sensory experience of Willesden. She is Smith’s vehicle for communicating colors, shapes, scenes, smells, sounds, and songs.

Leah is also Smith's vehicle for introducing Natalie, Nathan, and Felix to her readers. As the initial link between these three characters' stories, Leah functions as a channel for what *Globe and Mail* reviewer Lisa Moore calls *NW*'s "delicate" plot: "There are delicate connections throughout [*NW*], the sort of invisible connections that happen in an urban neighbourhood that is racially 'diverse'" (Moore). Given both Leah's conviviality and her localism, it is appropriate that she function as the nexus. Leah often recounts stories about people from Willesden in order to make conversation with Natalie (*NW* 70). Because Caldwell is adjacent to her back garden, Leah often sees familiar faces from the old estate (*NW* 70). Sharing her encounters is at least something to talk about with Natalie.<sup>65</sup> Natalie, in turn, recounts Leah's tales at her dinner parties: their anecdotal drama adding "local color" for her guests' amusement (*NW* 32, 96). It is through this storytelling process that Leah's encounters with Shar are told and retold. It is also how Nathan's thug narrative is introduced: establishing his addiction, his day-to-day survival on the streets, and his simultaneously protective and oppressive presence in Shar's life. Therefore, on the night of Natalie's trip through *auld hell* with Nathan, she immediately recognizes Shar when he stops to speak with her outside the Chinese takeaway (*NW* 371). Natalie then remembers Leah's account of Nathan's menacing threat. In quick succession, she ties Nathan's confessional plan to "fly or give it up tonight" with the "incident" on Albert Road (*NW* 362, 360). Professionally trained to connect details, Natalie always would have reached this conclusion, however, Leah's input enables her to do so more quickly. Perhaps in a similar way, Leah also prepares Natalie, with whom she is "bonded for life," to encounter her inverse self. If, as I suggested earlier, Nathan saves Natalie's life, then Leah indirectly participates as well.

When Natalie walks away from Suicide Bridge, she does “not know what had been saved exactly, *nor by whom*” (*NW* 169, 385, emphasis mine).

In the same way that Nathan can be interpreted as Natalie’s inverse self, Shar can be read as Leah’s “double with a fate that, had things played out differently, could have been hers” (Schwartz 45). Yet while Natalie insists that her life could never be like Nathan’s, Leah fixates on the possibility that her life could just as easily be Shar’s. Echoing the questions weighing on Leah’s mind, the Black Madonna, also an inverted double, asks, “Could things have been differently arranged, in a different order, in a different place?” The Lady’s return of questions to Leah suggests their unanswerable nature. Much of the Madonna’s monologue feels like an ambiguous oracle, perhaps dangerous to interpret, but also perhaps a message revealed through the novel’s telling. By reminding Leah of her roots in this neighborhood, in the “[u]nruly England of the real life,” the Black Madonna underlines Willesden’s significance to Leah’s individual purpose (*NW* 83). “Leah Hanwell of this parish”: this is your one life and these are your unique gifts. Your openness makes you a channel: a channel of *North West* London, of this neighborhood, of this book, of connectedness, of empathy, of the imperative to see better.<sup>66</sup>

Schwartz suggests that Leah’s ability to move effortlessly between groups of people leaves her “stranded . . . somewhere permanently in between,” always the “odd one out” (39). I agree that Leah’s suffusion with Otherness leaves no room for a substantive self. Yet I would argue that, exactly for this reason, Leah epitomizes Gilroy’s hopes for England: hopes that English culture one day will become so saturated with cultural complexity that the need to self-define becomes moot. By definition,

cohabitation and interaction refuse our preoccupation with boundaries and categories. As *NW*'s other main white character, Leah functions somewhat as a convivial foil to Annie and her melancholia. Rather than fearfully clinging to identities of *passed* past and hiding away from the reality of the *tense* present in unruly England, Leah embraces what *is*. Along with Felix, Leah represents the “ordinary, demotic multiculturalism” that Gilroy identifies as a “mature response to diversity, plurality, and differentiation”; and, therefore, she also epitomizes the multicultural values of “hospitality, conviviality, tolerance, justice, and mutual care” (99).

