



# Cosmopolitanism in the Temporal Layers of Life: Cosmopolitan Ethics in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*

 **Farnaz Esmkhani Youvalari**

Assistant Professor, İstanbul Kültür University, Faculty of Science and Letter, Department of English Language and Literature, Turkey

**Corresponding Author:** Farnaz Esmkhani Youvalari

**E-mail:** esmkanifarnaz17@gmail.com

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing on the twenty-first century theory of critical cosmopolitanism, this essay contends that in her third novel *On Beauty* (2005) Zadie Smith depicts two kinds of cosmopolitanism: critical versus intellectual. Through the non-elite characters *On Beauty* (2005) presents the lived cosmopolitan experiences arising from active practices at local, microcosmic level in the ordinariness of everyday life which can be conceptualized as situated cosmopolitanism. However, through the Wellington university intellectuals, Smith reveals the failed cosmopolitanism of elitist cosmopolitans operating primarily on the abstract level. In Smith's characterization of Wellington, racial hierarchy, stereotypes about Black and labor migrants, and institutional racism continue to push minorities to margins and limit their life opportunities. As an attempt to address the problems of exclusion and inequality associated with racial inferiority discourse the study will explore how critical cosmopolitanism succeeds in substituting these conflicts with cosmopolitan ideals based on individual responsibility and ethical engagement with diversity. Accordingly, this paper will illustrate ways the individuals choose to engage with and act towards others with reference to points such as gender, socio-economic status, and history. The paper will conclude that the situated cosmopolitanism of non-elites, not the intellectuals, becomes inherently cosmopolitan.

**Keywords:** critical cosmopolitanism, situated cosmopolitanism, cosmopolitan ethics, hospitality, discrimination, Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*

## 1. Introduction

In *On Beauty* Zadie Smith explores the experiences of the locals, elites, and non-elite mobile and immobile characters exposed to the cosmopolitan conditions of the contemporary interconnectedness and interrelation of differences. For many critics Smith's *On Beauty* is a tribute to E. M. Foster's *Howards End* (1997). In his study "The Forster Connection or, Cosmopolitanism Redux Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*, *Howards End*, and the Schlegels" (2011), Christian Moraru writes that from cultural perspective Smith retells *Howards End* to the "new millennium's globalizing world" by mixing the lives of liberal American Belseys with Caribbean-British Kippses. It is through her novel's "Forster connection" that Smith foregrounds the intense interconnectedness of lives in the contemporary global world. In Moraru's view it is because of this concept of connectedness and the cultural-emotional experience associated with it in Foster's novel that Smith drags *On Beauty* to the contemporary moment (133). While a diverse population of English, Trinidadian, African-American, or Carrabin characters, brought together in the small college town, gives Smith the chance to hail cosmopolitan theories.

Yet, the cosmopolitanism rendered in *On Beauty* is not entailed with the promise of utopian unity of all humanity as it has been popularized in the Greco-Roman ideal of world citizenship but a new cosmopolitan perception that is set on the reflexive perception of alterity. The novel explores the ideological contradictions of the cosmopolitan Anglo-American middle-classes and is partly based on Smith's experience as a writer-in-residence at Harvard.

In her article "Kipps, Belsey, and Jegede: Cosmopolitanism, Transnationalism, and Black Studies in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty*" (2010) Kanika Batra argues that in *On Beauty* Smith questions an institutionalized Black studies department as "disconnected to social reality and actively participating in the perpetuation of social inequality" (1080). According to Batra the Black studies department's cosmopolitanism fails to engage with cultural diversity. By categorizing the cosmopolitan actions of some characters as "vernacular cosmopolitanism" stated as a "lived reality and social activism" she claims that this cosmopolitan orientation precedes the theoretical discourse, insisted upon by Black studies department, in Wellington (1081). While the cosmopolitanism of elites and intellectuals in Smith's novels are understood to be possessed with self-interest and abstraction, the active ethical engagement of other characters are perceived to commit to the ethical aspect of cosmopolitanism embedded in the active engagement with otherness.

In his "Post-Hysterics: Zadie Smith and the Fiction of Austerity", David Marcus asserts that the publication of the novel marks a shift from "style to ethics" (4). In addition, in her 2003 essay on E.M. Forster's novels, Smith herself writes that "when you put people on paper and move them through time, you cannot help but talk about ethics" (2). Through investigating various manifestations of such issues in Smith's narratives, the study will indicate that the author renders a cosmopolitan perception in assessing the ways of improving cosmopolitan ethics to stop the unequal political structures inscribed in institutional frameworks.

