

NEOLIBERAL SPACE, PLACE AND SUBJECTIVITY IN ZADIE SMITH'S *NW*

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By

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## ABSTRACT

Following the literary criticism of Zadie Smith's *NW* by critics such as Lynn Wells and Wendy Knepper, this thesis seeks to engage with the social scripts and spatial dynamics of Smith's fourth novel. I argue that *NW* is concerned with the neoliberalization of both real and virtual spaces, emphasizing the consequent effects of neoliberalism on agency and subjectivity and highlighting the neoliberal advancement of hyperindividualism and securitization over social responsibility and solidarity. Much detail is given to *NW*'s exploration of race, class and social mobility at the tail-end of the global financial crisis of 2007-08. *NW*'s fragmented four-part narrative channels a perspectival approach to space and place by delineating its structure through the four separate subjectivities of the main characters.

I contextualize my thesis alongside Paul Gilroy's cultural criticism of contemporary British multiculturalism, conviviality and melancholia, while also anchoring *NW*'s spatial concerns to Jeff Malpas's spatial philosophy and Emily Cuming's explication of British council estates in various forms of contemporary literature. As well, this thesis incorporates the philosophical frameworks of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a guide for recognizing some of *NW*'s interest in the subjective experience of people and spaces, and to reorient the act of 'seeing' as a radical form of agency and mediation in itself. Ultimately, this phenomenological and epistemological approach to interpreting Smith's fiction creates the potential for meaning to be co-constructed between author and reader, forming a new social vision for the novel as artform.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION:		
	Diversity, Subjectivity, and the Politics of Space	1
i.	Postcolonialism to Phenomenology	5
ii.	Xenophobia and Neoliberal Space	12
iii.	Space, Race and Class	17
iv.	Virtual Space, Technology and Communication	26
CHAPTER ONE:		
	Space, Class and Identity Formation	33
i.	Performativity, Race and Voice	35
ii.	Class Warfare and the Language of Neoliberal Disposability	43
iii.	Class and Domesticity	53
iv.	Cultural Boundaries and Inclusion/Exclusion	63
v.	Fences, Walls and Neoliberalization	67
CHAPTER TWO:		
	Substituting the Virtual for the Real	73
i.	Right to Privacy and False Utopias	75
ii.	Communication Technology and Individualism	82
iii.	Impersonal Space and Fetishization	96
CONCLUSION:		
	Absence, Social Responsibility and Radical Subjectivity	106
i.	“Promising football star suffers a career ending injury, resorts to criminality”	108
ii.	Radical Subjectivity	114
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED		117

## INTRODUCTION

### **DIVERSITY, SUBJECTIVITY AND THE POLITICS OF SPACE**

Zadie Smith's fiction, from her debut narrative *White Teeth* onward to her more recent novel, *NW*, addresses the complexities found in a multicultural social environment. The period between the two novels has been witness to the rise in global terrorism and the collapse of global finance. As Laura Colombino has argued, the post 9/11 era has transformed the manner in which readers have interpreted Smith's first novel (165). *White Teeth*'s somewhat optimistic and convivial depiction of multi-ethnic London seemed a bit too light-hearted for the overnight transformation of the Western attitude towards politics, religion, globalization, and immigration in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks.<sup>1</sup> However, more nuanced readings have suggested that Smith's rendition of a multicultural urban centre is "subtly ambivalent and undermines the assumption that liberal consensus underpins and guarantees the subject's existence" (Colombino 164). One of the salient literary features of 2012's *NW* that can be distinguished as a departure from *White Teeth*'s complex but more conventional structure is its distinctly fractured narrative. In *NW*, many of Smith's quintessential techniques remain present, such as her ability to weave multiple key characters into her narrative arc, and her natural-seeming ability to convey a sense of realism in the dialogue, closely reflecting the contemporary urban moment. *NW* focuses

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gilroy's view of conviviality, which refers "to the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculturalism an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere" would be an apt perspective to consider in the context of Smith's work (*PT* xv).

on its four main characters from the same council estate in northwest London to explore the interrelatedness between identity and space. The two female characters, Leah, a white social worker who chooses to remain in the estate they all grew up in, and Natalie, a black lawyer who climbs the social ladder, are starkly contrasted in their attitudes towards class and success. The two male characters, Felix and Nathan, both live in and around the estate, yet offer a glimpse into the social pressures brought on by a changing economic landscape and the encroachment of neoliberal policies. The novel maps the neighbourhood of Northwest London in great detail, emphasizing the value of ‘place’ within the fractured narrative. The section ‘crossing’ pays particular attention to the connected roads and passageways that lead both Natalie and Nathan on a journey through the neighbourhood that surrounds Caldwell, the council estate they both once called home (Smith, *NW* 299). Much emphasis is placed on the topological properties of the neighbourhood and its ability to reorient the various subjectivities depicted in the novel. *NW* addresses and complicates the relationship between race, class and social mobility by examining the neoliberal power structures that ultimately treat racial inequality as a thing of the past, instead turning individuals into entities that compete with one another within the harsh socio-economic climate of contemporary northwest London.

The focus on a singular council estate as the fulcrum of activity within *NW* grounds the narrative structure and weaves in a network of individuals that impacts each of their lives in indirect ways. As both Natalie and Nathan re-experience their community in the section ‘crossing,’ the descriptiveness of Smith’s narrative becomes fine-tuned and hyper-focused:



The world of council flats lay far behind them, at the bottom of the hill. Victorian houses began to appear, only a few at first, then multiplying. Fresh gravel in the drives, white wooden blinds in the windows. Estate agent's hoarding strapped to the front gate.

Some of these houses are worth twenty times what they were a decade ago. Thirty times. (310)

Descriptions and details offer a topological, experiential perspective of the community at hand. As Wendy Knepper explains, "Smith's critique of prevailing representations of racial and cultural others also shapes her approach to construction of self and space" (115). This perspectival method of building a narrative allows for intricate and detailed movements through each character's personal experience. Knepper formulates "*NW*'s spatially-oriented aesthetic" as a new kind of "narrative immersion, which places emphasis on the interactive experience of worldly/textual navigation and rerouting" (116). For example, 'crossing,' the penultimate section of the novel, serves to situate Natalie and Nathan on very different socio-economic paths to address how space can have varying effects on diverse individuals. Their literal crossing of the neighbourhood mirrors their symbolic crossing of the socio-economic boundaries between them. I will build on Knepper's framework and move further into the narrative's focus on the neoliberal politics of space. Moreover, I suggest that Smith allows 'meaning' in *NW* to work conceptually as a bridge between author and reader to explore new ways of seeing the world in order to resist the neoliberal principles that bolster individualistic and meritocratic ideals amongst its citizenry.

Smith employs an epistemological and ontological perspective to recognize how the spaces and places we occupy, whether material or immaterial, remain charged with some of the structures that govern race and class within a social context. *NW* attempts to

identify key elements in an individual's experience of the world that eventually contribute to self-identity and self-expression. The text questions whether individuals maintain a sense of agency in their own lives, or are in some manner bound to play out particular destinies because of the limits and conditions brought on by neoliberal institutions. *NW* also examines how neoliberal culture shapes and molds technologies such as mobile phones and computers to bolster forms of impersonal communication and sponsor the growth of capital through technological means. Smith complicates technology further by questioning whether the neoliberal principles that govern real spaces are circumventing individuals by sheer design, and encoding these technologies and immaterial spaces with the same limitations we see imbued within the physical spaces of the novel. Through a phenomenological and ontological framework—with reference to the theories of phenomenologists such as Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida—this thesis will examine the experience of space and place within the novel and in the process will establish the interrelatedness of individualism and isolationism within the meritocratic society depicted. I argue that Smith's text ultimately explores various subjectivities, teased out through the perspectives of the four main characters in ways that highlight the way neoliberalism has socially conditioned individual perseverance. Furthermore, Smith examines how both real and virtual spaces, codified with political and economic implications, are expressly connected to the mediation of one's identity. *NW* recasts the very idea of conviviality in a more nuanced manner than Smith's first novel, *White Teeth*, asking the reader to question whether pluralism is threatened by the unequal

parameters that have been set by neoliberalism and its influence on space, place and technology.

## I. POSTCOLONIALISM TO PHENOMENOLOGY

Smith's literary output to date is most often compared with Salman Rushdie and his similar preoccupation with historiographic narratives that concerted work to reframe literature through a postcolonial perspective and to destabilize Western-centric colonial narratives (Tew 9-10). Rushdie's literary oeuvre, particularly *Midnight's Children*, invokes magical realism to allow the reader an experience not only based on the historical events that transpire, but also the sensual, mystical ambiguities that accentuate the importance of reclaiming one's history from an oppressor. Peter Boxall rightly states that Rushdie's work "is fascinated...with the concept of the embodiment of history" (54). For instance, Rushdie's protagonist, Saleem Sinai, recounts the story of the birth of India and Pakistan, two new nations faced with the challenges of decolonization. Rushdie executes his formidable prose by operating within an epistemological process of knowing one's situatedness in history in order to manifest alterity. Sinai proclaims that "most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence" signaling the powerlessness that one can have over a history that has been dominated by oppressive forces (Rushdie, *Midnight* 14). He recognizes the importance of "filling the gaps in [his] knowledge, so that everything is in [his] head down to the last detail, such as the way the mist seemed to slant across the early morning air...for instance, by opening an old tin trunk which should have remained cobwebby and closed" (14-15). Rushdie's text is concerned with the intergenerational

workings of a family centred primarily in South Asia. Unlike *Midnight's Children*, though, Smith's *White Teeth* looks at the intricacies of multiculturalism strictly from the perspective of diaspora. Much like Sinai's deep-rooted interest in history, Samad Iqbal, dedicated to his revolutionary great-grandfather Mangal Pande, resists the dominant Western historical narrative of colonialism by revising it to include the Bengali perspective of Pande's role in the 1857 Indian rebellion (Smith, *WT* 87). This act of resistance ultimately works to destabilize systems of oppression that uphold forms of subalternity within a historicity that greatly influences and reinforces contemporary narratives of colonialism. In her 2009 essay "That Crafty Feeling," Smith realizes she is not the writer she once was early in her career. She recognizes that her earlier work feels "oppressive" due to its rigorous pursuit of "information: personal, political, historical" (101). Critics such as David James and Wendy Knepper reference Smith's own understanding of experimentation and modernist aesthetics as not just empty terms that are thrown around but an attempt to shake the novel out "of its complacency" (qtd. in James 205) and motion towards a new literary form whose goal is to "get closer to the real" (qtd. in Knepper 115). Smith moves further into exploring how the novel can closely resemble real life—not exactly 'literary realism', but to mimic the sensations of everyday experiences on the page. Picking up where James and Knepper leave off, I will argue that Smith's work can also be read phenomenologically in its attempt to form a new critical understanding of social spaces and technologies under neoliberalism as well as a dialectical relationship between the author and reader.

*NW* is imbued with postcolonial and diasporic life, while also addressing the impact of the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, and the deep-seated neoliberal dogmas that have since become part of the social and political culture in Britain. *NW* highlights the complicated relationship between race and class through its depiction of space and place. It explores the manner in which presuppositions are effectively cruel reminders of the institutional racism that maintains a presence in British society. Smith comes from a lineage of post-war black British writers such as Sam Selvon, who depict institutionalized racism through literary forms. The politics of space is especially important to Selvon's work. According to James Proctor, "the difficulty of finding accommodation as a black settler in early post-war Britain" was "a consequence of the tensions surrounding housing in Britain" (61). *The Lonely Londoners* emphasizes the struggle of black immigrants by highlighting the prejudices they encounter, even though they are considered "British subjects," signaling how the visual field often determines one's place in society rather than citizenship (Selvon 31). As much as home and space present difficulties for immigrants in Selvon's work, Smith's *NW* explores the limitations and boundaries of space and how class has ultimately complicated racial politics.

A phenomenological and ontological framework will allow deeper access into how Smith craftily portrays diverse subject positions within material and immaterial space, and how agency is ultimately undermined by these spaces and the politics that are prescribed within them. Smith attempts to probe the relationship between subjectivity and space through her literary technique. The novel is littered with references to philosophical giants such as Kierkegaard (*NW* 254) and Heidegger (178), while some of the council

estates are named after enlightenment philosophers such as Hobbes and Locke (301). I also maintain that Smith's work engages with what Merleau-Ponty describes as the "essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness" (356). What is attempted here is a "return to the things themselves" (qtd. in Kockelmans 359). That is, Smith turns to a topological method of developing her narrative by fleshing out the objective space in her novel with great detail and description. Conversely, Smith teases out the interaction between subject and object through extended depictions of subjective experience of space and place, or what she schematizes as a "network of branches" (NW 28). For example, Smith portrays Leah as a former philosophy student who is disenchanted by "a life never intended for her" (33). Moreover, Leah recognizes the competitive nature of her schooling as she cannot properly pronounce "Socrates" in her university philosophy class, making the name sound rather like "a two-syllable packing company," which leads to ridicule from other students (33). Leah's inability to move ahead in her life reflects what Lauren Berlant theorizes as part of an "impasse," which "designates a time of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward" (4). Berlant suggests that this experience is one of the effects of twenty-first century neoliberal policies that have been attacking unreachable fantasies such as "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy" (3). Leah's life at University was ultimately "too disconnected from everything else to feel real" (Smith, NW 33), and the absence of feeling is reproduced in adulthood because her emotional labour is devalued by neoliberalism and its attack on conviviality. What can be described as the "financialization of the economy" has created "immaterial and networked labor," often in

the place of “manufacturing machine labor,” and has transformed many sectors of the economy, as Yannick Thiem has pointed out (469). Thiem argues that “becoming a debtor becomes a form of immaterial labor in the service of financial capital” (470). This form of capitalism ultimately “produces indebted and precarious subjects” (470)—an example of which is Leah performing immaterial, affective labour through the affective labour at her workplace, and which is, as mentioned earlier, devalued entirely by neoliberalism.

What will be critical for my thesis alongside the phenomenological reading of *NW* is an engagement with cultural theorist Paul Gilroy’s essay work—in particular, his book titled *Postcolonial Melancholia*, which assesses, albeit before the financial crash of 2008, the melancholic sentiment found within post-imperial Britain. Gilroy senses that the white nostalgic desire for a homogenous national identity has developed into a disillusionment with pluralism. Moreover, Gilroy’s argument supports aspects of antiracist solidarity that seek to counter discourses that view “invasive immigration... as an “intractable problem with national dimensions” as well as a threat to “convivial culture” (146). According to Gilroy, current British attitudes towards immigration “mak[e] the immigrant always seem to be stuck in the present. Devoid of historicity, their immediate circumstances are invested with an incontrovertible priority” (123). Gilroy’s argument theorizes that the socio-economic immediacy of the immigrant’s goals—the push for economic stability—erases any connection of the multicultural to the past, leaving it vulnerable to populist politics.

Gilroy's perspective paints a clear picture of how xenophobia has laid the blame on multiculturalism for much of the world's economic issues. Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial work reinforces Gilroy's argument because Bhabha has always paid heed to the disjointed relationship and an ideological split between colonizer and colonized and between native and immigrant that is linked to structures of power. Bhabha recognizes how "modernity as a *sign* of the present emerges in that process of splitting" (Bhabha 174; emphasis in original). He argues that the colonizer's usurpation of what began as an imagined blank space has formed into a "temporal lag," which defines the hierarchal boundaries of subaltern space (174). Emily S. Lee suggests that Bhabha's "analysis leaves colonial subjects as already and always experiencing the splitting and doubling, schizophrenically" (538). Moreover, Lee describes Bhabha's theory on the colonial subject as demonstrating "acute awareness that any descriptions of identities never sufficiently depict the individuals, the persons themselves" (539). Thus, historical and cultural signs remain racially and economically embedded within the social consciousness through a repetition of stereotypes and symbols. Bhabha attempts to epistemologically breakdown the spatial and temporal non-synchronicity that reproduces colonialism:

I shall call the 'sign of the present', the performativity of discursive practice, the *récits* of the everyday, the repetition of the empirical, the ethics of self-enactment, the iterative signs that mark the non-synchronic *passages* of time in the archives of the 'new'. This is the space in which the question of modernity *emerges as a form of interrogation*: what do I belong to in this present? In what terms do I identify with the 'we', the intersubjective realm of society? (176-177; emphasis in original)



Bhabha's line of questioning attempts to refocus the intersubjectivity of the self within a modern contemporary framework that attempts to address acts of belonging and becoming.

One's situatedness in the world is expressly important to understanding the phenomenology of *NW* and also raises the issue that *NW* is a commentary on the colonial subject by highlighting the way successful minorities, in a culture dominated by whiteness, seem to lose their bearing in the world. One example in *NW* presents Bob Marley as a cherished symbol for Natalie in her childhood (176). However, she later judges that a framed poster of Marley she encounters in adulthood has transformed into "horrible 'good taste'" (289). Marley, as a cross-cultural icon, has been adopted into different cultural forms and thus cannot embody Natalie's intellectual understanding of black success in political and economic terms in Britain. Marley's cross-cultural appeal is a poignant example of what Gilroy recognizes as a diverse culture that is often appropriated into purely "Western" forms as "a symptom of imperial arrogance" that "wants to make everybody essentially the same and in doing so, make them all 'western'" (63).<sup>2</sup> Gilroy argues that the racial differences are upheld by the sheer existence of anti-immigration politics, which are characteristic of a mainstream Britain that remains perpetually disinterested in transnational solidarity and instead either forces individuals into collectivized groups or initiates a "radically individualistic view of humanity" (64).

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<sup>2</sup> Gilroy's 2015 *New York Times* interview regarding the Black Lives Matter movement and its role in Britain helps to understand why Gilroy addresses issues of cultural sameness in *PM*. Gilroy recognizes the lack of diversity within Britain's educational system but also advocates that "neoliberalism loves diversity," which frames solidarity as "an altogether trickier thing." Gilroy advocates for a movement that is consciously and intellectually developed "rather than assumed on racial grounds," and that "the effects of racism are insufficient to maintain solidarity" (Yancy and Gilroy).

The latter has ultimately been adopted into practice by neoliberal entities to consequently promote racial indifference within many parts of the populous. *NW*'s perspective reflects Gilroy's argument in its depiction of a society that has embraced neoliberal values that reject community and solidarity in favour of an extreme form of individualism. Its depiction of successful minorities adhering to these values merely exposes the lack of social justice amongst different, more privileged, members of society. *NW*'s fragmented form and structure exposes the threat to convivial culture by presenting the world through four radically different perspectives. Smith develops a phenomenological framework out of the fragmentary narrative, which helps to expose the neoliberalized social conditioning that has pervaded the spaces and objects we come into contact with.

## II. XENOPHOBIA AND NEOLIBERAL SPACE

According to Gilroy, the retroactive desire for a return to past imperial glory also drives the melancholic sentiment found in modern day Britain. Gilroy proposes that the xenophobia found in contemporary Britain is an expression of a perceived loss of a clear and unambiguous national identity, even though such a national identity may never have existed:

Britain's inability to mourn its loss of empire and accommodate the empire's consequences developed slowly. Its unfolding revealed an extensively fragmented national collective that has not so far been able to meet the elemental challenge represented by the social, cultural and political transition with which the presence of postcolonial and other sanctuary-seeking people has been unwittingly bound up. (*PM* 102)

These reinforced forms of xenophobia are bound up in the culture and politics of nationhood and empire. They are vital to the institutions that support a democratic West.

Nevertheless, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, both the New Labour and the Tories have undermined and indiscriminately subverted the social contract by dismantling the core tenets of the welfare state that protects the disenfranchised, creating a vicious political cycle of discrimination and reconciliation that leaves minorities politically and economically voiceless. The recent tragic fire that decimated Grenfell tower, killing around 80 residents, is clear evidence of the unequal treatment of marginalized individuals under the conservative government led by Prime Minister David Cameron and, later, Theresa May. Increasing support for the privatization of many social programs and the erosion of the social contract, under the guise of Western democracy, merely rewards the financial elite and, as Henry Giroux rightly states, leaves behind “discarded individuals who remain invisible and unaccounted for in the dominant discourse of politics, rights, and civic morality” (77). Furthermore, as the global recession of 2008 highlights, deliberate financial deceit can transform itself into austere socio-economic measures that affect the most vulnerable sectors of society. Europe’s inability to uphold the social contract became apparent by the end of the twentieth century (Birnbaum 26). In Britain, the Labour Party, during its thirteen years in power, followed a fiscal path whereby it took “pains to depict itself as rejecting an egalitarian or redistributionist agenda” and expressed no clear route towards re-instilling social-democratic policies in Britain (Birnbaum 28). Instead, Britain and much of Europe began a process of “deregulation and privatization of the public economic sector” (26), constituting a harsh neoliberal economic environment.

