ZADIE SMITH AS THE POSTCOLONIAL SISYPHUS:
A NEO-POSTCOLONIAL EXAMINATION OF ON BEAUTY

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By

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother; without her unfailing encouragement and patient ear, I can honestly say I would not have made it. Thanks Mom, and here’s to another three years in law school!
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Introduction

In 1997 the realm of postcolonial studies instigated a decisive break with the past with its “Re-inventing Britain” conference. Held in London, the “Re-inventing Britain” project aspired to do just that - to reconceptualize certain key subjects associated with Britain and Britishness as they related to postcolonial studies. In his proposal which outlined the main ideas to be addressed by the project, Homi K Bhabha spoke of “the hybrid cosmopolitanism of contemporary metropolitan life,” and rejected “the multiculturalist thinking [of] the eighties” as outdated and inapplicable to the contemporary climate. Attended by the likes of no less than Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, the conference represented a major shift in postcolonial thinking insofar as it “propose[d] an alternative perspective that claims that culture is less about expressing a pre-given identity (whether the source is national culture or 'ethnic' culture) and more about the activity of negotiating, regulating and authorising competing, often conflicting demands for collective self-representation” (Bhabha, 1). Perhaps out of their sheer newness to the postcolonial scene, the youngest generation of black British writers was understood as representing the future of this new phase in postcolonial studies. For example, in the Introduction to their text, Black British Writing, R. Victoria Arana and Lauri Ramey contended that the “Re-inventing Britain” campaign “constitute[d] a nationwide public response to the compelling nature of the millennial theme sounded by the new black British writers and their supporters, the latest generation of successful black British cultural activists” (2). While it is debatable as to whether or not the new generation of black British writers ushered in the themes presented in the “Re-inventing Britain”
campaign or the campaign presented issues that these writers later took up, it is certain that this new generation came to be permanently linked with this new stage of postcolonialism.¹

One of the young authors included in this set who rose to literary fame was Zadie Smith. Along with Bernardine Evaristo, Kwame Dawes and Diran Adebayo, Smith was quickly pegged by critics as representative of this new voice of postcolonialism. Heralded as markedly distinct from their postcolonial predecessors in the thematics they addressed and the manner in which they wrote, Smith and her peers were understood as responding to a unique historical moment all their own. Indeed, the general buzz surrounding these authors was one of enthusiasm for their innovative perspective and approach; it was generally accepted that they had built upon the legacy of their postcolonial antecedents to generate texts that were better suited than those of their predecessors to describe and analyze the contemporary moment.

Given that almost a decade has passed since the “Re-inventing Britain” campaign, and the general roar of change, novelty and improvement in the field of postcolonial studies has since quieted down into the customary murmur, it is perhaps the perfect time to analyze more closely the texts of one of these authors in order to gauge just how progressive their work truly is. Taking Zadie Smith as its token representative of this neo-postcolonial movement, this paper will interrogate Smith’s third novel, On Beauty, and analyze its plot, characterization, narrative style and use of Diaspora in order to argue that aside from Smith’s innovative mobilization of the Haitian Diaspora, the content of Smith’s work does not live up to the neo-postcolonial hype heaped upon it.² The first section, entitled “Critical Commentary,” will outline critical
reception of the text responsible for propelling Zadie Smith into neo-postcolonial status in the first place, her debut novel *White Teeth*. "Zadie Smith, The New Millennium and Black British Writing," the second section of this paper, will proffer potential reasons (separate from the author's work) that help to explain why Smith was identified as neo-postcolonial, including a more in depth look at the historical circumstances present at the time of *White Teeth*’s release. Section three, "On Beauty and On Being Neo-Postcolonial," will provide a detailed analysis of Smith’s third novel, *On Beauty*. It will focus on examining various elements of the text in order to assess whether or not the project Smith is engaging in is truly- in comparison to her postcolonial predecessors- that much more innovative and better suited for the current historical moment. Finally, the conclusion will discuss how Zadie Smith both is and is not worthy of a neo-postcolonial designation. Ultimately, I will use this analysis of Zadie Smith as an argument for a more text-centric critical process, insofar as Smith is exemplary of the ills that the commodification of literature has had upon the field of critical analysis and literary studies alike.

But before proceeding, perhaps a brief explanatory note is necessary regarding the choice of text for this analysis. Although the ostensibly natural pick for an investigation into the validity of Smith as neo-postcolonial would be the text that placed her there to begin with (*White Teeth*), I have elected to examine *On Beauty* instead for a variety of reasons. Firstly, because the field of literary studies has been saturated with criticism on *White Teeth* and because so much of it has been tinged with neo-millennialism, it is my belief that a mobilization of Smith’s critically acclaimed but relatively undertheorized third novel will lend itself to the fresh reevaluation of Smith’s work that I
am seeking. Secondly, it was *On Beauty*, following the universally censured *The Autograph Man*, which was consistently compared to *White Teeth* in reviews and ultimately revived Smith’s reputation as neo-postcolonial. Thus the text ostensibly demonstrates a neo-postcolonial component that is just as strong if not stronger than that of *White Teeth*, insofar it is redemptive and cannot be explained away by millennial hysteria (*On Beauty* was published in 2005). Thirdly, given that Smith identified *On Beauty* as her best work of fiction to date while simultaneously categorizing *White Teeth* as “basically adolescent,” it would seem only appropriate to take for this analysis the text that the author believes best represents the literary work that she is trying to do.  

**Critical Commentary**

The publication of her first novel, *White Teeth*, launched Zadie Smith into literary fame in 2000. Critics uniformly approved of the novelist’s debut text, and seemed eager to hone in on the ways in which Smith deviated from her postcolonial predecessors. Indeed, critics were so impressed with Smith’s nuanced handling of such delicate contemporary issues as multiculturalism and miscegenation that many contended that the author had helped to usher in a new generic sphere, one that more aptly portrayed contemporary life in which traditional postcolonial concerns were no longer as relevant. In the journal *Wasafiri*, Laura Moss argued that Smith’s text was emblematic of “the next phase of postcolonial studies- a state of everyday cultural and racial hybridity,” due in large part to “the current state of globalization, diasporic migration and contemporary cosmopolitanism [which] has brought about a ‘normalization’ of hybridity in contemporary postcolonial communities” (12). Eschewing such postcolonial greats as
Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, Moss mobilized Smith and her text as proof as to why
the contemporary critic must “go beyond seeing hybridity as an in-between space or as
the articulation of the necessarily ambivalent interaction between colonial authority and
the colonial subject as Bhabha does, and explore it instead as an increasingly ordinary
locus in changing postcolonial contexts” (12). In an essay entitled “New Ethnicities, the
Novel, and the Burdens of Representation,” James Procter likewise stressed the
differentiation between postcolonial texts then (represented in his configuration by
Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*) and postcolonial texts now (represented by *White Teeth*),
and the inapplicability of utilizing traditional postcolonial discourse to discuss
contemporary novels such as Smith’s:

In a section of the novel set in 1984, *White Teeth* satirically evokes the early
multicultural discourses of education described earlier [pertaining to the
1980s]... If fiction of the first moment of representation encouraged us to take
sides, ‘putting in the place of the bad old essential white subject, the new
essentially good black subject’, the second moment offers no easy binaries in
relation to which readers can position themselves. (115)

Unlike Moss and Procter, John Clement Ball was more guarded about viewing Smith as
markedly distinct from her postcolonial forerunners, and delineated her work as “well-
trodden immigrant-novel turf” and compared it with that of Rushdie. Yet he nonetheless
did attribute a certain singularity to Smith’s text, asserting that unlike postcolonial works
of former decades, *White Teeth* rejected the notion of colonialism as a determining factor
in the lives of future generations:

Ultimately, however, the uniqueness of Smith’s novel and its vision of London is
found less in its geographical and spatial sensibility than in its thematic
foregrounding of time, history and causality... The London (and Britain) she
implicitly constructs is a consequence of its history, including imperialism, but
while it may be too layered with history’s residue—its shit—ever to be wiped clean
and made neutral, her thematics also imply that London’s future possibilities need
not be defined or limited by that excremental history. (243)
As shown in this small sampling of critiques, virtually all of White Teeth’s reviewers agree that Smith embodies the voice of a new phase of postcolonial studies. In their commentary, they emphasize the ways in which Smith’s work is different from that of her postcolonial forerunners such as Rushdie or Said, and stress the ways in which her perspective is uniquely emblematic of the changing contemporary times. An oft-quoted anonymous reviewer for The Economist even went so far as to bestow a neologism upon the text. This neologism, “post-post-colonial,” suggests a new generic classification is in order due to White Teeth’s complete thematic rupture with the past. The reviewer contends that White Teeth is a “triumphantly debut de siecle” novel whose author “can’t wait to be shot of the past”; because of this utter disregard for history, “the real spark of the book is not post-colonial, but post-post-colonial” (Pulling, 5). Although this review was quickly condemned by critics (including those listed above) who believe the reviewer simply went too far in his “post-post colonial” classification, it is important to note that despite their protestations and different terminology, they too hail Smith as occupying a new and progressive generic sphere, quite literally a “post-post-colonial” world.

With the publication of Smith’s second novel, The Autograph Man, this hyperbolic praise of Smith as ushering in a new genre and/or phase in postcolonial studies slowed. Significantly, with the many negative reviews of The Autograph Man came something else: a retrogressive and more realistic assessment of White Teeth. For example, in his critique of the novel for the London Review of Books, James Wood dismissed The Autograph Man as a “text incapable of ever stiffening into sobriety, a flailing, noisy hash of jokes, cool cultural references, pull-quotes, lists and roaring
italics.” Significantly, Wood also admitted in this same review that although perhaps overlooked before, these qualities had been present in *White Teeth* as well:

*White Teeth, for all its many miracles, occasionally revealed a cartoonish energy that at times seemed to amount to a fear of silence, a perpetual mobility.* Likewise, in *The Yale Review of Books*, Benita Singh wrote of *The Autograph Man*, “This incoherence is all very disappointing. Zadie Smith was supposed to be the next Salman Rushdie” and conceded, albeit quite reluctantly, that *White Teeth* too was not without its flaws: “if one criticism could be made of the novel, it was that it was too ambitious.” Although some critics, such as Michiko Kakutani and Thomas Mallon, clung to their apotheosized view of *White Teeth* while blasting *The Autograph Man*, the majority did not. Thus, cracks were beginning to form in the neo-postcolonial pedestal upon which Smith had been placed. Indeed, although still appreciative of Smith’s first novel, critics seemingly began to realize that perhaps the overwhelming desire for the “next big thing” in postcolonialism had yielded an overly ambitious response to *White Teeth*, and had blinded them initially to certain flaws or inconsistencies within the text.

