“Strolling toward nowhere”:
Urban Space and Narrative Time in Zadie Smith’s NW

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Introduction

The climactic scene in Zadie Smith’s 2012 novel NW begins with Natalie Blake wandering through her childhood neighborhood, the Caldwell Estate in Northwest London. In this section, titled “Crossing,” Natalie takes on a dissociated form defined by her aimlessness as she walks away from her home with the shame of her newly discovered affair. The tube station is closed due to an unexplained “Incident,” disrupting her intended route and leaving Natalie to confine her wandering to NW. The narrative reads:

She turned and walked back in the direction of Caldwell. Walking was what she did now, walking was what she was. She was nothing more or less than the phenomenon of walking. She had no name, no biography, no characteristics. They had all fled into paradox. (Smith NW 360)

In this moment, Natalie’s experience as a subject is erased. Through her Crossing, Natalie’s walking is a disembodied experience as she herself becomes the embodiment of the process of walking. Her identity, contained within her “name,” “biography,” and “characteristics,” is replaced with the movement of her body through the space around her. By becoming a process, a “phenomenon,” Natalie connects seamlessly with both the space of her childhood and the current temporal experience of that space, allowing her to reinterpret her relationship with NW.

Michel de Certeau describes the act of walking through a city as analogous to the act of speech within a language system (97). Just as the speaker appropriates their language system to perform a specific utterance, the pedestrian’s movement through urban space appropriates the spatial system to perform a single, specific enunciation of the space. This method of thinking
allows for an understanding of how everyday interactions within a place create a sense of space for the individuals who inhabit the city. The “place” of the city—or how roads and buildings are positioned in relation to each other as they can be described on a map—is a structure in the same way that the grammar of a language is a structure. It provides rules and scripts for how an individual is supposed to enunciate within it. Take, for example, the subject-verb-object sentence structure in English or the pedestrian crosswalks and traffic signals within a city. Space, on the other hand, as a practiced place requires a sense of temporality and movement as well as the implication of a sensory experience (117). Just as the act of speaking implies a physical speaker—or writing implies a physical writer—walking requires a walker; it requires an individual to perform the action walking through the space. If walking is viewed as synonymous with a spoken utterance, then Natalie’s experience in “Crossing” is not that of the subject speaking; she is the utterance itself. Her consciousness is reduced to her syntax.

Viewing the novel through this lens of movement through urban space as a form of syntax highlights the ways in which the novel utilizes space as a method of mimetic representation of time and memory. NW creates a path through the narrative through a depiction of geographical space rather than through a linear depiction of time. The reader follows the characters through their experiences and interactions with the city rather than following plot points in chronological order. The space of the city and, more significantly, the act of moving through that city is reflected within the text itself. Just as the novel itself is only experienced through the “routing” act of writing and/or reading, the city is only experienced through various routes of movement in both time and space. Therefore, both NW as a novel and NW as the textual space are formed by this movement of route-creation, and this creates an association
between physical and temporal space, affecting how the characters’ memories are depicted within the mimetic techniques of Smith’s realist style.

Wendy Knepper writes of NW that its “spatially-oriented aesthetic requires a new approach to narrative immersion, which places emphasis on the interactive experience of worldly/textual navigation and re-routing” (Knepper 116). She connects the experimental structure of the novel as it is divided into spatially-referent sections (Visitation, Guest, Host, Crossing, and Visitation) directly to the question of movement and mobility that recur within the narrative and geographic space of the novel. The routes depicted within the novel are not exclusively linear, as the ending echoes much from the beginning, from the section title to the physical space. However, this circularity acts to amplify the layering of memory onto space that each character has to confront in their own relationship to NW.

My goal is to further explore this relationship between the characters’ mnemonic relationship with NW in terms of how they move through the temporalized and historicized space of the city and how these aspects interact with the novel as a text through theories on the navigation of space and narrative. I will begin with looking at the structure of the novel as a whole and its position within broader realist and postmodernist traditions, situating the primary plot structure as one spatially and temporally oriented around a singular Event rather than a series of events. I will then transition to analyzing instances of movement and routing within the novel, showing how this movement reflects a dynamic definition of space, time, and the representation of memory. Finally, I will look specifically at Natalie and Leah’s friendship as the primary characters of the novel and how their individual experiences with Northwest London affect their development throughout the novel.
Realism and Memory

