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Zadie Smith's *NW* and the Edwardian Roots of the
Contemporary Cosmopolitan Ethic

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Zadie Smith's *NW* and the Edwardian Roots of the Contemporary Cosmopolitan Ethic

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British contemporary writer Zadie Smith is often representative of cosmopolitan writers of the twenty-first century: in both her fiction and nonfiction, she joins a multicultural background and broad, varied interests to an ethic based on the importance of interpersonal relationships and empathetic respect for the other. But while Smith is often considered the poster child for the contemporary British cosmopolitan, her ethics are in fact rooted in the one rather staid member of the canon: EM Forster, whose emphatic call to 'only connect' grounds all of Smith's fiction. Her latest novel, 2012's *NW*, further expands her relationship to Forster in highlighting both the promise and the limitations of empathy and cosmopolitan connection in the context of modern urban British life. This paper uses Kwame Anthony Appiah's definition of "rooted cosmopolitanism" to explore Forster's and Smith's shared ethics. I argue that their relationship grounds and influences Smith's literary rooted cosmopolitanism: that while she writes books for the age of globalization, her deliberate ties to the British canon suggest an investment in maintaining and reinvigorating the British novelistic tradition as a pathway to a collective British identity that is as expansive, modern, and empathetic as her novels.

Keywords: Zadie Smith, E. M. Forster, Cosmopolitanism, *NW*

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Zadie Smith's *NW* and the Edwardian Roots of the
Contemporary Cosmopolitan Ethic

“It is Forster who shows us how hard it is to will oneself into a meaningful
relationship with the world.”
— Zadie Smith, “Love, Actually,” 2003

The above epigraph may surprise fans of Zadie Smith. Here (in an essay published in *The Guardian* in 2003¹) is a genuine celebration of E. M. Forster, a fairly staid member of the British canon, a moderately progressive Edwardian intellectual whose novels are largely concerned with genteel British people learning about interpersonal and cross-cultural exchange. They have made for pleasant and very British period films. For her part, Smith is known for novels about immigrants and assimilation, mobility and migration: a popular but respected voice of the cosmopolitan, even post-national, twenty-first century. But her statement, an important analysis of Forster and his impact on the novel, also provides occasion for examining a paradox at the heart of Smith's own fiction, and more broadly the emergent tradition she represents. Smith is one of the preeminent authors of the “cosmopolitan novel,” a subgenre that seeks to transcend the novel's traditional ties to the nation-state. And Smith's particular contribution balances a post-nationalist ethic with a fierce commitment to a strand of British heritage and a robust concern for local culture and national history: a cosmopolitan writer by way of the British canon.

Much can be gleaned about this peculiar condition from an experience Smith recounts in an essay from July 2014.² Smith's anecdote in its original context illustrates the change of heart she underwent about science fiction writer JG Ballard. Smith describes her initial meeting with Ballard aboard the boat as “a car crash,” it was so disastrously uncomfortable. But this anecdote also offers a window into a larger discussion about Smith's fiction, her worldview, and her place among the British literary establishment:

The boat was full of young British writers, many of them drunk, and a few had begun hurling a stack of cheap conference chairs over the hull into the water. I was 23, had only been a *young British writer* for a couple of months [emphasis added], and can recall being very anxious about those chairs: I was not the type to rock the boat. I was too amazed to be *on* the boat. (“Sex and Wheels”)

The allegory here is significant to Smith’s self-fashioning: black, female, and working-class, she can board a vessel identifying her as a “young British writer,” and carrying her toward a place in Britain’s cultural heritage. She goes on to tell us how she nearly literally ran into Ballard. They then struck up what turned out to be an ‘agonising’ conversation without any alignment of taste or attitude from either party. Here is Smith’s interpretation of why they got off to quite such a bad start:

I was being dull—but the trouble went deeper than that. James Graham Ballard was a man born on the inside, to the colonial class, that is, to the very marrow of British life; but he broke out of that restrictive mould and went on to establish—uniquely among his literary generation—an autonomous hinterland, not attached to the mainland in any obvious way. I meanwhile, born on the outside of it all, was hell bent on breaking *in* [emphasis in original]. And so my Ballard encounter—like my encounters, up to that point, with his work—was essentially a missed encounter: ships passing in the night. (“Sex and Wheels”)

Ballard here offers Smith a type of the British writer in relation to which she can define herself, an affinity and a contrast; he, like she, is an insider and an outsider, only in precisely the opposite direction that she is. Two particular phrases stand out here, two phrases that could arguably be the twin defining features of Smith’s career as a novelist: “born on the outside of it all,” and “hell

bent on breaking *in* [to the very marrow of British life].” The Jamaican-British Smith’s work has been celebrated for its incisive, particularized depictions of twenty-first century multicultural identity, for illuminating the diverse postwar cosmopolis London has become. Her childhood in the public housing of Northwest London, ‘outside of it all,’ has informed that vision. Because of these particular qualities of her writing, and the facts of her biography, her work has been frequently grouped with other contemporary British postcolonial writers, especially Salman Rushdie; in fact, this association is what first brought Smith an invitation onto the boat of young British writers.

When she burst onto the literary scene in 2000, at age 24, with the publication of *White Teeth* to enormous critical and popular praise, Smith was frequently heralded as the heir to Rushdie’s legacy, a writer who brought to thrilling life the experiences of postcolonial, multicultural Britain (Quinn). Smith’s fiction encouraged this comparison; in a signature intertextual move, *White Teeth* incorporates the riots in the wake of Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* as a key moment in the lives of several of her mixed-up, ever-intertwining characters.

The novel “quickly became part of the canon of modern British fiction with its combination of witty satire and insightful analysis of the experiences of a person of color in the changing reality of Britain” (Campion 101). Since then, and with the publication of her next two novels, *The Autograph Man* (2002) and *On Beauty* (2005), Smith has continued to garner critical praise and significant attention in literary circles as a “leading contemporary novelist” (Campion 102), and specifically, like Rushdie, a writer who could speak to the multicultural reality of the day, a voice of the zeitgeist (Tolan 137). This literary and cultural association with Rushdie and other important voices of the late-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries appears to place Smith squarely within the tradition of the new cosmopolitan novel. In addition, Smith herself—

her life and her intellectual interests—is something of a poster child for contemporary cosmopolitan life. Born in London to a black Jamaican mother and a white English father, Smith went to Cambridge, became a novelist, and now teaches creative writing at New York University. Her essay collection from 2009, *Changing My Mind*, ranges over influences as varied as Kafka, David Foster Wallace, “The Philadelphia Story,” Zora Neale Hurston, George Eliot, Roland Barthes, and E. M. Forster. She is currently a frequent contributor to both the *New Yorker* and the *New York Review of Books*.

But Smith’s interest in establishing a place for herself in the literature of the last decade parallels her effort to relate to the longer history of British fiction. Smith has carefully documented her literary historical influences, dipping freely into the British canon and carrying on her own inter-textual conversation with its members: Charles Dickens, James Joyce, and especially Forster. Smith’s work is intent on ‘breaking *in*’—seeking a place within rather than against the British canon that has shaped the novel form over the past three centuries. At the same time she is invested in extending that tradition without sacrificing her particular ethical emphases and concerns.

In fact, the ethics of Smith’s fiction are drawn from that very tradition—specifically, from E. M. Forster. This essay’s epigraph is just one of many moments in which Smith has publicly proclaimed affection, respect, and unique indebtedness to Forster (in Smith’s own words: a “notable English novelist, common or garden variety” [*Changing My Mind* 17]). In the case of the epigraph, Smith is reflecting on what she sees as the whole project of his fiction: to show “how *hard* it is to will oneself into a meaningful *relationship with the world*” (emphasis added). Yet this encapsulation of Forster’s work is also self-reflective. Indeed, this one phrase could be used to describe Smith’s career-long effort to dramatize Forster’s problem: to illustrate

both the importance of a cosmopolitan ethic (a relationship with the world should be meaningful) and the contingencies thereof (this is a hard thing to do).