These values allow Leah to see the marginalized and the spectral, those whom others do not (or choose not to) see. Her attraction to Otherness is really an attraction to humanity: hence, her interest not just in giving the homeless man a couple quid, but also in hearing his story. Leah opens her door to a drug-addled prostitute when no one else will (*NW* 14). Because she tries to help, Leah is haunted by her inability to effect change in Shar's life: so haunted, in fact, that she cannot shake the idea that Shar is her alternate destiny (as seen in Leah's reaction to the photograph mix up: *NW* 107-09<sup>67</sup>). When Natalie asks if she still sees the girl who “scammed” her, Leah replies, “All the time. I see her all the time” (*NW* 353). Equally telling of her generosity of sight, Leah does not react to violence in the desensitized way Smith critiques in her interview with Rifbjerg. When Leah hears the news report of Felix's stabbing, she is angered by its emphasis on his childhood at the “notorious Garvey House project”: “He was murdered!” she cries at the television. “Why does it matter where he grew up?” (*NW* 104). While Leah never meets Felix in the text, she still responds to his death with compassion: she feels the loss of his life.



Lest she be misconstrued as a saint, it is clear that Leah is far from perfect: she deceives her husband, she is disrespectfully short with her mother, and she responds to Natalie's pettiness with resentment (Kakutani C1). She also spends quite a lot of time feeling sorry for herself. Nevertheless, she seems uniquely able to register Smith's care for Willesden, and England, in the present *tense*. The call to consciousness that pervades *NW* depends in large measure on Leah to channel conviviality, connection, compassion, and her particular concern for those on the street.

## CONCLUSION • “NoWhere”

While a number of reviewers reference Smith’s essay “Two Directions for the Novel” in their reactions to *NW*, I mention it now only to note one of Smith’s artistic objectives: “shak[ing] the novel out of its present complacency” through “constructive deconstruction” (94). Just as Smith plays with traditional structures in her latest novel, this thesis plays with the structures of that work—constructively deconstructing the characters whose stories are the story of *NW*.

I open my thesis with Felix’s story because, through it, I establish the groundwork that informs my reading. Containing the novel’s only sustained encounter between the *passed* past and the demotic multicultural, “Guest” invites fundamental postcolonial concepts to be brought into dialogue with the text. Its central characters present an attitudinal history of Empire: Lloyd in the resigned racial past, Annie in the melancholic present, and Felix in the convivial future. These metaphoric characters, and the postcolonial concepts they embody, project light onto London’s *tense* present, in the present tense about which Smith is writing in *NW*. Indeed, there is no laughter on *this* trip with her into Willesden.

Appropriately paradoxical for this novel, “Guest” can stand on its own but, since this section contains the novel’s *turn*, *NW* cannot stand without “Guest”—any more than England can stand without Her guests, whose collective transformational energy is the country’s most promising path forward (up and out of its not-yet-*passed* past). Indeed, since Felix would be disconnected from the rest of the novel but for Nathan, it seems

appropriate to follow my thoughts on “Guest” with my thoughts on “Crossing.” Nathan’s story gives depth to Felix’s: Nathan’s dead-end present closely parallels Felix’s *Graceless* past. Both represent the poor-alienated-young-black men who easily fall into drug culture as a way out. Had we met Felix three years prior, we would have found him sleeping at the bus stop in a stupor, “in utter oblivion, out of his mind on coke and K” (*NW* 135). Two years before that, we would have found him hustling coke for a film crew, trying to get out by getting paid (*NW* 177). The diegetic difference between Felix and Nathan is Grace, who gives Felix a *Gracefull* route up and out. Yet, Nathan *is* Felix’s alternate reality, one in which the despair rooted in a marginalizing culture cannot be escaped.