Yet all this newly adopted pragmatism was jettisoned upon the release of *On Beauty* in 2005, when critics began to again designate Zadie Smith as emblematic of a new breed of fiction. Eager to dismiss *The Autograph Man* as merely an anomaly, critics instead focused on the ways in which *On Beauty* was evocative of *White Teeth*, and returned full force to the neo-postcolonial verbiage they had utilized in 2000. In a review of *On Beauty* for *The Boston Globe*, Gail Caldwell praises Smith’s singularity by stating, “With her roots in post-colonial London and her sensibility somewhere between the 19th-century novel and hip-hop, Zadie Smith has managed the sort of fearless
exuberance in her fiction that belongs to most young writers' dreams.” Caldwell then implies that *The Autograph Man* is not relevant to a discussion of Smith's worth as an author, by referencing *White Teeth* in her review while noticeably snubbing Smith's second novel: “*White Teeth*... employ[ed] a mix of academic sophistication and polyglot street smarts that seemed at the time to anticipate a new kind of fiction... *On Beauty*, her third novel, follows Smith's less successful 2002 *The Autograph Man*, and this time she has returned full force.” Significantly, Caldwell was not alone in viewing *On Beauty* as reminiscent of *White Teeth* (to the exclusion of *The Autograph Man*), or in asserting that that although Smith's text had its “roots in post-colonial London,” it nonetheless represented “a new kind of fiction.” A reviewer for the online book distributor *Mostly Fiction* wrote of the text, “Zadie Smith treats us to another somewhat raucous family drama with *On Beauty*, not unlike *White Teeth* in certain ways... From the very beginning of her career comparisons to Dickens have abounded, and for good reason; Zadie Smith can write our contemporary world unlike any other author today [emphasis added]” (Reilly, 1). In this way, *On Beauty* revived what *The Autograph Man* had begun to diminish- notions of Zadie Smith as harbinger of a “new kind of fiction.”

Indeed, by 2006 associations between Zadie Smith and this alleged neo-postcolonial genre had not subsided, but rather had grown in intensity to the point of affecting even the author herself. Take, for example, Smith's reply to a question posed to her during a 2006 book reading of *On Beauty* at the New York Festival of International Literature. When interviewer Kurt Andersen asked Smith her opinion on being classified as postcolonial, the author responded by asserting:
I think it's a factual description for a great deal of writing. I mean, you're really pushing it with me, I'm born and bred in England and I'm about as post-post-post-colonial as it's possible to be... I don't mean to sound cynical about it, but part of it is just convenience, and I kind of apologize to the rest of the postcolonial authors because they have a right to be there and it just happens that White Teeth was published in the last year of the century, and it's very neat, so you read a Rushdie and then you read a Kureishi, and then I'm just tucked in as the last minute goes on the clock... [Also having a Jamaican mother], that's the reason and that's nice, but I feel slightly disingenuous to be there... [my work] doesn't really fit into the whole postcolonial thing, and then it all gets lost.

(Conversation, 19)

Thus aligning herself with her neo-postcolonial enthusiasts, Smith describes herself as “post-post-post-colonial” and argues that her placement within the postcolonial genre is merely convenient and somewhat arbitrary. She also gestures towards the need for a new genre for her writing by insisting that “it all gets lost” when placed in the context of the postcolonial realm. Although perhaps not significant in itself, the full import of this interview is realized when juxtaposed with commentary Smith put forth about her work just a few years earlier. In a self-review of White Teeth published in the short-lived British literary magazine Butterfly, Smith demonstrates a strikingly different view of her work and how it should be categorized:

A twenty-three year old first time novelist is fortunate indeed if one out of every fifty sentences is truly their own. And by this I mean not only its subject, but its rhythm, syntax, punctuation, and, should it aspire towards comedy; its punch line. To her credit, there are moments when Smith manages this... but often she doesn't and what we get in its place is some truly inspired thieving... Smith doing Amis, Smith doing Rushdie, Smith doing Kureishi, Winterson, Barnes, Auster, Virginia Woolf, EM Forster, Nabokov... White Teeth is the literary equivalent of a hyperactive ginger-haired tap dancing ten year old; all the writing is ornamental in the extreme... There is a damn good writer here struggling to escape the influence of the big, baggy English novels of the Eighties; a little too eager to prove she can write herself out of, back into and around a paper bag. (Mason, 83)

In this way, although Smith's classification as neo-postcolonial had perhaps grown out of certain late twentieth century phenomenon, such as the neo-millennial movement and/or
the “Re-inventing Britain” campaign, it had persisted nonetheless well beyond these two events, coming to ultimately affect even the author herself in 2006. In the span of just six years, Smith had radically shifted her view on her own work; the fearfulness of exaggerated imitation and unintentional plagiarism she cited in 2000 was replaced in 2006 with the demand for a new generic space into which her fiction could “fit.” As is demonstrated in the author’s own words, the view of Smith as alternately ushering in a new genre and/or a new phase in postcolonial studies had not died down after *On Beauty*’s publication, but perhaps had grown even more rampant.

**Zadie Smith, The New Millennium and Black British Writing**

As has been intimated in this paper thus far, the reasons behind Smith’s neo-postcolonial classification were numerous, her work being only one of the many complex factors that went into shaping this critical reception of Smith. One such factor already touched upon which greatly shaped how critics received Smith as an author was the approach of the new millennium. As John Clement Ball notes in an analysis of *White Teeth*, the month and year of the text’s publication is significant: “*White Teeth* was published early in 2000, the year that technically ended the preceding millennium but was embraced worldwide as the *de facto* beginning of the new one” (243). Although the argument can be made that the new millennium could not have affected critics to the point of influencing their reviews, given that we employ critics specifically for their alleged objectivity and immunity to forces outside of the text, reviews of *White Teeth* prove otherwise. Many reviewers made the mistake of viewing *White Teeth* as pregnant with neo-millennial meaning just because its publication date happened to coincide with the start of a new millennium. In an essay published in the anthology *Contemporary*
British Fiction, Dominic Head proudly made linking White Teeth with the new millennium the center of his analysis, his title saying it all: “Zadie Smith’s White Teeth: Multiculturalism for the Millennium.” Likewise, others such as Daneet Steffens undoubtedly caught the neo-millennial bug as well, as demonstrated in what she chooses to focus on in her Entertainment Weekly review: “In Zadie Smith's marvel of a debut novel, White Teeth, London's cultural melting pot festers and thrives as the millennium – or possibly the apocalypse – approaches.” Despite the fact that the narrative spans half a century, the reviewer elects to focus on the less important millennial and apocalyptic subplots of the novel. In this way, it is clear that the shifting of the calendar played a key role in influencing critics’ perception of Smith’s text. Indeed, in their habitual referencing of the new millennium in their commentary on White Teeth, most critics demonstrated a certain impotence in considering the novel’s substance independent of its publication date. Although this is not to say that White Teeth does not incorporate any truly innovative elements into its narrative, one must question to what degree critics’ enthusiasm for the new millennium ultimately propelled Smith into neo-postcolonial status. That is, it is not unfair to contend that although the text may not be completely unworthy of neo-postcolonial praise, the impetus for change presented by the prospect of a new millennium undoubtedly compelled critics to take what happened to be the first well written novel of 2000 and tout it as indicative of a new phase in postcolonial studies. In this way, the new millennium did influence critical reception of White Teeth, and can undoubtedly be named as one of the reasons Zadie Smith came to be understood as neo-postcolonial.

Secondly, the mass popularity of the novel also unquestionably played a role in
influencing how critics came to view Smith as representative of a new generic sphere. Smith’s popular appeal was undeniable—White Teeth sold more than one and a half million copies to English speakers alone, was translated into thirty different languages and was eventually made into a mini television series. Given that by the time of White Teeth’s release, technology and other forms of print text—such as newspapers, magazines and non-fiction—had all but usurped the novel’s place in popular culture, this anomalous surge in public excitement surrounding a novel could not have remained invisible to critics.5 Clearly White Teeth resonated with a contemporary global audience, and its author was capable of accomplishing a feat few other novelists at the time could—connecting with individuals across the globe through print fiction. Thus, given Smith’s unique ability to address pertinent questions of our contemporary climate through the medium of the novel, it is not surprising that critics were quick to classify the author as progressive and emblematic of a new stage in postcolonialism. Not only could her fiction be understood as representative of a new movement insofar as it revived popular culture’s interest in texts, but insofar as the next phase of postcolonialism was meant to address the unique concerns of “contemporary metropolitan life” (as outlined by the “Re-Inventing Britain campaign”), surely Smith’s text fit the bill. In this way, White Teeth’s popularity serves as another example of an element outside of the text itself that prompted critics to hastily deem Zadie Smith’s work emblematic of neo-postcolonialism.

Yet another contributing factor in Smith’s rise to neo-postcolonial classification, in addition to the new millennium and the text’s unusual commercial success, was the author’s racial makeup. Born to a Jamaican mother and an English father, Smith’s multicultural background was almost never omitted in reviews of the novel,
demonstrating just how preoccupied critics were with the author’s ethnic background. Critical interest in Smith’s biography ensured that the themes critics associated with the author’s own life—miscegenation, hybridity, syncretic ethnicity and multiculturalism—were also the ones most highlighted by them. These themes coincidentally happened to be the most neo-postcolonial aspects of the novel, and their emphasis—coupled with the downplay of other parts of the novel—yielded a general consensus of the text as neo-postcolonial. Likewise, clever marketing by publishers, in which images of the author were manipulated so as to emphasize her racial hybridity, encouraged both critics and readers alike to embrace Smith as one capable of giving new insight into national/ethnic/racial concerns. As was the case with the new millennium and popular reception of the novel, another force outside the text—in this case, the author’s biracial background—solidified classification of the text as neo-postcolonial.

