

## Searching for a “Different Kind of Freedom”: Postcoloniality and Postfeminist Subjecthood in Zadie Smith’s *NW*

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This paper attempts to open a new line of inquiry into Zadie Smith’s fourth novel *NW* (2012) by drawing attention to her investment in the contemporary feminine experience. I argue that by bringing women to center stage, *NW* marks a turning point in Smith’s fiction, while also bearing the hallmarks of the author’s previous work, namely her concern with Britain’s postcolonial legacy and issues of human connection. While Smith’s focus on self-monitoring educated women links the text to a postfeminist paradigm, the fact that these characters, and others, are of immigrant background locates the novel in the terrain of Britain’s postcolonial history and its multicultural present in twenty-first century London. My contention will be that far from adopting a celebratory approach to her postfeminist subjects as harbingers of social change, Smith points at the disabling aspects of this ideology, and the prevalence of racial and gender inequalities, problematizing individualistic notions of failure as self-responsibility.

Keywords: postcolonialism; connectedness; postfeminism; female friendship; bildungsroman; impressionistic narrative

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## Buscando un “tipo diferente de libertad”: postcolonialismo y sujeto postfeminista en *NW* de Zadie Smith

Este artículo pretende abrir una nueva línea de investigación en el estudio de *NW* (2012), la cuarta novela de Zadie Smith, prestando atención a su exploración de la experiencia femenina contemporánea. La centralidad de los personajes femeninos hace de esta obra un punto de inflexión en la narrativa de Smith, al mismo tiempo que la novela despliega las idiosincrasias de la autora, en particular su preocupación por el legado postcolonial de Gran Bretaña y por el tema de la conexión humana. Si bien el énfasis en una generación

femenina formada y autónoma liga el texto a un paradigma postfeminista, el hecho de que estos personajes y otros sean de origen emigrante ancla la novela en el terreno familiar de la historia postcolonial británica y su presente multicultural en el siglo XXI. Se intentará demostrar que más allá de celebrar al sujeto postfeminista como emblema del cambio social, Smith interroga los aspectos negativos de esta ideología y la prevalencia de desigualdad de género y racial, problematizando nociones individualistas del fracaso como responsabilidad personal.

Palabras clave: postcolonialismo; conexión humana; postfeminismo; amistad femenina; novela de formación; narrativa impresionista

Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) is arguably the author's most female-centered novel to date, as it spotlights issues of female identity and female friendship at the turn of the twentieth century. Despite its "late blooming" in women's writing, as Margaret Atwood observes in her essay on the subject (1986), the topic of female friendship has received considerable attention by such prominent contemporary women novelists as Fay Weldon, Toni Morrison, Joyce Carol Oates, Gail Godwin and Alice Walker, to cite just a few. The reviewer of the *Times Literary Supplement* places Smith's novel on this literary map, praising it as "one of the strongest dissections of female friendship since Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*" (Webb 2012, 19). Indeed, in the same way that Lessing's "Free Women" sections concerning the friendship between Anna Wulf and Molly Jacobs function as a "a skeleton, or frame" (Lessing [1962] 1993, 7) in the midst of the fragmentation of her novel, so the friendship of Leah Hanwell and Natalie Blake provides the backbone of Smith's non-linear and structurally complex fourth novel, as well as it being an excellent tool for exploring the lives of contemporary women. This should not be taken to signify that Smith has neglected the portrayal of women in her novels, which are inhabited by memorable female characters such as Irie Jones in *White Teeth* (2000) and Kiki Belsey in *On Beauty* (2005). And yet, it has been claimed that her "female characters lack development because they are overshadowed by white male protagonists [...] whose stories drive the narratives" (Walters 2008, 125). Whether the lack of central female characters in the fictions of Smith is due to the author's own admission of "having difficulty writing from the female perspective" (Walters 2008, 126), or to other motivations, with *NW*, which she considers to be the first book that she has "really written as an adult" (Bollen 2014), she has taken up the challenge. Bringing women to center stage, *NW* marks a turning point in Smith's fiction, while also bearing the hallmarks of the author's previous work, namely her enduring concern with Britain's postcolonial history and issues of human connection.<sup>1</sup>

This paper attempts to open a new line of inquiry into Smith's text by drawing attention to her exploration of contemporary women's lives. Despite being the author's first full-blown venture into the female realm of experience, this facet of *NW* remains markedly underexamined in the existing scholarship, which has concentrated on another aspect of the text's innovation, namely, the author's departure from the lyrical realism that characterizes her previous work, and in its place her embrace of experimentation and modernist precursors (James 2012; 2013; Knepper 2013; Fernández Carbajal 2016). David James identifies a revival of experimentation in Smith's generation of postmillennial writers, whom he places at a "crossroads" between realism and experimentation" (2012, 845). This wave of criticism has been partly prompted by Smith's essay "Two Directions for the Novel" (2009a), which James considers to have a "strikingly predictive relationship to *NW*," since it is aimed at "those who assume

