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DOI:
10.1017/CBO9781107337022.005

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Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (Harvard):
James, D 2015, Worlded localisms: cosmopolitics writ small. in L Platt & S Upstone (eds), *Postmodern Literature and Race.* Cambridge University Press, pp. 47-62. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107337022.005

CHAPTER 3

Worlded Localisms
Cosmopolitics Writ Small

David James

When the novelist Philip Hensher recently suggested that 'fiction asks us to examine the scale of our own compassion and interest', he captured the essence of what is both a dilemma and point of departure for contemporary literature's cosmopolitan imagination.[1] At once perspectival and spacious, regional and unruly, narrative fiction seems well suited to engage this question of how to render worldly experiences of racial disenfranchisement or cultural displacement while expanding its readers' affective 'scale' of compassion. Yet among a certain generation of postmillennial writers, this process of rescaling has been as much about mode as about the reader's edification. Calibrating the personal, familial and social dynamics of racial identity, these figures have reworked the kind of fiction whose geographical and characterological coordinates seem deliberately compressed; whose diegetic reach is often confined, contingent on quotidian circumstances; and whose vision may appear contracted, if not provincialized – put simply, fiction of local life.

Such a contraction in scale and focus might seem like a pointed departure from the audacious epics that defined high postmodernism. But the localist fiction I have in mind participates in that '*dialogical relation*', in Ramón Saldívar's phrase, 'between postmodern aesthetics and the practices of a broad cohort of contemporary minority writers'.[2] While Saldívar concentrates on Colson Whitehead, one could also consider among this group Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), Junot Díaz's *This Is How You Lose Her* (2012) and Taiye Selasi's *Ghana Must Go* (2013), along with the work of Jhumpa Lahiri and Zadie Smith, both of whom will become my focus here. While such writers converse with the legacies of postmodernism in chronicling new racial imaginaries, they have nonetheless moved away from the signature techniques of postmodernist fiction – suggesting that formal alternatives are already being sought and tested. Identifying an emergent 'postrace aesthetic' among these responses to postmodern innovation, Saldívar argues that 'minority writers', 'with a few exceptions', have

'found postmodernism such an inhospitable domain for their representations of contemporary social conditions'.[3] Why the domain Lahiri and Smith find more genial is at the same time more regional will be the question I pursue here. Although they contrast each other in register, geography and form, Lahiri and Smith find common ground in addressing profound questions of racial difference, cultural displacement and assimilation through narrative actions confined to specific domestic spheres or urban precincts. These preoccupations can be seen as part of a broader paradigm shift. For whereas 'Pynchon and DeLillo', as David Marcus puts it, 'emphasized the unseen networks of government agents and advertising executives that limited our everyday lives, the new group' – which for Marcus includes, David Foster Wallace, Dave Eggers and Smith herself – have 'tried to map out more local, more empowering connections: to mine the present for those rare, fragile moments of contact'.[4] As we shall see, this localist aesthetic by no means shies away from the interracial dynamics of cultural conviviality or from the ethically unpredictable demands of cosmopolitan accommodation.[5] On the contrary, Lahiri and Smith dramatize the 'tension between the local and the global' in imagining forms of social being, a tension that as Dominic Head points out has been captured by 'opposed perspectives on cosmopolitanism' itself, even as critics try to retrain 'the potential of the concept in the historical moment of globalization'. More significantly, these productive frictions and dialogues arising from 'the interaction between national and transnational impulses' signal parallels between critical and creative discourses, as the fraught global-local dialectic in theory also 'pinpoints the current crossroads of the novel' in practice.[6]

Lahiri and Smith each operate at these crossroads – which denote too, of course, the crossroads of form. Yet the issue of what forms are most appropriate to evoking systemic and ideological aspects of racial injustice and disenfranchisement, or to representing the evolving agendas of minority positions, is by no means clear-cut. On the one hand, preconceptions about the self-absorbed ventures of postmodern experimentalism can reinforce the assumption that fiction fixated on self-referential invention is hard-pressed to gain purchase on the material actualities of discrimination and marginalization. On the other hand, social realism offers no easy solutions either, especially when 'we see that postcolonial studies', as Susan Andrade argues, 'has a history of anxiety about having to defend its literature from being treated as ethnography'. As a predicate for this defence, modernism is often perceived to be 'better suited than realism to elucidating the complexities and relations of power under colonialism,

and, therefore, that it also articulates the challenges of the postcolonial condition'.[7] These formal alternatives for the novel – shot-through, as Andrade suggests, by competing critical sympathies about the kinds of political valencies we associate with different narrative modes – are complicated still further in our own time, as writers process the artistic reverberations of postmodernism. Emerging innovators are moving so fluidly between styles as to challenge the currency and accuracy of many generic distinctions, making modal boundaries more permeable than ever, and sharing something of Smith's determination to 'shake the novel out of its present complacency'.[8]

