



# Inclusion/Critique: Invoking European Modernism in Zadie Smith's *NW*

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## ABSTRACT

In 2012, Zadie Smith published her sweeping, experimental novel of London, *NW*. Perhaps unsurprisingly, its playful wordplay, urban mappings, and fractured form have prompted comparisons to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, as well as to the work of James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and T. S. Eliot. This essay argues that Zadie Smith, among other contemporary writers of color, responds to an awareness that reviewers, critics, and readers would compare her work to European literary modernism. Such awareness allows her to offer in her 2012 novel, *NW*, an implicit guide to the risks and limits of such comparisons.

**KEYWORDS:** Zadie Smith; *NW*; Modernism; Race; Inclusion.

**Inclusão/Crítica:** Invocando o modernismo europeu em *NW*,  
de Zadie Smith

## RESUMO

Em 2012, Zadie Smith publicou seu romance arrebatador e experimental sobre Londres, *NW*. Talvez sem grandes surpresas, o jogo de palavras, o mapeamento urbano e a forma fragmentada do romance tenham incitado comparações com *Mrs. Dalloway* de Virginia Woolf, bem como com as obras de James Joyce, Gertrude Stein e T. S. Eliot. Este ensaio argumenta que, como outros escritores não brancos, Zadie Smith reage a uma percepção de que resenhistas, críticos e leitores comparariam seu trabalho ao modernismo literário europeu. A consciência de como seu trabalho seria recebido permite que Smith ofereça em seu romance de 2012, *NW*, um guia implícito para os riscos e limites de tais comparações.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Zadie Smith; *NW*; Modernismo; Raça; Inclusão.

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I'd like to begin with the story of the paper I was tempted to write; that is to say, the story of the contemporary British writer Zadie Smith as a kind of modernist, or at least as someone wrestling with literary modernism in her experimental novel, *NW*. Yet as I dug into the work, I realized that Zadie Smith as a belated modernist, or as a descendent of modernism, or as an oedipal reactionary trying to unravel or murder modernism – none of these were the stories that *NW* actually wants to tell. There was another story waiting there, one with greater implications for how we think about modernism and how we think about the problem of inclusion.

When I bring up the idea of inclusion, I am thinking about how Zadie Smith self-identifies as a person of color and, in the press, is often called a “black British writer,” given her heritage: a Jamaican-British mother and white English father. I am thinking about how we as scholars are invested in studying and calling attention to the work of postcolonial and minority writers – this is one of my own long-standing investments – and how this means we must explore the complex, problematic ways in which the name of modernism can convey valorization.

One way that this happens is through what I have elsewhere called the “algebra of resemblance” – that critical move whereby we bring a minority or postcolonial writer into the modernist canon by listing traits – stream of consciousness, wordplay, fragmentation – that seem to render a text modernist (ABRAVANEL, 2019, p. 183). As Derek Walcott said in an interview, “the provincial is only accepted by the metropolitan when it seems to take on the qualities of the metropolitan culture. This is the terrible irony that has happened in my own case: one is praised for acquiring those attributes that convey some kind of benediction” (BROWN AND JOHNSON, 1996, p. 184). Here Walcott laments the expectation that, when he published his epic poem *Omeros*, “everybody” would read for James Joyce, would say, in Walcott’s words, “now he is trying to do *Ulysses*” (BROWN AND JOHNSON, 1996, p. 182).

As Walcott suggests, the attempt to broaden the modernist canon to include minority and non-European writers tends to reinforce the cultural capital of European modernism. Identifying postcolonial writers as being *like* canonical modernist writers can inscribe a center-periphery model into the realm of literary value. Even when we identify resistance or an ironic echo of European modernism on the part of the postcolonial writer, the algebra of resemblance tends to treat the name of modernism as validation. Such a transfer of cultural capital can, at worst, recall admittance to an exclusive club whose founding members set the rules.

Briefly, I’d like to review critical approaches to this problem in order to point out the value in these different approaches at the same time that I suggest there is another, underlying problem that still needs solving.

Without attempting to be comprehensive, I’ll offer two opposing discussions of modernism: Simon Gikandi’s and Charles Pollard’s. These are critics I respect, and my point here is not to dismantle but to sketch the landscape of inclusion in modernist studies.

