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‘Did all friendships – all relations – involve this discreet and mysterious exchange of qualities, this exchange of power? Did it extend to peoples and nations or was it a thing that happened only between individuals?’ (Zadie Smith, *Swing Time* [Hamish Hamilton, 2016], pp. 121-22). Write an essay on friendship in at least two of Smith’s novels.

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In Smith’s *On Beauty* and *Swing Time*, friendship functions as a vehicle for exploring power relations. The exchange of power is materialised through the various misunderstandings and connections between characters. In *On Beauty*, power relations are constructed and deconstructed through boundaries. Boundaries are established and broken in order to express the need for equality and understanding, offering a wider commentary on the nature of female friendships and the encounter between self and other. In *Swing Time*, Smith takes a converse approach, with power dynamics in friendship contesting personal autonomy. Blurring of boundaries between self and other instead question the extent to which one is free to access their own identity. Friendship thus acts as the frame for interrogating these ethical and political concerns.

In *On Beauty*, Kiki and Carlene’s relationship is complex, hindered by social dynamics before they are able to achieve friendship. It is first presented as a form of power imbalance. Such a reading can be framed through the lens of Derrida’s concept of hospitality, which Still defines as ‘crossing boundaries or thresholds […] between self and other […] private and

public […] individual and collective, personal and political.'[1] Firstly, the dichotomy between public and private is central in Smith's presentation of the power dynamics between the women. When Kiki enters Carlene's house, she is crossing the threshold of their public acquaintance into the intimate space of her home. This act in itself foregrounds the social dynamics at play, as Smith utilises space to convey Carlene's authority over Kiki. Carlene dictates where Kiki should occupy space in her house, imperatively commanding her to 'sit down' so they can 'talk properly'.[2] This request causes Kiki to feel hesitant and inferior within the setting as she 'felt and saw herself in this unlikely position, sitting on the floor beneath a woman she did not know.'[3] Her discomfort is presented as internalised, 'felt', and externalised, 'saw'. Interestingly, Smith detaches Kiki from her sense of self in order to emphasise this power imbalance. Her staging of their encounter is thus noteworthy as the manner in which Kiki is sitting conveys the spatial and metaphorical distance between the two women. Power dynamics are embedded in the syntax as the preposition 'beneath' is suggestive of Kiki's vulnerability within this space. Such feeling is intensified by Kiki's perception of their estrangement, marked by the negation, 'a woman she did not know'. In this way, Smith marks the uncomfortable boundary between public and private acquaintance as a barrier to understanding one another. Carlene and Kiki become unbalanced when this binary is contested, and their relationship is initially characterised as tense.

Smith further instils this tension through deliberate dialogue choices. With reference again to their first encounter in Carlene's home, Kiki is conversational and direct whereas Carlene remains reserved. Their differing sensibilities are central to intensifying the unbalanced power dynamic. Carlene chooses moments of silence and interruption, again asserting authority through conversation. Kiki feels 'wounded by the sense that she had said

[1] Judith Still, *Derrida and Hospitality: Theory and Practice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 4.
[2] Zadie Smith, *On Beauty* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), p. 91.
[3] Ibid., p. 91.

something so dull it was not worth replying to.'[4] From a linguistic perspective, silence is meaningful when 'the speaker [has] an intention'.[5] Carlene's choice to ignore Kiki appears deliberate, a way of dictating how much value she holds within the conversation. The severity of the verb 'wounded' is thus indicative of Kiki's offence at this prospect, emphasising her lack of autonomy within the conversation. Moreover, when Carlene speaks over Kiki with 'a line from a poem', Kiki is 'left with her mouth open at being interrupted'.[6] The sudden interjection of poetry is a formal shift in tone from Kiki's conversational dialogue, as though the women are speaking dissonant languages. Hale's concept of the 'aesthetics of alterity,' which she loosely defines as the 'representation of characters with a unique perspective,' provides a valuable framework for understanding this interaction.[7] In light of Hale's definition, it is necessary to consider the ethical implications of Carlene and Kiki's viewpoints. Boundaries also exist within Smith's use of narration, as she exploits the free indirect style to reveal Kiki's discomfort and lack of agency but deliberately reserves Carlene's perspective. In this way, she creates misunderstandings between her characters to convey power dynamics within female friendships. Consequently, Smith advocates for the need for empowerment within friendships, rather than opposition.