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<sup>1</sup> Zadie Smith's last novel *Swing Time* (2016), revolves around the lives of two biracial female friends (Pearce 2015).

that in fiction today there are no remnants of modernism and that realism remains unchallenged” (2013, 205).<sup>2</sup> It is unarguable that in its discarding of linearity as regards plot line and time frame, in its endless inventiveness and its incorporation of diverse narrative forms and styles, *NW* insistently calls the reader’s attention to its craft. My engagement with the text’s aesthetics will nonetheless be limited to the way it enhances Smith’s depiction of the crafting of the self, of processes of subject-formation and self-transformation, which, as we shall see, are central to this novel.

Writing about the issue of subject formation, Judith Butler explains that “the self delimits itself, and decides on the material for its self-making, but the delimitation that the self performs takes place through norms which are, indisputably, already in place” (2002, 225). The norm of femininity operating in Smith’s text corresponds to “the ‘can do’ girl,” a term used by Anita Harris (2003) and quoted by Angela McRobbie, whose ideas in *The Aftermath of Feminism* provide insight into Smith’s exploration of the feminine experience (2009, 58). McRobbie argues that “the attribution of capacity” (58) is the hallmark of contemporary womanhood. She explains that “the principles that underscore the new gender regime require willingness, motivation and aptitude on the part of young women that if instilled within the school system will be sustained and further developed in the workplace” (75). Success, according to this model, is not incompatible with marriage or motherhood, and the heterosexual norm prevails. This kind of feminine subject “emerges as a social norm of contemporary femininity” against which women are measured or measure themselves (77). Smith inscribes a postfeminist ideology in the text in the sense that her focus of interest is not on female powerlessness, but rather on women who have reaped the benefits of past struggles for equality and freedom. Coming of age in the nineties and despite their working class, immigrant backgrounds—Irish and Caribbean respectively—Leah and Natalie have had the opportunity to rise to their potential. If such focus on self-monitoring educated middle class women in control of their lives links the text to a postfeminist paradigm, the fact that these characters, alongside others, are of immigrant extraction grounds the novel in the terrain of Britain’s postcolonial history and its multicultural present. My contention will be that far from adopting a celebratory approach to her postfeminist subjects, the novel interrogates this norm of contemporary femininity by pointing to the limitations and exclusions it engenders, including the difficulty in achieving an

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<sup>2</sup> Also drawing on Smith’s essay, Wendy Knepper focuses on the novel’s aesthetics, which she defines as “a juxtaposition of avant-garde techniques with forms of rigorous lyrical realism” in “Revisionary Modernism and Postmillennial Experimentation in Zadie Smith’s *NW*” (2013, 125). Alberto Fernández Carbajal’s article “On Being Queer and Postcolonial” offers a reading of Smith’s text “through its echoes of Virginia Woolf’s novel in order to suggest that *Mrs Dalloway* provides *NW* with a similarly frustrated model of queer resistance to sexual normativity while simultaneously concentrating on human connection across ethnic divides” (2016, 79). Other issues raised by the text are also beginning to be addressed. In “A Right to a Secret,” Lynn Wells explores the notion of secrecy, both as a theme in the novel and as an anti-representationalist technique through which Smith avoids full exposure of “her characters’ inner workings” (2013, 97). David James has addressed the topics of localism and cosmopolitanism in “Worlded Localisms: Cosmopolitics Writ Small” (2015).

ideally coherent and fulfilling sense of selfhood, the weakening of the subject's moral power, and the continuing existence of patterns of gender and racial inequality.