Correlations between conceptions of race and the craft of their articulation thus remain all the more necessary to discern. In an effort to do so, I take a cue from scholars like Saldívar, Coleen Lye, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, who remind us of the need to mobilize 'the continuing importance of race as a category of analysis' not only beyond the potentially reductive premises of authorial nationality, ethnic origin or affiliation, but also beyond the thematic horizons of ideology-critique, to address instead 'newly racialized ethnicities' in 'terms that can then be related to the form and language of the literary text'.[9] If Smith is right to worry that even though fiction today can 'cut multiple roads', a 'breed of lyrical realism has had the freedom of the highway for some time now, with most other exits blocked', then one of my intentions here is to chart how writers have pursued alternative routes to seemingly localized destinations yet without sacrificing their engagement with worldly concerns.[10]

For novelist Patrick Flanery, 'more and more of what we call American literature looks outward'.[11] Among his examples of this extraterritorial imperative is Jhumpa Lahiri, the London-born daughter of Bengali immigrants who now lives in Rome but whose 'New England regionalism', as Urmila Seshagiri terms it, is perhaps her most 'significant achievement' – despite her fiction's apparently limited scale, it 'contains the consciousness of a nation'. Where Seshagiri praises Lahiri's writing for 'giving us a portrait of an entire nation through its evocation of a single region',[12] so Flanery sees that her work is 'a natural response to the present moment in the evolution of the American literary canon', since there's a 'feeling not that American subjects have been exhausted but that there is both challenge and possibility in turning to other countries as setting and subject of "American" novels'.[13] In a way, these two reactions are mutually complementary, each gesturing at how Lahiri uses the most singular of settings as optics for scrutinizing the quotidian textures of first- and second-generation Indian immigrant life, registering experiences within and

beyond North America by tracing the emotional trials and compromises for families moving between original and adopted nations.

Lahiri's acclaimed collection, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008), exhibits this movement between the regional and the global, devoted as several of the narratives are to characters who either literally or spiritually are 'living antipodal lives under the same roof'.[14] In the title story, a widowed father becomes in retirement the unlikely transnational subject while visiting his daughter, Ruma. She accepts her conspicuous cultural and racial isolation in the Seattle suburbs, where although 'she was growing familiar with the roads, with the exits and the mountains and the quality of the light, she felt no connection to any of it, or to anyone'. Despite the fact that 'her mother's example – moving to a foreign place for the sake of marriage, caring exclusively for children and a household – has served as a warning, a path to avoid', 'this was Ruma's life now'. In turn, whereas 'in India, there would have been no question of his not moving in with her' (*UE*, 34, 11, 6), Ruma's father makes travel plans to spend time in Europe with a new companion, confident in the knowledge that '[h]e did not want to live in the margins of his daughter's life, in the shadow of her marriage' (*UE*, 53). Different generations behaving towards each other, or for themselves, in anticipated and uncustomary ways serves as one of Lahiri's strategies for localising the tumult of ethnic unbelonging within the familial sphere.

Concerned less with the overt 'clash of culture, religion, or race', Lahiri foregrounds the 'paradox', as Seshagiri describes it, that a 'nation founded on the notion of hospitable soil can only enrich that soil through a transient, uprooted citizenry'.[15] Elsewhere in *Unaccustomed Earth*, though, Lahiri fulfils more directly the kind of prediction Flanery makes about the 'worlding' of American fiction's purview. For while Lahiri's New England settings do take on 'planetary breadth' – achieving for that region 'a literary vividness equal to what Joyce achieved for Dublin, allowing readers to feel at home in places that alienate and discomfort her readers' – 'Going Ashore' brings to a tragic close a miniature trilogy of narratives that comprise the collection's second part.[16] The first two offer a backstory, through childhood, for the growing relationship between Hema and Kaushik, whose brief, all-consuming romance occupies the concluding story. 'Once in a Lifetime' opens the trio and is narrated by Hema, recounting the period where her parents opened their home to Kaushik's family when they return from Bombay to Massachusetts: 'victims of jetlag', Hema recalls, 'you belonged elsewhere'. Hema's parents are 'perplexed by the ways in which they had changed', as though 'Bombay had made them more American than Cambridge had'. Kaushik himself complicates this

