

“A Liberal Susceptibility to the Pains of Others”: Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty*, Haiti, and the Limits of a Forsterian Intervention

Alberto Fernández Carbajal

Abstract: This article explores the literary and ideological connections between Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty* (2005) and E.M. Forster’s *Howards End* (1910); it argues that *On Beauty*’s transformation of Leonard Bast into Carl Thomas, a black American rapper, constitutes Smith’s successful refashioning of Forster’s commentary on cross-class relations, whilst the problematic portrayal of a Haitian community perpetuates the ideological shortcomings of *Howards End* in its inability to make a convincing case for the societal “Other,” hence diminishing the impact of the novel’s postcolonial commentary.

Postcolonial literary criticism of the last few decades has famously embraced the enthusiasm and insurgency of Salman Rushdie’s article “The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance” (1982). Seminal texts in the field such as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin’s *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989) self-consciously took their tone from Rushdie, in whose vision the former colonies express discursively their insubordination from the departed imperial power. Rushdie found a new idiom for postcolonial literary studies in this mood of complete political opposition to all things colonial. However, he would later qualify such initial fervour when considering the dissenting position of writers such as E.M. Forster. Upon receiving the “Booker of Bookers” in 2008 for *Midnight’s Children* (1981), Rushdie remarked on the anti-imperialism of *A Passage to India* (1924) and stated his “love” of Forster (Anonymous and Rushdie). Rushdie’s gesture demonstrates in a belated manner that opposition to the politics of imperialism does not cancel out the possibility of cultural apprecia-

tion of, and indebtedness to, colonial literature. This is a caveat which postcolonial studies has been slow in acknowledging since an admission of cultural connection might be construed as colonial complicity and therefore be discarded as politically retrogressive. My assessment here of Zadie Smith's relationship with Forster will negotiate a critical position from which we can gauge complex conclusions about postcolonial responses to literary tradition by interrogating both the promise and the problems of undertaking a complex rewriting of a colonial canonical text.

Such a purposeful complication of oppositional critical perspectives seems justified by the growing candour of postcolonial writers themselves—both inside and outside of their fiction—about their appreciation of their literary predecessors. Smith belongs in a generation of Black British writers whose complex relationship with English literature qualifies the often too unvaryingly antithetical stance of works such as *The Empire Writes Back*. In a recent article, Smith offers this nuanced vindication of Forster:

Between the bold and the tame, the brave and the cowardly, the engaged and the complacent, Forster walked the middling line. At times—when defending his liberal humanism against fundamentalists from the right and left—that middle line was, in its quiet, Forsterish way, the most radical place to be. At other times—in the laissez-faire cosiness of his literary ideas—it seemed merely the most comfortable. (*Changing My Mind* 14)

Smith's complex defence of Forster as a moderate but complicated writer goes a long way towards reclaiming him as an important figure of twentieth-century literature whose impact on several generations of postcolonial, contemporary, and Black British writers has been understated. Smith's novel *On Beauty* (2005), published after the success of her debut, *White Teeth* (2001) and its successor, *The Autograph Man* (2002), is an explicit homage to Forster (*On Beauty* n.p.). Smith is attracted to Forster's diffident "middling line" and appreciates the possibilities of resistance inherent in this interstitial position. In stating her debt to Foster, Smith aligns herself with a handful of postcolonial

critics, such as Benita Parry, who praise Forster’s ability to dissent with the British system without being politically radical (Parry 174). Parry, whose materialist interventions into colonial politics and anti-colonial resistance, derived in part from Marxist thought, could not be more distant from Forster’s liberal humanism, starts uncovering some of the ways in which a heterodox liberal critique of Britain and its Empire can offer dissidence from within its very normative structures and demands that we look at Forster as a writer whose work began to challenge imperial complacency in a period when Britain was desperately holding on to its waning Empire.

It is all the more curious and compelling, then, that Smith chooses to ignore explicit issues of imperialism in Forster’s work and concentrates instead on his exploration of Englishness in *Howards End* (1910). Critics have been quick to recognise in *On Beauty* a new “breed” of postcolonial rewriting. As Maeve Tynan suggests, “[s]upplementing Forster’s analysis of class relations with an investigation of racial dynamics in contemporary society, Smith updates rather than challenges the concerns of the previous novel” (78). Ulka Anjaria supports Tynan’s point by arguing that *On Beauty* “is not, as some reviews have suggested, a postcolonial response in the model of Jean Rhys to Charlotte Brontë” (39). Smith’s text does not “write back” to *Howards End* from a critical angle that uncovers suppressed colonial histories; on the contrary, Smith is breaking new ground by undertaking an honorific rewriting of a canonical text in light of postcolonial issues of race, class, and migrancy.

As Frank Kermode remarks, “Zadie Smith’s real debt [in *On Beauty*] may not be in her echoes of *Howards End*, though she does insist on them” (n.p.). Here Kermode goes beyond character and event parallelism and seems to hint towards the inheritance of a particular ideological position. Smith’s preface to the novel offers clues that Forster provides her with more than a mere structural model and that there is reason to ascertain philosophical and ideological kinship as well: “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” (*On Beauty* n.p.). Smith may be “writing back” to Forster retrospectively, yet not as a response to a colonial writer whose novel *Howards End* implic-

itly enacts an imperial ideal, as Fredric Jameson has suggested (58), but as tribute to one of “ [her] peers, [her fellow] English writers” (Gerzina 273). She offers a revision of Englishness that productively reconsiders the legacies of Forster’s exploration of class, cosmopolitanism, and the ethical limitations of the intellectual middle class.

