

# Wandering through London, Getting Nowhere: The Inescapability of Place in Zadie Smith's *NW*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Over the last 50 years, space has emerged as a prominent theoretical concept in the humanities in general and in literary studies in particular. Taking the theories put forth by scholars of space including Zygmunt Bauman, Michel de Certeau and Gaston Bachelard as a starting point, this article analyses the role which space plays in Zadie Smith's novel NW, proposing that urban space functions as a key structural element around which the narrative of the novel is organised. Using the motifs of walking and boundary crossing and the specific setting of the neighbourhood of Willesden, Smith paints a pessimistic picture of class hierarchies at work in contemporary London.*

**Keywords:** *urban space, locality, walking, Zadie Smith, NW, spatial turn*

“To walk is to lack a place.” (de Certeau 1988: 103)

## The spatial turn and urban space

In his 1967 lecture “Of Other Spaces” Michel Foucault famously predicted that the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would be “the epoch of space” (1986: 22). While the 19<sup>th</sup> century had been dominated by belief in progress and the understanding of life as a linear passage through time from point A to point B, this conception of existence no longer seemed valid in the postmodern period. Instead, Foucault proposed that

[w]e are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. (Ibid.)

Foucault's words were certainly prophetic. From the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards and continuing into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, space, place and spatiality have emerged as dominant terms in social and cultural theory. In many respects, this spatial turn represents an attempt to reflect upon and come to terms with a rapidly changing world. The development of globalization, decolonization and the rise of new technologies such as air travel and the Internet in the post-war period has left us acutely aware of the spaces and places that surround us. The “hitherto unthinkable level of mobility” that resulted from these processes “emphasized geographical difference; that is, one's place could not simply be taken for granted any longer. The traveller, whether forced into exile or willingly engaged in tourism, cannot help but be more aware of the distinctiveness of a given place, and of the remarkable differences between places” (Tally Jr. 2013: 13).

The writings of the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre and the American geographer Edward W. Soja, the two thinkers whose work is most closely associated with the concept of

the spatial turn, explore the social rather than the physical aspects of space. In his seminal work *The Production of Space*, originally published in 1974, Lefebvre outlined his view of the social construction of geographical space and attempted to show how the everyday space of lived experience is related to abstract philosophical or geometric constructions of space. Lefebvre did not conceive geographical space as a mere backdrop against which social relationships unfold but rather as an active agent in these relationships, an entity imbued with political and ideological meaning. This emphasis on the social aspect of space is also apparent in the work of Edward W. Soja. In *Postmetropolis: Critical Studies of Cities and Regions* (2000) Soja focused his attention on the “interweaving of spatiality and sociality”; while he agreed with Lefebvre’s assertion that everything spatial is connected to and defined by the social, Soja also believed that this relationship was reciprocal in nature and that “what is described as social is always at the same time intrinsically spatial” (8).

With its focus on the specific sphere of urban spaces, Soja’s *Postmetropolis* represents a major contribution to the rapidly developing field of critical urban studies. This increasing interest in the urban environment over recent years is by no means coincidental. More and more of the population of our globalizing planet now live in large metropolises, and city life is becoming the dominant form of human existence. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, observed that contemporary “cities are dumping grounds for globally produced troubles; but they may also be seen as laboratories in which the ways and means of living with difference, still to be learned by the residents of an increasingly overcrowded planet, are daily invented, put to the test, memorized and assimilated” (2007: 92). Bauman and many other theorists of urban space have noted that contemporary cities are complex, contradictory environments. While wealthy city dwellers enjoy unprecedented levels of mobility, they are also afflicted by a growing sense of anxiety and unease that leads them to hide themselves away in walled residential complexes under the constant surveillance of security technology. The urban working class is increasingly comprised of immigrants; paradoxically, once they have been drawn to the metropolis from their various homelands, they become bound to their specific neighbourhoods in which they find themselves trapped by poverty and prejudice. (Bauman 2007: 72-77) City dwellers live anonymous lives surrounded by crowds of strangers, experiencing a “growing sense of homelessness and alienation” (Seamon 2015 [1979]: 9). At the same time, their identities are inextricably linked with the urban spaces that surround them; they build and shape their cities and the cities then shape them in turn. As the British geographer David Harvey has suggested, “[h]ow a city looks and how its spaces are organized forms a material basis upon which a range of possible sensations and social practices can be thought about, evaluated, and achieved” (1990: 66-67). In other words, urban locations represent “bounded, oriented” spaces “in which particular buildings and activities take on a certain character and identity” and where “individual persons are able to take on the role of citizens” (Malpas 1998).

