

# Dark Posthumanism and the Novel

## Zadie Smith's *NW* and our possible futures

Erin Greer

**T**HE PHILOSOPHER ROSI BRAIDOTTI HAS DECLARED THAT the future of the humanities will be posthumanist, owing to forces of both virtue and necessity. “Posthumanism” names an array of conditions and intellectual positions that have challenged ideas stemming from the classic humanist conviction that man is the measure of all things. Its many points of origin include theoretical critiques of the illusory rational and autonomous “man” central to some articulations of humanism, as well as arguments that humanistic ideals have been (mis-)used to justify colonialism, racism, sexism, and exploitation rooted in liberal capitalism. Its origins also include new technologies that supplant traditional functions of human thought and labor, algorithms that make decisions for us and devices that augment and transform our bodies. Its reality manifests in escalating climate crises—droughts and hurricanes, fires and winter storms, vanishing coastlines and water shortages that should make clear that centuries of unthinking anthropocentrism might lead to the end of the so-called Anthropocene. With Braidotti and others urging updates to our ethical and political outlooks, I think the future of the humanities will indeed be posthumanist, for better or worse.<sup>1</sup>

The academic humanities have long known that “man” is a questionable concept and historical actor, of course, and a habit of critiquing our own presuppositions has prepared the humanities to help our world meet its posthumanist future.

<sup>1</sup> Braidotti is prolific on this subject, but for a concise articulation of her key claims on this forum's topic, see Rosi Braidotti, “Posthuman humanities.” *European Educational Research Journal* 12.1 (2013): 1-19.

The ironies and difficulties of this prospect are more than semantic, however. One follows from the fact that the future of the humanities is most immediately threatened by neoliberalism, which is itself a “dark posthumanism” in its premise—as the political theorist Wendy Brown has noted—that “markets do everything better than humans do.” Neoliberalism tautologically validates this premise, Brown suggests, through aggressive economic deregulation and disinvestment in the institutions that ostensibly improve human performance, like universities. Readers are likely familiar with the view that neoliberalism poses both material and cultural threat to the humanities, as its prioritization of profit rationalizes the withdrawal of material resources and cultural prestige from anything tangential to the growth of capital. Neoliberalism is often named as the force behind the dwindling numbers of majors in the humanities, the stripping of public support from nominally public institutions, and the crisis in academic working conditions, which increasingly reflect the wider, precarious “gig” economy. Yet if we think of neoliberalism as dark posthumanism, we can perceive that traditional humanist arguments about truth, beauty, and intellectual freedom are not only ineffective retorts to neoliberalism, in practical terms; they are intellectually inadequate, as well. To be sure, neoliberal politicians and administrators are unlikely to find such arguments moving. But neoliberalism is not the only force to raise doubts about our humanistic convictions, and if there is to be a posthumanist future to the humanities, we must counter “dark posthumanism” without uncritical nostalgia for a happy humanist past.

The present essay explores these issues as mediated by a work of literature: Zadie Smith’s 2012 novel *NW*, which I’ll argue draws together ambivalent ideas about humanism, literature, and neoliberalism’s darkly posthumanist tendencies. Set in 2010 in the racially diverse, working class, and gentrifying area of northwest London to which its title refers, *NW* is comprised of five sections and cycles through numerous stylistic modes, each associated with different stages in the development of novelistic prose in English. One section is narrated in the intimate, free indirect style of literary realism associated with the 19th-century ascendancy of the English novel. Another reads as a fragmentary *bildungsroman*, or “novel of development.” Others combine stream-of-consciousness narration with concrete poetry (in which letters are arranged on the page to evoke images), a chapter that parodies Google Maps directions, and chapters that oscillate between tight closeness to a central character and clinical, opaque detachment.

That James Joyce is one of Smith’s literary models is no surprise. As in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the stylistic shifts in *NW* invite us to reflect on the history and futures of narrative literature, evoking common convictions among literary critics that the novel, as a genre, has both formal and chronological kinship with liberal humanism,

for reasons I explain below. Also like *Ulysses*, *NW* conspicuously breaks familiar narrative conventions. In *NW*'s case, the breakage suggests that neoliberalism's posthumanist tendencies necessitate new conventions if novels are going to formally suit our contemporary world. My central proposition is that *NW*'s stylistic restlessness at once critiques neoliberalism and rebuffs nostalgia for older humanistic and novelistic norms. I draw forth its implicit outlook on the past and present of the novel genre in hopes that its insights are applicable more broadly, as we envision how humanistic scholarship and education remain essential—while also changeable—in conditions both excitingly and alarmingly posthumanist.