Nonetheless, I argue in this article that there is both cultural reinvigoration and ideological circumscription in the ways in which Smith’s text walks its own version of Forster’s “middling line,” divided as it is between a critique of the middle class and a liberal solidarity with the plight of others, which cannot do much to counteract their oppression in material terms. As I shall argue, the character of Carl Thomas “updates,” as Tynan suggests, the sometimes condescending depiction of the working class in Forster’s original novel. This constitutes Smith’s most productive revision of Forster’s original social commentary. However, in her unconvincing depiction of the Haitian community, which is meant to counteract the limitations of Forster’s social vision, Smith emulates the ideological circumscription inherent in Forster’s novel, hence establishing the sociological limits of her own postcolonial intervention.

On Beauty is set in contemporary Britain and the United States, and it explores the fortunes of the Belseys, a mixed-race Anglo-American family whose opposition to the British-Caribbean Kippses mirrors in significant ways the human mappings of Forster’s condition-of-England novel. *On Beauty* interrogates the ideological contradictions of the cosmopolitan Anglo-American middle classes and is based on Smith’s experiences as a writer-in-residence at Harvard. As an observer of academics at work, Smith retains a sense of detachment translated in *On Beauty* as an innate suspicion of intellectualism. Susan Alice Fischer argues that “[w]hile Smith’s Belseys and Kippses—her stand-ins for Forster’s Schlegels and Wilcoxes—appear to be at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, their actions ultimately reveal them to be much more alike than first supposed” (107). Through their affairs with their students, Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps evidence their flawed Ethics, revealing their human sameness in spite of their publicly displayed liberal and conservative agendas. Instead of pitting liberals against conservatives, as Forster does in *Howards End*, *On Beauty* articulates its search for human

connection in its exploration of the chasm between intellectual and intuitive approaches to art,¹ while still indexing the importance of personal relations, a central concern of *Howards End* and of Forster's work more generally. Anjaria has pointed out that “the underappreciated link between the two novels is their respective concern with the problem posed by aesthetic norms to individuals who seek human connection beyond the confines of their exclusive social milieu” (39).

Smith's characters attempt to connect in the face of interweaving issues of race and class. These enmeshed identitarian categories provide Smith's tribute to Forster with its particular postcolonial slant. Smith constructs urban working-class black characters, such as Carl Thomas, in order to undertake a critique of the bourgeoisie's inability to relate to the plights of those outside its privileged social spheres. Smith draws partly from Forster's social commentary on the division between the British middle and working classes in *Howards End*, embodied in the dealings between the Schlegels and Leonard Bast, to forge the beginning of a postcolonial critique of Anglo-American race and class relations. Leonard Bast, the original Forsterian character whom Smith transforms into Carl Thomas, is a white working-class character with bourgeois cultural aspirations that he attempts to fulfil by attending cheap concerts and reading inexpensive copies of works by John Ruskin and George Meredith. Forster famously offers some insights into Leonard's cultural ambitions with his comical but belittling imitation of Ruskin's prose² when Leonard describes to himself the mediocrity of his stuffy East End flat. However, Mary Pinkerton's charting of Leonard's progression in Forster's subsequent versions of the novel alerts us to some of the conscious limits of his representation. Pinkerton observes that Forster cut down Leonard's interior monologues in the revised manuscript, and his increasing use of pronouns and periphrastic constructions render Leonard an alien object to the curious Schlegels: he becomes “the boy,” “a nice creature,” “the victim,” “the father,” “the missing article,” “the fellow” (Pinkerton 238). In other words, he becomes a variety of “things.” Such conscious deployment of Leonard's remoteness from a bourgeois perspective cannot altogether counteract Forster's more problematic depiction of Leonard's cultural habits and his main role in the novel, which is kowtowing—

symbolically as well as materially—to his friends' interests. Nonetheless, the bourgeoisie's perception of the working class in terms of the abstract categories noted in Leonard's case anticipates Smith's manifest updating of Forster's social commentary.

Against Forster's problematic sneer at Leonard's literary ambitions, Smith's character Carl describes himself to Levi Belsey, whom Carl meets alongside the rest of the Belsey family at a performance of Mozart's *Requiem*: Carl explains, "I get my culture where I can, you know—going to free shit like tonight, for example. Anything happening that's free in this city and might teach me something, I'm *there*" (76; emphasis in original). Carl belongs to the vindicated black working class; he embraces his free access to culture with the enthusiasm of a generation living on the social achievements of the civil rights and Black Power movements, which contrasts with Leonard's arduous attempts at "buying" his way into the middle class, something which sets Leonard and Carl apart in spite of their parallel plights. From his first appearance, Carl is presented as unafraid of the "street" cadences of his speech; the precarious and sometimes ridiculous working class of Forster's text is transformed by Smith into a black working class which speaks proudly and which defies social stigmatization and cultural exclusivism. Smith's bestowal of social acceptance, which departs from Forster's potentially alienating depiction of Leonard, renders her novel emergently postcolonial in its celebration of multicultural societies and their fostering of cultural difference.

It is also important to *On Beauty's* intervention into the intellectual elite's narrow social focus that Carl is mainly defined by the Belseys' exoticizing gaze, which is often transfixed by Carl's appearance but is also dismissive of his character. Through differing perceptions of Carl's otherness, a postcolonial critique of bourgeois limitations begins to emerge. The most biased perspective on him is that of Howard, the head of the Belsey clan. After the performance of Mozart's *Requiem*, Howard ponders where he has seen Carl's face before and engages in a short reverie and thus detaches himself from any possibility of substantial social interaction with Carl: "'Rubens,' said Howard suddenly. 'Your face. From the four African heads. Nice to meet you, anyway'"

(77). In the “Author’s Note” added to the book as a postscript, Smith names and locates the painting to which Howard is referring and then disagrees that Carl looks like Rubens’s *Study of African Heads, c. 1617* (446). Aside from Smith’s de-authorization of Howard, this instance of intellectual limitation highlights Howard’s dissecting approach to those figures outside his immediate social milieu: Carl is objectified as he is transformed into a painting that Howard can behold, label, and finally dismiss. Whereas Forster’s Schlegels are fascinated by Leonard’s working-class difference and deflate his bookish references in order to cut through to his real life experiences, Howard is constructed as altogether myopic in his approach to socio-cultural difference.