### **Fictional spaces: Zadie Smith as a literary cartographer**

The field of literary studies has not been immune to the attraction of the spatial turn, and recent years have seen increasing numbers of literary scholars adopting spatiality as a theoretical framework for the analysis of works of literature. Indeed, this development is not wholly surprising considering the crucial role which space and place play in fiction. Although it may seem that time is the fundamental organising principle of narrative fiction, it is also possible to suggest that space is equally, if not more important. Robert T. Tally Jr. observed that in addition

to its temporal character, “narrative is also spatial, and the beginnings, middles, and ends of a given story may refer as much to sites or locations in a particular spatial organization as to moments in time in a temporal one” (2013: 49). This is particularly true in the case of postmodern and 21<sup>st</sup> century texts, many of which deliberately disrupt the traditional linear narrative structure and rely instead upon alternative techniques of narrative organisation.

There are clear grounds for seeing Zadie Smith’s novel *NW* as an example of a spatial narrative. As the title suggests, the setting is of central importance for the novel. While the timeframe of the narrative is disjointed and the story is only loosely plotted, space and location are a constant presence throughout the work. Smith depicts the spaces through which her characters move with a hyperrealist focus, paying equal attention to both well-known landmarks and the more mundane backdrops to city life such as corner shops, bus stops or abandoned phone booths. She notes down the itineraries of buses and Tube lines and mentions the brand names of stores and pubs. Space is not just a backdrop in *NW*; instead, it shapes all the other aspects of the story. The narrative of the novel is structured as a series of journeys between places rather than as a time sequence. The characters in Smith’s novel are also firmly bound to place, serving as perfect examples of the “dialectic relationship between space and identity” (Duff 2014: 2). They form an integral part of the streets through which they move, claiming them as their own and navigating them with ease. However, this relationship is not a one-sided affair. Instead, the neighbourhood itself emerges as a character in the story, an active agent which seems to hold its inhabitants in its grasp, never allowing them to stray from its orbit for too long.

In this sense, Zadie Smith can be considered a literary cartographer: just like actual maps, Smith’s stories are depictions of places in the world, whether real or imaginary. Her technique is also akin to that of a mapmaker. Just like a cartographer, she

must survey territory, determining which features of a given landscape to include, to emphasize, or to diminish; for example, some shadings may need to be darker than others, some lines bolder, and so on. The writer must establish the scale and the shape, no less of the narrative than of the places in it. The literary cartographer, even one who operates in such non-realistic modes as myth or fantasy, must determine the degree to which a given representation of a place refers to any “real” place in the geographical world. (Tally Jr. 2013: 45)

Moreover, the acts of mapping and storytelling not only share the same techniques but also have similar aims. Just as we use maps to help us navigate an unfamiliar landscape, we use works of literature to orientate ourselves in the puzzling terrain of existence. If it is true that “the ‘human condition’ is often one of disorientation, where our experience of being-in-the-world frequently resembles being lost” (Tally Jr. 2013: 43), then it is through stories that we try to make sense of the world and find our path within it.

### **Moving is being, walking means escaping**

While the narrative of *NW* takes the reader on a virtual journey across contemporary London, Smith’s map of London does not correspond to the official version. The centre here is neither Trafalgar Square nor Piccadilly Circus but Willesden, an area in northwest London which is far off any tourist map of the city. The alternative map proposed by Smith reflects the socio-cultural reality of the novel’s four protagonists: Leah Hanwell, Felix Cooper, Natalie (born

Keisha) Blake and Nathan Bogle, all of whom have grown up in the (fictional) run down council estate of Caldwell. The five loosely connected stories that make up the novel follow these protagonists on their various journeys across London as they try to make sense of their lives and forge a better, more meaningful existence for themselves.

