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“No Man Is an Island”: On Fragmented Experiences in Zadie Smith’s *NW* (2012)

Abstract: Published in 2012, Zadie Smith’s *NW* appears to break with the aesthetics of *On Beauty* (2005), her Booker Prize shortlisted novel: abandoning the linearity of traditional story-telling of which *On Beauty* partook, *NW* displays a formal fragmentation that allows the narrative to jump back and forth from one point of view to another, one time period to another, and this with no apparent rationale. Indeed, the novel weaves together the threads of four different narratives seen through four different characters, its structure thus fragmented into seemingly disparate subplots and timelines, as though it were taking to task the linearity of time itself. Through the analysis of the various fragmentary modes in *NW*, this paper wishes to contend that, while it may first appear to be a challenge to the congruence of plot, one that is reminiscent of the postmodernist taste for discontinuity and experimentation, this writing commitment for fragmentation is fundamentally a political stance in Smith’s fiction. By deconstructing the linear fabric of plot, *NW* seems to argue that experience — whether it be cultural, political, social or individual — is multifarious and ever-shifting, and thus can only be accounted for by discursively espousing its fragmentary nature. Therefore, the multiplication of subject-positions, the refusal of monologic narratives, as well as the eschewal of linearity in *NW* must be understood as rebuttals of a reality conceived of unilaterally, or normatively defined. In other words, my argument is that, in *NW*, the poetics of fragmentation is a politics of authenticity, since it is only through the representation of fragmented experiences that fiction can have any claim on realism.

Keywords: Zadie Smith, fragmentation, militant particularism, realism, experience, politics, authenticity, identity, critique

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In the third part of Zadie Smith’s *NW*, entitled “host”, Keisha Blake, later renamed Natalie for purposes of social integration and ascension, is perplexed by the opacity of the language used to describe the specificity of female orgasm. After struggling to link words to sensations and almost abdicating to the conveniently cryptic phrase

“phenomenological problem” (Smith 2013: 192), Keisha butts head with the following broader aporia: “If Leah Hanwell said the flower is blue and Keisha Blake said the flower is blue how could they be sure that by the word ‘blue’ they were apprehending the same phenomenon?” (Smith 2013: 192–193). This quotation may not appear at, or even towards the beginning of the novel, but it does occur at some other start, that of sexuality for Keisha, who is barely sixteen when she asks herself these questions. That such an interrogation should occur at this moment, precisely when a component of identity as essential as sexuality is called into question, is determinative. More than just exposing the unreliability of language to describe and communicate experience, the impossibility of knowing whether or not the word “blue” refers to the same reality betrays an anxiety over the nature of experience itself: how, indeed, can Leah and Natalie, who are as close as friends can be, ever know that their individual experience of the world is in any way commensurable? In other words, this question is a critique levelled at the very idea of the collective, a critique which suggests, against popular and literary belief, that every man may actually be an island. John Donne himself is quoted in the novel (Smith 2013: 232), but by a half-drunk pupil after work, as if to say that over the collective, held out as a wishful creed with no rational efficacy that only the fumes of alcohol can lead you to believe in, individuality always prevails. This fragmentation of totalities which are previously held as coherent entities, whether they be abstract or tangible, is to be found on every single page of *NW*: here, a friendship and shared experience, but also identity, and, to an even broader extent, writing itself, since the novel is divided into five seemingly disjointed parts, each resorting to different aesthetics and to broken styles that challenge the very process of reading. *NW* thus reads as the poetic implementation of fragmentation, taken as a paradigm for both writing and understanding what is mysteriously termed by Keisha “phenomenological problem[s]”. To put it simply, Smith rejects the temptation of all-encompassing narratives and sweeping generalizations, thus highlighting the illegitimacy of universal or absolute definitions, and preferring to take an interest in the particularity of fragments — fragments of life, fragments of identity, fragments of experience, contradictory though they all may be. Therefore, the multiplication of subject-positions, the refusal of monologic narratives, as well as the eschewal of linearity in *NW* must be understood as rebuttals of a reality conceived of unilaterally, or normatively defined. Thus, the form of the novel, in order to accurately account for reality, abides by what David Marcus calls, in “Post-Hysterics: Zadie Smith and the Fiction of Austerity”, “sociological realism” (Marcus). It is this sociological realism that I wish to interrogate here, taken as both a literary commitment and an epistemological posture, in order to show how, in *NW*, the poetics of fragmentation is a politics of authenticity.

