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'A Passport to Cross the Room': Cosmopolitan Empathy and Transnational Engagement in Zadie Smith's *NW (2012)*

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This article seeks to demonstrate that Zadie Smith's fourth novel, *NW* (2012), deviates away from celebratory multiculturalism in Britain, interrogating the struggle between critical cosmopolitanism and melancholia in a twenty-first century urban environment. It will be argued that Smith's limited geographical focus (on an area in which she was born and continues to reside) intimates that the social constructs of the family and local community are more conducive to developing cosmopolitan empathy and meaningful relations. Through an analysis of the ethical values of hospitality and openness, it will be suggested that *NW* reflects a rise in transnational relations and the construction of a cultural model of cosmopolitan communication haunted by national identity and the difficulties of negotiating cultural diversity. The article will then conclude by examining how *NW* exposes the racial inequalities and socio-economic disparities continuing to reside at the heart of British urban life.

With the publication of her debut novel *White Teeth* in January 2000, Zadie Smith was heralded as the new voice of British literature, her writing initially perceived as a celebratory examination of multicultural relations. Despite *White Teeth*'s evident postmodern irony, the novel possesses a naive optimism for post-millennial society, envisioning London's potential in establishing a 'Happy Multicultural Land' of transnational associations (Smith 2000: 465). As Smith herself acknowledged: '[e]nd-of-the-century books catch people in an end-of-the-century mood. The possibility of a community which involved so many different people and could be workable was a very optimistic idea' (Smith 2003: n.pag.).[1] Due to *White Teeth*'s critical engagement with cultural hybridity, national trauma and marginalization, Smith was initially placed alongside authors such as Salman Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi, but complained that, by presenting Britain as a so-called 'multicultural' society, critics interpret writing to be making some form of statement: 'it's not a statement, it's just a reality' (Smith 2010: n.pag.).[2] In a conversation in London in 2013, I asked Smith whether she minded her misplaced literary categorisation as a multicultural author (an inaccurate term she has repeatedly expressed distaste for), questioning whether her work is not more concerned with ethicality in general. Smith acknowledged the importance of ethics to her fiction (name-checking Martha Nussbaum – a strong proponent of cosmopolitan ethics) and definitively rejected the early positioning of her fiction.[3]

Transnational interaction in the British capital was undeniably marred by the terroristic attacks of September 11, 2001 in New York and July 7, 2005 in London. The atrocities reinvigorated the historical legacy of tension and melancholia surrounding cross-cultural engagement in London (and Britain in general), arguably reshaping the cultural and thematic sensibilities of contemporary literature. In her

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[1] Smith has since stated that she was 'straight out wrong' in assuming that cultural differences 'could be overcome' so easily (Smith 2005: n.pag.).

[2] Stephen Moss accumulates these views in his article for the Guardian following the release of the novel. See Moss.

[3] Nick Bentley, however, rejected such a reading and acknowledged Smith's more nuanced approach. See Bentley.

fourth novel, *NW* (2012), Smith moves away from her earlier focus on a colonial past, offering a critical commentary on fragmentary atomised life in the capital. While the older generation of *White Teeth* continued a tradition of postcolonial displacement, characterised by a lack of agency and belonging, the protagonists of *NW* enjoy a more bounded and abiding relationship with the spaces of their locality. By attempting to move beyond ethnic or territorial concerns, *NW* proves itself to be a pragmatic and affirming work which captures the new realities of urban life in London. The narrative questions shared local solidarity in an environment of intense ethnic diversity, and promotes a concentration on social capital as a means of fostering tolerance and cohesion within society.

In positioning Smith's work, it is important to first provide a clear definition of contemporary cosmopolitan ethics to demonstrate how *NW* moves beyond the multicultural paradigms and postcolonial concerns of *White Teeth* to provide a more uncompromising and melancholic view of post-millennial cultural interaction. Literary studies as a discipline often employs cosmopolitanism as a synonym for the terms globalization and transnationalism, but accurate definitions of the concept differ from these two interrelated terms by emphasising an ethical dimension, operating at the level of the individual. In particular, cosmopolitanism should be distinguished from transnationalism as the presence of transnational communities does not suggest that ethical ideals are practised or promoted; it is merely a state of cultural movement. Similarly, cosmopolitanism is often conflated with mere multiculturalism, yet Annemarie Bodaar correctly differentiates the terms by noting that multiculturalism denotes rigid 'adherence to the culture of the group' whereas cosmopolitanism concerns the formation of 'loose and multiple' socio-cultural ties that exceed the fixed boundaries associated with ethnicity alone and explores heterogeneous forms of belonging that arise through acts of individual ethical agency (171). Such a distinction is vital, as *NW* concentrates on *individual* ethics, rather than the actions of collective groups. The everyday lived experiences and cultural agencies of the characters position cosmopolitanism as an experiential process that rests on an actually-existing pragmatic engagement, rather than a lopsided view of the merits of cultural diversity.