Thus, the aforementioned boundaries between the women prevent them from connecting on equal terms, revealed through the motif of art, which serves an ethical purpose in the novel. It is a symbol of exchange and connection and performs its function within friendships. For Kiki and Carlene, discussion of the Maitresse Erzulie painting dissolves 'political and personal' boundaries and enables the women to achieve an equal, empowering friendship.[8] This breakthrough moment occurs when Kiki reveals the lack of artwork in her

[4] Ibid., p. 92.
[5] Dennis Kurzon, *Discourse of Silence* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1998), p. 8.
[6] Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*, p. 93.
[7] Dorothy J. Hale, *The Novel and the New Ethics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020), p. 98.
[8] Judith Still, p. 4.

home, to which Carlene responds with an invitation: 'You must come here whenever you want and look at mine'.[9] The tone of her imperative request is hospitable and honest in comparison to earlier events. This is plausible by the manner in which Carlene personifies artwork as her 'joy' and 'company'.[10] These nouns can be read as metaphorical denotations of friendship and community as Carlene is inviting Kiki to share in her private enjoyment, offering a form of personal insight. It is the subjective space of interpretation that deconstructs the personal and political, enabling their friendship to develop. Throughout the novel, value judgements are objective and politicised, expressed by the various ideological and academic debates. Kiki initially expresses her appreciation of portraits using personal subjective language marked by the transitive verb phrase, 'I just love portraits'.[11] However, she momentarily lapses into academic jargon, referencing a 'thesis of Howard's' and in response, Carlene directly states 'I like her parrots'.[12] Here, Carlene utilises 'direct, non-nonsense, personal and accessible language' as noted by Mousley.[13] His assertion is apt as Carlene's shift to simple, subjective language removes the possibility for the conversation to become ideological.

In addition to Mousley's observation, Carlene's response may be interpreted as empathetic. She empowers Kiki to assert her own judgements, rather than that of her husband's. Smith, as a writer, is thoroughly concerned with empathy and the ethical function it plays within her novels. It is apt to perceive Carlene's empathy towards Kiki and the empowering purpose it has. Such is apparent through the act of exchange when Carlene later gifts the painting to Kiki. She writes a personalised note 'it needs to be loved by someone like you' addressed from 'your friend Carlene'.[14] Here, Carlene's offer is fuelled by an honest appreciation for Kiki's sensibilities. Thus, past hostility is replaced with the sentiment of female

[9] Zadie Smith, p. 175.
[10] Ibid., p. 175.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Andy Mousley, 'I like her parrots: Accessibility, Aesthetics, Zadie Smith's On Beauty and the Women's Prize for Fiction', *Humanities*, 11: 6 (2022), 151 <https://doi.org/10.3390/h11060151>
[14] Zadie Smith, pp. 430-31.

empowerment, with Carlene and Kiki representing a newfound understanding between self and other.

Self and other exist as a collapsable boundary elsewhere in the novel. As well as functioning as an emblem of female empowerment, Carlene and Kiki's friendship reflects how empathy can dissolve the boundary between self and other. Similar can be said for Levi and Choo's friendship. Returning to Derrida's concept of hospitality, it is Levi's empathy that breaks the barrier between him and Choo.[15] Once again, Smith plays with physical boundaries to represent the encounter between the self and other. This is prevalent when 'Choo opened his front door' to Levi.[16] The act of opening the door signifies the beginning of a friendship between the pair. Choo grants Levi access to his private space and subsequently reveals his story. Free indirect style reveals that Levi felt that 'Choo had been on his conscience.'[17] Smith characterises Levi as empathetic and receptive, which is apparent through the way he utilises music to connect with Choo. Aristotelian ethics of friendships is an interesting frame for exploring Smith's concern with empathy. As summarised by Ward, his conceptualisation of friendship is a form of 'reciprocal giving and receiving [...] between persons who both have knowledge of one another's goodwill.'[18] Applied to Levi and Choo, reciprocity defines their encounter through Levi's offer of music and Choo's subsequent personal insight. The binaries of self and other, and individual and collective are challenged when he shows Choo 'how to pick songs or albums.'[19] Levi's invitation, the extension of his sensibility, is received by Choo, who desires to show him 'our music, Haitian music […] political music' that would 'make [him] weep'.[20] The possessive pronoun 'our' indicates the collective of the Haitian community, separating Levi as an outsider. However, Choo's recognition of Levi's empathy dissolves this

[15] Judith Still, p. 4.
[16] Zadie Smith, p. 357.
[17] Ibid., p. 357.
[18] Ann Ward, *Contemplating Friendship in Aristotle's Ethics* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2016), p. 14.
[19] Zadie Smith, p. 360.
[20] Ibid., p. 360.

distinction when he states 'you would like it. It would move you.'[21] The direct address includes Levi, inviting him to engage with Choo's experience through the shared medium of music. Smith therefore destabilises the power structures embedded in these barriers. The barrier between self and other is not a binary, it is fluid, and there is a worthwhile relationship in this encounter.