Finally, perhaps the element most responsible for Smith’s trajectory into neo-postcolonial classification was the subgenre of postcolonial studies into which she was ultimately placed. Because of her Jamaican mother and English father, Smith was quickly categorized by critics as belonging to the “Black British” genre of writing, and her young age ensured that she would be grouped together with other young Black British writers. As was explicated in the Introduction to this paper, Smith’s grouping within this young set of writers is significant for the purposes of this analysis. One must recall that the postcolonial world, instigated by the “Re-inventing Britain” campaign, had encouraged the notion that these newest inductees be thought of as ushering in a new phase in postcolonial studies. Further, this new wave of black British authors did nothing to deter such classifications; indeed, they in fact exacerbated this separatist notion by
actively seeking to differentiate themselves from their postcolonial antecedents. This newest generation of authors tended to reject, rather than embrace, any parallels made between their own work and that of their predecessors. Worth quoting at length are Arana and Ramey’s assertions regarding this phenomenon:

However, the neo-millennial avant-garde artists are clear about wishing to distinguish their voices from those of the preceding ("postcolonial") generation and very explicit about differentiating their neo-millennial aspirations from the old (colonialist and imperialist) ethos of Great Britain... The neo-millennial generation of black British writers is, on the face of it, less embattled than their postcolonial parents and grandparents; and they are more sophisticated. Born in England or Scotland or Wales, often to racially mixed families, they do not write about staying power because they are not the ones who migrated. Britain, they affirm, is their country. They are now rewriting Britain’s literary history as well as drafting its future. (3)

Given Smith’s incorporation into this self-proclaimed separatist genre, critical focus on how Smith’s text was separate and distinct from those works traditionally labeled as postcolonial was virtually inevitable. In this sense, the subgenre of black British writing into which Smith was placed virtually guaranteed her the description of neo-postcolonial, a classification that would have been used even if White Teeth had not exhibited any signs of true innovation or unique applicability for the contemporary moment.

In this way, classification of Smith as neo-postcolonial hinged on several elements, not all of which were directly associated with the content of the text. Although with any publication a plethora of factors outside of the text itself go into shaping critical reception if it, White Teeth’s situatedness within a particularly complex historical moment undeniably impacted its reception. The new millennium, its popular response, the racial background of the author and the goings-on within the field of postcolonial studies all had great influence over the way in which the text was received.
On Beauty and On Being Neo-Postcolonial

Having cataloged the critical commentary of Smith that classified her as neo-postcolonial then summarized the variety of factors that contributed to this categorization of Smith, this thesis will now shift its focus to a detailed examination of Smith’s most recent text, On Beauty. With the aim of determining whether or not any truth lies behind the claims of Smith as neo-postcolonial, or if this designation was simply a product of historical circumstances, my analysis will examine On Beauty within the context of fundamental postcolonial theorists and the work of comparable postcolonial novelists. Specifically, I will focus on On Beauty’s plot, characterization, narrative style and use of Diaspora in order to determine the extent to which Smith truly does distinguish herself from her forerunners and generates a more nuanced text better suited for the contemporary moment.

Thus one must return to Smith’s aforementioned assessment of her work as “truly inspired thieving,” as the structure of On Beauty is arguably just that. As Smith admits in her acknowledgements, “It should be obvious from the first line that this is a novel inspired by a love of E.M. Forster, to whom all my fiction is indebted, one way or the other. This time I wanted to repay the debt with hommage.” The homage to which Smith is referring is her use of E.M. Forster’s masterpiece Howard’s End as the basis for On Beauty. From the first lines of the text—“One may as well begin with Jerome’s emails to his father”—E.M. Forster is echoed (albeit with a modern slant), his own novel beginning with the words, “One may as well begin with Helen’s letters to her sister.” Just as in Forster’s novel, which begins with Helen Schlegel’s stay at the Wilcox home and a long distance declaration to her family back home of her intention to marry the youngest
Wilcox son, *On Beauty* commences with Jerome’s sojourn to the Kipps’ flat and emails announcing his engagement to Victoria Kipps. Howard, mirroring Aunt Juley of Forster’s text, by chance misses the subsequent note withdrawing the news of the engagement, and instead travels to the Kipps’ home in an attempt to convince the young lovers to call off the engagement. Howard’s encounters in London with Michael Kipps and Carlene Kipps mimic Aunt Juley’s confrontations with Charles Wilcox and Mrs. Wilcox respectively, and the beginning of both texts end with the young, disillusioned lover returning home with his or her guardian.

Deliberate parroting of Forster’s novel continues throughout the rest of Smith’s text on both a large and small scale, with *On Beauty* borrowing both large themes and small scenes from *Howard’s End*. In Smith’s configuration, the valuable object mysteriously bequeathed to a member of the opposite family is a Haitian painting, rather than an estate. Likewise, the central motto of *Howard’s End*—“Only connect”—is reimagined in *On Beauty* in Carlene Kipps’ observation, “There is such a shelter in each other” (431). Smaller scenes in Smith’s text are also direct reincarnations of those found in Forster’s text. The Belsey family outing to the Mozart concert in the Boston Common is a direct take on the Schlegel excursion to a performance of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony, with Carl Thomas usurping the role of Leonard Bast. Similarly, in both texts the matriarchs of the two families share a Christmas shopping trip, and the funerals of Mrs. Kipps and Mrs. Wilcox are quite similar, both remarkable in the diverse crowd of mourners they attract. Indeed, if one were to catalog all of the similarities between Smith’s text and Forster’s, one would need to dismember both texts in their entirety, for Smith takes full advantage of her “hommage” to Forster and borrows extensively from
Howard’s End. Even Smith’s central protagonist, Howard Belsey, takes his name from the title of Forster’s novel.

At first glance, Smith’s reliance on Forster could be interpreted as anti- (rather than neo-) postcolonial, given the discomfort with English language and literature found in many of the works of postcolonial authors and theorists. For example, when read through the lens of Ngugi wa Thiong’o and his view of the English language as an instrument for the perpetuation of imperialism, On Beauty does not appear to be radically progressive. In his text, Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature, Ngugi begins with the declaration: “This book...is my farewell to English as a vehicle for any of my writings. From now on it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way” (1). He rationalizes this decision by detailing the ways in which language is not just a means of communication that objectively reflects reality:

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other human beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world. (16)

Here, Ngugi highlights the ways in which language and literature fundamentally shape one’s view of oneself and the world. Later, he contends that insofar as Africans continue to use and study English, they will forever remain subservient to the worldview of their former colonizers. Read through this theoretical paradigm, Smith’s borrowing of Forster’s text could be understood as indicative of her complete interpellation into the worldview of colonialism. Her reliance on a canonical, early twentieth century English writer for certain plot developments and themes could be contrived as an embrace of the
patriarchal, hegemonic English canon to the exclusion of her Jamaican heritage. In this interpretation of *On Beauty*, the text can be read as radically reactionary rather than radically progressive.

Likewise, when placed within the theoretical framework of Frantz Fanon, *On Beauty* can be interpreted as retrogressive, rather than neo-postcolonial, in its dependence on *Howard’s End*. In his 1952 text *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon contends that it is irrevocably damaging to their psyches for black males to imbibe British literary representations during their formative years. He argues that this yields a certain white-identified worldview that results in a split consciousness once the young black man leaves his own people and is forced to see himself as Other:

The black schoolboy in the Antilles, who in his lessons is forever talking about “our ancestors, the Gauls’ identifies himself with the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries truth to the savages- an all white truth. There is identification- that is, the young Negro subjectively adopts a white man’s attitude...Subjectively, intellectually, the Antillean conducts himself like a white man. But he is a Negro. That he will learn once he goes to Europe, and when he hears Negroes mentioned he will recognize that the word includes himself as well as the Senegalese. (147-8)

Fanon goes on to assert that unless this problem is remedied in the form of the production of magazines, songs and history texts specifically designed for young black children, the cycle of fractured identity formation and low self esteem will continue to present itself in black individuals:

What am I getting at? Quite simply this: When the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an actional person. The goal of his behavior will be the Other (in the guise of the white man), for the Other alone can give him worth. (154)

Interpreted within the context of Fanon’s work, Smith’s mobilization of Forster’s narrative as a scaffolding for her own text could be construed as exemplary of the
dehabilitating effects of a white-centric educational system. That is, the author’s
traditional English education complete with a degree from King’s College, Cambridge
University, could be viewed from Fanon’s psychoanalytical perspective as that which is
to blame for Smith’s need to employ the work of a white male author from the traditional
literary canon as the basis for On Beauty. In this paradigm, Smith could be understood as
having imbibed the white-centric cultural values of England as a direct result of her
traditional English upbringing and thus made the Other the goal of her behavior; her use
of Forster in this interpretation would be read merely as a manifestation of this tragic
inferiority complex.

Similarly, when read through the theoretical lens of yet another postcolonial
theorist, Edward Said, On Beauty’s intertextuality can once again be interpreted as taking
a step back, rather than forward, in the field of postcolonial studies. As his seminal 1977
text Orientalism and 1993 text Culture and Imperialism demonstrate, Said dedicated his
career to exposing the ways in which Western discourse generated and perpetuated
certain fallacies about the East. He strove to highlight how these discourses ultimately
legitimated Western imperialism. In Said’s formulation, even the most well-intentioned
and sympathetic Western writer was tainted in his perception of the East by years of
indoctrination into an ideology that was created by and for the colonial powers. Said saw
this ultimately reflected in the Western literary canon, as explicated in this excerpt:

I doubt if it is controversial, for example, to say that an Englishman in India or
Egypt in the later nineteenth century took an interest in those countries which was
never far from their status in his mind as British colonies. To say this may seem
quite different from saying that all academic knowledge about India and Egypt is
somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact – and yet
that is what I am saying in this study of Orientalism. (11)
In Said’s paradigm, E.M. Forster (arguably best known for his novel *A Passage to India*) would serve as the prime example of an Orientalist, or one who ascribes to the ideology of Orientalism. This is defined by Said as “the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (3). Although much of *A Passage to India* is blatantly pro-India, from its sympathetic portrayal of the honest, warm-hearted, wrongly accused Dr. Aziz to its undermining of certain Western prejudices such as the dark man’s lust for the white woman, Forster would nonetheless qualify in Said’s paradigm as an Orientalist. This is because despite all sympathetic gesturing, Forster nonetheless repeats in his text the very cycle Said is speaking out against. In the act of writing about India, and in his subsequent entrenchment in the literary canon, Forster contributes to and perpetuates the cultural work that positions the Orient as “Other.” Because of this, Smith’s evocation of Forster in the contemporary moment through her use of *Howard’s End*, and the consequent continuation of Forster’s fame through such an evocation, could be read as the author’s engagement in a project that runs directly counter to that of Said. As a result, Smith’s text could be taken as frustrating rather than furthering the efforts of postcolonialist studies, and designations of Smith as neo-postcolonial are again brought into question if *On Beauty* is considered strictly in this light.