My argument is that the type of engagement or cosmopolitanism, prompted in the context of Levi and Kiki's participation in supplementing justice for discriminated subjects, amounts for a proper and ethical involvement with social diversity, unlike, form of abstract cosmopolitanism of the academic discipline of Wellington College as a superficial orientation and of little consequence exemplified in Carl's situation. In doing so, the novel foregrounds personal involvement with the suppressed other necessary to disrupt existing discourse mediating injustice. Subsequently, it portrays a situated moral cosmopolitanism anchored in everyday engagement of individuals with others which is concerned with ethical engagement of self with other cultures, moral codes, meanings, and perceptions.

## 2. Theoretical Background

Cosmopolitanism includes a rich body of literature and a complex history. The standard narration of the historical expansion of cosmopolitanism notes its beginning in Greek Cynicism and Stoicism, then studies the Roman adaptation of the concept; moves to Eighteenth century and the revival of the idea, mainly, in Kant's studies; marks a decline in cosmopolitan notion in nineteenth century; claims the revival of the term after World War II as the global institutions like United Nations are concerned with Kantian philosophy and moves towards the twenty-first century and re-emergence of the concept in diversity of forms. (Nussbaum 1997; Pollock 2002; Delanty 2009; and Inglis 2012).

Immanuel Kant is widely considered as the main figure in renewal of classical cosmopolitanism and a central reference point for contemporary cosmopolitan thought. In his seminal work *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch* (1795) Kant states that "people of the earth have thus entered in varying degrees into a universal community, and it has developed to the point where a violation of rights in one part of the world is felt everywhere", so the idea of cosmopolitanism is essential to political and international rights in order to transform them to a "universal right of humanity" (107-108). Kant argues for cosmopolitanism as a global moral community where certain obligations are "universal" to all humanity, states, and individuals alike. The emphasis on the obligations that we have to others since we all have the same moral worth supports the notion of universalism upon which cosmopolitan justice is founded. The cosmopolitan perspective that Kant asserts is "a view to well-being of the human race as a whole and insofar as it is conceived as progressing towards its well-being in the series of generations of all future time" (1796, 281). Yet, his notion of universal cosmopolitanism has been criticized by contemporary cosmopolitan theorists. For instance, Daniel Chernilo argues that universal conception of cosmopolitanism is problematic for its emphasis on universal unity and homogeneity over difference, heterogeneity and contingency, hence, universalistic dispositions, such as Kant's are "fundamentally unable to account for historical change, sociocultural variation and normative disagreement" (49). This kind of idealized cosmopolitanism comes over particularity of identity or sociopolitical affiliations.

In describing such an ideal universalism some contemporary cosmopolitan theorists highlight an array of alternative possibilities on cosmopolitanism within different disciplines, significantly, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, to positively theorize cosmopolitanism of everyday life such as "rooted cosmopolitanism" (Appiah 2006), "working class" cosmopolitanism (Werbner 2006), or "vernacular cosmopolitanism" (Bhabha 2011). For example, Bhabha's vernacular cosmopolitanism stems from "the ordinariness of the day to day" and "the intimacy of the indigenous" (44). It is more inclusive as it rejects an all-encompassing project towards universalization; it defines

cosmopolitanism as “a form of marginal or partial interpellation that opens up a space occupied by those who seek to establish an ethic of community” which emphasizes the importance of the local and everyday interactions in small ways (43). Such cosmopolitan notion demonstrates that individuals’ ethical association with ethno-cultural others will always be highly different, tied to their individual or social positions and economical situations. These conceptions of cosmopolitanism apply in conjunction with critical cosmopolitanism’s world-creating dynamic which emphasizes the idiosyncrasy of differences and the cosmopolitan values that are more conducive to generate the possibility and the desire to live with differences in an increasingly divided but also interconnected world.

As an orientation critical cosmopolitanism can be considered as an ethical medium of societal transformation. Critical cosmopolitanism demonstrates willingness to reflect the experience of living in intensely interconnected world and further develop the ethics such as responsibility, empathy, care, and hospitality to stop the continuation of inequality, politics of exclusion and cultural imbalances. The positive recognition of other in the encounter of self with diversity entails an ethical commitment that requires a strong reflexive relationship that includes the otherness of other and responsibility towards other.

In his argument about reflexivity, Gerard Delanty, a pioneer in the field of critical cosmopolitanism, argues about the essentiality of the Cosmopolitan sensitivity that can only emerge from flexibility of ideas about diversity and openness to move beyond the categorical identification of different people. This sensibility reflects an ethical process of improvement. It grows from a critical and situated cosmopolitanism that concentrates on tensions, conflicts, and power imbalances in globalization that give rise to and arise from cosmopolitan projects (Delanty 2009; Beck 2002; Rumford 2008). As Delanty contends, critical cosmopolitanism can be recognized as “a context in which societies deal with the normative challenges raised by differences, the reconfiguration of borders, and the many questions brought about by globalization” (Cosmopolitan Imagination 9). Regarding unequal developments, power imbalances, and different lifestyles, cosmopolitanism does not always accompany openness, solidarity, or cultural engagements of differences in the universal scope, but that “partial, fleeting, uncertain and fragmentary domains of commonality, expressed as empathy, recognition and sociability, can be found in disparate locations and situations” (Schiller and Irving 4). Accordingly, in an increasingly interconnected and diverse world, it is evident that providing justice and equality to difference is an essential necessity for peaceful coexistence of different cultural and other groupings. Accordingly, as a corrective for globalization theory’s homogenizing conceptualization of the world as a universal unanimity of all humanity, critical cosmopolitanism defends the need for a situated approach that can not only accommodate difference but also understand it as a means for promoting mutual recognition and ethical engagement with diversity in everyday life.

