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UM Graduate Student and Faculty Research Conference

Zadie Smith's Ritual Interest: *NW* in a Postsecular Lens

As a cultural critic and fiction writer, Zadie Smith stands as a central figure in contemporary literature. Smith's growing body of creative work, well-accepted by many readers and fellow writers, is particularly interesting to the literary critic for her attempts at being formally inventive and innovative while always relating her writing back to previous writers and artistic movements. Specifically, she models her writing after art that sees life and literature as inextricably related, with an explicit interest in Modernist writer E.M. Forster and Post-postmodern writer David Foster Wallace. While clear in how she draws inspiration from these writers, Smith places their beliefs in literature's ability to affect the real world in new contexts, in the process asking her readers to enter into fictional environments while paying attention to economic disparity, diaspora, gender, and place, among other themes. Smith treats these interrelated, complex concerns in various ways throughout her novels, but one potential through-line of her fiction, the presence of ritual, has been largely overlooked.

In Smith's most recent novel, *NW*, ritualization, defined by Catherine Bell as "a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities," embodies her potentially abstract cultural concerns in repeated physical events. In the process, her characters confront older British traditions and their own pasts as they attempt to make meaning out of their lives in the present moment. Smith's characters often find ritual surprising and unexpected in its contemporary and secularized setting, yet her narratives continue to strategically use ritual to help represent dynamic changes in the characters' senses of self-creation as well as the reader's understanding of the themes-at-issue. My interest in Smith is part of a larger project, investigating contemporary writers' involvement in imagining through their fictional worlds new possibilities for living ethically today. Provocatively, many of these writers, Smith included, use ritualized encounters to help their fictional characters imagine such potential practices. By taking up ritual in Smith's work, I will contribute to a new way forward for scholarly investigation into her creative project, an endeavor supported by recent scholarship in religion and literature discourses, secularism and religious studies, as well as Post-postmodern literary studies.