perception in the following story, 'Year's End', reflecting that 'I'd made that journey from India to Massachusetts, too old not to experience the shock of it, too young to have a say in the matter' (*UE*, 236, 235, 272). By the time we reencounter the couple in Rome in 'Going Ashore', Hema is on the verge of a wedding that's more determined than desired – 'she refused to think of it as an arranged marriage, but knew in her heart that that was what it was' (*UE*, 297) – and Kaushik is an ambitious, itinerant photographer who 'wanted to believe that he was different, that in ten minutes he could be on his way to anywhere in the world'. Rome seems to make both characters acknowledge that 'it was impossible [...] not to form attachments', however much their stay is temporary or fleeting in purpose, and regardless of the way that 'in Rome, in all of Europe', Kaushik 'was always regarded as an Indian first'. For Hema, however, associations develop in spite of racial difference, as '[c]ertain elements of Rome reminded her of Calcutta: the grand weathered buildings, the palm trees, the impossibility of crossing main streets'. Much like the Calcutta Hema 'visited throughout childhood, Rome was a city she knew on the one hand intimately and on the other hand not at all – a place that fully absorbed her and also kept her at bay' (*UE*, 309, 310, 299).

Against the backdrop of this liminal environment, at once reminiscent and distancing, Lahiri emphasizes the precariousness and poignant transience of racial identification through the intimacy between two characters sharing comparable stories of immigration and integration. 'Indianness' in this context 'is incidental', as Seshagiri points out, 'its language and customs no more empowered to secure identity than [...] the condition of parenthood or the experience of grief'.[17] And towards the denouement, it is a highly particularized landscape that itself seems suffused with this grief, when the couple travel north 'to Volterra, a town founded by Etruscans'. In this 'austere, forbidding, solitary place [...] they spent their remaining days together' (*UE*, 318), the locale capturing the foreboding conclusiveness of their visit:

> They went in Kaushik's car, up the coast into Tuscany, then cutting through the misted blue Maremma and the white chalk hills of the Cecina Valley, climbing and descending a thin slip of road. Volterra appeared in the distance, perched on a cliff high above the open countryside like an island surrounded by land. The rough, restrained architecture, the coats of arms and the hard dark walls, were something new for Hema. The medieval buildings were more recent than the Forum, yet Volterra felt more remote, impervious to tourists and time. Rome had hidden them, enabled them, their affair one of thousands, but here she felt singled out, exposed. She also sensed

> an indifference; they were among a handful of people who seemed not to belong to Volterra, and she felt that the people who lived there were waiting for them, politely but firmly, to pass on. (*UE*, 318)

While race may have been 'incidental' in Rome, in Volterra they register their difference once more through 'indifference', visibly marked as a touring minority who 'seemed not to belong'. This provincial setting makes nomads of them both, its isolated beauty reaffirming the exposure Hema now senses afresh. Indeed, Lahiri's style encapsulates as it contracts something of this contrast between environment and affect, between the 'impervious' elegance of sienna stone buildings and the brute reality of the couple's impermanence. Pictorially vivid renditions of the journey through 'misted blue' and 'white chalk' regions give way to the tightened, more decisive syntax of Hema's intimations that the affair, like them, will 'pass on'.

