

*Black British Literature Decolonizing
the Curriculum*

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The pioneering cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall saw in the works of Frantz Fanon, a “re-epidermalisation, an auto-graphy,” a new politics of the Black signifier (27). Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* turns the mechanisms of fixed racial signification against themselves in order to begin to constitute new subjectivities, new positions of identification and enunciation. Speaking at a conference on film, performance, and visual arts work by contemporary Black artists at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), Hall dwells on the “spectral effect,” the ghost of Fanon, the colonial man who wrote for his people. “Rather than trying to recapture the true Fanon, we must try to engage the after-life of Frantz Fanon . . . in ways that do not simply restore the past in a cycle of the eternal return, but which will bring the enigma of Fanon, as Benjamin said of history, flashing up before us at a moment of danger” (14).

As is widely known, Fanon wrote *Peau noire, masques blancs* (translated into English in 1967) while preparing for the exams that would enable him to join the august ranks of France’s psychiatric health system. The book came together in Lyon between 1951 and 1952, a period marked by, as his biographer Alice Cherki puts it, “a triple junction” of encounters and experiences (24). These were psychiatry, his chosen vocation; his discovery of phenomenology, existentialism, and psychoanalysis; and finally, the encounter with a racist White French society and the ways in which Fanon assimilated this experience, both in the army and during his years in Lyon, as a minority and a Black man. The doubt and trepidations of the introduction – “Why write the book? No one has asked me for it” (7) – juxtapose with the author’s quiet determination that the book will be a “mirror with a progressive infrastructure, in which it will be possible to discern the Negro on the road to disalienation” (184). Fanon situates the man of color in a world where he is seen, is heard, and is for others. The look of the other, rather than confirming oneself back to oneself, fixes one in a lethal epidermal scheme. Trapped in their respective “Whiteness” and

“Blackness,” White settler and Black native create one another without reciprocity. Critics have long noted that Fanon’s reinvention as a Black West Indian occurred only when he arrived in the French capital.¹ Here, Fanon had come to realize that volunteerism on behalf of the abstract principles of “freedom,” “France,” or “antifascism,” counted for nothing in the eyes of the majority of French citizens, for whom he remained inferior, inassimilable, nothing but an interloper. At the intersection of colony and the imperial metropolis, Fanon lost the “honorary citizenship” his facility with the French language had accorded him and became an “Antilles Negro” (*Black Skin* 38).

Stuart Hall, with whose homage to Fanon this chapter begins, is considered the founder of British multiculturalism, Hall was also the first editor of *New Left Review* and the long-time director of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, the flagship institution of cultural studies in the world (until administrators closed it down in 2002). Born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1932, he came to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar in 1951, ditching it – and his thesis on Henry James – in 1956 to plunge into activism, supporting himself by teaching part-time in the working-class neighborhoods of London. Echoing Fanon in France, Hall liked to say that he realized he was Black only when he arrived in England.² Like Fanon, he too never went back to the Caribbean after being confirmed in a constituted Blackness. Despite his relatively privileged position as a middle-class Jamaican and Black European, Hall’s lifelong struggle to redress the plight of populations suffering the simultaneous effects of race, gender, class, and migration in multicultural Britain stemmed from the painful realization that race was a great leveler. “There’s not much respect for black PhDs from Oxford,” he said jokingly to the novelist Caryl Phillips in an interview. “People looked at me as an immigrant, they couldn’t tell me apart from another boy just knocking around Notting Hill” (“Stuart Hall by Caryl Phillips”).

While this chapter is not on Fanon, it examines the related dynamic of learning and unlearning – learning to unlearn biased and compromised intellectual formations – in novels of growth or social initiation in African and Caribbean diasporic modernity. I evoke the spectral Fanonism Stuart Hall commemorates to examine Zadie Smith’s negotiations of what Fanon called a “dark and unarguable blackness” (*Black Skin*, 117). In his influential essay, “Critical Fanonism,” Henry Louis Gates Jr. posits Fanon “as an agon between . . . ontogeny and sociogeny,” supplementing Sigmund Freud’s conception of human development at the intersection of ontogeny and phylogeny (469). Gates enjoins that we read Fanon, not simply treat him as

an icon or screen memory: “It means not to elevate him above his localities of discourse as a transcultural, transhistorical Global Theorist, nor simply to cast him into battle, but to recognize him as a battlefield in himself” (470). Zadie Smith’s corpus testifies to a similar agon between the writer’s prerogative of impersonality and elective affinities and the “dark and unarguable blackness” that relentlessly attaches to raced bodies. The novels and nonfiction ask to be read not as global theory or interventionist polemic but as battlefields in themselves. Reading Zadie Smith according to the terms set up by Fanon and Hall could also be crucial for decolonizing hard-bitten reading habits in the classroom that treat Black literature as interchangeable with Black culture and society. While Smith’s writing of this culture and society is immersive, she routinely and systematically problematizes the category of Blackness itself, as we shall see in what follows.