Through its characters, *NW* portrays a brand of individualism that was born from neoliberalism's imposing dominance of the political sphere. Both Natalie and Frank live highly competitive lifestyles where individual achievement leaves no room for the pursuit of social justice. Natalie must choose between her low paying but ethically rewarding job at RKO, and a job that pays more in order for her to afford her lifestyle (249). Moreover, Natalie's dreams of working pro bono cases in the "Caribbean Islands of her ancestry" is passed off as an example of her "veiled...self-interest, representing only the assuaging of conscience" (254) Frank only reinforces Natalie's line of thinking as he sees no value in ethical work, citing it as stemming from notions of "sentimentality" and "woolly-mindedness" (254). Michael A. Peters indicates that this neoliberal competitiveness is bred from "an emphasis on freedom over equality, where freedom is construed in negative and individualistic terms. Negative freedom is freedom from state interference, which implies an acceptance of inequalities generated by the market" (19). Social justice and solidarity are framed as modern inconveniences. Individuals heavily rely on a system that promises to work for the good of the people, but *NW* reveals that the growth of individualism directly inhibits solidarity, creating an ethical and moral vacuum within financially successful sectors.

The consequences of neoliberal austerity are quite present in *NW*, exposing the inescapable circumstances found in everyday urban life. Smith's protagonists often find themselves trapped within a system that is organized along the lines of race and class. They attempt to resist the limits that are brought upon them by embracing a muscular form of individualism that has been supported by neoliberalism since the beginning of the

new millennium. We can recognize the extent of Smith's concern with neoliberalism in the encounter between Felix and Tom. As the two men are brought together from different walks of life—Felix from Caldwell and Tom from a middle to upper-class small township—they attempt to negotiate a car deal. Tom admits that “everyone’s looking out for themselves” these days (129), signaling some of the neoliberal undertones that reoccur throughout the novel. Moreover, the precarious socio-economic climate has Felix moving from one job to the other (127), while Tom explains the key to success lies in the very neoliberal book title “*Ten Secrets of Successful Leaders*” (127). The book represents a main tenet of neoliberal ideology, in that it implies that a particular formula is required in order to achieve success. In the era of hyperindividualism one must stay competitive by looking at neoliberal success stories and attempting to adopt certain strategies (129). Felix and Tom’s interaction has fixed racialized and classed undertones that are suggestive of the inequality between them. Felix’s work in the film industry is soon uncovered as a low level position, which solves a classed “puzzle between them” (121). Felix also exhibits some unease in revealing his classed and raced position through his use of vernacular language like “money man” to describe his small investment in his father’s business (127). What *NW* uncovers is the absence of the equality of opportunity promised by democratic ideals and free market principles. For Felix, a “thousand pound” investment in his father’s t-shirt business is clearly an inconsequential and awkward financial practice to boast about to someone like Tom, who comes from a position of privilege (127). Moreover, Felix admits that he is often mistaken for a weed smoker because of his appearance, suggesting that not only is Felix profiled racially, but such profiling has

become a normalized aspect of his day-to-day life (130). By contrast, Tom is also somewhat apprehensive about his position in the world. His own socio-economic sense of “melancholy” and unease overtakes the ostensibly convivial nature of their engagement, demonstrated by Felix inauthentically calling Tom “mate” (131). Smith focuses on Tom’s background, which is one of middle-to-upper-class privilege, and therefore comes with certain expectations and demands for success that he cannot—at least in the eyes of his parents who would have raised Tom under the conservatism of Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s—meet.<sup>3</sup> His mother and father “were country people,” who seem out of touch with urban life and Tom’s humanities degree from the University of Sussex (132).

Smith attempts to tease out the negative constraints of the forced conviviality between the two men. Moreover, Felix’s hyperbolic use of positive-thinking contrasts with Tom’s “twenty-first century intellectual ennui” that has grown out of his inability to take advantage of his “good fortune” (131-132). Both men are depicted as searching for a way to succeed within the neoliberal binary model of winners and losers. Yet, as this section of *NW* develops, Felix’s positive outlook is ultimately met with violence. *NW* explores how this model of free market economics simply cannot support individuals who are disadvantaged like Felix. Felix’s life, when compared to more privileged positions such as Tom and Frank, is revealed to have few to no safety nets. Felix is one of many casualties amongst a population of disposable individuals in society that are facing more and more cuts to social programs like education and social housing (Yancy and Gilroy).

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<sup>3</sup> Thatcher, while Prime Minister, was widely known for her deregulatory practices. She is also well known for stating that “there is no such thing as society: there are individual men and women, and there are families” (“Margaret”).

### III. SPACE, RACE AND CLASS

Smith focuses on the council estate of Caldwell to examine the perception of social mobility within the lower-class neighbourhood. Focusing on four urban individuals from the same council estate, *NW* engages with the roots of working-class housing in Britain, attempting to reshape critical discussion of British identity, which Gilroy argues, has “diminished, denied” and “actively forgotten” the “unsettling history” of Britain’s imperialist past (*PM* 90):

The political and ethical impact of this complex and internally differentiated racial humanity can be considered from a variety of perspectives. One of the more promising involves consideration of how exclusionary principles of modern, political nationality were actively racialized by their imperial exponents in order to win novel varieties of active consent from an emergent working class that was being simultaneously civilized and recomposed in the biopolitical conditions that had fostered popular imperialist feeling. (18)

Smith depicts people of colour actively embracing neoliberal ambitions while forgoing solidarity with the community they grew up in. Both Natalie and Michel, for example, see the council estate as a place that needs to be escaped (*NW* 92, 259). The text also depicts how council estates are viewed in mainstream media, often associated with criminality and abject poverty (265). Emily Cuming argues that “class has been crucial to the conception of council housing, from its roots in the ideological imperative of providing decent housing for working-class families, to these residential environments are depicted in the particular forms of cultural and media representations” (171). Within these various representations, the term “council housing...is sometimes used as a generic term or journalistic shorthand for issues of crime, social exclusion and a welfare-dependent ‘underclass’” (172). What these reductive stereotypes foster is a social environment

where certain distinctions become codified within the larger cultural context. These distinctions have a dampening effect on the perception of poverty and lower-class life, often alienating individuals from the rest of their community.

The topographical aspects of the council estate in the novel represent how space influences behaviour and experience in its shape and design. As bodies move through space, narrative structure forms through memory and self-identity. Jeff Malpas's work on the phenomenology of space and place indicates that the "concept of place is essentially the concept of a *bounded*, but open region *within which* a set of interconnected connected elements can be located" (170; emphasis in original). Boundaries are key to understanding the workings of the Caldwell estate. They highlight aspects of social and cultural insularity, but also aspects of solidarity found within the communal spaces of Caldwell. In Chapter One, I will expand on the forms of insularity and neoliberal norms of hyperindividualism and competition that affect one's subjective perception of space. Moreover, I will argue that the significance of the boundary wall that surrounds Caldwell is a symbol that divides Natalie's early life within the walls and her adulthood beyond the walls.

Smith's clear interest in forming spatial relations—the focus on 'space'—as a medium of inclusivity and exclusivity channels key issues with identity politics that complicate notions of race and class. Britain's socio-economic climate and the growing xenophobic attitude towards race sit unambiguously in full-view and are unabashedly in the mainstream. In 2006, Gilroy argued that Britain must "step back audaciously into the past" in order to "establish where the boundaries of the postcolonial present should fall



but also to enlist Europe's largely untapped heterological and imperial histories in the urgent service of contemporary multiculturalism and future pluralism" (*PM* 141). Yet, nearly a decade later, the pluralism Gilroy endorsed is unceremoniously absent. In its place, populist pandering has gained momentum, evolving into a new normal, and situating itself in opposition to globalization. According to Gilroy, Emma West's racist outburst on a public tramline in 2012 (which subsequently went viral, watched by millions of people) exemplified an entrenched xenophobic attitude against immigration and multiculturalism. West's vitriolic outburst encapsulates what Gilroy argues is a form of "white victimage" that has "become an increasingly prominent counterpoint to the fears of an Islamic takeover inside Europe and beyond" ("My Britain" 381). Britain's national identity crisis has been channeled into the populist discourses that have increasingly gained more ground after the global financial crash of 2008. This brand of politics found relevancy and political capital due to the public's deteriorating trust in the Blair-led New Labour Party, whose unfavourable wars (Afghanistan, Iraq), and poor economic resolve transformed the party into scapegoats for the financial strain experienced by the British public (Gamble 26).

The contemporary populist backlash towards the immigration policies of the past decade has rehashed the prejudiced concerns of Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech that took place in 1968, warning of an imminent race-war, and declaring Britain's national identity to be in crisis (Street 932).<sup>4</sup> Powell's racist ideology remains engrained

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<sup>4</sup> Powell's speech occurred during a period of mass immigration from the Caribbean. The hostility and prejudice towards immigrants during this era has been fictionalized by authors such as Sam Selvon and

in the xenophobic attitudes of many on the Right, including the British National Party. The underlying nostalgic desire for absolutist and universalist attitudes towards both race and class have become normalized in mainstream political debates after the 9/11 attacks, and the consequent terrorist attacks in Europe. As Gilroy affirms, the Blairite “Third Way” ultimately amplified the hostility towards immigration by pandering to populism through anti-immigration rhetoric (Gilroy, *PM* 102-103). Blair’s stance on immigration was also coupled with a movement to, quite ironically, quell hostility towards immigrants, which Gilroy highlights was a contradictory political effort by the Labour Party:

Any promise in this bewildering proposal was undone by the obvious fact that popular hostility to immigrants was being fostered by the mainstream politicians who were then to be charged with the mission of being tough on themselves! They are apparently fearful of being outflanked on the right by xenophobia and ultranationalism but reluctant to concede their complicity with the way that anti-immigrant feeling dominates the political debate. (*PM* 103)

The political climate that came shortly after the New Labour era of Blair and Gordon Brown, and the climate that manifested Emma West’s vitriol serves to widen the already significant divide between social groups. Consequently, the cracks that have begun to surface due to the socio-economic crisis are two-fold: there is a lack of solidarity between working class individuals from different ethnicities, on the one hand, and a glaring friction between social classes themselves that seems to, at times, confuse and complicate conventional understandings of race and racism, on the other. According to Gilroy, alongside Emma West’s racist outrage, the media closely covered Jane Goody’s public

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Anita Desai. As well, a more contemporary allusion to Powell’s speech can be found in *White Teeth* (Smith 62).

spat with Shilpa Shetty on a British game-show, opening up the debate that, “everybody could be a racist” (“My Britain” 391).<sup>5</sup> Gilroy argues that the racial undertones hidden within the disagreement between the two women can “be read for the way that they illuminate the contemporary re-composition of class inequality registered in changing cultural habits, language and tribal affiliation” (391). Gilroy rightly states that the back-and-forth dialogue between Goody and Shetty highlights how “xenological detail affords opportunities to anatomise the forms of social hierarchy judged acceptable in the context of a neo-liberal order that thrives on the brutal division of the world into two great teams: winners and losers” (391). This contemporary brand of racism, one that complicates class affiliations in British society, aggressively reconstitutes social boundaries into new forms of prejudice and classism.

Smith’s *White Teeth* had presented a multicultural London that offered a glimpse of optimism and pluralism in the face of harsh views on immigration, through its depiction of the complexities found in class and race. Although Smith’s effort in *White Teeth* is not fully focused on a single neighbourhood, it highlights her interest in how communities should be depicted in literary form. Smith’s focus on Willesden Green is imbued with the historical shift of a neighbourhood’s cultural identity due to an influx of immigrants in the 1960s until the end of the twentieth century. Willesden’s significance can be seen in its transformation during the post-war era from a working-class suburb into a liberal multicultural space. In fact, Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech was

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<sup>5</sup> Goody, a person of mixed descent, sided with her white counterparts in her attack on Indian Bollywood actress, Shetty (391).

directed at changing locales much like Willesden in the 1960s. Smith alludes to Powell's speech, citing it as mere "silly-billy nonsense" (*WT* 62). For Smith, Willesden presents a small victory that makes possible a pluralistic society and liberalism that privileges diversity. Smith continues to celebrate the diverse nature of Willesden in *NW*. The novel begins with an ode to the community, proclaiming that the neighbourhood maintains its unique characteristics as "people go barefoot," "the streets turn European" and "there is mania for eating outside" (*NW* 3).

The convivial nature of a liberal haven such as Willesden has become less of a certainty in the few years leading up to the decisive referendum for Britain to leave the European Union. In 2016, Smith reflects on her naïveté as a young novelist writing about multiculturalism:

Of course, as a child I did not realize that the life I was living was considered in any way provisional or experimental by others: I thought it was just life. And when I wrote a novel about the London I grew up in, I further did not realize that by describing an environment in which people from different places lived relatively peaceably side by side, I was 'championing' a situation that was in fact on trial and whose conditions could suddenly be revoked. (Smith "On Optimism and Despair")

*White Teeth* was published shortly before the September 11th attacks in New York. After the attacks and the subsequent London 7/7 bombings of 2005, the developing social attitude towards race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism around the Western world has since grown into a clear-cut distrust of immigration policies in Britain. This also becomes compounded with what Sarah Brouillette describes as a literary industry that "involves the promotion of a kind of book that is given the label 'world fiction' and then specifically aimed at an international market," which reflects the development of

“transnational media corporations and their multinationalism-cum-multiculturalism” (80). *White Teeth* maintains its success as a contemporary postcolonial novel in the twenty-first century for its insight into the lives of immigrants and people of colour in Britain. Its ability to depict “a city-scape in the process of being Caribbeanized” and focus on its “youth culture” helped to uncover aspects of urban multicultural life that were not easily accessible (Dalleo 93-94). *White Teeth* attempts to acknowledge the deep racial and cultural divide in Britain by highlighting the peculiar friendship of Archie and Samad. The two men hold an unorthodox friendship when compared to the transient nature of a typical friendship made “on holiday” by British travelers with someone from a different race or culture (WT 96). Archie and Samad transgress conventional modes of homosocial behaviour because of their differing backgrounds. Here it seems the English attitude towards conviviality can be measured spatially. The narrator reflects on conventional British behaviour reciting how “a friendship that crosses class and colour, a friendship that takes as its basis a physical proximity survives because the Englishman assumes the physical proximity will not continue” (96).

In another 2016 essay, “Fences,” Smith details some of her concerns with the growing segregation of both race and class in multi-ethnic London, in response to the pro-Brexit outcome of the 2016 referendum vote. Smith’s preoccupation with and concern for fences as boundary lines inhibiting social diversity and heterogeneity echoes her fictional work. Smith argues that the ongoing process of securitization taking place in her old neighbourhood signals a deep divide and distrust amongst people of various backgrounds.

She considers that the vote to leave the EU—which some argue is a vote against immigration— could also represent an uninformed stance against neoliberalism:

Now I'm tempted to think it was the other way around. Doing something, anything, was in some inchoate way the aim: the notable feature of neoliberalism is that it feels like you can do nothing to change it, but this vote offered up the rare prize of causing a chaotic rupture in a system that more usually steamrolls all in its path. ("Fences")

Smith recognizes that the issue is not simply reduced to a neoliberal backlash but considers its deeper socio-economic roots. Brexit exposes a growing sense of isolationism and disenchantment with community and has transformed itself into a misguided and hollowed out version of class solidarity. Smith describes this in autoethnographic detail as she considers her relationship with a neighbour:

I didn't know how to penetrate what I felt was the fear and loathing she seemed to have for me, not because I was black—I saw her speaking happily with the other black mothers—but because I was middle class. She had seen me open the shiny black door to the house opposite her housing project, just as I had seen her enter the project's stairwell each day. I remembered these fraught episodes from childhood, when things were the other way around. Could I ask the girl in the big fine house on the park into our cramped council flat? And later, when we moved up to a perfectly nice flat on the right side of Willesden, could I then visit my friend in a rough one on the wrong side of Kilburn? ("Fences")

Proximity within these urban enclaves does not morph into solidarity. Smith's inability to overcome the socio-economic boundaries between herself and the woman she encounters at her child's school is what some researchers describe as a form of "social tectonics" (Butler and Jackson 2350). Although Smith is a person of colour, her experience highlights the ongoing gentrification of lower class, multi-ethnic neighbourhoods throughout London. The studies conducted within some neighbourhoods show that "whilst the white middle classes spoke of the attraction of living in an ethnically mixed

neighbourhood, they had little to do with working class and black residents and indeed held them responsible for some of the problems their own children were having in the area's schooling system" (2350).

Gentrification becomes a key element that defines and re-defines how a space is perceived and occupied by different income brackets. Firstly, Butler and Jackson consider that what defines gentrification is "a change of use initiated by the more powerful at the cost of the less powerful and poorer, and emphasizes that changes are not just social and economic but also that they take place in the context of a change in the built or spatial environment" (2351). Their research into the districts of Brixton and Peckham were quite nuanced in how social groups integrated with each other in a gentrified neighbourhood. Brixton resembled the theory of "social tectonics" much more closely than Peckham. However, as Butler and Jackson conclude, spatial differences between the two districts have somewhat of an influence on how the divergent groups interact. For Peckham, Rye Lane, a mostly African and Caribbean shopping area becomes a point where white middle-class residents are able to engage with people of various ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. Although there are certain problems with the 'othering' or exoticizing of different groups, as Butler and Jackson suggest, "the proximity of Rye Lane and the extreme contrast between the two neighbouring areas (a seemingly segregated space) meant that "difference had to be confronted almost on the respondents' doorsteps and therefore could not be held at arm's length" (2362).

Questions of social and cultural proximity are of key interest within Smith's fictional work. *White Teeth* insistently returns to the understanding that that there is no

“neutral place...left in North London” (Smith, *WT* 455-456)—inhabited by immigrants who “cannot escape their history” (465). As well, the close proximity of disparate cultures is depicted in *NW*. Leah and Pauline, for example, witness old Hindus with “saris” who look like “they have walked to Willesden from Delhi,” as they commute through the neighbourhood (*NW* 43). In her reading of *White Teeth*, Colombino highlights some of the intricate ways Smith complicates the relationship between self-identity and space. Colombino argues, “Smith’s way of signaling that space is not a neutral medium...is to disseminate it with obstacles, boundaries and crossroads” (168). Spatially, *White Teeth* explores literal ‘fences’ as boundary lines that represent racial, cultural and socio-economic segregation and division amongst individuals inhabiting the same neighbourhoods in London. As a middle to lower-class community, Willesden has “parks without fences” when compared to a more affluent civil parish such as “Queens Park (Victoria)” which has fences erected (62). While we see moments of conviviality in *White Teeth*, represented by the lack of fences and an absence of homogeneity in Willesden (63), *NW* presents a northwest London that has begun to increase its securitization of the neighbourhood (87), which consequently symbolizes much of the isolation that the characters feel in the novel.

#### IV. VIRTUAL SPACE, TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATION

The neoliberalisation that has occurred in the past thirty-five years has impacted both local and global politics. As ensuing social and political developments have taken effect, technology has become an integral part of day-to-day life for most individuals in



the Western world. *NW* acknowledges the change in tech culture by focusing on how identity is mediated through mobile phone communication and online networking. More specifically, characters such as Natalie embraces the discreetness of online activity with a covert email address (294). Leah resists using technology as a way of not participating in online culture (34), whereas Michel emphasizes the seeming equality that virtual space has to offer an immigrant who is also a person of colour (29). However, *NW* complicates the question of whether individuals can overcome the social codes that are embedded within real spaces as they attempt to recreate themselves online. The novel emphasizes that the same oppressive neoliberalism found in real, physical spaces has permeated into online culture, leaving individuals to face the same prejudices and experience inequalities in their online interactions. *NW* is often preoccupied with change: the change that occurs in individuals and the change that occurs around them.

*NW*'s exploration of virtual space brings a particular perspective to the table concerning identity formation and agency. The novel engages with aspects of technology throughout the narrative, depicting a social environment dominated by mobile phone technology. Smith seems intrigued by the potential for online secrecy and ambivalence, as she explores the discreetness in online communication with Natalie. Yet, in some of her essays she argues that online interactions often diminish our real life selves, turning us into commodities. Lynn Wells theorizes that Smith's preoccupations during the period of penning *NW* revolved around the idea of a "secret"—whether there was room in this day and age to keep one. Wells works through Smith's own interest in Jacques Derrida's theorization that "secrecy is essential to individual liberty but is faced by the spatial

demands of social control which is essentially panoptic, in that all individuals become...uncomfortably complicit in each other's oppression" (98). Smith states her interest in Derrida's proclamation that "if a right to a secret is not maintained then we are in a totalitarian space" (Derrida qtd. in Smith, "That Crafty" 102). Derrida's prophetic expression remains quite relevant as we consider today's issues regarding Internet privacy, digital citizenship and digital rights. According to Wells, Smith imbues her characters with "secretive double lives" in order to "play dual roles as representations of certain aspects of the multicultural reality in contemporary urban Britain" (100). Furthermore, Wells acknowledges how Smith uses the secretiveness of each character as a technique to highlight how these individuals are attempting to escape the "social expectations" imposed on them (103). These expectations, whether raced, gendered or classed, are ultimately complicated through each character's interaction with 'place' and 'the other.'