While *On Beauty* contests the barrier between self and other, mobilised through connections between characters, *Swing Time* takes a different approach. In *Swing Time*, Smith conveys the potential for the relationship between self and other to become problematic. Unlike *On Beauty, Swing Time* is narrated through the first-person perspective. Such perspective enables questions of personal autonomy in identity. The notion of the self is contested through the narrator's friendship with Tracey and the 'mysterious exchange of qualities' in friendship becomes unequal.[22] Smith foregrounds this problematic relationship in the prologue, where the adult narrator receives a malicious email from Tracey, a 'single sentence: *now everyone knows who you really are*'.[23] It is inherently exploitative, promising to uncover the narrator's true character. However, this threat is ironic, as the narrator remains throughout the novel a shadow to the experiences of others, particularly Tracey, and lacks a distinct sense of self. The position of this threat at the start of the novel is salient, with Smith emphasising the novel's central concern – the search for personal identity. Following this threat, Smith alters the novel's chronology, using analepsis to recount the narrator's early memories of Tracey. In this way, the narrator appears vapid in her present, made real only through remembering her childhood friendship.

This wavering narrative identity is enhanced when Smith foregrounds the narrator and Tracey's friendship through sameness. The two girls 'noticed each other, the similarities and

[21] Ibid.
[22] Zadie Smith, *Swing Time* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016), pp. 121-22.
[23] Zadie Smith, *Swing Time*, p. 5.

differences, as girls will' despite the 'many other girls present.'[24] In this way, Smith separates Tracey and the narrator, mediated through the first-person perspective, establishing them as a kind of mirror image of the other. The objectification of their physical appearance is noteworthy, through the narrator's use of the metaphor of material: 'as if one piece of tan material had been cut to make us both'.[25] Reference to 'material' connotes a sense of construction, as though identity can be created, and the unifying nature of 'one piece' foreshadows their sameness – or inextricability. This blurry boundary between self and other is contested early in the novel, aligning with the narrator's childhood perspective. The narrator's sense of identification with Tracey remains throughout the novel, into her adulthood. Helm's 'positive account' of friendship is that friends can be 'other selves' and ' [...] to a certain extent, share a capacity for autonomy.'[26] However, this type of relationship can also be seen as problematic, as, in the case of the narrator, her sense of personal autonomy is lost due to her overreliance on Tracey. While Smith depicts their likeness in childhood, she also emphasises their dissonance in adolescence. The narrator claims that she 'found out what I was without my friend: a body without a distinct outline.'[27] She is rendered a shadow through this metaphor of the body. The only fixture in her identity seems to be that of 'my friend', with the possessive nature of this phrase emphasising her need for Tracey. Smith thus challenges Helm's notion of a shared autonomy in friendship, as the narrator's separation from Tracey results in her effacement.[28]

Along with her own effacement, the narrator undermines Tracey's identity by imposing upon her a perceived identity. Her perception of Tracey functions as a kind of subliminal power dynamic in their friendship, as she refuses to accept the version Tracey that fails to meet her

[24] Ibid., p. 9.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Bennett W. Helm, *Love, Friendship, and the Self: Intimacy, Identification, and the Social Nature of Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 255.
[27] Zadie Smith, p. 214.
[28] Ibid., p. 255.

expectations. Appiah perceives the slipperiness of identity and its relationship with self and other, proposing that it is 'in dialogue with other people's understanding' of 'who I am.'[29] This is embedded in the novel's narrative structure, as, unlike the polyvocal perspective in *On Beauty*, the narrative is restricted to the narrator's first-person point of view. For instance, when the narrator reveals her inability to accept Tracey's imperfect life: 'Even when I heard […] that she was having difficulties […] I couldn't imagine why that would be, her life was perfect as far as I was concerned.'[30] The nature of these first-person statements is egocentric, diminishing Tracey's autonomy over her own identity. Instead, Tracey's identity is decided by the narrator. Smith's writing is often concerned with the notion of freedom. Therefore, the limited perspective is also an ethical dilemma in the novel. It limits the readers' freedom to surmise, as they are only offered a singular viewpoint. Hale's 'aesthetics of alterity' can thus also be applied to *Swing Time*.[31] As in *On Beauty*, it performs a similar function in representing the way character perspectives interact. In *Swing Time*, this interaction is unbalanced, due to the first-person voice. This seems deliberate as Smith exploits the first-person narrative voice to comment on the power of perception within the hierarchy of friendships. For instance, the voice of the authorial self and the narrator become conflated in self-conscious commentary, in reference to the 'one-sided effect of envy… this failure of imagination.'[32] The narrator's 'failure of imagination' is her inability to accept Tracey as flawed, instead imposing an ideal version upon her. Here, Smith comments on the ethics of perception concerning one's identity, as though identity is something that can be conjured or performed.