1. Fragmentation, where art thou?

NW is the story, if indeed it can be called a story in the conventional sense, of four different characters whose lives intersect at different moments and with different impacts. The first part of the novel, entitled “visitation”, follows Leah and examines her tribulations, both within her marriage to Michel, a black hairdresser from Marseilles, and in relation to her social surroundings. This first part is told in a succession of chapters with no clear narrative thread, brusquely shifting from diegetic clarity to muddled interior monologues, reminiscent of modernist, and more particularly Joycian, streams of consciousness, often without signalling punctuation. The second part, entitled “guest”, compresses time into one single day — August 27th 2010 — and follows Felix Cooper around London. Of all the sections in *NW*, “guest” is the one that is formally the least experimental, straying from the rules of traditional story-telling only to break with grammar in reported speech in order to render the dialect of street-talk, particularly that in Northwest London, thus in keeping with realist fiction. There follows a third part, entitled “host”, which chronicles the life of Keisha from childhood to the the 27th of August 2010. This part is divided into 185 subparts, each titled and numbered, as though they were entries in an almanac, written in a style that mixes tones, modes, and references to both high and popular culture. The description of the different parts of *NW* would sustain what this brief overview of the novel clearly shows: a fragmented structure, that is to say sections that are discrepant in terms of formal properties and literary filiations and whose handling of such things as plotline, time, and even grammar is different, not to say loose.

However, if *NW* is clearly defined by macroscopic fragmentation as suggested by these structural discrepancies between the novel’s sections, the poetics of fragmentation is also to be found at the microscopic level of style, or rather of the arrangement of words, within — as opposed to between — each of these sections. Two examples illustrate this point particularly well. The first of these appears in the fourth part of the novel, entitled “crossing”, which is mainly a recording of a dialogue between Natalie and Nathan Bogle as they walk across London:

What are we doing? Nathan? What are we doing?
 Traipsing. North.
 Oh.
 That’s where you want to go, right?
 Yes. (Smith 2013: 308)

This short extract, a representative sample of the rest of the section, reads like a chaotic intermingling of voices. Indeed, the absence of reported verbs as well as that of the punctuation stylistically associated with dialogue makes of the text a pure record of sounds, as though it were pushing the generic limits of direct speech by doing away with the literary conventions that govern it. The passage,

and for that matter the whole section, could therefore be defined as the bringing together of different vocal fragments. The second example of the fragmentation of word arrangement in the novel is to be found in the first section, in chapter 8 which opens with the following sentence: “Elsewhere in London, offices are open plan/floor to ceiling glass/sites of energy/wireless/gleaming” (Smith 2013: 31). The repeated use of the slash, which seems to substitute for the more traditional comma or conjunctions “and” or “with”, fragments the syntax into juxtaposed expressions, out of descriptive efficiency or phrasal economy. In other words, the slash here literally cuts the syntax into separate pieces, thus becoming the graphic marker of fragmentation. More importantly, however, is what follows: instead of launching into a detailed and word-consuming description of a character’s anatomy, the text is arranged into a calligram that depicts her mouth, a phenomenon that is reminiscent of experimental literature, and more specifically of postmodernist fiction:

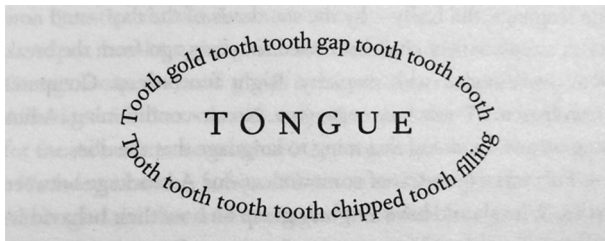


Figure 1

Source: Smith 2013: 31.