For Smith, ethnicity is not the sole concern regarding the construction of local communities in multicultural London: 'I don't see the racial difference as the big difference [. . .] I'm really much more interested in the way people behave to each other, their personal ethics [. . .] of course, race is a difference, but it's a small difference' (Smith 2003: n.pag.). In this way, Smith echoes Paul Gilroy's identification of a cosmopolitan culture of 'conviviality', picking up from 'where "multiculturalism" broke down', questioning how racial differences can be transcended without ignoring race's inherent power to divide (2004: xi). By defining conviviality as: 'the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere', Gilroy ensures the term is not dependent upon racial differences or ethnic categorisation, nor does it involve 'the absence of racism or the triumph of tolerance' (2004: xi). Rather, he suggests that the process of conviviality can involve working through melancholic reactions to legacies of racial discrimination and cultural hostility, escaping utopian perceptions of pre-9/11 multicultural politics. Smith's realistic approach to contemporary urban life similarly counterpoints conviviality and melancholia to prevent her fiction resorting to a naive or utopian perception of cultural relations.

Although current forms of cosmopolitanism draw their inspiration from classical and philosophical traditions, concerning the establishment of a moral community and the consideration of hospitality and intercultural dialogue, the post-millennial environment requires a more realistic framework of cosmopolitanism to address the radical inequalities of transnational mobility and the actually existing realities of cross-cultural engagement. The contemporary form of cultural engagement portrayed in the novel may be less aspirational than the normative universalism intrinsic to earlier conceptions of the term, but is representative of the pragmatic everyday social interaction that characterises cross-cultural urban life in global cities. For Smith, literature acts as a platform to demonstrate the possibilities of active individual agency and point towards more realisable futures: 'the ethical realm exists nowhere if not here: in the consequences of human actions as they unfold in time, and the multiple interpretative possibility of those actions. Narrative itself is the

performance of that very procedure' (2003: n.pag.). The urban city-spaces of *NW* therefore become commemorative and communal, as transnational flows inhabit and restructure a localised environment, problematising notions of national or ethnic identity and suggesting that the practice of cosmopolitan ideals is tied up with identity politics. By grounding cosmopolitanism in a realistic urban environment, the novel demonstrates how ethical ideals can arise at the most micro-levels of society, and details the strategies of ordinary citizens to bridge divides with cultural others. In so doing, a cosmopolitan approach does not necessarily operate in opposition to local experiences or local landscapes; instead, 'glocal' spaces emerge in which the dynamic tension and creative interplay of global and local forces complicate existing forms of belonging and questions of cultural identity.

While this article refers to Smith's interrogation of cultural ethics as an instance of (g)local cosmopolitanism, David James reaches a similar analysis, defining Smith's parochial and quotidian angle on wider global issues as an instance of 'worlded localism', involving a mediation between global and local flows (James 2015: 47). The transnational nature of this fictional London places Smith in line with a wider movement of contemporary novelists who, as Philip Tew claims, are envisioning the 'British scene [as] a globalized locality' (2007: x). A clear example is Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), which assumes a critical stance towards ethno-cultural allegiances to emphasise the creation of new and shifting affiliations within a transnational locale. Despite the parochial and narrow focus of *NW*, it is possible to discern an insight on more realistic forms of belonging in globalized space. By drawing attention to enduring socioeconomic inequalities, the persistence of racial discrimination and categorisation, the narrative exposes the cultural melancholy at the heart of British society. While it will be argued that Smith promotes the practice of cosmopolitan ethics as a response to Gilroy's notion of 'postcolonial melancholia' (2005: 146), it will also be suggested that such cultural melancholy continues to define the interactions and relationships of the novel, reflecting the uneasy and enduring racial tensions in urban city space. Further, drawing on Smith's own comments regarding race, community and identity, the article will reveal autobiographical tendencies in her

fictional experiences of the capital's urban spaces. The fictional north-west London of *NW* will be positioned as a microcosm for the kaleidoscopic transnationalism of the twenty-first century, interrogating the difficulties in practising the cosmopolitan ideals of empathy, tolerance and belonging.

The article will concentrate on the characters of Leah Hanwell and Felix Cooper, whose lives interrogate the feasibility of practising cosmopolitan empathy in a contemporary urban environment. Leah and Felix reside in the London suburb of Willesden (heralding a return to the bio-geographical spaces of *White Teeth*), an area in which Smith was born and to which she feels a great sense of affiliation. Their interdependent lives reveal the unspoken symmetry and synergy between parochial and cross-cultural life, fusing the cosmopolitan with the quotidian, allowing Smith to interrogate the ways by which ethnicity, class and identity play a role in the construction of urban communities. Territorial belonging is therefore central to the narrative and integral to understanding the complex allegiances between local inhabitants and their neighbourhood. *NW*, then, introduces the notion of a (g)localised cosmopolitanism, suggesting that cosmopolitan engagement should not necessarily be restricted to cross-border processes or concern transnational relations with the wider world. By entwining the complementary concerns of local and global cultural flows, the novel acknowledges the wider racial and socioeconomic tensions existing in the capital, suggesting the ethical ideals of openness and hospitality to be a productive form of social capital in overcoming these tensions.