In her essay “Two Directions for the Novel,” Zadie Smith analyzes what she views as two styles of contemporary realism: “lyrical realism” and “constructive deconstruction.” Lyrical realism encompasses a more traditional form of nineteenth-century realism that Smith says “has had the freedom of the highway for some time now, with most other exits blocked,” and it has therefore managed to remain at the forefront of contemporary fiction as “the image of what we have been taught to value in fiction” (73). “Constructive deconstruction,” on the other hand, Smith writes “means rather to shake the novel out of its present complacency…offering a glimpse of an alternate road down which the novel might, with difficulty, travel forward” (94). This model challenges default expectations of the form of the novel and the conventions of the realist tradition. It is a form of post-modernism in how it deviates from traditional forms, and it draws from post-deconstructive criticism, which “imports deconstructive spatiality both as a model for speaking about social relations and as a textual system by which those relations are taken to have been constructed in the first place” (Punday 24). This dual appropriation process allows for a text to “be simultaneously caught in system of différence and yet also open-ended…in order to define a type of ‘discursive struggle’ in which the individual can be a conscious and active participant” (24-25). Smith’s ideas for a constructive deconstruction form of the novel clearly build on this model of criticism. NW’s form aligns closely to this deconstruction of the lyrical realist form in how it represents movement and space to challenge traditional methods of the mimetic representation of the real.

NW’s experimental format serves to answer Smith’s own questions about authenticity in realism. She asks of lyrical realism, “Is this how time feels? Do the things of the world really
come to us like this, embroidered in the verbal fancy of times past? Is this really realism?” (“Two Directions” 82). The structure of NW follows this path of dynamic formalism very clearly in how it seeks to represent the space/time of Northwest London: as something to be experienced. As Christopher Holmes synthesizes, “thinking about the novel in process, as a dynamic, rather than a static preconception of equivalents, frees the reader from the expectation that form has an analogue in ‘natural’ ideas… Smith imagines the future of the novel as a dynamic that does not pause in the act of representation” (Holmes 146-147). Smith explained in an interview regarding NW:

Everything I do is an attempt to get close to the real, as I experience it, and the closer you get to the reality of experience the more bizarre it SHOULD look on the page and sound in the mouth because our real experience doesn't come packaged in a neat three act structure. For me, Joyce is the ultimate realist because he is trying to convey how experience really feels. And he found it to be so idiosyncratic he needed to invent a new language for it. All I was trying to do in NW was tell fewer lies then [sic] last time, and it came out the way it came out.

(Smith interviewed by Foyles)

This explanation provides a useful perspective for understanding how Smith is utilizing different literary traditions within NW, such as in the use of multiple styles of narration throughout the different sections, offering different lenses through which to interpret the characters’ individual realities and attempting to capture lived experience within the structure of the text as much as within the text itself. Establishing this connection between literary style and the representation of
lived experience is useful to positioning how the novel and the characters navigate space with similar types of movement.

Daniel Punday argues that “time and space are the constants that shape the continuity of world and text, and that they are therefore the ‘forms’ through which post-deconstructive fiction…is organized” (55). *NW* reflects this argument through its five-section structure, where each section utilizes a distinct narrative style and, at least for the first three sections, switches the role of the focalized character. The first section, titled “Visitation,” is written in a stream-of-consciousness style from Leah’s perspective; the second section “Guest” uses a more traditional, more lyrical-realist style to describe Felix’s last day; the third section “Host”, is told in series of small fragments and recounts Keisha/Natalie’s entire life up to the present day within the novel. These three sections, which compose all but the last 40 pages, each follow their respective focalized characters up to what I am calling the central Event of the novel: Felix’s murder, possibly at the hands of Nathan Bogle. This Event is based on Lyotard’s concept of an “event” that “can be spoken about only after it is over, and which is composed of ‘simultaneous and heterogenous temporalities’” (Cited in Punday 54). Felix’s murder fulfills this role in *NW* by being the singular plot point that the first three sections, with their “simultaneous and heterogenous temporalities,” converge upon.

The third section “Host” provides the clearest example of an experimental approach, what Knepper calls a “quest for a new kind of mimesis” (Knepper 113), in representing memory and time through the biography of Natalie Blake. It is the longest section of the book, and it is composed of 184 short flashes of memory like “snap-shots” out of a scrapbook (Pope 173). These snap-shots range from Natalie’s—when her name was still Keisha—first meeting with
Leah when they were four years old up to the present day. For the most part the events are chronological, but some of the memories are not actually events, such as “6. Some answers” which is two lists written by Keisha and Leah describing their favorite things (NW 205).