The characters share a desire to escape Willesden and free themselves from the grasp of their childhood home, and in this sense it seems apt to see *NW* as essentially “a novel about escape” (Cooke 2012). It is also a novel about journeys, both literal and metaphorical. The characters are constantly on the move, typically walking but occasionally taking the bus or the Tube. If they are forced to stay in one place, they start feeling trapped, claustrophobic. At the beginning of the novel, Leah finds herself unable to relax in the hammock in her garden, because she feels “[f]enced in, on all sides” (Smith 2013: 3). Later, we see her itching to leave her office, painfully aware of each passing minute, thinking: “This too will pass. Four forty-five. Zig, zag. Tick, tock.” (33), until she is finally set free at five o’clock. The entire section devoted to Felix is a description of his journey from Willesden to central London and back. Felix has decided to turn his life around and his Tube ride to Oxford Street is also a metaphorical journey towards a bright future of quitting drugs, finding a well-paying job, and maintaining a stable relationship. Naturally, he feels restless every time he needs to make a stop. When he visits his father, he notices all the signs of decay and hopelessness that have characterised his past life: “a dead cactus on the windowsill”, “the narrow hall”, “several molten radiators” that make the place hot and suffocating “like a sauna”, “dishes [...] piled high in the sink”, and a thick carpet that his feet sink into, trapping him and refusing to let him go (Smith 2013: 105). Similarly, when he visits his ex-girlfriend Annie to formalise their break-up, he feels the same “sense of suffocation and impatience” and a longing to escape (141). Indeed, he soon gives in to this feeling, walking away, feeling “like a man undergoing some not-yet-invented process called particle transfer, wonderfully, blissfully light” (164).

Of course, it is not in fact the grimy flats of his father and girlfriend that give Felix this feeling of suffocation but instead his own past and his ties to Caldwell, to his depressed father and his junkie girlfriend, and his own history of desperation, poverty and addiction. Felix makes a conscious decision to break away from all of this; to leave it behind and forge a better life for himself somewhere else. As a result, the act of walking, the central metaphor in *NW*, does not simply connote change but represents the hope for a change for the better, an escape from the deadening atmosphere of Willesden to some other place, any place else. Walking means possibilities, open horizons, a brighter future. At different points in the narrative Leah, Felix, Natalie, and Nathan each make a conscious decision to move, walk, go somewhere.

However, as Smith makes very clear, neither the protagonists’ actions nor their destinies are completely under their conscious control. As David Seamon observed, much of what we do in our everyday lives is guided by a subconscious, bodily knowledge, and “cognition plays only a partial role in everyday spatial behavior”. Seamon goes on to argue that “the body holds within itself an active, intentional capacity which intimately ‘knows’ in its own special fashion the everyday spaces in which the person lives his typical day” (2015 [1979]: 35). Seamon used the term “body-subject” which was coined by the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty to refer to this capacity of the body to “direct behaviors of the person intelligently” (Seamon 2015 [1979]: 41). The body-subject manifests itself in everyday, habitual actions, such as when “fingers hit the proper piano keys, arm reaches for string or envelope, hands together put letters in their proper mailbox, feet carefully work their way over a stream-bed, *legs carry the person to a destination*” (41, emphasis mine). Clearly, the act of walking can, on many occasions, be a corporeal action independent of our conscious control. Our legs often carry us along a route

that we are used to taking, even if, on that particular day, we actually intend to go elsewhere. As Gaston Bachelard observed, the paths on which we travel frequently remain ingrained in our “muscular consciousness” (1994 [1958]: 11).

The body-subject is invaluable in helping us to carry out everyday tasks without causing constant mental strain. However, this convenience comes at a price. Since it learns through repetition, the “[b]ody-subject is conservative in nature and prefers that movements adhere to their patterns of the past” (Seamon 2015 [1979]: 49). Once it learns certain behaviours, patterns of action or walking routes, it resists changing these routines or creating new ones; for example, we might find it difficult to use our non-dominant hand when writing or to take a different path to work than we are used to. As Felix Cooper or Natalie Blake learn, although they are consciously trying to walk along a different path, their legs always seem to be carrying them back to the place they know best: to Willesden.

### **Crossing boundaries, breaking rules**

As we walk through a city, we are engaged in a constant process of crossing boundaries; moving from one district to another, crossing streets or negotiating crossroads. It is no surprise, then, that the motif of crossing boundaries is so crucial in a novel like *NW* which is structured around journeys and walking. The importance of crossing in *NW* is made apparent by the titles of the five sections that make up the novel. Leah’s section is titled “visitation”, and its plot revolves around the mysterious figure of Shar, a former classmate of Leah who has since become a drug addict. Shar crosses the border between the public space of the street and the privacy of Leah’s home, intruding into her precariously middle-class life, asking for money and eliciting guilt. Leah is fully aware of the fact that she could quite easily have shared the same fate as Shar had circumstances been different, and she struggles to come to terms with the consequences of this realisation.