In this way, when taken strictly at face value within the context of certain postcolonial theorists, Smith’s use of Forster could be read as hardly postcolonial, let alone neo-postcolonial. When interpreted in this light, Smith’s employment of Forster is
more reactionary than progressive, insofar as it alternately duplicates the very literary pitfalls Ngugi and Fanon were attempting to expose and eradicate, or works in direct opposition to the goals of Said. Surely Smith’s own words on the subject do nothing to negate this type of assessment of her work, as shown in a September 2005 interview with Jessica Murphy Moo. When Moo questioned Smith as to what had motivated her to pay “hommage” to Forster, Smith replied by stating:

I suppose he's my first love fiction-wise. He seems to me a very humane novelist—and one who's actually much more interesting than he appears to be on the surface. He's extremely English. If you're born here, he naturally means a lot to you. Beyond that, I don't really know. I just really like him. (Take Three, 1)

In this response, no mention is made of superior or ulterior motives in mobilizing Forster so as to instigate a progressive reading of the text, and instead a pure adoration of the author is named as justification for this plot and character usurpation. Indeed, if one was to take Smith at her word, one would have to assume that Smith’s use of the canonical author was almost accidental, a mere inevitable result of her being English. Yet when one delves deeper into the mechanics of On Beauty, and takes note of how the author manipulates Forster’s text to suit her own purposes, one must assume that there is more behind Smith’s mobilization of Forster than she admits in this interview. In point of fact, when placed within the context of other postcolonial novels, it becomes apparent that On Beauty’s use of a canonical text is actually a subversive technique that has been used before by other postcolonial writers.

Indeed, although Smith’s reliance on Forster might appear retrogressive at first glance when read through the lens of certain postcolonial theorists, this appropriation of a traditional English text has been progressively utilized by postcolonial novelists before, most notably J.M. Coetzee and Jean Rhys. In his 1986 text Foe, Coetzee makes use of
Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* for the purposes of interrogating the nature of the narrative voice. His post-modernist text reimagines *Robinson Crusoe* as the tale of a female castaway whose true tale of shipwreck is grossly distorted by the ghostwriter she hires to pen her saga, Daniel Defoe. Jean Rhys likewise usurps a canonical novel in her 1966 text *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a “prequel” to Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*. In it, Rhys redresses the bigoted portrayal of West Indians found in the original text by sympathetically reconstructing the story of the first Mrs. Rochester. Both texts are progressive insofar as they engage in appropriation as a means of subversion. They both usurp the plotline of a canonical text for the purposes of demonstrating the multi-faceted nature of truth and narrative, calling attention to the concept that there are many sides to any story and it is the subaltern’s side of the story that is normally silenced in canonical literature. These types of texts belong to the subgenre of postcolonial literature that Helen Tiffin has called “canonical counter-discourse,” and can be characterized by “a post-colonial writer [who] takes up a character or characters, or the basic assumptions of a British canonical text, and unveils those assumptions, subverting the text for post-colonial purposes” (Tiffin, 97). In this way, insofar as *On Beauty* demonstrates itself to be subversive, Smith can be understood as a aligning herself with these counter-canonical novelists who are actually working to further certain postcolonial concerns.

That *On Beauty* is indeed subversive is immediately evident when one considers the racial and national makeup of its protagonists. Although often overlooked or taken as norm in analyses of *Howard’s End*, Forster’s text only includes protagonists of Caucasian descent who have been born and raised in England. Smith tweaks this key component of Forster’s novel in her reversionation, and in an ironic twist, includes only one white, English
character in *On Beauty*. All of the white, English characters from Howard’s End are refashioned in *On Beauty* into black or racially mixed, and represent disparate nationalities: Leonard Bast is reinvented as African American Carl from Roxbury; the Schlegels metamorphosize into the half-white, half-black, nationally hybrid Belseys; and the Wilcoxes transform into the black British family, the Kipps. With regard to portraying different nationalities, Smith is doubly subversive in that not only does she portray a plethora of different nationalities, but she also abandons the popular conception of nationality as a discrete, easily definable attribute. She does this by including in *On Beauty* not only the nationally hybrid characters noted above, but also characters living on the periphery of the legally sanctioned system of nationality. Members of the Haitian Diaspora—figured most prominently in the figure of Choo—defy clear cut national categorization. Despite living and working in the United States, these characters lack official citizenship as granted by the United States government. Likewise, given that they live in the United States but self-identify as Haitian individuals, Smith highlights the tension between cultural identification and place of residency in categorizing nationality. Thus by altering in *On Beauty* the racial and national composition of the original characters in *Howard’s End*, Smith is able to incorporate into her text additional thematic elements not found in Forster’s novel. Unlike Forster’s characters, who limit the text’s scope to discussions of class and political perspective, Smith’s characters enable her novel to deal with issues surrounding race and nationality as well. In a move reminiscent of Joyce in his seminal text *Ulysses*, Smith usurps the plotline of a canonical author only to adapt it to the contemporary moment, ultimately amending it to both highlight and reflect the complexity of the current cultural climate in all its multi-racial, neo-national,
binary-defiant glory.

Although Smith is innovative in comparison to Rhys or Sargasso in her use of an almost wholly subaltern cast of characters, she then struggles to exploit the counter-canonical technique as effectively as these novelists. One reason for this is Smith’s narrative method, which serves to obscure the novel’s ultimate agenda or message. The third person omniscient narrator of On Beauty shifts in voice throughout the text, seemingly to match the linguistic style of each character. For example, in describing Levi the narrator adopts a colloquial terminology, and uses shorter, less complex sentences: “Levi, who could never bear bad vibes, still felt the need to make this guy like him, like most guys liked him” (247). Conversely, in depicting members of Wellington academia, such as Jack French, the narrator makes use of a more expansive vocabulary and elevated rhetoric: “But nothing in French’s armoury of baroque sentences seemed sufficient for dealing with a girl who used language like an automatic weapon” (146). This relay of the narrative via character ventriloquism is possibly mobilized by Smith as part of her “hommage” to Forster, who employs a multi-voiced narrator in Howard’s End. But whereas Forster’s utilization of this narrative style is effective insofar as it can be linked to a larger social project, Smith’s use of the shifting narrative voice is not as successful. That is, in his 1992 text, Howard’s End: E.M. Forster’s House of Fiction, Alistair Duckworth convincingly argues that Forster mobilizes this narrative technique in order to present a variety of perspectives in a non-biased manner with the end goal of eliciting dialogue and debate amongst his readers: “Forster’s achievement as a social critic is not, however, to have proposed solutions to social problems but to have put significant topics on the table for his readers to discuss and debate” (129). While one
may argue (and many critics have) that Smith has accomplished the same textual feat as Forster in *On Beauty*, it is the narrator’s tone that ultimately debunks such an argument. Distinctly satirical in nature, *On Beauty*’s narrator does not encourage a serious consideration of all political or religious or class-based perspectives, but rather derides them all. The narrator is unmistakably irreverent towards Monty Kipps, whom she intimates is only posturing in his beliefs by describing him as “a man constantly on the lookout for the camera he knew must be filming him” (112). Yet she as just as unforgiving towards Howard Belsey, who is characterized as “a general who could barely get on his horse” with regard to the Affirmative Action Committee battle, suggesting his ultimate lack of conviction (157). Indeed, the narrator’s general synopsis regarding the protagonists and their beliefs is best captured in the passage describing Zora which asserts: “the truth was she didn’t take these public passions home, or even out of the room, in any serious way…Was anyone ever genuinely attached to anything?” (209)

Although one might argue that the narrator’s cynicism towards the characters need not define the author’s position or dictate how the reader should view the character (insofar as there is such a thing as an unreliable narrator), Smith does not create a space between narrator and reader so as to prompt a skeptical view of the narration. Rather, she encourages the reader to align himself with the narrator’s views in the continual use of the collective first person. For example, phrases such as “we forget what we choose to forget,” (34) or “swearing was, as we have seen, generally accepted in most situations [in the Belsey family]” (87) are peppered throughout the text. In self-consciously inserting herself into the narration, the narrator collapses the gap between reader and narrator and encourages him to join her in ridiculing all of the protagonists and their alleged “values.”
Thus the elements that go into Smith’s narrative voice—character ventriloquism, satirical tone and a presumed closeness with the reader—combine to obfuscate the ultimate message of the novel. Unless the overarching theme of the novel is meant to be that nothing is sacred and all principles can be compromised (which in itself is problematic), Smith’s choice in narration undercuts the novel’s effectiveness as a counter-canonical novel.

One might question why the lack of an immediately recognizable theme, or an overarching theme of general irreverence, undermines *On Beauty*’s effectiveness as a counter-canonical novel. The answer to both of these questions lies in the inherent nature of the counter-canonical novel. It is the overriding thesis that is the most important element in any counter-canonical text. Because the plot and characters are borrowed (albeit admittedly to varying extents), the text’s entire merit lies in its ability to successfully expose and challenge the “ideological elements [that] are presented as natural and exist in the background of the text or as a substrate upon which the text is built” (Lane, 18). Thus the lack of a readily apparent theme, or an overarching theme of general flippancy, does not justify Smith’s use of Forster or his canonical text. *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Foe* are so powerful precisely because of their immediately recognizable purpose, which is conveyed in their strategic narrative treatment of certain characters. Rhys’ project of rescuing the West Indians from the depths of castigation in Bronte’s text is readily perceivable in a first person sympathetic portrayal of Antoinette and her childhood in the Caribbean juxtaposed with a first person bigoted delineation of Rochester. Likewise, Coetzee’s interest in highlighting the perspectival nature of history and the silencing of the subaltern in canonical literature is achieved through a gradual
petering out of the feminine voice. The text begins with a strong, first person female narrator, shifting into a more distanced epistolary narrative, then ending with an unnamed male narrator. Thus, both Rhys and Coetzee’s effective narrative strategy aids them in presenting a clear-cut novelistic message that justifies their usage of the canonical text. By comparison, On Beauty falters because it lacks a narrative technique that at once identifies and justifies the purpose behind the author’s use of the canonical text.