It is this investment in Forster—representative of the somewhat stuffy interior of British intellectual history—that grounds her restless, ranging, global sensibility. Smith preserves a relationship to the British canon by engaging with Forster, rooting her ethical concerns in his and then using her own fiction to explore forms of cosmopolitan citizenship in a twenty-first century context. From the start her characters have dealt with the conflicts of mobility versus rootedness and shared identity versus self-fashioning, and have consistently found each other, and themselves, via cross-cultural connection. As her literary star has risen, Smith's critical and personal essays (the majority of her work during a seven-year span between her two most recent novels, *On Beauty* [2005] and *NW* [2012]) have shown her political and ethical concerns to be both broad and deep, relatable but still specific, clear but not rigid. But with *NW*, her return to fiction, Smith places an increased emphasis on the particular problem of Britishness as a form of national affiliation and the increasingly cosmopolitan social networks that inform the lives of Smith and her characters. Using her signature inside/outside perspective, Smith focuses on Britain's struggle between cosmopolitan promise and lived reality. Those Britons we encounter in *NW*, like in Smith's earlier books, explore various models of citizenship in pursuit of a meaningful social identity to both anchor and elevate their place in the world. But this time, their fates and flaws offer a forceful corrective to the promise of the cosmopolitan ideal; rather than growing from a rooted position in their local community, they are confined by the circumstances and expectations dictated by it. In showing how the roots of their identities limit access to cosmopolitan life, Smith turns these personal encounters outward to interrogate the systems of power in her nation. By highlighting this clash of promise and failure Smith extends Forster's

legacy, re-envisioning his concerns for the twenty-first century. It is here, when she yanks the transcendent cosmopolitan back to earth, that Smith tells a more complete story of today's British urban life. The story is her most important contribution thus far to discussions of cosmopolitan and national identity in an increasingly globalized world.

Cosmopolitan Studies and the Contemporary Cosmopolitan Figure

Smith's work, and Forster's for that matter, is preoccupied with *the cosmopolitan* as a literary and social type. This figure has been central to cosmopolitan thought, as an intellectual tradition, for centuries.³ Still, while scholars of cosmopolitanism point to its long history, they also observe that the field of cosmopolitan studies has exploded in size and scope in the last twenty-five years. Berthold Schoene identifies the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989), and then the attacks on the World Trade Center (2001), as key historical factors in the expansion of the cosmopolitan conversation; it is specifically since these events that "globalization and cosmopolitanisation have come to be perceived as twin phenomena working to fix, as Zygmunt Bauman puts it, 'the intractable fate of the world'" (Schoene 1).

Accordingly, cosmopolitan studies is interdisciplinary; the field draws scholars from history, social and political sciences, economics, and literary studies.⁴ However, as Schoene points out in his introduction to *The Cosmopolitan Novel* (2009), this contemporary appetite for investigating cosmopolitanism has not produced much in the way of consensus or even clarity: "what cosmopolitanism is, or might be, remains as yet to be clearly defined" (2). But Eleonore Kofman has noted two particular pathways the field has taken to treat this problem:

Surveying the burgeoning literature, two broad strands of thought engage with cosmopolitanism. The first emanates from a socio-cultural and aesthetic understanding of the cosmopolitan figure [. . .] The second, the political strand, has worked with the

fissures and pressures of the state system, arguing that contemporary problems require solutions at the political level that transcend states. (83)

Many scholars, including Kofman, Schoene, and Kwame Anthony Appiah, have emphasized the first strand in their attempts to theorize the challenging questions of the aims, promise, and limitations of a cosmopolitan identity. Their work on the cosmopolitan figure offers a useful conceptual vocabulary for explaining Smith's work and especially her characters.

Etymology tells us that a cosmopolitan is a world citizen, "someone who thinks that the world is, so to speak, our shared hometown, reproducing something very like the self-conscious oxymoron of the 'global village'" (Appiah 217). According to these theorists, what a cosmopolitan of today is *not* is as important to define as who they are; for example, contemporary cosmopolitans are not traditional cosmopolitans, which I take to mean those practicing pre-1989 cosmopolitanism. This "toxic cosmopolitanism" of pre-1989 looks like "Victorian mission Christianity or the colonial *mission civilisatrice*, that manifest love for others by attempting to impose their own purportedly superior ways, often by the sword" (Appiah 221). So contemporary cosmopolitans, by Appiah's account, seek to distance themselves from the sociopolitical ethic of colonialism.

Traditional cosmopolitans have also been condemned for effete as well as violent tendencies and a superficial interest in other communities—the cosmopolitan as a glorified tourist. Critics of traditional cosmopolitanism point out that the tourist may enjoy her encounters on an aesthetic level, but she has no vision for real global community-building. So traditional cosmopolitanism was too narrowly defined as a function of privilege. And those select (Western, male, wealthy) elite who could live a cosmopolitan lifestyle often did so at the expense of those who could not.

The twenty-first century cosmopolitan, then, represents new forms of global citizenship; she neither looks to create common ground at the expense of social diversity or individual autonomy, nor wants to peruse and collect exotic examples of difference at the expense of genuine engagement with those exhibiting it. One recent model for cosmopolitan thought that effectively advocates this balance is Appiah's notion of "rooted cosmopolitanism." In his conception, cosmopolitans do not seek to do away with or diminish the ethical, relational ties that shape and inform individual identity (and are necessarily local rather than global) in favor of general universalist principles, but rather to find smaller, particular ties across and between societal difference that don't demand totalizing similarity.⁵ Contemporary cosmopolitans, according to Appiah, must believe in the universal validity of difference and yet still seek for intimate connections across those differences. Appiah's cosmopolitans—who keep their sights on individuals within local communities, rather than bring the world together in total harmony—reflects a level of pragmatism that speaks to a larger trend in the field.⁶ This brand of cosmopolitanism, with its emphasis on specific relationships, is also fruitful philosophical ground for realist fiction, and especially for Zadie Smith.⁷

Eleonore Kofman, however, cautions that the state of cosmopolitanism as a social philosophy might yet be too optimistic. She argues that current ideas about cosmopolitanism, versus the availability and applicability of those ideas, expose problems. The ones she cites are the very problems that so engage the imaginations of Forster and Smith. Indeed, Kofman's work analyzes current data that speaks very directly to the London of *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man*, and *NW*.⁸ Much of her data demonstrates that while cosmopolitans may no longer be tied to the profits of colonial expansion, they are still beneficiaries of certain forms of privilege that others lack. She argues that in the global economy of the twenty-first century, "Staying immobile

is not an option, but the effects of this are radically unequal. Some of us become fully and truly global; some are fixed in their locality [. . .] in a world in which the global sets the rules”

(Kofman 86).

Kofman’s crucial point is that contemporary cosmopolitans, whatever their philosophical outlook may be, are still defined and influenced by larger sociopolitical forces, which in large part dictate whose lives express cosmopolitan values, and whose do not. And specifically, a cosmopolitan figure, while now found in more lifestyles and locales (though with still many privilege-based restrictions), is not necessarily perceived as the harbinger of increased cultural understanding or postnational camaraderie, depending on what they look like and how threatening they may seem to the dominant culture.⁹ Kofman urges caution (and data) upon her fellow scholars:

Too much of the celebratory writing on cosmopolitanism is not substantiated by empirical evidence and is more concerned with generating a new orthodoxy of theorizing social life based on the entitled and privileged subject, who enjoys unfettered movement, effortlessly consumes different cultures and places and is free to proclaim multiple identities. (94)

While Zadie Smith’s fiction is not the empirical evidence Kofman is seeking, the sociologist can here find correspondence in literary studies—Smith’s fiction speaks to Kofman’s analysis and especially her concerns for the field of cosmopolitan studies. Her books are very deeply engaged with the vision of rooted cosmopolitanism, while at the same time illustrating with specific and vivid characters many of the problems that Kofman’s research identifies. The novels are replete with figures whose interactions and conflicts dramatize the very debate of cosmopolitanism’s attainability by foregrounding questions such as: who are the real cosmopolitans today, and who

is disallowed? Who can both acknowledge and bridge sociocultural, racial, or national differences? Whose cosmopolitan lifestyle is celebrated, and whose is deemed suspicious?