Composed, unadorned, often frugal – Lahiri's prose is an unlikely heir to the verbal exuberance and transgressions in genre typically associated with postmodern writing. But even if the affinity here isn't exactly formal, then it's more legitimately thematic, as Lahiri zeroes in on the very ontology of transnational experience. Engaging with the most intimate repercussions of postmodern mobility, she tracks migrant lives into localised situations so as then to perform a 'worlding' of actions and decisions that coalesce there. 'Minor affairs', to borrow Hensher's phrase, 'take on an unexpected sort of scale', and it's precisely this prismatic refraction of prosaic events that also takes centre stage in the recent work of Zadie Smith.[18] Despite her reputation as emblematic of a new wave of multicultural British fiction, Smith's work has in other respects felt distinctly sectoral, fascinated by the quotidian dramas of suburban districts. While set on opposite sides of the pond, *White Teeth* (2000) and *On Beauty* (2005) both work from ordinary, domestic spheres outward. Such is Smith's 'militant particularism', as David Harvey might label it, an interest in local places as sites for the struggle towards an unromanticized, yet – for that reason – potentially durable cosmopolitan vision.[19] This emphasis on the regionally specific, microsociology of the everyday city continues in *NW* (2012). Even the cover to the cloth edition was intended, according to its designer Jon Gray, 'to look very English and be particularly representative of London'. But if *NW*'s jazzy jacket is 'bold, simple and eye-catching', as Gray hoped, the first pages give a taste of a narrative that certainly catches the eye, but is not always simple to follow.[20] The plot opens in what might at first look like an uneventful street scene, as the volatile Shar pleads for

help at the Willesden doorstep of the thirty-something, Leah Hanwell. The emergency (a quick cash loan for Shar to catch a taxi to see her supposedly hospitalized mother) turns out to be a scam, costing Leah £30 but entwining the two women for the rest of the novel.

In a following section, we move through Soho to chart the fate of an endearing recovering addict, the Caribbean Felix Cooper, as he bids a final farewell to a former lover. After reprimanding two black youths on the Underground for failing to give up their seat for a white pregnant woman, Felix is briefly taunted and fatally stabbed, becoming a victim of violence that's not racial but fiercely casual. We then switch perspectives again to what is the novel's longest part, 'Host', whose numbered and thematized subsections implicitly salute Joyce's 'Aeolus' chapter. These vignettes recount the experiences of Leah's Jamaican friend Natalie (formerly named Keisha), all the way from borrowing her first Walkman to her present habit of indulging in anonymous Internet sex. Like something of an epilogue, the final section, 'Visitation', ties these threads together in a closing scene of reunion: Leah is reconciled with her French-Algerian partner Michel, while rejoining Natalie to untangle the chain of criminal deceptions.

Such summaries, however necessary, aren't really helpful in approaching Smith's 'worlded' localisms. Beneath their verbal razzmatazz, her fictions offer quotidian domains of unexpected profundity, where the seemingly pedestrian movement from one action to the next is of secondary importance to the perspectival narration of significant sensory or spatial details along the way. *NW*'s reader is compelled to find interest less in the connective sinew between diegetic events than in the punctilious yet oblique manner of their description. The ethical implications of this obliquity, however, are not of the Jamesian kind, generated by the partial cognitions and limited lability of a central focalizing consciousness. They have more to do with Smith's accretive presentation of scenes that unfold through her curious way of combining direct speech (cued only by the Joycean dash in the opening section), interior thoughts conveyed by free indirect style and the sudden intrusion of a gnomic narratorial voice, stepping in to extract maxims from the mundane. Consider Leah's hurried farewell to Shar, oblivious of her ruse, as Michel arrives home from work too late to correct Leah's naïveté:

> – Who that?
> – Michel, my husband.
> – Girl's name?

– French.

– Nice-looking, innit – nice looking babies!

Shar winks: a grotesque compression of one side of her face.

Shar drops her cigarette and gets in the car, leaving the door open. The money remains in Leah's hand.

– He local? Seen him about.

– He works in the hairdressers, by the station? From Marseilles – he's French. Been here forever.

– African, though.

– Originally. Look – do you want me to come with you?

Shar says nothing for a moment. Then she steps out of the car and reaches up to Leah's face with both hands.

– You're a really good person. I was meant to come to your door. Seriously! You're a spiritual person. There's something spiritual inside you.

Leah grips Shar's little hand tight and submits to a kiss. Shar's mouth is slightly open on Leah's cheek for *thank* and now closes with *you*. In reply, Leah says something she has never said in her life: God bless you. They part – Shar backs away awkwardly, and turns toward the car, almost gone. Leah presses the money into Shar's hand with defiance. But already the grandeur of experience threatens to flatten into the conventional, into anecdote: only thirty pounds, only an ill mother, neither a murder, nor a rape. Nothing survives its telling.[21]