Unlike Hall and Fanon, Zadie Smith is a girl from the Athelstan Gardens Council Estate in Willesden (northwest London). Born to an English father and a Jamaican mother, she said of her first visit to Jamaica that “I was allergic to everything . . . I didn’t want to belong to the place” (Eugenides). Years later, when she traveled to West Africa, she felt unassimilated in an opposite, if equally tragicomic, way. “I was in the middle of what I thought was some kind of spiritual experience in West Africa, this search for my identity. It became clear after the end of quite a long trip that everybody I had been with thought I was white” (Eugenides). “When I was fourteen I was given *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by my mother,” Smith writes in the introductory essay of *Changing My Mind*. “I knew what she meant by giving it to me, and I resented the inference” (3). When her mother prods her to read the book lying unopened on the bedside table, the teenager asks if she is meant to like it just because Zora Neale Hurston is Black. “No – because it’s really good writing,” her mother insists (3). The budding author grows to love Hurston but does so furtively: “I wanted to be an objective aesthete and not a sentimental fool. I disliked the idea of ‘identifying’ with the fiction I read: I wanted to like Hurston because she represented ‘good writing,’ not because she represented me” (7). Zadie can finally out herself as a Hurston reader two decades later, when the world has woken up to the genius of Hurston thanks to biographies, films, and Oprah, and African American literature departments and the publishing industry are invested in reclaiming and constructing the “Black Female Literary Tradition” (8).

Just as it is ideologically flawed to think of literary writing and criticism as universal and isotemporal – this, Smith confirms, is a prerogative of the

privileged, a White mythology – she balks at the fetishization of Black women writers. Hurston had a very difficult life and died in poverty, but Smith would still like to make a case for her greatness that supersedes crude identity politics, including the notion that Black women are the privileged readers of a Black woman writer. “I want . . . to be able to say that Hurston is my sister and Baldwin is my brother, and so is Kafka my brother, and Nabokov, and Woolf my sister, and Eliot and Ozick,” states Smith, albeit with ambivalence and self-doubt (*Changing My Mind*, 10). While it is hard-won progress that Hurston is no longer a well-kept secret among educated Black women such as the author’s mother, the point Smith forcefully makes in this essay is that overcompensating by splashing her now across curricula needs to lead eventually to a concomitant correction and revision of the very modes of literary and aesthetic reception. In an ideal world, one should have the creative freedom, as readers or literary critics, to gravitate to Kafka, Nabokov, Woolf, Eliot, and Ozick while stating, in the same breath, that Hurston “makes ‘black woman-ness’ appear a real, tangible quality, an essence I can almost believe I share” (13). This chapter dwells on two of Smith’s novels, *On Beauty* and *Swing Time*, to elaborate on some of the themes encapsulated in the example from *Changing My Mind* above: the curriculum and its occlusions and amnesia; Black British writing pitted against a writing that is not delimited by the qualifier “White”; aesthetics versus politics; normative literary criticism and its mistrust of what it perceives to be the narcissism of identity politics; Anglo-American traditions of critique and the civilizational and temporal lag it posits between itself and “black women talking about a black book” (12).

Speaking of the difficulty of establishing a diasporic order of things, Samantha Pinto describes diasporic epistemologies as a “difficult play” between “recognizable forms of being, knowing, belonging, and acting in the world and the new forms that emerge as we try to understand its shifts” (7). Pinto’s use of “order” refers to Foucault’s 1966 work, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, where he excavates the bases and systematic frameworks of a series of representations in philosophy, natural history, and economics.³ Whether her novels are rooted in Kilburn or they cross continents, it could be argued that Smith is a proponent of dis-ordered writing, one that examines the diasporic phenomenology of being out of place on a temporal, and not just spatial, axis. In this interruption, a belated correction of what Matti Bunzl calls “the enabling temporal formations” of colonial discourse, lies the decolonizing potential of Zadie Smith’s work (vii).⁴ In the *New York Times* interview with Jeffrey

Eugenides conducted soon after the publication of *Swing Time* (2016), Smith says that:

what was done to black people, historically, was to take them out of the time of their life. . . . We had a life in one place and it would have continued and who knows what would have happened – nobody knows. But it would've gone a certain way, and we were removed from that timeline, placed somewhere entirely different, and radically disrupted. And the consequences of that are pretty much unending. Every people have their trauma. It's not a competition of traumas. But they're different in nature. And this one is about having been removed from time.

The “swing” in *Swing Time*, Eugenides observes, is both noun and verb. It refers to the 1936 musical and swing music, seemingly, but enjoins also that we interpret swing not as an adjective defining time but a verb acting on it. Nowhere is this more evident than in Smith's novels of displacement and disorder, which circle around the twinned foci of social mobility and (higher) learning, in school classrooms and on the university campus.