Smith finds a resource for addressing these issues in the Edwardian era and, in the process, demonstrates the degree to which they have been a uniquely British concern for over a century. Indeed, Rebecca Walkowitz's *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (2006), traces the tradition of cosmopolitan thought through two important periods of British fiction: the early and late twentieth century. She argues that modernist novelists from these two eras use innovative narrative and stylistic techniques to assert a perspective of what she terms "critical cosmopolitanism." Critical cosmopolitanism echoes Appiah's call for a rooted sensibility fused to a global concern for humanity. Walkowitz's cosmopolitans—Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce from the early twentieth century, and W.G. Sebald, Salman Rushdie, and Kazuo Ishiguro as the contemporary writers perpetuating the tradition—tend to "assert the often invisible connections between personal and international experiences" (Walkowitz 6); in short, their stories are cosmopolitan and even global in subject, but delivered on a local, human scale. Walkowitz's study also offers a helpful model for thinking about the genealogy of cosmopolitan thought, and how those roots continue to inform British contemporary fiction; significantly, her two groups of writers are contemporaries of Forster and Smith respectively, and identified as particularly British writers.¹⁰

Smith's cosmopolitan fiction is thus part of an important and ongoing tradition of novel writing that expresses a rooted or critical version of the cosmopolitan. Schoene's *The Cosmopolitan Novel* identifies in the contemporary British novel a singularly cosmopolitan vision.¹¹ His project expands the paradox of Smith's fiction: the novel is known as a form for explaining a nation to itself, but in Smith and other contemporary novelists, it has moved on to

explaining identities that transcend national boundaries. According to Schoene, this is the uniquely important contribution of literature to cosmopolitan studies: “Highly sensitive to historical and socio-economic shifts in polarity and perspective, literature is equipped with a unique pioneering capacity for envisioning the world” (25). Britain since 1945 has faced many of the shifts to which Schoene refers: its place in the globalized economy continues to vacillate, and its increasingly heterogenous citizens maintain various conceptions of citizenship and community within and beyond a national framework. British novels that explore the consequences and possibilities of these changes can offer nuanced, specific narratives that illustrate their impact on individuals and local communities, and in doing so take cosmopolitan studies beyond the realm of the theoretical.

Strange Bedfellows: Zadie Smith and E. M. Forster

And indeed, Smith’s novels present a vision of the world that confronts the promise of and challenges to contemporary cosmopolitanism, while also using this conflict to interrogate the particular problems of her Britain. For this project she has in E. M. Forster an important, if unlikely, predecessor. According to Smith, Forster “famously championed intimacy over sociality, friendship over country [. . .] his empathic instincts and enthusiasm rest always on those exiled from a societal network” (“Love Actually”). Smith’s commitment to Forster is rooted in statements like this, statements from her critical work which both incisively capture *his* cosmopolitan ethics and self-reflexively comment on *hers*, providing us with a lens through which to consider her fiction.

In the same essay, Smith explains and defends E. M. Forster’s work for an audience if not unfamiliar then at least less than enamored with it. Forster, she argues, transformed the English comic novel because of his stubborn empathy for even his most muddled of characters: “He

expanded the comic novel's ethical space (while unbalancing its moral certainties) simply by letting more of life in. Austen asks for toleration from her readers. Forster demands something far stickier, more shameful: love” (“Love, Actually”). Forster’s affection for his characters is especially notable because of their many spectacular weaknesses, Smith notes; but his fiction

plays an essential role in our moral understanding [. . .] it is Forster’s fiction that goes further in showing us how very difficult an educated heart is to achieve. It is Forster who shows us how hard it is to will oneself into a meaningful relationship with the world; it is Forster who lends his empathy to those who fail to do so. (“Love, Actually”)

This expansion of the epigraph suggests, not just the cosmopolitan project of Forster’s (and Smith’s) fiction, as I’ve discussed, but also Forster’s (and Smith’s) ethical pathway to that project: a shared belief in the importance of empathy between individuals above all else, a rooted cosmopolitan ethic that continually challenges us to encounter more difference and approach it with more love. Ultimately, Smith suggests that this is the challenge not just of cosmopolitanism, but of the novel form: “‘When we read with fine attention, we find ourselves caring about people who are various, muddled, uncertain and not quite like us (and this is good).’ [. . .] This is the good that novels do, and the good that they are” (“Love, Actually”). Smith’s vision of the novel’s potential affirms and expands Schoene’s claim that literature can offer nuanced visions of a changing world. Smith demonstrates here that the individuals we encounter within that world provide an opportunity not only to observe the challenge of characters practicing rooted cosmopolitanism, but also to practice that ethic ourselves as readers. Accordingly, Smith’s first four novels explore the same essential challenge of the cosmopolitan ethic for the twenty-first century; their characters, too, seek for and struggle with friend before nation, specificity before

stereotype, empathy before infighting, while also inviting readers to care for and understand their particular problems.

As “Love, Actually” suggests, Smith’s essays, commentary, and extra-textual notes to her novels express a profound kinship with E. M. Forster. She has written several essays on Forster that touch on both the analytical and the personal (“Love, Actually,” opens with her experience of reading and loving *A Room with a View* at age 11). She insightfully explores his fiction and nonfiction work and its relationship to his contemporaries’ in “E. M. Forster, Middle Manager” (her review of the collection *The BBC Talks of E. M. Forster, 1929-1960*). As Alberto Fernandez Carbajal notes, this “complex defense of Forster as a moderate but complicated writer goes a long way towards reclaiming him as an important figure of twentieth-century literature whose impact on several generations of postcolonial, contemporary, and Black British writers has been understated.” Most famously, the acknowledgments to Smith’s third novel, *On Beauty*, explicitly references Forster’s *Howards End*: “It should be obvious from the first line that this is a novel inspired by a love of EM Forster, to whom all my fiction is indebted, one way or the other. This time I wanted to repay the debt with *hommage*” [emphasis in original].

The ideas of debt, homage, influence and reclamation at play here are the core of a continuing critical conversation on the Forster-Smith relationship and how it informs the latter’s authorial choices. Forster’s cosmopolitan ethics anchor Smith’s fiction in a way that suggests Forster is the root to Smith’s own rooted cosmopolitanism: her literary-cultural ties to Forster, and by extension to Britain’s canon, provide the basis of her authorial identity and the local stage on which she dramatizes her values. Rooted in the tradition and the challenges of England, Smith’s cosmopolitan ethics achieve global resonance by way of specific national loyalties and

concerns.

Forster's Cosmopolitans

Each of Forster's novels, regardless of setting, concerns itself with international experiences and how they impact personal relationships; his humanist philosophy of "only connect" (the epigraph to *Howards End* that came to represent his ethics more generally) is consistently set against a backdrop of transnational conflict and sociocultural difference. And Forster's life, like Smith's, was marked by the interplay of home and abroad. Even before he published any novels, Forster traveled widely and set many of his novels in the same settings he frequented: Italy, Egypt, India (Beauman).

A Room with a View and *A Passage to India* are the novels which are at first likely to arise in a discussion of Forster's cosmopolitanism, because of their traveler protagonists and international setting. Forster's engagement with cosmopolitanism, though, is not confined to his fictions of travel; even when his characters don't leave their island, they embody varying models of citizenship that sometimes harmonize and sometimes clash with the networks that surround them. Indeed, *Howards End* in particular expresses Forster's cosmopolitan ethic in that its heroine, after encountering and rejecting a number of models of cosmopolitan living, comes to embody rooted cosmopolitanism. This heroine, Margaret Schlegel, balances a keen emotional investment in her local community—represented by the property that gives the novel its title—with an emphatic imperative to exercise respect for cultural difference and empathy for the experiences of others.

Forster's fiction, and especially *Howards End*, distinguishes itself because of its deliberate distance from the "toxic" imperialist cosmopolitanism of many of his late Victorian/Edwardian contemporaries. *Howards End* establishes Forster's prescient suspicion of

the cosmopolitans of his era; as Christian Moraru notes, the novel highlights “the dangers [of cosmopolitanism] we need to be aware of, such as conquest, subjugation of others and their lands, and the like” (136). In *Howards End*, Forster explicitly rejects the cosmopolitanism that is a totalizing force in the colonized world of the Edwardian period. As the novel’s didactic narrator notes at the sight of “the Imperial” type in a passing car (certainly a Wilcox type), “But the imperialist is not what he thinks or seems. He is a destroyer. He prepares the way for cosmopolitanism, and though his ambitions may be fulfilled, the earth that he inherits will be grey” (*HE* 281). The greyness Forster ominously predicts here indicates his Appiah-esque condemnation of the cosmopolitan who travels without respect for or interest in difference, but rather hopes to make the world his own mirror.