Howard’s dehumanizing aestheticization is communicated to his like-minded daughter Zora, whose sensual interest in Carl casts him as an object of mere aesthetic beauty. When she runs into him at a swimming pool, “[f]or a whole twenty-three seconds the last thing on Zora’s mind was herself” (133). She also becomes aware of Carl’s power to attract attention: “Zora could clearly see people stealing a look, and lingering, not wanting to release the imprint of Carl from their retinas, especially if it was only to be replaced by something as mundane as a tree or a library or two kids playing cards in the yard. What a *thing* he was to look at!” (137; emphasis added). To Zora’s self-centred mind, Carl is not an interesting member of the urban black working class with life experiences compellingly different from her own but a wonderful “*thing* . . . to look at.” This fascination with Carl’s appearance aligns Zora with the intellectual superficiality of her father, while articulating the legacies of Forster’s objectification of Leonard Bast.

This episode also marks the beginning of a failed attempt at integrating Carl into the bourgeois structures of the fictional American University of Wellington. Zora fights an academic battle to allow him to stay as a discretionary student in Claire Malcolm’s poetry class, but what should have embodied a strategic use of institutional discourse to further Carl’s case becomes Zora’s frustrated attempt at bridging the empirical gap between her and the object of her desire. Zora’s personal interest in Carl, disguised as academic philanthropy, is thwarted by her inability to forge a personal connection with him which can extrapolate itself from the

academic discourses of Wellington and from her own privileged position. Towards the end of the novel, after Zora's jealous attack upon Carl and his eventual seductress, Victoria Kipps, he is finally forced to confront the fact that all this time he had been a political pawn manipulated by Zora's misguided altruism. Once he has become aware of Zora's sexual interest in him, he states, "I'm just some experiment for you to play with. You people aren't even black any more, man—I don't know *what* you are" (418; emphasis in the original). Aida Edemariam suggests that "[t]he answer is middle-class." Carl remains the exotic black object of Zora's unfulfilled mixed-race bourgeois fascination, the "toy" with which she plays from the safety of her privileged cultural and economic position. In presenting this clash of social strata and racial identities, Smith performs a postcolonial critique of the bourgeoisie's inability to transcend its social boundaries. The self-driven seduction of the societal "Other" reveals Smith's inheritance of Forster's equally conflicted bourgeoisie and its inability to forge a productive connection with Leonard Bast, the working-class outsider. However, Smith's text is also aware of Carl's attractive otherness and by extension of the global middle-class investment in the exoticism of socio-cultural difference. Whether Smith's text can be said to partake of such exoticization of difference, via Graham Huggan's notion of "the postcolonial exotic,"³ Carl's progression evidences the postcolonial impetus with which Smith attempts to rescue him from the shackles of the intellectual elite.

Carl's realization that he has been used by interfering intellectuals prompts his irate departure from Wellington. As Colin McCabe has remarked, "[a] cavil that should be noted is that Smith is currently ducking Forster's more pessimistic realism—the Leonard Bast figure . . . is neither as desperate at the beginning nor as dead at the end as Forster's character." Critics such as John Carey, and more recently Jonathan Rose, have contradicted the alleged realism of Forster's depiction of Leonard. As an apparent rebuttal of one of the weaknesses of her literary model, Smith repels the more problematic aspects of Leonard's fate and refuses to make Carl perish for the sake of middle-class introspection: Zora's physical longing for him, unlike Helen Schlegel's plot-driven attraction to Leonard, never materializes. On this front Smith

rejects Forster's handling of Leonard, which, featuring his famous “death by bookshelf,” ultimately serves the allegorical and material interests of his benefactresses, while claiming no rightful material place for the British working class in the house-as-nation that is Howards End. Conversely, *On Beauty* forfeits its chance to appropriate Carl and allows him to leave the privileged streets of Wellington, his unsettled but unbroken black working-class identity allowed to veer out of Zora's range of vision and influence.

Carl's disenchanted conclusion about the hermetic egoism of the bourgeoisie also entails a positive lesson, for it overturns the social complacency that had begun to assail him earlier in the novel. While working as an archivist for the Black Music Library at Wellington, a role created specifically for him in order to satisfy public debate about discretionary students, Carl's sympathy for black disenfranchisement begins to wane. During one of Zora's assiduous visits, he states, “I'm having trouble concentrating—I keep on getting a lot of noise from outside. People hollering for an hour” (376). Zora replies, “Some kind of Haitian protest thing. . . . Oh, you can't see them from this angle,” to which Carl retorts, “I can't *see* them but I can hear them, man, they *loud*” (376; emphases in the original). The characters disturbing Carl's newly attained cultural ambitions are protesters from Haiti. The Haitians in *On Beauty* are the novel's main politicized figures; Smith attempts to expose the social inadequacy of the bourgeoisie through its general ignorance of the Haitians' precarious social status both in Haiti and in America. Their representation is, nevertheless, an aspect of Smith's narrative that restricts the novel's potential as a constructive postcolonial intervention into issues of political asylum and postcolonial autocracy.