This inverse acknowledged, I turn attention once more to the scene of Felix’s murder. Felix resists Nathan and Tyler when they demand his earrings not because he dearly values a pair of synthetic stones, but because he dearly values gifts of Grace. The earrings represent the favor, the opportunity, the new lease on life that Grace gives Felix, and Felix dies trying to hold onto these gifts. In “South,” I argue that Nathan is a marked man. Here, I would suggest that Felix is too. Grace cannot save him: in the end, he is as irredeemable as Nathan. The lack of hope the novel offers these young black men, which my work establishes, is an open space for future study. Interesting conclusions will result from comparative studies of *NW* within a British, postcolonial, or transatlantic context, through the lenses of race and masculinity.

As the “Bogle” of the novel, Nathan is the conduit for its theme of haunting; the function that presents both the reader and Natalie with her tenement roots. Unlike the two men, Natalie escapes *auld hell* and its limitations, but she is haunted by what she

shed on her route up and out: her name and her neighborhood, her race and her class. In the novel's culminating scenes, Natalie's roots and routes cross in such a way as to make her stumble. Ultimately realizing that her ability to perform *all* of her contradictory personae is anything but failure, Natalie confidently walks away from the haunting accusation that she fails to keep it real. "Whoever said these were fixed coordinates to which she had to be forever faithful? How *could* she play them false?" (*NW* 397, emphasis mine). Natalie cannot betray her roots because they are part of her, so she might as well make use of them. Rather than settle for a simple and restrictive *past*, she chooses to self-author a complex *history* to underwrite her future possibilities. In this way, too, Natalie Blake and Nathan Bogle are each half of the same compass needle pointing in opposite directions: Natalie *is* the sole author of her existence, while Nathan, in the words of Marcus, *is not* the author of who he is, even in part (70). Surely, Natalie haunts Nathan too; although he is so marginalized, one can only speculate how.

As I argued in "North," Natalie is an autobiographical thought experiment for Smith, a fictional extrapolation of the personal conflict she expresses in "Speaking in Tongues": her inability to deploy, even pragmatically, her "childhood" voice alongside her "lettered" voice (132). To carry Natalie-as-thought-experiment one step further, I would suggest she also represents Smith's hope that future Keishas and Sadies can rise to the Inns of Court and literary acclaim without feeling they must shed any part of themselves (or without being accused of having done so). Natalie is Smith's projection of a new "Host" society in which everyone's routes really can be about "good work"—unburdened either by limitation or the need to overwrite a haunting past with revisionist history (*NW* 278). Such a "Dream City" comes into being through the recognition,

acceptance, and processing of a *passed* past as prescribed by Gilroy (“Speaking in Tongues” 137). Characteristically convivial, that society, like Leah, is completely open to strangers and Otherness. In this way, the Other’s “North”-bound climb requires a “West,” with its sunset over all aspects of Empire.

As suggested, Leah’s porosity channels both the novel and its ideals. As a frame, “Visitation” enables *NW* to be read as a call to consciousness, and therefore, is best examined last in order to appropriately emphasize its message, which is developed through the course of the novel. The imperative of the Black Madonna to Leah, and of Zadie Smith to her reader, is to see better—to see the *there* that is *here*.

To see the *there* that is *here* from a postcolonial perspective should be simple enough: as Gilroy so aptly puts it, “the immigrant is now here because Britain, Europe, was once out there” (100). Beyond the cognitive acceptance of multicultural reality, however, *NW* demands a humanitarian response to *all* otherness. Thematically aligning with the post-millennial trend in contemporary London literature to throw light on the hidden and give voice to the silenced, *NW*’s inverse selves motif points both to human connectedness and to social responsibility. One need not experience a situation to be conscious of it: after all, perhaps it is only by Grace that another’s life is not one’s own. “Grace” is not only “favour,” or even “luck”: it also suggests a situational “obligation” (*OED* entry “grace”).