A clarification regarding the novel's structural pattern becomes necessary at this point, particularly because it invites readers to think about a third character, Felix Cooper, as a co-protagonist alongside the two female figures. *NW* features an impressionistic temporal structure. As Marianne DeKoven explains, "impressionistic narrative generally begins on the eve of an important event or time, without letting the reader know that it has any particular significance. The story then 'flashes back' to the events or times in the protagonist's life which build to this crucial moment, constructing the whole picture through an accretion of episodes, until the reader has a full sense of the import of that initial moment" (1983, 32-33). The important event, or as DeKoven would have it "pinnacle" (33), in *NW* is furnished by the death of Felix in the present time of the novel, during the August bank holiday weekend, when London celebrates the Notting Hill Carnival. Felix acts as a link between the five different sections comprising the narrative, which all culminate in this incident or ramifications of it. The greater part of each section covers moments and events in the protagonists' lives prior to this pinnacle, the thematic significance of which becomes gradually apparent. At the end of the first section of the novel, "Visitation," Leah, who is at a carnival Sunday party, overhears the news of a stabbing the night before. The victim's identity is unveiled in the next section, "Guest," which charts the last day of Felix's life, a Saturday, with revealing flashbacks into his past. "Host," a retrospective section centering on the development of Natalie's character, ends with a walk that takes her to the environs of the crime scene soon after the stabbing that Saturday. This walk is the focus of the brief section "Crossings," where Natalie crosses paths with one of the suspects. The aftermath of these events is dealt with in the final section, "Visitation," whose concluding scene features the protagonists' involvement in seeking justice done for the death of Felix. Though more obliquely than previous works, *NW* encompasses the author's perennial preoccupation with the ethics of connection, which is thematized through the friendship at the center of the novel, as well as through the protagonists' irresistible entanglement with others, even total strangers, within the urban coordinates of the text. This clever, if intricate, structural pattern also allows Smith to preserve the centrality of the female experience in the novel without sacrificing the thematic relevance of Felix, whose full significance only becomes clear at the end of the narrative as the three characters converge.

*NW* is, in essence, the story of two female friends exploring the meaning of their lives. Smith has admitted that "men hardly exist" in this fourth novel (Bollen 2004), one that she dedicates to her best friend Sarah Kellas. Following the argument of critic Marianne Hirsch, it seems appropriate that a novel preoccupied with the exploration of feminine identity should not deal with its female characters in isolation, but in relation to other women. "Female identity in fiction," Hirsch argues, "can no longer be studied in the context of traditional ego psychology that fails to take into account

women's fluid ego boundaries [...] relationships between women emerge as important [...] plots," adding that the different forms of female bonding, characterized by being supportive and nurturing, are related to "mother-daughter affiliation" (1981, 218). In her landmark study, *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Hirsch adheres to Nancy Chodorow's claim that the foundation of female identity is located in "the pre-oedipal period," where "mother-daughter bonding, not phallic lack, connection, not castration, characterize female identity" (1989, 132). Similarly, Luce Irigaray has argued that women should not be "accomplices" in the matricide on which patriarchy is based, and should instead foster positive relations with other women ([1981] 1997, 44). In this line of thought, the reclamation of female alliances amounts to an assertion of the feminine. Hirsch identifies in the feminist fiction of the 1970s a foregrounding of the female plot, which displaces male figures in favor of same sex female relations: "the retreat to the pre-oedipal as a basis for adult personality, the concentration of mother-daughter bonding and struggle, and the celebration of female relationships of mutual nurturance leave only a secondary role to men" (1989, 133). Although Smith does not explicitly position herself within this tradition of feminine writing, in its privileging of the female friendship plot, *NW* shares much of its spirit.

Irigaray also comments on the need for balance in female relationships, which should avoid extreme patterns of "*fusion or rivalry*" that may threaten to desubjectivize or destroy women ([1985] 1997, 192-193, italics in original). The closeness of the female bond, the theorist claims, is not incompatible with the separateness of the friends, who should not be mirrors of each other: "Between us [...] one is not the original and the other, her copy [...] we relate to each other without simulation" (1980, 78). In effect, Irigaray displays a modern understanding of friendship based on difference. As Sandra Lynch explains, classical discourses on friendship "place more emphasis on similarity and equality between friends—shared concerns, shared character, even complete fusion on all matters—than on taking account of the otherness of the friend" (2005, 35). In contrast, modern approaches to friendship problematize the traditional emphasis on likeness and perfection, viewing it "as a relationship predicated on separation and difference allow[ing] for the accommodation of divergent opinion in the relationship, for openness to change and development" (85). The latter view underscores the fluidity of relationships between friends, which may be subjected to the disruptive influence of forces such as temperament, moral attitudes, class status or wealth. Smith clearly eschews the traditional notion of the female friend as kindred spirit and "confidant," which, as Janet Todd explains, is at the root of the traditional literary representation of female friendship (1980, 1), in favor of a more fluid and unsentimental understanding of its dynamics. Her female figures are ideological opposites with divergent life trajectories. Whereas Leah's most distinctive quality is her "generosity of spirit" (Smith 2012a, 157), coupled with a certain bohemian propensity, Natalie's is her self-serving "cleverness and will-to-power" (160). While Natalie manages to gradually rise above the estate tower blocks through her academic endeavors, Leah, in a paradoxical role