That Smith does not present a clear thesis that helps the reader to understand why she chose Forster or Howard’s End deserves some attention, for the choice of canonical text is perhaps the most crucial element in any counter-canonical novel. To return once again to Rhys and Coetzee, the reasons behind the authors’ choosing of Jane Eyre and Robinson Crusoe respectively are immediately self-evident. Bronte’s treatment of the first Mrs. Rochester as the insane, animalistic half-Creole who acts as a foil to the modest, English Jane has long been of interest to postcolonial scholars, who often cite Jane Eyre as exemplary of the Eurocentric mindset that positioned the Other as savage and “un-British.” Likewise, Coetzee’s mobilization of Robinson Crusoe for a counter-discursive purpose is relatively straight forward, given its sustained association with colonialist ideologies. As Helen Gilbert asserts,

> For Caribbean writers in particular, Defoe’s novel, along with The Tempest, is held responsible for establishing and maintaining the New World tropologies that have led to the subordination of black peoples in a master/slave dialectic. Read critically, both texts depict the profound interpellation of the racial other into western discourse: hence, the Crusoe/Friday and Prospero/Caliban relationships act as symbolic touchstones for the larger colonial enterprise. (36)

Similarly, Peter Carey utilizes Great Expectations as the canonical text from which he creates his 1997 counter-discursive novel Jack Maggs because, as Barbara Schmidt-Haberkamp explains in her critical study of Carey’s text, “Victorian novels, as both the
authors of *The Empire Writes Back* and Edward Said in his seminal study *Culture and Imperialism* have shown, were ‘made as central to the cultural enterprise of Empire as the monarchy was to its political formation’" (250). Conversely, *Howard's End* does not immediately present itself as a text that would be conducive to, or in need of, subversion. That is, insofar as the counter-canonical novel engages in the process of “literary decolonization” by way of a “radical dis/mantling of European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses,” *Howard's End* does not seem to lend itself to this project (Tiffin, 95). Aside from reenacting the usual pitfalls of the English canon (e.g. utilizing an all white, English cast of characters), Forster’s text does not in any particular way stand out as a novel that girds imperialist ideology, and in many ways is actually critical of the intrinsically exploitative British imperialist economic system. That is not to say that one cannot surmise many good reasons as to why Smith may have found it useful to reach back to Forster (and this particular text) in order to further her analysis of the contemporary moment. The historical positioning of England in 1910 just four years before the start of World War I strongly parallels that of the United States in the contemporary moment. Hedonistic King Edward could be compared with the spendthrift President Bush, and America’s post 9-11 related difficulties both home and abroad (internal cultural conflicts and a problematic foreign policy that severed ties with the United Nations) could be seen as comparable to England’s foreign and domestic political problems in the early twentieth century (i.e. disputes over Irish Home Rule, widespread poverty in England). Indeed, Smith could very well be drawing a deliberate analogy between the contemporary United States and pre-WWI England in her use of *Howard's End*, highlighting that the end of the
United States’ reign is imminent. Yet if this is the author’s intention, the analogy ultimately serves to demonstrate how competing projects within a text can undermine its integrity as a whole. For the purposes of showing how history repeats itself, *Howard’s End* is the natural choice. Yet for counter-discursive, postcolonial purposes, Smith would have been better off choosing a more imperialist-oriented text by Forster such as his 1924 text *A Passage To India*. Smith’s multi-racial cast of characters in *On Beauty* fall flat once positioned within the framework of *Howard’s End* in part because there are few tacitly understood colonial European discourses to subvert or dismantle from the original text. In this sense, although Smith’s choice of *Howard’s End* is justifiable in certain ways, it is less than optimal in a neo-postcolonial context.

With regard to Smith’s multi-racial cast of characters, one might find it useful to progress from a discussion of Smith’s narrative style and choice of canonical text into an analysis of her characterization in *On Beauty*. As was noted earlier, the root of Smith’s subversion of *Howard’s End* is to be found in the author’s racially and nationally diverse set of protagonists. It is perhaps surprising, then, that Smith mobilizes popular racial stereotypes to delineate her characters. Take, for example, the character of Kiki Belsey. Overweight, maternal and sassy, Kiki embodies the first black female stereotype represented in the text- that of the “mammy” figure. As Kimberly Wallace-Sanders explains in her text *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender and Southern Memory*, the mammy figure was readily identifiable in literature by certain traits:

The mammy’s stereotypical attributes- her deeply sonorous and effortlessly soothing voice, her infinite patience, her raucous laugh, her self-deprecating wit, her implicit understanding and acceptance of her inferiority and her devotion to whites- all point to a long-lasting and troubled marriage of racial and gender essentialism, mythology and southern nostalgia. (2)
Given that the narrator takes pains to delineate Kiki as the matriarch of her family and the welcoming party hostess, who responds to Claire’s likening of her dress to a sunset by joking, “Honey, I done set already,” the similarities between Kiki and the mammy stereotype are undeniable. Indeed, the narrator deliberately invites a comparison between Kiki and the mammy legend through certain interior monologues of Kiki’s, such as the following:

And so her chest gave off a mass of signals beyond her direct control: sassy, sisterly, predatory, motherly, threatening, comforting- it was a mirror-world she had stepped into in her mid-fourties, a strange fabulation of the person she believed she was... But then, thought Kiki, they were brought up that way, these white American boys: I’m the Aunt Jemima on the cookie boxes of their childhoods, the pair of thick ankles Tom and Jerry played around. (51)

Likewise, in addition to utilizing the mammy stereotype in order to delineate Kiki, the narrator makes use of yet another mythologized representation of the black female body in her depiction of Victoria Kipps: the Jezebel figure. In her text, *Arn’t I a Woman; Female Slaves In the Plantation South*, Deborah Gray White offers a useful synopsis of the Jezebel stereotype:

One of the most prevalent images of black women in ante-bellum America was of a person governed almost entirely by her libido, a Jezebel character. In every way, Jezebel was the counterimage of the mid-nineteenth-century ideal of the Victorian lady. She did not lead men and children to God; piety was foreign to her. She saw no advantage in prudery, indeed domesticity paled in importance before matters of the flesh. (29)

Serving as a foil to the other antebellum conceptualization of the black female (the mammy figure), the Jezebel figure necessarily embodied not only different personality traits than the mammy figure but also different physical characteristics as well. In her analysis of the icon, K. Sue Jewell outlines the physical attributes that traditionally corresponded with the Jezebel image:
Jezebel, more commonly known as the bad-black-girl, is a cultural image that is portrayed as a mulatto or a fair-complexioned African American female, who possesses features that are considered European. Thin lips, long straight hair, slender nose, thin figure and fair complexion are the physical characteristics that make up this image, which conforms more to the American standard of beauty than any of the other images. (46)

Alternately delineated as “gamine” and “sinewy,” with “a long silky weave,” Victoria Kipps deviates in certain aspects from the Jezebel characterization (her dark skin and full lips) but nonetheless retains enough of the stereotypical attributes so as to evoke it. Yet it is not so much the protagonist’s appearance as her hypersexualized persona that yields a marked likeness to the mythologized Jezebel figure. In both On Beauty’s narrative (which indulges in detailed examinations of Victoria’s breasts on multiple occasions) and its plotline (which features Victoria in sexual relationships with no less than three of her fellow characters), the novel takes pains to present the Kipps’ daughter as highly sexual and sensual, even likening her to Nabokov’s Lolita. But the text goes beyond delineating Victoria as a mere hypersexualized female and deliberately evokes the Jezebel stereotype in having the narrative take as its main focus Victoria’s seduction of a Caucasian male. That is, in portraying Victoria as one who seduces Howard, and further in portraying her as one who apathetically questions him about his wife while engaging in this seduction, Smith evokes the Jezebel fabulation that represented the black female as the active opponent of domesticity, the ultimate agent in bringing about the moral downfall of the otherwise virtuous male via her uncontrollable lasciviousness. In this way, On Beauty incorporates into its narrative two of the most persistent and derogatory representations of black womanhood from the antebellum South, the mammy and the Jezebel figures.

Unfortunately, as was true of the narrative voice, this type of characterization
proves unclear in its ultimate purpose and falters within a counter-canonical framework. As stated, the merit of a counter-canonical text lies solely in the extent to which it is able to build off of certain elements of the original text, in order to ultimately "challenge colonial ways of knowing" via a dismantling of "colonialism’s representations, reading practices and values" (McLeod, 32). Thus with regard to characterization in the counter-canonical novel, resistance to popular stereotypes would be of paramount importance in this respect, as part of the project of dismantling the original text and the ideologies that gird it. Different counter-canonical novelists have approached this project of resistant characterization in various ways. For example, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rhys simultaneously evokes and resists stereotypes of West Indians by characterizing Antoinette Mason as the polar opposite of the stereotype she embodies in Bronte’s original text. Coetzee takes a slightly different but no less powerful approach, by figuring Friday as completely silent throughout *Foe*, symbolizing the protagonist’s refusal to be inscribed within/subsumed by a European ideology that positions him as Other. These approaches to stereotype-resistant characterizations are perhaps the most useful within the counter-canonical model, for the possibility of misunderstanding or misreading what the author is trying to do is minimalized. Conversely, the method Smith is presumably employing - the deliberate invocation of the stereotype - is another possible method by which to approach characterization that challenges stereotypes, but this technique is a bit more difficult to execute. The author must be patently clear in her subversive usage of stereotyping, else she runs the risk of being read as merely reaffirming colonialist ideologies. Regrettably, *On Beauty’s* failure to definitively outline the author’s intent in mobilizing stereotypical representations contributes to its
ineffectuality as a counter-canonical text.