Our Lady of Multicultural Willesden asks, “How have you lived your whole life in these streets and never known me? *What made you think you were exempt?*” (*NW* 83, emphasis mine). As an imperative of benevolence and responsibility, *NW*’s call is clear: to recognize the global in the local; the universal in the particular; and, as Felix would

say, the eternal in the personal (*NW* 151). If the global is local, then the local is global, which means the *here* is also *there*, and therefore **NoWhere** in particular. The lady of multicultural Willesden, then, speaks to us all.

## Notes

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1. *White Teeth*'s honors include: the Betty Trask Award (2001), the WH Smith Award for Best New Talent (2001), the Commonwealth Writers' Prizes for Overall Winner and for Best First Book (2001), the Whitbread First Novel Award (2000), the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction (2000), the Guardian First Book Award (2000), and an EMMA (British Television's Ethnic and Multicultural Media Award) for Best Book/Novel (2000). It was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction (2001), the Authors' Club First Novel Award (2001), and the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize (2000). The novel also was included among *Time* magazine's 100 Best English language Novels from 1923-2005 (*Zadie Smith*).

2. *On Beauty* won the Orange Prize for Fiction (2006), and *The Autograph Man* won the *Jewish Quarterly* Literary Prize for Fiction (2003).

3. "Whatever road presents itself, they will take, and if it happens to lead to a dead end, well then, Mr. Schutters and Mr. Banajii will merrily set upon another, weaving their way through Happy Multicultural Land" (*White Teeth* 384).

4. The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, and the July 7, 2005 suicide bombs detonated in Central London; "9/11 shook the fundamentals of multicultural Western societies. The mood in Britain was intensified after the London Bombings in 2005—known as '7/7'—because the suicide bombers were British 'born and bred'" (Rettberg 177).

5. For example: Pérez Fernández, Irene. "Representing Third Spaces, Fluid Identities and Contested Spaces in Contemporary British Literature." *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies* 31.2 (Dec. 2009): 143-160. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 27 March 2014.

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6. See reviews by Joyce Carol Oates, Kathryn Schulz, Lev Grossman, Darin Strauss, and Michiko Kakutani. Leo Robson, writing for the *New Statesman*, compares Smith's style in *NW* to E.M. Forster and Martin Amis combined: "Smith tends to write from her own experience, but only ever in the third person and usually with an authorial purview less omniscient than know-it-all: part E M Forster, part Martin Amis" (48).

7. Gilroy defines conviviality as: "the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere" (xv).

8. Lyrics from "Feeling Good" by Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley (1964).

9. Gilroy cites Linda Colley's *Captives: The Story of Britain's Pursuit of Empire and How Its Soldiers and Civilians Were Held Captive by the Dream of Global Supremacy, 1600-1850* (New York: Pantheon, 2002). As the title suggests, Colley contends that the English were imprisoned by their ambition for dominance. She further contends that the Empire was too vast to be analyzed as a whole (Gilroy 94). Gilroy quotes Colley's book: "Environments, economies, customs, power relations, and lives were sometimes devastated; but by no means always, because these intruders were frequently limited in number, and dependent often on a measure of indigenous tolerance" (95). Colley's way of thinking, Gilroy argues, ultimately results in blaming the colonized for empire and its evils.

10. Developing his case for melancholia, Gilroy discusses England's "neurotic...continued citation" of WW2 (89). Among his examples is the song still sung by Brits at football matches against Germany: "Two World Wars and One World Cup, Doo Dah, Doo Dah" (106). Felix's memory of Annie's headscarf suggests she was in costume, posing from those glory days.

11. "It didn't matter what nonsense came out of her mouth, her accent worked a spell. Felix had seen it magic her out of some unpromising corners" (*NW* 167).



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12. A popular brand of ceramic sinks, but an interesting detail; in light of reading Annie as England's *passed* past, the cracked Belfast sink suggests the state of the present-day Empire, faltering and faded in Northern Ireland.

13. "What looked like a single breakfast oat sat on her bottom lip, painted over with scarlet" (NW 162).