“Host” as a section on its own follows a similar spatial and temporal structure of the novel as a whole, but it is centered around Natalie and Leah’s relationship rather than the whole of NW. It contains its own Event in the very beginning, when Keisha is told by her mother about the time that Leah saved her from drowning when they were four years old. From this point on, “they were best friends bonded for life by a dramatic event, and everyone in Caldwell best know about it,” and this sentiment repeats itself in many other subsequent snap-shots (204). The pool itself also returns when Natalie goes there with her children as an adult. The narrator makes a point of drawing attention to this fact, stating, “In case you were wondering, this was indeed the same pool in which the dramatic event had occurred, many years earlier” (335). This particular act of emphasis highlights the importance of the geographic space of the event in the recollection of its memory. This is especially true since neither Natalie nor Leah actually remember the dramatic event happening, and Natalie’s mother’s memory of it is depicted as not entirely accurate, since she remembers Natalie’s younger brother being there even though he would not yet have been born based on the timeline she was given. Michel de Certeau writes regarding the association of memory with places that “There is no place that is not haunted by many different spirits hidden there in silence, spirits one can ‘invoke’ or not. Haunted places are the only ones people can live in” (de Certeau 108). NW is deeply haunted in Natalie’s history, and confronting this is something that she eventually needs to do in order to feel like a fully constructed person.
As she gets older, Natalie is continuously confronted with the question of where her personality derives from and who she truly is without the interpretive lens of another person, usually Leah but sometimes her husband Frank. In “110. Personality Parenthesis,” the narrator asks, “what was Natalie Blake’s personality constructed around?” (NW 273). This question follows her throughout “Host.” One way in which this question is possibly answered is through the email address she secretly creates for the adult website Leah sends her, “KeishaNW@gmail.com.” By using both her birth name and the zip code abbreviation for her hometown, Natalie unconsciously points to the importance of her geography in her identity formation. There is an important part of her identity that she only taps into in this attempt to be anonymous in her search for extramarital affairs that is deeply entwined with her childhood and NW. She is experiencing NW’s haunting of her past even if she cannot fully admit to it.

Felix differs from Natalie in this sense; he has no trouble recognizing his connection to the routes he frequents. “You live in the same place long enough, you get memory overlap,” he acknowledges as he remembers his fateful meeting with his girlfriend Grace at his regular bus stop (NW 135). Unlike Natalie, he is open to experiencing the city and his frequent routes through frequent places as ghosts of each previous instance. In retracing his routes, he relives the temporal experience of his past. Felix can acknowledge that the space he occupies, like the bus stop for example, is a haunted space. In this way, Felix displays the discourse which de Certeau refers to as “local authority…a crack in the system that saturates places with signification” (106). It is this saturation that creates the connection between the physical place of a city with the temporal experience of its inhabitants, creating what de Certeau describes as “space” or “practiced place” (117).
**Rhetoric of Walking**

Chapters 9 and 10 in the first section “Visitation” highlight this contrast between a map route between two places (A to B) and the physical and temporal experience of a pedestrian walking between those same two places. Chapter 9 takes the form of map directions for one of three suggested routes between point A, Yates Lane in NW8, and point B, Bartlett Avenue in NW6 (41). It lists street names alongside distances and expected durations informing the reader in step-by-step instructions on the best route between the two points. Although it is not a graphic depiction, it still serves the same function as tracing a route on a map with the added aspect of requiring the reader to conjure the spatial map for themselves, whether by simply imagining it or by referencing a separate map outside the text. However, if a secondary map is consulted, it would show that these directions are entirely untenable outside the world of the novel, depicting an impossible route between two nonexistent places (Knepper 117). Although these map directions do show movement in their depiction of a route—it is possible to trace the movement on a map and translate that to the act of walking down the streets for the defined distances—it lacks what de Certeau calls the “practice” or the act of “passing by.” He explains:

> Surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by. The operation of walking, wandering, or “window shopping,” that is, the activity of passers-by, is transformed into points that draw a totalizing and reversible line on the map…These fixations constitute procedures for forgetting. The trace left behind is substituted for the practice. (De Certeau 97)
The directions presented in Chapter 9 are a clear example of this process of mapping a route. It reduces the route to a set of precise, clinical steps without regard to the actual experience of “passing by.” These directions describe the “place” of Northwest London, and the temporality depicted is also representative of a “place” reading. It inscribes a linear prediction of time in terms of countable minutes it takes to walk between the two points rather than a dynamic or spatialized interpretation of the time it takes to experience the walk.