Simon Gikandi and Charles Pollard are two critics who, writing specifically about Caribbean modernism, have interrogated the concept of inclusion: instead of measuring the modernist traits in the works of postcolonial writers, they have each quite differently used the work of postcolonial writers to redefine modernism.

In *Writing in Limbo: Modernism and Caribbean Literature*, Gikandi builds his concept of “Caribbean modernism” by framing modernity with the European conquest of the Americas (1992, p. 24). This Caribbean modernism is “opposed to, though not necessarily independent of, European notions of modernism” (GIKANDI, 1992, p. 4-5).

Charles Pollard takes issue with Gikandi’s style of redefinition, which he classifies as a “simple, binary distinction between Caribbean and European modernisms” (2004, p. 19). In place of such a binary, Pollard urges “an understanding of modernism as discrepant and cosmopolitan” enough to encompass both European and Caribbean writing (2004, p. 19). Although Pollard and Gikandi take distinct and largely opposing positions, both use the term, “modernism” to indicate Caribbean writing that is worthy of study and canonization. This impulse, which bridges their considerable differences, begs the question of what we gain when we identify Caribbean literature – or postcolonial literature – as modernist. For Pollard, it is a clear picture of the continuities among European and postcolonial writers. For Gikandi, it is a way to mark the arrival of modernity as colonial, and to chart the discontinuities between European modernism and the Caribbean “counter-discourse” that critiques it (1992, p. 10).

I am going to be extremely politic here, or try to be, and not pick a side, in part because various mobilizations of the term, modernism, can have value. But in larger part, I’m not going to pick a side because I have a different point to make about the category of modernism and the problem of inclusion. Namely, the problem of being a literary critic and trying to do what we like to think is our stock and trade: inventing concepts, delimiting literary periods, and in this specific case, defining the meaning of modernism. After all, who ought to be responsible for such a hoary and meaningful term but scholars?

Yet I would venture to suggest that we are not always the most prominent voices that writers hear, in the public sphere or in their heads, when they consider their legacy. Before they think of us, it seems some at least will think of their reviewers, prize committee judges, general readers, and other authors who are their peers. We can define modernism as we will, we can argue and debate (and I think we should), but we lose our way if we think we can determine it.

Modernism is already out there. It’s alive. And the way in which it circulates in the work of reviewers and marketers, in the judgement of prize committees and readers and peers, is what writers such as Derek Walcott and Zadie Smith must grapple with.

In order to see how this works, it’s worth taking a look at the reception of Smith’s novel, *NW*. In her review of *NW* in *The New York Review of Books*, Joyce Carol Oates opens with reference not to Smith but to *Ulysses*: “Only an assiduously calibrated work of art, of the ambition and artistry of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, for instance, can take us beyond the dazzling and distracting surface” (2012, p. 20). She then quotes *Ulysses* for over 100 words before taking us to the title of Smith’s novel: “Zadie Smith’s *NW* is a boldly Joycean appropriation, fortunately not so difficult of entry as its great model” (OATES, 2012, p. 20).

This line, “the boldly Joycean appropriation,” is worth mentioning not only because of Oates’ stature in contemporary letters or that of *The New York Review of Books* but moreover because Penguin and Random House chose to place this quote, “a boldly Joycean appropriation,” at the

head of a number of their marketing materials, including PenguinRandomHouse.com and the Random House catalog display for high school teachers (PenguinRandomHouse.com).

And Oates is not alone. A whole host of reviewers find modernist echoes and ancestors in Smith's experimental *NW*.

NPR's Maureen Corrigan lauds Smith in *NW*: "She excels at Gertrude Stein-inspired lines that whip together sound and nonsense and fleeting zigzags of insight" (CORRIGAN, 2012).

British newspaper *The Independent* finds in *NW* "the immersive stream-of-consciousness flow and jump-cut montage of Virginia Woolf" (TONKIN, 2012); *The LA Times* observes "the influence of Virginia Woolf or James Joyce" (ULIN, 2012). One reviewer even calls *NW* "Zadie Smith gone Modernist" (BERNHARD, 2012).