reversal, “occupies the stereotypical position of ambitionless under-achievement often assigned by mainstream British culture to immigrant and non-white Londoners” (Wells 2013, 100). It is worth noting that Leah and Natalie embody variations of the forces in conflict in Smith’s previous novel, *On Beauty* (2005), liberal humanism versus self-reliant pragmatism, as articulated by the male protagonists, the liberal Howard Belsey and the more conservative Monty Kipps. These opposing forces become reconciled, however, through the protagonists’ wives, as a genuine, if short-lived, bonding develops between Kiki and Carlene, despite their disagreement on fundamental issues. *On Beauty* can thus be said to prefigure Smith’s analysis of female relationships in *NW*, where the topic is given full expression. Even though Leah and Natalie’s friendship has withstood the test of time, marriage, and motherhood, the current outcomes of the friends’ differing choices, coupled with their individual personal crises, have combined to create some natural tension and distance within their relationship.

Leah’s and Natalie’s disaffection is clearly related to their complex relationship with the feminine norm according to which they have constituted themselves. Smith captures their lives at a time when their identities are failing, illustrating McRobbie’s observation that “young women now find themselves, if no longer trapped within the home, then confined to the topographies of an unsustainable self-hood [...] and deeply invested in achieving an illusory identity defined according to a rigidly enforced scale of feminine attributes” (2009, 120). The ‘illusory’ and ‘unsustainable’ character of their subject positions manifests itself in the way Leah has failed to live up to the expectations of this type of feminine subject, while Natalie, who emblemizes it, finds it unfulfilling. Although the spirit of self-determination from which the protagonists operate is invoked at the onset of the narrative by the line “I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me” (Smith 2012a, 3), on which Leah ponders as she leisurely reads a magazine in the garden hammock of her basement flat, the grandiosity of this statement gradually wears thin as we are exposed to Leah’s misgivings about the expectations surrounding her heterosexual marital relationship. Having chosen to marry French-Algerian Michel much to her mother’s dislike, she is faced with the conundrum of how to reconcile her marriage with her rejection of maternity and her repressed homoerotic drive, feelings which clash with normative heterosexual femininity. Her encounter with Shar, the crack addict who appears begging for money on Leah’s doorstep at the onset of the novel and who will haunt her as though the return of a part of herself that she has repressed, reignites her attraction to women, at the same time as she is being continually reminded of her procreative “duties” by her family and female colleagues. Leah professes a sort of private feminism, having an abortion in secret and thus disregarding her husband’s wish to become a father. And yet, despite her autonomous and critical stance, Leah seems to covet Natalie’s middle-class lifestyle, as the following passage illustrates, “Leah watches Natalie stride over to her beautiful kitchen with her beautiful child. Everything behind those French doors is full and meaningful. The gestures, the glances, the conversation that can’t be heard.

How do you get to be so full? And so full of meaningful things? Everything else Nat has somehow managed to cast off. She is an adult. How do you do that?” (Smith 2012a, 57). While Natalie has status, a home and a family, Leah has a low paying job in a charity and rents a council flat from which she can still see the old estate, a constant reminder of her more modest attainment in life. Natalie represents the feminine ideal of aspiration and achievement against which Leah cannot help but measure herself. When, as McRobbie argues, “having a well-planned life emerges as a social norm of contemporary femininity [...] the absence of such styles of self-organization becomes [...] a signal of failure or a symptom of some other personal difficulties” (2009, 77), an assumption that Leah seems to have internalized despite her private rebellion against these classifications.

Smith’s investment in exploring postfeminist subjecthood is evinced by the prominent role that Natalie plays in the narrative. As an iconic “neo-feminist subject,” neo-feminism being Hillary Radner’s term for postfeminism, Natalie is portrayed as “a free agent working in [...] her own interests with a view to optimizing [...] her position outside of the confines of family and hereditary status, but within a profit-driven society” (Radner 2011, 11). Her section, “Host,” the longest and most chronologically extensive, occupies a central position in the novel, and could even stand on its own: an abridged version of it was first published by Smith in *The New Yorker* as a short story titled “Permission to Enter” (2012b). Functioning as a sort of embedded narrative of formation or *bildung*, as I will argue, “Host” presents Natalie as a subject “actively engaged in the production of [her] self,” to use McRobbie’s words (2009, 60). The section charts the transformation of Keisha Blake—as she was formerly known—into Natalie De Angelis through a number of carefully monitored choices regarding education, career, partners, home ownership and even naming. Natalie, “our heroine,” as the narrator in this section refers to her (2012a, 171), manages to climb the social ladder through her adoption of an ethos of meritocracy and individualism, overcoming familial, class and race barriers. While a law student, she changes her name from Keisha to Natalie, which is less ethnic sounding and more resonant with her process of self-invention, inaugurating a life guided by the principles of expediency and pragmatism. Her Afro-Caribbean boyfriend and fellow law student Rodney Banks, with his stigmatizing ties to her former life in the estate, is replaced by a more suitable partner, affluent and cosmopolitan Frank De Angelis, a Black-Italian investment banker to be. Through her association with Frank, Natalie enters the corporate world of money and business. After working as a lawyer for her community in a small firm and partly with a view to fitting in better with Frank’s social circle, Natalie creates her own commercial law practice devoting her career to defending the interests of corporations. She refers to her social ascent metaphorically as a progress from being “an accidental guest at the table, as she had always understood herself to be,” to becoming “a host, with other hosts” (Smith 2012a, 190), hence the title of the section. In their Victorian trophy home, Natalie and Frank form a family, thriving in spite of the stock