Class, Classroom, Race Mobility

In *Swing Time*, the unnamed narrator describes a mad playground game that erupted in her school when she was nine:

It was like tag, but a girl was never “It,” only boys were “It,” girls simply ran and ran until we found ourselves cornered in some quiet spot, away from the eyes of dinner ladies and playground monitors, at which point our knickers were pulled aside and a little hand shot into our vaginas, we were roughly, frantically tickled, and then the boy ran away, and the whole thing started up again from the top. (65)

At first, this seems to be a form of prelapsarian sex play. But as the game continues, and moves into the classroom, a sinister change can be observed.

The random element was now gone: only the original three boys played and they only visited those girls who were both close to their own desks and whom they assumed would not complain. Tracey was one of these girls, as was I, and a girl from my corridor called Sasha Richards. The white girls – who had generally been included in the playground mania – were now mysteriously no longer included: it was as if they had never been involved in the first place. (66)

This is how colonialism enters the novel, not by the narrator's reanimating its remnants in Africa or the Caribbean but, frighteningly, in her finding its deformations and hierarchies still operative in her classroom in London in

the early eighties. The sexual experiments of children are informed by a racial pecking order and undergo a perceptible “blackening” of the game in the shift from playground to the classroom. Somehow her male classmates have understood that it is the brown girls whose knickers can be pulled aside; and it is the brown girls who accept this as a natural order of things, all at an age before sexual role play has become conscious, cultivated, or coerced.

The low educational attainment of Black pupils has been a feature of policy debates and a concern for Black families for several decades. However, as scholars of education such as Nicola Rollock point out in *The Colour of Class*, there is scant British empirical work that explicitly explores how race and social class *jointly* shape their experiences. The example from *Swing Time* enjoins that we add gender to this mix. Policy debate positions Black British families as a homogenous working-class entity, deficient, uninterested, and uninvolved in their children’s education. It is, in other words, the “deficit model” of thinking about education, entertained on both sides of the Atlantic, which presumes, as Robbie Shilliam has argued, that Black families and communities have no cultural capital to gift their children as an inheritance and can only transmit pathological behavior. Shilliam reflects on the low acceptance rates of Black students in “prestigious universities”; the negative experience of university faced by this ethnicity; and the relatively low attainment levels of those who do enter the student population. “Some have explained away these disparities by presuming that Black students arrive at the gates of the university with pronounced social and cultural deficits garnered from their familial and community upbringing – that is, their blackness. I would direct their assumptions back to the image of Stuart Hall studying at Oxford,” Shilliam states (“Black/Academia” 59). The racial differentials are produced within the British academy, itself an isomorphism of the society which had created Blackness, as inhering to the Windrush generation and their descendants in Britain, as a negatively defined identity, not-English and not-White. What is missed out in Eugenicist reports of underachievement in British secondary education is what Shilliam calls the “educational maltreatment of . . . children” pointed out painstakingly by citizens’ groups such as the Black Parents Movement, established in 1975 (“Black/Academia” 59). Both entities in the decolonization debate – those clamoring for decolonization and those jealously guarding their elite cultural privilege – err in not connecting the pinnacle of higher studies at university with the base of the population pyramid, “growing relentlessly blacker, browner, poorer” (“Black/Academia” 59).

Studies on the education of the middle classes, on the other hand, focus exclusively on the White middle class, and the ways in which it mobilizes cultural capital strategically for the betterment of offspring. In the *Colour of Class*, the authors – Rollock, David Gilborn, Carol Vincent, and Stephen Ball – recommend that instead of focusing solely on schools and education policy, we analyze the educational experiences of Black children in the context of their homes, focusing on how Black parents view and interact with schools. Political theorists like Shilliam recommend also that we penalize the monocultural university environment and the racialological thinking behind the conventional curriculum for making deficits where there are none. They point out spaces outside academia where non-White activists, not academics themselves, have chosen to situate their dissent. Smith's *Swing Time*, more so than the other sociological fiction she has written, looks at the promise of social betterment as it galvanizes the Black Caribbean middle classes, even as they continue to be positioned as outsiders and imposters in the apartheid of a wealthy neocolonial metropolis. She elegizes the neutralization of this promise beyond the tertiary level and also dispassionately questions the curious self-hatred and social animosity that attaches to the survivor figure of African continental heritage who makes it in predominantly White and white-collar professions.

The most spectacular mobility figure in Smith's *Swing Time* is the mother of the nameless narrator. The story revolves around two mixed-race families, converging on the figures of two little tan girls, both living in the council estates of northwest London in the 1980s, one (the narrator's home) relatively gentrified compared to the other. Neither family is on benefits, despite Tracey's mother's numerous attempts to "get on the disability" (10). The narrator's father is an unwitting poster child of the enervated White working classes; her friend Tracey's father is absconding, polygamous, and criminalized, a dangerously charismatic man-child, the un-lived-out life of whose kinetic energy is expressed in Tracey's own prodigious enjoyment of dance. Tracey's mother is "white, obese, afflicted with acne," her thin blond hair pulled back in a "Kilburn facelift": the narrator's mother is a feminist autodidact, a copy of *Black Jacobins* under her arm (10).