14. Trying to convince Felix to stay the weekend, Annie suggests grilling "that chicken thing you like," fumbling about for the word "jerk" (NW 169). When he mentions his apprenticeship at a garage, she responds, "Vintage cars are a nice hobby" (NW 177).

15. "'In poor areas people steal your phone. In rich areas the people steal your pension.' Felix smiled minutely" (NW 178).

16. I use *organic* as meaning: full of life; harmoniously working together as parts of a whole.

17. "That's setting the bar rather low, don't you think? I mean, bully for you she's not in a coma..." (NW 179).

18. Garvey House is Smith's reference to the Black House, a dilapidated terrace on the Holloway Road that became a haven for young black men in trouble with the law. The Cooper family lived in the House—"a mix of squat, halfway house and commune"—until they were relocated to Caldwell when Felix was eight (NW 121). One of the pictures in the photo-essay shows Lloyd stretched across a stained mattress reading *Malcolm X* (NW 123).

19. "'Like a sauna in here!' Felix dropped his coat to the floor and kicked off his trainers. In the narrow hall he remembered to give a wide berth to the first of several molten radiators, which, if you made even the faintest contact with them, burned your skin" (NW 118). "It was a greenhouse in this place, it was unbearable. The walls were sweating" (NW 126).

20. Other examples of this generational portrayal, in which parents confine themselves to safe domestic spaces while their children thrive outside in public spaces, include: *Some Kind of Black*

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by Diran Adebayo, *The Scholar* by Courttia Newland, and *Never Far From Nowhere* by Andrea Levy (*Imagining London* 224-25).

21. God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference. Alcoholics Anonymous teaches this prayer.

22. Schulz calls Felix's "novella" her favorite part of *NW* and describes it as well-able to stand on its own (77).

23. For example, (Moraru 133).

24. "Warm liquid reversed up his throat. Over his lips. Yet it couldn't be oblivion as long as he could name it, and with this in mind he said aloud what had been done to him, what was being done to him, he tried to say it, he said nothing. Grace!" (*NW* 198).

25. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "bogle" primarily as: "a phantom causing fright; a goblin, bogy, or spectre of the night; an undefined creature of superstitious dread. (Usually supposed to be black, and to have something of human attributes, though spoken of as *it*.) Also, applied contemptuously to a human being who is 'a fright to behold.'"

26. Interestingly, in order: a Capitalist, an Absolutist, a Utilitarian, a Libertarian, and an Atheist who all spent time in London. Likely, their memorialized presence among these tenements is as puzzling to the folk of Caldwell as to Smith's readers.

27. "I'm on the street, Keisha. I had some bad luck" (*NW* 368). "Bad luck follows me, Keisha. That's the thing. I don't follow bad luck. Bad luck follows me" (*NW* 375).

28. Writing about the American "hip-hop mentality," Gilroy contends: "Under the corporate tutelage of Spike Lee and company, consumerism, hedonism, and gun play were no longer to be incompatible with the long-term goals of racial uplift. Bigger investments in the present were necessary because the slaves' traditional belief in a better life after this one had started to fade with their Christianity" (127).

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29. One of Smith's many pop-culture references, spoken by Frank is, "'MTV Base...Look at that joy.' He reached forward on the bed and put his finger over a dancing B-girl in a white shell suit. 'I was in Puglia when he died. Nobody understood. *Some fat gangster? Who cares?* This was the attitude. It's not even music as far as they're concerned'" (NW 264).

30. For example, on a Saturday morning, Leah dances around in her pajamas. Smith's description of the dancing Leah melts into musical accompaniment: "She dances like a girl. She is not a girl anymore. YOU REALLY GOT ME. YOU REALLY GOT ME. YOU REALLY GOT ME" (NW 30).

31. The second track on Biggie's quadruple platinum album *Ready to Die*.

32. "It was Islam rather than Christianity that would supply the patch of solid ground on which postmodern-black nationalism could plant its over-sized ideological feet...A highly selective and partial appropriation of Islamic motifs assisted in developing strict communitarian responses to the nihilism of consumer culture and the despair of fratricidal and suicidal violence" (Gilroy 127).