The collisions Forster presents us with in the novel between ways of life (the lively, bohemian [and half-German] Schlegel siblings; the practical, mercenary Wilcox family; the downtrodden Basts), although all occurring on English soil, are increasingly at odds, depicting a splintering of British life and identity. Even within just one branch, the Schlegel family, Forster presents conflicting notions of cosmopolitanism. “Remember that I am cosmopolitan, please,” says Tibby, the youngest Schlegel sibling and the least sympathetic (133). But while Tibby appreciates his German-English heritage and the freedom it accords him, “[h]e had never been interested in human beings [. . .] Tibby’s attention wandered when personal relations came under discussion” (216). Tibby, in his deliberate detachment, exhibits a fondness for the lifestyle of a cosmopolitan with no concept of the ethic.

Forster characterizes Tibby’s sister Helen, on the other hand, as a highly ethical character striving for a cosmopolitan ideal. Helen believes that “personal relations are the important thing for ever and ever, and not this outer life of telegrams and anger” (*HE* 144); that empathy between

individuals trumps all other concerns and can be achieved anywhere and between anyone (except people like the Wilcoxes, who disagree with her and represent the “outer life” she loathes). But her quest to profess and promote universal empathy while also rejecting her life in England leaves her drifting and rootless for much of the novel, and increasingly isolated from her siblings. Her long departure to travel Europe and escape scandal — to fully live as a cosmopolitan without the weight of the English conventions of morality and steadiness — is ultimately untenable: “‘Nothing matters,’ the Schlegels had said in the past, ‘except one’s self-respect and that of one’s friends.’ When the time came, other things mattered terribly” (*HE* 288).

By the novel’s end, Helen’s rejection of “other things” has made her less rather than more empathetic towards her closest of relationships, her family: “A sick-bed could recall Helen, but she was deaf to more human calls; after a glimpse at her aunt, she would retire into her *nebulous life* [emphasis added] behind some *poste restante*. She scarcely existed; her letters had become dull and infrequent; she had no wants and no curiosity” (*HE* 238). In rejecting her roots, Helen loses the capacity to invest in her local community, and damages the “personal relations” she professes to cherish.

It is Margaret, the eldest Schlegel, who rescues Helen, and it is Margaret who most successfully embodies Forster’s cosmopolitan vision. Margaret rejects the “toxic cosmopolitanism” that Appiah condemns: as Moraru points out, Margaret is a cosmopolitan figure who suspects the correlation between cosmopolitanism and imperialism and fears that the former can contribute to the totalizing, homogenizing forces of the latter (136). Rather, Margaret maintains a steadfast belief in empathy that can cross socioeconomic and cultural lines while also allowing for the proliferation of difference. She recalls Appiah’s concept of rooted cosmopolitanism in that her understanding of empathy is not contingent upon intellectual or

philosophical agreement; just as Appiah rejects the notion that cosmopolitanism must be founded on universal ideas between cultures, Margaret rejects the impulse (from Schlegels and Wilcoxes both) to advocate for only one version of an ideal life, equally applicable to everyone. “Don’t you see that all this leads to comfort in the end?” she assures Helen at the novel’s close. “It is part of the battle against sameness. Differences—eternal differences, planted by God in a single family, so that there may always be colour; sorrow perhaps, but colour in the daily grey” (*HE* 293). Margaret’s description of individual and cultural variation as “planted by God” (emphasis added) suggests both deliberateness and fixity: people, even within nations or families, were intended all along to be different, and those differences have firm roots that ought not be disturbed.

Margaret’s respect for “the other’s nurturing proximity to the self no matter how far apart the two may be by location, ethno-racial background, or political allegiance” is, in Moraru’s view, the very thing that distances her from the more toxic views of her contemporaries (114). And her focus on England and the society that surrounds her provides the rootedness Appiah advocates in his prescription for an ethically sound cosmopolitan citizenship. Unlike Helen or Tibby, Margaret is keenly invested in England’s present and its future prospects. Thinking aloud about her German father’s path, she wonders, ““How could he settle to leave Germany as he did, when he had fought for it as a young man, and all his feelings and friends were Prussian? How could he break loose with Patriotism and begin aiming at something else? It would have killed me”” (132).

Margaret’s deep concern for her community, her rootedness, is most markedly represented by her ultimate inheritance of Howards End, the house Mrs. Wilcox always intended her to have. The house and its grounds are the promise of an England removed from the

‘grayness’ of the world, that offers the opportunity for personal relations that include difference without precluding empathy. For Margaret, “In these English farms, if anywhere, one might see life steadily and see it whole, group in one vision its transitoriness and its eternal youth, connect—connect without bitterness until all men are brothers” (*HE* 230). Forster, speaking as Margaret, here establishes the core logic of rooted cosmopolitanism: the “English farm” as a fixed place in which to breathe life into transcendent ideals, an existing, practical community that provides a context for intimately experiencing differences and practicing empathy.

Thus it is Margaret who is the initial author of the famous epigraph to *Howards End* that has come to represent Forster’s most lasting dictum to his readers; her urgent calls to ‘only connect’ are what propels the novel’s resolution (though not without avoiding tragedy). Margaret’s role as a rooted cosmopolitan heroine at odds with the lifestyles that surround her dramatizes the central pattern of all of Forster’s fiction: how to achieve the ethics of cosmopolitanism and empathy within a disinterested, fragmented society. This pattern, and the promise of the “English farm” as a setting for effective rooted cosmopolitanism, forms a template for Smith’s fiction to follow and to adapt.

Smith’s Forsterian Fiction, 2001-2005, and *NW*’s Cosmopolitan Crisis

NW marks an important milestone in Smith’s engagement with cosmopolitan ideas and the ethics she inherits from Forster; its title, like *Howards End*’s, references a specific place that functions as a fixed, local site for larger ideas with global implications. This dynamic of Forster’s is still in play in *NW*, but the novel is also a departure from the rendering of cosmopolitanism that has appeared in her earlier novels, especially *On Beauty*, the homage to *Howards End* that spawned much of the critical conversation surrounding Forster and Smith in the first place. Shortlisted for the Booker Prize, and winner of the 2006 Orange Prize in fiction,

On Beauty has received considerable critical attention, and its plot and character parallels with *Howards End* are well established.¹² Fiona Tolan, however, has argued for Forster's philosophical presence not only in *On Beauty* but also in, as Smith herself acknowledges, "all [her] fiction," including *White Teeth* and *The Autograph Man*: "it is evident that, at a time when an appreciable number of contemporary British and Irish writers are publicly declaring their allegiance to Henry James, Smith has, over the cumulative course of three novels, been tracing a dialogue with Forster's potent if rather less fashionable legacy" (137), of which *On Beauty* is an extension rather than the starting point. Fundamentally, Tolan demonstrates that what Smith openly admires in her critical examinations on Forster—his ethics of tolerance, his empathy for humanity, his emphasis on personal relations—are the very same foundations on which she builds her fiction.

Forster's willingness to explore his characters' quotidian but promising empathic crossings and their failed attempts teaches Smith more about humanity—and fiction—than more overtly or consistently philosophical works can. She emulates this in *White Teeth*, *The Autograph Man*, and *On Beauty*:

[Smith] imbues the everyday with a philosophical significance and attaches an ethical import to the notion of 'being in the world.' This idea—the importance of being in and of the world, rather than at some philosophical remove from the everyday—threads its way through Smith's ethical reflections and through her novels. Although her characters may look to God and country, it is for the quality of their personal relations that they are judged. (Tolan 143)

Tolan's tracing of, what she terms, "Forsterian ethics" in Smith's early novels effectively highlights the richness and consistency of this relationship. But while her paper provides a

synthesis of Smith's ethical foundations, her framework does not take into account the cosmopolitan vision shared by these authors, which in my view is essential to understanding both the focus that draws Smith to Forster and their particular contributions to the British novel.

While *NW* remains unexplored on this issue, *On Beauty*'s relationship to cosmopolitanism and Forster has been a source of critical interest. Christian Moraru, for example, suggests that "in Forster [. . .] the Jamaican-British writer [Smith] finds a generous model of worldliness and sociality that she extends to a place and time where such values seem in short supply" (134). For Moraru, *On Beauty*, like *Howards End*, expresses an ethical cosmopolitanism that acknowledges and celebrates difference as the very source of connection and sociality (42).¹³

Howards End aligns Forster closely with Appiah's vision of rooted cosmopolitanism, and Smith's *On Beauty* also foregrounds this vision—in which "social space at long last becomes . . . a domain where self and other come together by virtue rather than at the expense of their individualizing marks" (145).¹⁴ The cosmopolitan figures both Forster and Smith bring to life in their fiction—Margaret Schlegel, Archie Jones, Kiki Belsey—make the case for "the importance of being in the world" (and contributing to their particular localities) without succumbing to totalizing impulses or sacrificing the intimate relationships that foster their empathy; their commitments to local communities and individuals cultivates a broader imaginative relation to the wider world.