market crash of 2008. Whereas Natalie dissociates her husband from the questionable ethics underlying the crisis, his uncritical defense of the finance industry —“‘if the City closed tomorrow,’ said Frank, without looking at his wife, ‘this country would collapse. End of story’” (240)—reveals his complicity with the system that caused it.

It is in the “Host” section of the novel that Smith develops her most sustained interrogation of normative notions of contemporary femininity. She does so through a departure, on both the thematic and formal levels, from the traditional conception of the narrative of formation as a genre depicting “a process of teleological and organic growth, in the manner of a seed that develops into a mature plant according to inherent genetic principles” (Boes 2006, 232). By contrast, Smith follows the more contemporary trend for narratives of female formation to “featur[e] female protagonists imaged in the context of a more disordered, less knowable world, and [to be based on] philosophical notions of the self as unstable, constructed and contradictory” (Salvatore 2002, 156). As such, Smith extends the narrative of Natalie’s social rise beyond her formative years to also include her downfall, ending this section with the “heroine” steeped in a profound personal and marital crisis and feeling estranged from the self and the life she has constructed. The implication is that her loss of self may stem from her rigid adherence to the ethos of meritocracy and competitiveness, having allowed “work and capacity” to “dominate rather than be subordinate to [her] self-identity” (McRobbie 2009, 61). When Leah summarizes Natalie’s achievements saying to her “You have your work. You have Frank. You’ve got all these friends. You’re getting to be so successful. You are never lonely,” the narrator explains how “Natalie tried to picture the woman being described” (2012a, 236), as if she could not recognize herself in this interpellation. She is portrayed as undergoing a process of “critical desubjectification,” which Butler explains as a “turn[ing] away from the law, resisting its lure of identity [...] a willingness *not* to be,” quoting Agamben to add that “‘there is in effect something that humans are or have to be, but this is not an essence nor properly a thing’” (1997, 130-131; author’s emphasis). Natalie, who significantly refers to her different roles as “drag” (245), comes to the realization that, however ideal and strived for, her subject position is a construction, rather than something natural or authentic, and as such it may fail or cease to work.

It thus seems fitting that the text of “Host,” which articulates the narrative of Natalie’s formation, should draw readers’ attention to its construction as a literary artifact more intensely than any other section of the novel. There is a marked correspondence between notions of selfhood and the form of their articulation in this part of the text. Smith’s engagement with the constructed character of feminine selfhood and notions of the incoherent self is matched, and indeed enhanced, by her recourse to anti-representationalist techniques, heeding her own advice that in order for realism to continue to be relevant, its practitioners “will have to push a little harder on their subject” (Smith 2009a, 80). Notions of unity and continuity are eschewed through a heterogeneous series of almost two hundred numbered vignettes. Linearity

is disrupted by forward-looking vignettes like “41. *Parenthetical*” (2012a, 169), static ones like “138. *http://www.google.com/search?client*” (223), which features a philosophical reflection on time, or discontinuous clusters as “69. *The invention of love: part one*” (182), “88. *The invention of love: part two*” (189) and “182. *Love in the ruins*” (256). Generic expectations are challenged by Smith’s deployment of different text types to suit her purposes, like the titular menu in “66. *Menu*” (181), an email conversation in “123. *Bye noe*” (210), concrete poetry interwoven with dialogue in “113. *Miele di Luma (two weeks)*” (203), or the script style of “165. *Stage directions*” (241). “*Miele di luma (two weeks)*” emphasizes the surface of the prose, the plasticity of words in order to evoke a mood of self-containment and indulgence for Natalie and Frank’s honeymoon in an Italian luxury beach resort. A very different picture of their marriage emerges over a hundred vignettes later in “*Stage directions*,” where Smith turns to the conventions of drama to capture the disintegration of their relationship, a prelude to Natalie’s breakdown, as she unsuccessfully tries to resist the temptation to arrange an online date with a stranger. In effect, Natalie’s well-planned life, her achievement of a certain image of female desirability, has led to feelings of alienation and inauthenticity, which culminate in a spiral of self-berating behavior through her recourse to sexual encounters of a degrading nature.