That Smith is deliberate in her invocation of stereotypes representing the black female body and ultimately wants to mobilize them for some progressive purpose (and has not simply been interpellated into some racist ideology) is evident in her statements given in various interviews. For example, in an October 2005 NPR interview with Terry Gross, Smith commented on her decision to delineate Kiki as evocative of the mammy stereotype:

I think it’s always there at all times, in terms of your physical presentation, you can’t control it, your face speaks before you; but when you’ve had a transition it’s much more obvious, you notice it more. And personally I used to be very big so I know the difference and I remember it, and I do think that if you’re black and big, people would always call me sister and stuff, I got a lot of that, like there was a lot of idea that I would immediately be very humourous for instance or very nurturing and I don’t know if I’m either of those of things... So I think a lot of that was put into Kiki, the sense that your face speaks for you and that it sometimes says things that you don’t want it to say. (Difference, 1)

Thus, Smith is self-consciously employing the mammy stereotype in her depiction of Kiki so as to highlight the reductive and erroneous nature of the societal gaze that seeks to posit individuals into certain pre-fixed categories based upon their physical appearance. Yet in order for this to be self-evident in the text, the narrator must distinctively delineate a gap between the protagonist and the stereotype placed upon him/her, in order to avoid having the reader conflate the two. In Bessie Head’s 1974 text *A Question of Power*, the author demonstrates the differentiation between the main protagonist and the stereotypical manner in which others view her by exploring the interiority of Elizabeth (through shifting narrative sequences of dreams, hallucinations, and reality), and depicting the ultimate mental collapse that such a disparity between self-perception and the societal gaze can cause. In her delineation of Kiki, Smith rejects such
an approach, as exhibited in the narrator’s repeated passing over of opportunities in
which to explore the inner recesses of Kiki’s psyche:

Sometimes you get a flash of what you look like to other people. This one was
unpleasant: a black woman in a headwrap, approaching with a bottle in one hand
and a plate of food in the other, like a maid in an old movie. The real staff-
Monique, and an unnamed friend of hers who was meant to be handing out
drinks- were nowhere to be seen. The living room revealed only one other
person, Meredith, a fat and pretty Japanese-American girl, constant- you assumed
platonic- companion of Christian. (98)

Likewise, Kiki suffers from no severe mental delusion so as to suggest that the gap
between the mammy stereotype and her actual interiority is so large as to cause her
mental anguish. Another methodology by which authors sometimes highlight the
discrepancy between a protagonist and the stereotype they supposedly embody is by way
of satire, or subversive mimicry. Although speaking to feminist, rather than
postcolonialist, modes of representation, Luce Irigaray offers a useful theorization of this
approach:

How can we introduce ourselves into such a tightly woven systematicity [of
patriarchy]? There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one “path,” the one
historically assigned to the feminine: that of mimicry. One must assume the
feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of
subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it. Whereas a direct
feminine challenge to this condition means demanding to speak as a (masculine)
“subject” that is, it means to postulate a relation to the intelligible that would
maintain sexual difference. (76)

In this paradigm, Smith could have positioned Kiki as engaging in subversive mimicry
when the mammy gaze was put upon her, thus emphasizing the discrepancy between
Kiki’s identity and the identity forced upon her by the societal gaze. Instead, Smith
figures Kiki as mimicking the mammy image simply because it is expected of her and
because it puts others at ease. For example, in speaking with Claire and Warren, Kiki is
delineated as “moving her head from side to side in a manner she understood white
people enjoyed” (52). Although Smith does place a gap between Kiki and her stereotypical representation, in that Kiki is cognizant of the mammy gaze and is able to appropriate it for her own ends (pleasing other people), the lack of a more overt conversation between Kiki and her stereotype (either by a further developed exploration of the character’s thoughts on the subject or more deliberate actions on the part of Kiki to subvert it) results in a less successful textual mobilization of stereotype than that of other postcolonial novelists. This is because Kiki’s reaction to the gaze can be read as a sort of complacency on the part of the character towards stereotyping, or a sort of implicit acceptance of racist ideology because of its pervasiveness in society. Although I would maintain, based on various interviews Smith has given, that Smith keeps Kiki silent on the subject as a form of the most forceful resistance to the stereotype (i.e. a distancing on the part of Kiki to her stereotype so strong that the character cannot even entertain the notion of letting it affect her sense of identity), this cannot be wholly supported by the text. This lack of an immediately recognizable purpose for the author’s use of stereotypes is particularly disappointing given On Beauty’s canonical scaffolding. Because Smith has elected to showcase as her protagonists those racial and national subalterns traditionally excluded or stereotypically represented in the English literary canon, this unjustifiable use of stereotypes is particularly problematic. If On Beauty is to be viewed as a progressive text, it is acutely important that it clearly demonstrate the invalidity of stereotypes, and not mistakenly reaffirm the legitimacy of the canonical text’s typecasting.

In this way, it is difficult to abide by categorizations of Zadie Smith as neo-postcolonial. Not only does her text not embody a new phase in postcolonial
literature, it is not even as effective as past counter-canonical texts in its counter-
discursivity. The choice of narrative voice, canonical text and characterization approach
are all inappropriate for the counter-canonical genre, and serve to make the text a less
than effective counter-discursive text.

The argument can be made that this neo-postcolonial analysis of *On Beauty* has
focused primarily on the text's merit as a counter-canonical novel, and Smith did not
intend for it to be viewed as such. One could hold that Smith's use of Forster is
tangential and should only play a small part in a discussion of the novel's worth. To this,
I would respond that taking another's work, to whatever small a degree, is a matter of no
small import. Because Smith felt the need to borrow from another author, this aspect
should be made central to any discussion of the text, and her work should therefore be
judged according to counter-discursive standards. Accordingly, *On Beauty* should
assessed according to how much it builds off the original text in some progressive or
subversive way; if Smith did not intend for such comparisons to be made, she should not
have chosen a canonical novel as the source of her plotline.

Yet putting aside *On Beauty*'s failure as a counter-canonical novel, there is one
aspect of the novel that is truly deserving of neo-postcolonial merit. Smith's mobilization
of the Haitian Diaspora in *On Beauty* embodies a progressive step forward away from the
postcolonial works of the past and a unique relevancy for the contemporary moment.
Smith builds upon the work of postcolonial theorist Appadurai by linking media,
migration and globalization in her portrayal of the Haitian Diaspora in Boston, and is
progressive insofar as she presents in popular fiction what heretofore had been relegated
(primarily) to the theoretical realm. Further, Smith's use of the Haitian Diaspora in her
text encompasses two essential qualities necessary for the neo-postcolonial designation: a decisive break with the past (with regard to the type of Diaspora she elects to delineate) and a unique applicability to the contemporary climate (insofar as her text embodies a direct response to the post 9-11 era of melancholic national rhetoric).

In 1996, Arjun Appadurai released a text entitled *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. In it, Appadurai explores the affiliation between globalization, mass migration and electronic mediation in the modern world: “Implicit in this book is a theory of rupture that takes media and migration as its two major, and interconnected, diacritics and explores their joint effect on the *work of the imagination* as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity” (3). He argues that media and migration, although not historically “new” forces, nonetheless have a functioning in the contemporary world that is singular to the present moment. He contends that media and migration are unique to the here and now in that they “seem to impel (and sometimes compel) the work of the imagination,” which in turn threatens “the continued salience of the nation-state as the key arbiter of important social changes” (4). Ultimately, Appadurai views the “nation-state [as] enter[ing] a terminal crisis,” and the “diasporic public spheres” created by electronic media and mass migration as “the new crucibles of a postnational political order” (22). Predating Bhabha’s comments in the “Re-inventing Britain” proposal on the “hybrid cosmopolitanism of contemporary life” and the inapplicability of the “multiculturalist thinking [of] the eighties,” Appadurai asserts:
The wave of debates about multiculturalism that has spread through the United States and Europe is surely testimony to the incapacity of states to prevent their minority populations from linking themselves to wider constituencies of religious or ethnic affiliation. These examples, and others, suggest that the era in which we could assume that viable public spheres were typically, or exclusively, or necessarily national could be at an end. (22)

*Modernity at Large* figures media and migration as the central forces behind globalization in the contemporary world, and forecasts the imminent collapse of the nation-state.

Likewise, *On Beauty* highlights the pervasiveness of electronic media and mass migration in the contemporary world and the correlative threatened sovereignty of the United States through the Haitian Diaspora in Boston. Forces of the Haitian Diaspora, in the form of both people and media, are incorporated into *On Beauty* to demonstrate the waning power of the nation-state. This is perhaps best exemplified in the figure of Choo, both in his physical presence and subjectivity. His inclusion in the text in bodily presence alone comments on the prevalence of unsanctioned diasporas in the modern world, in that he is a Haitian national who has emigrated to the United States and is living there in questionable legality. Choo embodies the “global flows of people and things” that characterize the modern era and necessitate that “the new global economy has to be seen as a complex, disjunctive order” in which a purely nationalistic rhetoric cannot be sustained (Appadurai, 32). Just as Choo’s body represents the force of diasporic migration and the work it is doing to bring about a postnational world, so too does his subjectivity represent the work of Haitian diasporic media in displacing the sovereignty of the nation-state. In speaking of media’s connection with the decline of the nation-state, Appadurai asserts:
The megahetoric of developmental modernization (economic growth, high technology, agribusiness, schooling, militarization) in many countries is still with us. But it is often punctuated, interrogated, and domesticated by the micronarratives of film, television, music and other expressive forms, which allow modernity to be rewritten more as vernacular globalization and less as a concession of large-scale national and international policies. (10)

Smith demonstrates this notion in her text by forging an overt connection between Choo’s anti-governmental stance and his encounters with various subversive “micronarratives” of media. The most obvious example of this project comes during the narrator’s description of Choo’s apartment, in which everything else in the room is somewhat passed over in vague terms, except for one item which is described in detail:

By his chair on a little table was a long sheet of yellow paper, one of those Haitian bulletins they gave out for free everywhere. The main feature was a photograph of a little black man on a gold chair with a mixed-race woman on another gold chair beside him. Yes, I am Jean Bertrand Aristide, read Levi from the caption, and of course I care about the illiterate poor Haitian scum!...I did not buy these reasonably priced chairs with drug money, no way! I may be an uncommonly totalitarian dictator but I can still have my multimillion-dollar estate while protecting the grinding poor of Haiti! (359)

Because the political flyer is the one of the few items even present in Choo’s sparsely furnished room, and the only item delineated in any comprehensive way, the reader must conclude that Smith wishes to draw his/her attention to it. In doing so, Smith forges an overt connection between subversive print media and anti-governmental positions. Because Choo is one of the most political characters of the text (and the most vocal in his anti-governmental stance), the political flyer in his room serves to symbolically represent the author’s belief in the connection between print media and subversive political stances. In this way, Smith highlights the newly subversive functioning of print media in the modern world. Moving away from traditional theoretical assumptions about print media, which position it as propaganda for the nation-state, it here operates in a subversive role
as the impetus behind Choo’s critique of Haiti’s government. In this sense, Choo serves as a symbol of Haitian diasporic sphere’s influence on the sovereignty of the nation-state, both in his physicality and media-driven subjectivity.