Identity, as a performance, is a thread that continues into Tracey and the narrator's adult friendship. Such is exemplified through the narrator's time working backstage at Tracey's show. As in *On Beauty*, the realm of the arts offers a reflection on the nature of friendship,

[29] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 20.
[30] Zadie Smith, p. 215.
[31] Dorothy Hale, p. 4.
[32] Zadie Smith, p. 214.

power and identity. In this instance, it is Tracey's role as a performer that embodies this notion. The working roles which both characters occupy mirror the power dynamic of their friendship, with Tracey front and centre onstage while the narrator works behind the scenes. The narrator associates her job with a kind of physicality and materiality: 'The thing I remember most vividly is the warmth of her body as she ran off stage into the wings, into my arms, where I stood ready.'[33] The narrator's recollection of Tracey's bodily warmth gives life to this memory, providing the narrator with a sense of purpose. This is expressed through the parataxis denoting the act of dressing, 'into the wings, into my arms'.[34] The act of dressing Tracey can also be read as a metaphor for how the narrator prescribes her an identity, as discussed through the narrative style. However, the narrator's readiness also renders her passive and in some sense objectified, when Tracey '[holds] on to [her] elbow for balance.'[35] Her job working for Tracey becomes representative of their friendship dynamic, as the narrator finds her sense of purpose through Tracey: 'It gave me something concrete to do with my time.'[36] It is also plausible to perceive this exchange as transactional, as the narrator gains a sense of importance and Tracey has someone to help assemble her. The transactional friendship can be interpreted as a consequence of the narrator's dissolved identity and further diminishes her autonomy.

This form of relationship is characteristic of the narrator and is echoed in her later friendship with Aimee. The transactional nature of their friendship can be understood through Aimee's exploitation of the relationship between self and other, reducing the narrator to a mere extension of herself. Towards the close of the novel, the narrator attempts to assert herself, 'That's my job as friend.'[37] The opposition of 'job' and 'friend' is acute, one connotes

[33] Ibid., p. 341.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid., p. 333.

transaction while the other is a denotation of equality and empathy. However, the narrator is coldly reminded of her role, 'your job is: personal assistant.'[38] Smith establishes their relationship as business-like and influenced by power structures. In this way, their friendship becomes almost politicised. May asserts that, in relation to business-orientated relationships, 'neoliberalism presses them in the direction of self-interest.'[39] His observation is interesting when reading Aimee and the narrator, as the concept of self-interest unsettles the power dynamic. Aimee has access to the narrator as a tool for her image and the narrator loses her personal identity. This is experienced through the way she perceives her own objectification; she sees herself as 'not a person at all but a sort of object […] it was like being fictional.'[40] Smith's use of language here is conscious. The metafictional style of awareness, 'like being fictional' foregrounds the narrator as unreal, but also implies that her identity is so far lost that the novel form cannot bring her into existence. In light of the neoliberal context, Smith may pass subtle commentary on how contemporary society is losing its appreciation for personable connections, instead favouring personal gain. Such is apparent through the metaphor of the shadow, where the narrator experiences her relationship with Aimee as a 'shadow life', suggestive of its empty or unreal nature.[41]

Thus, the relationship between Aimee and the narrator can be seen as a broader ethical commentary on the boundary between self and other. Aimee is depicted as desensitised and unaware, with her ignorance harmfully disregarding this boundary. She is noted as never perceiving the 'differences between people [as] structural or economic' but as '[essential] differences of personality.'[42] The distinction between 'structural and economic' differences and that of 'personality' is vast. Aimee adopts a cosmopolitan outlook, assuming that others have

[38] Ibid.
[39] Todd May, *Friendship in an Age of Economics: Resisting the Forces of Neoliberalism* (Lexington: Lexington Books, 2012), p. 71.
[40] Zadie Smith, p. 427.
[41] Ibid., p. 431.
[42] Ibid., p. 111.

free access to personal autonomy in the same way that she does. To some extent, Aimee's egocentric viewpoint parallels the way of the narrator, who perceives others solely from her own perspective. However, this creates tension within their friendship, for instance, the narrator observes their conversation as becoming 'rapidly and strangely heated' and how her hands were 'out in front of [her], like a politician making a point.'[43] This simile denotes the power struggle within their encounter, with both women unable to agree on the other's viewpoint. In this way, both Aimee and the narrator exemplify the problematic encounter between self and other, through a self-centred lens.

Smith's use of narrative perspective in her novels is therefore crucial in destabilising notions of power and autonomy. By characterising perspective through free indirect style or first-person narration, she mirrors the encounters and exchanges that occur within friendships. In Smith's writing, friendship is underpinned by a series of social and political boundaries, all of which are interrogated through the various characters' perspectives.

[43] Ibid.

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