33. Nathan's mother is St. Lucian (NW 70). His father's race is not mentioned, but because Nathan mocks Natalie's husband for being "half-caste," I assume that Nathan is not (NW 377). Additionally, Natalie tells Nathan that, although Leah would never admit it, Michel "looks like" him, and Michel's skin is "very dark" (NW 376, 25).

34. Ralph Ellison expresses a similar idea in his *Invisible Man*: "The fact is that you carry part of your sickness within you, at least I do as an invisible man. I carried my sickness and though for a long time I tried to place it in the outside world, the attempt to write it down shows me that at least half of it lay within me. It came upon me slowly, like that strange disease that affects those black men whom you see turning slowly from black to albino, their pigment disappearing as under the radiation of some cruel, invisible ray" (575).

35. Cheryl, Natalie's sister, lives "hand to mouth" with her three children, all fathered by different men, in the council flat where the girls grew up (NW 296).

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36. Particularly within hip-hop culture, “keeping it real” also functions as an excuse for ignorance and idleness, and a justification for crime. Chris Rock controversially addressed the expression in his 1996 Emmy award-winning HBO special *Bring the Pain*. Again given Smith’s penchant for pop culture, as well as the link I have drawn between Nathan’s character and the hip-hop culture of the 1990s, Rock’s “Niggas vs. Black People” comedy sketch, which explains “keeping it real” as keeping it “real dumb,” is worthy of note.

37. A “tenant” has been “taken on” as a full practicing member of the Inns of Court.

38. Smith’s metaphoric use of “language” is especially interesting in light of Ruth Franklin’s review for *The New Republic*, and the autobiographical ties between Smith and her character Natalie Blake. Franklin frames her review of *NW* with quotes from Smith about code switching. When first at Cambridge, Smith moved between a home voice and a university voice but later sacrificed one voice for the other, much to her eventual regret: “I should have kept both voices alive in my mouth” (Smith *qtd. in* Franklin 52). Franklin contrasts Smith’s elaborate intellectual writing style with the limited emotional development of her characters in *NW*, and she concludes that Smith must relearn her home voice in order to write with both “the voice of the mind and the voice of the heart” (56).

39. The etymology of “Keisha” is uncertain, but several databases link its origin to the Hebrew name of Job’s second daughter, Keziah. Most popular from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s in the U.S. and England, “Keisha” also is attributed to African American coinage. Many of its variations (*e.g.* Lakeisha) are African American. Natalie is of Medieval Latin origin.

40. “From the first day I was stepping into this country I have my head on correctly; I was very clear: I am going up the ladder, one rung at least” (*NW* 32).

41. “The British use a phrase suggesting ascension for enrollment at university” (Franklin 52).

42. Over fancy pastries and wine, Theodora Lewis-Lane, “QC, OBE, PhD,” shares with Natalie the story of her rise to “unlikely professional triumph” (*NW* 283). The child of Jamaican

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citizen-migrants raised in poverty in South London, Theodora makes clear that she refused to involve herself in civil rights and criminal law. “In this profession,” she begins, “fortune favors the brave—but also the pragmatic” (*NW* 284). Initially disregarding this advice, Natalie finds her “do-gooder” work receives “back-handed compliment[s]” from university classmates who become corporate and securities solicitors: who better than Natalie to work on these front lines, these “hopeless” streets of her birth? (*NW* 291-92).

43. As an interesting *parallel*, Queen’s Park denotes both Natalie’s professional success and Nathan’s professional failure.

44. Sell posits that “Smith’s idea of identity as gesture is similar to social psychologist Erving Goffman’s, who, building on George Herbert Mead’s insight(s),...views human interaction as a ‘performance’ by an actor responding to environment and audience and presenting a self for pragmatic ends in what amounts to a ‘dramatic realization’” (37).