Likewise, Smith’s portrayal of Haitian media and migrants as agents of postnationalism is not limited to those parts of the novel that deal directly with the Haitian protagonists’ character development. Smith also demonstrates the corrosive power of Haitian diasporic spheres in her delineation of the interactions between American protagonists and Haitian music/Haitian immigrants. This first comes about in Kiki’s interaction with the Haitian jewelry salesman at the beginning of the novel. In this exchange, Smith illustrates the ways in which foreign nationals can interrupt national discourses of race and ethnicity. As was explicated earlier in this paper, Kiki is entrenched within a specifically American ideology that fetishizes her body into a “mammy” or “Aunt Jemima” figure. In the scene with the Haitian vendor, Smith promotes a reading of Kiki as an individual so deeply inured to this stereotypical gaze that she experiences actual disorientation and discomfort when she does not receive it:

Aside from her money, the guy seemed barely concerned with her, neither as a person or as an idea. He did not call Kiki ‘sister’, make any assumptions or take any liberties. Obscurely disappointed, as we sometimes are when the things we profess to dislike don’t happen, she looked up abruptly and smiled at him. (48)

The jewelry salesman’s non-responsiveness to Kiki’s body results in an “obscure disappointment” on the part of Kiki, because he does not react in the expected manner. The vendor thereby represents a disruption in the continuum of a specifically American national discourse, in that he cannot or will not acknowledge the customary “mammy” gaze. That this should be read as attributive to his Haitian nationality is suggested in the fact that virtually all of the American characters, whether black or white, react to Kiki’s
body as a stereotype and none of the non-American characters do. In juxtaposing this scene with the one that immediately succeeds it—Kiki’s interaction with Warren and her performance as the mammy figure—Smith demands that attention be given to the national specificity of the “mammy” gaze. The author figures diasporic individuals such as this salesman with the power to interrogate specifically national discourses through their bringing of them to the fore in their refusal to implicitly accept them. Because it is but a small step from questioning the legitimacy of one national discourse to questioning them all, Smith here gestures towards the notion that the Haitian Diaspora in Boston and other diasporic spheres like it will ultimately be responsible for the decline of the nation-state. In this way, the text again uses the Haitian Diaspora as a force actively inimical to the nation’s sovereignty, insofar as a Haitian immigrant embodies the power to bring to the fore the artificiality and erroneousness of certain national discourses.

Kiki is not the only American protagonist whose encounters with the Haitian Diaspora illustrate the place of marginality the nation state is forced into as a direct result of diasporic public spheres. The effect Haitian media and Haitian nationals have on Levi demonstrate the tedious hold nation-states have on their subjects. Whereas Kiki’s conversation with the Haitian jeweler pointed to the illegitimacy of certain national discourses and threatened the nation’s sovereignty in this way, Levi’s meetings with the Haitian Diaspora threaten the notion of nationality as a necessary or relevant attribute. Levi’s chance encounter with a member of the Haitian Diaspora, Choo, on a Boston street ultimately results in his transformation into a Haitian-identified man. Through this encounter, Smith highlights two important aspects of nationality; its learned rather than inherent nature, and its subsequent fragility resulting thereof. That is, if Levi’s
nationality was an innate quality, it would require more than a random meeting with a man on a street corner to transform Levi’s sense of himself from American to Haitian. Smith suggests through Levi the facility of unlearning one’s nationality, and the ability of diasporic individuals to displace the nation in teaching an individual his sense of identity. Likewise, it is not just diasporic individuals, but diasporic media in the form of books and music, that help Levi to transform himself into a Haitian-identified individual. Smith illustrates the powerful effect these forms of media have on Levi in passages such as the following:

‘I know you’ve been crying’, insisted Kiki, but she didn’t know the half of it: couldn’t know, would never know, the lovely sadness of that Haitian music, or what it was like to sit in a small dark booth and be alone with it- the plangent, irregular rhythm, like a human heartbeat, the way the man harmonized voices had sounded, to Levi, like a whole nation weeping in tune. (408)

Almost immediately after listening to this music, Levi steals the Hyppolite painting ostensibly for the Haitian political cause, demonstrating just how powerful diasporic media can be in reshaping one’s sense of nationality. That he indeed has come to think of himself as a Haitian man, and therefore conceives of his actions as justifiable in support of a Haitian cause, is evident in the way he addresses his mother when she accuses him of wrongful theft: “IT AIN’T LIKE THAT!...People in Haiti, they got NOTHING, RIGHT? We living off these people man!...You, OK, married to your white man in the land of plenty- you OK. You doing fine. You’re living off these people, man!” (428) Levi’s Haitian-infused characterization of his father as a “white man” (Haitian infused insofar as Choo employs this vernacular) and his emphasis on “you” in speaking to his mother imply that Levi has distanced himself from identifying with his family, and has instead come to fully conceive of his identity as Haitian. In delineating
the effect Haitian music has on Levi, Smith is building off of Appadurai’s contentions that “part of what the mass media make possible, because of the conditions of collective reading, criticism and pleasure, is what I have elsewhere called a ‘community of sentiment’, a group that begins to imagine and feel things together...these sodalities are often transnational, even postnational, and they frequently operate beyond the boundaries of the nation” (8). Levi’s encounter with the Haitian music enables him to “begin to imagine and feel things together” with Haitian men such as Choo and engage in ersatz nostalgia, or “nostalgia without lived experience or collective historical memory,” as a Haitian man (78). In this way, On Beauty highlights through Levi, and his experiences with the Haitian Diaspora, the capacity of media and migration to displace one’s birthplace and/or place of permanent residency in determining nationality. The text demonstrates the vulnerability of nations in the face of diasporic public spheres which challenge the national rhetoric of a static “Americanness” innate in all citizens of the United States.

Smith’s mobilization of the Haitian Diaspora (in the form of both diasporic individuals and diasporic media) as a force threatening to the nation’s sovereignty is progressive and worthy of neo-postcolonial merit insofar as it engages in a dialogue with a specific contemporary moment. That is, in the post 9-11 context, the dominant ideology of the United States as represented through various forms of mass media, cultural consumption and political rhetoric enforced a general shoring up of national borders, a tightening of “nation” implicated designations such as “American” and “patriotic.” Likewise, the United States witnessed a virulent reappropriation of a binary system of classification in which individuals were deemed either “with” America or
“against” it. In Precarious Life, Judith Butler likened the behavior of the United States in the post 9-11 era to:

A virulent and self centered subject; its actions constitute the building of a subject that seeks to restore and maintain its mastery through the systematic destruction of its multi-lateral relations, its ties to the international community. It shores itself up, seeks to reconstitute its imaginary wholeness, but only at the price of denying its own vulnerability, its dependency, its exposure, where it exploits those very features in others, thereby making those features ‘other’ to itself. (41)

As Butler so rightly points out, the trauma of 9-11 did not induce the United States’ to acknowledge its own vulnerability but rather to virulently defend delusions of autonomy and sovereignty. The threat embodied in 9-11 to the nation’s fantasy of itself as invincible only exacerbated the nation’s self-perception of itself as a discrete unit capable of removing itself from the global context. It is this rhetorical climate that makes Smith’s use of Appadurai and his contentions regarding how “the global flows of people and things” facilitate “new ways in which individual attachments, interests and aspirations increasingly crosscut those of the nation-state” so significant (10). Written in 2003 and inspired by the author’s experiences as a Fellow at Harvard University during the 2002-2003 academic year, On Beauty actively rejects the rhetoric popular at the time of its conception. Smith challenges this melancholic national rhetoric by setting her characters within this post 9-11 moment, then illustrating the lived experience of globalization in the modern world. That On Beauty is indeed set in this separatist, post 9-11 moment is evident in certain key comments made by the protagonists; Claire observes to Howard that “[Your silly ideological battles] don’t really matter. The country’s got bigger fish to fry now” (120) and later to Jack French that “the war continues, the President’s an ass, our poets are failing to legislate, the world’s going to hell and I want to move to New
Zealand” (151). Kiki’s pivotal reconciliation scene with Howard makes this gesturing toward the post 9-11 time period explicit: “I don’t feel like I even know you anymore...it’s like after 9-11 when you sent that ridiculous email round to everybody about [Baudrillard]” (394). In placing her protagonists within this historical context while simultaneously figuring the Haitian Diaspora in the Boston area as a narratively peripheral but thematically significant element of the text, Smith effectively undermines this national fallacy of autonomy and homogeneity. That is, Smith’s employment of the Haitian Diaspora in her text- both in its mere inclusion alone and in the way the author figures it as a force that undermines the nation- can be understood as a commentary on the global nature of the contemporary world, and the inapplicability of any rhetoric that seeks to assert the sovereign, autonomous nature of the nation-state. In this way, Smith’s use of the Haitian Diaspora in On Beauty as evidence of the postnational state of contemporary affairs is unquestionably neo-postcolonial, insofar as the text deconstructs and writes back against an ideology particular to the contemporary cultural climate.

Although her timing in her usage of Appadurai’s theories is the most prominent neo-postcolonial aspect, there are other reasons for holding Smith’s use of the Haitian Diaspora to be neo-postcolonial. Smith brings into fiction (and thereby popular culture) what had remained since Modernity at Large’s 1986 publication purely within the theoretical (and therefore academic) realm; although no shortage of postcolonial fiction has focused on the diasporic individual’s migration to another place and his relation to his former homeland via his imaginary, none to my knowledge have explored the ways in which diasporas disrupt the new homeland’s national rhetoric and persons of the new homeland’s sense of nationality. Moreover, Smith’s particular approach to the
delineation of diaspora is significant, for she is one of the few novelists to incorporate illegal immigrants into her text, and one of the only to showcase them as a significant element of the text. As Laila Amine contends in her essay, “A House with Two Doors? Creole Nationalism and Nomadism in Multicultural London,” “the clampdown on migration flows has entailed a surge in illegal immigration. These faces are generally absent from novels focusing on immigrants...” (73). Not only does Smith incorporate illegal immigrants into her text, she also explodes certain stereotypes regarding them. To draw from the work of Amine again, there is a certain understanding regarding illegal versus immigrants extant in popular culture today. Amine contrasts Zadie Smith’s novel *White Teeth* with Stephen Frears’ film *Dirty Pretty Things* as examples of the way in which legal and illegal immigrants respectively are represented in popular culture:

> In the popular British view...these two imaginaries neither overlap nor interact. No migrant in the film fights for the recognition of his or her culture, religion, or language, nor does he or she speak about the past and future in Britain. On the other hand, the novel depicts no immigrant living underground and hiding his identity, harassed by immigration services or with reason to hide. The truth, however, is far more complicated, the story not so neat or clean. (74)

In *On Beauty*, Smith represents Choo and other members of the Haitian Diaspora as inhabiting both of these worlds. Choo can be read as the stereotypical illegal immigrant in his living quarters and government-evasive occupations, yet he defies stereotype by fighting for recognition of his culture via rap performances at the Bus Stop and pro-Haitian political tables in Wellington Circle. Smith’s delineation of the Haitian Diaspora is progressive insofar as she includes illegal immigrants as main protagonists at all, but even more so because she does not relegate these illegal immigrants to their stereotypical representations. Insofar as neo-postcolonial denotes a certain unique applicability for the contemporary moment and a progressive step forward from postcolonial texts of the past,
Smith certainly achieves neo-postcoloniality in *On Beauty* through her portrayal of the Haitian Diaspora.