Identity becomes further complicated by the always-on nature of online interaction and the new media model that harnesses the Internet user as the main source of content. It is no secret that media is consumed for more hours in the day than ever before.<sup>6</sup> Jaron Lanier—whose book *You Are Not a Gadget* is reviewed in Smith's essay

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<sup>6</sup> The ubiquity of mobile phones allows for access to what Marshall McLuhan would call "cool" media (311) because of the participatory nature of online social media. While television has "depth," the web, in its current iteration, has taken McLuhan's understanding of "depth"—or what he generally describes as media that allows for audience participation—to its furthest reaches. Much of our current online consumption of media is wholly participatory; our lives and opinions have become the main source of content that we experience during an average online session. Some of the most popular websites today are solely based on user interactivity and communicability. There are no clear boundaries between one's personal and public life. What McLuhan originally discussed in his groundbreaking work is that TV engages the viewer much more than its predecessor, radio. McLuhan found radio a format to be less

“Generation Why?” alongside David Fincher’s film *The Social Network*<sup>7</sup> (written around the same period as *NW*)—suggests that TV still remains somewhat relevant as old media due to the abundance of chat and discussions that take place online surrounding the content made for TV:

It is astonishing how much of the chatter online is driven by fan responses to expression that was originally created within the sphere of old media and that is now being destroyed by the net. Comments about TV shows, major movies, commercial music releases, and video games must be responsible for almost as much bit traffic as porn. There is certainly nothing wrong with that, but since the web is killing the old media, we face a situation in which culture is effectively eating its own seed stock. (Lanier 122)

What Lanier describes is the Internet at its fullest capacity; it offers the highest rate of participation as a media, and it connects likeminded individuals together through a sea of information and data.

Natalie/Keisha’s (I use the dual name here to signal the character’s choice to revert to her given name, Keisha, virtually while still utilizing her adult name in real life) interest in the online sex website indirectly raises a debate surrounding online anonymity. Smith’s emphasis on sexuality, empowerment and privacy is complicated by the effortlessness of behaving immorally because the technology affords individuals a manner of discreetness that has never been available before. Natalie asks why Frank, her husband, is “looking at [her] computer,” feeling as though her privacy has been violated (*NW* 295). Natalie’s internet browser history represents private details that might never be

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participatory because listeners can disengage themselves from the content and leave it on as background noise (311). He claimed that you cannot disengage from TV in the same way because of its participatory nature.

<sup>7</sup> *The Social Network* is a 2010 movie about the early days of the social media giant Facebook and its co-founder Mark Zuckerberg.

shared unless discovered through a form of snooping. Smith's fictional domestic scene turned into reality for many households across the globe, with the recent Ashley Madison scandal, when the real life adultery website was hacked and user information leaked online for all to see. Many individuals who had discreet affairs were exposed and a website was put in place for users to search through a database of email addresses belonging to individuals who, presumably, had patronized Ashley Madison. In Canada alone, there were two reports of suicides after the leaks became public ("Ashley"), revealing that the exposure of sensitive information can often have tragic consequences. This intrusive access to vulnerable information—the overlap of sensitive private material into public space—reveals important details about the tech culture of our time. Lanier suggests that "the internet has come to be saturated with an ideology of violation" (65). Although Ashley Madison offers a service that is immoral to many individuals, hacks such as this have almost become the norm.

*NW* continuously returns to technology and its pervasiveness, throughout the narrative, to challenge our understanding of communication technology and virtual space. Smith, with her emphasis on realistic vernacular, provides a true-to-life textual exchange between Leah and Natalie that reads as typical dialogue between best friends, but also represents the moment where the website "[www.adultswatchingadults.com](http://www.adultswatchingadults.com)" is planted in Natalie's mind (242). The discreetness and the constant access of mobile phone technology eventually pushes her curiosity far enough for her to visit the site. Smith's awareness of how technology is effortlessly accessible and ever-present is spread throughout the narrative arc. For example, the exchange between Felix and Tom that I

referenced earlier not only crystallizes the persistence of economic and racial inequality under a putatively colorblind and meritocratic neoliberalism, but it also exemplifies Smith's concerns regarding the ubiquity of mobile phone technology in everyday life. Their dialogue is often overshadowed by the intrusiveness of mobile phone technology. Felix inadvertently eavesdrops on Tom's phone call with his girlfriend, Sophie, and hears "more than he wanted to" (124). The mobile phone continuously buzzes throughout their conversation, and Felix even receives a text message from a scam insurance company that prompts the two men to discuss the current cutthroat environment that prioritizes cash flow over solidarity (129). The manner in which mobile phones are represented as ever-present objects in our daily lives suggests that the novel engages with this new format quite skeptically, prodding us to reconsider the veneration it receives.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will examine *NW*'s narrative exploration of the complexity of black identity and, in particular, the role neoliberalism plays in how race and social mobility are understood and lived. Then, my second chapter will assess some of the ways *NW* presents communication technology and the ways it has shaped our everyday interactions, while also exploring how race and class are mediated online. I will show how *NW* narrates space and place to highlight the ways neoliberalism has reorganized socio-economic standards and fostered a false sense of conviviality amongst individuals. Much of my reading will utilize a phenomenological framework to recognize how subjectivity is performed within *NW* and how the subject positions influence and mold our reading of race and class within the harsh socio-economic environment of the novel. Chapter One thus provides a material and social foundation for critically

considering Chapter Two's examination of the novel's alternative modes of techno-utopian discourse, which present identity, race and class as being performed in more nuanced ways online. What binds the two chapters together is *NW*'s insistence that both the material and the virtual are impacted by a neoliberal culture that separates individuals into winners and losers, institutionalizing individualism as the highest democratic order. *NW* emphasizes that this muscular individualism ultimately enforces a culture of disposability and impersonality both on and offline. In my conclusion, I will emphasize that Smith holds a distinct social vision that radically shifts our limited perspectives as readers towards a phenomenological framework of seeing the world through a new critical conviviality; one that ultimately champions a form of radical subjectivity and the co-construction of meaning between the author and reader.

## CHAPTER ONE

### SPACE, CLASS AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Smith employs fragmentation within *NW* by separating the novel into five sections of various lengths. Although the second section titled ‘guest’ operates in a more conventional narrative format, section three, ‘host,’ is divided into short chronological chapters that span over decades, while the opening section, ‘visitation,’ spans several days. Both ‘guest’ and ‘crossing’ compress time even further as the former depicts a day in the life of Felix, and the latter, several hours of one night. Smith creates a distinct relationship between space and time throughout each section. Although mostly linear, ‘host’ manages to thread together a multitude of instances where Natalie is confronted with the tension between how she sees herself and how others see her in the world, as she “convert[s] an external judgment” from her friends and family “into a personal choice,” appearing to never succumb to indecisiveness or ambivalence (Smith, *NW* 242). This socialized form of behaviour, which originates in Natalie’s childhood, is highlighted by her motivation to “exist for other people” (179). Smith’s characterization of Natalie is key to recognizing some of *NW*’s concerns with class and social mobility. To clarify, Natalie is one of the only characters in the text that can be located across two social spaces. She moves beyond Caldwell into a comfortable upper-class lifestyle with Frank only to return to the working-class estate to visit her mother Marcia, her sister Cheryl and Leah throughout the narrative. Moreover, I consider Natalie’s persistent attempt to examine her orientation in the world as a possible entryway into the philosophical works of Kierkegaard and Heidegger. As the only character to move beyond Caldwell’s walls, she

displays symptoms of existential dread when she cannot even recognize the origin of her “anxious” state in the chapter titled “Time speeds up” (269). Smith relates Natalie’s anxiety to the demands of motherhood and an upper-class lifestyle that is increasingly becoming “time poor” (266). This engages with Smith’s earlier allusion to Kierkegaard’s concept “*Fullness of time*” (254).<sup>8</sup> The association with Kierkegaard raises interesting concerns regarding time and identity. Natalie’s awareness of the speed at which modernity moves intersects with her ability to recognize the in-betweenness of her self-identity. Part of the neoliberal conditioning depicted in the novel is under the constraint of increasing demands on labour and economic stability, which *NW* addresses is a culture of “time poor” workers from all walks of life (266).<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard remains an important philosophical figure in the novel based on his dialectical approach to subjectivity, time, anxiety and existence. Kierkegardian subjectivity is of interest for understanding Natalie’s name change from Keisha, and why this change holds philosophical significance in *NW*. Kierkegaard wrote his concept “*fullness of time*” under the pseudonym of Johannes Climacus, indicating a philosophical mode of theorization that allows the author some distance from his own work. According to Banu Helvacioğlu, Kierkegaard’s mode of theorization “is often regarded as his trademark not only for the indirect and imaginary construction of his thoughts, but also as a means to engage with his own works in a critical fashion, often in the form of self-mockery” (183). Natalie

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<sup>8</sup> Kierkegaard’s concept that Smith references can be found in *Philosophical Fragments* written in 1844 (123).

<sup>9</sup> See my Chapter Two, p. 96 for a reading of individuals like Natalie being affected by a “time poor” economy, as being demonstrated by her use of mobile phone technology.



seems much more inclined to identify the artificiality of her personality because she has made a significant shift towards a new identity.

The phenomenological relationship between characters and the spaces they inhabit is an important framework for understanding the novel's insistent connection between identity and space, and also the close relationship between narrative and memory. I argue that *NW* functions, in part, as an exploration of divergent perceptions of space, and that the individuals who occupy these locations are 'similarly dissimilar' in their experiences and subjectivities. They share the same spaces, maintain historical, cultural, and political commonalities, but differ in their phenomenological and ontological relationship with the "network of branches" (Smith, *NW* 28) that make up the *things* and *places* they interact with. In other words, the language and structure in each section conveys a particularly distinct subjectivity for each character, detailed by the phenomenon of seeing and their own lived memories. The topological language of the novel and how the novel operates in a loco-descriptive style that illustrates North-West London in great detail—while underscoring the very neoliberalized environment at hand—suggests that spatial topology remains at the forefront, as one of the more important formal properties of *NW*.

## I. PERFORMATIVITY, RACE AND VOICE

Smith's concern with race in *NW* undertakes a distinct modality that attempts to complicate both self-identity and social codes. She builds on her previous work to imbue characters with diverse subjectivities that are challenged by social and political issues in

contemporary London. Her two female protagonists, Natalie and Leah have similarities yet remain entirely distinct as women who are challenged by issues of motherhood, domesticity and selfhood. Natalie, a successful black lawyer, remains conflicted in her choice to embrace upper-class life, while balancing her memories of a lower-class childhood. Smith's nuanced interpretation of black female success deviates from previous critical observations that Smith "has a problem with black women" and "has difficulty creating female characters (both black and white) that are more than one-dimensional character types" (Walters 125). Natalie's complexity reflects some of Smith's attitude towards 'voice,' which she expressed in her 2008 speech "Speaking in Tongues." Smith meditates on her experience of moving from Willesden to Cambridge University and how the change had a direct impact on her 'voice.' For Smith, "Willessden was a big, colorful working-class sea" while "Cambridge was a smaller, posher pond, and almost univocal" ("Speaking" 133). Smith addresses the complexity of her experience, embodying a "double voice" (133) in a univocal culture, while never really fitting neatly into cultural norms and expectations in regards to class and education:

If you go (metaphorically speaking) down the British class scale, you've gone from Cockney to "mockney" and can expect a public tarring and feathering; to go the other way is to perform an unforgivable act of class betrayal. Voices are meant to be unchanging and singular. There is no quicker way to insult an expat Scotsman in London than to tell him he's lost his accent. (133)

This portion of the speech offers a glimpse into Smith's view of how language can exist as a clear social marker, through speech and accent. It also relates back to the neoliberal constraints that have, on the one hand, apparently diluted issues of race in Britain by

cultivating a false sense of conviviality amongst individuals of different backgrounds, and on the other hand, further defined class as a marker of economic success or failure.

Within British culture, one's voice and accent tie together forms of socially acceptable behaviours and obligations. Yet, a distinct voice also suggests that class can engender solidarity and allocentrism (forming an interdependency within a group). The allocentric behaviour brought on by codified commonalities like a shared accent also signals a direct relationship with the political and historical implications found within class and race, complicating the possibilities for pluralism within a multi-ethnic Britain. Although Smith does not directly refer to upper-class individuals as embodying "the voice of lettered people" (133), she connotes that aspect of language and speech are, at least in the eyes of British citizens, directly associated with class relations. Thus, class's performativity is a factor in the derision faced by those who betray their place of origin. Furthermore, class also fundamentally remains a social configuration, often manicured by the moralistic values of the state. Social codes are upheld to eschew ambivalence and mold individuals into acceptable, safe, and ultimately governable citizens. E. Patrick Johnson's theorization on race, authenticity and performativity complicates class and identity even further. Johnson's view of blackness in a white supremacist society like the United States elucidates some of the multi-layered complexity found in the relationship between class and race:

There is no "real" poverty in the black inner city, but rather only that the representation of that poverty may take many discursive turns such that one might actually live in the ghetto but not necessarily *appear* to. The reverse may also be true as witnessed among rappers who sing about life in the ghetto but who themselves don't actually live there. And even in those instances where a rapper

does remain “in the ghetto” his geographic location does no more to secure the authenticity of his blackness than it does to diminish the fact of his wealth. (30)

Johnson identifies these typifying labels as “ideological construct[s]” that are iterative representations upheld by the dominant cultural mode (30). The “politics of representation” (30) that Johnson acknowledges remains similarly present for Smith’s own experiences as a person of mixed descent in Britain. Smith’s “double voice” presents identical challenges because her doubleness manifests within the visual field. Smith reveals that when your “personal multiplicity is printed on your face... anyone can see you come from Dream City” (“Speaking” 137-138)—Dream City representing an idealized space where “everything is doubled, everything is various” (138). Smith offers Barack Obama as an example of a public figure who has perfected multi-vocality. She credits his continued success as a political leader coming out of his flawless ability to not “just speak for his people” but be able to “speak them” (136). Obama’s skill seemingly transcends the limitations brought on by class and race. It symbolizes aspects of Smith’s imagined ‘Dream City’ and gives rise to idealized visions of a post-racial society. Nevertheless, Obama’s presidency fostered misinformed discussions regarding post-racial unity, while neglecting the hard truth about the institutionalized cultural misrepresentations and iterations of blackness in media (which *NW* attempts to highlight).

Moreover, Nicole Fleetwood conceptualizes black women’s “engagement with “hypervisibility” (111)—referring “to both historic and contemporary conceptualizations of blackness as simultaneously invisible and always visible, as underexposed and always exposed, the nuances of which have been depicted in art, literature and theory” (111). She argues that the black body has become both commodified and fetishized, and the term

hypervisibility is a way of observing the hegemonic cultural and political systems that encourage certain ways of seeing the black body in culture and media. For Fleetwood, the act of seeing and deciphering race is a mode of identification called “colorism” (73). She suggests that colorism “attempts to fix a scale of blackness based on dominant structuring principles of the field of vision and through an understanding of the black body as a visibly identifiable body, even in traces” (73). In *NW*, Natalie’s fixation on her self-identity often presents itself in a very reflexive manner as she consciously reorients her relationship with the exterior world. She is aware of her racialized body as a person of colour and changes her name from Keisha to Natalie—what would be considered a ‘white’ name—in order to distance herself from her early life in the council estate. In her informal “attempt at social criticism,” she admits that she is “not what most people have in mind when they think of a ‘banker’s wife’” (273). Natalie realizes that she conflicts with the social constructs that are seeming predictors of success when it comes to race, class and gender, as she is “a highly educated black woman” and “a successful lawyer” (273). Such self-reflective critiques epitomize what Fleetwood would describe as a subject that “understands the colorist paradigm and assesses value in relation to the hierarchy; and a colorist gaze frames her understanding and perception of the actions of others marked through this system” (73). Fleetwood invokes Frantz Fanon (and Homi Bhabha’s interpretation of Fanon) to highlight the necessity for “a mode of articulating the space where the black visual subject becomes intelligible through dominant discourse” (22). In *NW*, Smith engages with aspects of the visual field and how individuals like Natalie/Keisha attempt to evade the cultural misrepresentations of both

class and race. Fleetwood's approach to Fanon and Bhabha incorporates the visual field of seeing and the prerequisites that distinguish the performativity of blackness in a culture dominated by whiteness.

Natalie's diverse background is a point of conflict, which helps articulate Smith's framework of a 'double voice,' as Natalie, on the phone with the police to report Nathan as a suspect near the end of the narrative, disguises "her voice with her own voice" (333). This final line in the novel relates to Natalie and Leah's exchange in the park, as they contemplate whether "a voice" is "something you can own" (287). This paradoxical question develops out of the women listening to a voice that blares out of the loudspeakers of a park café where they "long ago agreed that this voice sounded like London—especially its northern and north-western zones" (287). The ontological essence of the question presented by the two women cannot be emphasized more clearly: how much agency do they have over their voice and by extension, their identity—considering that one's voice often indicates social markers such as class and race, alongside the geographical location of one's background. The relation of the self (subjectivity) to the public becomes crucial to understanding Smith's inquiry into identity formation. As detailed in the previous passages, Kierkegaard's presence in *NW* highlights Smith's emphasis on modern time as compressed at much higher degrees than our predecessors (256).<sup>10</sup> Natalie's anxious state, however, is a symptom of the unresolved in-betweenness of her identity (evidenced by her choice to use a 'double voice' by the end of the text).

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<sup>10</sup> See my Chapter Two, p. 88 for a more detailed close reading of change and modernity contextualized through technology in *NW*.

Smith invokes Kierkegaard in order to present the challenges of mediating one's identity within a society that is increasingly constrained by the lack of time.<sup>11</sup> Smith's allusion to Heidegger's concept of *Thrownness* in chapter 9 of 'host' (conspicuously titled "Thrown") holds much philosophical significance, as it relates to the moment of Natalie's mental "breach" that separated "what she believed she knew of herself, *essentially*, and her essence as others seemed to understand it" (178; emphasis in original). During her childhood, Natalie/Keisha exists within the walls of Caldwell and without the awareness of social scripts. Smith incorporates elements of psychogeography, to detail Natalie/Keisha's "compulsion" to traverse the given landscape with no immediate motivation to guide her (178).<sup>12</sup> When Natalie/Keisha "begins to exist for other people," she also begins to recognize a public voice<sup>13</sup> that pushes against her own subjectivity (178). *Thrownness* becomes of value for its ability to illuminate my reading of Natalie/Keisha's mental bifurcation. Heidegger states that *Dasein*'s existence in the world is one that is veiled because of being *thrown* into the world (Heidegger, *BT* 176). It also formulates as a "state-of-mind" where one's Being has, essentially, revealed its existence to itself (174). Smith structurally weaves this concept into *NW* through Natalie/Keisha's aimlessness and discovery of being "Thrown" into the world of ideologies.

Natalie/Keisha ultimately becomes aware of the standards that have been set in the world

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<sup>11</sup> Whereas Heidegger separates time into two functions: "temporal 'entities' (natural processes and historical happenings) and non-temporal 'entities' (spatial and numerical relationships)" (*Being and Time* 39). For Heidegger, time is the fundamental criterion for understanding existence and *Dasein* (40).

<sup>12</sup> According to Alastair Bonnett, fictional British psychogeography "is an arena of conflict between two important strands within British radicalism: the use of the past to critique industrial modernity and the suppression of nostalgia" (46).

<sup>13</sup> See *Being and Time* pg. 237.

where she exists, yet her state-of-mind develops out of fear, as she refuses to acknowledge her inability to answer questions from others (179). This moment in the text engages with Heidegger's concern for inauthenticity and authenticity. Heidegger recognizes that a state-of-mind that is thrown into the world is fleeing from itself, which ultimately leads to fear and anxiety (*Being* 230)—states of inauthenticity. However, Heidegger also suggests that 'anxiety' brings one's state-of-mind "back from its absorption in the world" (*BT* 233). Smith seems interested in using these frameworks to develop Natalie's inner turmoil as she continuously reorients herself in the world and reexamines her significance amongst the public and the network to which she belongs.

Through a phenomenological structure, Smith complicates Natalie's voice by acknowledging that it is as diverse as one's background, politics, and culture. Smith also emphasizes that there is a sense of freedom in how one makes use of one's voice. Natalie embraces the seeming artificiality of identity as she plays with "drag" and considers the "various attitudes" necessary to be "most authentic, or perhaps less inauthentic" in the wardrobe she wears during her sexual encounters (278). As Natalie attempts to disguise her voice with her "own voice," the novel implies that Natalie has reoriented her speech to allow for a more diverse representation, signaling a movement away from her earlier "self-contempt" (252). Although she performs a voice that could very well originate from extrinsic forces, she ontologically performs a voice that reflects her nuanced subjectivity. It becomes engrained with a performative value. We cannot fully grasp Natalie as readers but we can recognize her doubleness. Smith proclaims the need for a movement away from "human dissection, of entering the brain of characters" ("That Crafty" 102). We are



not meant to learn a character's true intent or motivation, but instead must recognize that the character's choices are based on their subjective experience and interpretation of the things and places around them—which we are all beholden to, as well. It is through a shared culture, alluded to in *NW* as the “network of branches” (28), where we can uncover some type of meaning from the novel. Returning to Heidegger's phenomenology once more, we can reimagine choosing our ‘voice’ as something formed not only by the public, which generally imposes limits on one's pure subjectivity, but also “by ‘making up’ for *not* choosing” which signifies “choosing to make this choice,” and “making this decision from one's own Self” (*BT* 313; emphasis added). Such a voice becomes “the voice of conscience” and follows the inscription that subjectivity lies within a shared culture while simultaneously distinct and separate from the public mass (313).