However, the route also provides an acknowledgement of the reality of walking the route in the disclaimer as it tells the reader that the directions are “for planning purposes only,” and that events such as “construction projects, traffic, weather…may cause conditions to differ from the map results” (NW 41). This disclaimer acknowledges the shortcomings of printed routing directions, explicitly stating that the experience of walking the route is not fully captured in the instructions; however, the phrasing—that conditions “may” differ—implies that without the variation caused by unusual events the route is accurate. The shortcomings of the directions are therefore presented as an occurrence out of the ordinary rather than an inherent lack of ability to accurately depict a lived experience in a written set of steps as de Certeau insists. This does not mean, though, that this type of mapping is entirely inferior, nor is it entirely inconsequential for transcribing the experience into the novel. This set of written directions acts as one half of the mimetic inscription of the route, and this can be seen clearly in how the chapters fit into the rest of the “Visitation” section.

Neither Chapter 9 nor Chapter 10 center on a specific character. It is not entirely clear in the narrative who the map directions are for or who is experiencing the “redux” walk, although it is implied to be Leah since she is the focalized character in the entire first section. However, this
ambiguity positions the reader explicitly into the text without a character to act as a mediator. Rather than interpreting the experience through Leah’s stream-of-consciousness as in the rest of the section, the viewer is placed right next to her, or even into the same place as her, as the “walker.” This connection between the text and the space of the novel mimics de Certeau’s real-world idea of “passing by” with the depiction of reality in the novel as an experience. The shift into second person in the disclaimer in Chapter 9 facilitates this merging of the reader and Leah into a singular figure of the Walker and the transition into the “passing by” of the redux in Chapter 10. By concluding with the imperative sentences, “you should plan your route accordingly. You must obey all signs or notices regarding your route” (41), the directions become less abstract to the reader. They are not someone’s directions; they are “your” directions. It is “my” route as the reader. Through this projection, the sensory description in Chapter 10 is amplified.

Chapter 10 begins simply, “From A to B redux:” after which follows a long paragraph full of sensory images and stream-of-conscious narration. The images of the people, the buildings, and even the smells in the streets flash by in a series of lists and sentence fragments. In contrast to the ordered, step-by-step list presented in the previous chapter, in Chapter 10, the Leah/reader figure of the Walker is practically assaulted by these fragmentary images as the narrator seems incapable of focusing on one thing for very long, giving the entire chapter the feeling of a word-association game where each idea leads to the next without explicit context. For example, one section reads, “TV cable, computer cable, audiovisual cables, I give you good price, good price. Leaflets, call abroad 4 less, learn English, eyebrow wax, Falun Gong, have you accepted Jesus as your personal call plan? Everybody loves fried chicken. Everybody” (42). This
collection of phrases in isolation do not actually make sense, but within the context of the route “A to B,” the reader is able to parse each phrase into something with contextual meaning. The above section becomes the articulation of the experience of passing by a TV store; a shopkeeper with a non-British accent attempting to entice a potential customer; a survey of leaflets, shops, and signs; and a commentary on the prevalence of places to buy fried chicken. These brief flashes fill in the gaps that the linear route depicted by the maps directions cannot capture: the “passing by.” However, the context of the route only really makes sense after viewing the printed directions. The “redux” can only occur after the original. Although de Certeau’s distinction between the trace on a map and the lived experience of walking are very clearly delineated in real life, Smith utilizes both in her attempt to capture the real experience of navigating this specific section of NW. In this way, she manages to reflect the speech-act of walking the same way that writing itself is a representation of speech.

To return to Natalie’s climactic walk in the fourth section of the novel, her experience of walking in this section transitions from her biography into the end of the novel through a different kind of routing than “A to B.” “Crossing” is the first section where the entirety of the action takes place after the Event, representing a Crossing or bridge for the temporal space of the novel. It finally moves past the cyclical rhythm repeated in the earlier sections, all ending with Felix’s murder, and into the conclusion. “Crossing” does this by forcing Natalie to interact with the space of NW and her own complicated history with the area through her interactions with Nathan. Unlike “A to B,” which reflects de Certeau’s theories on space through an immersive experience for the reader, “Crossing” focuses on Natalie’s extremely localized situation. This section is specifically rooted in Natalie’s history and how it is intertwined with the history of
NW. This particular instance of spatial interaction is presented in contrast to “A to B Redux,” which is designed as a depiction of a present, ongoing experience rather than an individual history. Instead of placing the reader within the text, “Crossing” embodies Natalie’s accumulated temporal and spatial relationship with NW, and it brings her development and the overall action of the novel to a climax through her walk on the route outlined by the chapter titles.