The second section titled “guest” follows Felix on his journey across London. Of course, Felix crosses multiple geographical boundaries as he travels through the city, but on a more significant level he is also crossing (or hoping to cross) the boundary between social classes. After taking the Tube from Kilburn to Oxford Street, Felix enters the mysterious world of the privileged class of Londoners moving around New Bond Street:

Fifty yards away, on Oxford Street, people pressed against people, dense as carnival, almost as loud. Back here all was silent, empty. Slick black doors, brass knobs, brass letterboxes, lamp posts out of fairy stories. Old paintings in ornate gold frames, resting on easels, angled towards the street. PRICE UPON APPLICATION. Ladies’ hats, each on its own perch, feathered, ready to fly. RING FOR ASSISTANCE. Shop after shop without a soul in it. At the end of this little row, Felix spotted a customer through a mullioned, glittering window sitting on a leather pouffe, trying on one of those green jackets, waxy like tablecloth, with the tartan inside. [...] The type Felix saw all the time, especially in this part of town. A great tribe of them. Didn’t mix much—kept to their own kind. THE HORSE AND HARE. (Smith 2013: 122)

Felix is acutely aware that he has entered alien territory. Even while travelling there by Tube he felt “like a tourist” (119), a stranger in his own city. It is obvious that the London of Smith’s *NW* is a deeply divided city where members of the different “tribes” mix so rarely that they seem like foreigners to each other.

In contrast, Natalie, the protagonist of the third section of the novel titled “host”, appears to be an exception to this rule. Like the other protagonists, Natalie was born and bred in Willesden, but unlike them, she has managed to cross the class divide. Thanks to her ruthless ambition, Natalie was accepted at a top university, has become a successful lawyer and is now married to a rich banker. She has moved out of Willesden into a picturesque house with a park view in an upper-middle-class neighbourhood, simultaneously crossing both spatial and social boundaries. However, in the fourth section, which is actually titled “crossing”, Natalie recrosses the same boundary once again, this time returning to Willesden to stroll along the familiar streets with her former classmate Nathan.

What all these incidents have in common is that each time the characters walk across physical, spatial and geographical boundaries, they are also crossing a social divide, a boundary of race, gender and, most notably, class. As was discussed above, class boundaries are physically built into the urban environment. As urban “space becomes more valuable, it also becomes the dividing factor” between the members of different economic strata (Duff 2014: 11). These types of divisions produce neighbourhoods and areas which are segregated along the lines of class, profession, race or gender and generate a sense of alienation and displacement (ibid.). Throughout the novel, Zadie Smith and her characters question whether the boundaries between such segregated realms can be crossed, and if they can, what price must be paid to get to the other side.

### **Walking, remembering, and returning**

In his discussion of walking across urban spaces, Michel de Certeau draws a comparison between two distinct experiences of the city: one in which the city is viewed from above and another in which it is experienced at street-level. The former, made available to the urban planner (thanks to satellite imagery) or the privileged skyscraper dweller, is a voyeuristic experience, one in which distance is put between the city and its observer. The voyeur’s position high above the city “transforms the bewitching world by which one was ‘possessed’ into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god” (1988: 92). In contrast, the latter experience, that of “the ordinary practitioners”, the Natalies, Leahs, Felixes and Nathans of the world, occurs “below the thresholds at which visibility begins”. Instead of observing, ordinary citizens experience the city by walking:

*They walk—an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmänner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other’s arms. (Ibid., emphasis mine)*

Ordinary city dwellers are thus an integral part of the organism of the city, and it is them, rather than the urban planners, who create the city by walking and living within it. Ignorant of or indifferent to the uses which planners or authorities intended for various spaces, dwellers use them in their own way, often breaking the rules and venturing off from the demarcated routes. In a section of the novel that reads like an echo of de Certeau’s theories, Smith juxtaposes a series of travel directions for a trip from Yates Lane (a fictional street set off Edgware Road) to Bartlett Avenue (another fictional street near Willesden Lane), complete with a note urging the traveler to “obey all signs and notices regarding [her] route”

(Smith 2013: 39), with an account of Leah's experience of the same journey at street level. Instead of "obeying signs and notices", Leah absorbs the multitude of sights, sounds and smells surrounding her. Hers is a physical, sensory experience, and in the course of her walk she encounters countless other rule-breaking city practitioners: hospital patients at St. Mary's sneaking a cigarette, street traders selling stolen goods and drivers blasting hip-hop.