Describing her mother's plain white linen trousers, her blue-and-white-striped Breton T-shirt, her frayed espadrilles, her beautiful Nefertiti head, the narrator says:

She dressed for a future not yet with us but which she expected to arrive . . . everything so plain, so understated, completely out of step with the spirit of

the time, and with the place. One day we would “get out of here,” and she would complete her studies, become truly radical chic, perhaps even spoken of in the same breath as Angela Davis and Gloria Steinem . . . Straw-soled shoes were all part of this bold vision, they pointed subtly at the higher concepts. (10)

The mother actualizes the vision only partially, educating herself long-distance and immersing herself in socialist activism before consolidating her considerable rhetorical prowess and populist politics as an MP. She enjoys the incorporation into the socially exclusive meritocracy, but, unlike her daughter, who remains ambivalent till the end about Black Power and White liberal guilt alike, the world remains Manichaeian to her. While her mother sanctimoniously talks about “our people,” the narrator hears the “overlapping quack and babble of those birds,” repeating again and again, “I am a duck! I am a duck!” (311). While the mother reads Marx and Frankfurt school, sociology and politics, Hughes and Robeson, the narrator dreams of MGM idols of dance such as the Nicholas Brothers – Fayard and Harold – in midair, doing the splits. She finds, in the school library, *The History of Dance*, “a different kind of history from my mother’s, the kind that is barely written down – that is felt” (101). She mines the performative transmission of history in dance and music for postpolitical biopolitics, where Tracey’s dad got *it* – his ability to leapfrog into a split – from Michael Jackson, Michael Jackson got *it* from Prince, and maybe James Brown, and they all got *it* from the African American tap-dancing duo, the Nicholas brothers. And Fred Astaire got *it* from the Nicholas brothers too, blacking up his face to perform the “Bojangles” number in “Swing Time.”

As Taiye Selasi put it in her review of *Swing Time*, her friend Tracey “is the narrator’s abiding point of reference, the one with the talent, the clarity and the fire.” The narrator’s success, happiness, and her precarious self-situation in the world, whether in relation to the carnal networks of global capitalism or the surveillant networks of new media, are all relative to Tracey. It is Tracey who is the foe of the narrator’s mother, soma to her psyche, village life to her city ambitions, Dionysus to her Apollo. Tracey is the obscure, sidelined genius to the mother’s considerable, if also cultivated and derivative, talent. At the receiving end of a lecture by the narrator’s mother on the history of racial epithets – Tracey had used the word “Paki” at Lily Bingham’s tenth birthday party – she shuts her up with the devastating logic of an upturned chin and “It’s just a word” (82). In a disjointed world, with the grown-ups particularly unaligned with its time signatures, Tracey as dancer “knew the right time to do everything”

(26). As in dance, so in storytelling. The girls write stories about ballet dancers in peril, Tracey dictating and the narrator transcribing. “Just as you thought the happy ending had arrived, Tracey found some wonderful new way to destroy or divert it, so that the moment of consummation . . . never seemed to arrive” (32). The theories of “secular salvation,” as Ashis Nandy terms it, shaping social knowledge in the West – anarchism, Christian socialism, communism, for instance – have little appeal for Tracey.⁵ Unlike the narrator’s mother, who goes out in a fug of bravery, denial, and delusion, Tracey ends where she begins – in a familiar place and an obdurately unchangeable time.

The narrative unraveling of the Black woman who seemingly *has it all* is something we have seen in Smith’s 2012 novel *NW*. I am referring to Keisha, who has survived a childhood in the projects, Kilburn Pentecostal, and Brayton Comprehensive – “some schools you ‘attended.’ Brayton you ‘went’ to” (9) – to rename herself Natalie and become a barrister. Her narrative is the most disjointed of the four parts of the novel, broken into 185 staccato sections, the confessional flow repeatedly thwarted by quiz answers, menu items, and Instant Messaging (IM) chats. “Natalie Blake had become a person unsuited to self-reflection” (252). Natalie’s psychic life suffers equally from the narrative control over it of which she is justifiably proud (her word for it is “time management”) and the panic and rage that is related, no doubt, to her friend Leah’s growing hatred (Leah has stayed much where she was), the emotional abandonment of the natal family that she has left far behind (a professional hazard for the mobility hero), her uncomprehending and infantilized banker husband, and the baffling fullness of motherhood into which she finds herself coerced.