Once Natalie reaches the boundary of Caldwell, Nathan approaches her, calling out her name as Keisha Blake. The two of them walk through Caldwell together, almost entranced by the repetitiveness of the buildings and the history they represent. They discuss vaguely their memories of each other and of themselves, identifying with the names of the buildings in which they grew up—Natalie was Locke and Nathan was Russell. However, Nathan’s presence does not serve to reorient Natalie, but rather to further alienate her from experiencing her present moment, both by offering her spiked weed and by positioning her in a past version of herself by repeatedly referring to her as Keisha. He continues to emphasize to Natalie that she knows him “from back in the day” and the “bad things” he has done are not “really” him, as if his past among the Caldwell estate is somehow more real to him than his present moment.

Natalie’s dissociation, though, prevents her from being able to situate herself at any specific point in time. She joins Nathan, but she does not return to herself. She finds “some relief in becoming an object” (NW 363), as if the act of consciousness is too overwhelming to partake in. Nathan takes over her subjecthood for her, leading her through their old estate:

He started walking. Natalie followed. Walking was what she did now. As she walked, she tried to place the people back there, in the house, into the present current of her thought. But her relation with each person was now
unrecognizable to her, and her imagination—due to a long process of neglect, almost as long as her life—did not have the generative power to muster an alternative future for itself. All she could envision was suburban shame, choking everything. She thought to the left and thought to the right but there was no exit. *(NW 364)*

Natalie is struggling with connecting herself to her history and her relationships with the people from Caldwell, including herself as Keisha. Her future is also impossible, which contrasts to her experience the rest of the novel, where forward, future movement was the primary focus of her actions. Additionally, Nathan becomes a facilitator for her loss of subjectivity. Natalie follows, giving a sense of direction to where she is walking; she is walking where Nathan is walking. De Certeau writes that “to walk is to lack a place. It is the indefinite process of being absent and in search of a proper” (103). In this moment, Natalie is embodying this process, and Nathan becomes the place she is lacking. He represents her history with NW and the past she has been resistant to openly acknowledging in her desire to move forward in her life. The repetition of the sentence “walking was what she did now” highlights this transition from an independent consciousness and subject to a vessel for the lack of place that is the act of walking. As long as she continues to walk, she will continue to lack a place and therefore her own subjectivity.

**Centering NW**

After their initial meeting in Caldwell, Natalie and Nathan walk until they reach the edge of the estates, and they continue walking past the “edge of nostalgia…strolling towards nowhere” *(NW 366, 372).* At the Corner of Hornsey Lane, Natalie asks him to stop following her
because she “can’t hear [herself] think” (381), showing a return to her own subjectivity by viewing herself as the leader rather than the other way around. Finally, once they reach the Hornsey Lane bridge, Natalie announces that this is where she had been going all along:

“Hornsey Lane. Said Natalie Blake. This is where I was heading” (383). Within the entire section of “Crossing,” Smith indicates dialogue through indented and smaller-point font rather than with traditional quotation markers, and this is the only instance of insertion of the dialogue marker within the dialogue itself. “Said Natalie Blake” operates as a marker of Natalie’s transition back into her conscious subjechthood. Her name and identity have returned to her now that she has reached her supposed destination. She is no longer walking, and she no longer lacks a place.

It is significant that Natalie’s aimless wandering concludes on the Hornsey Lane bridge. To de Certeau, bridges have “a mediating role” in his theories on urban space (127). They occupy an “in-between space,” representing “a transgression” and “a disobedience of the law of place” as well as “the possibility of a bewildering exteriority” and “an exoticism of sabbath of the memory, a disquieting familiarity” (128-129). The in-betweenness of the bridge as a space provides Natalie with the opportunity she needed to reinterpret the position she holds in her relationships both with other people and with her space.

As she pauses on the bridge, the first thing Natalie notices is the barrier on the sides, observing that “this must be how they stopped people going nowhere” (384). Besides being an observation about suicide, it is also recognizing how the bridge has stopped her own “strolling towards nowhere” (372). The bridge has given her a place. Looking from the bridge out over center city London—a place that is a recognizable somewhere as opposed to the bridge, which even Nathan calls the “middle of no-where” (383)—Natalie notes that “the view was
cross-hatched…It was impossible to get any sense of the whole…The tower blocks were the only thing she could see that made any sense…from this distance they had a logic” (384). This view of the city is incredibly distant and removed. Although it is a recognizable place, it is not familiar from this distance. The only thing that looks logical to her are the towers, which are significant as low-income housing, just like the estates in which Natalie and Nathan grew up. If NW is the “middle of no-where,” then these tower estates are a piece of that nowhere in the somewhere of London’s center. This is the part of the view that Natalie finds actually familiar, and this moment reflects a kind of solidarity with her class that Natalie has until this point attempted to avoid.