**N**W centers on two women in their mid-thirties, friends since childhood on a public housing estate. As the novel repeatedly reminds us, they came of age alongside neoliberalism. Leah, who's white, works in low-level public service, is agonized by social inequality, and ambivalent about her loving but rather dishonest marriage to a black French-Caribbean immigrant. Natalie, originally named Keisha, is black, and whereas Leah's preoccupation with inequality interferes with her willingness to commit to the middle-class values and privileges that nonetheless contour her life, Natalie embraces an ethic of brutal individualism and defiant consumerism. She works critically but willingly within the constraints of racism and sexism, transforming herself from Keisha into Natalie, a lawyer (who files no charges when a senior attorney gropes her) married to a wealthy, cosmopolitan banker. Natalie has two children and a wide circle of brunching, dinner-partying, sophisticated friends, who express relief when she swaps her public service legal career for one representing multinational corporations.

As the novel opens, Leah is drowsing in a hammock in her backyard. We soon learn that she discovered that morning she's pregnant and called in sick to work. Several chapters later, she will get an abortion, having told no one about the pregnancy, not even (or especially not) the husband who believes they are trying to have children. Leah is reflecting on a phrase she heard on the radio, which recurs again and again in the novel as an ironic motif: *I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me*. "A good line," she thinks, then tries to write it on the pages of a magazine. It is not a "good line," of course: it's banal and ambiguous and false, but its ethos drives and haunts the novel's characters. In any case, the words won't stick to the magazine's glossy pages.

This opening vignette brings together two of *NW*'s preoccupations: the matching of literary forms to norms of personhood (a dictionary versus the various forms the novel samples), and the

uneasy individualism central to neoliberalism. The theorist I mentioned earlier, Wendy Brown, encapsulates neoliberalism's ethos as one of individual "responsibilization," the "idea and practice" that "forc[es] the subject to become a responsible self-investor and self-provider."<sup>2</sup> In part, Brown explains, responsibilization is essential to 21st-century neoliberal governance because of the evisceration of welfare and stable, well-paying jobs. When there is no social safety net, you must self-invest and self-provide. This evisceration of welfare is a running theme and scenic backdrop in the novel, but *NW* shares the view expressed by theorists like Brown, who builds on Foucault and others, that neoliberalism is more than an economic philosophy, that it extends the logic of "investment" into all relations and activities—the workplace and the home, exercising, dating, raising children, cultivating friendships, and developing any identity at all.<sup>3</sup> For theorists like Brown, there is a crucial difference between the ideal human subject of neoliberalism and the ideal subject of classic economic and political liberalism. Individual self-interest, converging in a marketplace of goods or ideas, is no longer deemed sufficient to the needs of capital. Following financialization and the escalating risks of unregulated markets, neoliberalism requires downgrading the individual person, disciplining the naive self-interest we think of as "desire" and replacing our very sense of self with the sense of having or being a *portfolio of assets*. Brown's neoliberal subject is a portfolio seeking investors, and activities previously thought of as taking place outside the market are "transmogrified," as she puts it, "according to a specific image of the economic. All conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics." Specifically, she argues in *Undoing the Demos* (2015), all spheres of existence and activity become measured in terms of how they enhance or diminish the value of the portfolio self.

Regardless of the accuracy or scope of this account of neoliberalism, it articulates *NW*'s own implicit theory, developed via its investigation of converging aesthetic and social problems. As I mentioned above, there is a conventional story in literary studies according to which the genre of the novel has both formal and historical affinity to liberal humanism. A strong version posits that the novel—especially in its 19th-century realist apogee—at once reflects and cultivates the norms of liberal culture, training readers in what Elaine Hadley calls the "liberal cognition" suited for economic and political institutions in liberal societies.<sup>4</sup> Private reading reinforces the ideals and skills of reflection, individual autonomy, and judgment, while also cultivating sympathy for others in our community who must have vivid inner lives, just like characters in novels. The novels of 18th and 19th century Britain, America, and Europe additionally stress the primacy of individual personhood by building plots around individuals driven by ambitions and desires they must learn to temper with reason

<sup>2</sup> Brown discusses "responsibilization" at length in chapters 3 and 4 of *Undoing the Demos* (Zone Books, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> For a reading of the novel's interest in neoliberal austerity politics, see David Marcus, "Post-Hysterics: Zadie Smith and the Fiction of Austerity," *Dissent* 60.2 (2013): 67-73.