In “Two Directions for the Novel,” Zadie Smith reads Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* and Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder*, an unusual pairing that she herself identifies as “antipodal” and mutually cancelling (71). She contemplates the “extraordinary persistence” of realist fiction of the Balzac-Flaubert model, “a literary form in long-term crisis” (73, 72), and wonders why American metafiction, once touted as an antidote to realism, has been relegated to a corner of literary history. It is evident in the essay that between the lyric realism of *Netherland* and the postmodern play of *Remainder*, Smith would personally authenticate the latter. “If *Netherland* is a novel only partially aware of the ideas that underpin it, *Remainder* if fully conscious of its own” (82). However, despite her sharp critique, in essays such as “Two Directions for the Novel,” of the “essential fullness and continuity of the self” (73) that Smith sees as an unexamined

credo of traditional realism, her novels *NW* and *Swing Time* see closure and completion in uncannily similar terms (namely, the fullness and continuity of the self).

Enraged though she is at the psychological torture her dying mother has incurred in the hands of Tracey, whose barrage of abusive emails to this local politician is also a catalog of pain – child-support woes, rent arrears, skirmishes with social workers, fears of losing child custody – the narrator of *Swing Time* claims responsibility, not retribution.

There is no case I can make that will change the fact that I was her only witness, the only person who knows all that she has in her, all that's been ignored and wasted, and yet I still left her back there, in the ranks of the unwitnessed, where you have to scream to get heard. (448)

In both *NW* and *Swing Time*, Smith posits individual development as autogenous, while also subsuming its brute solipsistic force in linked chapters, an epic narrative arc, and dreams of the common weal. The seemingly *sui generis* nature of characters in *Swing Time* is downplayed by revelations of their fractal nature. The novel throws up new assemblages at every turn: Tracey and the narrator, Tracey and Jeni LeGon, the narrator and Hawa, even the mother and Aimee. Individualism itself is seen as an imported American secular ideology, a hodgepodge of Social Darwinist capitalism, New Age spirituality, and a relentless desire for self-improvement. The “notorious narcissism” (Jennifer Egan’s term) of the *Bildung* narrative is replaced here by new forms of connectivity, collectivity, cellularity (when each small group in the cell only knows the identities of the people in their cell).⁶ It seems to say, as Robbie Shilliam argues in “Austere Curricula,” that “the deficit does not lie with Black heritages – familial and community – but in the racist structures that devalue, demean and exclude the sources of cultural capital that Black children carry with them into the classroom” (98). It would therefore be simplistic to read in the worldly protagonist’s return to childish certainties and the council estate, in both *Swing Time* and *NW*, a regressive compulsion. If anything, it is a rewriting of the novel of formation as an interminable gestational process, and an acknowledgment of the village that it takes to raise a gifted child.

The Campus Cosmopolis

Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* (2005), which a staff writer at the *Harvard Crimson* said could have been titled “On Harvard,”⁷ is also about assemblages and a dreamed-for connectedness between the assembled but

nonidentical actors. An avowed *hommage* to E. M. Forster's *Howards End*, what draws Smith to the precursor novel of 1910 is, as Christian Moraru observes, Forster's "relational imagination and, behind it, his uniquely cosmopolitan mindset" (134). True to this legacy, *On Beauty* seems to aspire to a world where interpersonal connection is not restricted to the ties of blood, culture, or nation but is overlaid instead with elective affinities, disinterested friendships, or professional loyalties. Forsterian liberalism is layered further in the novel with insights from Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*, a philosophical treatise which gives Smith the title of her novel. In a nutshell, Scarry's argument is that beauty is a "compact, or contract between the beautiful being (a person or thing) and the perceiver" (90). The perceiver and the object perceived bestow on each other the gift of life. "Beauty is pacific," Scarry goes on to say, its live-giving pact with participants one that bestows peace and justice "in reciprocal salute to continued existence" (107). Smith's *On Beauty* examines the connection between beauty and distributive justice in a campus novel where not all bodies can be cosmopolitan alike even in the liberal haven of a twenty-first-century college town, and beauty, instead of repairing existing injuries, as promised by Scarry, becomes an ally of the perpetrators of social and racial injustice.

Dorothy Hale has astutely identified in Smith's revisionism of Scarry the gap between a philosopher's treatment of beauty and the novelist's:

Whereas Scarry seeks primarily to describe "the felt experience of cognition" (3) that unites all human beings of every culture in their experience of beauty, Smith portrays the particularity and contingency of each individual's apprehension of beauty. And while Scarry aims to enumerate the fundamental qualities of beauty, Smith stresses its relativity and social constructedness. (815)

The relativity and discursive formation of beauty is explored through the vicissitudes of the characters in *On Beauty* and their individual attempts to comprehend beauty "through private contemplation as well as through acts of social exchange" (Hale 815). The "felt experience of cognition" (Scarry's term) is indissociable from one's educational advantage and sociocultural location, the novel seems to say. Hale's phrase "aesthetics of alterity" encapsulates *On Beauty*'s work of demystifying autotelic responses to beauty; it refers also to the capaciousness and capacity of the novel form itself in representing the lives of others, or the "variety and autonomy of social perspectivalism" (Hale 817).