In spite of Carl's working-class subplot, the troubling depiction of the Haitians effectively aligns the novel's ideological perspective with the bourgeoisie whom the novel aims to critique in the first place. Like Forster, who is conscious of the marginality of Leonard Bast in the eyes of his affluent protagonists, Smith is aware of epistemological circumscription. At several points, Smith's narrative rehearses the Haitians' ineffability in order to point to such perceptual boundaries. For instance, when Howard enters a cab driven by a Haitian, he realizes that “on the

radio, men were screaming at each other in a French that was not, as far as Howard could tell, French” (325). Later on, we are told that “[t]wo cabs came parallel with each other now, heading in opposite directions. The drivers slowed down to a halt and yelled happily at each other from their open windows while beeping horns started up around them” (134). Then Carl states, “Those Haitians got a lot of mouth, man. Sound like they screaming all the time” (134–35). The Haitians who fill the affluent spaces of Wellington with their unintelligible noise are loud but remain outside the threshold of comprehension for Smith’s protagonists. If Carl constitutes an alien object of bourgeois fascination, then the Haitians belong in an even more remote category of otherness, whereby their very sound is inimical to Howard’s untrained ears. According to Philip Tew, “Roy Sommer is entirely correct that the novel considers ‘social and linguistic barriers’ and that the Haitian rappers are rendered incomprehensible” (103). Most Haitians in the book are unintelligible not only because of their French patois, whose cryptic character fails to break the surface of bourgeois consciousness, but also because of their ambiguous activism in English. It is ultimately their equivocal political messages in the novel, I argue, which render them unknowable. When Haitians are finally granted a comprehensible voice in *On Beauty*, the messages they convey are of a problematic political ambiguity; in addition, the views they occasionally voice on the ideal of a common African origin for all black people renders discourse a tool not to further the Haitian cause but to point out the contradictions between race and class consciousness in the global black middle class.

The work of Paul Gilroy is useful when exploring this latter tendency in the novel: Gilroy argues that class divisions in America are the product of “postmodern consumer culture” (254). However, he also suggests that instead of admitting to the historical change underlying the economic and social betterment of black people in America, it is race that has been regarded as “the primary mode of division in all contemporary circumstances” (254). In Gilroy’s view, some sectors of black American communities still hold on to the idea that “a unitary black culture is still essentially intact, and that an identifiable pattern of bodily experiences and attributes can serve to connect blacks regardless of their wealth or

their health, their gender, their religion, location, or political and ideological habits” (254). In Smith’s text, it is Kiki, the Belsey matriarch, who comes to embody the tensions pointed out by Gilroy between race and class in America, whilst a Haitian man is crucially made to voice a model of “ethnic absolutism” which the novel resists.

During a stroll through a street market, Kiki comes across a stall managed by a black man. Kiki hazards an initial guess at his African identity, to which he confidently replies, “We are all from Africa” (48). The man finally reveals that he is from Haiti, after which Smith’s narrator reports: “‘*Right*. My –’ began Kiki, but realized she did not want to say the word ‘cleaner’ in this context. She began again, ‘There’re so many Haitians here. . . .’ She dared a little further: ‘And of course it’s so difficult, in Haiti, right now’” (48–49). Smith presents Kiki as unwilling to concur with claims of a common racial past with which she does not identify but whose prevalence she recognizes; she is also unable to acknowledge that she employs a black Haitian woman as a cleaner. Smith’s portrayal of Kiki’s dilemma is symptomatic of the complex social realities to which Gilroy refers in *Against Race*. Kiki’s diffidence points to the contradiction between her race identity, which rejects Pan-Africanist constructions of blackness, and her class consciousness, which remains at odds with the existence of social differences between different black people in America.

What remains crucial to the current examination of the ethical fault-lines of the sociological dimensions of Smith’s novel is that the exploration of race and class tensions is performed at the expense of the Haitian man’s ideological integrity. Smith renders the Haitian seller the mouthpiece of an outmoded Pan-Africanist discourse alien to Kiki’s— and Smith’s own—bourgeois sensibilities, a moment of rehearsed ideological superiority which could be extended to the novel’s bourgeois readership. Crucially, the anonymous Haitian’s position is undermined from Kiki’s perspective for the sake of bourgeois self-evaluation. Such cross-class ideological and identitarian ventriloquism is problematic not only on account of Smith’s debunking of the black seller’s ideal of unified blackness but also because Smith is misconstruing the political stance of post-revolutionary Haiti. Martin Munro states:

Popular images of Haiti as a place of untamed, premodern Africanity . . . have tended to obscure the reality that the revolution envisioned a state which, as Michael Dash points out, “would neither be relegated to the periphery of the world nor would it succumb to atavistic longings for a racial past. The impulse was towards the future and not dwelling in mythical origins.” (5)

Whilst not concerned with Haiti itself, Smith perpetuates these popular images in her fictional representation of the island’s expatriated citizens, who vouch for a pre-colonial and ante-slavery racial ideal. Kiki’s race and class consciousness is duly probed, yet the Haitian seller’s understanding of race is allowed to remain in keeping with discourses of the American 1960s, overlooking the post-revolutionary Haitian political ethos described by Munro and Haiti’s current focus on looking ahead rather than back to a common African past for all black peoples.

In addition to this appropriation and misconstruction of Haitian racial discourses, Smith’s inability to make a consistent case for her most precarious fictional figures is importantly connected to her wayward approach to Haiti. Howard and Kiki’s youngest son, Levi, provides evidence that his location and cultural background condition his access to knowledge and his capacity to foster fruitful interpersonal relations in the face of socio-cultural difference. Levi’s liminality parallels in interesting ways Smith’s particular interstitial position and means of knowledge acquisition. As a mixed-race subject from a privileged cultural background who shows curiosity towards the black urban working class, Levi undertakes a journey of discovery not dissimilar to Smith’s in her deployment of Haitian characters. However, in attempting to find a parallel social dimension to that of Forster’s *Howards End*, Smith’s novel perpetuates the empirical circumscription that is also the indirect legacy of Forster’s novel. John Batchelor suggests that the brief episode in *Howards End* in which Leonard meets a Cambridge undergraduate on a train “is applauded by the novel as Cambridge/Bloomsbury liberalism at its best” (228) and is metonymic of Forster’s own sporadic and brief contact with the working class at the time of writing the book.

