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Beauty*

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**KIPPS, BELSEY, AND JEGEDE**  
**Cosmopolitanism, Transnationalism, and Black**  
**Studies in Zadie Smith's *On Beauty***

by Kanika Batra

Zadie Smith's novel *On Beauty* confirms that the fiction of the second generation Caribbean diaspora has indeed arrived on the international scene, if indeed any confirmation was required after the phenomenal success of Smith's first novel *White Teeth*.<sup>1</sup> The status of Smith's fiction in the Euro-American academy, which is also the setting of *On Beauty*, encourages an analysis of disciplinarity and institutionalization. Recent criticism has directed attention to Smith's portrayal of the American academy in passing. In a review of Elaine Showalter's *Faculty Towers: The Academic Novel and Its Discontents*, Alan McKenzie points to "complacency both in the novels and campuses" that Showalter examines and concludes by commenting on Smith's *On Beauty* as a "strange" and "wonderful" novel which he is "not certain" would have benefitted from having been run through the "very fine mill" of Showalter's critical exegesis (759). Examining a set of novels that he calls "academic satires," Charles Green briefly discusses *On Beauty* as Smith's attempt to bridge "a deeply emotional domestic drama with the public performances of the so-called culture wars" (183). Green critiques the novel's "limp" treatment of the culture wars but commends "how Smith successfully treats race" (185). Kathleen Wall reads Smith's *On Beauty* and Ian McEwan's *Saturday* through a theoretical framework derived from Elaine Scarry's *On Beauty and Being Just*, which provides the title to the novel. Wall's reading is a curiously apolitical treatment of Smith's trenchant critique of racial and economic disparities. Taking my cue from these critical opinions, I offer a reading of Smith's representation of blackness in its institutional, social, and aesthetic dimensions.

Marking a shift from *White Teeth*, which documented multicultural Britain through Archie Jones's and Samad Iqbal's British-Jamaican and British-South Asian families, *On Beauty* is set largely in America, though it briefly references England as well. Presenting the lives of two families, the Kippses and the Belseys, in the college town of Wellington, the novel foregrounds the transnational dimensions of the black diaspora that is the subject of Black Studies as an academic discipline. Smith details a year in the life of Howard Belsey, English by birth, American by residence, art historian by profession, and liberal multicultural by choice. Howard's marriage to Kiki, his "American wife," and his life in the safe environs of Wellington comprises Smith's narrative. This marriage between an Englishman and an African American woman, and the lives of their children, Jerome, Zora, and Levi, are the lens of Smith's ironical explorations of race, class, and gender relations in idyllic Wellington. The idyll is interrupted by the arrival of Sir Monty Kipps, neo-conservative Trinidadian British art historian, housed in the Black Studies Department. The Department

is home to Howard's closest friend, Nigerian émigré Erskine Jegede, Soyinka Professor of African Literature and Assistant Director of Black Studies, previously a fellow student with Sir Monty at Oxford. The vagueness of Sir Monty's job profile at Wellington or the nature of his duties at Black Studies is in contrast to the neo-conservative anti-affirmative ideas he propounds.

Douglas Davidson and Frederick Weaver, writing in the *Journal of Black Studies* in 1985, wrote that "a central education mission of Black Studies at White institutions is to enable students to see that the rest of the curriculum is White Studies" (344). This utopian hope is unfulfilled at Wellington; in addition, the author's deliberate lack of explanation of Sir Monty's duties as a Visiting Professor as well as Erskine's position indicate that both serve as token additions to the cultural diversity in the Wellington faculty and course offerings. Such tokenism casts doubt—as the author presumably intends—on the very nature and purpose of Black Studies at Wellington.

While analyzing Smith's representation of Black Studies it is useful to consider the history of the discipline. Most accounts emphasize that black identity politics and institutional racism were factors contributing to demands for curricular revisions (Hall; Huggins). This article begins by outlining the emergence of the discourse understood as Black Studies to propose a dialogue with recent discussions of cosmopolitanism as a way of understanding its varying emphases on what Houston Baker, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth Lindeborg call the "vernacular" and the "theoretical" (9). The words carry multiple meanings: vernacular is understood as lived reality, social activism, and, more recently, popular culture; the theoretical connotes an analysis of the vernacular most evident in academic discourse. Next, I read *On Beauty* in the context of race and class specific theories of identity to illustrate what Homi Bhabha has called "vernacular cosmopolitanism." The article concludes by indicating how the novel presents an attenuated discussion of gender and sexuality. My argument is that through the range of issues the author strives to address, the novel paradoxically epitomizes, even while it discredits, an institutionalized Black Studies. The discipline is presented as disconnected to social reality and actively participating in the perpetuation of social inequality. Such a view, in my opinion, does injustice to contemporary work being done under "Black Studies," particularly since the discipline occupies a relatively marginal position in the Euro-American academy even today. Smith's profoundly ironical take on the "cosmopolitanism" of transnational academic exchanges of the kind epitomized by Howard Belsey, Monty Kipps, and Erskine Jegede in their personal and institutional affiliations engages with class specific racialized identities but leaves unresolved the place of racialized gender and sexuality outside and in the corporate academy of the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup>