(G)local Hospitality

The narrative introduces Leah Hanwell in the garden of her Caldwell flat, '[f]enced in, on all sides' (Smith 2012: 3). She is subject to a cacophony of other voices impinging on her daily life, creating a claustrophobic atmosphere of otherness from the outset. Leah, a woman of Irish descent, shares her flat with her French-Algerian partner, Michel, who longs to escape the squalor of Willesden and improve his financial situation. He is well aware of the inequalities within London, accepting it as a fact of contemporary life: 'Michel likes to say: not everyone can be invited to the party.

Not this century. Cruel opinion – [Leah] doesn't share it' (Smith 2012: 3). Despite his transnational parentage and social standing, Michel feels no empathy for other cultures; instead, a sense of moral responsibility and accountability is reflected in Leah's localised engagement. By demonstrating a commitment to her area, working for a non-profit charity organisation helping local communities, Leah positions cosmopolitanism to require individual agency and performative acts of socio-cultural engagement. The initial chapter, 'Visitation', involves the unexpected appearance of a distressed woman named Shar on Leah's doorstep, who claims to need money to visit her ailing mother in hospital. Leah accepts Shar into her home (the threshold of the doorstep signifying the invisible boundary between detachment and commonality) following Shar's claims of being local and sharing mutual acquaintances from Leah's past. Immediately, then, the narrative also brings into play the notion of hospitality: opening the door to the 'other' evolves into an act of cosmopolitan solidarity, widening one's capacity for empathetic identification. The incident serves as an analogy for global hospitality at the most micro-level, suggesting the limits of neighbourliness when living in close proximity to others, and drawing Leah out of her initial isolation.

Moreover, Leah's engagement with Shar reflects a narrative hospitality that permeates throughout the novel; a hospitality that speaks to the sense of mutuality and reciprocity that can exist from sharing a close proximity to the lives of others. Leah and Shar exist in an urban environment where they can be strangers to one another, yet still 'belong' in their shared home. The encounter represents a movement away from postcolonial forms of relationality towards the promotion of local cosmopolitan ethics (involving the inner circles of our family and community) to be broadened and implemented more globally. In this way, Leah demonstrates that she is 'as faithful in her allegiance to this two-mile square of the city as other people are to their families, or their countries' (Smith 2012: 5). The empathy practised by Leah in offering Shar both money and hospitality is an act of cosmopolitan patriotism that recognises the necessity for locally relational forms of belonging and interaction in order for ethical ideals to be transferred externally and globally. The incident

also demonstrates that cosmopolitan dispositions may be fostered without mobility, distinguishing cosmopolitanism from acting as a synonym for transnationalism. The cosmopolitan sensibilities inherent in the narrative, therefore, move beyond *White Teeth*'s concentration on ethnic roots, towards a more fluid conception of localised and pluralised routes that tie individuals to area and fellow residents.

Leah's empathy is nevertheless at odds with that of her community. Shar's lament – 'I'm saying *help me* – no one did a fucking thing' – affirms the absence of communal affinity in Willesden; the majority of the community 'wouldn't piss on you if you was on fire' (Smith 2012: 6, 12). The relevance of opening the narrative from Leah's secluded garden becomes apparent, being emblematic of the community in which she resides. The 'ivy from the estate' smothering all other vegetation reflects the absence of communal ethics in London society at large, but the apple tree in Leah's garden 'grows despite them all, unaided', demonstrating how an absence of solidarity fails to dampen her cosmopolitan empathy (Smith 2012: 67). Willesden's residents may share a communal space, but Leah is the only character who assumes an outward-facing orientation to the wider world. Smith's omniscient narrator is aware that in London 'kindness is rare' and that '[t]his is not the country for making a stranger tea' – yet due to citizens like Leah '[t]here is goodwill' (Smith 2012: 8). By focusing on the similarities she shares with Shar, rather than the differences, Leah bridges the socio-cultural divides permeating London society and demonstrates that cosmopolitan engagement is often more realisable through the banal associations of day-to-day life. Indeed, this specific encounter falls most precisely into Gilroy's conception of 'a "vulgar" or "demotic" cosmopolitanism' from below, through which 'cosmopolitan attachments' find 'ethical value in the process of exposure to otherness' and which 'glories in the ordinary virtues [. . .] that can be cultivated when mundane encounters with difference become rewarding' (2004: 75). The incident also indicates that achievable cosmopolitan ideals should enable the development of mutuality, often even through superficial engagement, rather than a transformation of social relations and interaction.