As she turns her gaze from the city towards her home, she “had the sense of being in the country” where if a woman “were covered in shame” she could “take her leave by merging” with the ground beneath her, in contrast the city where only “a break—a sudden and total rupture—would do” (383-384). She again contemplates the suicidal possibility of the bridge, but the act remains merely a possibility. This recognition and admission of her shame re-centers Natalie within her own identity and her position to the city. She recognizes NW as its own region as well as a directional indicator from the center of the city. Even if it is “no-where,” it is still the middle of that “no-where.” NW is its own center on the periphery. After this realization, Natalie decides to leave Nathan, since she no longer needs him to facilitate her relationship to her space; she has “merged” with NW through reconciling with her shame and her history.

This reconciliation for Natalie repositions her more closely to Felix’s understanding of NW as a space. In viewing a map of the London Underground Felix considers how it “did not express his reality. The center was not ‘Oxford Circus’ but the bright lights of Kilburn High Road” (190). To Felix, “’Wimbledon was the countryside, ‘Pimlico’ pure science fiction…It was
nowhere” (190). This act of recognizing his own position in relationship to center city London reflects how Felix interprets NW as his own local space. He has already done the work that Natalie finally does in “Crossing” in his ability to locate the center of his perspective. Just as he acknowledges the haunted spaces he occupies, Felix already understands the connection to NW that Natalie and Leah have to learn.

Leah Hanwell, in contrast to Natalie and Felix, represents a different kind of loyalty to NW. She is described as being “as faithful in her allegiance to this two-mile square of the city as other people are to their families, or their countries” (6). This loyalty manifests itself in several ways, most notably through her willingness to assist Shar, the visitor at the beginning of the novel who scams Leah out of thirty pounds and whose presence then proceeds to haunt her for the rest of the novel. Leah feels an obligation to Shar because of their mutual connection to NW, specifically their school; they both “went Brayton” (10). Leah’s loyalty to NW creates a sense of stagnation in her life, where not only does she not leave the place where she grew up, but she also desires to remain stationary in time as well. “She fears the destination…Simply: I am eighteen in my mind I am eighteen and if I do nothing if I stand still nothing will change I will be eighteen always” (27). For Leah, standing still and remaining in NW allows her to avoid the realities of aging and her husband’s desire to have a baby, something she is actively avoiding through her secretive use of contraceptives. The space of NW, then, is both a physical location that Leah is intimately familiar with as well as a time she hopes to maintain—being eighteen. However, this is clearly a futile attempt since it is not actually physically possible to remain eighteen forever, which Leah is afraid of confronting.
Another source of this fear for Leah is the feeling that she is being forced down a path of forward progression that she does not want. Her relationship with Michel is described as “unusual” in the sense that “their chronology is peculiar. The physical came first” (26). The pressure exerted by her mother, her husband, and her best friend Natalie attempts to shift this unusual chronology into a normative kind of forward progression—the next step is having a baby—and contributes to Leah’s feelings of existential dread. She wonders, “Why must love move forward? Which way is forward?” (28). This lack of directionality is mirrored in her desire to remain in NW. She cannot picture a desirable “forward” without compromising her allegiance to this space, and transitively to her teenage self.

Early in the novel, Leah comes into contact with Willesden Church during a walk with Natalie and her children. The medieval church sits in the middle of a roundabout, surrounded by the busy traffic of the contemporary city, “out of time, out of place” (77). As Leah and Natalie approach the church, descriptions of the building as well as the “force field of serenity” surrounding it are juxtaposed with their mundane movements, like Natalie pushing the stroller. This contrast pulls the church into the modern day and the present moment of experience while also highlighting the centuries of history it contains. This description shows the temporality of the church alongside Leah’s, incorporating the both of them into the same historically located space.

The effect of this history on Leah is explicit from the moment she crosses the threshold into the churchyard. She wanders through the graves, allowing the “alien past” to crowd around her as she reads the worn and vaguely comprehensible text on the gravestones. Two of the gravestone texts are printed in the text, “Emily W____” and “Marion _____” neither of which
have their full names or ages still legible. Both inscriptions also reference the women as mothers; Emily had six children and a husband to survive her, and Marion was buried with her infant daughter. A third text follows in the same format directed toward Leah:

Take it easy for forty-eight hours.