Another reviewer helps to explain this profusion of references: "A couple of chapters into *NW*, I had a revelation. *Mrs Dalloway*! If *On Beauty* was a modern take on *Howards End*, then this must be Zadie Smith's spin on Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*! I've got the 'hook' for my review!" (THE NARRATOLOGIST, 2016).

Modernism is the hook. It's the frame. It's the yardstick or ruler against which Smith can be measured, and not always favorably. But the reviewer who thought she'd found her hook saw that she'd been scooped: too many other reviewers had what she calls "that same idea."

Smith has written elsewhere about her love in particular for Virginia Woolf's diaries (2018, p. 352). She offered a self-conscious reworking of E.M. Forster's *Howards End* in her third novel, *On Beauty*. She's explained in an essay that she sometimes writes with other great books open on her table; she welcomes many voices and rhythms (2009, p. 103).

Zadie Smith does not, it appears, suffer from the anxiety of influence, in Harold Bloom's sense of the phrase (1973). Yet I would suggest that she expresses something else: a recognition of and struggle with how her novels will be measured against what Derek Walcott called the "big bucks" of literary history (BROWN AND JOHNSON, 1996, p. 182). Indeed, in reading *NW* in the context of its reception, it's almost like Zadie Smith knew what was going to happen.

In the opening paragraph of *NW*, Smith writes: "On the radio: I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me. A good line – write it out on the back of the magazine" (2012, p. 3)

Our initial glimpse of the personality, the persona of our first protagonist, Leah Hanwell, before we even know her name, is her interest in this quote. In being "the sole author," in self-definition.

The narrative repeats and breaks this line, the first experimental fragment in the chapter:

"I am the sole

I am the sole author" (SMITH, 2012, p. 3).

And again on the second page:

"I am the"

"The sole" (SMITH, 2012, p. 4).

And again: "I am the sole. The sole. The sole" (SMITH, 2012, p. 4).

It's impossible to overlook how relentlessly the proliferation of sole undermines its proclamation of singularity, of uniqueness. And of course, it's already a quote, multiplied via the

mass media of radio; when Leah tries to copy it down, she finds that “pencil leaves no mark on magazine pages” (SMITH, 2012, p. 4).

The radio, the magazines, the inability to “leave a mark” in magazines, all in the first two pages, invoke the blare of marketing, the NPR interviews, the BBC interviews, the way that Smith, before her first book was published, was already, through media gossip, a famous author.

Leah Hanwell closes her eyes. She can still hear the radio buzzing in her earbud; she wants to escape this sound that offered the echoing possibility of individual authorship.

At this, the text descends into a litany of fragments inside Leah’s mind: “Darting water boatmen, zig-zagging. Zig. Zag. Red river? Molten lake in hell? The hammock tips. The papers flop to the ground” (SMITH, 2012, p. 4). Unsurprisingly, one reviewer has found in this passage an echo of “The Waste Land” (SCHWARTZ, 2012). Yet this is what lives inside the protagonist’s mind, surrounded as she is by the sound of the radio, magazines, and also newspapers, which flop into the grass in sections: “World events and property and film and music ... also sport and short descriptions of the dead” (SMITH, 2012, p. 4). It’s fairly comprehensive; perhaps the only thing missing are the book reviews, the place where the papers grapple with the question of sole authorship and where some, such as a review in a Canadian paper, seem to deny such a claim, with their assessment of *NW*: “It’s not entirely unique” (NATIONAL POST, 2012).

This question of sole authorship, floated ironically as a quotation, repeated and broken and echoed and disabled by the thickness of modern media, becomes a more serious thematic concern for the protagonist who takes up the last third of the book; the one who grows up in council estate in northwest London of mixed Jamaican and white British heritage, who through hard work and forms of sacrifice remakes herself as a solicitor, after having changed her name from Keisha to Natalie Blake.

This protagonist too suffers the question of “sole authorship” – and indeed the line recurs in her section –, suffers it as existential and identity crisis, suffers it palpably, through feelings of emptiness, through feelings that every voice is a new disguise; feels the lack of an essential self not as postmodern freedom, but in the form of authorial despair.