The development of Natalie and Leah’s friendship features prominently in this section, functioning as a barometer that registers the protagonists’ disaffection. Significantly, “Host” opens with the incident that forges their relationship, as Natalie saves Leah from drowning at the community pool on their council estate at the age of four. There was no lifeguard at this facility, unlike in more comfortably off neighborhoods, as Natalie’s mother complains: “They had a guard up the hill, in Hampstead, for them. Nothing for us” (Smith 2012a, 151). This event sets the context in which the girls’ relationship unfolds, suggesting that their bond is grounded in the need for mutual support in an underprivileged environment. Although the interracial nature of their friendship points at a certain degree of conviviality in the racially diverse council state where they grow up in the seventies and eighties, Leah functions like “a sort of passport” into social acceptance for Natalie, allowing her to socialize outside her church and ethnicity. When their relationship lapses due to the interference of Natalie’s mother, who finds the dildo that Leah had given Natalie as a birthday gift, Natalie feels like an “outcast,” “revealed and exposed” (167). During their girlhood years, when the friends are immersed in the process of becoming the individuals we encounter in the text, their relationship functions as an empowering space of freedom and respect in which their developing selves can thrive. This we see, for instance, in the ease with which Leah accepts Natalie’s renaming of herself, or in Natalie’s unbiased understanding of Leah’s attraction towards other women. As Hirsch remarks, “whereas the connection between mother and daughter is fraught with potential dangers, intragenerational friendships among women offer only the benefits and not the pitfalls of same-sex bonding (1989, 133). In contrast to the stability enjoyed by the friends during their formative years, Smith

imbues their adult relationship with an atmosphere of disconnection, and lacking in intimacy and self-disclosure. Leah is able to see through the cracks of the glossy façade of Natalie's marriage, while Natalie suspects Leah of being depressed due to what she perceives as Leah's stagnant life. Smith reinforces this point in one of the final vignettes of the section, ironically titled "*Catching up*" (258), depicting the friends' meeting in an Irish pub. While the meeting takes place in the midst of Natalie's personal crisis and her sexual escapades, the conversation does not move beyond the superficial.

The question, then, is whether the novel simply depicts female disaffection or whether it also envisions an alternative, a "being elsewhere or otherwise" for Leah and Natalie, to use Butler's terms, (1997, 130). For all its elusiveness, as the text circles around issues without really trying to resolve them in a satisfactory manner, *NW* does gesture towards the protagonists' need for a decentering of their selves, for a leap "out of solipsism into communality," as Smith remarks in her tribute essay to the late author David Foster Wallace (2009b, 283). Appearing in the same collection as "Two Directions for the Novel," Smith's essay "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace" (2009b) can also be seen to have had a bearing on *NW*, although it has not been invoked in discussions of her novel. The Wallacian predicament that "awareness must move always in an outward direction, away from the self" (268) constitutes Smith's main critique of her postfeminist subjects—Natalie in particular—who, to use Radner's terms, face the "challenge [...] to imagine a sense of community in a culture in which identity and self are generated through individual achievement and fulfillment," and to ease frictions "between economic independence and the need for collective affirmation [...]; between an ethical imperative and self-gratification" (Radner 2011, 197). The female disaffection featured in the text is thus counterbalanced with a discourse of deprivation and social inequality related to race, class and gender, which opens up a potential space for personal reconstruction through ethical engagement with others.