The emphasis on connectedness that, well, connects Forster and Smith is clearly documented in both their bodies of work; it has also demonstrated a mutual interest in a cosmopolitanism that is rooted in critiquing conventional models and proceeding from a place of mutual tolerance for difference; "We refuse to be each other," reads the epigraph opening *On*

Beauty. And as Tolan points out, each of Smith's novels end on "a scene of reconciliation [. . .] By being so determinedly in the world, by not being good but rather learning to fail better, Smith's characters move closer to achieving Forster's vision of connection" (144), despite the alienating or totalizing forces they encounter.

While scholars have addressed Smith's earlier fiction on these grounds through 2005, her newest novel recasts the discussion and signals a shift in Smith's work as a novelist. In the seven years between the publication of *On Beauty* and *NW*'s release, Smith moved to New York City, became a fixture on the NYU faculty and a contributor to a number of important New York-based publications. And while *White Teeth* made her famous, her essays and reviews from this period of hiatus from fiction have situated her as a lively, forceful and insightful voice in nonfiction as well. Smith's "Two Directions for the Novel," published in 2009, speaks to her own evolution as a writer.¹⁵ In it, Smith argues that what she terms "lyrical realism," as represented by Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*, is the dominant but restrictive mode for writing "Anglophone" novels in the twenty-first century: "A breed of lyrical realism has had the freedom of the highway for some time now, with most other exits blocked" (*Changing my Mind* 73). This novel form no longer adequately reflects the lives we lead, according to Smith: "Is it really the closest model we have to our condition? Or simply the bedtime story that comforts us most?" (*Changing my Mind* 74). She goes on to champion another novel, the mechanistic, avant-garde, postmodern *Remainder*, by Tom McCarthy: "antipodal" to *Netherland* (*Changing my Mind* 72). And while she takes a moment to "cautiously hope" for the survival of the lyrical realistic novel, "if it's to survive, lyrical realists will have to push a little harder on their subject" (*Changing my Mind* 81). Smith has thus set herself up, both geographically and professionally, to move in a new direction with this new novel. And *NW* is Smith's "pushing harder."

NW represents a departure not just stylistically (as we shall see), but an important revision of her earlier cosmopolitan vision. Her latest novel represents a new chapter in the Forster-Smith story: one that continues to investigate cosmopolitan social types. In Smith's earlier fiction, characters offer various modes of citizenship, as Forster's do; their choices and perspectives are either broadened or narrowed by their opportunities to experience empathy for each other. But with *NW*, Smith expands her vision beyond her panoply of characters by placing greater emphasis on the socioeconomic contexts that either foster or proscribe various kinds of social relations. The fates of her characters, all striving for a cosmopolitan ideal, reflect the limits of that ideal in a twenty-first century metropolis. For those who live outside the realm of the "privileged national," as Kofman's research shows, the potential for cosmopolitan social relation is severely restricted. This is the world of the NW neighborhood, the fixed locality in which its inhabitants' ethical perspectives and cosmopolitan potential form and fumble. Smith dramatizes these experiences to highlight and interrogate the systems that dictate the contingencies of forms of social relation.

Smith's earlier fiction is dramatically different, and much of the critical response to *NW* thus far has focused on this divide (citing the "Two Directions" essay as well as the novel itself as evidence). For some, this represents "an unpacking of Smith's abundant narrative gifts to find a deeper truth, audacious and painful as that truth may be. The result is that rare thing, a book that is radical and passionate and real" (Enright). For others, however, Smith's experiments with style and structure come at the expense of character depth and emotional impact: in a review for the *New Republic* (a publication Smith has previously published in), Ruth Franklin writes that "for all its stylistic range, it is a peculiarly limited book: curiously soulless, finally more thought-provoking than moving."

The “stylistic range” to which Franklin refers includes changes in structure and narrative voice from Smith’s earlier work but also within the novel itself. *NW* is divided into three large sections (“Visitation,” “Guest,” and “Host”) and then two short codas (“Crossing” and finally “Visitation” again). Each of the first three divisions explores one character’s perspective through a different narrative mode. All of these sections demand more of the reader than in much of Smith’s earlier fiction: more focus and more cultural fluency. But as the sections’ titles suggest, each perspective—Leah’s, Felix’s, then Natalie’s—offers a distinct response to the same system of social ethics. Indeed, while the book’s title establishes the unifying theme for these narratives (all of the characters live in and are shaped by the neighborhood Willesden, in the Northwest corner of London), the section titles announcing each character’s entry reinforce the broad variations between their ethical positions and their mobility and control within the neighborhood’s (and the novel’s) larger framework.

Aesthetically, this novel looks more like Joyce than Forster, especially in the first section, which is clearly indebted to the stream of consciousness first championed by Woolf and Joyce; and the one-day arc of Felix’s story, as some reviewers have noted, recalls the structure of Mrs. Dalloway. Still, Smith’s fundamental project to confront the challenge posed by Forster’s work remains. *NW* suggests the possibilities and especially the challenges in striving for a rooted cosmopolitanism, and in doing so, illuminates the realities of urban working-class Britain that dictate those contingencies. In this she once again tackles Forster, though a lesser-known Forster who, as Elizabeth Langland notes, “force[s] us to acknowledge the seemingly intractable restrictions of national character, of muddle, in transcending our limitations in order to achieve understanding and harmony” (103).¹⁶ Smith demonstrates her investment in this same critical vision in *NW*, though she has updated the nature and scope of the “intractable restrictions”

Forster revealed to his attentive readers. The imperative from both Forster and Smith to examine ethics in context highlights the authors' shared investment in illustrating tensions between local, lived realities and broader transcendent ideals.

Indeed, as Vanessa Guignery notes, *NW* is from the first fixated on personal empathetic encounters, "a Forsterian concept," against the background of multicultural and transnational collision. Smith follows Forster by bringing to life a specific locale (for him, an English country cottage, an Anglo-Indian outpost; for her, a working-class pocket of teeming multicultural London) and exploring how individuals within that space encounter global conflict or embody broader ideals.

Within the setting of *NW* (although setting is too drab a word to describe the priority Smith puts on place within her ethical vision), each of Smith's primary characters are engaged in crossings; and as their section headings imply, each character's perspective is influenced by his or her position relative to others (How does a guest behave? What do visitations require? What are the characteristics of a host?). These crossings are personal, geographic, literary, and cultural (Guignery). The sum of these micro-interactions within each section shows how each of our protagonists responds to their locality, and in doing so demonstrates a different model of social relation, recalling the spectrum of Schlegel siblings Forster presents in *Howards End*.

Specifically, Leah, Felix, and Natalie each encapsulate an aspect of the vision of rooted cosmopolitanism, the ethic Appiah advocates for and Forster aligns with the promise of the "English farm." *NW*, like Forster's farm, offers an opportunity for individuals to invest in their local community, to encounter and appreciate sociocultural difference within that community, and in doing so to cultivate a wider capacity for empathy and intimacy. Each of Smith's characters offer glimpses of that cosmopolitan vision within their myriad metropolitan crossings.

And yet their efforts to connect fall short, and their fates and frustrations speak very keenly to the challenges Kofman has put forward to idealized notions of cosmopolitan life today; in spite of all their many crossings, Leah, Felix, and Natalie are not affluent enough, not white enough, not nonthreatening enough to enjoy the promise of cosmopolitan citizenship so hopefully envisioned by the rooted cosmopolitan ideal. While they physically move throughout the city with ease, other kinds of mobility—upward class mobility, sociocultural mobility—are profoundly circumscribed. The protagonists in Smith’s latest work find personal relations elusive at best, toxic at worst, and their *connections* constricting rather than liberating.