On the one hand, this type of intimate physical connection with a city rewards its dwellers, and this is certainly the case with Leah whose depth of experience with the streets of Willesden will forever lie beyond the reach of a mere voyeur. On the other hand, however, it can also mean that ordinary citizens may be unable to extricate themselves from the city's grasp. Although they perform the physical act of walking, it is the pattern of the streets themselves that leads them to their inexorable destinations: their bodies are "*clasped* by the streets that turn and return [them] according to an anonymous law" and "*possessed*, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of [urban] traffic" (de Certeau 1988: 92). The city merges with its dwellers, each creating the other in turn. This is particularly true in the case of the character of Nathan Bogle. At school, Nathan was a bright child who excelled at mathematics and was talent-hunted for a local football team. However, after an injury ended his prospective football career, Nathan abandoned his aspirations; now in his thirties, Nathan lives on the streets of Willesden, smoking crack, mugging passers-by, and procuring women. Nathan is Natalie's alter ego, he is the embodiment of the story of a Caldwell kid who has ended up on the wrong side of the tracks; someone whose social trajectory is not upwards but downwards. However, Smith suggests that in some sense it is Nathan who is truly free. Natalie feels trapped in her new life, crushed under the weight of constantly needing to perform and meet expectations, unsure either of her place in the world or of her own identity; in contrast, Nathan has cut himself off from society and all of its incessant demands and pressures:

*Oh Nathan, 'member this, 'member that—truthfully, Keisha, I don't remember. I've burnt the whole business out of my brain. Different life. No use to me. I don't live in them towers no more, I'm on the streets now, different attitude. Survival. That's it. Survival. That's all there is.* (Smith 2013: 317, emphasis in the original)

Unlike Nathan, who has given up on the idea that a better life is possible for a council estate kid, the remaining three protagonists continue to try to break free from their working-class upbringing and from the suffocating power of Willesden to varying degrees. Leah does so unwillingly, in order to appease her hard-working and ambitious husband. Felix decides to turn his life around after he falls in love with Grace, a young woman with a passion for self-help and personal growth. Natalie is driven by a furious sense of ambition, by which she tries to compensate for her lack of meaningful personal connections. However, despite their efforts to move forwards (whether halfheartedly or enthusiastically), to get somewhere, and to change their lives, their journeys always take them back to where they started.

In *Remembering Places: A Phenomenological Study of the Relationship between Memory and Place*, Janet Donohoe writes:

Like a parchment turned palimpsest upon which memory is written and rewritten, erased and covered over with marks that show through and that can never completely be eliminated, so too our bodies and places cannot completely erase the old. (2014: xvii)

The places we inhabit shape us and make us who we are. They also dictate our actions; they determine what is possible and what is not, where we can go and where we must stop, what we can see and what remains hidden. The places of our childhood wield an even more profound power over us. As Bachelard observed,

over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. After twenty years, in spite of all the other anonymous stairways; we would recapture the reflexes of the “first stairway,” we would not stumble on that rather high step. [...] In short, the house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting. *We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house, and all the other houses are but variations on a fundamental theme.* (1994 [1958], 14-15, emphasis mine)

The council estate in which they lived with their parents and the neighbourhood in which they grew up have left an indelible mark on the four protagonists of *NW*. Regardless of how hard they try to walk away, their steps always unconsciously lead them back to Willesden.

## Conclusion

The first and final sections of *NW* are both titled “visitation”, and in the latter section, Smith takes us back to Leah Hanwell’s fenced-in garden, reinforcing the circular structure of the narrative. For much of the novel, the characters have been on the move, walking the city streets; they have covered a lot of ground, venturing as far as Edgware Road, Oxford Street, Soho and Hampstead Heath. Eventually, however, their journeys lead them all back to where they started — to Willesden, to northwest London. Nathan is left aimlessly wandering the streets, hiding from the police who want to question him in connection with a stabbing. Leah remains in her rented basement flat, just as uncertain about how to reconcile her husband’s and her own conflicting expectations of life as she was at the beginning of the book. Natalie runs away from her seemingly perfect, but ultimately insincere existence only to return to her house later the same day, completely unsure of how to go on. And Felix, who seemed to have everything figured out, returns from his day in central London ready for his new life only to be stabbed by a couple of thugs a few metres from his front door because he refuses to hand over his zirconia earrings. Throughout the novel, the number 98 bus appears again and again, shadowing the four protagonists along their various journeys, and eventually returning all of them to its terminus: the Pound Land/Willesden Bus Garage. In the end, Zadie Smith offers us a pessimistic vision of contemporary London; one in which locality is destiny. And in such a London, the four protagonists’ attempts to liberate themselves from Willesden by walking, both physically and metaphorically, are doomed to failure. Regardless of how far they travel and how many boundaries they cross, they are ultimately getting nowhere.

## Notes

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