Peopling the North West London world of Leah and Natalie are a host of characters who remind the self-absorbed protagonists of their connections and duties to others. A stark contrast is drawn between those council estate youths who, like Natalie and Leah, managed to make their way in British society and those who failed to overcome the obstacles of race and class and turned to crime and drugs. Shar, Nathan Bogle and Felix Cooper, the latter being the focus of my discussion, may well fit the description of "the failed offspring of state multicultural policies and practices" (Fortier 2008, 40). It is through them that Smith inscribes a narrative of marginality which is linked to Britain's postwar history of migration from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent. Smith creates an atmosphere of familiarity among these characters, the privileged and the downtrodden, who all attended the same comprehensive school and whose paths continue to intersect as adults across the urban coordinates of the novel. Although *NW* could be seen, as its title seems to suggest, as a novel "about being local, about a turn away from cosmopolitan versions of migrancy" (Procter 2003, 126), it features a

“worlded localism,” one which engages “profound questions of racial difference, cultural displacement and assimilation” (James 2015, 48). Successful black women like Natalie, as well as the talented multiracial elite to which she and her husband belong, may have acquired a symbolic significance as “harbinger[s] of social change” (McRobbie 2009, 58), but nonetheless Smith maintains a strong correlation between class and race in the novel. Far from subscribing to a celebratory discourse of integration, Smith points at the prevalence of racial inequalities and problematizes the notion of failure as self-responsibility encoded in the ethos of meritocracy.

By bringing Leah and Natalie into relation with Felix, by turning him into their co-protagonist, and his death into a sort of pinnacle in this impressionistic narrative, Smith underscores the idea that although subjects have the capacity to form themselves, they always exist in relation to others. Felix is the only downtrodden character for whom Smith gives us a personal history, making his life “valuable” and therefore his loss “grievable” (Butler 2010, 25). His section, “Guest,” a title which significantly turns him into a foil to Natalie, traces the last day of his life as he visits several people across west London, including his Rastafarian father, Lloyd. These encounters, which offer revealing glimpses into Felix’s harsh past and his present hopeful condition as a recovered addict, allow Smith to portray this character with more depth than would be otherwise allowed by his brief appearance in the narrative. Smith partly depicts Felix as a product of his background, having been born in a dysfunctional family of Caribbean background and raised in a *halfway house* for troubled black youth in the seventies. His death intrudes into the lives of the protagonists, just as the suicide of Septimus Warren Smith does in a day of the life of Clarissa Dalloway. He is “a latter-day Septimus” (Fernández Carbajal 2016, 86), and ultimately, an updated Leonard Bast, from E.M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910), who has been claimed as the source of Woolf’s character (Russell 2005). Like his forerunners, Felix struggles to advance himself nourished by a belief in his own potential and by the redeeming force of his girlfriend Grace. It is Felix’s refusal to part with the zirconia earrings that Grace has given him, a gesture paradoxically suggestive of his desperate grasp on the promises of life, which seems to precipitate his stabbing on Albert Road. His murder, however, can be considered a retaliatory act for his empathetic behavior in an incident involving a white woman and two black men on the train he was travelling home earlier. Felix’s assailants had felt humiliated and betrayed when he had asked them to make room for a white pregnant woman, “[i]t was a hot day to be in that state. Looking at her made the sweat break across Felix’s nose” (Smith 2012a, 145), choosing to honor his duties as a compassionate citizen rather than being guided by race loyalties. This is not a hate crime like that of Jamaican Stephen Lawrence, also mentioned in the novel (170), but the event hints at a certain degree of inter- and intraracial tension in the society depicted in the text.

In a perfect juxtaposition of privilege and plight, also reminiscent of Woolf’s novel, the news of Felix’s death reaches Leah during a private party as she shelters from the turbulence of the Notting Hill Carnival celebrations going on outside. Nonetheless,

the impact that the murder of Felix ultimately has on Natalie and Leah is more consequential than that of Septimus's suicide on Clarissa. After an argument with her husband over her involvement in the online dating scheme and feeling a suspension of selfhood—"she had no name, no biography, no characteristics" (264)—Natalie goes for a night walk that takes her back to her old neighborhood and may hence be understood as a regressive immersion into and reconnection with her past as Keisha Blake. There she accidentally comes across the crime scene and her former school friend Nathan Bogle, allegedly hiding from the Police because of his involvement in the murder. This encounter gives Natalie a glimpse into the plight of others who, according to her meritocratic ethos, she would normally consider social inferiors and responsible themselves for their failure in life. By witnessing Nathan's shady dealings with a group of women on the street, for instance, Natalie is able to see through the stereotype of the drug-addict and gain insight into the ordeal of Shar's life: "'Who was that girl, the little one, in the headscarf?' 'Huh? Why you worrying about her?' [...] 'Wasn't she at Brayton? She looked familiar to me. Is her name Shar?' 'Didn't know her then. That ain't her name with me?' 'What's her name with you?' 'We in court? I call my girls all sorts.' 'What do you do to your girls? You send them out to thieve? You pimp them out?'" (279-280). In this scene Shar has ceased to be a mere anecdote used to spice up a dinner party conversation (77), and becomes an example of a male-dominated and exploited woman with no control over her life. It is true that Shar remains an underdeveloped character with no history or interior life, a fact consistent with the postfeminist focus of the text. At the same time, though, through her the author obliquely addresses the exclusions engendered by the postfeminist paradigm, given the continuity of gender-related inequalities, without adopting this issue as a central part of her agenda.