## II. CLASS WARFARE AND THE LANGUAGE OF NEOLIBERAL DISPOSABILITY

Invoking Heidegger's framework of thrownness helps me to investigate some of the ontological inquiries that *NW* makes regarding agency and subjectivity—and whether the neoliberal policies and socio-economic circumstances found in northwest London are some of the dilemmas that have come to produce an environment moving further towards a dangerous brand of self-serving individualism. Characters such as Nathan and Shar remain spectral faces on the fringes of the socio-economic crisis that overshadows the narrative. David Marcus suggests that the novel expresses a clear concern with the lack of upward mobility that is often mythologized in Western cities such as London (70). Both Nathan and Shar are rendered haplessly at the bottom of the social ladder where agency

seems beyond reach. Their desperate social positions are symbolic of the deterioration of localized protection for vulnerable sectors within major urban centres. Zygmunt Bauman regards the state of affairs in modern cities as part of a movement towards segregation and dislocation:

Contemporary cities are...the stages or battlegrounds on which global powers and stubbornly local meanings and identities meet, clash, struggle and seek a satisfactory, or just bearable, settlement—a mode of cohabitation that is hoped to be a lasting peace but as a rule proves to be only an armistice; brief intervals to repair broken defences and redeploy fighting units. It is that confrontation, and not any single factor, that sets in motion and guides the dynamic of the ‘liquid modern.’ (81)

The novel presents Shar and Nathan in confrontational situations as they both intrude on the lives of other characters throughout the narrative with little to no warning, invoking Bauman’s gloomy description of clashing identities in the above passage. It is what Smith describes in the dust jacket of an early edition of *NW* as one of “‘the rare times a stranger crosses a threshold without permission or warning, causing a disruption in the whole system’” (Smith qtd. in Knepper 117). The novel begins with Shar stumbling on Leah’s doorstep, presenting herself as in desperate need of aid for her sick mother in the hospital. The initial scene that follows is multi-layered and represents two individuals brushing against each other in the same physical space, yet baring very distinct and separate subjectivities. Their encounter plays out under the shadow of neoliberal individualism that turns social actors into self-serving citizens in an unlevelled socio-economic environment. Shar claims that “no one did a fuckin thing to help” her out on the street, immediately before she knocks on Leah’s door (7). As the two women sit down inside Leah’s home, Leah realizes that the initial “emergency” at the door “was less awkward,

more natural than” the two disparate individuals sitting at a table, attempting to find some common ground (8). Both women cannot attain a sense of comfort in each other’s presence and the narrator, through Leah’s perspective, states that this “is not the country for making a stranger tea,” signaling a deterioration of conviviality that has overtaken British culture due to the continual practice of xenophobia amongst a large part of the population (8). Gilroy argues that difference is still “hated and feared...but is nothing compared to the hatred turned towards...the half-different and the partially familiar” (*PM* 125). This critical social commentary is echoed by Smith in her essay on the Brexit referendum a few years later, proclaiming that the “consequence of Brexit is to finally and openly reveal a deep fracture in British society that has been thirty years in the making” (“Fences”). In the essay, Smith describes her own inability to relate with someone outside of her social class regardless of whether they lived next door or not. Leah and Shar are haunted by uncertainty as they both explain their unstable circumstances to each other (Leah’s unwanted pregnancy and Shar’s physical abuse and rape). Although they are worlds apart, they resort to a physical embrace in an attempt to produce a sense of solidarity and cope with the harsh and austere socio-economic environment. Their proximity is ever so close as Leah “grips Shar’s wrist,” “puts her hands on her shoulders,” and “their foreheads...inches from each other” (7). This detailed physicality is ultimately an attempt to jumpstart the latent affective qualities they both cannot seem to locate.

That the Caldwell estate is a commonality between Leah and Shar is the underlying motivator for Leah’s generosity. Leah’s attempts to remain committed to her

community is compared to the commitment one would see from “other people and their families, or their countries” (6). The two women are dissimilarly similar, in that they share a common physical space, yet are involved with completely unrelated psychic disturbances. Shar is compared to a “woman in a war zone standing in the rubble of [Leah’s] home” (5), resembling Bauman’s ‘liquid modern’ citizens. Neoliberal intervention supports the ongoing marketization of major cities and the conditioning of its citizens into accepting an economic system that relies on the unregulated and unfair trade of goods and finances. *NW* acknowledges the impact of globalization on a localized level, as Leah and Michel are forced to shop for groceries at a “chain supermarket” that “closed down the local grocer,” and pays “slave wages,” while also supporting the imbalance of global trade between the West and the developing world (80). What becomes evident is that neoliberalism affects society on a localized level by instilling particular attitudes in individuals like Leah and Michel. Their inability to maintain a localized connection to goods and services leaves them considering whether they are “good people” (80). Although Leah agrees that they cannot afford “ethical things,” she secretly resents Michel’s interest in and desire for Natalie and Frank’s level of wealth, while failing to notice the possibly immoral nature of his pursuits (80). Morality becomes a negotiable cost of neoliberal economic measures. It could be argued that neoliberalism functions much more efficiently with an economic culture of ‘time poor’ individuals. The system depends on the belief that there is a “basic tendency towards competitive, acquisitive and uniquely self-interested behaviour which is the central fact of human social life” (Gilbert 9). We are reminded throughout the novel that time is under heavy constraints, as Leah

admits that she has “no time nowadays” to read her books at the beginning of the narrative (13), and Natalie cannot “stop mentioning the time, and worrying about it” (264). When there is no time for anything other than maintaining financial stability or growth, ethics and morality are put in danger of being displaced from an individual's day-to-day life. Neoliberalism assumes the individual to be a self-serving agent and this ideology is put into place through long work hours and precarious work conditions. The individual must maintain financial stability and growth over other more ethical endeavours. Furthermore, neoliberalism presents individuals with impossible choices in the most banal of circumstances. For example, Smith highlights Leah and Michel’s purchase of “tomatoes from Chile” at the chain supermarket, possibly alluding to Chile’s own historical association with the neoliberalism that was developed out of the ‘Chicago school,’ and adopted by Pinochet shortly after the US backed coup d’état in 1973 (Gilbert 7).<sup>14</sup>

*NW* presents several fictionalized examples where neoliberal hegemonic affairs shadow the narrative. Natalie’s brief encounter with Nathan in the park is informed by the class divide between them. The two former acquaintances have “no idea how to be” sincere because of the socio-economic difference that presents itself—contrasted by Natalie’s business attire against Nathan and his friends, who Natalie perceives to be “dressed as kids” (263). Moreover, Natalie’s work with the law firm RSN brings her into

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<sup>14</sup> Smith also references Kenya in this brief passage detailing the issue between localized and globalized economics (*NW* 80). According to Bilal Butt, neoliberalism has had a major influence on Kenyan third wave conservation efforts (99). The impact, Butt argues, has been one of land dispossession from local hands by-way of often “violent” and “coercive” neoliberal tactics (104).

contact with people from her high school, Brayton. She quickly wonders whether her former school “had gone downhill” (243), as three of her clients were past students. Furthermore, Natalie’s colleagues describe her former neighbourhood as a “hopeless sort of place, analogous to a war zone” (245). Smith attempts to depict Natalie’s ascent into an upper-class lifestyle as a shift that essentially alienates her from her socio-economic background. Natalie’s attitude towards the past contrasts with Leah’s own struggle to remain loyal to Caldwell. While Natalie embraces her new life, Leah’s “allegiance” to the “two-mile square” neighbourhood she grew up in (6) is ultimately tested in the narrative as she comes to realize that Shar’s story about her sick mother was untruthful.

The operative mode of neoliberal ideology causes distrust and alienation amongst members of the same class due to the growing belief that “independence expresses an ideal and dependence expresses a kind of social deviancy” (Peters 90). Morality becomes tenuous on all fronts as the social pressure of maintaining independence becomes much too difficult. According to Peters, this “dichotomy between independent/dependent personality...maps onto a series of hierarchical oppositions central to modern culture: masculine/feminine, public/private, work/care, success/love, individual/community, economy/family, and so on” (90)—often alienating individuals, and as *NW* indicates, leaving many like Shar and Nathan more likely to appear as criminal-like. Lynn Wells identifies that the issue between Shar and Leah lies in the difficulty of “knowing the Other's life story, of seeing the ‘what’ to the ‘who’” (105). Leah ascertains certain social cues when attempting to read Shar’s physical body and considering that “perhaps Shar needs money” (6). Yet, Leah cannot comprehend her plight, as she perceives the

'othering' of Shar's face, which takes on a multitude of properties. On the one hand, Leah sees Shar's face as "dreamy, slow," yet on the other hand she witnesses Shar turn "dark" while grinning "satanically" (11). As this section primarily works through Leah's perspective and subjectivity, Smith mystifies Shar's personality—her elusiveness unsettles our own expectations, alongside Leah's. Phenomenologically, the face, the unfamiliarity of experiencing, or of *seeing* the face does remain a phenomenon with social implications for thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas, whose work on the face and 'the other' offers some insight into how we can read Shar and Leah's encounter in the text. Levinas scholar, Drew M. Dalton highlights how "the enigma of the face" is what "Levinas thinks opens up the possibility of ethical consideration and responsibility" (24). Leah's attempt to personalize her encounter with Shar is ignited by their shared experience of place, which is also charged with historical and political implications bound within the symbol of the council estate. Shar's face opens up an opportunity for Leah to feel a sense of duty, or a responsibility to the mysterious 'other' that has knocked on her door. Accordingly, Dalton proposes that "the face of the other, in presenting beyond the bounds of phenomenal reality, presents beyond finitude itself" (25). Leah and Shar's interaction represents the potential for ethics and morality to exist. The face-to-face encounter is not limited to the physical barriers between them, nor is it bound by subjective experience. What occurs is a movement beyond space and time, eliciting a pre-cognitive response to the subject at hand, and also connecting back to Kierkegaard's "fullness of time."

Alongside this face-to-face encounter between Leah and Shar, there is a palpable tension that complicates the reading, in that the space they inhabit and the objects they interact with seemingly influence their exchange. “Together” the women “look like old friends on a winter’s night, holding their mugs with both hands” (Smith, *NW* 12). The cups of tea encourage an intimacy that Leah observes between the women—although still strange and unusual because both women seem uninvolved and appear to be “not listening to their own conversation” (12). What seems to transpire between them is inconsistent and unconventional dialogue, involving “tea or rape or bedroom or heart attack or school or who had a baby” (11). Language loses meaning and effectiveness. While language loses meaning and effectiveness, Leah nevertheless desires deeper onto-epistemological truths in her attempts to negotiate through the encounter with Shar. She is expressly concerned that “the grandeur of experience threatens to flatten into the conventional, into anecdote” (14).<sup>15</sup> The encounter between them is ultimately ephemeral. *NW* begins with Leah’s point of view to highlight that those in the community, who work for its betterment (12), for instance, seem unable to have a positive effect and are left unhinged and unsettled by their inability to attain the freedom that was once promised to them. Leah’s not-for-profit workplace is depicted in *NW* as “boxy” and “cramped” offices, housing overstretched and underpaid workers like Leah while offering services for marginalized communities in London (31).

Much like Shar, Nathan Bogle ultimately transforms into an apparition and a social outcast as he grows into adulthood. The story emphasizes Nathan’s descent into

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<sup>15</sup> Which is also an important perspective that Smith has regarding social media platforms.



abject poverty through the eyes of the other main characters. However, Nathan's possible involvement in Felix's murder overshadows the novel, leaving us to consider the tragedy of their lives as evidence of *NW*'s concern with agency and social mobility. When Nathan and Leah run into each other, Leah identifies Nathan's economic troubles directly from the ragged clothing he has on (45), similar to her earlier assessment of Shar's demeanour. Smith employs a chiasmus to connect Nathan with the image of a child—which reoccurs once more in 'host' during Natalie's encounter with Nathan at a park. Nathan is both known and unknown, almost "in two directions: imposing the child on this man, this man on the child" (45). Nathan admits to merely "surviving" (45), yet his language remains impersonal and ineffective. It suggests that in an environment of financial austerity from the neoliberal practices that reduce welfare spending, language to describe personal turmoil becomes abstracted. Further on in the narrative, Nathan and Natalie's journey through Northwest London in the section 'crossing' leads Nathan to admit that "everyone loves a bredrin when he's ten. After that he's a problem" (313). Nathan recognizes his own disposability and the limitations imposed upon him at an early age. The lack of social mobility that Nathan is confronted with in adulthood—after a failed attempt at a football career—means that there is, according to Nathan "no way to live in this country," where "no one wants you" (313). Natalie, however, ultimately feels little sympathy for Nathan's hapless existence, as stated in the final few lines of the novel. She attests that "we worked harder" and "we were smarter and we knew we didn't want to end up...like Bogle" (332). This harsh attitude presents the type of conditioning that takes place within

the neoliberal machine. Natalie's belief system follows an overtly neoliberal attitude that divides citizens into winners and losers.

Gilroy argues that "these days, if individuals fail to take advantage of opportunities to free or improve themselves, then the fault is all their own" ("We Got" 26). According to him, "enthusiasm for the selfish pursuit of riches has been disseminated through the medium of hiphop culture...where it has been combined with ruthlessness and an explicit appetite for domination and manipulation" (30). The widespread conditioning that takes place under the neoliberal machine spreads through both ends of the socio-economic ladder. The novel alludes to Lauren Hill's famous chorus from Nas' song 'If I Ruled The World (Imagine That)'. The refrain—"If I ruled the world! / (Imagine That.) / I'd free all my sons. / Black diamonds and pearls" (Smith, *NW* 311)—idealizes a form of solidarity in which the individuals who find success could ultimately free the others left behind, both literally and figuratively; however, certain elements presented in the novel are suggestive of the opposite effect. Smith complicates aspects of social responsibility by portraying the most desperate of the four characters, Nathan, as a hardened criminal in the eyes of Natalie. Yet we are not privy to what truly causes such violence to manifest within urban centres. Does the individual have a sense of agency and choice in his actions or does a system of limitations and barriers determine where and how violence takes place? By leaving characters' motivations mostly ambiguous, we as readers are left guessing, much like Leah and Natalie are in regards to the exact demeanour of their former classmate, Nathan. While Nathan appears rather suddenly in the narrative, he also remains present when he is not actually there. Leah mistakenly

identifies Nathan as one of the young men that Michel has an altercation with in the first section of the novel (81). She admits that the outfits worn by Nathan and the man she mistakes him for wear “the hooded top, the low jeans” like “a uniform—they look the same” (81). Smith interrogates the phenomenon of looking through the characters’ perspective to emphasize that the very act of seeing must be scrutinized in order to re-familiarize ourselves with a radical form of subjectivity that resists the moralistic and meritocratic social policies of the neoliberalized state.

### III. CLASS AND DOMESTICITY

Smith’s concern for subjectivity is apparent in her treatment of differing perspectives in each character. The subjective perception of objects in space can exist within a phenomenological framework to define various ways of seeing. For example, the chapter “Architecture as destiny” expresses how language itself is closely related to class. Marcia, Natalie’s mother who has remained in Caldwell her whole adult life, prefers to describe the room as a “*lounge*” (271) instead of living room or sitting room, which sociologist Kate fox indicates is a marker of an individual's lower class background (78). Simply from the use of language, we can grasp that an objective space can relate to one’s subjective response to space, as both Leah and Natalie call the same room by different names —“sitting room” and “living room,” respectively (Smith, *NW* 271). However, it should also be noted that “linguistic codes” have “nothing to do with money, and very little to do with occupation” (Fox 82). Phenomenologically, Jeff Malpas would argue that these types of subjectivities are ultimately “interdependent and irreducible” perspectives

in subject/object relations (142). He states that subjective perception is part of a narrative that “can be seen as structuring, in a similar fashion, both memory and self-identity, as well as the places, the landscapes, in which self identity is itself worked out and established” (185). In the same chapter, Natalie recalls her own sense of subjectivity through memory and observation. As she observes “the things she and Frank had bought and placed in this house,” she “liked to think they told a story about their lives, in which the reality of the house itself was incidental” (Smith, *NW* 271-272). However, Natalie seems to conclude that their upscale home in Kilburn feels like an “unimpeachable reality” (272). She recognizes the structure and the architecture hold much more history and weight than her own personal history. She questions her own subjectivity and cannot differentiate herself from the other bodies that may have lived in her home and adapted it to their own use. Her effort to identify with the accumulation of objects becomes unsatisfying, as “her own shadow” becomes “identical to all the rest” of the former inhabitants (272). Natalie’s inability to form a meaningful relationship with the space she inhabits highlights *NW*’s preoccupation with how one’s identity has become a distinctly governable part of one’s existence under neoliberalism. The reality of Natalie’s life is dictated by the artificiality of neoliberal codes of conduct, emphasizing a muscular individualism that ironically molds one’s self-identity.

Social policies that govern social groups across many walks of life also strongly influence the design and structuring of neighbourhoods. Echoing her husband Frank’s claim that ““you can’t get anything on the park for less than one million,”” Natalie indicates the money is not for the architectural design of the building but how much

“distance the house puts between you and Caldwell” (252). The lack of housing market regulation allows for divisions in class to manifest in public spaces, alienating communities from each other that are financially unequal. This suggests that “structures order and reorder space in ways that establish and constrain the actions and lives of the individuals who inhabit that space” (Malpas 186). Council estates like Caldwell were, according to Emily Cuming, built in post-war Britain with the concern “that model dwellings would in some sense produce model forms of citizenry and selfhood” (168). Cuming states that “the supposed failure of specific forms of council housing—the high-rise in particular—was rooted in the social discrepancy between the modern planners who drew up the prototypes and the working-class people who had to live in them” (171). These governmental policies effectively promote types of social conditioning that often result in social insularity. The policies undermine diversity by attempting to mold individuals into ideal moralistic citizens. Individuals who live within the walls of Caldwell have a distinct worldview that sharply differs from the world outside. Natalie notices how “relative weakness in Caldwell translated to impressive strength in the world. The world asked so much less of a person and was of simpler construction” (221-222). This line is structured as a chiasmus once again, substituting the line in reverse to emphasize that although these two worlds seem separate in their views they are also inherently dependent on each other. Moreover, the culture within the walls of Caldwell demands a particular perspective on the world of news and events, as “newspaper choice had been rather important” in the council estate (251). Marcia Blake’s choice to read the

“*Voice*” (a British national black newspaper) and the “*Daily Mail*” (leaning consistently conservative) hints at her black Pentecostal working-class identity (251).

In *NW*, individuals from lower-income households, such as Leah and Shar, are depicted surveying the size and space of homes and comparing them to their own limited reference points. Leah visits Natalie’s new home and measures it out by “working from an older scale of measurement: twice the size of a Caldwell double” (246). However, we see the reverse effect as Shar regards Leah’s council flat to be favourably large, even though Leah considers it a more modest abode (8). Peter Hall argues that the dimensions and layout of space “were design solutions laid down...by architects who...themselves invariably lived in charming Victorian Villas” (qtd. in Cuming 171). The size of a space, which is determined by the designer, has a conceivable impact on how individuals from different socio-economic backgrounds adjust to the layout. Furthermore, the novel reflects on the cultural impact of the media’s view of council estates and their inhabitants. As Marcia and Natalie watch a show centred on council housing, Natalie realizes that “poverty is understood as a personality trait” (265). Marcia derides the characters in the program for their degeneracy, proclaiming “how meticulously she took care of her own” (265). The television program is an example of damaging cultural stereotypes that precipitate a particular way of judging the lower class. It conveys a discursive relationship between the subjective self and the spaces designed for specific social groups. Cuming highlights the need to understand the importance of “dissonance and irregularity” in the relationship between places and their occupants (216):

For considering these disjunctures and mismatches between people and places is a way of resisting the ideology of the home as a mimetic or ‘reflective’ space

from which individual or social character may be read. Indeed... such disconnections are common in examples such as the marked contrast between exterior descriptions of houses and the people who reside in them. (216)

While the original design model for council housing was to raise the quality of citizenry, the resulting outcome that Smith presents in *NW* exposes this type of social organization as flawed for its attempts to mold subjectivities into distinctly classed social groups.

*NW* depicts spaces as able to move individuals “out of time” and “out of place” (Smith, *NW* 69). The narrator alludes to The Kinks 1968 song “The Village Green Preservation Society,” found in chapter six of ‘visitation’ (26). The song idealizes “tudor houses, antique tables and billiards” (26), while rejecting aspects of modernism that are lifeless and meaningless. The refrain in the song, “Preserving the old way from being abused / Protecting the new ways for me and you,” attempts to create a relationship with the urban environment that is in danger of becoming disconnected due to the encroachment of modern gentrification and the contemporary demands of urban rejuvenation (26). Time becomes a significant theme in the novel because Smith addresses the continuing neoliberal assault on personal time in the twenty-first century, which “ultimately depoliticizes people and narrows their potential for critical thought, agency, and social relations to an investment in shopping and other market-related activities” (Giroux 35). *NW* attempts to highlight some of the ways that geometric designs and topographical arrangements evoke particular experiences and feelings to overcome the burden of an increasingly time sensitive culture. Smith also investigates the peculiar juxtapositions found within neighbourhoods that create stark visual contrasts that evoke different modes of being in this world. For example, as Leah, Natalie and her kids attempt

to find Willesden Church, they first tread through streets lined with discarded objects and “eccentric items” (68). The “decapitated Anglepoise, a car door, a hat stand, enough rolled-up lino for a bathroom floor” all represent urban waste on a seemingly forgotten street. Their bodily movements through the space lead them to “run as one animal” between the traffic and cars (69). However, as the group arrives in the green spaces of the church, Leah perceives “a force field of serenity” that separates them from the adjacent impoverished street (69). The church grounds are analogous to the streets behind them as it holds a “broken stone urn” and a “crumbling cross” (70), while many of the tablets are worn and “covered with ivy” (70). The juxtaposition of the two disparate settings represents the contradictory nature of urban spaces. It highlights some of the ways that space and our relationship with it can influence perception, mood and experience of the objects. This scene suggests that time presents itself within the things that are perceived, transforming them into meaningful objects and relics. A modern anglepoise lamp, emboldened with aspects of modern ingenuity, has no real value anymore, which hints at *NW*'s apprehensiveness towards modern conveniences that have turned to waste.