**Conclusion**

In this way, allegations of Zadie Smith as neo-postcolonial are neither wholly valid nor wholly invalid. Although I contend that the author’s mobilization of the Haitian Diaspora is the most neo-postcolonial element of *On Beauty*, the text does demonstrate certain other progressive components as well. For example, as touched upon earlier, the novel highlights the inapplicability of binary classifications in the contemporary world, by showcasing as central characters individuals who cannot be easily bound by racial, national or ethnic categories. The plethora of identity constructions both within and between races available to the protagonists, the habitual transatlantic travels and the ability to adopt or eschew cultural practices associated with one’s ethnicity imply that the protagonists in *On Beauty* are in a constant negotiation with their identity due to the limitless possibilities presented in the modern world. Indeed, as is most poignantly delineated through the character of Levi, the author is gesturing towards not only the limitless nature of identity construction in the modern world, but also the notion of it as fluid and in constant flux (i.e. there is no one set identity for individuals, but only a lifetime of identity negotiations). Insofar as texts traditionally portray character development as something with a concentrated endpoint, in which the main protagonist finally achieves a coherent sense of identity and/or learns the lessons he needs to in order to fully realize his full identity, Smith is moving beyond this traditional bildungsroman schematic and into a format that is more fitting for the contemporary moment.

Yet despite these neo-postcolonial tendencies, the text is not wholly emblematic
of a new phase of postcolonialism and reviews by critics that categorize it as such ignore significant elements of the text. Although Smith does gesture towards innovative themes in her work, the notion that Smith builds upon the work of her predecessors in a truly progressive way is problematic when one considers Smith’s use of Forster. This fundamental element of the text necessitates that On Beauty be judged as a counter canonical text, and when compared to novels such as Foe or Wide Sargasso Sea, the text pales in comparison. Smith’s narrative style and characterization come across as conflicted when anchored in the scaffolding of Howard’s End, and the justification behind the use of Forster’s novel is not immediately recognizable. Yet, even when removed from a counter-canonical evaluation, the text still cannot be said to stand without internal contradiction. These elements of narration and characterization remain problematic. The reader is still left to wonder which (if any) of the character’s viewpoints are worth taking seriously (since the narrator derides them all), and what the author is ultimately trying to accomplish by using stereotypes to delineate her characters. Thus, certain aspects of On Beauty prevent it from wholly embodying what one might think of as “neo-postcolonial,” or a truly inventive piece of literature that helps usher the postcolonial movement forward in some significant way.

I have chosen to name this thesis “Zadie Smith as the Postcolonial Sisyphus: A Neo-Postcolonial Examination of On Beauty” because the onus put upon Smith by these critics and arguably the postcolonial theorists of the “Re-inventing Britain” campaign to embody the next phase in postcolonial studies is not unlike the proverbial boulder put upon the mythological Sisyphus. And like Sisyphus, although Smith has made some progress towards mounting the hill whose other side embodies neo-postcoloniality, she is
ultimately doomed to fail. This is because the demands put upon her are impossibly high; with such unrealistic expectations almost any young author is bound to disappoint.

Perhaps the more important question to ask is not “Does Smith embody postcolonialism?” but “Is there any benefit in labeling an author as emblematic of the next phase in literary studies?” Of course there is some usefulness in describing a text as innovative or progressive, but hyberbolic labels such as “neo-postcolonial” are questionable in their constructiveness. With few exceptions, no one author or text can be described as having instigated a complete rupture with the past. Historically, most texts include progressive elements but do not as a whole step into a new literary sphere (the possible exception to this being Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and a few notable others). Moreover, who is to say that a contemporary novel which is truly progressive would even be labeled as such at the present time? Those select novelists who did usher in a new literary genre were not applauded by their contemporaries for their innovation but castigated as talentless or vulgar. This is because each phase of literary studies represents the ideology of that particular moment; these progressive novels represented a new ideology that could not be understood by their contemporaries. To label a text neo-postcolonial assumes the ability to foresee the ideology of the future; and as Althusser contends in his work on Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), an individual can never identify ideology as such or ever remove oneself from it for each person is always already operating within a framework of ISAs: “what seems to take place outside ideology...in reality takes place in ideology,” and that “it is necessary to be outside ideology...to be able to say: I am in ideology (a quite exceptional case) or (the general case): I was in ideology” (48). In applauding Smith as unmistakably neo-postcolonial, critics attempt to deny the fact that
they are trapped within certain ISAs, and ignore the fact that their being interpellated into certain contemporary ideologies precludes them from being capable of foreseeing future ideologies (and hence future literary genres). In this way, one might question how useful it is for critics or theorists to even engage in praise that positions a text or author as indicative of a new phase in literary studies, for no one can foresee the future direction of postcolonialism. Thus, critical reviews that figure any text or author as quintessentially indicative of a new literary phase are faulty not only in that they assign the author with a virtually insurmountable task, but also insofar as they position themselves as capable of stepping outside of ideological paradigms and foreseeing future ideological shifts.

Given the inherently flawed nature of any assertion that figures certain authors or texts as indicative of future literary genres, one must question why critics are so eager to delineate authors in this manner. With regard to Smith, there may be a plethora of reasons as to why critics are so vehement in their neo-postcolonial classification, yet I would argue that this phenomenon has at its root two main causes: the nature of modernity and the nature of the contemporary novel as a commodity. The nature of modernity conceptualizes change as both inevitable and desirable; hence it is not surprising that critics and scholars alike are continually on the lookout for the “next best thing” that will launch the literary world forward. They are all too quick to indulge in hyperbolic praise for the first potentially progressive author that comes along, and do not truly explore the substance of his/her work. The nature of the contemporary novel as commodity also compels this type of critical praise; since the novel has become increasingly detached from the world of ideas and increasingly attached to the world of capitalism, it now needs to be scrutinized as such. The novel has become like any other
sales-driven commodity, and the critics and "Re-inventing Britain" members like any other capital driven workers. Thus, hyperbolic praise and artificially generated hype with the aim of securing more sales or more revenue for projects is now a sad reality for the world of literature. Thus, it is my hope that this thesis, and other projects like it that seek to reevaluate certain critical assertions, will clear a space for texts in which they can be assessed according to their true merits and not according to the dictates of capitalism. This thesis is thus intended to represent but one step towards the return of literature to a more uncontaminated space, and my hope is that it will represent the first step of many.
1 Arana and Ramey hold that there is a direct correlation between the “Re-Inventing Britain” conference and the surge in work put forth by black British writers and cultural activists immediately prior. While this may be correct it cannot be contended with any certainty, for few of the texts they cite as predating the conference actually address the specific concerns put forth by the “Re-inventing Britain” campaign, the one notable exception to this being Diran Adebayo’s Some Kind of Black which was released in 1996.
2 Here, I do not mean to suggest that Zadie Smith or On Beauty should be understood as wholly representative of the entire generation of young black British writers who have been touted as the next phase in postcolonial studies; that is, just because Smith does not live up to the neo-postcolonial hype, that is not to suggest that others fall short as well. However, given that Smith “has been more critically studied and commercially popular than any other new novelist,” she would seem to represent one of the best authors that the movement has to offer (Childs, 201).
3 In a February 2005 interview with Random House, Zadie Smith responded to an interviewer’s speculation that On Beauty was the author’s “most accomplished” novel by stating, “I’m glad if that’s true—I’d be disappointed if I thought I hadn’t made at least a little progress since I wrote White Teeth. I was twenty when I started that book—I’m thirty now...But I did feel that the writing in White Teeth is basically adolescent, a very good fake, and, after its success, I realized my writing would have to do its maturing and development in public. Most writers don’t have a White Teeth hanging around—they arrive a little more formed with an On Beauty. My juvenilia is on the shelf for anyone to look at” (Bold Type, 1).
4 For examples of critics’ denouncement of The Autograph Man, please see Michiko Kakutani’s review in The New York Times which called the book “flat-footed,” “dour,” “abstract and pompous” and “tight and preachy” or Thomas Mallon’s evaluation in The Atlantic Monthly which holds that the book “creates genuine disappointment.”
5 For an exploration as to whether or not the novel is truly in decline, and a defense as to how its popularity and relevance has changed, rather than subsided, please see the Introduction to Peter Childs’ text, Contemporary Novelists: British Fiction Since 1970.
6 For a detailed explanation of how publishers manipulated Smith’s likeness in order to project a certain image for her text, please see the beginning of Dominic Head’s essay, “Zadie Smith’s White Teeth: Multiculturalism for the Millennium.”
7 For an in-depth analysis of how Rhys and Coetzee utilize these canonical texts and reinvent them for postcolonial purposes, please see Chapter 2 of Richard Lane’s text The Postcolonial Novel (Themes in Twentieth Century Literature and Culture), entitled “The Counter-Canonical Novel: J.M. Coetzee’s Foe and Jean Rhys’ Wide Sargasso Sea.”
8 Although the argument can be made that Howard’s End delineates two English families and one nationally hybrid, insofar as the Schlegels might be said to be half-German by way of their father’s emigration, I would argue all for all intents and purposes the Schlegel women are English, for they are not depicted as ever having lived in Germany. Conversely, Smith makes a point to outline in the introductory chapters that the Belsey children have had a transatlantic upbringing, and have lived in England for part of their lives.
9 Although it is never fully disclosed in the text whether members of the Haitian Diaspora are illegal aliens or not, Choo’s comments imply that he at least is; he references taking the job as a waiter at the Wellington dinner because it is “money in hand” (e.g. income not reported to the US government for tax purposes) and he presumably works as a street vendor for the same reason, given that he was a French literature and language teacher back in Haiti (361).
10 For an in-depth discussion of the nation’s mobilization of print media, please see Benedict Anderson’s 1983 text Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. Anderson contends that the nation played a vital role in individual identity formation in the post Enlightenment period. He asserts that through the work of print-capitalism, persons who had never met before came to view themselves as in “deep, horizontal comradeship” with one another, as part of the imagined community of the nation (6).
11 That Smith is calling attention to the fact the “mammy” figure is a specifically American construction seems evident in that all of her American characters, regardless of race, conceptualize Kiki in this manner and none of the non-American characters do. For example, both Warren and the “young brother half her age [who] had trailed Kiki up and down Newbury for an hour” are depicted as viewing Kiki as the mammy figure; by contrast, no mention is ever made of Monty Kipps viewing Kiki in this manner, and the Haitian jewelry salesman pointedly does not.
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