<sup>4</sup> See Elaine Hadley, *Living Liberalism* (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

and moral virtue. This account of the novel's history has been challenged on several fronts, including its Eurocentrism and its reduction of an assorted literary past to a focused *telos*. Nonetheless, *NW* raises a question consistent with this account, extended into the 21st century: what happens to literary realism when a society's ideal person is no longer an individual actor seeking to balance self-interest against other obligations, but rather a portfolio seeking to win investors? What updates are required of the novel—a technology allegedly designed as a vehicle of liberal humanism—in the era of dark posthumanism?

It is *NW*'s third section, which follows Natalie's progression from childhood to the present, that most overtly links the norms of neoliberal subjecthood to the issue of narrative style. This section evokes the classic subgenre of the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of development, which is commonly theorized as exemplifying the mutual reinforcement of novelistic and liberal humanistic norms. It follows Natalie as she progresses, like a classic hero of the *Bildungsroman*, from humble beginnings through education and wider experience, up socio-economic and cultural ladders. As Joseph Slaughter writes of the *Bildungsroman*, Natalie's plot of individual development is also a "plot of incorporation" into a social "whole," which is comprised of strenuously distinct individuals.<sup>5</sup> She joins the 21st-century ruling class of bankers, lawyers, and other professionals who boastfully complain about how hard they work and the consumerist pressures they actively reproduce. But if *NW* alludes to many conventions of the classic *Bildungsroman*, it conspicuously breaks others. The chapters detail stages of Natalie's life in chronological, linear sequence, but they differ dramatically in length, tone, and perspective. Some are a single sentence long, while others offer extended descriptions of single moments. Some chapters summarize entire cultural eras or offer ironic quips about popular culture. The cumulative effect is that of a shattered, jolting, uneasy *Bildung*, the aesthetic matching Natalie's own uneasiness.

Here, then, the novel offers one answer to the question regarding the fates of literary realism and the novel in the era of dark posthumanism. Natalie is an acolyte of self-making in the turbo-charged, "responsibilized" mode of neoliberalism, described from an early age as "crazy busy with self-invention" and wracked with worry that, in truth, she "ha[s] no self to be," no "personality at all." She wonders if the "self" she busily invents is "only the accumulation and reflection of all the things she had read in books and seen on television." In college, she ditches her boyfriend from home for a cosmopolitan aristocrat named Frank de Angelis, suffering pangs of self-consciousness (if not conscience) owing to the "gaping socioeconomic difference" between the two men. She marries Frank, despite lacking respect for him. When they begin having children,

<sup>5</sup> See Joseph R. Slaughter, "Enabling fictions and novel subjects: The Bildungsroman and international human rights law." *PMLA* 121.5 (2006): 1405-1423.

she considers reproduction another labor necessary for accumulating and reflecting values she cannot identify as her own. The conventional *Bildung* of 18th and 19th century European fiction imagines the linear, progressive development of an autonomous and stable individual, a thinking and feeling human. Natalie's *bildung*, in contrast, imagines the self as the accumulation of a portfolio, accruing (capital) interest rather than cultivating (human) interests.

## What updates are required of the novel —a technology allegedly designed as a vehicle of liberal humanism—in the era of dark posthumanism?

Indeed, the novel never lets us lose sight of the fact that her coming of age coincides with that of neoliberalism. For instance, a chapter after she has married Frank asserts that “only the private realm existed now. Work and home. Marriage and children.” The ghost of Margaret Thatcher lingers, whispering that there is no such thing as society, only men, women, and families. Another chapter, titled “the end of history,” describes a so-called “revolution” without politics, evoking Francis Fukuyama's declaration that “history” has concluded with the triumph of capitalism over socialism. Fukuyama may have intended to declare the victory of *liberal* capitalism, but in the (in) famous essay and book of that title, he also ambivalently affirms the neoliberal view that, after history, human affairs are dictated by markets and technocracy rather than political deliberation and conflict. In the chapter titled after Fukuyama's essay, we read variations on these post-historical sentiments: “what could go wrong, now we were all friends?” and, a beat later, “anyway, it was all already decided.”

The name of Natalie's husband, Frank De Angelis, carries a Dickensian ring that almost too perfectly reflects the character's function as something like an “angel investor” in Natalie's portfolio. His family wealth is instrumental to her *Bildung*: he convinces his mother to finance her legal training, explaining that he told his mother, “even if I didn't love her, it doesn't make sense to let this kind of ability go to waste for the lack of means—it doesn't make *economic* sense.” They marry shortly after. A chapter reflecting on their relationship imagines it from four angles: it might be a “loving relationship,” an example of a “low-status person with intellectual capital but no surplus wealth [who] seeks high-status person of substantial surplus wealth,” the result of reproductive urges, or simply selfish genes running the show. Natalie seems uncertain which to believe. Later, she conceptualizes Frank and herself as “a double act that only speaks to each other when they are on stage,” and later still, as “incorporated. An advert for themselves.”