### Speaking to Each Other

The history, origins, and major concerns in Black Studies are succinctly summarized in the introductions to two landmark anthologies—*Black British Cultural Studies*, edited by Houston Baker, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth Lindeborg, and *The Black Studies Reader*, edited by Jacqueline Bobo, Cynthia Hudley, and Claudine Michel—which provide an

overview of the discipline in the US and British contexts.<sup>3</sup> Baker, Diawara, and Lindeborg chart the emergence of Black British cultural studies by contrasting Stuart Hall's account of its emergence in Thatcherite Britain in the 1980s with the history of US Black Studies in the aftermath of the civil rights and black power movement in the 1960s and 1970s. As stated in the introduction to the volume, "Perhaps the most striking difference between theorists and practitioners of black cultural production in Britain and black American cultural workers, of, say, the black arts and the black power movements, is their assumed sites of enunciation" (9). According to them, the degree of emphasis on "vernacular politics" and the "theoretical space of enunciation" differs in the two contexts: black social activism is emphasized in the rise of the field in the US; the theoretical space of the academy is often considered central to the origins of Black Studies in Britain under the aegis of Cultural Studies departments at the University of Birmingham, the Open University, Leeds University, and other institutions (Baker et al. 9).

In other words, if the vernacular as lived reality and social activism preceded the theoretical discourse in the US, in Britain the theory is said to have created the conditions for the enunciation of the vernacular. The inherent problems with such an account are evident from even a cursory examination of the British context where the racial ferment of the 1950s and 1960s culminating in the Notting Hill Riots of 1959 was coterminous with, if not prior to, the method of inquiry characterized by Stuart Hall's legacy to the Birmingham School of Cultural Criticism. In the same way, Black Studies in the US had taken root in black and white institutions such as Howard University, the Tuskegee Institute, Stanford University, and Harvard University which offered courses in the study of "Negro life and culture" in the 1930s and 1940s prior to civil rights activism (Norment 30).

Another difference between the assumed sites of enunciation, evident in the nomenclature of the two anthologies, is indicated by the adjective "cultural" often used for Black Studies in Britain unlike the US. This is not simply in the interests of academic diversification since Cultural Studies and Black Studies occupy parallel and sometimes intersecting trajectories, but also because the histories of the discipline in Britain and the US often take "culture" as a referent for the former and "politics" as the mainstay of the latter. The beginnings of Black Studies in the US have acquired the status of mythical origins. Bobo, Hudley, and Michel's introduction to the *Black Studies Reader* indicates how "historic social justice movements" that "preceded the mid-twentieth-century grassroots activist endeavors . . . led to fundamental alterations in social and political organizations, including institutions of higher learning" (1). Some institutions responded to black activism for a more relevant curriculum: a Black Studies program was established at Merritt Junior College in Oakland, California in 1963, and a Black Studies department at San Francisco State College in 1967–1968. Bobo et al. place Black Studies in a tradition comprising Chicana/o, Asian American, and Native American studies, fields that were "born of social unrest in addition to academic initiatives" (3). The convergences between the British and US academic contexts through developments in Cultural Studies are also acknowledged by Bobo et al. who mention that in the latter part of the twentieth century, Cultural Studies, "as a theoretical approach to understanding the position of specific social groups, became a predominant method of analysis" (8). The legacy of Stuart Hall is undeniable in the cultural turn in Black Studies, substantiating Baker, Diawara, and Lindeborg's claim that black theory in the United States "was enormously energized by the persuasive and brilliant analyses of

black British cultural studies" (13). Smith's first work *White Teeth* was hailed as an exemplary representation of the multiplicity of cultures and subcultures in postcolonial Britain that are the subject of Black British cultural studies. For the reader expecting a similar *mélange* in *On Beauty* the expectation is at least partially fulfilled through the expressive cultures of African American and black diasporic communities revealed in rap, hip-hop, and Spoken Word poetry.