The practice of empathy in the novel fails to engender the dissolution of prejudices and stereotypes, pointing to inherent cultural and racial divisions. Following

the encounter, Leah fails to discern Shar's manipulation, refusing to accept that Shar borrowed money from her for drugs, having fabricated the story about the hospital. Leah's mother pessimistically claims that she should have had more children so Leah would possess a realistic understanding of the bleak reality of London life. Only a week later, another drug addict appears on Leah's doorstep to take advantage of her good nature. Leah subsequently begins to doubt her sympathetic tendencies and regret her altruism, ironically doodling 'I AM SO FULL OF EMPATHY' at work – an environment in which she constantly feels isolated and excluded on account of her non-African heritage (Smith 2012: 29). The novel's fictional north-west London is not a homogenous monolith, but an aggregation of disparate factions comprised of a composite mix of transnational characters. The capital functions as a microcosm for the mounting cultural relations of the wider world, imposing an analogous globality on the heterogeneous boroughs and districts which form a composite cosmopolitan environment. By exploring how positive social relations and attachments begin at the most parochial level, the narrative demonstrates how lived experience in a contemporary urban cityscape is increasingly informed and shaped by more global processes of movement in general. This concentration on the locally relational spaces of Willesden does not herald an escape from global issues but rather a direct confrontation with the transnational realities of London life, rejecting the idea that cosmopolitan theory is reliant on transnational mobilities or that cosmopolitanism itself necessarily supercedes the nation-state. The cosmopolitanization of narrative space ensures cross-cultural sympathies and associations become a necessity for those bounded individuals not subject to transnational mobility and untroubled by questions of geographical or ethnic belonging. In this sense, the practice of tolerance and cosmopolitan empathy by Leah embraces a glocal form of ethical agency for its implementation.

NW ensures the tenets and values of cosmopolitanism are shaken and interrogated constantly. And yet, Ulrich Beck emphasises that the '[r]ecognition of cosmopolitan differences' and 'resulting cosmopolitan conflict' from cultural encounters are constitutive of 'the cosmopolitan outlook', and should not destabilise the project of cosmopolitan empathy (2006: 7). Arguably, Leah's initial acceptance of Shar is a temporally-framed embrace of otherness – inviting the other into the home

in a way that recalls the Derridean concept of hospitality – but not a practice that requires extension outside of this context. It is Leah's *continued* efforts after the event that are indicative of her ethical nature. Notably, even after her exploitation, Leah encounters Shar again in the street and offers to help with her drug addiction. She is free to disengage herself from the temporary connection with Shar at any point but chooses not to do so. Although the encounter does not entirely cancel our sense of Leah's estrangement, it suggests a relational process of social negotiation that allows her to be temporarily inclusive. Her concentration on developing cross-cultural commitments within an apathetic community, both in her public and private life, implies the belief that communities are formed by routine acts of individual agency, rather than existing as ready-made cultural constructions. While on a bus, 'Leah stares at a red bindi until it begins to blur [. . .] taking up all of her vision until she feels she has entered the dot, passing through it, emerging into a more gentle universe, parallel to our own, where people are fully and intimately known to each other' (Smith 2012: 39).[4] Such multiplicity fractures the belief that individuals possess a singular and static identity, unaffected by external cultural influence. On this basis, Leah's cryptic existential assertion that 'I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me' acknowledges both an ownership of her identity and a need for the substantiality of self (Smith 2012: 3). Following Rapport's reasoning on the nature of cultural identity in general, it can be said that Leah evinces 'in otherness' versions of herself, indicating the 'mutualities of playing hosts and guests to one another' (2012: 208), and acknowledging the role of cosmopolitan empathy in building ties across socio-cultural divides. Leah's attempts to establish wider patterns of allegiance is once again reflective of the novel's melancholic stance to cultural relationality and ethical orientation, as she struggles to establish any meaningful relationships with her fellow residents and loses a sense of her own identity in the process.

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[4] Leah's longing for interconnection and mutuality throughout the text reflects Smith's own stated desire to experience a form of cultural transposability: 'I urgently want to be everybody else all the time' (Smith 2013: n.pag.).