Two dimensions of critical cosmopolitanism must be considered initially, first, the notion of cosmopolitanism as an attitude or a quality manifested in people’s perspectives and orientations, second, the notion of cosmopolitanism as a moral and ethical standpoint. By investigating terms such as “cosmopolitan society” or “cosmopolitan perspective”, Delanty considers them both as descriptive terms (i.e. terms that describe current reality of the world) and as prescriptive terms (i.e. terms that indicate theoretical perspectives and/or proposed public policy strategies for the 21st century); thus, they engage in the process of simultaneously evaluating a pervasive reality of current life and proposing ways sociologists and political actors should deal with this reality. Critical cosmopolitanism underscores ethical engagement of self with diversity which involves an imaginative re-placing of self in other’s experience, reality, morality, and life to understand the diversity or multiplicity around the self. To claim it in the image of cosmopolitan involvement, this study aims to argue that to become a cosmopolitan individual involves a fresh engagement with the lived experience of others; only by searching its cultural environment experientially might an individual gain a cosmopolitan orientation.

Contemporary discriminatory practices, largely, stem from categorization of identities according to their differences from mainstream society such as: their race, nationality, culture, or religion that leads to marginalization and devaluation of migrant workers or minority groups. In this sense, as Andrew Irving states in his article “Chance, Contingency and Face-to-Face Encounter”: “Difference becomes mapped on to the structure of law itself insofar as ‘who’ has rights and access to health, education, security and so forth remains rooted on such things as the contingency of birth, gender, and national identity rather than according to one’s need as an equal world citizen” (67). Consequently, in defending the ideals of a critical and situated cosmopolitanism, this essay seeks to investigate possibility of ethical cosmopolitanism as it is rendered in Smith’s representation of her characters’ everyday engagement with diversity in the multicultural setting of Wellington. The study will underline the ethical dimension of cosmopolitan engagement of the individuals with differences, alterities, and otherness of others as manifested in the novel to acknowledge how the cosmopolitan engagement of individuals gives an ethical agency to them and how this ethical engagement can be conducive to the growth of ethical values such as hospitality, empathy, ease in proximity with unfamiliar, or the formation of new social relations on local and national scales.

### 3. Cosmopolitanism in Temporal Layers of Everyday Life

Set in the fictional Wellington College town in Massachusetts, *On Beauty* explores the lives of the mostly local intellectual class compared to the non-elite subjects' life experiences in this academic town in the US. In the context of the novel the second-generation immigrants and Haitian workers are represented as intruders to a land that they do not belong to. They are reduced to unintelligible beings in the field of community and identity as dislocated subjects both in academia and popular representations. Most of the privileged characters in the novel identify these others as the markers of disorder and danger that threaten the existing structures of society. As it is portrayed through the battle over affirmative action in Wellington college, the novel entails the continuing relevance of lives rooted in history of slavery and racial labeling, as determining definitions in the formation of interpersonal relationships and social integration. Diverse orientations that characters take in their recognition and engagement with differences affects the expansion of cosmopolitan ethos. Envisioning the interdependency of life in the twenty-first-century globalization, the novel questions the possibility of a utopia of cultural harmony by rendering exclusionary politics and arguing for the necessity of justice and equality as the only agenda of institutional, socio-cultural, and individual ethical reliability.

In signifying the exclusionary politics of the globalizing multicultural city, she lives; Kiki declares the power imbalances that she faces during her everyday life to her husband Howard: "I'm alone in this ... this sea of white. I barely know any black folk anymore [...] unless they be cleaning under my feet in the fucking café in your fucking collage. Or pushing a fucking hospital bed through a corridor." (Smith 206). History of slavery is central to Kiki's life whose "great-great-grandmother, a house slave; great-grandmother, a maid"; and then her grandmother, a nurse from whom she inherited the house that Belsey family now live at as "an inheritance that; changes everything for a poor family in America: it makes them middle class" (Smith 17). Upon her chat with Monique, a Haitian who works as house cleaner in Belsey Household, Kiki feels strange and "nervous of what this black woman thought of another black woman paying her to clean" (Smith 11). This validates the interrelation of history of slavery with current life in Wellington where social structures are still governed by determinants of racial labelling treated as ascribed characteristics to minority groups intersected with their race, gender, and socio-economic status. As the narrator reflects, for most of the White-American friends of the Belsey family the "impassive blackness" on Kiki's face was a "sphinx-like expression that sometimes induced their American friends to imagine a more exotic provenance for her than she possessed. In fact, she was from simple Florida country stock" (Smith 8). The narrator's observation marks the already existing Westernized concept of black people as intensely exotic others firmly embedded in rigidly discriminatory perception of the intellectual inhabitant of Wellington. Kiki's identity is predicated on the differentiation of the self from other and is only legitimized through her marriage to a white man of an intellectual class, namely, Howard Belsey. It is through, first, this marriage that Kiki is allowed to enjoy the company of her husband's colleagues, the academic members of Wellington society, and second, the house that she has inherited from her mother which situates her in a middle-class setting. Thus, her uphill movement from African-American working-class subject to Wellington intellectual class member associates her social respectability and legitimacy.