45. Bhabha quotes *The Satanic Verses* as encapsulating “the indeterminacy of diasporic identity”: “Whether We be multiform, plural, representing the union-by-hybridisation of such opposites as Oopar and Neechay, or whether We be pure, stark, extreme, will not be resolved here” (225).

46. Natalie, of course, makes perverse decisions too, but “all [her] storytelling had, in the end, this aim in view”: namely making her future safe (*NW* 288).

47. “The red and white air technology of the Greek goddess of victory [Nike]. Keisha Blake put her hand against the reinforced shop-front glass. Separated from happiness...Ninety-nine quid” (*NW* 211).

48. One of three international hits off *Watch the Throne*, “Niggas in Paris” won Best Rap Performance and Best Rap Song at the 55<sup>th</sup> Grammy Awards last year (*Watch the Throne*).

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49. Natalie Blake is not always well-received by others because she is a token. KeishaNW is what “everyone’s seeking” because she, too, is a token. Natalie is both undesired and desired as a commodity but not as a *real* person.

50. “Hanwell” is also recurrent in Smith’s work. When asked about the “Hanwell family” in an interview, Smith called the surname a “talisman”: “I don’t think the Hanwell family all fit together in any logical way...Perhaps one day if I get a great burst of energy I’ll link them all properly” (Hodgkinson).

51. Tongue-in-cheek, Smith’s Narrator notes that “Colin Hanwell tries to listen. Really he isn’t interested in foxes and *what they might symbolize*” (NW 57, emphasis mine).

52. Natalie “crossed her wrists” before offering her “shaking hands” to Nathan (NW 361). Smith’s repeated use of the word “cross” in “Crossing” highlights Natalie Blake and Nathan Bogle as alternative versions of the same self who converge at this particular moment in time. Again referencing Schwartz’s interpretation: Nathan is Natalie’s “double with a fate that, had things played out differently, could have been hers” (45).

53. For example, “If you had any real self-respect or self-esteem,” challenges Natalie, “one person asking you to put a cigarette out in a fucking playground would not register as an attack on your precious little ego” (NW 339).

54. “Here the boundary wall had been partially destroyed—*it looked like someone had torn it apart with their hands, brick by brick*” (NW 366-67, emphasis mine). In “Two Directions for the Novel,” Smith praises Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* for “work[ing] through the things we expect of a novel, gleefully *taking them apart, brick by brick*” (85, emphasis mine). Just as Natalie meticulously breaks apart the structure that limits her, Smith, too, echoing McCarthy’s “avant-garde challenge,” breaks apart the tenets of lyrical realism (“Two Directions” 85).

55. The major road through North West London changes names several times: at one point it is the Kilburn High Road, and then it becomes Shoot Up Hill, NW2. Fortune Green adjoins

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Hampstead Cemetery, NW2, NW6. These real place names could not be more fitting for the ever-climbing Natalie Blake.

56. As a teen, Zadie Smith changed her name from Sadie Smith.

57. Another of Leah's female lovers once suggested to her that all people are "compelled toward" the number thirty-seven: "Watch for 37, the girl said, in our lotteries, our game-shows, our dreams and jokes, and Leah did, and Leah still does" (*NW* 46). Smith, who was thirty-seven-years-old at the time of *NW*'s publication, plays with this self-referential number throughout the book, but especially in Leah's section. For example, while "Host" does not have a chapter 37, "Visitation" contains four chapters numbered with italicized "37"s, which appear behind chapters 11, 15, 17, and 23 (not italicized). Respectively, these chapter "37"s describe: the *magical* number thirty-seven, Leah's abortion, Leah's encounter with the Black Madonna, and the scene at the pharmacy in which Leah is given Shar's pictures by mistake. Leah is thirty-five in narrative time, but the repetition of the number thirty-seven in her section seems to highlight her preoccupation with aging, with the clock's ticking past her childbearing years and toward death (*NW* 28). Since she does not want to leave her mark in the world by bearing a child, she is very much searching for other ways to make her life significant.