However, while I agree about the Forsterian strain of self-othering and estrangement Smith injects into identity politics in *On Beauty*, it is limiting and reductive to describe her contribution to the philosophy and phenomenology of beauty as a “novelistic aesthetics of alterity,” as Hale does (816). The allusive and citational structure of *On Beauty* – Smith extrapolates from a variety of literary and academic genres – troubles the extant distinctions between the anthropological novel, autofiction, cultural criticism, and lyric poetry. The novel posits beauty as socially constructed but undercuts its own truth claims with personal experiences of beauty that are immediate, overwhelming, and too unique or accidental to be reified. This inherent dichotomy is key to understanding the mutually cancelling impulses of Black British writing such as Zadie Smith’s: this fiction may do the work of ideology critique or represent the lives of others, but it jealously reserves the right to be abstract and nonmimetic art, not a communicative form, at times. The work generates its own terms of exegesis, enjoining readers to treat it as literature, not autoethnography, and thereby ushering a process of decolonizing the reading and reception of Black British writers.

Zadie Smith has said in interviews that she came to the undergraduate English degree at Cambridge from a non-academic background. Her adolescent self had immediately associated the university with a salvation narrative that wasn’t dashed to the ground because her college, King’s, was unique in the Cambridge system: “King’s was a real intellectual community; I knew nothing about drinking societies or Blues or banking. Maybe it went on, but I never saw it. To me King’s was one long, invigorating conversation” (“An Interview with Zadie Smith”). She mentioned in the same interview that without the Cambridge English course, which “started at the beginning and ended near-ish the end,” and the great breadth of novels she read there, she would not have become a novelist: the literary theory and philosophy she studied on the course, in particular, helped develop critical skills lacking from her school education. The fictional institution of Wellington is no King’s College, Cambridge, but we could read Smith’s campus novel as a dreamed-for conversation between outsiders and insiders where the cultural and literary heritage shared between colonial history’s winners and losers assumes recombinant forms.

Ideally, there would be space for deliberate reflection and critical evaluation even in the neoliberal and corporate university, and the principles and aims of higher education would be attuned, not opposed, to liberation and social justice movements gathering momentum outside the classroom. However, as Kanika Batra has persuasively argued, Smith’s treatment of

institutionalized Black Studies at Wellington marks a failure, in the microcosm of *On Beauty*, of aspirations of inclusivity and widening access. “The discipline is presented as disconnected to social reality and actively participating in the perpetuation of social inequality” (1080). Batra disagrees with this skeptical depiction of Black Studies, which occupies a marginalized position in the Anglo-American academy and White liberal arts institutions. She points out that in Britain, especially – and she has in mind Stuart Hall’s monumental contribution to Birmingham’s School of Cultural Criticism and his pioneering of cultural studies in general – the theoretical space of academic discourse was not only coterminous with the vernacular space of Black cultural life, but it actively enabled these elaborations of the vernacular. In fact, Batra implies that a novel such as *On Beauty* is itself a beneficiary of the legacies of Black Studies and that it showcases some of its ongoing debates: “Smith’s representation of the class specific dimension of the black diaspora through Haitian migration to the US brings to the fore cultural identity, race relations, and economic stratifications – key concerns explored by Black Studies from its inception” (1085).

While Batra’s reading defends the impetus of Black Studies as intellectual and pedagogical as well as political, it also sounds a cautionary note about the limits of “progressive racial politics” such programs stand for (1090). What brings the tenuous link between academic and the social to breaking point in *On Beauty* is the treatment of Carl, the “street poet” embraced by the Belsey family after they meet him at a free performance of Mozart’s *Requiem* on the Boston Common. Carl’s inclusion in faculty parties – and his involvement as discretionary student in English professor Claire Malcolm’s class – reveal the savior complexes masquerading as inclusive gestures, even when some of the actors in this campus circus, such as Kiki Belsey or Erskine Jegede, are Black, diasporic, or cosmopolitan themselves. “Are you interested in refining what you have?” Claire asks Carl after his spoken word performance at the Bus Stop, a hub for local artists in Wellington (232). A professor of Creative Writing, Claire is a poet herself, and a teacher and talent scout par excellence. She initiates her students into a dynamic interaction with the canon, not reinstating the hierarchy between the immortals and wannabes but discussing dead poets side by side with student work. She is adept at impressing on her wards the magic of commuting intimate thoughts through the stylized language of poetry, “through rhyme and metre, images and ideas” (259).

Carl’s refinement in her hands is there for the class to see. He had attended his first session with an affected slouch, mumbling his lyrics and

reacting in a hostile way to the implication that the rap he was chanting was a poem: “rap ain’t no art form. It’s just *rap*” (259).