Natalie's portfolio self proves to be as unstable, as risky, as the stock futures Frank trades at work (recall that the novel's "present," toward which Natalie's section progresses, is the immediate aftermath of the financial crash of 2008, itself a retort against the neoliberal faith in unregulated markets). The instability of the former is evidenced not only by Natalie's recurrent anxieties that she has "no self to be" and her marriage is theatrical, but also by a risky, compulsive habit she develops shortly after marriage, when she begins perusing the "listings" —her evasive word for a website on which people advertise for casual sex. She creates an account, using the name Keisha, and eventually arranges several unsatisfactory threesomes. The section of the novel I read as her fragmentary *bildung* ends with Frank's discovery of this mostly-virtual alter ego.

## **What happens to literary realism when a society's ideal person is no longer an individual actor seeking to balance self-interest against other obligations, but rather a portfolio seeking to win investors?**

The narrative voice in Natalie's section marks a stark contrast to that of the section that immediately precedes it. While tracking her life's progression, the narration leaves her subjectivity opaque, never representing with psychological depth the self whose existence she questions. In the preceding section, *NW* follows a minor character named Felix using the intimate narrative style of free indirect discourse, the style perfected in the era when both realist fiction and liberal humanism were culturally dominant in England, in which third-person narration borrows the idiom and preoccupations of characters and grants representational depth to their mental and emotional states. Felix is a hardworking optimist with clear goals and plans, a man whose relationship to experience is suited to a narrative style associated with individual agency and authenticity. He dies at the end of his section, however, as if Smith wants to rebuke readers for indulging in the pleasures of a narrative form suited to an outdated fantasy of psychological unity and depth. That Felix is black is perhaps a subtle rebuke, as well, to the historical exclusions of British realism, affording narrative complexity to a character whose social "type" was excluded from the terms of both humanism and realism in the 19th century. He is only included in *NW* under brief and ambiguous terms, his death an item on the news at the end of the first

section and a subject of conversation in the novel's final pages. His section differs stylistically not only from Natalie's fragmentary *bildung*, but also from the first section of the novel, which tracks Leah using a stream-of-consciousness style that similarly blends proximity and psychological distance.

The contrast emphasizes *NW*'s refusal to give the same depth of representation to its protagonists. It conspicuously rebuffs the inclinations of readers who wish to empathize or identify with characters, calling into question long-running associations between novels and empathy—and by extension, between novels and humanism. Here, *NW* contributes to a larger reconsideration of narrative ethics that has developed in both critical and creative works in recent decades in the wake of theoretical challenges to liberal humanist visions of the self. Dorothy Hale argues in a recent book that contemporary authors, including Smith, embrace a “new ethics” for narrative fiction.<sup>6</sup> Whereas it was once common for authors and critics to assert the value of narrative fiction based on its alleged exercise of our empathetic capacities and its cultivation of faith in common moral salience beneath surface differences—the philosopher Martha Nussbaum remains a proponent of this view, using it to link novels and liberal humanism—many today are rethinking the value of empathy. According to the “new ethics,” Hale explains, we do not need to empathize with others, but rather to learn that the other is *other*, inaccessible to our imagination: this humility is the starting premise for ethical relations. Along similar lines, Tammy Houser has argued that *NW* thematizes the selective and pointless distribution of empathy among the privileged.<sup>7</sup> Readers are invited to empathize with Felix, who dies, unsaved by readerly affect in a world where violence and racism exert a cruel, unjust toll. Leah, moreover, thinks of herself as “so flooded with empathy,” which the novel links to her depressive lethargy rather than effective political work to address the injustices that trouble her.

But if *NW* resists classic assumptions linking novels and empathy, it also reminds us that empathy is absent from the darkly posthumanist ethos of responsabilization. This point is made powerfully clear in the novel's final pages, in which Natalie visits Leah, who is once again reclining in her hammock, despondent and distracted. They have a disappointingly shallow conversation, but in its course Leah offers the nearest explanation we find in the novel for her emotional state, saying to Natalie, “I just don't understand why I have this life”—a line that seems to point equally to the limitations of her life, its foreclosures of alternative possibilities as she ages and is pressured from all sides to begin having children, and also to the relative privileges of her life compared to those of others, including “that poor bastard,” Felix, whose death is a piece of her media backdrop. Natalie's immediate response is exemplary “responsibilization”

6 See Dorothy Hale, *The Novel and the New Ethics* (Stanford University Press, 2020). She focuses on Smith's earlier novel, *On Beauty*, where the querying of humanism and antihumanism is mediated by the story of an art history professor.