The narrative consistently indicates this inherent melancholia by emphasising the limitations of socio-cultural agency or ethical idealism in relating to the lives of others. Leah's acts of empathy fail to empower Shar's financial or physical condition, while the callousness of the city affects Leah's belief in the merits of an ethical approach to her fellow neighbours. The calligram of an apple tree in the novel with its '[n]etwork of branches, roots [. . .] The fuller, the more fruitful. The more the worms. The more the rats', acknowledges Leah's shifting and increasingly pessimistic view on cultural relations in the capital (Smith 2012: 24). While the life cycle of the tree possibly suggests the potential for change and reconciliation with herself and her community, by beginning to desire reciprocity for her actions, she reveals her cosmopolitan engagement to be a form of conditional (rather than unconditional) hospitality, restricted by an acute awareness of the stark realities of urban life. With Michel's help she eventually accosts a man they assume to be one of Shar's drug-dealing friends in an attempt to reclaim their money. The man subsequently kicks and kills their dog, Olive. The brutal encounter denies Leah the cultural hospitality she herself espouses, and she is forced to watch helplessly as other London residents turn away from the scene. Due to this chain of events, Michel is finally granted his wish of living a more isolated and wary life, avoiding the elements of London life which he considers unsavoury. Accordingly, from the perspective of everyday interaction and socialisation, the narrative reflects Rapport and Amit's acknowledgement that cosmopolitanism in general 'may be as much a pragmatic "making do" as an ethical stance' (2012: xii). Leah's initial act of empathy has directly led to a less cosmopolitan approach to her local community, indicating the delicate balance of racial and socio-cultural tensions governing the capital's urban spaces.

Cosmopolitan Conviviality and Postcolonial Melancholia

The following chapter, 'Guest', revolves around the movements of Felix Cooper, a car mechanic (of Jamaican and Ghanian parentage) and resident of Willesden. Felix is indicative of the socio-economic inequalities existing within London, constantly passing consumerist symbols of the capital's wealth to which he is denied. Leah's philosophy of empathy, openness and hospitality to her community has not been

extended to Felix by the Caldwell housing estate. Crucially, the growing economic inequality in the area problematises the potential for a cultural convergence in human commonality. Phil Barnes, a left-wing neighbour of Felix's father Lloyd, echoes Leah's compassion for the people of Willesden and the socio-economic troubles of London in the twenty-first century: 'I believe in the people [. . .] Not that it's done me any good, but I do. I really do' (Smith 2012: 101). Barnes bemoans the economic decline of London's urban communities, linking the degeneration to an absence of communal engagement and claiming that the current generation of youngsters are not politically engaged. Lloyd, however, is resistant to the possibility of communality; the absence of a doorbell at his flat-entrance suggesting a complete detachment from the socio-economic problems facing Willesden. Despite being subject to economic and racial inequalities, Lloyd fails to comprehend the reasoning behind such cosmopolitan empathy for other races, questioning why Barnes would want to 'get in on the struggle when it ain't even his struggle' (Smith 2012: 95). Although Felix clearly disagrees with his father's moral outlook, he perceives Barnes's left-wing outlook to belong to a bygone era, an impractical response to the everyday experience and stark realism of contemporary urban life. In turning away from both of these opposing ideologies, Felix instead acts as the mouthpiece for Smith's own cautiously pragmatic attitude towards intercultural relations.

The majority of Felix's narrative concerns his relationship with Annie Bedford, an aging, white, upper-class drug-addict. The encroaching cosmopolitanization of her local community, coupled with her drug abuse, leads Annie to jokingly exclaim that her own apartment 'was France [. . .] I felt I needed a passport to cross the room' (Smith 2012: 127). As Mica Nava identifies, contemporary London is increasingly characterised by these 'hybrid, post-multicultural, lived transformations which are the outcome of diasporic cultural mixing and indeterminacy' (2007: 13). Annie is the microcosmic embodiment of Middle England xenophobia resisting such ethnic infiltration. Her palpable belief in the reified and concrete nature of identity, cultural or otherwise, contrasts sharply with the novel's cosmopolitan fluidity, indicating the ethno-phobic perspective of individuals who continue to perceive British society as a monoculture. In perceiving cultural diversity as a cancer upon her failing

and increasingly restricted empire, Annie recognises that her own meagre dwelling is under threat from foreign bodies, as ethnic difference not only surrounds her but begins to intrude upon her private life. The fear of ethnic infiltration unsettles her already fragile psyche; she neurotically interprets Westminster council's questions regarding her claim for assistance to be a ploy to displace and supplant her with a Russian who will pay higher rent. A Norwegian sub-agent who works for the land-lord attempts to force Annie to contribute to the shared areas of the building. Annie merely proclaims that she avoids the other tenants: 'I barely use the stairs. It may be a "shared area" but I don't use it', and notes that the man possesses a 'funny accent', calling him 'Mr – I can't possibly pronounce that name' (Smith 2012: 125). Annie's evident ethnocentrism acts as a diametrically opposed force to Leah's cosmopolitan empathy in the narrative, indicating how a concentration on ethnic difference alone destabilises and obstructs cultural engagement. More importantly, Annie's haunt-ing presence highlights the way in which postcolonial melancholia resides alongside cosmopolitan ethics in the narrative, and suggests how cosmopolitan relationality, if not a solution to melancholia, remains an empathetic means of overcoming such regressive approaches to cultural interaction.