### Cosmopolitans of a Certain Kind

The rather sketchy contours of Black Studies, the academic discourse theorizing these expressive cultures in *On Beauty*, indicate the tenuous link between the social and the academic that, Smith suggests, characterize the discipline. This is most evident in the trajectory of Carl, the "black boy" and "street poet," whom the Belsey family meets at a free performance of Mozart's *Requiem* on the Boston Common. There Kiki impulsively invites Carl to a party celebrating her thirtieth marriage anniversary to Howard, coquettishly stating: "we could do with a few more brothers at this party" (78). Carl's spontaneous appearance at the party and unceremonious dismissal indicates the clash between the "vernacular" and the "theoretical" that effectively characterizes Smith's description of the gathering:

The Black Studies Department's graduate crowd were out in full force, mostly because Erskine was well loved by them and they were, anyway, by far the most *socialized* people at Wellington, priding themselves on their reputation for being the closest replicas on campus to normal human beings. Along with large talk they had small talk; they had a Black Music Library in their department; they knew, and could speak eloquently of, the latest trash television. They were invited to all the parties and came to all of them too (107, emphasis added).

Well socialized though the department is and well aware of black popular culture, there are limits to the sociability that welcomes the "theoretical" engagement with blackness while rejecting any interaction with the kind of vernacular sociality represented by Carl.

Carl's status as a "discretionary" student in English Professor Claire Malcolm's class further marks a tacit acceptance of vernacular sociality, one that is also seen as a cosmopolitanism waiting to be brought out of its cocoon to unfurl in rainbow hues. Claire meets her poetry class for Spoken Word nights at the Bus Stop, a Moroccan restaurant in Wellington. Smith describes Spoken Word as,

an art form . . . [that] practiced the same inclusiveness as the venue itself: it made everybody feel at home. Neither rap nor poetry, not formal but also not too wild, it wasn't black, it wasn't white. It was whatever anybody had to say and whoever had the guts to get up on the small boxy stage at the back of the basement and say it. For Claire Malcolm, it was an opportunity each year to show her new

students that poetry was a broad church, one that she was not afraid to explore (212).

Witnessing Carl's performance of a piece about an ex-girlfriend who had an abortion without informing him, Claire offers him a place in her poetry class with the purpose of "refining" his vernacular talents. This pedagogic relationship also indicates an attempted merging of the vernacular and the theoretical in which the attempt is to translate the former into the latter. The ideological contradictions of such a translation are pointed out by Bruce Robbins in his discussion of Kwame Appiah's work:

As amended by people like Appiah, *cosmopolitan* has emerged in a decade or two as a widely popular term of praise. . . . Cosmopolitanism posits the option that fidelity to a particular place and tradition can be understood, like Aymara-speaking Bolivian rappers, as simultaneously and successfully participating in the global, the modern, and the innovative. However limited the rappers' caloric intake, therefore, however modest their living conditions and life chances, their indigenously inflected rapping is taken as grounds for rejoicing, or for what Appiah has called 'celebration of cultural variety' (CP, 29). Today it is hard to find a place where the celebration is not in full swing. (49)

Claire's desire to secure and retain Carl as a student in the face of Monty's anti-affirmative agenda reveals not only the "celebration" of the spectacular transformation she hopes to effect, lending an air of cosmopolitanism to Carl's vernacular talents, but it also reveals the strange workings of the Black Studies department.

Other than Erskine Jegede, whose area of expertise is African literature, there is no clear sense of the purpose of the department within an institution such as Wellington. It is at best a space existing on the margins of the predominantly white liberal arts institution, and at worst a misuse of its resources since its curricular and social commitments are never defined. The superfluity as well as the *status quo* nature of the department is evinced in its director's expertise in making people feel important. The very nature of the department is a means of securing a balance between the liberal and conservative elements in Wellington. This is, after all, the department that houses Monty Kipps, staunch advocate of a black meritocracy, as well as provides campus jobs to Claire Malcolm's "discretionary" kids such as Carl:

When someone was determined to destroy his peace and well-being, when they refused to either like him or to allow him to live the quiet life he most desired, when they were, as in the case of Carl Thomas, giving someone a headache who was in turn giving *Erskine* a headache, in situations like this, Erskine, in his capacity as Assistant Director of the Black Studies Department, simply gave them a job. He *created* a job where before there had been only floor space. *Chief Librarian of the African-American Music Library* had been one such invented post. *Hip-Hop Archivist* was a natural progression (Smith 372).