Leonard Bast evidences Forster’s growing fascination with the working class, but he also constitutes a problematic, if not always unsympathetic, construct based on scarce material experience. Forster’s narrator in *Howards End* warns us with self-conscious intent that “[w]e are not concerned with the very poor. They are unthinkable,” and therefore he prefers to deal with someone like Leonard, who seems to stand “at the extreme verge of gentility” (44). In representing characters which, in Levi’s eyes, stand for an attractive otherness, whilst being experientially distant herself from the plight of the Haitian population, Smith incurs the same empirical risks as Forster, hence echoing the shortcomings of *Howards End*’s flawed social commentary.

Smith’s character Levi is first attracted to the Haitian community by the hip-hop they play on the street and is lured further by their illegal commerce of music, DVDs, and other products of “postmodern consumer culture” (Gilroy 254). But in spite of his cultural posturing, it is mostly through reading that he starts acquainting himself with the history of Haiti. Smith writes:

The experience of reading . . . books had wounded him. Levi had been raised soft and open, with a liberal susceptibility to the pain of others. . . . Each time he returned to the Haiti book he felt impassioned; . . . Haitian Aids patients in Guantánamo, drug barons, institutionalized torture, state-sponsored murder, enslavement, CIA interference, American occupation and corruption. It all became a haze of history to him. He retained only the searing, unwelcome awareness that somewhere, not far from him, a people were suffering greatly. (355–6)

Liberalism is conjured here, for this class-bound ideology engenders an important solidarity in Levi which, for all its compassion for the Haitian peoples, is only of the most abstract kind: a “haze of history” which floods *On Beauty* itself. In this “hazy” humanism lies the risk of Smith’s liberal critique. Levi decries in equal measure Haiti’s local government and American intervention; the teenager’s convoluted view of history remains an obstacle to his comprehension, as his conflicted political awareness becomes metonymic of the book’s indecision about

its own political intervention. Such ambivalence, mediated as it is by Levi's developing social consciousness, renders Haiti a space of abstract suffering but of no specific political persuasion and reveals, at once, the limitations of Levi's efforts at understanding Haiti's situation and the foreclosure of the novel's political commentary.

Gilroy proposes that radio, film, sound recording, and television have created "forms of solidarity that propelled the idea of belonging far beyond anything that had been achieved in the nineteenth century by the industrialization of print and the formalization of national languages" (110). Although Levi's initial attraction to the Haitians is informed by purchasable commodities, he accesses knowledge of Haiti most effectively and compellingly through books. Yet, whilst this cultural approach is unable to bridge the gap between Levi's socio-cultural background and that of his Haitian acquaintances, Smith's own authorial perspective on Haiti is determined by similar restrictions, conditioned as it is by indirect accounts of Haiti.

Levi's book on Haiti belongs to the library of his prestigious secondary school. The indirect approach Levi uses to familiarize himself with Haiti offers a fictional parallel to Smith's own research for the novel. *On Beauty's* representation of its exiled Haitian community is highly conditioned, to borrow Arjun Appadurai's term, by contemporary mediascapes;⁴ *On Beauty's* reliance on these gives precedence to journalistic critiques of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the twice-ousted leader of the country.⁵ In one of the novel's scarce episodes of political discussion, Levi joins a group of Haitian street poets who are meeting in a bar called "The Bus Stop" in order to express their dissatisfaction with the current state of Haiti. At first they sing in French patois, but the narrator offers: "then came the chorus—sung by everyone together, including Levi, in English: 'AH-RIS-TEED, CORRUPTION AND GREED, AND SO WE ALL SEE, WE STILL AIN'T FREE!'" One of the students in the audience asks, "We have something to do with Haiti?" to which the tutor, Claire Malcolm, responds, "We have something to do with everywhere" (238). This short episode makes it hard to discern what form of oppression Smith's text is denouncing most loudly, whether the corruption and greed of the exiled Aristide or, as

Claire would have us reflect, that of the successful American military interventionists. Levi’s cultural background places him awkwardly between the Haitians with whom he is performing and the educated bourgeois audience which contains his own sister Zora and renders him unable to take a clear political stance.

Added to Levi and his friends’ denouncement of Aristide, *On Beauty* articulates an intermittent critique of the political leader that is in accordance with media accounts, whilst remaining equally censorious of foreign intervention. Smith’s text is not keen on taking sides; it remains ambivalent in its Forsterian “middling” political stance, which seems caught up, like Levi himself, between two contending factions. Nonetheless, Aristide is taken to task more explicitly later in the novel when Levi visits his friend Choo; in the small flat of Levi’s Haitian co-worker there is a picture of Aristide with a caption that reads:

Yes, I am Jean-Bertrand Aristide, read Levi from the caption, and of course I care about the illiterate, poor Haitian scum! That is why I have married my wonderful wife (did I mention she is pale-skinned??), who is bourgeois de souche, not like me, who came from the gutter (and can't you see how I remember it!). I may be an uncommonly totalitarian dictator but I can still have my multimillion-dollar estate while protecting the grinding poor of Haiti! (359; emphases in original)

This irreverent caricature paints Aristide as a self-interested dictator who has taken advantage of political privilege and who freely boasts of his race and class prejudices. In contrast with this scathing picture, which echoes the mocking tone of the media, Peter Hallward offers a vindication of Aristide that challenges strategic foreign vilification.