This sequence exemplifies the two-tiered fashion in which Smith moves from direct speech (sparely presented in reportorial fashion) to third-person reflections of a more conspicuously abstract kind. A certain duality lies behind her aim, on the one hand, to simulate quick-fire conversations in all their unadorned immediacy, and, on the other, to linger over the miniature profundities that such conversations reveal. It's not that Smith tries to make too much of the nascent ethical potential of such moments of interracial encounter, or what Marcus called 'those rare, fragile moments of contact' we find in a new generation of writers, who 'seek to render not only the cognitive disorder of postmodern experience but also the social and psychological disorders of postmodern – that is, post-welfare state – capitalism'.[22] Neither does Smith sentimentalise these encounters: as with the frugality of Lahiri's narration, so here the tautness of Smith's syntax offers a kind of grammatical correlative to the self-restraint she exercises in emotive episodes across *NW*, episodes that could have easily been rhetorically embellished to emphasize their poignancy. Nonetheless, Smith has no hesitation in departing from Leah's perspective to intrude as an

observer of delicate gravities. Leah will not have been ruminating on how the 'grandeur of experience threatens to flatten into the conventional' or on the extent to which this unforeseen moment of reciprocity is prone to 'anecdote'. We might be reminded of *Middlemarch*'s sometimes-teacherly commentator, a narrator who ensures that in socially awkward exchanges the underlying ethical subtleties are rarely lost on Eliot's readers even if they're missed by the characters involved. As for Eliot so for Smith: there's nothing immoral about speaking *for* one's fictional agents. But it's revealing that Smith still wants license to riff on the implications of how tenderness between persons across racial and socioeconomic divides can be fleetingly glimpsed; how that tenderness can be replaced just as fleetingly with disappointment; and ultimately to show how even the most earnest individuals, like Leah, must watch out for their own tendency to regard inconsequential moments as microcosms of virtue.

Smith has spent a number of years, of course, pondering the challenge of retooling the ethical efficacy of fiction in an age after postmodernism. Thus the complicated connection in the scene above between showing and telling, between impartially rendering and conspicuously imposing, between contriving a scenario of contact across race and class and then signposting that scenario's ethical lessons – these complications show how alert Smith is, in Dorothy Hale's terms, to how 'the perspectivalism that grounds the aesthetics of alterity also causes problems for its perfect realization'.[23] Smith deliberately foregrounds for her readers that process of realisation, making no attempt to muffle an intrusive and instructive heterodigetic voice, yet without detracting from the essential ethical dilemmas that are themselves dramatically foregrounded for her characters in this brief encounter.

Smith's cosmopolitical imaginary, then, is at once unsentimental and vigilant. To that extent, *NW* suggests that what's 'more significant than the overt staging of cosmopolitanism', as Janet Lyon observes, 'is the role that cosmopolitan fragility plays in the conditional sense of worldly engagement'.[24] That unpredictable terrain of social and ethnic conviviality is reciprocated on a more individualised level in *NW*'s penultimate section, 'Crossing', where a desperate and forlorn Natalie walks to Hornsey Lane Bridge, a site infamous for suicides. She takes in the elevated prospect of London's financial heart. Though lofty, the perspective isn't sublimely panoramic: instead of encompassing all she surveys, her view of the city is splintered at eye level by the bridge's intricate iron lattices. At this point Smith is careful not to offer, as she might have done earlier in her career, an aphoristic gloss on the way Natalie's proliferating images of the

topography below link by analogy to the capital's irrepressible diversity.[25] We are instead privy to what Natalie sees in a jumbled and unsynthesised manner. In turn, Smith initially refuses the luxury of imposing as the wise sage with a proverb to hand, one that would help to reassemble the worldlier implications of a scene currently scattered by a 'view' that's 'cross-hatched':

> 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 get any sense of the whole. From up here the bus lane was a red gash through the city. The tower blocks were the only thing she could see that made any sense, separated from each other, yet communicating. From this distance they had a logic, stone posts driven into an ancient field, waiting for something to be laid on top of them, a statue, perhaps, or a platform. A man and a woman walked over and stood next to Natalie at the railing. Beautiful view, said the woman. She had a French accent. She didn't sound at all convinced by what she'd said. After a minute the couple walked back down the hill.[26]