The balance Erskine attempts in order to deflect criticism is evident in the position of hip-hop archivist he creates for the school dropout but immensely talented vernacular poet Carl. On the one hand this is a scathing critique of the dilution of the political content of Black Studies since its inception in the late 1960s and early 1970s, on the other, Carl's discovery of the "crossroads" as an important trope in hip-hop music and his excitement at its political significance forwards the idea, perhaps a stereotype, of an untutored genius whose potential contribution to the field is devalued by the gatekeepers of the academy.

The British art historian Sir Monty Kipps is one such gatekeeper. Monty's ongoing feud with Howard, who is on the Affirmative Action Committee, sits uneasily with his "space" in Black Studies. Much like the Black Studies Department, as Howard's best friend at Wellington and Monty's former classmate at Oxford, Erskine is located between the poles of liberalism and conservatism and never once takes an open stand against Monty. In what can only be seen as Smith's attempt to redress the balance of blame, she makes a black man responsible for advocating an anti-affirmative action policy. Such a stand directly affects "street" kids like Carl, but, more importantly, it echoes voices against the dilution of academic standards by affirmative policies in American universities. One of the most famous among these positions is Harold Bloom's argument against the lowering of standards in the academy. Kipps's and Bloom's stand is best summarized by Henry Giroux's critique: "by contrasting cultural politics with popular culture and the decline of academic standards, Bloom conveniently cloaks the contempt he harbors for minorities of race, class, and colour and their 'uncivil' demands for inclusion in the curricula of higher education and the history and political life of the nation" (344).<sup>4</sup> Smith's representation thus connects to ongoing debates in Cultural Studies and Black Studies about the public and social relevance of these fields in the US and British academy (Cole; Jennings; Giroux). Smith's portrayal of institutional gatekeeping by well-placed black and white academics points to the pervasiveness of racial disparities both inside and outside the academy that validates Black Studies as a legitimate and necessary field of study even in the face of opposition.

### **Ethnicity, Identity, and "Vernacular Cosmopolitanism"**

Houston Baker's optimistic account of the emergence and future of Black Studies in the early 1990s that includes an analysis of hip-hop, rap, and the presence of black youth in elite university campuses across the US can also be seen as an attempt to connect the vernacular and the theoretical in ways suggested by Black British cultural studies theorists such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. In his analysis Baker recounts the opposition to Black Studies from black intellectuals such as Sir Arthur Lewis and Kenneth Clark (precursors of the fictional Monty Kipps) and their charges of compromising intellectual rigor for "Political Correctness." Despite this opposition, Baker writes that academics such as Henry Louis Gates, Moelfi Asante, and Cornel West "are joined with innumerable undergraduate and graduate students to build the American Black Studies project securely for the twenty-first century" (27). When one considers the precarious positions of many Black Studies programs or departments across the US and England—the dismissal of eleven members

of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham University, historically building on the significant work by Stuart Hall and others, on the specious charge of failing to meet Research Assessment Criteria; the controversy around Cornel West's departure from Harvard; and the sinking fortunes of Black Studies programs across the US—Baker's predictions seem unduly optimistic (Webster; Wilson; West).

Baker's observation that "a steady urban beat" has "carried Black Studies from academic migrancy to forceful, scholarly citizenship in the American university" (32) succinctly introduces the inextricable links between race, popular culture, migration, and institutionalization that Smith explores in *On Beauty*. This is most evident in the Belseys's interactions with "outsiders": Jerome's short-lived affair with Monty's daughter Victoria and his fascination with their religious convictions that afford a studied contrast with his own liberal, non-religious family; Zora's infatuation and interaction with Carl, who gains an entry into Claire Malcolm's poetry class and a job at the Black Studies Department; and Levi's gradual awareness of race and class disparities through Choo, a former French teacher from Haiti who "hustles" imitation Gucci and Prada goods on the streets of Boston for a living. Smith's representation of the class specific dimensions of the black diaspora through Haitian migration to the US brings to the fore cultural identity, race relations, and economic stratifications—key concerns explored by Black Studies from its inception.