The very segmentation of the narrative speaks to the disjointed relationships between our protagonists; each is divided from the other, even as their lives and bus routes intertwine. All three characters were born in Caldwell, the public housing project in Willesden, and all three live in the same neighborhood as adults. Leah and Natalie have been best friends since childhood, but the gulf of Natalie’s increasing affluence strains their relationship. Felix has no direct relationship to either woman (he is, after all, designated the “Guest” of the narrative), but they, along with the rest of the neighborhood, are impacted by his fate. The novel’s structure provides an opportunity for Smith to examine the poles of the Schlegel-esque cosmopolitan spectrum: rootedness that approaches entrapment and transcendence that approaches unmooring, brought to life by Leah and Natalie respectively, while Felix, the most idealized of the three, embodies (albeit only briefly) a mobility fostered by a cheerful appreciation for difference amidst his interaction, for “colour amid the daily grey” (*HE* 293). This spectrum of social behavior (just within a small group of adults of similar age within Willesden) illustrates the difficulty inherent in achieving rooted cosmopolitanism in the context of a striated, constricting social sphere.

In “Visitation,” Smith first introduces us to the constraints within local NW life. Leah, a working class white woman raised in public housing, encounters these constrictions specifically in the form of the personal relationships she prizes. We learn that Leah has possessed an intuitive ability for empathy since childhood:

A generous person, wide open to the entire world [. . .] If there happened to be a homeless man sitting on the ground outside the supermarket in Cricklewood Keisha Blake had to wait until Leah Hanwell had finished bending down and speaking with the homeless man, not simply asking him if there was anything he wanted, but making conversation [. . .] Within Brayton she befriended everyone without distinction or boundary, but the hopeless cases did not alienate her from the popular and vice versa and how this was managed Keisha Blake had no understanding. (210)¹⁷

Thus Leah is, in her way, an intuitive cosmopolitan, a Margaret Schlegel or Kiki Belsey in new, working-class garb; a citizen of the neighborhood who has the capacity for a meaningful relationship with the world because she can live ‘without distinction or boundary.’ This ability informs her adult life and her marriage: she meets her husband, a French-Nigerian named Michel, in Ibiza. They share an intense sexual connection. We eventually learn, however, that Leah is bisexual, further suggesting that her boundaries are perhaps unusually porous and inclusive.

Leah is especially loyal to her corner of London—(“Leah is as faithful in her allegiance to this two-miles square of the city as other people are to their families, or their countries”—but within its microcosm, she possesses a unique degree of social sensitivity (*NW* 6). Perhaps too much so. “I AM SO FULL OF EMPATHY, Leah writes, and doodles passionately around it,” during a work meeting, suggesting that Leah’s ability to “only connect” has not provided her

with increased social mobility or personal intimacy in many years (37); while she has intuited the cosmopolitan ethic, via her empathy for others with different backgrounds, races, classes, since childhood, she lacks the freedom that is supposed to accompany it. Her social capacity does not match her social context. And in spite of the facts of her life and the characteristics of her childhood, Leah is struggling to connect to her most personal of personal relations: she has grown distant from Natalie in the event of her (Natalie's) upward mobility, and she is lying to her husband. As Natalie and Michel are striving for the traditional forward-march of adult life, Leah, panicked and inflexible, gets increasingly lost.

Smith's title for Leah's perspective, "Visitation," is suggestive of the ambiguity and passivity Leah struggles with. She is in constant communication with individuals she encounters (Leah is rarely alone in any scene in the one-hundred-and-nine pages of narrative Smith allots her), but feels increasingly isolated. "Visitation" implies a distant, perhaps even formal, encounter, a stark contrast to the warmth and intimacy Leah is supposedly known for; it also connotes foreboding, impending trouble. And as she spirals toward a nervous breakdown, and the empathy she is so 'full of' bogs her down in depression, her decline suggests that the environment of the neighborhood, for all its promise for exercising rooted cosmopolitanism, militates against the Forsterian ideal of a "brotherhood of man." The intractable class-based tensions that color her exchanges diminish the promise of NW as a local site for wider imaginative empathy. And Leah's intense loyalty to what she has always known keeps her afraid of and frustrated with all that smacks of excessive change or ambition, including the people she most loves.

In Leah, Smith offers a more nuanced relationship to the cosmopolitan tradition, and raises questions about the viability of the cosmopolitan ideal; and in these concerns we can also

see Forster's influence (though Smith's extension of these concerns to the working class is an important modification of his purview, in which lower class characters seem to melt away or conveniently die). As David Medalie notes, Forster's fiction and especially his later novels highlight that "the difficulties arise always when the pursuit fails to take account of the 'complex world, full of conflicting claims' [. . .] [in *A Passage to India*] the implication is that it is not sufficient for these benevolent impulses to be worthwhile in themselves, they need also to be mediated in relation to contingency" (37). Smith extends this imperative by filling Leah with benevolent impulses without shying away from illustrating how they manifest as problematic in the context of *NW*'s particularly 'complex world.'

But while Leah's relationships, at home and work, leave her increasingly isolated and retrenched, Felix's have bought him a new happily rooted presence in his world. Smith's section on Felix, "Guest," is a ninety page interlude. Its title suggesting his impermanence but also his mobility: Felix may just be visiting, but he has been invited to these interactions and will be welcomed upon arrival. And indeed, "Guest" is characterized, at least initially, by propulsive motion; we follow Felix across the city to visit his father, make a business deal, end a toxic dalliance—and then meet a sudden, useless death. Like Leah, Felix is presented as a person with a store of intuitive empathy, but also with a flexibility and comfort that allows him to move easily between social and cultural circles; over the course of the one day we are with him, Felix travels all over London via bus and tube. Each leg of his travels takes him to a different personal encounter with a different side of the city; each is navigated with some success, though without his losing touch with his life in his neighborhood—the girlfriend he adores and the father he dutifully cares for make Felix *NW*'s most successful rooted cosmopolitan. He, like Margaret Schlegel, possesses a broad-ranging empathy that recognizes the value of difference without

losing sight of the particular needs and duties of his community. Felix alone is allotted moments of interpersonal exchange that show how a city can cultivate an ethic of mutual care:

Now Felix collided with a real live young man leaving a glass-walled video emporium, walking backward through the double doors while waving good-bye to his friends ...

Felix touched the guy gently on the elbows, and the stinger, with equal care, reached back and held Felix where his waist met his back; they both laughed lightly and apologized, called each other “Boss” before separating quickly, the stranger striding back toward Eros, and Felix onwards to Soho. (*NW* 158)

Felix exhibits the attitudes and the flexibility of a cosmopolitan. And in his new phase of recovery and rediscovery, his life promises some of that mobility and freedom (“he knew he was meant to feel heavy, but the truth was he felt like a man undergoing some not-yet-invented process called particle transfer, wonderfully, blissfully light” (*NW* 189)). Felix, though, does not look like a cosmopolitan—Forster would not recognize him and neither do the Londoners who surround him. Thirty-two, the son of Jamaican immigrants, raised in a notorious public housing project, he is a recovering drug addict with a new lease on life. Despite his impressive feat of reinvention, and the natural gregariousness he exudes from the moment of his introduction to readers, Smith quickly demonstrates the quotidian contempt Felix encounters from the larger London culture. Consider a brief scene of connection via commute, a familiar instance to any city dweller:

After a moment the two trains seemed to cruise together. He looked out now at his counterpart, in the other train. Small woman, whom he would have judged Jewish without being able to articulate any very precise reason why: dark, pretty, smiling to herself, in a blue dress from the seventies—big collar, tiny white bird print. She was

frowning at his t-shirt. Trying to figure it. He felt like it: he smiled! A broad smile that emphasized his dimples and revealed three gold teeth. The girl's little dark face pulled tight like a net bag. Her train pulled ahead, then his did. (NW 136)

Within this transitory moment (literally, two pathways passing by each other) Smith highlights how Felix distinguishes himself from fellow Londoners; he enjoys encountering cultural differences on his travels. While he notes this young woman's distinguishing features with interest and pleasure (darker complexion, blue dress), she resists and perhaps even fears his (gold teeth, black skin). The attributes that mark Felix trigger, even just in passersby, notions of classism and racism that profoundly circumscribe Felix's social opportunities. Yet in spite of these hegemonic limitations, Felix manages a great deal of empathetic, cultural crossing during the rest of his day. In a very funny scene, Felix (a mechanic) negotiates the purchase of an old car from a young, posh, clueless Londoner, recalling some of the class-crossing friendships in Forster's fiction, only this time, it's the working-class guy pitying the rich one. In a stranger, darker, more melancholy episode, Felix visits an old lover--a drug-addled woman from an old money family gone to seed. The two sleep together one last time ("They fit together. They always had" [NW 182]) before Felix ends the relationship once and for all, to return happily to Grace, the woman who helped him turn his life around. Felix's ability to successfully navigate these disparate encounters highlights his particular appreciation and respect for differences between individuals, a key characteristic to the rooted cosmopolitan ideal.