The catalogue of trees, cars, spires, and squares firmly lines up the discourse with Natalie's perspective. In turn the language responds to this characterological alignment, as Smith's choppy syntax bluntly eschews the impulse to spread a sweet lyrical glaze over sightings of ordinary sites. Eschewed as well are those aphoristic asides, those pathos-hungry elaborations and qualifications the Zadie Smith of *On Beauty* would have surely employed to make much of Natalie's incapacity 'to get any sense of the whole'. As such, the scene is allowed to stand in its own right, to signify on its own potentially profound and potentially inconsequential terms: this is something of a new ethical manoeuvre, one that not only affirms 'the perspectivism upon which the aesthetics of alterity rests', but also highlights how Smith's deliberate quelling of authorial evaluation might itself be ethically motivated.[27]

If Smith opts for a more depersonalized voice in *NW*, this degree of impersonality seems all the more virtuous for being so purposive. Still, her mark as the director of an allegory of cosmopolitan fragility is nonetheless detectable, as though irrepressible. In the passage above, for instance, that the 'tower blocks' can be seen as tacitly 'communicating' with each other is an insight supposedly grasped by a woman contemplating suicide – or at least contemplating her proximity to the tragic history of suicides the bridge memorializes. It's not that this insight isn't entirely credible so much as its provenance feels subtly divided, as though the narrator is assisting Natalie with the job of defamiliarizing a multicultural realm

that appears opaque, pointing the way towards some redeeming 'logic' hidden behind the impersonal façade of urban sprawl. More evidence of Smith's orchestration quickly follows, when the ambivalently 'Beautiful view' is confirmed by a French woman who, like the high-rises, appears both separate from Natalie yet in communication with her – we cannot tell whether she is speaking suddenly out of nowhere to Natalie or simply to her partner. Who cares about such miniscule ambiguities within such a localised scene? Zadie Smith does, and she wants us to care too. For the worldly ramifications of her confined forms of attention become plain in these scenes, where Smith creates a web of reverberating images and sentiments that enlace – like the 'cross-hatched' metal latticework of that bridge – to create an existential 'logic' that's not merely suggestive but (as it turns out for Natalie) life-saving.

In her most recent work, Smith is striving harder to encapsulate ordinary moments such as these, recuperative moments of self-recuperation that carry a broader social symbolism and that were presented with greater ease in *On Beauty* where racially and 'socially diverse characters are filled with aesthetic experience'.[28] This is hardly a flippant change of heart; it's a strident turn towards a grittier aesthetic, a flintier mode of observing different aspects of ethnic affiliation and intersubjectivity on the verge. The result in *NW* is a narrative economy in which the narrator no longer relies on the convenience of stylish aphorisms to reassure us that figures like Natalie will survive their personal and familial crises. Whatever beauty exists here is woven into the fabric of tragedy, as tender and exquisitely delineated snapshots of the physical world recur in situations of calamity. Some of these situations are merely hypothetical, as they are for Natalie, who refuses the 'prospect' of self-annihilation, though it remains always 'possible'.[29] But elsewhere, in the case of Felix, murdered by those whose racial background he shares, the threat turns out to be grimly actual. In both instances, the menace is modulated – or even, like in Lahirir's fiction, counterpointed – by the grace of Smith's language: the 'wind' which 'shook the trees' and accompanied Natalie's step back from the bridge railings recalls a gust blowing through that scene of assault seconds before Felix is knifed, when a 'breeze passed over the three of them, filling their hoods and sending a cloud of sycamore leaves spinning to the pavement' (*NW*, 282, 148). In these comparable episodes, we can see that Smith is still capable of the kind of lyrical realism she has both praised and criticized in the past.[30] Yet that lyricism has a fiercer edge now, momentary elegance surfacing in localised scenarios charged with fatality. Expressive though they undoubtedly are, such fleeting descriptions punctuate rather

than transform fraught events, relinquishing any inclination 'to comfort us, to assure us of our beautiful plenitude'.[31]