These concerns can be charted through the theoretical oeuvre of Stuart Hall whose influence is well-acknowledged in US as well as British traditions of Black Studies. To begin, the two different concepts of identity presented by Hall are a cornerstone of Black Studies. If, as Hall has suggested, one crucial way of thinking about cultural identity is in terms of the idea of "one, shared culture" such that our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes providing a stable frame of reference, the other is a position which recognizes that cultural identity is marked by similarities as well as differences, and is therefore a matter of "becoming" as well as "being." The most important aspect of this discussion is Hall's acknowledgement that the second view "qualifies, even if it does not replace, the first" ("Cultural Identity" 211–12). Hall extends his discussion on identity through the idea of ethnicity that "acknowledges the place of history, language, and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual" ("New Ethnicities" 168). One of the ways in which racial disparities can be interrogated in *On Beauty* is by making apparent "the thoroughly naturalized link between 'race' and 'ethnicity'" that is the legacy of Black British studies interrogation of the intellectual traditions of British Marxism (Baker et al. 4). Hall's theorization of black labor is in these terms, "the class relations which ascribe it, function as race relations. Race is thus, also, the modality in which class is 'lived,' the medium through which class relations are experienced, the form in which it is appropriated and 'fought through'" ("Race" 55). Such a disruption of the class-mediated link between race and ethnicity is indicated in Smith's novel through the youngest Belsey, Levi, as he gradually becomes aware of the reasons for the presence of Haitian, Mexican, and Lebanese immigrants in Wellington. Early on in the novel Levi's imitation of a class specific form of black culture involves dressing, talking, and walking like a black man in the "hood." His preferred class and racial identity receives a rude jolt when he interacts with Choo and perceives the inextricable connections between blackness, diaspora, citizenship, and institutions. Choo's anger at waiting tables at Wellington on



less than minimum wages and his grief at stepping down from teaching to serve another black man like Sir Monty Kippis indicate the modalities of race and class in the diaspora that supplement the African American perspective offered by Carl.

The most ubiquitous diasporic presence is that of the Haitians, introduced in the novel by a brief description of the Belsey's hired help, Monique, "a squat Haitian woman, about Kiki's age, darker still than Kiki" (10). Monique's presence leads Kiki to a "strange moment, nervous of what this black woman thought of another black woman paying her to clean" (10–11). Levi's anger at this situation includes an awareness of Wellington's exploitation of cheap diasporic labor as well as at his family's participation in this exploitation by paying Monique less than four dollars an hour because she is not "American." His knowledge of the various connotations of "black" traverses the distance from when he thought that "black folk were city folk" and "people from the islands, people from the country" were "obstinately historical" to when he acknowledges the role of historical and social processes shaping the fortunes of the Haitian people (80).

Homi Bhabha has spoken of the "ethical urgency for revising cosmopolitanism for the contemporary world order" to take into account the lives of millions of refugees and migrants by posing the question: "Are the Stoic values of a respect for human dignity and opportunity for each person to pursue happiness adequate cosmopolitan proposals for this scale of global economical and ecological disjuncture?" (41). The world-making of the dispossessed is explained by Bhabha as an "experience of modern living that Julia Kristeva has called 'the cosmopolitanism of those who have been flayed' or what . . . [can be] tentatively name[d] a 'vernacular cosmopolitanism'" (43). This is in contrast to the more apparent cosmopolitanism of privileged diasporic individuals who are otherwise on the "outside" of American academia, though unlike Carl their outsider status is more a matter of geography rather than class: Erskine Jegede is a Nigerian émigré; Howard Belsey is a British expatriate; and Monty Kipp is Trinidadian-British. The differences between these immigrants and those from Haiti and Mexico implicate the university as one of the sites for the propagation of economic and racial disparities, thus calling into question its left-liberal academic discourse on racial and economic justice. Exposing how the town utilizes immigrants' services as cheap public and private labor allows Smith to present Wellington as a site of capitalist exploitation: "structures through which black labor is reproduced—structures which may be general to capital at a certain stage of development, whatever the racial composition of labor—are not simply 'colored' by race: they work through race" (Hall, "Race" 55). The participation of Kiki, Howard, and Levi in this system is not held up for special censure, though they are the vectors of Smith's articulation of the pitfalls of liberalism.

### **Gender, Sexuality, and the Counter-politics of Blackness**

Thus far I have argued how an equal emphasis on politics and culture in Black Studies in the US and Britain helps in the articulation of the vernacular and the theoretical also presented in Smith's fictionalization of the transnational black diaspora. Black Studies scholarship on race, ethnicity, and class that is implicitly evoked in the novel can be placed

in dialogue with recent revaluations of cosmopolitanism from the perspective of ethnic minorities, migrants, and refugees, as suggested by Bhabha and Robbins, among others. I have modeled a transnational form of inquiry by using both British and US theorists' contributions to a counter-politics of blackness to read *On Beauty*. In this section, I would like to focus on gender and sexuality as key modalities in recent articulations of this counter-politics. As Paul Gilroy observes, "sexuality and gender identity . . . express the evasive but highly prized quality of racial authenticity. Their growing power in configuring contemporary notions of blackness raises once again the critical issue of how the complex dynamics of race and gender come together." Following Hall's analysis of race as a modality in which class is lived, Gilroy's assertion that "the naturalness of gender can supply the modality in which race is lived and symbolized" (*Small Acts* 7) helps map Smith's exploration of race, gender, and sexuality in *On Beauty* on the axes of historical and contemporary anxieties.