58. "Shar" sounds a little like "shaman," one "who is regarded as having direct access to, and influence in, the spirit world" (*OED* entry "shaman"). As something of a shamaness, Shar lays her hands on Leah's stomach and predicts that her baby will be a girl, born prematurely, with a proclivity for running: "You'll need one eye on her, all the time" (*NW* 12). The name "Shar" is the truncated form of many names, including "Shardai," which means "runaway" in Arabic and suggests a connection between Leah's visitor and Leah's child.

59. In "Affirming Complexity: *White Teeth* and Cosmopolitanism," Rogers argues that Smith charges society with "voluntary blindness," especially to those on the street—a charge that carries over into *NW* (53-54).

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60. Some of Sir Thomas More's polemic writings, which defend the practice of pilgrimage, mention the Willesden shrine with familiarity. In 1954, Willesden hosted Westminster's celebrations for the Marian year initiated by Pope Pius. During that year, 60,000 pilgrims visited the shrine (Fr. Nicholas).

61. Leah is not responsible for the mistake, but she is subjected to the Leader's chastisement of the entire team: "Question: how did this get so far down the line without intervention? I'd really like to know. Checks and balances, people! . . . The decision-making is obviously about relatability and yeah, empathy, and a personal connection but it's also about follow-through and visibility in the sense of value for money, that we get to be conscious of via a process of paperwork [p]aperworkpaperworkpaperwork" (NW 34-35).

62. Perhaps influenced by Michel's disgust toward Shar and his contempt for her ruse, Leah's kindheartedness temporarily ebbs. When Leah points out Shar to Michel in the sweetshop, he lunges at her accusingly (NW 24). On Willesden Lane, Leah surprises herself by echoing her husband's harsh words: "Proud of yourself? *Thief*. I want my money" (NW 45).

63. For example, the summer before both girls leave for university, Leah spends her days buzzed and picnicking under shade trees on Hampstead Heath. Natalie spends hers in a bakery at "three twenty-five an hour" to earn the money she will take with her to Bristol (NW 234).

64. In her interview with Rifbjerg, Smith discusses Willesden's "layers of English life" (e.g. "If you look up, the buildings are from the 1890s, train stations from the twenties and thirties, the churches are sometimes medieval"). These layers, and their contradictions, are "[u]nruly England of the real life": "freshwater springs and tube stations, ancient yews and one-stop-shops, grazing land and 3D multiplexes" (NW 83).

65. Interestingly, Marcia also resorts to local gossip in order to communicate with Natalie: "You remember Mrs. Iqbal? Small woman, always a bit snooty with me. Breast cancer...Guess



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how much for eggs at that market...I seen Pauline. Leah's working for the council now. She always had such big ambitions for that child" (*NW* 294-95).

66. Smith's 2007 essay on writing is entitled "Fail Better."

67. "Her photos. My envelope. That's what happened. Like a riddle in a dream" (*NW* 109).

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## **Vita**

Heather Childress Custer was born in Charlotte, North Carolina to Kent and Linda Childress. She graduated from Central Cabarrus High School in North Carolina in June 1993. The following autumn, she entered the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to study English and Secondary Education as a North Carolina Teaching Fellow, and in May 1997 she was awarded the Bachelor of Arts degree. Relocating to Caldwell County, North Carolina, she taught 8<sup>th</sup> grade language arts until 2005, when she became an Academically and/or Intellectually Gifted Specialist. In November 2007, she earned the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards Certification in Early Adolescence English Language Arts. In May 2010, she began work on her Master of Arts degree in English at Appalachian State University. The M.A. was awarded in May 2014. In August 2014, Mrs. Custer joined the English faculty at Appalachian State as an adjunct instructor of Composition.

Mrs. Custer is a member of Phi Beta Kappa and was inducted into the Cratis Williams Society of Outstanding Graduates at Appalachian State. She is an active member of both the Alpha Delta Kappa Honorary Organization for Women Educators and her local Service League. She resides in Lenoir, North Carolina with her husband and their four dogs.