Felix never gets home, though; he gets into a dispute on the train by asking two surly young men to move for a pregnant woman. It is his impulse to extend empathy (and to suggest that others do the same) that dooms him: these same men later mug and stab Felix, a stark moment of needless violence, as the very bus that has been the means of his travel around the

city—his world—pulls away in front of him. Smith suggests that while Felix of all *NW*'s residents possesses the closest approximation of the rooted cosmopolitan ethic, his local realities of violence and poverty actively limit—indeed, end—his potential to pair that ethic to a cosmopolitan lifestyle.

When Smith introduces Natalie, in “Host” (the novel’s dominant narrative for its dominant character), she has shown that successful cosmopolitan citizenship is implausible at best for the residents of this neighborhood. But in Natalie, and the 184 listed segments that range over the course of her life in the neighborhood up until the story’s present day, Smith offers a tale of upward mobility and cosmopolitan lifestyle. Raised in the same housing project as Leah, Natalie has gone on to become a wealthy and successful barrister with a banker husband, two beautiful children, and a house still in the realm of *NW* but considerably more posh, suggesting upward mobility and freedom even within a fixed space.

Although Natalie’s life appears to be the most cosmopolitan in style and content, she is the character for whom personal relations prove the most elusive—like Leah and Felix, the promises of cosmopolitanism are not, ultimately, for her; her transcendence of the *NW* of her peers instead leaves her rootless and adrift, without a meaningful identity or the empathetic relationships on which to ground it. In Natalie, we see the lifestyle of cosmopolitanism divorced from the ethic—Leah, in reverse.

Natalie’s vignettes, in an aggressively listed form, offer brief moments from childhood on, moving toward a story of gradual rootlessness. “Host” narrates Natalie’s deliberate divorce from the society of her birth. Voraciously curious and iron-willed, Keisha Blake is, like Felix, the child of Jamaican immigrants. From early on in her college career she “thought life was a problem that could be solved by means of professionalization” (238); empathy is an impulse she

discards somewhere along the way. The driving relentlessness of her ambition recalls the well-meaning but obtuse Henry Wilcox.

And while she lacks the gift for easy friendship that Leah and Felix possess in spades, Natalie (once she's shed Keisha to seem more racially neutral) does develop a distinctive cosmopolitan vision of sorts for her life and ambition:

When Natalie now thought of adult life [. . .] she envisioned a long corridor, off which came many rooms—each with a friend in it—a communal kitchen, a single gigantic bed in which they would all sleep and screw, a world governed by the principles of friendship [. . .] I will be a lawyer and you will be a doctor and he will be a teacher and she will be a banker and we will be artists and they will be soldiers, and I will be the first black woman and you will be the first Arab and she will be the first Chinese and everyone will be friends, everyone will understand each other. (*NW* 251-52)

Natalie works hard to belong to this ambitious, rarefied and highly idealized cosmopolitan club; perhaps this house she imagines is her own house, thus making her the “Host,” controlling and orchestrating a world of upward mobility. Her name, her clothes, and her accent all undergo a transformation; she excels in school and in her legal training. She meets and marries Frank de Angelis, a figure that seems to harken back to the cosmopolitans of Forster's era, albeit with a more diverse ethnic background (part African, part Italian:) “He was made of parts Natalie considered mutually exclusive, and found difficult to understand together [. . .] An indescribable accent. Like he was born on a yacht somewhere in the Caribbean and raised by Ralph Lauren” (*NW* 241).

Frank, in Natalie's view, can belong anywhere, be whomever. In her efforts to achieve the cosmopolitan lifestyle into which Frank was born, however, Natalie feels instead like she

belongs nowhere at all. Her own identity begins to feel like a mystery to her (*NW* 246). On her honeymoon to Italy (a favorite place of Forster's for the English traveler), Natalie is uncomfortable and embarrassed because she can't swim; there are facets of her upbringing that are so fundamentally different from her husband that her window into his privilege only serves to isolate her from him.

She makes an excuse to live once again in NW (the neighborhood, her most evocative local space), albeit in her own expansive house (again, reinforcing her position as "host" not only of social gatherings but overseeing Willesden at large). Her sense of displacement and disconnect only grows, however; in search of connection, she peruses personal ads for trysts under the username KeishaNW—and her marriage collapses as a result. Natalie is perhaps the most lost of our three protagonists, even though she has put herself in the best position to achieve a cosmopolitan ideal; belonging nowhere, her attempts at personal connection leave her flailing, wandering around her old neighborhood with Nathan Bogle, a once promising tenant of Caldwell (the council estate) who is now a sinister character living on the streets—and ultimately revealed to be Felix's murderer.

Smith uses the novel's coda to show the aftermath of Natalie's panicked night of wandering, when Michel asks for her help in reaching Leah, with whom he can no longer effectively interact. The dissolution of her marriage has at this point brought Natalie some level of insight about the nature and promise of cosmopolitanism: "Freedom was absolute and everywhere, constantly moving location. 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!" (*NW* 397).

Leah and Natalie's friendship—always the emotional core of the novel, despite the way they're erected as opposites on the rooted cosmopolitan spectrum—comes to the forefront as a chance for them both to reconnect with their loved ones and the world they live in. But even as they conspire to serve justice by implicating Nathan Bogle as Felix's assaulter, this bond is already frayed at the seams, and Natalie is too invested in differentiating herself from her friend to support her as fully as readers may hope:

If candor were a thing in the world that a person could hold and retain, if it were an object, maybe Natalie Blake would have seen that the perfect gift at this moment was an honest account of her own difficulties and ambivalences, clearly stated, without disguise, embellishment or prettification. But Natalie Blake's instinct for self-defense, for self-preservation, was simply too strong. (*NW* 399)

So connections in *NW* remain tenuous, tense, or tragic; thirsty as these characters all are for the clarity and meaning that comes from 'only connecting,' they all struggle to do so. It is through their failures that Smith illuminates the world of *NW* (the neighborhood): at once teeming with multicultural, globalized urban life, it is also the site of confusion and disconnect, systemic violence, prejudice, and claustrophobia, rather than the fluid, friendly cosmopolitan home of Natalie's imagination.

Smith's *NW* addresses the limits of cosmopolitanism, then, by telling us the stories of those without access to it. Not victims, these are fully realized characters whose lives and worlds nonetheless are closed in by their circumstances; as David Marcus puts it, "There is nowhere to go if you come from Northwest London. Adulthood is not empowering; it is the land of the un-free" (71). Smith, like Kofman, argues here that cosmopolitanism is not accessible to everyone,

and we should not pretend differently. The limitations of race and class are as present and potent as ever, even as post-1945 London increasingly takes on the sheen of the cosmopolis.

By showing us how Leah, Felix and Natalie all fail to live in London's NW as rooted cosmopolitans, Smith turns her gaze to the limitations of that world and its systems more acutely than in her earlier novels. This new emphasis on the contexts which challenge the promise of a rooted cosmopolitan ethic envisions Forster's own concerns (especially prevalent in his later novels) and updates them for the twenty-first century.

Indeed, the limitations of a cosmopolitan vision are arguably as Forsterian as the vision itself. David Medalie suggests that the failure of interpersonal relationships to flourish in the face of a swiftly changing city is an often present undercurrent in Forster's work (Medalie 37). My reading of *Howards End* supports this vision of Forster: while the novel does end on reconciliation, it does not extend to Leonard Bast and his abrupt death, or Tibby, who perpetually holds himself aloof. And the relationship between Helen Schlegel and Henry Wilcox remains stiff and strained, despite their shared affection for Margaret. The implosions we as readers witness in Leah and Natalie, for their inability to learn from each other's weaknesses, has some of the same willful messiness Smith celebrated in "Love Actually." And despite the common suggestion that Forster's novels are comfortable and reassuring, several scholars have argued for their darker, more ambivalent layers. Paul Peppis suggests that Forster's English novels, "[d]espite their pastoral-idealistic conclusions, their fantasies of national reconciliation [. . .] are riddled with anxiety, violence, and death [. . .] [they] paradoxically resist the reconciliations they render. Death, disconnection, and failure are as common in them as marriage, connection, and success" (58-59). And Medalie points out that "few of the ambitions fuelled by the 'personal relations' ethos are fulfilled in Forster's fiction [. . .] for the most part [. . .] these desires are

thwarted [. . .] and, especially in [*Howards End* and *A Passage to India*], the quest itself is shown to have catastrophic repercussions for some of the characters” (38).