In this terrible sun.

Take it easy, Leah Hanwell of this parish.

Only daughter of Colin Hanwell, also of this parish.

Take it easy for the rest of your life. (79)

The call to “take it easy” is referencing the instructions Leah received after her recent abortion. It is also significant that she is referred to as “Leah Hanwell of this parish,” showing that she is the same as the other women buried here because of their shared geographic place. If it were not for the years separating them, Leah’s fate could easily have been the same as Emily and Marion and all of the other women; the space connects them through time and through history. All of these women are connected through this church because “the church is what makes it Willesden” both in the sense that it defines the boundaries of the parish and it serves as a tangible conduit for the area’s history.

Leah’s anxiety is further exasperated inside the church where she first sees the Black Madonna. Natalie reads a description of the statue from an informational brochure: “Thought to be more powerful than the traditional Madonna, she has miraculous powers, including: the gift of serendipity, restoring lost memories, resuscitating dead babies…” (81). These powers show up clearly in Leah’s experience with the statue and the church from the serendipitous encounter she
has on her second visit to the threat of “resuscitating” her three abortions and forcing her
“forward.” In terms of lost memories, it is not so much Leah’s own memories being restored to
her, but a more collective memory of Willesden and the other women she has come to be
identified with. Leah finds no reassurance from this statue, describing the pose of the Christ child
in her arms as an “accusation” rather than a “blessing” as “He reaches out to stop any escape, to
the right and to the left” (81). This echoes Natalie’s feeling of being trapped in the Caldwell
estate and in her role as a mother, unable to find escape to the left or to the right. This feeling of
entrapment mirrors these experiences for the two women, showing how these instances are
forced moments of reflection on their respective experiences with NW outside of their regular
comfort zones.

The Madonna herself echoes the Christ child’s accusations towards Leah in the chapter
immediately following this scene—in one of the several incongruent interruptions labeled as
Chapter 37. She says:

How have you lived your whole life in these streets and never known me? How
long did you think you could avoid me? What made you think you were
exempt?...Spirit of these beech woods and phone boxes, hedgerows and
lampposts, freshwater springs and tube stations, ancient yews and one-stop-shops,
grazing land and 3D multiplexes…Of the old church, of the new, of a time before
churches…Are your knees going? Who are you? Would you like a glass of water?
Could things have been differently arranged, in a different order, in a different
place? (83)
This confrontation aligns the Madonna with the historical trace of the church in a way that emphasizes her temporal connection to the space of Willesden and all of NW. The Madonna perceives time as simultaneous, positioning the past—beech woods, hedgerows, freshwater springs, etc—in the same place as the present—phone boxes, lampposts, tube stations. This interjected Chapter 37 creates a sense of the Madonna as the stationary object around which time passes, even though in reality the statue was introduced at least a hundred years after the church as it stands was built. In Leah’s visions, however, the church exists around the Madonna, as does everything else in NW, and Leah is just another woman “of this parish,” destined to live the same as the others. Leah is not “exempt” from the passage of time or the expectations of others.

Later on in “Visitation,” Leah accidently wanders into the church again while she was on a walk by herself. She then starts visiting the church on an almost daily basis, keeping it a secret from Michel and everyone in the same way she keeps her contraceptives a secret. She creates a daily ritual for herself of taking her contraceptives every morning and stopping by the church in the evening. “She does not want to ‘go forward,’” the narrative explains (103). In her efforts to not go forward, Leah is caught in a cycle that leaves her stuck in the space of NW and her home as well as the history of the city itself. Her connection to NW is what establishes her connection to the church and to the Madonna, who seems almost to be exerting her “miraculous powers” and transcendence over the history of NW to keep Leah in this rhythmic cycle. Leah’s experiences with the history of the church and with localizing her life in the context of the community in which she resides and the broader history of how other women have experienced the same anxieties of motherhood give her a basis of support when she is finally confronted about them by Michel at the end of the novel. Her growth comes from acquiring an understanding of the
temporal space of NW—the area of her “faithful allegiance”—to go along with her spatial knowledge.