This section of the book, told in 185 numbered sections, might be thought of as a Bildungsroman in miniature: the story of Keisha Blake’s development from childhood to motherhood, from a working-class neighborhood to an affluent one, and from a given name to a chosen one. On the face of things, this sequence might seem a recognizable, even clichéd story of so-called upward mobility under capitalism. Yet Smith gives us something quite different. Embedded within this seeming narrative of progress, Keisha experiences an evacuation of identity. As a child, “Keisha experienced an unforgettable pulse of authorial omnipotence. Maybe the world really was hers for the making” (SMITH, 2012, p. 207). This power, this optimistic and empowering pulse of self-determination, falters in the face of the world she encounters. Before she is even grown, “she began to exist for other people” (SMITH, 2012, p. 208). Rather than Keisha making the world, the world begins to unmake her, to leach the power of what she hoped would be her “authorial omnipotence.” In a work so self-conscious of its making, it seems significant that Keisha’s momentary, fleeting, and perhaps imagined power seemed to her “authorial.” Like Leah, Keisha cannot claim sole authorship of her experience and identity.



Yet she attempts acts of authorship nonetheless. In order to soothe her childhood unhappiness “when being bullied,” Keisha turns to literature for solace and self-understanding (SMITH, 2012, p. 214). Here is another trope of the Bildungsroman: the sensitive and literate protagonist taking comfort in stories. And while Keisha does indeed comfort herself, she simultaneously perceives that “the people in the literature and the movies looked nothing like you, came from a different socio-economic and historical universe, and—had they ever met you—would very likely have enslaved you or, at best, bullied you” (SMITH, 2012, p. 214). The irony isn’t lost on Keisha, but it doesn’t help. The books and narratives of the past are all she has to make sense of the present, even if they don’t tell her story, even if they exclude or threaten her.

Without a clear blueprint for her identity, without a literary canon or social reality that allows her to see and know herself, Keisha struggles. She looks to other girls and tells herself, “She is real. You are a forgery” (SMITH, 2012, p. 221). She accepts her friend’s intimate confessions with the fear that she alone has “no self to be” (SMITH, 2012, p. 246). She changes her name to Natalie, an act of self-authorship if ever there was one, but this too doesn’t help. Smith’s anonymous narrator asks us, “But for the sake of a thought experiment: what was Natalie Blake’s personality constructed around?” (SMITH, 2012, p. 273). Perhaps the clearest answer comes in a striking section entitled “*In drag*” (SMITH, 2012, p. 333). The narrative gives us Natalie:

Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each required a different wardrobe. But when considering these various attitudes, she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or perhaps the least inauthentic. (SMITH, 2012, p. 333)

There is a rich and varied body of theoretical work on drag, and while these theories are not the focus of this essay, it is worth noting that Smith’s use of the term pivots around the idea of authenticity. While drag may for some be liberating, here Natalie appears to experience it as distancing phenomenon, a splitting of identity into “various attitudes,” each separate and sometimes oppositional. Moreover, Natalie has given up hopes of authentic drag and instead seeks a double negative: “the least inauthentic.” It is a grammatically unwieldy way to parse the self. No wonder the narrative tells us that Natalie “struggled to think” it.

In introducing and undermining the question of sole authorship on the first page of her novel and in the private struggle of her female protagonist of color, in constructing it through the various media in which the novel would be assessed, and in turning this question of sole authorship and comparison into an identity-based theme, Smith wants us to know that she knows. She may be grappling not with her literary predecessors as much as with those who cite them: a concern with those who make and break books, in part through their assessment of authors.

Therefore, rather than reading minority or postcolonial writers for hints of modernism, I’d invite us to read for their awareness, their negotiations, of the ways in which they may be read for modernism. Rather than imagining inclusion as open arms, and the invitation into modernism

as a kind of embrace, we might consider the way in which inclusion has happened and will happen to writers of color, who are already working within and against the expectation that the so-called compliment of comparison will be paid.

As much as we might like it to be, modernism is not a scholarly performative: we can't speak it into existence.

To understand these texts, then, one must also understand the anticipatory burden under which their authors labor; an anxiety that is not about Woolf and Joyce exactly, not Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence but rather an anxiety of *influencers*: reviewers and marketers and booksellers primarily, but also readers, and only sometimes scholars.

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