Green spaces are an important element of the urban landscape in *NW* and Smith returns to them to signify the value of such infrastructure in cities like London, which are increasingly becoming less free due to the rise in surveillance technology and securitization. In the section ‘guest,’ Phil Barnes reemphasizes the importance of green spaces in the urban environment. Barnes states that ““a bit of green is very powerful”” (114). A study undertaken by Ayona Datta on the housing project of Bethnal Green (Northeast London) indicates the importance of communal spaces in and around the



community. According to Datta, her study suggested that communal spaces “encouraged physical encounters between its tenants” and “incorporated places where women socialized and kept an eye on their children, and created conditions for community activities” (800). Moreover, Smith includes Barnes's allusion to John Keats's “Ode to a Nightingale,” which emphasizes the transcendent effects nature has on experience (115). The reference to one of the preeminent poets of the Romantic period possibly expresses the novel's keen interest in the relationship between memory and space. Keats's poem is a meditation on the experience of nature and the compelling sensations it evokes in the mind. Nature becomes an access point for an epistemological and ontological appreciation of self and identity. As Jeff Malpas argues, the connection between landscape and memory is ultimately bound in narrative structuring:

The partial dependence of the ordering of space and place on subjectivity is reflected, in a particularly important way, in the role of narrative in such ordering. Narrative is that which can be seen as structuring, in a similar fashion, both memory and self-identity, as well as the places, the landscapes, in which self identity is itself worked out and established. (185)

*NW*'s spatial preoccupations seem intent on highlighting the interrelatedness of space and identity to assess how subjectivities are distinguished and developed within neoliberalized urban centres. Evidence for the novel's differing perspectives presents itself in the way the novel recurrently depicts Leah, Natalie and Felix enjoying the open green spaces of Hampstead Heath—a large public park in Northwest London. Nathan, on the other hand, rejects the park and any value assigned to it. He admits to never having inhabited the green spaces of ‘the Heath’ as a child growing up (315). This inconsistency presented by

Nathan's multivalent subject position, as opposed to the four main characters, also complicates the notion that green spaces are symbols of inclusivity.

While green spaces are reflective of self-identity and transmutability within urban enclaves, Caldwell's boundary line, marked by its outer walls, intimates a clear interest in the symbolic nature of walls. Natalie/Keisha's relationship with the wall is one of compulsion and curiosity as she first traverses the boundary of Caldwell as a child, signifying her subjective constitution, which is filled with the desire and motivation to overcome physical boundaries (178). While close to the end of the novel Natalie finds herself outside of the same walls, examining it closely. Natalie "walked the length of the back wall...seeking some sign of perforation in the brick" (300). The wall symbolizes her dichotomous existence, yet she is on the outside of the wall, indicating that she is not part of the inner world behind it. Spatially, she becomes no more than a body drifting towards Caldwell to reproduce her childhood compulsions. After Natalie runs into Nathan, their walk around the wall of Caldwell leads them to a portion of it that "had been partially destroyed" and "looked like someone had torn it apart with their hands, brick by brick" (305). The wall seems to represent aspects of Natalie's psyche, as she begins to immerse herself in Nathan's world for this brief section of *NW*. Natalie and Nathan's literal "crossing" of neighbourhoods presents a psychogeographic turn towards a bodily movement through an urban landscape with no clear motive behind the action. The term 'psychogeography,' coined by Guy Debord and the Situationist International, focuses on 'drifting' in city spaces. British psychogeography, according to Alastair Bonnet, is a literary movement that "should be understood as a site of struggle over the politics of loss

within the radical imagination” (46). Natalie’s walk towards Caldwell’s boundary wall symbolizes a passive rebellion, which takes place shortly after her domestic dispute with Frank; it is a radical maneuver—a dismissal of her modern neoliberalized lifestyle. She becomes “nothing more or less than the phenomenon of walking” (Smith, *NW* 300). It is a nostalgic reproduction of her childhood walk across the boundary lines of Caldwell when her compulsions would allow her body to drift through space in-between two distinct worlds. Her return to this movement in space is a nostalgic act that is “simultaneously refused and deployed”—what Bonnett coins “radical psychogeography” (48). Natalie returns to Caldwell in an attempt to reproduce the past, while simultaneously dissolving the boundaries between her former and current identity completely, as she recognizes that she is nothing more than “certain physical memories” (Smith, *NW* 300).

As one of the only characters to move away from the Caldwell estate, Natalie forms an alternative relationship with social mobility and social inequality. Although there are well-defined moments in *NW* that contrast the worlds of lower-and-upper-class lifestyles, different attitudes towards estate life complicate issues of gender and race. Natalie’s recursive relationship with Caldwell’s boundary wall seems to be associated with what Doreen Massey argues “is the limitation of women’s mobility, in terms both of identity and space” that “has been in some cultural contexts a crucial means of subordination” (qtd. in Cuming 200). Moreover, familial tension complicates Natalie’s professional and marital success. Her strained and impersonal relations with her sister, Cheryl, highlights the disconnection between her life in the outside world and her sister’s life inside Caldwell, as their individual perspectives of the council estate are polarized.

Cheryl chooses to remain in Caldwell claiming that she could easily leave without Natalie's assistance, while Natalie offers to help her sister relocate somewhere more comfortable (260). Their perceptions of space are also contrasted, as Natalie sees "every surface balanced" with "things upon other things with more hanging off and wrapped around," while Cheryl sees "plenty of space" available for her family (258-259). Smith complicates the notion that success might bring happiness to your domestic life, as even Natalie recognizes the artificiality of her marriage. Natalie begins to consider if the essence of her marriage to Frank is built on a foundation of money and privilege. Natalie assesses their union in scientific quantitative terms, robbing it of any affect:

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

Human animal in need of food and shelter seeks human animal of opposite gender to provide her with offspring and remain with her until the independent survival of aforementioned offspring is probable. (227)

Natalie only assumes Cheryl's lack of domestic partner and financial stability manifests in a tacit unhappiness. However, Smith returns to subjectivity once more by angling two individuals with differing world views against each other. Shortly after, the inability to address the difference between subjective opinion and objective truth becomes more explicit, as Natalie and Frank ride the tube, disagreeing on the poor choices of the Blake household (227). The narrator states that "both believed their own interpretation to be objectively considered and in no way the product of their contrasting upbringings" (229). Much like the characters remain partial mysteries to us as readers, they ultimately remain unable to fully understand and articulate their world views to each other and consistently

brush up against one another's varying subjective response to forms of social, cultural and political issues.

#### IV. CULTURAL BOUNDARIES AND INCLUSION/EXCLUSION

The cultural mainstream plays a distinct role in shaping the public's perception of poverty and crime, a function that emerges in many instances that are detailed in *NW*. As Felix's murder is announced on the local news, the announcement states that he "grew up in the notorious Garvey House project in Holloway" (92). Leah complains that the broadcast is "typical sensational reporting," charged with classed and racial implications (92). Yet the novel depicts the history of Garvey house (based on the photo book by Colin Jones portraying The Black House youth hostel) as a symbol of Black Power and liberation from oppressive and discriminatory institutions. As Felix and Lloyd look back at old photos of Garvey House—according to the photo book, Garvey House was a mix of "squat, halfway house and commune" (105)—they come across a photo of Lloyd "flat out on a stained mattress reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*" (107). The captions in the photo book describe the space that was used as shelter for displaced lives; Garvey House also consequently acted as a space where individuals felt a sense of inclusivity and found a political voice. Cuming argues that the "living spaces of economically marginalized groups are, like all interiors, both real and imagined, physical places of shelter and symbolic sites of belonging or exclusion" (18). Forms of exclusion were widely reported in London during a long period of discrimination in the 1960s that saw landlords rejecting potential tenants on the basis of race. Garvey House represented a

space where young individuals who were deemed delinquent and disposable could find safety and comfort. The images of Malcolm X and “Black Power” spray painted on its walls symbolizes an urban black cultural movement with a clear objective to empower black youth in London. However, the cultural capital that developed in the seventies has all but disappeared in the communities depicted in contemporary northwest London. Instead, it portrays urban youth who are struggling to define themselves in an economy that has failed them. Former CND activist, union supporter and friend of Felix’s mother Phil Barnes expresses his disillusionment with the cultural detritus that has pacified today’s youth (Smith, *NW* 112-113). Barnes contends that the kids today do not have a desire to organize politically (113). They are “just watching all that reality TV, reading the rags” and are “more interested in buying a new phone” (113). *NW* highlights some of the ways race and poverty are depicted in different kinds of media and how these institutions shape the perception of race, poverty and identity within the cultural mainstream. Gilroy builds an important argument that engages similarly with the decline of intellectualism in today’s black youth culture. Gilroy states that today’s black youth are fed hyper-individualistic cultural materials in the media such as 50 Cent’s book *The 48 Laws of Power*, charged with neoliberalised instructions on how to gain power and success (Gilroy, “We Got” 31). Gilroy argues that neoliberal interests have much to gain in portraying racism as anachronistic, while promoting young black entrepreneurship (23, 25). In *NW*, Barnes declares today’s youth to be aimless, unable to organize politically for a cause (113). While Garvey house existed as a space where young black individuals could organize politically, today’s youth culture has ultimately moved towards virtual

spaces for political action. Twitter and Facebook have become such a space where hashtags like #blacklivesmatter have given many marginalized individuals in the black community an alternative channel to organize and protest against the unfair actions of those in power.<sup>16</sup> In Chapter Two, I will argue that Smith's perspective of virtual spaces falls under the view that much of the mobile phone use in the novel is more for modern conveniences that ultimately serve to alienate individuals from others and themselves due to sheer design. We also come to encounter moments in the text where seemingly deracialized virtual activity still perpetuates discriminatory behaviour amongst users.

Natalie's experience as a successful black lawyer in a disproportionately white world explores the neoliberal attitude that racial inequality has been resolved because of the growing racial diversity within the corporate sectors of society. While having brunch at an upscale café with her husband Frank and their friends Imran and Ameeta, Natalie begins to feel the comforts of financial security. She also considers their very presence in the café in the gentrified neighbourhood as a pluralistic act in and of itself. According to Natalie, the four individuals are what "estate agents" call the "local vibrancy" of the neighbourhood (252). This scene in the text invokes Gilroy's argument stated above that "neoliberalism presents racism as anachronistic" ("We Got" 31). This post-racial perspective expressed in *NW* highlights the complacency and apathy towards racial and social inequalities. The narrator expresses how the multi-ethnic group at the café are deracialized simply because of their ability to hold a place within a socio-economic sector

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<sup>16</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor emphasizes the impact that online activism has had on organizing rallies in physical spaces (174).

that is largely underrepresented by people of colour. It falsely emphasizes that conviviality and pluralism are not political ideals that need to be actively pursued.

The post-racial climate that *NW* investigates also highlights the pernicious neoliberal ideology that supports racial indifference, while also eliciting a way of looking at capital, goods and ownership as being suggestive of hard work, or “pulling yourself up by the bootstraps.” This paradigm, Gilroy explains, is part of “the neoliberal fantasy that anything can be achieved if the correct disposition has been adopted” (“We Got”). Michel’s attitude is conditioned by free market capitalism, self-made success and a system that encourages unsympathetic views of less fortunate individuals. His unfavourable view of Gloria (his Jamaican neighbour) receiving “benefits” (Smith, *NW* 30) mirrors the neoliberal conditioning that forces society to take a moralistic view of its members. Moreover, Felix’s death in the novel complicates the moralizing view of neoliberal politics. His attempts to clean his life up and embrace a positive outlook fall short due to the violence he encounters on the streets of *NW*, highlighting the unstable ground that many disenfranchised individuals have to walk on. Neoliberal morality promotes certain social attitudes favouring the position that unlimited opportunities for success are out there and those who fail to seek them out will be ostracized by others. Zygmunt Bauman reflects on this neoliberal mindset as being in favour of competition rather than solidarity (68). While Michel attempts to overcome prejudice by connecting online (Smith, *NW* 30), he still functions within a normative, prejudiced model, distinguishing himself, with his ‘tougher’ African culture, from his Jamaican neighbour, who lives above his apartment with “two babies” and “no husband” (30). Michel fails to



recognize his own cultural biases because the rigorous socio-economic setting complicates multiculturalism by assuming that everyone has a self-serving nature. Michel, however, cannot ascertain the full extent of the unfair system that he participates in. He carries with him the historical conditions that foster such prejudices, stemming from the hierarchical and hegemonic neoliberal system that institutionalizes subalternity. Consequently, Michel has bought into the neoliberal dogma that permeates twenty-first century life; by contrast, the novel clearly identifies Frank with the neoliberal narrative of success. With his cultured experience living as a privileged child in Italy— one who had it “rich though not as rich as they once were” (221)— Frank represents what Bauman would call a “global operator” (80). Furthermore, Frank inspires Michel’s neoliberal competitiveness when he advises Michel that “*the smart guys get right back in the game*” (Smith, *NW* 30). The game, unbeknownst to Michel, is one that is played by exploiting inequality, forfeiting equity for marketization and deregulation. The novel subtly refers to the bonuses received by Frank and his colleagues in the financial market (273), indicating the unevenness of a system that manages to reward individuals at the top of the social ladder, regardless of their faults or errors.

## V. FENCES, WALLS AND NEOLIBERALIZATION

The crash of 2008, partly blamed on the marketization and deregulation brought about by New Labour policies, also marks the increasing resistance to globalization that eventually resulted in the Brexit referendum of 2016. *NW* presents a society that is increasingly reliant on securitization and privatization, and also highlights the relationship

between space and politics. In ‘guest,’ the novel alludes to the changing urban landscape, as Felix notices that “the walls have grown taller outside the Jewish school and outside the Muslim one” (167). Smith’s own Brexit diary, published in 2016, expresses a concern for the increasing segregation that has been taking place for several years in multi-ethnic London. She states that “these days the Jewish school looks like Fort Knox. The Muslim school is not far behind it. Was our little local school also to become a place behind a fence, separated, private, paranoid, preoccupied with security, its face turned from the wider community?” (“Fences”). In the novel, Smith depicts a London moving further towards securitization as noted in two distinct moments in the narrative (*NW* 39, 87) and comments on the fact that “everyone is suddenly an expert on Islam” (86). Islamophobia is amplified by sensationalism in the news media, prompting a greater interest in terrorism and its connection to radical Islam. The London terror attacks of 7/7 in 2005 created anxieties over security concerns in Britain.<sup>17</sup> State policy towards security swiftly changed to allow for stronger surveillance measures. The attacks in London ultimately turned the issue of securitization towards the issue of multiculturalism, even though the victims of the 7/7 attacks were from seventeen different countries and of various backgrounds. Smith does not address this directly in the novel; however, she highlights some of the activities of multi-ethnic elites in London, who seem unaffected and unbothered by the harsher perception of multiculturalism in Britain. According to the novel, London has become a hub for Arab, Russian, Israeli and American socialites who

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<sup>17</sup> The recent attacks that took place in Manchester and London’s Westminster and Borough Market have only bolstered Islamophobic fears in the UK (Stack).

are “united by the furnished penthouse” and the “private clinic” (40). This aspect of cultural heterogeneity is congruent with the ongoing process of neoliberalization in major cities such as London. It has been argued that “the overarching goal of such [neoliberal] policy experiments is to mobilize city space as an arena both for market-oriented economic growth and for elite consumption practices, while at the same time securing order and control amongst marginalized populations” (Peck et al. 58). This marketization of urban centres creates an unequal and unlevelled localized municipal policy under neoliberalism.<sup>18</sup> The consequence of such inequality would result in “transnational capital” being “relieved of its responsibilities for local social reproduction,” while “urban citizens” are “increasingly deprived of the power to shape the basic conditions of everyday urban life” (65). Moreover, neoliberalism has indoctrinated familial relations in the novel. Many of the successful multi-ethnic adults in Natalie’s professional circle choose to let handlers care for their parents (86). Segregation has not only been prioritized for differing communities and groups, but it also has become part of the larger cultural model, affecting all aspects of an individual’s life. Gilroy recognizes “the proliferation of service work and the reappearance of a caste of servile, insecure, and underpaid domestic laborers, carers, cleaners, deliverers, messengers, attendants, and guards...are foundations on which these aspects of the privatization and destruction of the civic order have come to rest” (45). Smith echoed this sentiment a decade later in her Brexit diary:

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<sup>18</sup> Smith acknowledges this in *NW* in her depiction of chain supermarket closing down the local grocer (*NW* 80).

For many people in London right now the supposedly multicultural and cross-class aspects of their lives are actually represented by their staff—nannies, cleaners—by the people who pour their coffees and drive their cabs, or else the handful of ubiquitous Nigerian princes you meet in the private schools. The painful truth is that fences are being raised everywhere in London. Around school districts, around neighborhoods, around lives. One useful consequence of Brexit is to finally and openly reveal a deep fracture in British society that has been thirty years in the making. The gaps between north and south, between the social classes, between Londoners and everyone else, between rich Londoners and poor Londoners, and between white and brown and black are real and need to be confronted by all of us, not only those who voted Leave. (“Fences”).

Much like Gilroy, Smith demonstrates that she understands the growing divide between ethnicities and classes, while also underscoring the reinforcement of the ‘social tectonics’ I discussed in the introduction.<sup>19</sup> A rise in marketization and privatization, and the erosion of social programs are also superseded by an even stronger distrust in globalization by populist movements. Bauman argues: “It is around *places* that human experience tends to be formed and gleaned, that life-sharing is attempted to be managed, that life meanings are conceived, absorbed and negotiated” (81; emphasis in original). The ever-increasing dislocation and segregation of a city and its citizenry impacts the behaviour of individuals within a society. Furthermore, as the novel depicts, hyper-individualism is a seemingly liberal ideal that has been embraced by society; however, the individuals Smith portrays appear anything but free. The social welfare of vulnerable and marginalized sectors, whose general make-up is of multi-ethnic newcomers and labourers, has been silenced by the noise of Islamophobia. Many sectors in the highest demand for social services have ultimately lost the ability to vocalize their needs when individualism and securitization have taken greater precedence.

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<sup>19</sup> See p. 24.

*NW* presents individuals in a neoliberal society who are pulled apart by fear and anxiety, caused by a precarious financial existence that looms over social, political and cultural sectors, and resists epistemological and ontological modes of thought. Language becomes meaningless, dismissible, and purely phatic (lacking depth or substance) in nature. Inauthenticity becomes the dangerous model that thrives within neoliberal social spheres. This is a result of more emphasis placed on pragmatic attitudes towards government, finance and the economy. It is also part of the neoliberal "rediscovery of the main tenet of classical liberal economics that people should be treated as rational utility maximizers in all their behaviour" (Peters 119). Although scholars rightly argue that Smith's modernist literary aesthetics in this novel distinguishes a style of realism that channels James Joyce, her characters are ultimately left anxiety-ridden in a society that compartmentalizes its social issues, leading individuals to embody what Wells, in her reading of *NW*, calls the "artificiality of social narratives" (105). These include the social markers of marriage, child rearing, economic stability and so on. I partly agree with Wells; however, I would add that it is not the social narratives themselves that are artificial but the way they are conditioned under neoliberalism, reproducing similarities in behavioural attitudes between different people and forcing individuals to accept normative roles in society. Sameness ultimately leaves a society less free and rejects certain individuals on the fringes who may not fit into a particular standard or model that is accepted. The dominant political system within *NW* incorporates a radical form of individualism that ultimately suppresses diversity, while posing as a bastion of liberalism and equality. The novel complicates and re-mystifies individuals of various racial and

social backgrounds to reimagine diverse forms of subjectivities and experiences that must be, above all else, considered as an integral part of twenty-first century humanism and social responsibility, instead of re-inscribing the competitiveness that divides citizens into winners and losers. Smith seems interested in reorienting our perception of race and class by resisting conventional modes of characterization that attempt to place the reader within a focused point of view. Alternatively, Smith examines the disconnection that individuals experience in their urban environments by teasing out the social policies and political hindrances that govern the spaces of northwest London. The four main characters find the physical spaces they inhabit a troubling part of their existence. Leah's belief that you cannot make friends with strangers (8) is also compounded by the perpetual guilt that arises from her inability to act ethically due to financial constraints (80). Furthermore, Natalie's wealth engenders feelings of anxiety and inner turmoil, while also leaving her to acknowledge that wealth merely gives you the necessary distance away from poverty (252). Smith incorporates into her novel philosophical frameworks that, I emphasize, offer, in part, a way of re-learning and slowing the modes of seeing the world, beyond the limiting pervasive eye of neoliberalism. The following chapter will argue that *NW* expresses a concern for the growing dependence on technology as a form of escape from active social responsibility. I will highlight various aspects of *NW* that present a culture that is being conditioned to embrace hyper-individualism through the use of mobile phones and other online communication tools.