In other words, the integrity of the text is fragmented by the generic intrusion of a foreign form, as though *NW* were a patchwork of different tonal, formal and stylistic fragments, brought together by the flexibility of Smith’s accretive writing. As Vanessa Guignery points out in “Zadie Smith’s *NW*, or the art of line-crossing”, “Smith develops a whole array of modes and strategies that are partly indebted to realist, modernist and postmodernist practices, and she mixes literary references with items of popular culture” (Guignery). It is this “whole array of modes and strategies”, this comingling of “realist, modernist and postmodernist practices” that is the gateway of aesthetic and formal fragmentation in *NW*.

2. A desire for realism

And yet, fragmentation in *NW* does not solely serve a formal, or dare I say formalistic purpose: it finds in the novel a powerful echo at the level of thematics. In an interview given to *Foyles* about *NW*, Zadie Smith herself warns against the strictly formalistic and experimental. She says: “I think we should be wary of labelling certain techniques ‘experimental’ as if it’s just a set of tools one picks up to lend

whatever you’re writing a trace of hipster cool [...] Everything I do is an attempt to get close to the real [...]” (Smith 2017). In other words, the fragmentary modes implemented in *NW* are all designed to conjure up as close and precise an image of reality as possible. Take for example the third part of the novel, devoted to Keisha/Natalie Blake. As has been stated the entire section is divided into 185 subparts, “the fragments maybe reflecting the fragmentation of her identity” (Guignery), as suggested by Vanessa Guignery. Indeed, Natalie is a character presented from the beginning as one who likes all-encompassing explanations and stable definitions: for instance, when she is taken to visit an old church by Leah in part 1, instead of looking at the architecture, she spends the whole visit pouring over a guidebook which she reads aloud finding it reassuring to be offered a synthesis of what she is seeing. Unsurprisingly, therefore, she struggles with fragmented identities. Talking about Francesco de Angelis, a fellow student who is to become her husband, she says: “He was made of parts Natalie considered mutually exclusive, and found difficult to understand [...] Like he was born on a yacht somewhere in the Caribbean and raised by Ralph Lauren” (Smith 2013: 207). Beyond Smith’s recognizable humour here, the extract pinpoints the character’s inability to apprehend the real outside of totalizing categories, and if the comment here applies to someone else’s identity, it is also the case with Natalie’s very own one:

170. In drag

Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each required a different wardrobe. But when considering these different attitudes she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or perhaps the least inauthentic. (Smith 2013: 182)

Although this fragment appears towards the end of the series of 185, it reads like the key for understanding the whole section. Just like Natalie’s fragmented identity is presented in 185 entries, so here it is divided into different sets of clothing. The syntax is mimetic of this fragmentation: the accumulation of nominal sentences, along with the hammering repetition of the word “drag” (and a series of monosyllabic words) give the impression of an infinite fragmentation of identity, a fragmentation that reaches for both the personal, the social, the professional, and the ethnic. In other words, and as made clear by the end of the entry, Natalie is a character who struggles to synthesize the different fragments of her identity, and for whom the failure of synthesis is unbearable. The poetics of fragmentation is resorted to here to give rise to a realist image of the character, that is to say an image that does not betray the effective experience of identity.

If thematic fragmentation is clearly to be found at the characterological level, *NW* extends it to other areas as well. Unsurprisingly, since Smith is often considered to be a “London writer”, a reputation well-earned by such novels as this one, this is first to be seen in the way the novel deals with space. If most of *NW* either takes place or references the fictional Caldwell neighbourhood, the portrait of the city that it sketches embraces the entirety of London. Names of districts, roads and