Despite the socially embedded injustice that she observes, Kiki does not feel alienated from a society of white people that she has committed to live with. She acts to exceed these confinements in her declared cosmopolitanism; she feels empathy for others in her communal engagement with her neighborhood. For example, prior to her marriage to Howard she was a hospital administrator where she received a state reward for her out-reach service to the local community. Her ethical engagement with others cultivates a cosmopolitan sensitivity, a critical sensitivity, that is against "closure and particularism" reflected in her commitment to a sense of responsibility towards others; further it demonstrates the significance of local commitments that foster progressive cosmopolitan engagement (Delanty, "Nationalism" 359). Indeed, as she improves her ethical agency in her engagement with other, Kiki transcends the race dimensional notions of strangeness and otherness enmeshed in Wellington neighborhood.

Inviting Kipps family to their marriage anniversary at the very night of their arrival to Wellington town shows Kiki's cosmopolitan hospitality that will gradually lead to the constitution of a strong friendship between her and Carlene Kipps. Beside, her cosmopolitan sensitivity for the suffering of others is reflected at her first appearance in Kipps's house where she finds out that Carlene is suffering from an illness while the family members are not very much committed to care for her. Thinking retrospectively about her marriage problems upon Howard's repeated infidelity and the first time that she visited Carlene Kipps, Kiki thinks about:

Seeking any happy memories of the long, distressing summer, moments when the weight of what had happened to her marriage was not crushing her ability to breath and walk down the street and have breakfast with her family, for some reason, that afternoon on the porch with Carlene Kipps kept rising up. (Smith 163)

Kiki's compassionate engagement with Carlene not only demonstrates a sense of mutuality and reciprocal exchange of sensitivity and empathy between these two women, but simultaneously results in a formation of new friendship. As Carlene quotes a line from a poem "There is such a shelter in each other" (Smith 93). In her localized engagement with her neighborhood family, Kiki reflects a sense of moral responsibility and reliability by demonstrating a commitment to care for Carlene where she proves ethical engagement and performative actions as



central to any cosmopolitan orientation in local engagement. Kiki's is a kind of moral standpoint towards the world that is aware of both its privileges and obstacles, which reflects on these issues from the perspective of Other, with whom she seeks to learn from and with. It contains a methodological implication since here cosmopolitan participation aims at reflecting on the moral status of her. In this respect, Smith applauds Kiki's capacity to incorporate cosmopolitan ideals to embroil herself with a sense of goodwill and faith that transcends the binary thinking imposed on her.

The arrival of Kipps family to Wellington inflames the long-held conflict between Howard Belsey and Monty Kipps. The interfamilial relation of these two families is inextricably tied to a political debate on affirmative action. Monty Kipps, a Trinidadian migrant to Britain and now to the US with his conservative agenda, stands in opposition to Howard's liberal ideology which begins to heighten now that Monty and Howard are colleagues in Wellington university. Despite this interfamilial conflict, Kiki continues her visits to Kipps house and evolves with Carlene's suffering. She shows more flexibility in her perspectives in comparison to the fundamentalist mindset of her husband. For instance, when Monty and Kiki come across a conversation on "affirmative action", as Monty calls it a "demoralizing philosophy", Kiki reflects her flexibility in saying that: "I've always been a supporter of affirmative action, even if I personally felt uncomfortable about it sometimes – I mean, obviously my husband has been heavily involved in it. But I was interested in the way you expressed that. It makes you think about it again" (Smith 367). The affirmative action is to increase the presence of the minority subjects in higher education, yet the investment in representation of underprivileged students in universities and colleges may be unfair regarding the entailed injustice imposed upon those reasonably assured of achieving the requisite entrance score (FU 420). Thus, Monty evaluates affirmative action in itself a "corruption" that allows disqualified students to the university classes "choosing them over *actual* students better qualified than they" because of their "needy cases – as if it helps minorities to be pushed through an elite environment to which they are not yet suited. When the truth is that the liberal- as ever! – *assumes* there is benefit, only because doing so makes the liberal *herself* [...] feel good" (Smith 329). Kiki aligns with Monty's perspective because as a black woman she is conscious about the segregating policies embedded deeply in her own personal history as she confesses "I certainly wasn't done any favours in my life – nor was my mother, nor was *her* mother . . . and nor were my children," (Smith 367). Against being the victim of American discriminatory structures or being the wife of a man who genuinely believes in virtue of affirmative action, Kiki's reflexivity about the action marks her openness to diversity of ideas that not only challenges the rigid mindset of Monty and Howard, but, simultaneously transcends the closing policies of the US in moving beyond history of colonization that she herself has been a part of until recently.