The first thing Claire did with Carl’s rap that day was show him of what it was made. Iambs, spondees, trochees, anapaests. Passionately Carl denied any knowledge of the arcane arts. He was used to being fêted at the Bus Stop but not in a classroom. Large sections of Carl’s personality had been constructed on the founding principle that classrooms were not for Carl. (259)

His historical mistrust of White and elite civic institutions is not unfounded, and we, as readers, had anticipated this. Carl lowers his guard despite his unease with the wave of attention from Claire and her pupils, and in the full knowledge that there was no mobility story unfolding at this institution, where he was not even a registered student. Perhaps it was not a sick joke after all; she wanted him to do well, and he wanted to do well for her. Carl writes the sonnet Claire had repeatedly asked for. He doesn’t think it is great but “everybody in the class made a big fuss like he’d just split the atom” (260). Overwhelmed, he looks at the sonnet on the crumpled sheet of paper where his rap would normally be scribbled, resolving to type the thing out next time if he could get his hands on a keyboard. True to Deleuze and Guattari’s reading of the encoding function of relations of power in capitalism, Claire has decoded Carl – freed him from established codes – only to rebind that energy into “factitious” and self-serving codes.⁸ *On Beauty* would suggest that this process of progressive unfixing, rapidly followed by re-inscription into new forms of production and consumption, marks the self-expansion of capital and the capitalist university alike.

Just as Carl is easing into a timid feeling of affiliation to this community of aspiring writers, Claire embarrasses him in front of the whole class by asking if he was serious about the opportunity. “I mean, do you want to stay in this class? Even if it gets difficult?” (261). Carl is tempted to angrily retort but relents to Claire’s conviction that *he* needed the class. Soon after, Claire would appoint Zora, daughter of art historian Howard Belsey, to speak at a faculty meeting on behalf of Carl and the other unregistered students. The self-styled “communist loony-tune anti-war poetess” Claire Malcolm tells Zora unabashedly that she would ideally send Carl to make his case, but “the truth is these people won’t respond to an appeal to their consciences in any language other than Wellington language” (263). Zora Belsey, who is indeed fluent in Wellington language – and who has long harbored the fantasy of addressing Wellington College faculty with an

impassioned speech – falls into step with Claire’s prejudice that Carl doesn’t have a voice and needs someone like Zora, Black but with an enviable pedigree and a level of cultural distinction, “to speak for him” (263). These moments of class differentiation even in Black writing are key to the process of decolonizing the interpretation of Black literature: there is no room for a sanctimonious reading here, and Smith provokes critical thinking on the interrelated issues of race and class or economic and social factors. Carl is betrayed and banished from the diegetic space not by White racism alone but the very proponents of Black meritocracy and a Black public sphere, including the Foucault-reading Zora and her brother Levi, with his faux Brooklyn accent and his hankering after authentic racial identity 200 miles north of Brooklyn.

The Zadie Smith novels discussed in this chapter imagine counter-hegemonic spaces of education and Black reading publics transversally, through compromised and corruptible classroom and campus politics. The novels are particularly valuable for questions of decolonizing the English literary curriculum because of the nuanced and ambivalent way in which they use literary lineage to claim a postcolonial literature and culture to come. The themes of these works have a history of mobilizing both sides in the decolonization debate: multiculturalism, equality and diversity, widening access, canon revision, value criteria and aesthetic judgment, aesthetics and ethics. These are novels of ideas punctuated by doubt and guilt surrounding the learned exposition of ideas, an elite prerogative; it is imaginative writing that strays into imaginative activism.

In my interpretation, the implied reader of this body of work is both Carlene Kipps and Kiki Belsey of *On Beauty*, with their polarity of responses to the painting, “Maîtresse Erzulie,” by the Haitian artist Hector Hyppolite. Kiki is wife of the “Empson Lecturer in Aesthetics” at Wellington College; Carlene is married to Howard Belsey’s nemesis, the right-wing Black Christian Monty, a Rembrandt scholar at the same institution. At the start of this scene, the women act as cartoonish opposites of the academics they are married to. Kiki’s response to art, unlike that of her husband’s, is subjective, wilfully naïve, and blunt. She declares that they have no paintings in the house, “at least none of human beings,” although this is because Howard mistrusts representational art (175). Carlene, on the other hand, offers a feminist deconstructive reading of the Voodoo goddess Erzulie, calling her “the *mystère* of jealousy, vengeance and discord, *and*, on the other hand, of love, perpetual help, goodwill, health, beauty and fortune” (175). The naked Black woman in the Hyppolite painting, her “fantastical white space” surrounded by tropical branches, flowers, and birds, functions as a contingency,

unexpectedly providing common ground (175). When Kiki trots out a thesis of Howard's about binaries in metaphysics to impress Carlene, Carlene puts an end to this nonsense by simply and kindly saying to Kiki that she likes Erzulie's parrots. This momentary truce is a triumph of Forsterian cosmopolitanism, Randi Saloman argues, which makes "connection the endpoint rather than the condition of moving forward" (690). The university and the university adjacent, Smith implies, could be a transformative space in its openness to difference and the play of the signifier. To quote Saloman again, "vast possibilities . . . emerge from the simple joining together of different individuals in unexpected combinations" (690).