streets abound, as shown by the titles of part 4: “Willesden Lane to Kilburn High Road” (Smith 2013: 303), “Shoot Up Hill to Fortune Green” (Smith 2013: 313), “Hampstead to Archway” (Smith, 315), “Hampstead Heath” (Smith, 319), “Corner of Hornsey Lane” (Smith 2013: 320), and “Hornsey Lane” (Smith, 322). Although the cartography may be sweeping in its scope, the novel goes to great lengths to highlight the boundaries that exist between these spaces, when for example Felix Cooper says, about his girlfriend’s ex, that “he had taken his ‘I’m-a-male-nurse-I-find-hip-hop-too-negative-I-can-cook-curry-goat-I-want-to-move-to-Nigeria’ routine back to south London, where, in Felix’s opinion, it belonged” (Smith 2013: 153), as if to suggest that certain behaviours, certain mental and cultural structures belonged in specific areas of the city, and could not communicate with others. The characters may travel from one neighbourhood to the other, but each of these neighbourhoods retains its specificities, and remains dislocated. As David James puts it in “Worlded Localisms. Cosmopolitics Writ Small”, comparing the novel to Smith’s previous ones, “[t]his emphasis on the regionally specific, microsociology of the everyday city continues in *NW*” (52). Thus, if the form of the novel is fragmented, it is because the thing that it is trying to represent is fragmented. The prefix ‘micro’ in “microsociology of the everyday city” could thus be replaced by realist, since it is this attachment to the particularity of fragments that is the guarantee for Smith of realism.

3. Fragmentation, a political critique

In “Post-Hysteries: Zadie Smith and the Fiction of Austerity”, David Marcus gives this following definition of “sociological realism”: “a social novel capable of capturing not only the ways we experience life but also the ways in which it *happens* to us” (Marcus). As I hope to have shown, with the example of Natalie and her experience of identity, *NW* does indeed capture “the ways we experience life” as fragmented. But if the novel belongs through and through to sociological realism, it is also, as Marcus underlines, because it captures how life “happens to us”. The characters’ experience of space is particularly telling. If Felix culturally relegates Grace’s ex-boyfriend to south London, the novel also insists on the physical border between these different districts, which is to say that *NW* constantly draws its reader’s attention to the lines of fragmentation that it sheds light on. Indeed, throughout the narrative, Caldwell is forcefully separated from the rest of London, not just in terms of financial or cultural identity, but through the means of a geographical line, materialized by a “boundary wall” (Smith 2013: 304) which Natalie walks along towards the end of the novel. Describing such a boundary, Natalie muses: “This must be how they stop people going nowhere” (Smith 2013: 322). In other words, the physical manifestation of the fragmentation of space has a direct impact of the characters’ lives — it “happens” to them — impeding their very freedom

of movement, despoiling them of any sense of agency. To put it simply, this fragmentation of space is the corollary of the social fragmentation of London, and that certain characters should be quarantined in certain neighbourhoods, unable to overcome this fragmentation, testifies to their tragic fates. Thus, through the representation of space in *NW*, Smith seems to suggest that London cannot be apprehended as a whole, not so much because it is too vast, but because such are its disparities that doing so would not allow us to make sense of it: the city’s reality is not in its wholeness, but in its numerous fragmented pieces. This is made explicit when Natalie, in the novel’s penultimate section, walks to Hornsey Lane Bridge and looks out over the city. Her view is blocked, or “cross-hatched” (Smith 2013: 304) rather, as the novel says, by the bridge’s criss-crossing metal-work: “St Paul’s in one box. The Gherkin in another. Half a tree. Half a car. Cupolas, spires. Squares, rectangles, half-moons, stars. It was impossible to make sense of the whole” (Smith 2013: 322). Yet again, fragmented stylistics match fragmented reality in this brief extract: the very short, nominal sentences, which give rise to a very choppy and fragmented syntax, convey a sense of the view, itself fragmented, that Natalie contemplates. The “box”, that is the square delineated by the metal-work, thus finds its equivalent in the terse phrasing of the style, each sentence becoming a box itself. If Smith’s care to turn away from the whole and to focus individually on the different districts of London therefore partakes of this “sociological realism” evoked by David Marcus, that is a realism that does not erase particularities with overreaching generalizations, it is also a redefinition of realism itself. Realism, Smith seems to say through her fragmentary writing, is not so much — or at the very least not just — a way of representing reality, it is a perspective, that is, a way of looking at it. Indeed, *NW* seems to forcefully suggest that the real cannot be looked at from afar, and that it is only by adopting the very perspective of the thing you wish to understand that you may make discern its authenticity.