The promise of critical cosmopolitanism is to be found in a sense of consciousness that recognizes, respects, and engages with differences rather than reifying them. Kiki's empathy for differences vindicates that her flexibility and reflexivity is of higher ethical values than the purity of liberal and conservative attitudes of Wellington academia. Her close friendship with Carlene makes sympathy practical and echoes Cicero's claim that "society and human fellowship will be best served if we confer the most kindness on those with whom we are most closely associated" (qtd.in Appiah 2006: 14-15). Her cosmopolitanism transcends the race dimensional concepts of strangeness and otherness embedded in Wellington life towards a positive recognition and reciprocal integration with diversity which argues for a "rooted cosmopolitanism" or "cosmopolitan patriotism" whereby Appiah argues for local significance of cosmopolitan ethics. In Appiah's words, "loyalties and local allegiances determine [...] who we are" (14). Kiki's aspiration for communal attachment or her sense of responsibility to her neighborhood relationships, irrespective of their cultural or other differences, always comes up against the problem of racism, inherent in her locality, defining her as a cosmopolitan individual.

Kiki recognizes the "temporal layers" of "everyday life" (Smith 203); she believes in cosmopolitan moments that may emerge from everyday encounters, working place, sharing an aesthetic taste, walking down a street, or empathizing with the suffering of another; in other words, from temporal layers of life where one may come to recognize different aspects of other's life. Charles Green assumes that "Kiki represents Smith's most artistic power in *On Beauty*, the ability to give characters emotional breath. Kiki is not just an ex-Floridian, a mother, a hurt wife, an academic spouse. She morphs through all these overlapping roles" (45). In her engagement with her locality, Kiki highlights the situatedness of cosmopolitanism that she experiences in her mundane practices, rooted in her ethical engagement and cosmopolitan sensitivity towards others. In this sense, Smith takes as a case in point the processes through which Kiki, whose self-identification and self-understanding lies in the US history of slavery and discriminatory structure of society, acts upon social life, makes moral decisions, resists, and responds to the categorical identification running in Wellington.

Howard and Kiki's youngest son Levi is one of the few characters that see "temporal layers" of "everyday lives" that Kiki wishes Howard to recognize. For Levi "everybody got their own way of getting through the day" which shows his openness and capacity to recognize and positively engage with different ideas, behaviors, or moralities (Smith 203,273). He is often noticed as a danger in his locality to whom he seems familiar because he lives there, but still defies easy classification because of his being black in comparison to most White dwellers of Wellington town. Being

irritated by the way he is being watched in his neighborhood, Levi imagines wearing a “T-shirt that just had on it YO- I’M NOT GOING TO RAPE YOU” (Smith 80). That Levi casts his anger at being looked at by a local old lady in racialized terms underlines white perception of black people in Wellington. Similar to Kiki, Levi’s self-identification and self-understanding are closely related to and complicated by contingent events such as his mother’s African roots, his father’s intellectual status, the Victorian site where he lives, and the racial categorization deeply implemented in Wellington life. As a biracial character, Levi cannot easily recognize a firm point of reference for defining his identity and sense of belonging, as a result his identity swings between his being African-American descendant and at the same time member of the high class society of the Wellington town. Therefore, he feels nervous about his locality from which he dissociates himself in his daily journeys from Wellington to Boston suburbs, to his desired street life, where he can solidify his black identity.

Levi’s daily translocal mobility stands as a movement that the cosmopolitan subject would make to transcend parochial loyalties towards Kwame Anthony Appiah’s celebration of adventures of cosmopolitanism as the movement of self-conscious individuals from “segregation and seclusion” to “shared cultural conversations”, as the only path to human civility and comity (16). These daily journeys supply Levi with a cosmopolitan experience of cultural heterogeneity that Wellington fails to recognize in everyday experience. As Bryan S. Turner writes personal detachments are key features central to formation of cosmopolitan orientation, entailing an openness to cultural others since “cosmopolitanism does not mean that one does not have a country or a homeland, but one has to have a certain reflexive distance from that homeland” (57). His journeys are not steamed from his desire to acquire “nondominant cultural capital” from the disadvantaged workers in inner Boston but to break away from the dominant elitism that cannot distinguish differences for the dogmatic thinking reflected in its intellectuals’ aesthetic arrogance, religious hypocrisy or conservatism that rule their lives (warikoo 470).