According to Gilroy, contemporary society needs to interrogate: 'what sorts of insight and reflection might actually help increasingly differentiated societies and anxious individuals to cope successfully with the challenges involved in dwelling comfortably in proximity to the unfamiliar without becoming fearful and hostile' (2004: 3). Felix's presence in Annie's flat, however, fails to indicate the progression of intercultural relations in post-millennial London. The dilapidated state of Annie's decaying realm is reflected in her mental well-being. She becomes an agoraphobic from within the polyphony of multicultural London and avoids living with alterity by psychologically holding the world at bay. As a result, Felix begins to suspect the true reason for Annie's increasingly restricted mobility: she 'wasn't really afraid of open spaces, she was afraid of what might happen between her and the other people in them' (Smith 2012: 127). By remaining resistant to hospitality and ill-disposed to difference, Annie embodies a nationalistic outlook, intent on keeping the hostile 'other' excluded from her life. The entropic nature of Annie's insular existence is

strengthened by her biological decrepitude and sexless infertility in comparison to the fertile transnationalism sprouting all around her: 'your lot have a lot of babies they can't afford or take care of' (Smith 2012: 141). Annie's criticism here reflects what Gilroy terms the 'iconic ciphers of postcolonial melancholia: criminals [. . .] and their numberless alien offspring' (2005: 146). By remaining detached and avoiding any solidarity with her fellow residents of Willesden, Annie is distancing herself from hostile cultures that will destabilise her imagined sense of class hierarchy and racial privilege.

By mocking her neighbours across the road, a Japanese and French couple, Annie also doubts the practicality of cross-racial mixing. Notably, she maintains a psychological detachment from her own cross-racial relationship with Felix, contradicting her systematic rejection of cultural relations in the capital. Annie's condescending treatment of him, as if he were her colonial subject, forces him to wonder if her flat 'truly was a separate world. Her Majesty upstairs swore it was' (Smith 2012: 121). Through their tense rapport, Smith's narrative is acting out what Gilroy perceives as contemporary society's 'ordinary experiences of contact, cooperation, and conflict across the supposedly impermeable boundaries of race, culture, identity, and ethnicity' (2005: xii). The racialised discourses inherent in the chapter consequently evoke the spectre of imperial heritage and ethnic classification as a challenge to cosmopolitan hybridity. Gilroy considers the fixity of cultural heritage to act as an antithesis to conviviality, resulting in a '[p]ostimperial melancholia' still evident in contemporary life (2004: 109). The progressive presence of transnational others in Annie's flat, which remains in a state of national stasis, therefore echoes Gilroy's related claim that cultural confrontation 'turn[s] the tables on all purity seekers [. . .] to force them to account for their phobia about otherness' (2004: 167). Felix ultimately determines that Annie is beyond help, proudly comparing the politically progressive nature of his new girlfriend Grace to Annie's racially-motivated closed-mindedness. By simply leaving the negative stasis of her entropic living space behind, he is able to rejoin and embrace the vibrancy of twenty-first century London life. While it would be a mistake to suggest Felix's revelation signals a movement from an isolationist to a more cosmopolitan stance.

Like Leah, Felix attempts to connect with the diverse inhabitants of Willesden through small daily actions of comity, goodwill, and citizenship, all of which fail to engender a reciprocal response. He encounters Tom, a young white male attempting to sell his father's car, who finds it difficult to associate or identify with Felix after discovering he is black. In an effort to relate to Felix, Tom resorts to asking him for drugs, betraying and exposing the continuation of racial stereotyping in the capital with which Felix is well-familiar. Later, after smiling at a small Jewish woman he catches eyes with on a passing train, Felix notes that the woman is unable to process this simple act of compassion and attempt at connection across ethnic divides. Her defensive reaction fictionalises Smith's own declaration that: 'I'm sad when I see people glaring at each other on the Tube' (emphasised as one of the main reasons she abhors British society) (2005: n.pag.). As with Leah's act of hospitality, Felix's cordial altruism is the root cause of his misfortune. He attempts to force two young black men (intimated to be Nathan Bogle and his friend, Tyler) to give up their seats on the tube for a heavily pregnant white woman, receiving verbal abuse in response. The pregnant woman even assumes the two men are Felix's friends, on account of their shared colour. The tense atmosphere surrounding the encounter suggests that Felix is doomed to remain defined by his race, perpetuating a history of racism, prejudice and fear that arguably characterised late-twentieth century relations. After leaving the station, he is attacked and stabbed in the side by the two men, proving yet again that cosmopolitan empathy can result in destructive consequences for the bestower. The chapter ends bleakly with Felix's death, as the local bus stops to collect a young girl dressed for summer, symbolising the social mobility which eluded him during his spell in Willesden. London's populace simply continue with their lives, indifferent to the racial and socio-economic struggles of their fellow residents. Felix's narrative, in particular, brings lucidity and cultural realism to idealistic notions of cosmopolitan empathy in an urban environment.