Smith foregrounds black male sexuality as one such source of anxiety. Levi's discomfort when he senses a "crazy" black woman looking at him while he walks down Redwood Avenue in Wellington arises out of an awareness of being the only black kid in a white neighborhood. Walking to his house he thinks that a T-shirt that said "YO - I'M NOT GOING TO RAPE YOU" might be useful "like three times a day while on his travels. . . . There was always some old lady who needed to be reassured on that point" (80). Much like threatening black male sexuality, a threatening black female sexuality emerges in the novel through Howard's amazement at the way in which Victoria offers herself to him. Much like anxiety about affirmative action policies for ethnic minorities, Smith displaces the burden of critique when it comes to gender and sexuality. As a young black man whose sexuality was historically threatening to white women, Levi would be expected to inspire fear among white residents of Wellington. Yet, he feels discomfited when seen by an old *black* woman in the neighborhood. In the same way Howard's anxiousness about his sexual encounters with Victoria effect a historic reversal of white male sexual oppression of black women.

If Victoria's sexuality corroborates Angela McRobbie's description of the "phallic" woman, it also partakes of the brash self-confidence of a younger generation of women that Robbie diagnoses as "post-feminist masquerade." Part of this masquerade involves a celebration of the "freedoms associated with masculine sexual pleasures" including "sex as light-hearted pleasure, recreational activity, hedonism, sport, reward, and status" (McRobbie 83). This display of "masculinity enhances . . . [the woman's] desirability since she shows herself to have a sexual appetite similar to her male counterparts" (McRobbie 84). Howard's experience with pornography courtesy of Victoria lends another dimension to the clash between the vernacular and the theoretical testing the limits of his class-specific cosmopolitanism. In his short lived sexual liason, Howard experiences these limits as a challenge to his understanding of the vernacular as lived reality and popular culture: "Howard, who had almost no personal experience of pornography (he had contributed to a book denouncing it, edited by Steinem), was riveted by this modern sex, hard and shiny and fluid-free and violent" (379). His rarefied theoretical sensibilities honed on a deconstructive critique of Rembrandt's art and a vague liberal feminism cannot understand Victoria's self-managed sexual aestheticization, though he is temporarily fascinated by it. From demanding a sexual encounter on the day of her mother's funeral to sending

him semi-pornographic pictures over email, and, finally, dressing up like a stripper for an encounter in a cheap motel, Victoria's chic post-feminist black female sexuality doesn't object to but rather demands an objectification of desire on its own terms. This is in contrast to Carlene Kipps's docile domesticity and Kiki's black feminist beliefs marked with an awareness of her sexuality.

Though Kiki's feminism is in direct contrast to Victoria's "post-feminist masquerade," hers is by no means an asexual femininity; rather Smith places that sexuality within a complex matrix of class and sexual orientation. Confronted by Howard's affair with Claire, Kiki's outburst reveals that she finds other men desirable, though unlike him she has remained faithful in their marriage. The outburst also reveals her racial isolation in Wellington:

Everywhere we go, I'm alone in this . . . sea of white. I barely *know* any black folk more, Howie. My whole life is white. I don't see any black folk unless they be cleaning under my feet in the fucking café in your *fucking* college. Or pushing a fucking hospital bed through a corridor. I *staked my whole life* on you. And I have no idea any more why I did that (Smith 206).

In reverting to black vernacular patterns of speech ("they be") Kiki's outburst links her lived experience of racial isolation to her language in much the same way as Carl's reaction to Zora's jealousy of his relationship with Victoria.<sup>5</sup> In the moment that he understands that Zora is championing his place in the poetry class for reasons other than his talent, he distinguishes himself from the Belseys in the same race and class specific way that Kiki distances herself from Howard:

"People like me are just toys to people like you . . . I'm just some experiment for you to play with. You people aren't even black any more man—I don't know *what* you are. You think you're too good for your own people. You got your college degrees, but you don't even live right. You people are all the same," said Carl, looking down, addressing his words to his shoes, "I need to be with *my people*, man—I can't do this no more." (418)

Both encounters reveal the pitfalls of the liberal multicultural utopia that intellectuals like Howard, Claire, and Zora attempt to create through their personal relationships and vocal political convictions.