In *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide, and the Politics of Containment*, Hallward provides evidence of popular support of Aristide in the face of a media campaign poised to defend “First-World” nations’ interests in Latin America. Aristide’s reformist political programme included the return to Haiti of the high sum paid to France as compensation for the ex-colony’s independence. This request of postcolonial restitution, which could have tempted other formerly colonized countries into

similar courses of action, was more than the former colonial powers would tolerate, and a second successful coup was performed, this time with crucial US military intervention. Hallward offers that, upon the President's departure, his supporters "vented their rage and their confusion on downtown Port-au-Prince. . . . [R]eporters and other 'independent observers' were discouraged from going anywhere near the places where virtually all of the violence was carried out: the slums inhabited by Aristide's most dedicated supporters" (248–49).

This picture of a leader supported by his people and evicted by self-serving foreign powers contrasts with media accounts of Aristide as a tyrannical ruler and, by extension, with Smith's own indirect yet equally censorious portrayal of him. The media's strategic alignment with "First World" economic interests alerts us yet again to the use of the global media as a platform through which military intervention is justified. The hegemony of such media representations entails a lack of populist supporters amongst *On Beauty's* Haitians, and such an absence of complicated views on Aristide restricts the scope of *On Beauty's* postcolonial critique of post-independence governments. Smith's novel rehearses the "liberal susceptibility to the pain of others" of its character Levi Belsey, but its resulting solidarity does not result in a clear political intervention; it advances instead into a conflicted "haze of history" which tends to veer too complacently towards partial and strategically constructed media representations. The problematic (dis)engagement with Haiti does not foreclose the novel's more fruitful critique of middle-class social exclusivism, but it constitutes a weak antidote to the embattled working class of *Howards End*. Smith's well-meaning but conflicted appropriation of Haitian characters demonstrates, in effect, that there are some implicit dangers in honouring the liberal, "middling" line of Forster's writing. The Haitians in *On Beauty* remain as "unthinkable" as the very poor in *Howards End* and as problematically vindicated as Leonard—and Jacky—Bast.

Smith's strategic use of her Haitian characters is taken even further as Choo helps Levi execute a plan that places the novel's mystified object of interpersonal connection, the painting of Maîtresse Erzulie by Jean Hyppolite, in the hands of its intended heiress, Kiki Belsey. If in

Howards End we have the titular house which, through the friendship between Margaret Schlegel and Ruth Wilcox—and after many tribulations—becomes the home of the British middle class, then *On Beauty* transforms the allegorized house into Hyppolite’s painting. This work of art depicting the Caribbean goddess embodies the interpersonal connection, based on intuitive artistic appreciation, between Kiki and Carlene Kipps, the matriarchs of the novel’s politically antagonized families.⁶ Levi and his Haitian friend Choo believe that by stealing the painting from Monty Kipps’ university office they will be claiming justice on behalf of the Haitian artists whose works Monty has been buying at extremely low prices in an opportunistic manner. After its theft, Levi hides the painting under his bed, only to be found later by his unsuspecting mother and brother Jerome.

Kiki becomes incensed by the discovery; she rails against Levi’s relationship with his Haitian friends and against the Haitians themselves by association, exclaiming to Levi, “You just believed anything these people say. You just gonna believe them all the way to jail. Just want to be cool, show you the big man around a load of *no-good Negroes*” (428; emphasis in original). The Haitians’ ethical position is undermined by Kiki in no uncertain terms; they are regarded as bad influences on Levi, whose efforts at feeling black by socializing with working-class black men have only led him to this misguided altruistic act. Kiki’s anger is succeeded by the unexpected discovery of Carlene’s note addressed to her, which is stuck to the back of the canvas. The note of bequest contains the motto “*There is such a shelter in each other*” (429; emphasis in original), which recalls the epigraph of *Howards End*, “Only connect...” The painting of Maitresse Erzulie epitomizes the possibility of interpersonal connection through an appreciation of beauty that is divorced from the language of intellectualism and, so it would seem, also from the language of dissident and despairing political activism. Similarly to Henry’s eventual bequest of *Howards End* to Margaret, which fulfils the previous Mrs Wilcox’s original wish for what would happen after her death, Carlene’s painting arrives in Kiki’s hands also indirectly, bringing to fruition the text’s prizing of intuitive approaches to art and beauty. But the convenient transportation of the symbolic canvas from one bourgeois house to

another is undertaken by a Haitian with Levi's help. Crucially, Choo's motives and methods are frowned upon to the point of his banishment from the novel's closure.

After the revelation of Carlene's last wish, Kiki commences a legal battle against Monty Kipps for withholding the canvas, and Levi informs his family that his mother intends to sell the painting and that the proceeds will be "going to the Haitian Support Group"⁷ (437). Fischer observes that "[h]ere, Levi's and Kiki's recognition of both beauty and human connection leads quite literally to greater justice" (119). Yet this financial transaction could also be read as the legacy of the "liberal guilt" which Daniel Born recognizes in the denouement of *Howards End* (150). After engaging dishonourably with Leonard Bast and becoming pregnant with his child, Helen Schlegel attempts to bestow on him the greater part of her fortune before fleeing to Germany: once personal relations have failed, the only possible course of action to avoid responsibility and regret is the unleashing of money, that preternatural sign of bourgeois affluence. Kiki's perfunctory financial transaction seems to be motivated by a feeling of guilt comparable to that of Forster's character. It can be interpreted as yet another example of charity in the face of "First-World" mishandling of a "Third-World" country and its citizens.