7 See Tammy Houser, “Zadie Smith's *NW*: Unsettling the Promise of Empathy,” *Contemporary Literature* 58.1 (2017): 116-148.



dogma: “because we worked harder,” she says, “we were smarter and we knew we didn’t want to end up begging on other people’s doorsteps.” As an explanation for why they are alive and another person is dead, this is incoherent as well as callous, especially given *NW*’s sensitive depiction of Felix. As a justification for inequality, it also falls short, not only ethically and politically but conceptually, as the novel has repeatedly demonstrated that neither hard work nor “wanting” are straightforward.

*NW* thus prompts us to rethink the assumptions these two characters represent: Leah exemplifies empathetic identification and suffering in the face of inequality, a model some might call liberal humanism, embedded in classic defenses of novels and the humanities.<sup>8</sup> In her case this leads to nothing useful. Natalie exemplifies harsh, unforgiving individualism, and her anxieties and risky behavior caution us about its personal toll, while her wrongheaded response to Leah shows its ethical and conceptual void. Here, then, is my reading of the curiously proximate-yet-distant quality of the narrative voice in its depiction of the two protagonists, a reading that differs somewhat from the “new ethics” reading: the narrative style conspicuously suits dark posthumanism, for different reasons stemming from the same neoliberal soil. Whereas the opacity of Natalie’s inner life reflects its evacuation to make way for portfolio interest, in Leah’s case, the narrative voice reflects the effects of her despondent, apolitical empathy in the face of the inequality that accompanies brutal “responsibilization.” If we believe we live after “the end of history,” after everything has been decided, the novel warns, we might meet inequality with feelings rather than action. The stylistic restlessness thus enacts a critique of neoliberal responsibilization, while simultaneously refusing—in the representations of both Leah and Felix—to retrench in older humanistic ideals.

**I**N THIS REFUSAL, THE NOVEL SUGGESTS THAT THE FUTURE of the novel genre will not be its past. We cannot counteract dark posthumanism with Victorian-style fiction or its implicit values. By extension, we cannot defend the humanities with nostalgic humanism, visions of the integrated self that at best are naïve and at worst have been mobilized for imperial, anthropocentric, exploitative purposes. But neither can we embrace the darkly posthumanist present. By this reading, *NW* reflexively theorizes its function as a diagnostic rather than therapeutic or revolutionary tool. Literature, it insists, will not make us more empathetic, better people—or if it does, this is hardly enough. Literature can, however, formally innovate and develop narrative styles that clarify—by reflecting and resisting—the stakes of

8 On a related subject, John Plotz has drawn insightful attention to a “there but for fortune” motif in nineteenth century realist fiction, through which the privileged ostensibly learn that their good fortune is random enough they may as well empathize with those less blessed by fickle fate. John Plotz, “Is Realism Failing? The Rise of Secondary Worlds.” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*. Vol. 50. No. 3. Duke University Press, 2017.

our current trajectory. If, as my students report, *NW* is a difficult, aversive novel because its characters remain opaque, frustrating, and damaged, it can call us to an aversive view of the values subtly and unsubtly shaping these characters and, perhaps, ourselves.

From this standpoint, the futures of the novel and the humanities *do* resemble their intertwined pasts: attuning us to our conditions but refusing to rest, refusing to allow even their own tools—narrative voice, conventional plots, aspirational pictures of the “human”—to ossify into timeless ideals. Aesthetic form and ideology are historical, contingent, and thus changeable as our world changes. Aesthetic form can resist as well as reflect the changing norms of our world, partly by urging us to perceive complicities between aesthetic forms and societal norms. Many futures of the novel, and the humanities, remain to be written.

Of course, if the academic humanities are a site in which we practice thinking critically with works of art, philosophy, and history, they do not directly disrupt dark posthumanist forces. More nuanced critiques of neoliberalism do not dissuade its acolytes. The Felixes of the world are not saved if we read aversive novels. But one way to be “posthumanist” is to allow philosophies, histories, and aesthetic works, including novels, to refresh our critical bearings in the lives we lead “post”—after, beyond—deliberations hosted in humanities classrooms and journals. In other words, the question to ask is: how do *we*—as political actors informed by the works institutionally housed in the humanities—respond to dark posthumanism, insisting that everything has not already been decided, that a brighter posthuman future can be made, and written? *a*