For Levi, the white academic context of Wellington College is “ain’t America. You think this is America? This is *toy-town*. I was *born* in this country – trust me. You go into Roxbury, you go into Bronx, you see America that’s *street*” (Smith 63). With his daily mobility, Levi resists and minimizes the stressed and dissolved nature of his locality that defines immigrant or biracial subjects as cultural others, however, his cosmopolitan journey is not towards ideal and desired cosmopolitan world of harmony and justice as Appiah celebrates but a journey from idealized Wellington to the impoverished and marginalized section of city where he recognizes the magnitude of problem of otherness on “unseen” migrant workers from Haiti and other underprivileged countries who only participate in Wellington life as cleaners of university or houses which refers to their rootedness in long history of slavery, colonialism, and economical structure of America that neglects their authority and accountability.

To position cosmopolitan ideals in communication with others of disadvantaged classes seems to identify that cosmopolitanism is not the privileged subject of cultural goods and vocabularies that are mostly attributed to elites but as Ulf Hannerz argues it is “a matter of varieties and levels” (239). In a space that is marked by racial discrimination, Levi’s choice to leave the comfort of Wellington in order to go and fight for the rights of Haitian immigrants proves his sense of obligation to others that stretches beyond his familial and local ties towards a cosmopolitan orientation as a “willingness to become involved with the Other, and the concern with achieving competence in cultures which are initially alien” (Hannerz 240). Encountering others for Levi entails a strong sense of connectedness:

It’s just like you just meet someone and you just know that you’re totally connected, and that this person is, like, your brother – or your sister [...] Even if they don’t like, recognize it, *you* feel it. And in a lot of ways it don’t matter if they do or they don’t see that for what it is – all you can do is put the feeling out there.

That’s *your* duty. Then you just wait and see what comes back to you. That’s the deal. (Smith 304)

Levi desires to understand the life of the young Haitian workers that he comes to engage with. Unlike Levi, whose engagement with others has been initiated by being the son of an intellectual member of society, most Haitian workers encounter life in the US in the stake of poverty when they are being primed for life in those still impoverished and marginalized settlements. Ultimately, there is an inherent tension between Levi’s self-identity by virtue of his class, position, or education as a member of Wellington intellectual community and the working-class people he so eagerly wants to integrate with. Prior to his engagement with Haitian street vendors, he always introduces himself as “a black kid from the ghetto” walking with an “exaggerated hip as if a gun were weighing down his left side” to enmesh his identity with the image of black gangsters as depicted in his favorite Hollywood Western movies (Smith 192). Further on, he performs play-acting to promote his relationship with Choo, the Haitian street vendor to whom Levi expresses strong empathy. This points to how his blackness receives a little recognition in his own lived experience in Wellington as a half-white and half-European subject. He feels the need to constantly affirm his African-American status, as a form of communal identification, in order to incorporate the street life that he finds genuine and real. Indeed, his adaption of working-class identity is aimed to disrupt the otherness that those underprivileged workers may feel in their connection to him; it acts as a performative action “for improvising and acting in relation to gaps and failures in knowledge and comprehension” as he understands in his communication with this minority group (Irving 73). He enjoys such an individual agency and performative action arising from progressive empowerment of his cosmopolitan orientation which helps him to explore heterogeneous forms of belonging and results at the subversion of cultural identification on the one hand and implementation of active agency on the other

hand. This vision of agency reflects the core of cosmopolitan progress and is crucial to the transformation of self and society.

The historical records of Haitians' narrative of slavery overwhelms Levi by "the evil that men do to each other. That white men do to black" in response to which he wants to "stop Haitians on the streets of Wellington and make it better for them some how" (Smith 355). Certainly, Levi's disguised definition of himself assumes a cosmopolitan stance whereby he appropriates in Victor Roudometof's idea of "cool cosmopolitanism" featured by "an ironic form of distance from current cultural attachments" which allows subjects to transcend "the boundaries of one's culture" (122, 113). By processing a different personal history, Levi associates himself with the historical narrative of Haitian Immigrants which otherwise stands at odds with the way he has been raised "soft and open, with a liberal susceptibility to the pain of other" (Smith 355). Critical cosmopolitanism lays emphasis on an appreciative "openness" to familiarity with diversity which is predicated on "dialogue", "capacity", and eagerness towards "differences" through experience and "self-reflexivity" that can lead to profound cosmopolitan "transformation" (Delanty, *Cosmopolitan Imagination*). Levi constructs communal ties with Haitian workers around the commonality of ethnicity and race. Indeed, Smith enunciates a critical cosmopolitan stance that moves beyond homogenizing categorical identification in arguing for the significance of communal identification confronting the power imbalances and tensions involved in current globalized cities.