The Haitians whose moral fibre has been questioned and who have been appropriated for the sake of bourgeois self-assessment are evicted from the book's concluding chapter. In the midst of Kiki and Howard's divorce proceedings, we find out that "Howard had let go of Monique, the [Haitian] cleaner, describing her as an expense they could no longer afford" (434). Added to this perhaps more conscious critique of bourgeois self-interestedness, Choo is nowhere present, and Levi's personal liaison with his Haitian friends is not given any closure: the Haitians become, in effect, the Jacky Basts of Smith's novel. The Haitians and Jacky are too tainted by their lifestyles for reformation, at least according to the moral codes of the novels' protagonists; the Haitians' instigation of theft and Jacky's past as a prostitute are both histories beyond redemption. The severing of cross-class links in the final chapter of *On Beauty* seems to inherit the comparable bourgeois victory of *Howards End*, which complicates not only Kiki's altruistic gesture but also the

novel’s exploration of connection between different nations and social classes.

Smith’s attempt to bring a positive closure to her novel emulates the desperate entrenchment of the Schlegels in *Howards End*, the house whose thin ethical walls are not able to contain the working class that Forster intended Leonard to represent. Howard’s final lecture attempts to re-stage *Howards End*’s closing. *On Beauty* ends in a lecture hall, where most of the novel’s educated characters are awaiting Howard’s talk on Rembrandt; in this amenable space, Smith’s sensibility can consider beauty, art, and ethics, all from the perspectives of her central characters. Howard has left his script in his car, five blocks away from the conference auditorium, and he goes through his PowerPoint presentation in silence. He eventually halts on Rembrandt’s painting entitled *Hendrickje Bathing*. According to the narrator: “Howard’s audience looked at her and then at Howard and then at the woman once more, awaiting elucidation. The woman, for her part, looked away, coyly, into the water. . . . Howard looked at Kiki. In her face, his life. . . . He smiled at her. She smiled. She looked away, but she smiled” (442). This unscripted approach to art produces some hope for Kiki and Howard, who find through Rembrandt’s painting a new form of artistic connection not mediated by Howard’s usual intellectual discourse; through Rembrandt’s painting, the divorcing couple appear to rediscover the “shelter” they used to “have in each other” (429), echoing the sentiments shared previously by Carlene and Kiki. Smith’s literary motto, which she borrows from the poetry of her husband Nick Laird, is ultimately the refuge of bourgeois conjugality expressed through artistic appreciation. Just as finding an allegorical and material house for the homeless English middle class was Forster’s aim in *Howards End*, the aesthetically mediated sentimental liaison between her bourgeois characters is the destination of Smith’s *On Beauty*.

Smith’s subtle hope for Howard and Kiki has some important ideological consequences for her novel. Although *On Beauty* attempts to offer a compromise between a critique of the bourgeoisie and a vindication of the black urban working class, Smith’s aesthetic and ideological emulation of Forster’s text drives her narrative in great measure

towards the bourgeois core of the novel, with no final thoughts being spared for the Haitian characters on whose plight the book's most blatant political critique has been built. As a bourgeois mixed-race author who is self-confessedly indebted to Forster and who aligns herself with the tradition of English literature, Smith seems to inherit not only the most productive legacies of *Howards End*, such as the critical representation of bourgeois exclusivism, but also the limitations of a bourgeois critique of the bourgeoisie itself. The ambivalence of Smith's political commentary engenders a mood of postcolonial indecision which *On Beauty's* deployment of migrant, black, and mixed-raced subjects cannot altogether ameliorate. This novel provides hope for a new model of postcolonial rewriting, one which reveals multi-faceted cultural exchanges rather than the strict opposition to "colonial discourse" so often decried in postcolonial studies, albeit providing evidence of how the canon can prove both artistic inspiration and visionary confinement.

It would seem that it is not on the liberal side of the liberal humanism which Smith inherits from Forster that *On Beauty* founders as a powerful postcolonial critique. On the contrary, the "ideological inconsistency" which Smith so liberally boasts in her non-fiction (*Changing My Mind* xi) is what makes her fiction an enthralling place where characters meet at the crossroads, an intellectually probing space where identitarian constructions in terms of class, race, and nationality are negotiated for the sake of ideological and cultural complexity. It is, by contrast, on the side of humanism, or should we say, of the *humanities*, that we can see the horizon of Smith's particular approach to the Haitian question. Tynan denounces "Smith's predilection for scholarly reference . . . over believable representations of her characters" (79). As Tynan suggests, Smith seems keen on playing the educated game of cultural recognition and finds it hard to depart from the world of books and intuitive yet ambitious learning. (This in itself is an aspect of bourgeois culture still highly favoured in *On Beauty* despite the novel's suspicion of academic discourse.) Yet, while doing so, Smith fails to empower her less economically or socially privileged characters with a strong political message that can help them break the boundaries of middle-class commensurability.⁸

Notes

- 1 In investigating the ethical dimensions of aesthetic appreciation, Smith makes reference to its main non-fictional intertext, namely Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just* (2000). For a more detailed examination of the relationship between both texts see Tolan.
- 2 Leonard self-consciously moulds his prose after Ruskin's:

Leonard was trying to form his style on Ruskin: he understood him to be the greatest master of English Prose. He read forward steadily, occasionally making a few notes.

“Let us consider a little each of these characters in succession, and first (for of the shafts enough has been said already), what is very peculiar to this church—its luminousness.”

Was there anything to be learnt from this fine sentence? Could he adapt it to the needs of daily life? Could he introduce it, with modifications, when he next wrote a letter to his brother, the lay-reader? For example:

“Let us consider a little each of these characters in succession, and first (for of the absence of ventilation enough has been said already), what is very peculiar to this flat—its obscurity.”