The final section of the novel completes its circular structure in several ways. First, it mirrors the beginning of the novel both in title—also called “Visitation”—and in setting—the primary action takes place in Leah’s garden. After Natalie sees the news of Felix’s murder in the newspaper, she realizes that was the Incident that she had seen the night of her walk, and she recognizes Nathan’s possible connection. She goes to visit Leah at the behest of Michel, who has just discovered the contraceptives with Natalie’s name on them that Leah has been taking. Leah is outside in her garden, refusing to speak until she sees Natalie holding her baby and finally says, “Look at you. You look like the fucking Madonna” (399). This connection between her best friend Natalie and Willesden Church’s Madonna is significant in that it positions both of them as facilitators of her reconciliation with her own secret. Leah is only able to admit that she is afraid of having a baby while she is in the presence of the image that made her realize it in the first place. Leah’s growth does not necessarily come from changing something about herself, but rather learning where her experience exists as a historical layer in her space.

For Natalie, the ending is much more ambiguous about whether or not her experience on the bridge has altered her perceptions of her space. Initially, it seems as though she has reverted back to the same perspective she began with, claiming that the only reason she was better off than Nathan Bogle was because she “worked harder” and that he “didn’t want it enough,” echoing the individualistic/capitalist drive she expressed throughout the novel (400). However, the final paragraph offers a different interpretation of her ending. The two women decide to call in an anonymous tip implicating Nathan in Felix’s murder. The scene reads: “Leah found the
number online. Natalie dialed it. It was Keisha who did the talking… ‘I’ve got something to tell you,’ said Keisha Blake, disguising her voice with her voice” (401). This is the first time that the narrator has referred to her as Keisha Blake since she changed her name. Regardless of how other characters refer to her, the narrator has consistently reflected Natalie’s own internal perception of herself. Calling herself Keisha in this moment indicates that her perception of herself has shifted into an acknowledgement of the part of her identity that she has been avoiding up to this point. Additionally, the act of “disguising her voice with her voice” shows a recognition of these two sides of her identity, since both Natalie’s voice and Keisha’s voice are equally referred to as “her voice.” Although Keisha’s voice is considered a “disguise” and therefore does not hold the same sense of reality as Natalie’s voice, her acknowledgement of her connection to that part of her life does show a change in Natalie’s perspective. The end of the novel reflects a kind of rhythm or circularity within the narrative and within the characters’ space. However, it also reflects the forward movement of time and how the characters’ interiority has shifted based on their new experiences within their space.

Conclusion

NW utilizes several aspects of Zadie Smith’s ideas of a “constructive deconstruction” form to create an experimental novel focused on the questions of representing memory, space, and the connection between the two in a different way from a traditional lyrical realist novel. NW is organized around the space of the urban suburb and the temporal Event of Felix’s murder rather than around a linear style sequence of events. This choice of organization calls into question ideas of linear space or routing as well as linear time, represented traditionally in mapping and narrative organization respectfully. These ideas are represented in how the novel
questions the definition of NW as a currently experienced place, a historically located space, a
direction pointing away from a specified center, and additionally as the text itself. Organizing
plot around a singular Event reflects how we organize spatialized time in our heads and in our
lives. This attempt at mirroring space and narrative time offers a unique, experimental mimetic
representation of memory and lived experience. Michel De Certeau’s explanation of space as
temporal and habitable space as “haunted” articulates how we experience space through time and
history, and therefore the reciprocal is also true that we experience time and history through
space. In NW, this translates into the representations of mapping and routing within the text, such
as in the “A to B redux” which provide glimpses into the process of creating and understanding
space for the characters and for ourselves as readers.

For Leah and Natalie, the characters involved in the novel’s most important relationship,
reconciling their understanding of their position in regard to the space and history of their home
requires them both to step away from where they feel most comfortable. Leah has to gain a
deeper understanding of NW’s past in order to recognize how her temporal stagnation is not an
isolated situation. Natalie has to confront the space of her own history before she can
acknowledge her connection to that place, its people, and her own past self. By the end of the
novel, they have both had their secrets revealed, and they come to terms with their new
reconciled interpretations of the space of NW through their connection to each other.

For both characters, these changes are subtle, and the end of the novel initially seems like
a resistance to concrete change in how it resolves in a cyclical format. However, although the
place the characters end up in is the same, the space has been altered. NW as a novel resists the
idea of linear, forward progression by presenting this altering of space. The ending is circular,
but it is not necessarily cyclical, since it is less an identical repetition of actions, but a return to the same place at a different time. The action of the novel and the characters’ development exists as an additional layer of history within NW as a space. Therefore, the result of Smith’s experiment is not just a different way of representing space and narrative time, but also a different way of understanding how people and spaces change within a singular place.
Works Cited


https://www.foyles.co.uk/author-zadie-smith.