"By reducing the body and the living being to matters of appearance, skin, and color . . . the Euro-American world in particular has made Blackness and race two sides of a single coin, two sides of a codified madness," writes Achille Mbembe in *Critique of Black Reason* (5). Zadie Smith corrects the madness of making Blackness stand for racial difference exclusively, implicating Whiteness with Blackness every step of the way. The novels are vibrant with the chatter of the English literary canon. "I want . . . to be able to say that Hurston is my sister and Baldwin is my brother, and so is Kafka my brother, and Nabokov, and Woolf my sister, and Eliot and Ozick," Smith has stated. There is an identical moment of double consciousness in Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*, where she expresses her awe of the prodigious imaginations behind "Faulkner's Benjy, James's Maisie, Flaubert's Emma, Melville's Pip, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein" (4). As a reader, she can freely inhabit the canon that she is historically estranged from, while as an African American woman writer she is just as unfree in "my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world" (4).

There are no pieties associated with the fact of Blackness. In Smith's short story, "Sentimental Education," Monica, who, like Zora Belsey in *On Beauty* is obtusely "on the side of law and order" (13), wants her boyfriend's childhood best friend to stop lodging furtively in their Oxbridge college. Monica and Darryl are Black, the tracksuited friend Leon White, working class, and a drug dealer. "I don't like the idea of a young white man dragging a young black man into the mud," Monica sanctimoniously states, before reporting Leon anonymously to the provost (15). As with Monty Kipps in *On Beauty*, the vaunted ideal of meritocracy upheld by Monica is unmitigated by self-reflection on her privilege. Zadie Smith can be taught to decolonize the English literary curriculum not only because second-generation Caribbean literature has arrived, the derisive trope of arrival itself a colonial inheritance. Novels such as *On Beauty* and *Swing Time* do not err on the side of essentialism, demonstrating instead

that beauty or rhythm are extracultural and transhistorical forces, but they can also be individual and personal in the Fanonesque ambivalences of identification.

Notes

1. See Macey. Henry Louis Gates Jr. points out that Fanon, “whose mother was of Alsatian descent, grew up in Martinique thinking of himself as white and French,” and that his “painful reconstitution” as Black West Indian occurred only when he arrived in Paris (468).
2. The biographical information on Stuart Hall can be found here: www.runnymedetrust.org/blog/black-history-legacies-stuart-hall. The biographical details also come up in Stuart Hall’s interviews. See, for instance, the conversation with Les Back: https://research.gold.ac.uk/id/eprint/2321/2/At_Home_and_Not_at_Home-1.pdf.
3. Pinto is also alluding to the Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé’s “disorder” of gendered writing. Disorder, evoked by Condé in relation to what she describes as the “forgotten, out of print, misunderstood” Caribbean women writers, is a synonym for creativity, which breaks free from the constraining decrees on West Indian writing issued by male writers (161). Condé’s powerful essay “Order, Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer,” is a valorization of an antipodal realist feminist tradition whose seemingly “pessimistic, negative, and fatalistic” elements – its antimessianism, frank sexuality, and unsparing look at domestic discontent – she finds preferable to the “conventional revolutionary bric à brac” (164).
4. This phrase appears in Matti Bunzl’s foreword to Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, a highly influential work of critical anthropology where Fabian has interrogated the role of time in the constitution of Anglo-American and French anthropology and the production of ethnographic knowledge.
5. The idea of secular salvation theories or narratives cropping up at the time of modern colonialism occurs repeatedly in Ashis Nandy’s writings. An elucidation can be found here, in the text of Nandy’s Ambedkar Memorial Lecture delivered in 2012: <https://kafila.online/2013/02/06/theories-of-oppression-and-another-dialogue-of-cultures-ashis-nandy/>.
6. Jennifer Egan, “Black Box,” a Twitter-formatted short story, appeared in the *New Yorker*: www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/06/04/black-box.
7. www.thecrimson.com/article/2005/10/7/beautiful-zadies-novel-disappointingly-dense-on/.
8. These concepts of decoding and recoding appear in Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus*. Eugene Holland describes “decoding” as a positive moment which “frees desire from the constraints and distortions of codification.” Recoding, however, consists of opposing processes which reverse the emancipatory charge of decoding. These tie “freed libidinal energy back into factitious codes . . . so as to extract and realize privately appropriable surplus-value” (80).

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