## CHAPTER TWO

### SUBSTITUTING THE VIRTUAL FOR THE REAL

The main questions addressed in this chapter will highlight just how *NW* explores social mobility and race through its depiction of technology use and mobile/online communicability. *NW* is one of many novels in the twenty-first century to address the ubiquity of mobile phones and the networked individuals that use them so addictively. For instance, Smith's British contemporary Julian Barnes indicates, through subtle gestures, the technological changes that have impacted the way we communicate in *The Sense of an Ending*. His protagonist Tony remarks on the ease of text messaging today over other outdated forms communication—quite artfully depicting the shift from epistle to email. Consider too, *The Financial Lives of Poets* by Jess Walter, which was published in the same period as *NW*, and which portrays a family under financial strain partly caused by the economic downturn of 2008. Walter's novel centres on a character named Matt and his attempt to save his house from foreclosure, while he becomes suspicious of his wife's newfound interest into the world of social media, and self-representation. *The Financial Lives of Poets* paints a humorous picture of failure in the twenty-first century, and avoids some of the more serious tones we see in *NW*. The common thread that binds these contemporary novels together is a concern for our perception of time and the speed at which we receive information, or what Peter Boxall deems the preoccupation with "twenty-first century speed":

Our time is bent and crafted by the computer, the mobile phone, the satellite, the Internet; by electronic communication at the speed of light. It is, for our generation of contemporaries, electronic speed that draws the blurred horizon of

our possibilities, that conjure a dizzying cahoots between virtual time and weightless space. (3-4)

Nevertheless, the positive impact of technology on twenty-first century modernity—through advancements privileging the comfort afforded by new and improved machines, and the intelligence and intuitiveness of modern computation—is overshadowed by an overstimulated public, faced with the pressures of always-on connectivity. Heidegger’s essay “The Question Concerning Technology” offers a valuable schema for understanding the “essence” of technology (24). Heidegger states that through “[e]nframing...man...puts him in position to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering” (24). In other words, we must apprehend a way of looking at technology without being ensnared by the social, historical and political uses that have influenced its design and potential.

*NW*’s primary concern with technology lies in its ability to offer characters such as Michel and Natalie certain liberties online that cannot be afforded to them in real life. Smith examines how identities are mediated through the experience of virtual spaces—whether one can truly escape the pervasiveness of neoliberalism, and whether these virtual spaces will grant individuals, who desire more control over their personal and professional lives, a sense of agency. It is also necessary to consider whether *NW* remains sympathetic towards virtual spaces—and, more specifically, towards online anonymity—and whether it privileges certain modes of discourse over others. Although engagement with technology is interspersed throughout the narrative, it is oft accompanied by feelings of anxiety, compulsion and uncertainty. As I demonstrated in Chapter One, the cultural zeitgeist depicted within the novel is infused with individualistic and meritocratic



ideologies. In Chapter Two, I will show that in *NW* the technology at hand is functional in expressly the same manner, seemingly privileging individuality and privacy, while simultaneously producing a network of individuals that act and behave in much the same way.

## I. RIGHT TO PRIVACY AND FALSE UTOPIAS

The debate surrounding digital rights and privacy has become a key issue today. Scholars attest that “although users may be able to use pseudonyms, the IP address of the network connection identifies them as clearly using their real name, house address or national insurance number. At present, companies as well as governments worldwide can freely use data deriving from specific ISP addresses without the users’ consent, knowledge or awareness” (Drakopoulou et al. 110). The Internet is made up of mostly unregulated space; however, users are increasingly at risk of losing their sovereignty over their digital bodies due to large conglomerates battling over big data and online privacy. Although *NW* engages online anonymity in order to explore how individuals can mediate their identities in virtual spaces, it engages with the problematic of whether we can truly remove the social codes that follow us in real life. Smith’s text is somewhat resistant to the technocultural boom of the twenty-first century. At times, technology becomes an intrusive aspect of daily life in *NW*, most notably during Felix and Tom’s conversation that takes place in the pub (Smith, *NW* 124). Smith’s suspicion of connectivity as the new normal is evident in her examination of the negative effects of being overexposed to the technology, and whether this overexposure reorients our conscious experience of things.

Are the everyday technologies we interact with progressive and useful, or are they merely substitutions for perpetual boredom and anxiety?

Our physical limitations bring forth a very distinct experience of “real” life while our virtual selves remain unencumbered by the restrictiveness of the body. As much as our online identity is an extension of the material body, it is also limited by and beholden to the immateriality of virtual experience, which has a distinct impact on how we socialize online. For example, Sherry Turkle’s early case study of multi-user dungeons (MUDs) describes, in ethnographic detail, case studies of individuals who are isolated in real life, while seeking to compensate for this online (198). However, Turkle’s case studies reaffirm what many scholars believe, which is that online users of MUDs (and this can relate to social media) cannot ultimately transform themselves, or overcome the parts of their personality that they may not like (200-201). Instead, users reproduce their real-world inhibitions in virtual space. Smith recognizes that online self-presentation is still tinged with the historical and political implications that many in the real-world attempt to escape online. An instance of this problem, which I will interrogate later in this chapter, occurs throughout Natalie’s experience on the aforementioned sex website, exposing raced and classed conversations online between total strangers. However, *NW* also complicates the idea that social problems of the ‘real world’ will invariably carry over into the virtual. The novel suggests that virtual spaces offer a more nuanced type of mediation that allows individuals the sense of overcoming race and class, while not guaranteeing that racism and classism will never be encountered. Natalie and Michel are the more obvious examples of people who attempt to utilize virtual spaces as a tool for

self-representation and as a space that helps them overcome the political and socio-economic limitations they encounter in the real world. Natalie benefits from the discreteness of virtual activity and seeks adulterous affairs due to an unhappy domestic life, whereas, Michel mistakenly sees the Internet as a deracialized space where many of the limitations he encounters in real life can be avoided. Yet, much of Web 2.0 appears designed to support neoliberal ideologies that urge users to perform competitively and market themselves as a brand. Ilana Gershon recognizes how networks like Facebook embody many neoliberal traits in their design. Gershon argues that “Facebook’s interface...is structured to encourage a neoliberal engagement with others because it allows people to present themselves as a compilation of both consumer tastes (preferred movies, books, music) and unweighted alliances (shown through the number of one’s Facebook friends, wallpostings, and one’s posted photos)” (867). Facebook, the world’s largest social media site, implores its users to share personal details in order for them to connect with others who maintain similar interests. The more users divulge about themselves the more networked the interface becomes. This provokes individuals to embrace anti-anonymity on the web. The emergent problematic found in an anti-anonymous formula that Facebook promotes is one that raises ethical questions in the collection of user data for marketing and advertising purposes.<sup>20</sup> This movement towards

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<sup>20</sup> Essentially, there are very limited regulatory systems that determine how data is collected, or how data is interpreted. Some of the more concerning issues that are raised in the debate include the infringement on an individual’s digital rights and their rights to privacy. Edward Snowden’s 2013 leak of classified information exposing the NSA directed PRISM surveillance program reveals how the deregulatory practice of data collection is promoted by the very entities that are meant to uphold democracy and serve the population. The Orwellian nature of such activities ultimately brings forth a culture of surveillance, fueled by the neoliberal policies that promote the need for securitization. Companies such as Facebook heavily rely on

the synthesis of real and virtual identities presents contradictions as many users attempt to mediate themselves in starkly different ways online than in real life.

Anonymous Internet activity by unidentifiable users reinforces the stereotype that has developed in regard to virtual space as embodying aspects of liberty and equality due to the absence of readable bodies that shape people's perceptions. Virtual spaces seemingly provide an egalitarian platform to transcend race, gender and class, but this utopian view is inaccurate in its assessment of the way self-presentation actually takes place online. Scholars argue that race and class are social codes that may be more fixed online than has previously been considered. Identities are mediated, but arguably as an extension of our physical bodies. For Jennifer González, race cannot be hidden nor can it be shed online because it "is never free from the social, historical, linguistic, and psychological constraints and conditions that also shape racial discourse offline" (42). Moreover, this is not only limited to race, as it applies to the way class and gender is performed online. "Race and class," according to González, "still play a role in the way Facebook and other sites, like MySpace, construct networks of inclusion and exclusion, such that membership and a sense of belonging are already circumscribed via categories existing in the culture at large" (56). Nonetheless, González' argument extends further than just social media and encompasses much of Web 2.0. These distinguishing factors of inclusivity and exclusivity, which González argues exist as readable and interpretable data sets, govern the ways in which we mediate self-presentation, but they also prescribe

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well-grounded data for advertising purposes. They are firmly committed to tethering a user's virtual identity to their real identity. One particular way Facebook has attempted this in the past is to change their policy on account names, forcing individuals to adopt their real names instead of aliases.

how identities are read online. Alongside the argument that social codes ultimately remain with that virtual bodies, it should be stated that the virtual bodies are also readable and interpretable data sets that can be monitored and surveilled by corporate and governmental entities. Gavin Smith aptly argues that “[r]esearch in the interdisciplinary field of surveillance studies has shown how practices of data profiling—of attributing meaning to data that reflects and reifies pre-existing cultural biases—perpetuate social inequalities on the basis of particular indicators like race, ethnicity, class, age, gender and sexuality” (109-110). Our virtual bodies, as suggested, cannot shed the cultural and historical conditions that have shaped and continue to shape our experience and our ability to interpret others.

*NW*'s exploration of online mediation further illuminates its central preoccupation with agency in the cut-throat socio-economic environment of the narrative. An illiberal reality has become part of the neoliberal model—one that propagandizes Western ideals such as freedom and equality yet leaves the majority of its citizens on unstable financial ground. The ensuing lack of social mobility has generated a demand for virtual spaces to function as democratic outposts beyond the reach of the growing inequalities found in everyday life. For example, Michel, a black man of African origin who immigrated from France with a limited grasp of English, expresses how his online persona “is nothing about skin” or a “university paper” (30) prompting us to consider how his attitude falls in line with the utopian ideals present in contemporary discussions surrounding the Internet. However, Helen Kennedy argues against this reductive view:

Not surprisingly, a number of scholars have pointed out that online anonymity is more problematic than this. For example, discussing the increased incivility in the

electronic exchanges he witnessed in the site research, Santa Monica's Public Electronic Network, Joseph Schmitz (1997) disputes the claim that such environments are necessarily democratic because of the absence of visual clues to identity. Instead, he argues that although some "markers of difference" are difficult to detect in online communication, others are easy to identify, so that judgments and discrimination still exist. (29)

Michel sees "money to be got out there" because of the seemingly even playing field of virtual space (Smith, *NW* 30). However, alongside Kennedy's observations, virtual space could also constrain users into behaving like competitive neoliberal entities. Michel's attitude reflects the goal-oriented ideology that has become a staple of neoliberalism, as he is always "thinking of the next achievement, the next thing, taking it higher" (30). Moreover, neoliberalism and technology have a distinct association. Many technical designs allow neoliberal ideology to permeate the functionality of various forms of technology. Jeremy Gilbert argues that regardless of "whether we are referring to...self-helping black entrepreneurs, self-reliant working mothers, lone porn users, rational-choosing economic subjects, austerity-age 'foodies' or self-motivating meritocrats: it is entirely, but genuinely, as *individuals* that the neoliberal machine contributes to a real expansion of powers and freedoms" (21). It is through these various forms that "the technologies...and their analysis in light of neoliberal optics, draw our attention to the way that a number of pre-existing technologies and cultural practices have been enlisted in the service of the process of neoliberalisation" (21). What Smith relays in her text is that Michel's perspective has more to do with neoliberal ambitions and meritocracy than utopianism. Michel celebrates the "pure market" economics privileged by a deregulated platform of online networks (*NW* 30). Michel's competitive drive has been conditioned by Frank's success in the market, and the laissez-faire neoliberal dogmas that govern

finance and capital in the global economy. Moreover, while neoliberalism has a keen interest in deregulating markets it is also very interested in regulating and conditioning individuals to perform in specific ways. Gilbert aptly defines neoliberal ideology as a system where the state trains populations to perform within the confines of a deregulated and free market, and is quite pertinent for a discussion of *NW* due to the neoliberal conditioning exhibited throughout the narrative:

Put simply, neoliberalism, from the moment of its inception, advocates a program of deliberate intervention by government in order to encourage particular types of entrepreneurial, competitive and commercial behaviour in its citizens, ultimately arguing for the management of populations with the aim of cultivating the type of individualistic, competitive, acquisitive and entrepreneurial behaviour which the liberal tradition has historically assumed to be the natural condition of civilized humanity, undistorted by government intervention (9).

This manner of conditioning presents itself quite clearly in Smith's text through the competitive drive of characters such as Frank and Natalie. Leah, however, performs acts of resistance within the system because of her express loyalty to Caldwell, ironized by her declaration that she is "SO FULL OF EMPATHY" (33) in an environment where such affective labour is devalued. Her husband Michel's perception of virtual space as a post-racial utopia is a misjudgment because it naively ignores how virtual space has been utilized by neoliberal agendas that foster deregulation and individualism on a global scale. Smith plays into Michel's naïveté when Frank forewarns Michel that he does "not want to be responsible" for any losses Michel may incur online (66). Instead, Frank advises Michel to use the online site "*Today Trader*" to play with "fake money" and "get in the swing of things" (66). Frank immediately recognizes Michel's vulnerability in a market governed by "the big boys" of finance (66), and prompts Michel to reconsider his

decision to spend *real* money in an unapologetic and cutthroat economy. Their discussion highlights how the Internet has transformed into a place where any individual can walk into the virtual market as a trader, waging money alongside larger entities who have what Frank calls a considerable “safety net” (66); however, the seemingly even playing field also creates a system where profit may be harder to come by than originally thought. In its early phase of development, the Internet was utilized as a tool that connected networked nodes between different research schools in the United States. Today, it has morphed into a multi-faceted, networked medium driven by communication, finance and capital, and supported by neoliberal policies that promote free market principles.

## II. COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND INDIVIDUALISM

The ubiquity of mobile phone technology offers a conscious experience where the dissatisfaction found in one’s real life can be temporarily relieved by the instantly accessible media and information online. *NW* investigates this contemporary way of life through its depiction of various digital technologies. The novel ends with both Natalie and Leah acknowledging that emailing a “police website for anonymous tips” is rather “anticlimactic” and “not very satisfying” (332). Instead, they prefer to call the police directly regarding Nathan’s possible involvement in Felix’s murder. This decision certainly privileges a distinct attitude towards anonymity—due to their preference for an older, more direct form of communication over a much newer and indirect form—and complicates how we should read the secretive life each character harbours throughout the narrative. Why are the two women in favour of directly calling Kilburn Police Station to



report a possible suspect, while still opting to remain anonymous? Do they wish to have an immediate impact on the case, or desire to participate in something that transcends the mundane interpersonal communication they are accustomed to? As the two women stare “at the screen” they feel “disappointed” (332), signaling dissatisfaction with web-based activity as a medium. This particular attitude towards new communication is an oft-repeated refrain in the narrative that foreshadows Natalie and Leah’s decision to forgo emailing all together by the end. In the first section ‘visitation,’ Smith addresses the Internet’s ability to function as a place where “bank statements, student loan reminders...maternal epics” are tucked away and “not to be opened is not to exist” (34). For Leah, virtual space can be ignored, and offers her some control over her anxieties, as “she is on the run from herself” (34). Yet her inability to maintain her identity online also becomes a symptom of her real life turmoil. Leah’s online behaviour is expressed through absence in Derridean fashion. *NW* takes a similar position to Smith’s essay work by focusing on the demands, or what Smith calls the potential for “blandness,” that virtual life can develop into, through the vision from which a virtual platform of communication is developed (“Generation”). The demands of virtual communication also signify how certain social scripts often insist on your participation in virtual culture, which Smith would argue is an “oppressive” form of “totalitarian space,” leaving no room for mystery and enigma (“That Crafty” 100-101). Leah’s refusal to access her inbox can be interpreted as an act of negligence that is caused by an overlap of her private and professional ordeals—a very common occurrence in today’s wired-in culture. Margaretta Jolly makes the argument that “e-mail is a symptomatic form of life writing in the context

of a network society. It is a symptom of a new kind of everyday mediation, in both regressive and progressive forms” (153). Jolly keenly recognizes that technology becomes a substitute for real life behaviour and acts of mediation. The genre can either work as an affective medium or remain abstracted and incoherent. However, we see a stark contrast in attitudes between Leah and Natalie, as Natalie finds solace in her emails. She wishes for an escape from “self-contempt” in a trip to the bathroom to “spend the next hour alone with her email” (252). While Leah’s avoidance is an escape from the pressures of her inbox, Natalie embraces her inbox, as a respite from her real-world problems. These contrasting behaviours are both forms of escapism that highlight some of the ways individuals engage or disengage with technology to regain agency over a life that may slowly be unraveling. Moreover, these two representations of online social culture highlight the close association between our real and virtual selves. Scholars of Auto/Biography studies are exploring how our virtual selves are impacting our positions in the world:

Has the digital turn in our society made an appreciable—and from the standpoint of scholarship, an identifiable, measurable, citable—difference in the experience of being in the world, of being embodied, to some degree empowered, and to some degree vulnerable as a self in the midst of other selves? This is a question the field of auto/biography studies is in a particularly good position to tackle, not only because the artifacts it engages are closely tied to the lived experience of their makers, but also because it so often anchors that engagement in philosophical reflections on the problem of human subjectivity. (McNeill and Zuern vii)

*NW* partially engages with this question as both Leah and Natalie, soon after they turn twenty-eight, receive countless emails with “photo attachments of stunned-looking women with...babies lying on their breast” (Smith, *NW* 261). Natalie feels an ample

amount of disdain for these emails and sarcastically forwards them to Leah with the line “*it’s as if no one ever had a baby before,*” which according to Natalie is “the new thing to say” about these conventional photos of new motherhood, leading to another moment of brief irony in the novel (262; emphasis in original). Moreover, each email repeats the same phrase, “Mother and baby doing well, exhausted” (262), while corresponding with Wells’s argument highlighting how the novel depicts socially reproduced scripts for women to perform (102). However, *NW* exposes how individuals are likely to participate in such scripts because of the broader social and cultural appeal of such behaviour. *NW* also acknowledges that many of these normative scripts leave individuals like Leah vulnerable because of their non-normative choice to not have children. In fact, the email chain of new mothers presents a link to Natalie and Leah’s inner struggle caused by their inability and/or refusal to uphold certain ideals that are reproduced online.

*NW* also complicates agency through its circumspect presentation of technology during Natalie and Frank’s dinner party. The guests seem to acknowledge the comfort that technology affords them but are also wary of its impact, albeit quite contradictorily: while “everyone comes together for a moment to complain about the evils of technology...most people have their phones laid next to their dinner plates” (86). The novel brings forth an uncomfortable aspect of individualism that conditions seemingly independent actors into behaving rather similarly. The guests are concerned with their individual needs, but like the iterative conformity on display in the emails of mothers with their newborns (262), they behave in much the same way as one another. The narration explains how “everyone says the same thing in the same way” (87), putting the

individualism they all cherish and celebrate into question. The conversation, charged with neoliberal undertones, moves from such topics as “private wards. Private cinemas. Christmas abroad. A restaurant with only five tables in it. Security systems. Fences” (87); it becomes apparent that this is a culture of segregation and disconnection. The technology developed seems to tread on the heels of this new cultural paradigm, working to further dislocate and disconnect individuals, while dismissing alterity and pluralism. Within an atmosphere of privilege, one mother expresses that “at the end of the day, don’t you just want to give your individual child the very best opportunities you can give them individually”—the ultimate goal being whatever “brings the child the greatest possibility of success” (87). The syntax of the line presents a muscular form of individualism that overtakes even the family unit, where this form of hyper-individualism would have once seemed strange and alien. As guests attempt to “define success,” they pass around “the crème fraîche” or “the lemon tart” (87), and the indulgence on display is a clever juxtaposition by Smith that invokes the oft-repeated line: *Qu'ils mangent de la brioche*. The speed of the conversation almost mimics the speed of mobile phone communication—everything all at once. Topics are touched on, but never for too long. As the conversation moves towards childbirth, a topic Natalie would rather forgo, technology becomes a substitute for the dialogue itself when Natalie cuts the conversation for a short viral video (87). What Smith attempts to highlight is Natalie’s sense of detachment, which she does by having it overshadow the dialogue. Here, Smith could be engaging with Jaron Lanier’s viewpoint on how the web caters to dispassion. Lanier states that “anonymous blog comments, vapid video pranks, and lightweight mashups may seem

trivial and harmless, but as a whole, this widespread practice of fragmentary, impersonal communication has diminished interpersonal interaction” (4).