Smith also delves, albeit in passing, into sexual alterity as a way of exposing the pitfalls of liberal and conservative ideologies. Kiki's name, which evokes "ki-ki," a term popular in the 1940s and 1950s for lesbians who didn't believe in butch-femme role playing, and her admission of a close emotional and sexual relationship with a woman in her youth complicates the terrain of sexuality explored in the novel.<sup>6</sup> In her conversation with Carlene, Kiki mentions the headiness of the 1970s marked by racial and sexual assertion:

"I guess I mean there was a revolution going on, everybody was looking at different lifestyles, alternative lifestyles . . . so whether women could live with other women, for example."  
"With women," repeated Carlene.

“Instead of men,” confirmed Kiki. “Sure . . . I thought for a while that might be the road I was going to go down. I mean, I went down it some way.” (177)

Carlene’s comment that “It’s not very uncommon in the Caribbean” places Kiki’s disclosure in the tradition of black diasporic female sexuality made famous in Audre Lorde’s fiction, poetry, and essays as well as in dialogue with Frantz Fanon’s famous assertion in *Black Skin, White Masks* that there is no homosexuality in Martinique as “the result of the absence of the Oedipus Complex in the Antilles” although “the schema of homosexuality is well enough known” (180). However, even here, any discussion of Kiki’s sexuality is foreclosed by Carlene’s revelation that Monty’s best friend, the Reverend James Delafield who delivered the benediction on President Reagan’s inauguration, is gay. Kiki’s irksomeness at “find[ing] her own revelation passed over so quickly” is dissipated by the humor of the discovery that Monty’s conservatism falters over his acceptance of the Reverend’s sexuality along with his enjoyment of his company and cigars (177–78). Besides Carlene’s placement of Kiki’s relationship with women in the traditions of the black diaspora, an authentication of female bonding is evident in the painting of Maitresse Erzulie, the Haitian voodoo goddess associated with female empowerment and sometimes lesbian women, that she wills to Kiki.<sup>7</sup>

The lack of a sustained discussion of Kiki’s sexuality resonates with the silence and invisibility surrounding black women’s sexuality except in the phallic mode that best characterizes Victoria. Evelyn Hammonds has observed that, “the historical narrative that dominates discussion of Black female sexuality does not address even the possibility of a Black lesbian sexuality or of a lesbian or queer subject” (308). This neglect has been remedied in recent theorizations of the field that not only disrupt the silences in the historical narrative but also introduce concerns of sexuality as essential to any contemporary discussion of race. Such concerns further the political and cultural agenda of Black Studies in ways that might also lead to a reinvention of the field and its alliances with other interdisciplinary endeavors such as Queer Studies.<sup>8</sup>

If we accept Kobena Mercer’s claim that “the profusion of rhizomatic connections of the sort that constitute an evolving black queer diaspora community implies another way of conceiving the ‘role of the intellectual,’ not as heroic leader or patriarchal master, but as a connector located at the hyphenated intersection of disparate discourses and carrying out the task of translation,” then Smith’s “intellectuals” do not do anything to serve as “connectors” despite being in a unique position to do so by virtue of their own privileged diasporic locations (30). The connections Mercer urges the intellectual to make also resonate with the epigraph to E. M. Forster’s *Howard’s End*—“only connect”—to which Smith’s novel alludes constantly. While Forster’s novel epitomized a failure of connections across class, Smith’s extends Forster’s discussion to include race and class concerns but founders on gender and sexual politics of the intellectual troika of Kipps, Belsey, and Jegede, marked by their numerous extra-marital liaisons. It is, in fact, the “non-intellectual” Kiki’s turn towards a support network of women, among them Carlene and the “lesbian” friends—whom Howard, for all his apparent liberal pretensions, detests—that indicates the rhizomatic connections between race, gender, and sexuality. Although this is not the focus of Smith’s novel, such connections are essential for a performative resignification

of Black Studies, a task undertaken by black intellectuals on both sides of the Atlantic as well as black activists, artists, filmmakers, performers, and musicians.

### Whither Black Studies?

Smith's fictionalization of the Black diaspora underscores and comments on the transnational dimensions of Black Studies, which, as indicated in this article, can be seen in dialogue with theories of cosmopolitanism. Much of this work focuses on the search "for mobile and flexible frameworks for studying the shifting landscapes of diaspora, in which 'politics' and 'culture' neither reflect each other, determine one another, nor substitute one for the other, but enter into complex relations of mutual articulation whose outcomes are rarely ever predicted in advance" (Mercer 16). In *On Beauty* liberal politics and black culture are brought to a head on collision towards the conclusion with the fiasco surrounding the Haitian painting owned by Carlene Kipps that she leaves to Kiki. Ignoring Carlene's wishes, her family keeps the valuable painting for themselves, and it finds an unusual home in Sir Monty's office in the Black Studies Department. When the painting is stolen from there, the first suspect is Carl. In what is perhaps the weakest turn of Smith's plot, Carl drops out of the narrative, pointing to the failed agendas of the cultural and the political in Wellington College. Though the institution has a department of Black Studies in place, it has minimal consideration for people whose lives are the objects of its study besides their use value as cheap labor or token additions as "discretionaries" contributing nominally to diversity to satisfy the institution's social conscience.