Peppis explains that while Forster is often associated with cosmopolitan travel narratives and the shifting scene of the British Empire’s twilight years, his novels are also invested in diagnosing and treating the problems of England and Englishness in the face of expanding modernity; for Forster, cosmopolitans confront particular challenges rather than enjoy an idealized, established lifestyle. For Peppis, the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the novels concerned with this project—“their refusal to resolve competing desires to confront and escape modernity, to assail and restore England, to prosecute and rehabilitate Englishness”—are what retain readers’ interest and “articulate with particular honesty and interest the aesthetic and political complexities and contradictions of Forster’s moment” (60).

Smith, as we know from the epigraph of this paper, values this side of Forster; and it is in this novel that she most deeply mines the impact of cultural and socioeconomic contexts for individual social relations. She reframes his central problem to exhibit the same restless ambiguity, the hectic mix of ideas and outcomes to incisively capture her own moment. The ‘death, disconnection and failure’ of the cosmopolitan vision in *NW* are a Forster-esque corrective to modern urban English life for working-class men and women. Smith’s characters, like Forster’s, show us the promise and the failure of cosmopolitanism in order to “prosecute and rehabilitate Englishness”: literary patriotism by way of cosmopolitan ethics, in which a cosmopolitan backdrop helps cast the local and the contingent in relief.

What do we make of this century-spanning relationship, these persistent parallels? How does it illuminate contemporary British fiction? Peppis calls Forster “something of a literary patriot” because of his preoccupation with Englishness, its restoration and its failure (47). The

body of evidence linking Forster to Smith suggests that she shares his brand of literary patriotism. In fact, the very intertextuality so markedly present in Smith's work suggests an investment in maintaining and reinvigorating the British novelistic tradition as a medium for addressing British identity, even as her choice of canonical godfather focuses her fiction on cosmopolitan figures whose identities are persistently both local and global, both parochial and cosmopolitan.

Smith's fervent engagement with her predecessors has placed her firmly in conversation with 'the English novel' and its legacy (and especially its cosmopolitan strand). Instead of shying away from that tradition, she has embraced and broadened it, advocating, unfashionably, for the novel as an opportunity for empathy, an education in "moral understanding," even while the world she creates fails at this. She offers the readers a chance to empathize with characters whose own attempts flounder. Smith's insistence on maintaining the relevance of writers like Forster and on forcing her readers and her critics to consider her literary influences and how they manifest in the twenty-first century suggests that contemporary British fiction is invested in continuing to explore a collective national identity, even while finding ways to expand and complicate it.

Notes

1. The essay was adapted from Smith's Orange Word Lecture, titled, "E. M. Forster's Ethical Style: Love, Failure and the Good in Fiction."

2. It was published in both the *Guardian* and the *New York Review of Books* that month.

3. Theories of cosmopolitanism, like the related field of globalization, emphasize that neither trend has merely sprung up this century: "you could describe the history of the human species as a process of globalization," reiterates Kwame Anthony Appiah (216). Appiah points to early scholars of cosmopolitanism as far back as Marcus Aurelius, as well as Immanuel Kant.

4. Even the few scholars whose work informs my own study are widely varied in origin and approach: Kwame Anthony Appiah is a Kenyan-British philosopher and ethicist living in the United States, while Berthold Schoene is a German literary scholar living in Manchester; Eleonore Kofman contributes critical work in sociology from Middlesex University, and Rebecca Walkowitz is a prominent modernist scholar based out of Rutgers.

5. Appiah's argument for 'rooted cosmopolitanism' in part derives from his rejection of universalist/idealist thinking, a school of thought which, according to him, is both impractical and problematic, because universalism can believe in the equality and unity of shared human nature without caring much for the specific lives of individuals; cosmopolitans, on the other hand, find precisely what is worth sharing in those specific lives: "Far from relying on a common understanding of our common human nature or a common articulation (through principles) of a moral sphere, we often respond to the situations of others with shared judgments about particular cases" (Appiah 257).

6. Indeed, according to Schoene, "the new post-1989 cosmopolitanism has shed its former starry-eyedness and grown realist [. . .] Acknowledging and cherishing human life for what it is – that is, embracing its diversity and inveterate imperfections—cosmopolitanism is rooted in the realities of the present rather than mobilizing for the future fulfillment of any one or other set of utopian ideals" (10).

7. And Appiah makes the case for an epistemological connection between cosmopolitanism and literature, arguing that the reason rooted cosmopolitanism is possible is because of humanity's universal grasp of narrative structure, and how it enables us to imagine

the lives that are not our own; Appiah sees a cosmopolitan logic to the way we relate to narrative, and the potential for literature to cultivate a cosmopolitan sensibility within its readers (257).

8. Like Appiah, Kofman notes that cosmopolitans today are not exclusively or necessarily world travelers, arguing that one problem with the field of cosmopolitan studies is its “failure to recognize everyday sociality and networks [. . .] or the ordinary cosmopolitanism of working-class [. . .] and migrant groups” (85). These are the networks, alive and well in her neighborhood of Willesden, in which Smith is invested. And the research Kofman accumulates, demonstrating that individuals deeply rooted in one place and engaged in “social networks and cultural frames” are more likely to “engage in wider social transactions and therefore constitute actual cosmopolitans” (85-86), emphasizes the possibility of cosmopolitans living not in hotels but in places like Caldwell, the council estate featured prominently in *NW*.

9. “Thus the much celebrated dispositions of the privileged national (detachment from local communities, mobility, being at home anywhere, no fixed allegiance) are, on the contrary, treated with suspicion and hostility when demonstrated by minorities and migrants” (Kofman 92).

10. As mentioned, Smith has already been linked with Rushdie and Ishiguro; and Forster, while he took a different approach to his writing, was grappling with the same cultural and political upheaval as Joyce and Woolf. His worldview was formed by the same forces. Thus Walkowitz’s study of ‘critical cosmopolitanism’ within these two periods remains a relevant resource from which to draw when considering both Smith and Forster. Walkowitz also takes time out of her argument to identify or “call” her writers British (5). She is careful to provide a group of writers who are contributing to a specifically British literary tradition and to cosmopolitan studies because she suggests that this movement has particular resonance for twenty-first century British culture and identity. This, again, supports the notion of Smith’s particular importance to British contemporary fiction.

11. Though Schoene chooses different contemporary authors from Walkowitz. His remarks on Smith are very dismissive indeed, grouping her with a cadre of young popular writers whose books are “acceptably middle-brow, yet otherwise undemanding and entirely forgettable airport reads that help people while the time away. In my view, they are best described as novels of no consequence, devoid of truth, beauty and community” (185).

12. Though some see these as more mechanical or even gimmicky than substantive.

13. This brand of cosmopolitanism, according to Moraru, departs from the “classical cosmopolitanism” that, while brandishing ideas of universalism, was fundamentally Eurocentric and imperial in nature (Moraru 138-39).

14. While Moraru cites Appiah in his article as an important scholar within the larger field of cosmopolitan studies (139), he doesn’t specifically invoke Appiah as the inspiration for his own “differential cosmopolitanism,” but his explanation thereof points to the same key balance between global and personal that Appiah’s “rooted cosmopolitanism” calls for (143).

15. Published initially for the *New York Review of Books* as “Two paths for the novel” and then revised as “Two directions” in her 2009 essay collection, *Changing My Mind*.

16. Langland’s essay, “Forster and the novel,” examines Forster’s understanding of the novel as a form and considers the contributions he made to its tradition; she concludes that his understanding of ‘national character’ and its shortcomings is one of the reasons Forster’s work remains relevant.

17. Natalie’s retrospective of her own childhood is intertwined with Leah’s, providing further insight into Leah’s character.

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