At the end of the novel, Keisha’s mobile phone works as a medium that bonds the two best friends, and evokes feelings of nostalgia for simpler, much slower times. Although Keisha draws “the phone from her pocket” (Smith, *NW* 333), they still manage to use the phone as if it worked much like a rotary phone. Leah and Keisha’s bond is rekindled because they resemble “two good friends” making calls “to boys they liked, back in the day, and in a slightly hysterical state of mind, two heads pressed together over a handset” (333). Ironically, they are calling about Nathan, one of the tragic figures in the narrative, whom Leah had a childhood crush on as a young girl. Smith also acknowledges a shift in Natalie/Keisha’s character highlighting that *Natalie* dials the number, and then transforms into *Keisha* while speaking to the police (333; emphasis added). Smith conveys the sense that Natalie/Keisha has taken ownership of her ‘double voice’ by signaling this shift in identities and embracing her in-betweenness. Moreover, it reengages the beginning of the novel in its attempt to portray mediation of and agency over one’s identity. Natalie becomes the embodiment of the phrase “I am the sole author” (3). This also coincides with her childhood experience of “an unforgettable pulse of authorial omnipotence” (178). However, Smith counters this revelation as Natalie later considers whether she has a “personality at all or was in truth” only accumulating and reflecting “on things she had read in books and seen on television” (185). Smith seems to steer the argument towards a more deterministic perspective but refrains from doing just

that because what Smith might be more interested in is the inquiry itself, rather than the conclusions derived from it.

The nostalgic ending suggests that *NW* explores the relationship between time and technology, and what impact it has on our experiences. As Natalie considers the life of “John Donne,” who was “also a modern and surely saw change” (256), she becomes aware of how the modernity that *she* phenomenologically experiences is, in fact, “more modern and that the change comes faster” (256). Once more, Smith artfully maps this sentiment into the novel’s structure, beginning the narrative with Leah using pencil and paper to communicate her thoughts and ending it with the women using email, and mobile phone technology as another “more modern” form of communication. Furthermore, as Leah receives an early incarnation of a home computer the narrative reflects on the archaic nature of its functionality, while Natalie/Keisha dazzles the Hanwell’s, Leah’s family, with her programming skills (184). The slow process of communication is almost a parody of itself in the labour that is required to program a single sentence (184).<sup>21</sup> Smith also signifies the separation of how we behave differently in public and private when Natalie/Keisha writes, “THAT’S JUST FUCKING FASCINATING,” as a response to one of the chat queries for Leah’s “private amusement” (184). Leah and Natalie/Keisha’s chat on Leah’s first computer counterbalances their instant messaging later on in the novel (239-242). It exposes how technology has become an entrenched part of our everyday lives and asks whether we

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<sup>21</sup> It is also important to note Smith’s preoccupation with David Fincher’s depiction of computer programming culture in *The Social Network* and the difficulty in trying to portray “the intensity of programming in action” without seeming artificial (“Generation”).

might be taking such power for granted. Here, Heidegger's framework of 'Enframing' becomes useful for theorizing about the essence of technology instead of concerning ourselves with its practicality and functionality.

The presence of mobile phones in *NW* and the hands-on attitudes that accompany them are manifested, quite explicitly, throughout the narrative; however, Smith probes Natalie's relationship with her phone to consider the contradictions that can take place in our day-to-day experiences with technology. The short chapter titled "The Present," in the section 'host,' examines how Natalie pretends to detest "abhorred expensive gadgets" yet secretly adores her phone and is "compulsively, adverbly addicted to the Internet" (255). The language Smith uses emphasizes how the mobile phone might be a type of modifier, changing the way we behave and function simply because of the ease with which we use the technology. The compounded word "adverbly" works not only as the word 'adverb' but also as 'adverse' to reinforce the idea that the phone simultaneously prevents Natalie's development and modifies her behaviour. Paradoxically, Natalie's phone "was incredibly fast" and "still too slow" (255), addressing the cultural dissatisfaction with the speed of technology, while also juxtaposing it yet again to Leah and Natalie/Keisha's earlier chat on Leah's much slower first home computer. This new phenomenon is what Philippe Lejeune and Katherine Durnin call "new communication tools" that are "attacking life itself, leaving people to worry about speaking of these changes in how we communicate "with joy or regret" (249). Natalie's inability to express her love for the technology in public is what Lejeune and Durnin describe as our inability to "adopt a neutral stance" (249), and only confirms the pressures developed as a by-product of the

overexposure to multiple communication platforms. Accordingly, Natalie's dissatisfaction with her phone's speed might have two contrasting pathological roots. Either "new communication tools are so powerful that (in the negative version) they are overwhelming our human capacities and so will reduce us to anxiety or idiocy, or (in the positive version) they are forging a new type of human" (Lejeune et al. 249). Natalie's anxieties manifest through her phenomenological experience of technology because communication has no means to an end, in the same sense as a motorized vehicle or the simplest form of technology, a hammer. It is a constant current of information and data. There are no limits to its use. Scott C. Richmond's fascination with boredom and mobile phones leads him to consider that the design of mobile phone technology alleviates the boredom experienced in a precarious socio-economic environment:

Boredom helps us understand some of the affective postures and aesthetic dispositions that make damaged, precarious life bearable in our current economic, social, cultural, and technical milieux. By this I mean a vague set of utterly familiar behaviors, like pulling out your iPhone during a boring movie – or checking Facebook during a faculty meeting. (23)

Although Natalie is much more involved with her mobile phone than Leah, when the two women message each other at work, Leah admits she is "just dying...dying of boredom" (241). Natalie is much more inclined to check her phone throughout the narrative and remains the more eager to mediate her virtual identity. During a visit with her mother Marcia, Natalie is chastised for disengaging from the program they are viewing, and is accused of always "checking her phone" (265). The limitlessness of mobile phone use, and the always-on functionality, has complicated the way we experience time. Experience becomes one of delight and despair in our continual connectivity to the network.



Moreover, mobile phone technology—as an extension of our bodies in a virtual world—needs consistent upkeep. Once we have driven our car to the desired destination, the car loses its functionality. Once we hammer the nail in the wall to put up a fixture, we put the hammer back in the toolbox, out of sight. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson articulate this point in their essay “Virtually Me”:

Self-presentation in online environments, unlike in analog life writing, does not have narrative beginnings and ends distinguishable by birth or death. Its structuring is primarily episodic rather than emplotted. In this way, online presentation is located in time and ever-changing. This mobility of selves in online environments complicates our notions of temporality: it is both an eternal present of moments of self-accretion and extensible across time through the archive. (90)

Smith and Watson’s argument manifests in the narrative through Natalie’s contributions to the website. They happen intermittently, and possibly even resemble the short chapters that make up the section ‘host.’ Consequently, Zadie Smith contrasts online life writing with more conventional forms of biography when Natalie attempts to write a structured essay on social criticism, yet cannot move beyond the first two lines on the page (273). The comparison Smith makes between online and offline writing conveys a sense that online writing offers something more unencumbered and temporally satisfying than writing in a word processor, disconnected from the world. Natalie is depicted as “smoothly” typing into her web browser like “a pianist playing a scale” when she decides to remove a contribution from the site (262)—the removal also imbued with agency and mediation of her online identity. In her choice to abstain from contributing to the website, she becomes disembodied from her virtual identity. The online community she frequents

has created a back channel that ultimately allows her to satisfy the desire for control over her unsettled psychic motivations.

Natalie's covert email account, keishaNW@gmail.com, enables her to create the distance necessary between her finely manicured real life identity, and the fetishized and commodified virtual life she participates in. Natalie's performativity expressly details how "people are situated and situate themselves discursively in relation to context-specific social norms, which determine and constitute identities as subject positions" (Smith and Watson 82). Natalie's alias is not merely an alternate mode of self-presentation but an act of mediation that has been informed by a particular discourse online. Rob Cover suggests that online self-presentation partly highlights the "act of choosing" as "a recognition of a beginning, a trajectory, undertaken to negate the performative effect of discourse and present a coherent, essential self" (64). Cover looks at how technological frameworks facilitate discursive choices that present categories for the individual to choose from and construct their online identity. The medium dictates the parameters but the individual chooses from the categories available. Natalie's email address directly refers to her race and class to fulfill certain identifiable social codes that the online sex website requires for active participation. The privacy that Natalie procures from a partially anonymous email account could be connected to the lack of privacy she endured as a sexually curious teenager in a Pentecostal household (Smith, *NW* 189). For Smith, an exploration of anonymity and duplicity within these online virtual spaces also highlights how unresolved psychic motivations (not to be confused with psychological dysfunction) hidden in the unconscious mind might reflect what we seek out online, and

in what manner or form we choose to cohere, or even not to cohere. Whether one reinvents oneself online or attempts to represent oneself truthfully, online self-representation comes with unique problematics. According to Cover, “the demand for coherence requires that the individual forge a sense of self and belonging across an array of identity categories” (59). However, Cover continues to suggest that “these include common axes of discrimination such as gender, ethnicity, ability, and age but might also be comprised of spurious experiences, which are less easily categorizable and less well demarcated in an identity/difference dichotomy” (59). Furthermore, Melissa Gregg’s assessment of adultery technologies, affording its users a sense of discreetness online, helps to illuminate why an alternate email address would “come across as a series of opportunities to be seized in moments free from surveillance” (105). The ability to privatize individual desires, motivations and needs in virtual space differs from the attitude held by Marcia Blake, who once claimed to a young Keisha that ““people who get locks got something to hide”” (Smith, *NW* 189). Smith’s subtle gesture towards issues of privacy somewhat accidentally anticipates much of the debate surrounding online privacy in the recent years. The discreetness that adult Natalie enjoys adheres to no strict boundaries that impede her libidinal desires, offering her the chance to liberally explore her sexuality, which was repressed and controlled during her teenage years in the Blake household.

Although Natalie’s compulsive addiction to her phone conveys a disposition of unrest and instability, it also exposes the pressures found in the constancy of online connectivity. Our relationship to mobile phones has become a reiterative process of

online self presentation, and a reorientation of our relation to time. Gregg identifies this as part of “how long-hours cultures produce their own forms of intimacy” (105).

Consequently, Natalie seeks out alternative forms of intimacy as she eventually feels a “calm and contentment” from long hours at work (Smith, *NW* 275). Natalie’s dedication to work is almost in service of time itself. She experiences nostalgic memories of an earlier period in University when “a clockface...meant to signify the history of the universe in a twelve-hour stretch,” giving us a literal image of Kierkegaard’s ‘fullness of time’ (275). Gregg suggests that virtual spaces offer an experience of time that “isn’t neatly separate from intimate others” and offers a “release valve for the normative and overbearing expectations of monogamy” (106-107). Friends can often relieve the pressures of work and time constraints, as they “provide a comforting role for each other when their partners are busy at work” (106). Smith recurrently focuses on the homosocial bond between Natalie and Leah that plays a significant role online, portraying one of the more positive elements that the always-on culture brings to *NW*.

The online intimacy between Natalie and Leah sheds insight into how identity is performed in virtual space and how bonds are maintained between individuals. As my earlier reading indicates, Natalie/Keisha’s preference for a certain kind of profane humour chatting on Leah’s first computer (184) reappears in their adult chat later in the narrative (240). Natalie jokingly mistakes Leah’s “big news” as an admission she has contracted “cat aids” (240). As Leah announces her engagement to Michel through an instant message service, the two women resort to self-deprecating humour about “slowly...dying of boredom” (241). Although the women are speaking of a pivotal moment in Leah’s life,

it is juxtaposed with disposable lines of text. Both women joke around about the pressures of marriage as a monogamous institution that forces one “to give up everyone else” (241). It highlights the impersonal nature of instant messaging and the necessity of keeping the interaction light-hearted. Yet, Smith foreshadows Natalie’s own marital infidelities, when Leah who sarcastically suggests the website [www.adultswatchingadults.com](http://www.adultswatchingadults.com), which Natalie compulsively visits later on (242). Interestingly enough, Gregg rightly recognizes a “culture enamoured with the upgrade” that adultery websites depicted in the novel and real life websites like Ashley Madison capitalize on using “the figure of the philanderer who trades in longevity for a new model” (108). Natalie’s ambitions lead her to consider Frank De Angelis as an upgrade over her first boyfriend Rodney Banks, recognizing “the gaping socio-economic difference between” them (208). She displays the strident neoliberal competitiveness in her union with Frank. Once married, Natalie and Frank do not “work against each other, or are in competition;” they are “incorporated” (267). Natalie’s domestic life becomes normative as she is somehow left in charge of the household and the family (271), which becomes an issue that leads to feelings of entrapment. Natalie’s domestic circumstance could be understood more clearly, if we recall Heidegger’s phenomenological concept ‘thrownness.’ Heidegger senses the lack of freedom one encounters when ‘thrown’ into a world that imposes itself politically, socially and historically onto one’s subjective relationship with one’s surroundings and the subsequent freedom that develops out of the phenomenological questioning of these surroundings. By embracing the corporate lifestyle, Natalie loses her own frame of reference as a hardworking, ambitious “force of nature” (264). Moreover, Natalie and

Leah believe that “people were willing them to reproduce. Relative strangers on the street, people on television, everyone” (268). By contrast, when she visits her queer brother Jayden, she witnesses “fluid and friendly living arrangements she herself had dreamt of years earlier” (264). For Natalie, the “arrangement,” described as “timeless” (264), is gendered. She considers her own relationship with time as she personifies temporality as the only woman in Jayden’s home (264). This distinctly unfree relationship with time indicates her desire to liberate herself from the constraints imposed on women in the “time poor” neoliberal culture she is a part of. Ultimately, Natalie’s divergence to virtual space is partly motivated by the limitations brought on by the neoliberal hegemony that prevails over women's domestic space.

### III. IMPERSONAL SPACE AND FETISHIZATION

Natalie’s mobile phone becomes a readily available access point to the online community that she visits and allows for her libidinal desires to manifest in real time. Natalie’s secret email account, keishaNW@gmail.com, symbolizes the bifurcation of her identity and works to mediate this reimagined version of herself as distinctly raced and classed. By choosing the name she abandoned and the locale she grew up in, she positions herself at odds with her upper-class professional lifestyle. It can also be read as an act of reclaiming an identity that symbolizes the “profound loneliness and isolation” she felt as a child (192). Nevertheless, Natalie’s black body becomes commodified and fetishized online when she realizes that she “is what everybody is looking for” (261). As she is tricked online by a much older couple, whose desires are for a “BF 18-35,” she begins to

question why people are specifically looking for black women (284). This example in the text can be better understood alongside David Marriott's examination of racialized fetishism, which aptly states:

The racial stereotype seduces, not because it is a secret, but because it represents, in fantasized form, a myth of immemorial sameness, no matter the different particularities to which misrecognition gives rise or the contradictions of social reality. From this point of view, racist ideology is already immanent to the fiction of the commodity form, and the stereotype is the mythic form of its projection. (220)

The combination of racial fetishization and the access to online forums—where raced and classed sexual acts are sought after—present certain liberties and freedoms, which technology offers through discreet channels. What we see however, is the fetishization of blackness reproduced in the text through Natalie's encounters. In one example, “after much negotiation on email” (288) with a black couple, Natalie arrives at their home to observe their “unmistakably African” demeanour (288). Natalie sees their livelihood as embodying all the elements of “mod cons” (modern conveniences) (289). The “African wall sculpture” and the poster of Bob Marley (289), are in some way a celebration of culture, but at the same time they are a commodification of the diasporic experience that haunts these decorations. Moreover, the couple's prim and proper demeanour, almost resembling an “advert for American life insurance” (289), implies that, for Natalie, they are playing a role that is convenient in a pseudo-post-racial world, where commodifying symbols of blackness, falsely insinuates that things are ‘all right,’ and brushes aside issues of racial inequality and discrimination within urban centres.

Another moment where Natalie is fetishized through a real life encounter, established through her online activity, develops when she meets the two men from

Wembley. Both men are much too preoccupied with the incorporeal interactions on a Chatroulette-like website to engage with Natalie, “the real thing,” who is right in front of them (292). One of the men comments on Natalie’s assertiveness, racializing her identity by inferring that her blackness ultimately determines her “strong-minded” behaviour (292). The racialized and gendered stereotyping of her attitude as a black woman is suggestive of how the impersonal nature of the website seems to elicit disinhibited behaviour, whereby users appear to commodify women and to fetishize and stereotype race. Marriot argues that the “stereotypical... involves the substitution of difference by a reified stand-in” (219).<sup>22</sup> Thus, Natalie becomes a reified stand-in for many of the racial interactions she encounters online and also partially plays into it when she dresses in drag.

The encounter with the two sexually inefficient men exposes some of the concerns Smith has in the way online interactions constrain and limit individuals from becoming more than just the discursive categories that represent them in the design principles of Web 2.0. The novel’s preoccupation with subjectivity and agency online portrays a differing form of communicability—distinguishing the unique speed of online connectivity and the discreetness of the platform that connects a multitude of networked individuals. However, these ephemeral forms of communication are depicted in the novel

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<sup>22</sup> Jenny Ungbha Korn’s autoethnographic study of Chatroulette helps understand this scene in *NW*, as her findings “supported earlier academic research on gendered differences in online use that found men more often pursuing sexual interests online than women” and can “illustrate how mediated anonymity may foster racist interactions, as suggested by online disinhibition theory” (101, 103).



as inauthentic and insincere performances of individualism.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the changes to the way we communicate are often emphasized by the use of image and video manipulation tools that take full advantage of mobile phone camera technology. Our networked selves may in fact be evolving to desire communication in different, more nuanced ways than before. James J. Hodge argues that “being networked...is less about striving for connection to anyone or anything than it is about maintaining and managing the felt experience of connection as such” (“Sociable media”). What we see in *NW*, primarily through Natalie’s compulsive Internet use, is what Hodge would consider a “libidinal promise of connection” that is a newly discovered aspect of online interactivity on a network (“Sociable media”). Software like Snapchat is popular because of its transitory nature, and maintains its attractiveness as a social media platform because of its reduced demand on one’s identity and subjectivity. *NW*’s depiction of a Chatroulette-like website calls attention to the arbitrary behaviour of its algorithmic design. Its principal concept is to randomize your experience and to procure impersonal encounters with other users. The individuals Natalie encounters are predominantly male, and the site transforms and commodifies her identity as a woman, by virtue of the nature of the design. The site also engenders what scholars have called “online disinhibition theory” (Korn 103), where individuals revel in behaving inappropriately or becoming exhibitionists when there are

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<sup>23</sup> Newer communication platforms currently trending online are moving further into ephemerality. Snapchat, for example, disposes of user created content after a certain period of time, and always privileges present and future moments. This moves away from Smith and Watson’s argument in regard to temporality and the archive, as the archive itself becomes somewhat irrelevant in this format. It suggests that individuals may have begun to look for networks that require less subjectivity and more impersonal forms of communication. Both Facebook and Instagram have developed similar features to their software in order to address this growing new trend. The platform has become adaptable and free flowing, privileging the short-lived over more long-form genres like email.

no real repercussions, because of their anonymity. Smith presents disinhibition and sexuality in Natalie's encounter with the two men on Chatroulette as an unregulated virtual space that differs from real life. Smith suggests that the technology, while offering disinhibition as pleasure, simultaneously acts as a barrier for the men, who cannot seem to "do anything without the net somewhere in the mix" (292). The design of Chatroulette also suggests that the immediate disposability of the individual you interact with holds neoliberal undercurrents, possibly even conditioning users to search for an ideal condition with reckless abandon. This particular phenomenon suggests an overlap between the real and the virtual, raising questions about how the constancy of always-on performativity develops into alternate modes of communication. Change in the way we communicate is also depicted in more intimate settings between Natalie and Frank. While they are both at home, in separate rooms, Frank sends a text message to Natalie asking if she is coming to bed (275). Frank remains ever-present in the room with a "mechanical tone, out of sight (275), highlighting another more domestic way to look at mobile phones: as extensions of our bodies. This instance of communication occurs immediately after Natalie has contributed to the website, and the mobile phone injects the room with Frank's spectre-like domestic presence.

Smith's essay "Generation Why?" helps contextualize *NW*'s preoccupation with online communication. The essay, covering Lanier's book and Fincher's film, discusses *The Social Network*'s millennial feel but also looks at the design of Facebook and Web 2.0's limitations in representing individuals online, and the way that it reduces users to bland, flattened versions of their real life counterparts through social media. According to

Smith, Facebook is a superficial platform that prods users into divulging general interests, which reduces them to simpler demystified versions of themselves:

When a human being becomes a set of data on a website like Facebook, he or she is reduced. Everything shrinks. Individual character. Friendships. Language. Sensibility. In a way it's a transcendent experience: we lose our bodies, our messy feelings, our desires, our fears. It reminds me that those of us who turn in disgust from what we consider an overinflated liberal-bourgeois sense of self should be careful what we wish for: our denuded networked selves don't look more free, they just look more owned. (Smith, "Generation Why?")