By placing Natalie's moment of awareness happen in the midst of her personal breakdown, Smith points at the possibility of a renewed life for her which is less self-serving and more outward directed. Whether her breakdown will lead to a real breakthrough is uncertain, but, as the narrative reaches its close, she seems immersed in the process of understanding that, as David Forster Wallace asserts in his popular speech *This is Water* (2009), on which Smith also draws in her tribute essay: "[T] here are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talked about in the great outside world of winning and achieving and displaying [...] [It] involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day" (Wallace 2009, 119-120). A further moment of outward-directed awareness occurs when Natalie is touched by the "depth of misery" she perceives in the eyes of Lloyd and Grace, featured on the cover of the *Kilburn Times* (Smith 2012a, 287) and feels compelled to respond to the family's appeal for information following Felix's murder. It must be noted, however, that her empathetic and civic-minded attitude is undermined by her continuing belief in self-reliance, implied in her comment that "We wanted to get out [...] they [Shar, Felix]

didn't want it enough" (293), which shows her indifference to the contingencies of family background, race, class and gender highlighted elsewhere in the text. That both empathy and lack of feeling coexist in the final brushstrokes of Natalie's portrayal may be explained by Smith's reluctance to "pin" her characters down and rather to show their natural inconsistencies in a nonjudgmental way (Bollen 2014). We may feel drawn to give her empathy some credit if we agree with Wallace's claim that a fundamental role of fiction is the articulation of a character's "capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn't have a price," rather than the easy condemnation of the materialism of modern life (McCaffery 1993, 132). The personal breakdowns suffered by the protagonists at the end of the narrative open up new possibilities of self-construction. Natalie's musings that "freedom was absolute and everywhere [...] You couldn't hope to find it only in the old, familiar places" (2012a, 291) suggest a desire to stretch her self-identity beyond the confines of her status and occupation. Leah's statement, "I don't have to apologize for my choices" (292), made when her husband discovers her use of contraception, signals a new disposition to be outspoken about her disagreements with prescriptions of heterosexuality and motherhood. Even though the novel ends with the protagonists both at an impasse, Smith suggests that the way forward is towards a more fulfilling pursuit of freedom that does not alienate them from establishing meaningful and caring connections with others, friends and ultimately strangers.

In keeping with "the ethical investment with the other" which characterizes her work (Tolan 2013, 140), Smith underscores the disempowering aspects of discourses of free choice and self-determination for the lives of middle-class women, pointing at the liberating potential of forms of collective affirmation. The sentiments of disaffection, joylessness and injustice that plague the narrative become attenuated in a poignant concluding scene of female bonding that sees the friends respond jointly to the call of Felix's family for public assistance in locating witnesses to the crime. Although a small-scale initiative, this gesture can be interpreted as an affirmation of civil society, understood as "ties of affection, friendship and community" (Wolfe 1989, 240). This moment of convergence invests female friendship with ethical and civic undertones that transcend the personal, as friendship becomes a "context from which individuals can perform their public duties" (Frazer 2008, 246), given its potential to "generate externalities [...] which benefit all" (253). The novel's denouement reinstates the link between female friendship and altruism that Smith intimates in *On Beauty* (2005), which ends with Kiki intending to sell the painting she inherits from her friend Carlene and donate the money to a Haitian Support NGO.

At the same time, readers cannot fail to notice that Smith invests this scene with a deeply personal sisterly aura, as the following description of the phone call indicates: "Apart from the fact that she [Natalie] drew the phone from her own pocket, the whole process reminded her of nothing so much as those calls the two good friends used to make to boys they liked, back in the day, and always in a slightly hysterical state of

mind, two heads pressed together over a handset" (2012a, 294). Smith's recourse to this sororal image amounts to an affirmation of the female plot, and the importance of same-sex bonding to female identity. In the novel's final scene, the author takes her protagonists momentarily back to a "pre-oedipal, pre-separational female past, as yet uncontaminated by social institutions," to use Hirsch's words (1989, 184). Despite the author's reluctance to offer an idealized portrait of female relations, the final encounter between Leah and Natalie stresses the qualities of female solidarity, loyalty and understanding in the face of the dilemmas affecting the lives of contemporary women as they handle their freedom. In *NW*, it is neither motherhood nor marriage that emerges as the paradigm of care, but rather the friendship that the protagonists profess towards each other and towards others.

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