In fact, what is achieved in *NW* is a politicization of authenticity itself. Gone, the novel seems to say, are the days of happy hybridity and naïve multiculturalism, the result, no doubt, of what Zadie Smith calls the evaporation of “communal responsibilities” (Smith 2017) or what David Marcus would identify as “the social and psychological disorders of postmodern — that is, post-welfare state — capitalism” (Marcus). The veneer of wealth and progress is just that, a veneer. *NW* seems to say this exactly: as Felix accompanies Annie up to her rooftop terrace, recently repainted for the purposes of shooting a film, he comments: “Everything covered in a thick white gloss to maximize the light. It was done very quickly to service a fiction” (Smith 2013: 149). The entire extract is articulated on the wordplay with “fiction”: fiction for the film that was shot there, but also fiction in the sense of fantasy, the fantasy of a prosperous nation with equality of opportunity. The “thick white gloss” is only but a veneer of wealth that conceals underneath it teeming fragments of lives that remain shackled in poverty. That Smith should choose “white” as the colour of the paint is not innocent: in a novel mostly about black people, she

is tying the social and financial fate of her characters to their ethnic identities. What this sentence seems to say is that the meta-narrative of progress and prosperity is not only a white one, but also one which is inauthentic, that is to say, irrespective of reality. As such, the painstaking attention the novel pays to the specificity of experience is reminiscent of what David Harvey calls, in *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*, “militant particularism” (23). In recounting a political dispute he had with a colleague with whom he was working on a book about a car plant at Cowley in east Oxford, a plant that at the time was the object of partial closure with the threat of delocalization looming on the horizon, David Harvey laments the impossibility of formulating a global political project that does not neglect specific and localized subject-positions, while underlining the danger of abstracting from particular experiences generalities to be implemented on a larger scale. He writes:

The view that what is right and good from the standpoint of the militant shop-stewards at Cowley, is right and good for the city, and by extension, for society at large is far too simplistic [...] But there is something equally problematic about imposing a politics guided by abstractions upon people who have given of their lives and labour over many years in a particular way in a particular place. (Harvey 1996: 23)

Although this analysis pertains to the debate about whether or not the closing down of the car plant at Cowley is to be defended or fought away, the intellectual dilemma Harvey is articulating, which is also a political one, is narrativised in *NW*. Indeed, the novel appears to say, a politics elaborated on state-level, of which this “thick white gloss” is a metaphor, itself the product of a culture that it contributes to sustain, does take into account the existence of an identity such as that of Felix, or even Natalie, and much less that of the socially outcast Nathan Bogle, who spent their lives trying to conform to this “thick white gloss”. Therefore, Smith seems to be denouncing it as a political fallacy, just as she is rebuking it as a literary make-believe: if fiction wishes to be realist, sociologically or otherwise, it must reckon with the multifarious particularities it aims at representing. Fragmentation, of plotline, of language or of form, therefore becomes both the means and the guarantee of this authenticity, and the anxiety over the incommunicability of fragmented experiences — when Keisha asks herself if the word “blue” means the same thing for her as it does for Leah — must be understood, in *NW*, within the frame of a political critique that concerns the conditions of possibility of collectiveness. Hence, if Smith’s writing can be said to partake of “militant particularism”, that is of a self-aware commitment to voicing each and every subject-position, it is because in probing these different fragments of experience it encourages us to do what what E.M. Forster summons his readers to achieve, that is, to “only connect” (iii) what seems initially fragmented.

One would be remiss, in titling a paper about fragmentation “No man is an island”, in a novel that takes place in London at that, not to mention the insular nature

of British identity. There is something too easy in bridging Great Britain's geographical reality, its separateness from the continent so to speak, with its people's distaste for generalizations and penchant for particularisms, that should make one wary. And yet, *NW* reads as a probation of fragmentation not only as a fictional mode, but also as a political project, one that takes into account if not the reality of British identity, then at least the authenticity of its capital. The collective, the novel insists, is a fiction, and fragmentation is first and foremost a deconstruction of the myth of a united kingdom. When David Harvey asks "how can we judge, understand, adjudicate, and perhaps negotiate through different knowledges constructed at very different levels of abstraction under radically different material conditions?" (Harvey 1996: 23), he puts words on the danger of fragmentation as a pathway to relativity. Fiction, Zadie Smith seems to answer, bypasses that danger, because unlike intellectual or political theories it does not ask us to choose: fragmentation thus presents fiction anew as a willing suspension of partiality.

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