In fact, what we see in *NW* is a constant struggle to define one's sense of agency in a world that is increasingly less free. We can recognize the lack of freedom that the characters in the novel face as being partly due to the neoliberal policies that also govern some of the main principles of Web 2.0. Both Michel and Natalie's migration to the web suggests that both seek out a manner of liberty and choice, and more importantly, agency over their lives; however, the virtual space they find themselves in is designed with neoliberal principles in mind. According to Ilana Gershon, Facebook incorporates elements of neoliberalism that pervasively guide its users into behaving as neoliberal actors. Gershon argues that the "neoliberal perspective demands selves that consciously bring a market rationality to their relations, Facebook is a medium that urges, but does not determine, the creation and display of these sorts of selves" (867). Moreover, Facebook, for Smith, is a platform that, on the one hand demystifies the individual user through its categorizations, while simultaneously re-mystifying the experience of using the site, by offering the illusion of choice in the way things are presented. Smith states that "if the aim is to be liked by more and more people, whatever is unusual about a person gets flattened out" ("Generation"). This concern regarding the flattening of one's identity also

supports Wells's suggestion that Smith might be preoccupied with "the ethical danger of reducing others to essentialized identities based on race or other factors while denying their uniqueness" (100). Smith goes even further to suggest a need for "[a] private person, a person who is a mystery, to the world and—which is more important—to herself" ("Generation"). Smith seems to negotiate through the contradictions found in identity and subjectivity, allowing individuals to remain enigmas, while pursuing characters who are ambivalent over clearly delineated lines. As well, in Smith's 2007 talk, "How to Fail Better," she reveals the need to recognize the difference between authenticity and 'cultural authenticity' in Heideggerian terms:

That novelist, like me, I suppose like all of us who came of age under postmodernity, is naturally skeptical of the concept of authenticity, especially what is called "cultural authenticity" - after all, how can any of us be more or less authentic than we are? We were taught that authenticity was meaningless. How, then, to deal with the fact that when we account for our failings, as writers, the feeling that is strongest is a betrayal of one's deepest, authentic self? ("How to")

Smith considers searching for forms of authenticity outside of yourself to be a fallacious task because you cannot escape 'the self.' *NW* presents Natalie as partly embodying what Smith refers to as Heidegger's theory of "Das Man."—the self living for others. As Wendy Knepper rightly argues of *NW*, Smith is attempting to "open new imagined routes and pathways through the world" (113). Natalie seems characterized quite ambivalently to bear this writerly tension between new discovery and social conditioning. She maintains a sense of mystery throughout the novel and it can be argued that we as readers still remain mystified by her character arc. While Knepper correctly identifies Smith's social vision, I suggest that Smith forms a relationship with phenomenology as a possible

movement towards change or, at least, as a framework for dissecting the systematic institutionalization of hyperindividualism in twenty-first century social policies.

Smith recognizes that the limitations found in the material and immaterial spaces her characters occupy are obstacles to gaining an epistemological and ontological understanding of the harsh economic conditions that lie before them. The virtual space that Natalie explores emphasizes her dissatisfaction with “the real” (270). The more she attempts to control her socio-economic outlook, the more anxious she becomes. What the novel might insinuate is that modernity merely creates both the illusion of freedom, by way of technological means, as well as the illusion of more time, when technology offers us the ability to do more with the same finite amount of time that we have always had. This disillusionment in the narrative is a response to neoliberal values, or what Natalie identifies as a social environment where everyone is “sometimes sincerely but usually ironically” “living the dream” (252). It is also a social environment that promotes competition and rampant isolationism, while precipitating the absence of humility and social justice. The technological presence within the novel—often supporting a distinct socio-economic attitude that privileges competition over solidarity—also seems to bring about impersonal behaviour amongst its users. As Frank and Natalie have brunch with Imran and Ameeta, Smith attempts to draw a line through Natalie’s self-identity in this upscale café setting, creating socio-economic tension. Again, technology is represented as a device that works as a resolution for Natalie’s “self-contempt” because her mobile phone contains a distracting “blinking envelope with the promise of external connection” that leads to further self-alienation (252). All four patrons relish in the connectivity

provided by their phones, as they are individually connected to a network of others. The novel returns to the image of the mobile phone offering forms of modern comfort in the palm of your hand, ultimately serving to live for other individuals and forming seeds of inauthenticity in the process.

The individuality conveyed through social scripts and phatic forms of communication are conscious attempts by Smith to acknowledge that language when oft-repeated can lose its affective intent. Hodge recognizes the relationship between mobile phones and the tendency for today's communication technology to primarily generate phatic (impersonal) forms of communication. He complicates our notion of digital connectivity by suggesting an ulterior interpretation of why we enjoy staying connected:

I imagine this impersonal pleasure as conceptually and phenomenologically distinct (if not wholly separable) from the much-noted carnivalesque performance of identity online, the work of crafting avatars, handles, and profiles. In contrast to analyses of online identity typically centering around immersive virtual worlds such as *Second Life* or *World of Warcraft*, I argue that many of the pleasures of connection are profoundly impersonal. They're not about being or becoming someone else. The ordinary and impersonal pleasures of networks are about not having to be oneself too much; impersonal connection is about the bare sensation of feeling connected. ("Sociable Media")

Hodge argues for the positive and pleasurable aspects of these interpersonal forms of communication. He regards phatic communication as the natural progression away from longer forms of life writing. However, Smith takes a more critical stance in *NW*. She depicts a society that has embraced individualism while its members simultaneously behave almost exactly the same in their pursuits. Natalie admits that she forgets "what it was like to be poor. It was a language she'd stopped being able to speak, or even to understand" (276). Her inability to contextualize the harsh conditions found outside of her

socio-economic bracket is what partially obscures the ending, and thereby becomes a microcosm of a larger social and cultural issue that Smith seems eager to tease out.

## CONCLUSION

### **ABSENCE, SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY AND RADICAL SUBJECTIVITY**

In her essay “Rereading Barthes and Nabokov,” Smith elucidates her developing writerly style as one that aims for “any possible genuine link between the person who writes and the person who reads” (57). For Smith, meaning exists within the ground rules of the novel. In a reading and rereading of *NW*, layers of hidden connections and associations come forth, causing, me, the reader, to question characters’ motivations and the motivations of the author. *NW*’s contradictory nature, and its utter resistance to conventional forms of characterization, relay a complex model where meaning is understandably difficult to locate. It raises the question as to what kind of future this novel anticipates. Smith acknowledges the difficult unstable partnership between reader and writer. She proclaims the important of forgoing essentialist claims about “ultimate” or “secret” meanings within a text, instead admitting that we may simply be “stumbling towards meaning simultaneously, together” (57). There are hints to this perspective in the way Smith resists the need to move deep into a character’s inner motivations throughout *NW*. For example, the repetition of names in the second section. ‘host,’ is required to help situate the characters within the spatial and temporal limitations that are presented in every new chapter:

It had never occurred to Keisha Black that her friend Leah Hanwell was in possession of a particular type of personality. Like most children, theirs was a relationship based on verbs and nouns. Leah Hanwell was a person willing and available to do a variety of things that Kesiha Blake was willing and available to do. Together they ran, jumped, danced, sang, bathed, coloured in, rode bikes. (179)



Smith avoids detailing the internal motivations of either character. Instead, she develops the scene through the description of Natalie/Keisha and Leah's friendship; one that has its own set of rules and parameters for it to exist. Moreover, in the passage above, Smith references how, at its core, language is made of simple commands and rules that dictate the way relationships between individuals are formed and carried out. It also motions us towards an understanding that language is made up of a set of recognizable patterns, which we as readers pick up on but also interpret with variance. However, Smith also counterbalances this by removing names all together and focusing purely on action in the language:

The man was naked, the woman dressed. It didn't look right, but the woman had somewhere to go. He lay clowning in bed, holding her wrist. She tried to put a shoe on. Under their window they heard truck doors opening, boxes of produce heaved on to tarmac (99)

The woman was naked, the man dressed. The woman had not realized that the man had somewhere to go. Outside their window came the noise of a carnival float testing its sound system, somewhere to the west, in Kensal Rise. (323)

In these passages, Smith focuses more on the similarities between characters and the surroundings that inform our reading of the scene, as the first passage is of Felix and his girlfriend Grace, while the second passage is of Natalie and Frank near the end of the narrative, after their domestic dispute. Although Smith regards critics such as Barthes as having moved the needle much too far towards the reader, it must be stated that the need to create patterns where patterns may not be readily visible is bound within the process of reading a narrative. As we see in the two disparate passages above, Smith leads us to recognize the pattern within the language and syntax. By rearranging the words, she

composes new paths for the reader. Smith utilizes a phenomenological approach to *NW*. Our tendency towards using patterns to search for meaning in a work of art is pushed even further towards the abstract and conceptual.

#### I. “PROMISING FOOTBALL STAR SUFFERS A CAREER ENDING INJURY, RESORTS TO CRIMINALITY”

What *NW* builds towards is literary dynamism—a narrative form where events occur and there is a partial resolve to the narrative arc yet throughout a single reading, even multiple readings, new meanings appear and radically shift the perspective of the novel. The dynamic literary model Smith presents helps to unhinge built-in, socialized prejudices through her perspectival approach to characterization and her emphasis on the co-construction of meaning between the author and reader. Social mobility and working-class life are influenced by economic forces that are far removed and alien to average citizens but are ever present in determining much of the socio-economic pressures suffered by the individuals depicted. *NW*'s fragmented structure ultimately presents us with at least three distinct subjectivities, while the fourth, Nathan, is left not only on the fringes of northwest London, but also on the fringes of the text. We are left without many answers as to why Nathan's life spiraled downward from a promising football career to a life of crime and violence. I argue that this absence of detail is possibly a way of acknowledging the absence of Nathan's subjectivity, and quite possibly a technique that asks us to move beyond stereotype. Natalie and Leah's inability to look beyond Nathan's apparent wretchedness signals that the novel ends without a change in the characters'

perspective of poverty and crime. In the beginning of *NW*, the narrator declaratively states that “I am the sole author” (3), highlighting the artificiality of the text while simultaneously addressing the difficult process of penetrating authorial intent. Smith is the author and we must play within her rules, but we cannot be the “sole” reader and there can never be a “sole” reading. Furthermore, poverty, crime and race are embedded within the cultural consciousness and often sensationalized in mainstream media. Smith presents two black men from lower-class families participating in a senseless act of violence. Felix, having “been mugged many times” (169), ultimately has little choice in the matter. However, the violence is a reproduction of the violent encounters that have taken place and still take place in Britain. It seems as though we may feel like we know Nathan’s character well, without necessarily requiring the extra detail to bridge the gaps—promising football star suffers a career ending injury, and resorts to criminality. It seems almost too familiar.<sup>24</sup>

The neoliberalism of the past twenty-five years has lowered standards of education, privatized public sectors and created rampant inequality between the rich and poor in Western countries, while also diluting and debasing the cultural mainstream, leaving the majority to consume media of little to no substance.<sup>25</sup> These forms of

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<sup>24</sup> Recent media coverage of the deaths of Mark Duggan and Rashan Charles painted them as hardened criminals in the public eye even though they both had small misdemeanour charges on file.

<sup>25</sup> The neoliberalized criminal justice system often operates on the basis of incarceration and protection, while allowing for little in the way of rehabilitation, or any real preventative measures to protect community peace. Preventative measures may not be as lucrative as maintaining a steady flow of people through the prison system. The Regan and Thatcher periods in the 1980s saw an increase in the privatization of social programs, including the privatization of prisons in both the United States and Great Britain. The twenty-first century has seen the prison system in Britain continue on its path towards privatization, creating controversial ‘for profit’ prisons around the country. Back in 1993, David Shichor

hegemonic oppression operate through a system of power that has ultimately expressed a clear preference for increasing profit margins over quality of life for all. *NW* depicts an unsettling society with many individuals struggling to maintain their composure in the face of growing social and economic pressures. However, Smith seems interested in more than just the financial struggles of lower and middle class households. Felix's tragic death and Natalie's assumption that Nathan could be the perpetrator asks us to reconsider the association between poverty and criminality. Natalie's highly-charged judgment of marginal individuals like Nathan, who, according to her, ultimately "get what they deserve" (332), is quite possibly an opinion held by many citizens and politicians in Britain, albeit behind closed doors. By contrast, Felix's trajectory was on a much different path than Nathan's, moving towards an apparently self-determined outcome. Yet Felix could not avoid the violence that is often experienced in lower-class neighbourhoods. The fictional crime depicted in the novel might reflect the violent murders that took place in the black community in 2007 that also encouraged former Prime Minister Tony Blair to forgo 'political correctness' and make a racially-charged public statement regarding the problem of crime in the black community (Wintour and Dodd). Blair's outburst once again tied criminality to a minority group, rehashing decades of discrimination and alienation the black community has faced in the mainstream public. Blair only highlights the institutionalized racism that has plagued the black community in London and other

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argued that the privatization of prisons presented some challenges to how they would operate for profit under large conglomerates (116). The rise of these public institutions being run with a corporate mindset brings forth moral and ethical issues regarding the treatment of prisoners under state control. Privatization also raises the issue of whether rehabilitation of prisoners for proper reentry into society is possible under these circumstances.

parts of Britain since the post-war era. *NW* alludes to one such moment of institutionalized racism from 1993 that had a large impact on the black community in the 1990s and into the new millennium. The novel depicts the Blake family witnessing four white boys, who were charged with the murder of Stephen Lawrence, “walk free from court, swinging punches at the photographers” on television (Smith, *NW* 195). Lawrence’s racially motivated murder sparked outrage when an inquiry into the investigation revealed rampant police misconduct, which eventually led to a major change in the British legal system. In 2011, Mark Duggan’s death at the hands of a Metropolitan police officer was deemed lawful even though an inquiry later showed that Duggan was unarmed (Davies and Taylor). This year, two other high profile cases of young black men dying at the hands of police made headlines. Both Edson De Costa (Deardon) and Rashan Charles (Akiwowo) died in the custody of Metropolitan police with no real answers as to why their lives came to a tragic end. Alongside these tragic death, studies have shown that in the new millennium, the black community has been overrepresented “at each stage of the criminal justice system,” although the fact that they are overrepresented “does not suggest that those groups are more likely to offend” (Goodman and Ruggiero 56-57). The study, covering 2004/05, also showed that black people were six times more likely to be searched than their white counterparts (57), highlighting a possible correlation between such institutionalized racism and a growth in gun violence in the inner city. Furthermore, many of these vulnerable lower-class communities do not have the social resources to address the alienation and deprivation that is felt on a large scale by black youths.

It is a terribly unfortunate reality in today's globalized economy that individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds and immigrants are seen as disposable in the eyes of the financial elite.<sup>26</sup> Economic migrants and asylum seekers arrive in Britain in search of opportunity and hope only to come face-to-face with an increasingly xenophobic population. As noted earlier, the appalling fire that destroyed Grenfell Tower in 2017, killing 80 people, is brutal evidence of the systemic forms of neglect suffered by individuals of lower-class origin. This horrific tragedy is being investigated as one of the gravest forms of corporate manslaughter in British history. The crime, however, only calls for a large fine with no jail time for anyone found guilty, according to the 2007 Corporate Manslaughter Act (Dodd and Sherwood). The cladding, considered to have been the main cause of the rapidly spreading fire, is evidence of willful neglect on the parts of the council that overlooked the tower, and the corporate entities that were commissioned to get the building up to code. More than 70 other high rises have failed a fire safety test in London, indicating that this accident has only uncovered more extreme neglect and the failure of those in power to protect families who inhabit these council estates (Watson).

*NW*'s focus on the council estate of Caldwell highlights the absence of social responsibility for lower-class individuals like Nathan, and reflects the forms of neglect that take place in the real world. Smith's latest novel, *Swing Time*, also explores

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<sup>26</sup> Childhood poverty in Britain has increased throughout the decade, reaching its highest levels in 2017 at 30%. According to Justin Watson, head of Oxfam's UK division, "there are now more people in poverty in the UK than there have been for almost 20 years and a million more than at the beginning of the decade" (qtd. in Butler).

alienation through its first-person narrative. The unnamed narrator in the novel often reflects on the social perspectives of individuals, as she faces classed and raced stereotypes in an England “where everybody was” supposedly “equal anyway and there was no need to ‘go on about it’” (117). If Nathan, and others like him, have gotten what they deserve, does that leave everyone else in the clear? And how far can we push this line of thinking? Who else are we not socially responsible for? I think that the novel prods us to consider the societal constructs that are in place conditioning individuals to be less concerned about vulnerable sectors of society, and thereby fostering a culture of complacency and disposability. This also helps us to better locate the systemic issues that have an effect on the people we interact with and the spaces and places we occupy. Much detail about Nathan’s life remains absent. Does Smith make it easier for us to dispose of him as a character because of his seemingly criminal behaviour? We are ultimately led to believe that Nathan murdered Felix, yet the novel does not directly address this. The only evidence of Nathan's guilt is a cut on his cheek, which is briefly detailed on pages 45 and 168. The novel references that he is “a person of interest” (332), while Natalie and Leah also believe he is a suspect based on what they already know “about his character” (332-333). However, what they know about his character is not clarified and remains strictly anecdotal. Smith positions Nathan as a figure who “is a jolting form of time travel, moving in two directions: imposing the child on this man, this man on this child” (45). He is simultaneously a child and an adult to both Leah and Natalie. Moreover, Nathan is clearly misidentified by Leah in the first section of the novel, quite possibly foreshadowing the ambivalence that Smith constructs within Nathan’s characteristics

(81). Smith withholds detail about Nathan because she chooses instead to highlight the ease with which the mind assumes certain stereotypes when it comes to criminality, poverty and race, even for someone who may be of the same socio-economic or ethnic background. It is a form of social conditioning that resists the subjectivity of ‘the other.’ Consequently, what supersedes our biases is ‘stereotyping.’ Emily S. Lee’s phenomenological reading of Bhabha’s postcolonial metropolitan subject addresses the stereotype as a form of ‘splitting’:

The stereotype reduces the person into a part, “because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation” and can never depict the entirety of the person.<sup>14</sup> The stereotype ambivalently enunciates that which is other and foreign, yet “entirely knowable and visible.”<sup>15</sup> The stereotype challenges temporal synchronicity for it requires both halting time and repeating time. The stereotype halts time in its presumption to be infinitely true. (541)

The phenomenon of seeing ‘the other’ as depicted in *NW* brings forth Leah’s perception of Nathan moving in two directions: the knowable former childhood crush and the unknowable adult drifter. Nathan as a “person of interest” becomes, for us, the stereotyped suspect on the street. We are to assume his guilt because of the built-in prejudices regarding crime and poverty. Nathan’s hapless existence, his simply “surviving”—alongside the cut on his face—is indication enough of his culpability in the crime, but Smith also leaves details out of the narrative for the reader to question any impulse to indict Nathan.

## II. RADICAL SUBJECTIVITY

*NW*’s preoccupation with subjectivity and diversity signifies the importance of recognizing differing points of view within a pluralistic society and the impossibility of



this within the confines of neoliberal policies that intend to shape our perception of the world. As Natalie waits for the 98 bus on her way to Leah's house in the last section, she has a conversation with a woman with a dog, who admits that she "did not become a good Muslim" until she "came to Kilburn" (Smith, *NW* 329). Natalie questions the woman, asking if dogs are *haraam* (forbidden) in Islam (329). The woman states that her dog is "a gift from God" (329), indicating that she holds an unorthodox opinion on Islam that deviates from tradition, and complicates conventional representations. The woman's perspective is explained further:

Whoever said these were fixed coordinates to which she had to be forever faithful? How could she play them false? Freedom was absolute and everywhere, constantly moving locations. You couldn't hope to find it only in the old, familiar places. Nor could you force other people to take off their clothes and give it to you like a gift. Clarity! I realized Mindy-Lou could actually speak to me through my mind, well, then I really had a moment, like in a storybook or a film, and I knew I would always be watched over and loved by everybody I met forever the end. (329-330)

This perspective represents a radical understanding of freedom that is very much absent in each character's mind. *NW* suggests that the individual invariably expresses subjectivity, and it must be assumed that it cannot be any other way. As Kierkegaard argues, "modern speculative thought has mustered everything to enable the individual to transcend himself objectively, but this just cannot be done" (204). Smith's hypertextual link to a Google search of Søren Kierkegaard is just one of those philosophic nudges to the reader (*NW* 245). The link to the search embraces curiosity and asks us to seek out an epistemological understanding of her work. While we may not, with much clarity, illuminate her reasons behind the direct reference to Kierkegaard, we as readers are obligated to use the technology at hand to experience the search itself. Smith asks us to

inquire. We are, after all, “stumbling towards meaning” with the author (“Rereading” 57). Subjectivity, in the eyes of Kierkegaard exists as “a process of becoming” (200). This may also be true for Smith’s literary model. It remains continually in progression, somewhere between authorial intent, and the reader’s own subjective response to the work. It is fair to say that Nathan is not disposable as a character. He is accentuated with some of the characteristics of a literary foil, but he is not Iago. We learn about him through others; however, when he speaks, he is almost impenetrable. Natalie is ultimately unforgiving in her view of Nathan and his criminality, but does the novel itself have a similar overall view of his deviance? Does Nathan occupy a deviant space within the neoliberal model, and suffer the consequences thereof?

What the novel proposes is to look at radical forms of subjectivity because accepting another’s subjectivity may lead us to allow room for alternative perspectives. I return once more to the issue of agency to argue that the novel also considers whether we are, in fact, free to choose. Slavoj Žižek suggests that “we are much more free and responsible than we think” (10). To understand this point of view Žižek states that the “first step is to accept the consequence of modernity, which is radical freedom not only in the good sense, but in the terrifying sense that we have to decide... There is no agency on which we can rely” (11). Considering Žižek’s statement alongside *NW* raises an interesting social possibility: we can challenge the way we look at the everyday by acknowledging that seeing might not be a choice; but the way we observe others is, ultimately, the source of agency and radical freedom in the modern world.

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