One of the designating characteristics of cosmopolitanism is to transcend the parochial nationalism or any prejudiced loyalty which is not prompted only by love of other but as Moses Hadas writes "a rebellious reaction against every kind of coercion imposed by the community upon individual" (Gikandi 29). Not only, Levi expresses a cosmopolitan sensitivity to Haitian vendors' lives and forging intimate connections with them, further on, he joins the Haitian support group campaigns for "higher wages, unfair detention – a lot of issues" enacted on these people. In his participation in Haitian Activist group, Levi performs an ethical engagement with strangers and diversity to create and maintain a standardized social status for Haitian working-class immigrants or to legitimize the existence of others in the socio-economic structure of the state. The Haitian campaign tries to petition a future not embroiled in exclusion but in mutual recognition of each other. Their effort to solicit a societal transformation can be conceptualized as an ongoing process of ethical action that successfully supports the cosmopolitan perception of an equal, justified, and harmonious world for all. In this sense, Levi puts abstract ideas of cosmopolitanism into practice which signals the relevance of performative ethical agency to social solidarity; he performs a progressive cosmopolitanism to create a vision of others dissociated from contingent events and hostile social structures. Andrew Irving states that the constitution of cosmopolitan outlook and further improvement of cosmopolitan virtues such as solidarity, responsibility and empathy emerge through movement and "face-to-face interaction" wherein "truth becomes contextualized" (71). Therefore, the type of engagement or cosmopolitanism, prompted in the context of Levi's participation in supplementing justice for discriminated subjects, amounts for a proper and ethical involvement with social diversity, unlike, form of abstract cosmopolitanism of the academic discipline of Wellington College, specifically Black Studies Department, as a superficial orientation and of little consequence, exemplified in its failure in discretionary students' approval to enter Wellington university. In doing so, the novel foregrounds the significance of dynamic interaction, dialogue, and face-to-face encountering of Self with the suppressed other necessary to disrupt existing discourse mediating injustice.

#### **4. Exclusionary Politics as Performed in Wellington Locality and University**

Like Levi, Carl is a cosmopolitan flaneur who enjoys communicating with multiplicity to increase his sociability and possibility of engagement with different ideas, cultures, or behaviors. His cosmopolitan Flaneurism would "teach" him something new and broaden his recognition of cultural differences as he assumes "I get my culture where I can" which states his resistance to cultural homogenization or ethnic categorization as a marker of his peculiarity (Smith 76). The narrator describes him as a young handsome and talented black poet from African-American descent, who has been brought to Wellington university as a "discretionary" student to participate in Claire Malcolm's creative poetry class, a practice that has granted him a job in the college library.

In their first acquaintance with Carl, Levi and Kiki invite him to the Belsey anniversary party which evidences their openness to differences and ease of proximity to the unfamiliar. Their capacity for cosmopolitanism encompasses "a range of social roles and emotional practices including hospitality, patience and acceptance of difference" (Sen 96). Their friendly welcoming exemplifies Jacques Derrida's concept of "cosmopolitan hospitality" whereby he argues for a kind of hospitality "invented for the singularity of the new arrival, of the unexpected visitor" (83). Against Levi and Kiki's welcoming attitude, Zora, who considers herself as "the essential bridge between Wellington's popular culture and her parent's academic culture", differentiates herself from Carl based on their academic, economic, and cultural differences. As Carl starts a conversation with her, she remains almost silent all through Carl's philosophical speeches on music, college life, and Wellington at large. She imagines Carl's questions as "a kind of verbal grooming that would later lead – by routes she didn't pause to imagine – to her family home and her mother's jewelry and the safe in the basement" (Smith 139). Here, Carl's cosmopolitan openness and aspiration is



contrasted to Zora's disintegration of mutuality and shared recognition that suggests the condition of contingency related to identification of exclusionary arrivals in Wellington as perpetrators of crime.

Carl's acceptance as "discretionary" student in Wellington Collage is more insensitive than his degradation by Zora. The cosmopolitan liberal stance of Howard and his colleague Claire, regarding affirmative action, is grounded in their concerns about underprivileged individuals like Carl, and their rights to higher education and potential opportunities that may dissolve the inequalities imposed on these marginalized groups. However, as it is reflected in Monty Kipps's hostile attitude in defending his conservative philosophy of human rights, the issue of affirmative action results at a restless debate over the legitimacy of such action. These conflicts respond to "limits of conventional liberal thoughts, most notably those posed by linking citizenship to national identity" beside drawing attention to "ethical challenges posed by globalization" (Calhoun 107). While Howard demands rights against "conceptual denigration, blatant stereotyping and other manifestation of the politics of hate" (Smith 323, 327, 329), Monty enforces strong boundaries against the disadvantaged others, which he rationalizes based on socio-cultural structures of rights and formal citizenship, in doing so he maintains a standard of living that is privileged.