While Smith is not questioning Black Studies as a mode of social and cultural interrogation, she expresses a legitimate sense of skepticism of the ways in which it fulfills an academic need without taking into account the social. What is observable in the "flexible frameworks for studying the shifting landscapes of the diaspora" offered by Black Studies' analysis of race, class, gender, and sexuality that have been highlighted in this article is that ethnicity and class are the modalities through which race is articulated, but often a progressive racial politics faces an impasse when confronted with articulations of gender and sexuality. Indeed Smith's clever representation of shades of blackness in *On Beauty* founders when it attempts to consider black hetero- or homosexuality as a source of anxiety. As a field of inquiry premised on taking into account intersectional identities, Black Studies itself involves a set of complex intellectual, institutional, and pedagogic negotiations that limit as well as facilitate its political edge. Acknowledging these limitations while facilitating these articulations is crucial at a time when race and racial justice seem, in some circles, to be redundant terrains of social inquiry even as the reality of black lives attests to their continued importance.

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#### NOTES

1. First generation British Caribbean writers include the novelists George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, C. L. R. James, and Andrew Salkey. Some of the prominent poets of this era were Edward Brathwaite and Louise Bennett, also known as “Miss Lou” in the Caribbean.
2. For a useful account of cosmopolitanism, see the introduction to Cheah and Robbins’s anthology *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation*. In a recent essay Robbins observes, “celebrations of cosmopolitan diversity have largely been uninterrupted by the issues of economic equality or geopolitical justice. I wonder whether it isn’t time to stop and ask how much of the praise is merited, what work cosmopolitanism is and isn’t doing (51).
3. See also the essays in *The African American Studies Reader*, edited by Nathaniel Norment Jr. The anthology provides a good account of the emergence of the discipline and includes analyses of gender and sexuality. Norment mentions in the introduction that “African Diaspora Studies can enhance African American Studies by providing more inclusive cultural, political, economical and educational perspectives. It can provide a framework for correcting the misinterpretation and subordination of the African diaspora” (xxxvi). My choice of *The Black Studies Reader over The African American Studies Reader* is dictated by the former’s focus on “Black” in a transnational rather than a predominantly African American context.
4. Since Smith loosely bases Wellington College on Harvard University, it is reasonable to assume that she expects her readers to remember the clash between vernacular and theoretical cosmopolitanism epitomized in noted African American intellectual Cornel West’s encounter with Harvard’s president Lawrence Summers in 2001. The immediate cause of West’s resignation from Harvard was Summers’s view that his work, specifically his hip-hop CD titled *Sketches of my Culture*, that included rap and spoken word poetry, did not meet standards of academic relevance expected from faculty associated with Harvard. For West’s clarifications about and an account of the debates surrounding the controversy, see his article “Why I Left Harvard University” adapted from his book *Democracy Matters* published in 2004.
5. It is an interesting paradox that while Zora’s name evokes that of Zora Neale Hurston, a proponent of folk and African American vernacular, her association with Carl is marked initially by suspicion, later by infatuation, and finally by a sense of exasperation at his new found role as archivist in the Black Studies Department.
6. See Audre Lorde’s listing of terms used by lesbians in New York in the 1950s in her “biomythography” *Zami*, where the narrator recalls being “part of the ‘freaky’ bunch of lesbians who weren’t into role playing, and who the butches and femmes, Black and white, disparaged with the term Ky-Ky, or AC/DC” (178). See also John D’ Emilio’s historical account of lesbian identities in *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, which cites an informant, a woman from New Orleans, who remembers that in the 1950s, “If you didn’t pick a role—butch or femme—and stick with that, people thought you were mixed up and you didn’t know who you were and you were laughed at and called ‘ki-ki’—a sort of queer of the gay world” (99).
7. Carlene’s handwritten note willing the painting to Kiki evokes Ruth Wilcox’s similar note willing her house, Howard’s End, to Margaret Schlegel. Smith has acknowledged in several interviews that E. M. Forster’s novel, *Howard’s End*, is an intertext to *On Beauty*.
8. See the essays in the anthology *Black Queer Studies* edited by E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson.

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