Smith's tangible promotion of Leah's social and ethical capital, introducing the norms of reciprocity and cooperation in answer to an individual-centred society, fails to strengthen pre-existing relations between the local inhabitants of Willesden. As Tew argues, Smith's fiction suggests that 'the leap of empathy to fully understand

otherness may be unachievable, but she recommends the attempt' (2010: 115). While Felix's attempts to engage with his diverse community result in a tragedy of empathy, determined by racial categorization, Leah's engagement reveals the sensitivity required in forging cross-class hospitality (Smith story in Brexit). The failed efforts of both characters reveal the melancholia continuing to reside at the heart of post-millennial British society; a melancholia continuing to be shaped and defined by class warfare, the spectre of cultural heritage, and prevalence of social exclusionary politics and inequalities. Through the characters of Leah and Felix, Smith corrects models of cultural connectivity that rely on a distinction between global and local flows. While the aspirations of cosmopolitanism often seem to reject or ignore the role of the local, Smith's narrative is not directly promoting global engagement but instead advocating a specific form of (g)local cosmopolitanism that perceives identity as a negotiation between and local and ethnic identities.[5] (G)local cosmopolitanism ensures that Leah and Felix's practice of the cosmopolitan ideals of openness and empathy includes and encapsulates '[e]verybody' (as Smith's repeated narrative refrain affirms) without the need for cultural mobility (Smith 2012: 35). That being said, Smith resists an idealistic conception of community or cultural connection, conceding that:

> there's such a shelter in each other, but it's also true [. . .] that we refuse to be each other [. . .] it's really impossible to make a leap of empathy entirely into another person's head [. . .] to do it entirely would be intolerable of course, and would be a dissolution of yourself. But it has to be done to some extent, otherwise there's only strangers and enemies. People who are opposed to your will, and trying to understand that your will is not the only thing on the planet, but [. . .] makes space for all these other wills [. . .] that's the whole point. (2006: n.pag.)

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[5] (G)local cosmopolitanism follows Bhabha's vernacular cosmopolitanism in recognising how global concerns and processes are defined by local concerns, promoting the implementation of ethical values within local communities *in order* to impact the global (Bhabha 2011: 38–52).

Conclusion

If there has indeed been an 'ethical turn' in the fiction of the twenty-first century, as Peter Boxall theorises, then it is a fiction reflective of the emergent cosmopolitan condition, opening up a space for the possibility of reciprocity and empathetic identification with otherness (2013: 141). Smith's fiction in particular demonstrates how globalising processes, politics, discourses and structures impact upon localised settings, and how cultural engagement requires a constant negotiation of difference. Individuals may retain parochial outlooks and attachments, but also appreciate, and demonstrate a consciousness of, global cultural interdependencies. By acting as a microcosm for wider global relations, Willesden reflects the melancholic struggle in actualising a cultural space where citizens can balance existing allegiances with the potential formulation of new ties and identities. Smith claims transnational communities in general are constantly evaluated on whether they are a success or a failure, but 'the reality', as Smith claims, 'is that it's both things all the time' (2005: n.pag.). The desire for cultural relationality across entrenched divides in the narrative comes to reiterate the sentiments of Alsana Iqbal in *White Teeth*: '[i]nvolved is neither good, nor bad. It is just a consequence of living [. . .] one becomes involved and it is a long trek back to being uninvolved' (Smith 2000: 439).

The socio-economic and ethno-political troubles of the early twenty-first century necessitate a more realistic narrative commentary on the importance of multicultural relations and civic responsibility. This article has attempted to show that, rather than circumventing the more global issues of displacement and cultural hybridity inherent to *White Teeth*, *NW* moves beyond the limitations of ethnicity alone and positions such contested issues as everyday features of the post-millennial urban environment – less raw and more quotidian. The novel's characters become more than exaggerated ethnic stereotypes (a charge levelled at Smith's earlier fiction) employed to display the true diversity of London's thriving transnational communities. Cross-cultural interaction in the narrative remains subordinate to related issues of socio-economic status or social-standing, reflecting Smith's claim that 'human problems persist' in the capital but 'most of them in my opinion are ones of class

and money, not of race or cultural tendencies' (2010: n.pag.). By interrogating how cultural connectivities are forged across these established divides, the novel utilises Willesden for the exploration of wider cosmopolitan ethics, with the narrative marking a progression away from *On Beauty*'s (2005) limited focus on the aesthetics and ethics of art: 'mining not only the ways in which we feel but also exposing the stratified ways we live' (Marcus: n.pag.). Through the ethical and cultural agency of Leah and Felix, Smith defiantly portrays London as an exemplary transnational metropolis of social and ethical possibilities at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Despite the contrasting ethnicities and socio-economic status of its characters, *NW* forges a commonality between vastly disparate individuals in troubling and melancholic times, their spatial coordinates and sense of belonging uniting them as residents of contemporary north-west London.