With many of her so-called 'new sincerity' contemporaries in the United States – Dave Eggers, Jennifer Egan, Jeffrey Eugenides – *NW* shares the goal of steering contemporary fiction away from the brand of explicit self-display that made postmodern metafiction, in Smith's words, a somewhat 'fascinating failure, intellectual brinkmanship that lacked heart'.[32] Far more than an experiment in self-referentiality, *NW* has been applauded for its ragged genius: manifold architecture, protean focalization and inconsistent register are celebrated in their own right as the essence of the novel's roomy embrace of social and racial diversity. Less convinced reviewers detected a combination of irresolution and over-ambitiousness, judging the narrative's divided sections as a series of aborted attempts to make things new.[33] That latter estimation is, however, unfair, if we consider that to tidy up *NW* would be to mar what is a carefully choreographed unruliness that matches in form the local territory it surveys. Smith deliberately forgoes the very aesthetic cohesion she executed so elegantly in *On Beauty*, refuting the very mode of lyrical realism with which she had aligned by the middle of the last decade. *NW* thus represents a break with her earlier sensibilities: gone is *On Beauty*'s pellucid and poised use of free indirect style, the controlled perspectivism that solicited from readers a feeling of counterintuitive sympathy towards the jaded adulterer Howard Belsey; gone is the upbeat multicultural backdrop of *White Teeth*, painting in the wake of happy hybridity a graver portrait of London's divisions; gone are the descriptive ingredients that 'assure us of our beautiful plenitude', the ingredients Smith can master well enough when she wants to. That *NW* is so undaunted in avoiding these traits makes it clear that Smith's mission is to slip the noose of classification and assume a temperament of her own making. What was beautiful about *On Beauty*'s social vision has been translated here into something more rugged yet just as compositionally beguiling, rougher in conception but fiercely devoted to socio-ethnic particularisms. A determination to flout what she calls 'the image of what we have been taught to value in fiction' grants Smith the facility to offer her most uncompromising vision yet of race in contemporary Britain.[34]

'Surely there is something to be said for drawing a circle around our attention and remaining within that circle. But how large should this circle be?'[35] Such is the question I have been exploring here in relation to fictions that are at once confined in location but capacious in implication, circumscribed in incident yet global in ambit. It's the question Smith entertains in her latest work to date, *The Embassy of Cambodia* (2013).

Located again in Willesden, this miniaturist story centres on the fortunes of Fatou, who has journeyed from the Ivory Coast to Ghana, Libya and Italy, before working in England as a domestic servant in the wealthy Derawal household. Treated like a skivvy by the family, Fatou finds respite in visits to the neighbourhood swimming pool, a routine that takes her past the Embassy of Cambodia and the visiting women there who intrigue her: 'No doubt there are those who will be critical of the narrow essentially local scope of Fatou's interest in the Cambodian woman from the Embassy of Cambodia', remarks Smith's chorus-like narrator, 'but we, the people of Willesden, have some sympathy with her attitude'. Raising the issue of accountability in the most quotidian terms, Smith assesses what it means to engage across racial difference while at the same time acknowledging that 'if we followed the history of every little country in this world – in its dramatic as well as quiet times – we would have no space left in which to live our own lives or to apply ourselves to our necessary tasks, never mind indulge in occasional pleasures, like swimming'.[36] Hence Smith's investment in the scale of recognition, in finding the right circle of attention – despite the prejudicial inhibitions that seem normalised in the community: 'We are from Willesden. Our minds tend toward the prosaic. I doubt there is a man or woman among us, for example, who – upon passing the Embassy of Cambodia for the first time – did not immediately think: "genocide."'[37]

How to go about 'drawing that circle' of awareness, responsibility and reciprocity is also an interpretive question, of course, posed not only to Smith's west Londoners but also to her readers. Following Fatou's diurnal patterns of reflection and obligation, as she subsists with limited resources and endures few vocational opportunities, Smith compels us to reflect on the range of our sympathetic involvement. Meanwhile, this story's localism is itself deceptive, for '[i]n Willesden', as the narrator notes, 'we are almost all New People, though some of us, like Fatou, were, until quite recently, Old People, working the land in our various countries of origin'.[38] For Smith, as for Lahiri, the challenge is not only to see how regional outlooks and cosmopolitan behaviours might practically coincide, but also to articulate what it means for people to have a 'right to a local history', as Smith herself has put it, 'even if many of us arrived here only recently and from every corner of the globe'.[39] Even as they operate at opposite ends of the stylistic spectrum, these writers move on a more comparable affective spectrum between cultural dislocation and vulnerable hospitality, committed to localised arenas for identity that are far from inconsequential.