Monty accuses Carl of stealing "Maîtresse Erzulie", a painting Carlene Kipps leaves as a gift for Kiki. As Carlene describes to Kiki, Erzulie was a "Voodoo goddess" called "the Black Virgin" and the "Violent Venus". Erzulie is the symbol of all the central motifs of the novel like "jealousy, vengeance and discord" as well as "love, perpetual help, goodwill, health, beauty and fortune" (Smith 174-75). Erzulie's diverse persona provides a rubric for understanding and analyzing the relationships and the key conflicts between underprivileged characters' senses of history or aesthetics and Wellington intellectuals' perception of them. Painted by Haitian artist Hector Hippolyte, the painting travels from Haiti to England to Kipps' American residence, finally to be sold by Kiki in her benevolent act of donating the money to the Haitian support group.

The novel reveals that, indeed, Levi has stolen the painting out of an act of justice against Monty's deceitful acquisition of the high-priced painting for a few dollars from a Haitian village. The two events, Carl's being accused of robbery and Monty's deceptive purchase of Erzulie painting, questions the moral agency of intellectual class. Instead of expressing the moral principles that Monty is so excited about highlighting as an academic in Black studies department, all his contribution to black minorities starts from some act or practice that is characterized as a violation of black people's rights which is furthered with his exploitation of another "discretionary" student. He reveals his immoral position in his affair with Chantelle Williams, another discretionary student whom Monty has an affair with but avoids her participation in his classes.

Intellectual class's cosmopolitan claim fails to stop the inequities or corruptions imposed on working class immigrants. Although the expressed cosmopolitanism of the black studies department, Claire and Howard, remain an important conduct for understanding the inequalities that characterizes the lives of less privileged others, when it is considered in practical sense, they only employ cosmopolitan posturing in their superficial engagement with others which highlights an absence of cosmopolitanism in practice. Like it is indicated in Carl's case, "there is a tension [...] between struggles to open new individual opportunities – for those with the resources to take them up – and struggles to transform social structures to benefit those much less well off" (Calhoun 2015, 105). Although Wellington College had opened its door in a certain meritocratic way to Carl or Chantelle, yet as the novel reveals these characters are still defined according to racial hierarchy which continues to push them to the margins of society. In this sense, Smith implies the embodiment of power imbalances and exclusionary politics in institutional structures indicating how indifferent responses to injustice are grounded in idiosyncratic reasoning that decides who belongs and who is excluded from privileged life.

When Zora reveals Monty's scandalous affair with Chantelle William. Monty withdraws from his anti-affirmative action position to be allowed to "keep his job but not his principle" in Wellington academia where the discretionary students are finally decided to stay. This echoes Smith's argument in her interview with Terry Gross, "Novelist Zadie Smith on Historical Nostalgia and the Nature of Talent" where she argues that "whatever we're living at the moment is not in some way fundamental. Things are constantly open to change." Where "different values within people can be preyed upon and brought to the fore" (2017). In this sense, Smith renders a cosmopolitan consciousness in, not only rejecting the fundamentality of any disposition, but as well, asserting its possibility to change and transformation. As the novel reveals, the rejection of anti-affirmative action opens the promise of a more reflexive, progressive, and democratic discourse which is intended to vitalize the discretionary student project and transform the vision of social others in reaction to delegitimizing politics of exclusion. In this sense, Smith is positive about creation of democratic policies and positive transformation of social structures through cosmopolitan participation in transformative activities opposed to discriminatory projects.

## 5. Conclusion

As it has been presented in *On Beauty*, for Smith cosmopolitanism is never an absolute or fixed category that resides in intellectuals more than others, but an aspect of social life that must be actively constructed through practices of ethical engagement with diversity. The notation of cosmopolitanism that is rendered in the novel is not a homogenous monolith, but composed of an amalgamation of disparate segments comprising a composite mix of



individuals' local, trans-local, and transnational experiences and engagements with otherness. In situating different cosmopolitan performances in the same context, in *On Beauty*, Smith points to the fact that while all forms of cosmopolitanism share some similar virtues, they are not universalist, positive, or practical in the same level. She applauds the mundane cosmopolitanism of those who recognize the particularities of diversity in a positive, reflexive, and appreciative manner. Moreover, in situating Cosmopolitanism of non-elites within the racist space of Wellington, Smith indicates how situated cosmopolitanism of non-elites operate along discriminatory policies whereby cosmopolitan ethics are articulated, concretized, and achieved through everyday practices. In doing so, the novel demonstrates how corporeal participation ensures greater connection with diversity, and greater familiarity with different lifestyles, more conducive to developing ethical values and meaningful social connections that encompasses the underprivileged minorities, as well. She intervenes from the standpoint of underprivileged subjects to let another world come. The possibility of which is not in abstract articulation of cosmopolitan ideals but ethical performance of individuals.

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