However, one should argue against Susanne Cuevas's assumption that Smith has transcended the notion of ethnicity, and is now writing 'from a "post-ethnic" perspective' (2008: 394). Ethnicity remains integral to post-millennial socio-cultural relations in the narrative – '[h]ere is the Islamic Centre of England opposite the Queen's Arms' – and a strong racial current continues to flow beneath all activity in north-west London (Smith 2012: 35). Leah's mother Pauline, for example, considers Kilburn to now be a lost territory owned by the Nigerians: 'the whole of Africa being, for Pauline, essentially Nigeria, and the Nigerians wily, owning those things in Kilburn that once were Irish' (Smith 2012: 15). This cosmopolitanization of space and cultural specificities of north-west London is suggested to be integral to a lived experience of the capital. The polyvocality of the novel reflects Smith's own refusal to accept that we live in 'a post-racial world'; instead she simply claims 'the reality of race has diversified' (2009: 143). The narrative, then, confronts the harsh realities of transnational engagement, depicting a melancholic and unsentimental London which has witnessed the terrorist violence of 7/7, with the subsequent mounting cultural tension and increasing social divides that followed. Through Leah and Felix's tolerance and empathy, *NW* reflects an enduring optimism for London's future – a future mediated by the events which have befallen the capital since the publication of *White Teeth*. The root problems at the heart of Willesden do not complicate or

invalidate the values of cosmopolitan empathy or cultural engagement. Rather, the racial and economic inequalities are an impetus for citizens like Leah to reinvigorate urban life, prove its inherent malleability, and inject an ethical idealism into its socio-cultural relations. Openness to alterity becomes central to Smith's vision of cosmopolitan urbanism, representing what Gilroy terms an emerging cultural 'pressure from below' to enforce 'hospitality, conviviality, tolerance, justice, and mutual care' through social obligations (2004: 108). Despite her unromantic portrayal of Willesden, one should not ignore the optimism integral to the narrative, nor disregard the close personal attachments Smith enjoys with north-west London. The localised focus of *NW* demonstrates that although cosmopolitanism is a global cultural theory, it is intrinsic to ordinary encounters.

The political shift in Britain following the recent exit from the European Union exemplifies the socioeconomic and racial tensions evident in *NW*, as well as curtailing any more optimistic designs for cosmopolitan community-building and ethical engagement. In 'Fences: A Brexit Diary', a levelled and passionate response to Britain's unprecedented moment of political isolationism, Smith acknowledged the unique positioning of London as a model for multicultural idealism, an 'outward-looking city' that is 'so different from these narrow xenophobic places up north':

> around here change is the rule. The old grammar school up the hill became one of the largest Muslim schools in Europe; the old synagogue became a mosque; the old church is now a private apartment building. Waves of immigration and gentrification pass through these streets like buses (Smith 2016: n.pag.).

Smith goes on to reason that London-centric rhetoric and focus during political debates conceals the changing reality of Britain – a rapid and intense shift from cosmopolitan togetherness to nationalistic fervour which exposes an 'us vs. them', 'London vs. the rest' attitude founded on class division and racial tension. Yet she also recognises the 'painful truth [. . .] that fences are being raised everywhere in London',

as the capital witnesses the preservation of historic xenophobia and 'post-imperial melancholia' that has so often characterised cross-cultural relations (ibid.; Gilroy 2004: 109). The dramatic political developments are integral to any subsequent readings of the novel, not least due to Smith's literary positioning (both by herself and her critics) as a London novelist. The initial image of Leah, fenced off in her garden before opening the door to otherness, now evokes a Britain fenced off from Europe, and symbolises the mediation of local and global frame of reference in the struggle between nationalistic and cosmopolitan modes of belonging.

As the introduction theorised, however, *NW* does not imagine some pretty fantasy of twenty-first century life, or envision an unrealistic utopian depiction of the capital as a quixotic dream never to be realised, based on 'the myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect' (2000: 541). Rather, the narrative reflects a rational, melancholic and pragmatic glocal environment built on the conflict, diversity and discord of a future *imperfect*. Dissonance is suggested to be the means by which to achieve harmony when living with difference. Xenophobic fear and casual racism persist in the fictional capital, while social exclusivity prevents true cosmopolitan openness and conviviality. These processes of social disintegration and dissolution are the very materials with which Smith builds upon the possibility of transnational connectivities and interrogates cultural convergence. By demonstrating a realistic conception of cosmopolitanism characterised by a rootedness in 'realities of the present rather than mobilising for the future fulfilment of any one or other set of utopian ideals', *NW* encapsulates Berthold Schoene's requirements for the cosmopolitan novel; the 'post-1989 cosmopolitanism' embodied by *White Teeth* following the fall of the Berlin Fall has finally 'shed its starry-eyedness and grown realist' (2010: 10, 9). The novel therefore rejects the sense of an ending that late-twentieth century fiction adheres to and instead reflects on recent socio-cultural and ethno-political transformations and their role in establishing new ethical possibilities in literature.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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