Notes

1 Philip Hensher, 'Small but Global', *Guardian, Review,* Saturday 2 November 2013, 2.
2 Ramón Saldívar, 'The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative', *Narrative* (21 January 2013), 4.
3 Saldívar, 'The Second Elevation of the Novel'.
4 David Marcus, 'Post-Hysterics: Zadie Smith and the Fiction of Austerity', *Dissent* (Spring 2013), http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/post-hysterics-zadie-smith-and-the-fiction-of-austerity. Accessed 1 November 2013.
5 A somewhat different concern with the convergence of cosmopolitics and localism (thematic and linguistic) in contemporary fiction can be seen in Bishnupriya Ghosh's work on the global circulation of South Asian narratives in English. 'In committing to the local', she argues, 'all cosmopolitan writing does not steer clear of the fetishistic localisms that underpin the new world order' (*When Borne Across: Literary Cosmopolitics in the Contemporary Indian Novel* [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004], 61).
6 Dominic Head, *The State of the Novel: Britain and Beyond* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 147
7 Susan Z. Andrade, 'Representing Slums and Home: Chris Abani's *GraceLand*' in David James (ed.), *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicizing Postwar and Contemporary Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 225.
8 Zadie Smith, 'Two Directions for the Novel' in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009), 93.
9 Saldívar, 'The Second Elevation of the Novel', 2. See also Coleen Lye, 'Racial Form', *Representations* 104 (Fall 2008), 92–101; and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).
10 Smith, 'Two Directions for the Novel', 71.
11 Christopher Holmes, 'An Interview with Patrick Flanery', *Contemporary Literature*, 54/3 (Winter 2013), 454.
12 Urmila Seshagiri, 'Jhumpa Lahiri's Real America: On *The Lowland*', *L.A. Review of Books*, 9 October 2013, http://lareviewofbooks.org/review/jhumpa-lahiris-real-america-on-the-lowland. Accessed 12 December 2013.
13 Holmes, 'An Interview with Patrick Flanery', 454.
14 Jhumpa Lahiri, 'Once in a Lifetime', *Unaccustomed Earth* (London: Random House, 2008), 236. Hereafter referred in the text as *UE.*
15 Seshagiri, 'Jhumpa Lahiri's Real America: On *The Lowland*'.
16 'Jhumpa Lahiri's Real America: On *The Lowland*'.
17 'Jhumpa Lahiri's Real America: On *The Lowland*'.
18 Hensher, 'Small but Global', 17. Material reworked for this section originally appeared in a different form in the review, 'Wounded Realism', *Contemporary Literature* 54/1 (Spring 2013), 204–14
19 David Harvey, *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), 19–45.
20 Jon Gray, 'Book Designer', *The Observer, The New Review*, Sunday 30 December 2012, 11.
21 Zadie Smith, *NW* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), 13.
22 Marcus, 'Post-Hysterics'.
23 Dorothy J. Hale, '*On Beauty* as Beautiful? The Problem of Novelistic Aesthetics by Way of Zadie Smith', *Contemporary Literature* 53/4 (Winter 2012), 818.
24 Janet Lyon, 'Cosmopolitanism and Modernism' in Mark Wollaeger (ed.), with Matt Eatoug, *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 397.
25 Compare Hale's observation that *On Beauty* is replete with aphorisms that 'usually offer generalizations about human nature suggestive of lived experience' ('*On Beauty* as Beautiful?', 839).
26 Smith, *NW*, 281–2.
27 Hale, '*On Beauty* as Beautiful?', 820.
28 'On *Beauty* as Beautiful?', 815.
29 Smith, *NW*, 182.
30 Voicing her reservations about the lyricism of Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008), Smith observes that 'I have written in this tradition myself and cautiously hope for its survival, but if it's to survive, lyrical realists will have to push a little harder on their subject' ('Two Directions for the Novel', 80).
31 Smith, 'Two Directions for the Novel', 80–1.
32 'Two Directions for the Novel', 73.
33 Compare, for instance, Adam Mars-Jones's unconvinced review for *The Guardian*, 31 August 2012, http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/aug/31/nw-zadie-smith-review, in which he argues that *NW* 'is oddly divided between confidence and indecision' and Christian Lorentzen's 'Why Am I So Fucked Up?', *London Review of Books* 34/21 (November 2012).
34 Smith, 'Two Directions for the Novel', 71.
35 Zadie Smith, *The Embassy of Cambodia* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2013), 24.
36 Smith, *The Embassy of Cambodia*, 23.
37 *The Embassy of Cambodia*, 6.
38 *The Embassy of Cambodia*, 40.
39 Zadie Smith, 'The North West London Blues', *New York Review of Books Blog*, 2 June 2012, http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2012/jun/02/north-west-london-blues/. Accessed 1 November 2013.