Something told him that the modifications would not do; and that something, had he known it, was the spirit of English Prose. “My flat is dark as well as stuffy.” Those were the words for him. (48)
- 3 In *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* (2001), Huggan undertakes a famous critique of the ways in which the cultures of postcolonial countries are being marketed for white middle-class audiences, thus contributing to the ongoing hegemony of western capitalist practices.
- 4 In his study of globalization, Appadurai defines the different dimensions of global culture as “scapes.” These comprise ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapas, finanscapas, and ideoscapas, and, he argues, they stand for “deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as sub-national groupings and movements (whether religious, political or economic), and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighborhoods and families” (33).
- 5 As an example of a prominent U.S. newspaper's bias against Aristide, *Washington Times* columnist Greenberg opens his commentary on the Haitian's president second ousting in 2004 with the following statements: “Nothing became Jean-Bertrand Aristide in office like his leaving it—and so not inviting still more bloodshed. The country's president and demagogue-in-chief decamped in the style of other Haitian dictators over the years. How many other presidents of Haiti have been forced out over its troubled history—10, 20, 30? We lose count. . . . Also, do you count Jean-Bertrand Aristide twice, since this is the sec-

ond time he has fled into exile?" To Greenberg's polemical depiction of Aristide, we can add his further denouncement of the apparently typical and expected anti-Americanist "conspiracy theories" following Aristide's ousting.

6 Like Ruth Wilcox, Carlene Kipps dies early on in the novel, and her death hovers over the rest of the narrative, as her last wish to bequeath her dearest painting to Kiki slowly comes to pass.

7 Smith misnames here the real Haiti Support Group founded in 1992.

8 Thanks are due to Prof John McLeod, who inspired my reading of this novel "one way or the other."

Works Cited

- Anjaria, Ulka. "On Beauty and Being Postcolonial: Aesthetics and Form in Zadie Smith." *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*. Ed. Tracey L. Walters. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. 31–55. Print.
- Anonymous and Salman Rushdie. "Everybody Needs to Get Thicker Skins." *The Guardian Online*. July 2008. Web. 9 Feb. 2012.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996. Print.
- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 2002. Print.
- Batchelor, John. *The Edwardian Novelists*. London: Gerald Duckworth, 1982. Print.
- Born, Daniel. "Private Gardens, Public Swamps: *Howards End* and the Revaluation of Liberal Guilt." *Novel* 25.2 (1992): 141–59. Print.
- Carey, John. *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice Among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939*. London: Faber, 1992. Print.
- Edemariam, Aida. "Learning Curve." *The Guardian Online*. Sept 2005. Web. 9 Feb 2012.
- Fischer, Susan Alice. "'Gimme Shelter': Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*." *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*. Ed. Tracey L. Walters. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. 107–21. Print.
- Forster, E.M.. *A Passage to India*. London: Penguin, 1989. Print.
- . *Howards End*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961. Print.
- Gerzina, Gretchen Holbrook and Zadie Smith. "Zadie Smith with Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina." *Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk*. Ed. Susheila Nasta. London: Routledge, 2004. 266–78. Print.
- Gilroy, Paul. *Against Race: Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001. Print.
- Greenberg, Paul. "A Conspiracy Theory is Born." *Washington Times Online*. March 2004. Web. 15 Sept. 2010.
- Hallward, Peter. *Damming the Flood: Haiti, Aristide, and the Politics of Containment*. London: Verso, 2007. Print.

“A Liberal Susceptibility to the Pains of Others”

- Huggan, Graham. *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. London: Routledge, 2001. Print.
- Jameson, Fredric. “Modernism and Imperialism.” *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*. Ed. Seamus Deane. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990. 43–66. Print.
- Kermode, Frank. “Here She Is.” *London Review of Books*. Sept. 2005. Web. 9 Feb. 2012.
- McCabe, Colin. “Zadie Smith and Salman Rushdie: Writing for a New World.” *Open Democracy*. Oct. 2005. Web. 9 Feb. 2012.
- Munro, Martin. “Can’t Stand Up for Falling Down: Haiti, Its Revolutions, and Twentieth-Century Negritudes.” *Research in African Literatures* 35.2 (2004): 1–17. Print.
- Paproth, Matthew. “The Flipping Coin: The Modernist and Postmodernist Zadie Smith.” *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*. Ed. Tracey L. Walters. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. 9–29. Print.
- Parry, Benita. *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique*. London: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Pinkerton, Mary. “Ambiguous Connections: Leonard Bast’s Role in *Howards End*.” *Twentieth Century Literature* 31.2–3 (1985): 236–46. Print.
- Rose, Jonathan. *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2001. Print.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Midnight’s Children*. London: Picador, 1982. Print.
- . “The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance.” *The Times* 3 July 1982. 8. Print.
- Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and Being Just*. London: Duckworth, 2006. Print.
- Smith, Zadie. “E. M. Forster, Middle Manager.” *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*. London: Hamish, 2009. 14–27. Print.
- . *On Beauty*. London: Hamish, 2005. Print.
- . *The Autograph Man*. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- . *White Teeth*. London: Penguin, 2011. Print.
- Tew, Philip. *Zadie Smith*. London: Palgrave, 2010. Print.
- Tolan, Fiona. “Identifying the Precious in Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty*.” *British Fiction Today*. Ed. Philip Tew and Rod Mengham. London: Continuum, 2006. 128–38. Print.
- Tynan, Maeve. “‘Only Connect’: Intertextuality and Identity in Zadie Smith’s *On Beauty*.” *Zadie Smith: Critical Essays*. Ed. Tracey L. Walters. New York: Peter Lang, 2008. 73–89. Print.