Rethinking Home Through Hospitality: Zadie Smith's *NW*

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Introduction

Zadie Smith's 2012 novel *NW* follows the lives of Natalie Blake, Leah Hanwell, Felix Cooper, and Nathan Bogle, who all grew up on the deprived (fictional) Caldwell council estate in Willesden, northwest London — the eponymous NW. This article will examine notions of home, concentrating on Natalie and Leah as Smith clearly focuses on her female protagonists and their (complicated) friendship. Natalie (originally Keisha) Blake is a black woman born in London to Jamaican parents. Her two younger siblings are Cheryl and Jayden. Keen on upward mobility, she becomes a successful barrister and marries investment banker Francesco (Frank) De Angelis, the son of a wealthy Italian mother and a Trinidadian father. With their two children, they inhabit an extravagant house in Queen's Park, a rather affluent NW neighbourhood. Her friend Leah Hanwell, a white woman in her thirties, is the only child of an Irish mother and an English father. With her husband Michel, a hairdresser of French-Algerian descent, she lives in a council flat around the corner from her childhood home. Working for a charity organisation, she lacks Natalie's and Michel's ambition to move forward, preferring to stay childless and in the same place.

While home can be approached from various perspectives ranging from romanticised associations with shelter and cosiness to sites of power and violence as well as from ideas of physical places to emotional ties, *NW* lends itself to an analysis of home drawing on Derrida's concept of hospitality. The subtitles of the novel's five parts, "Visitation," "Guest," "Host," "Crossing," and again "Visitation," are keywords in Derrida's framework and suggest an exploration of the interplay between home and hospitality. Hospitality is not only linked to but also dependent on a physical home from which it can be offered. Moreover, it involves power relations between a host and a guest. This essay will show that the imbalance of power ensuing from hospitality in Smith's novel turns out to be detrimental to the heroines' (already strained) friendship and to the evaluation of their homes. After a brief introduction covering the theoretical framework, the first part will outline the role of Willesden as the heroines' identity-shaping childhood home;

the second will — based on this foundation — investigate their adult homes through the lens of hospitality, gauging the intricate (power) relations between hostess and guest.

Jacques Derrida's Concept of Hospitality

For Derrida, "[h]ospitality, if there is such a thing, is […] an experience in the most enigmatic sense of the word" (2000b: 8), underlining the elusive nature of hospitality that makes it difficult to grasp. Derrida's preoccupation with the topic is reflected in seminars with his students, especially towards the end of his career, resulting in partly unusual formats. Among these are "Foreigner Question" and "Step of Hospitality/No Hospitality" (French "Pas d'hospitalité"), two seminars making up his 2000 publication *Of Hospitality*, a Q&A of sorts between Anne Dufourmantelle and himself. His article "Hostipitality" exists in two completely different versions: The first is a short article, based on a paper held in Istanbul in 1997, published in volume 5 of *Angelaki* in 2000, the second a much longer collection of unedited material comprising four 1997 seminar sessions published in *Acts of Religion* in 2002. Their readability is often impaired by insertions of the French original, German quotes, and Latin etymologies, but also by the pedagogical nature of the texts and the evolutionary character of his thoughts. A clear line of argument is, hence, blurred — also owing to his deconstructionist approach.

Derrida distinguishes between unconditional hospitality (visitation) and conditional hospitality (invitation) as two incompatible faces of hospitality, whose law is contradictory and deconstructive. Strictly speaking, expecting an invited guest, being able to prepare for and await, anticipate, and receive them, does not really involve hospitality for Derrida: "One must say *yes*, […], to let oneself be swept by the coming of the wholly other, the absolutely unforeseeable […] stranger, the uninvited visitor, the unexpected visitation beyond welcoming apparatuses." (2002: 361-2). In other words, "[h]ospitality consists in welcoming the other that does not warn me of his coming" (ibid.: 381), it is a challenge to the unprepared host and "gives without return or else is nothing" (ibid.: 386). Knowing that this is an impossible ideal — as nobody can be expected to accommodate a complete stranger or hide a criminal — Derrida still considers it worth pursuing. By contrast, in a setting of conditional hospitality, the host "defines the conditions of hospitality or welcome" (2000b: 4) by "selecting their invitees" (2000a: 55), for instance. Conditional hospitality is based on certain laws, "the rights and the duties" (ibid.: 77) of hosts and guests. It is, thus, delimited by a right to hospitality and a reciprocal duty to conform to the role of the guest. Derrida seeks to solve the aporia constituted by unconditional and conditional hospitality by suggesting that "[w]e will have to negotiate constantly between these two extensions of the concept of hospitality" (ibid.: 135), which means that the dividing line between the two is often fuzzy, as is also evident from reading Smith's novel in the light of Derrida's philosophy.

Regardless of this distinction, "[h]ospitality is the deconstruction of the at-home" (2002: 364) and "a self-contradictory concept and experience which can only […] deconstruct itself — precisely — in being put into practice" (2000b: 5). Deconstructing home means questioning, unsettling, or even disrupting the traditional sense of (feeling at) home through the practice of hospitality, which debunks power mechanisms at work between host and guest and, hence, reveals unfamiliar or uneasy aspects of home.

A key term related to this deconstruction of home is that of "hostipitality," a blend of hostility and hospitality that Derrida creates to express the (hostile) tension in the host-guest relationship. He resorts to the etymology of Latin 'hospes' meaning either 'host' or 'guest,' conflating it with Latin 'hostis' meaning 'enemy.' Referring to Benveniste, Derrida considers 'hospes' a basic term in hospitality consisting of two elements, *hostis* and *potis*. "*Hostis* is going to effect this strange crossing between enemy and host […;] *potis* […] unites the semantics of power, mastery, and despotic sovereignty." (ibid.: 13). Hos(ti)pitality, thus, entails power and hostility in the relationship between host and guest and, consequently, deconstructs idealised positive notions of home like friendship or comfort. In the following, Derrida's framework will be used to analyse the relationship between Leah and Natalie and their homes in Zadie Smith's *NW*.

Coming of Age in Willesden

To set the scene for a discussion of home through the lens of hospitality, the different attitudes of adolescent Leah and Keisha towards their native Willesden will be outlined as they are essential for an understanding of home and its deconstruction through hospitality.[1] Willesden is characterised as facing economic and social challenges, yet for Leah, it has always been a haven investing her with autonomy. She has been living in her native district nearly all her life and "is as faithful in her allegiance to this two-mile square of the city as other people are to their families, or their countries" (*NW* 6). Her consistent unwillingness to move forward, her immobility and stagnation, are neatly summarised in the sentence "Leah, born and bred, never goes anywhere." (*NW* 50). This deadlock has not only spatial but also temporal components — "I am eighteen in my mind […] I will be eighteen always." (*NW* 24) — and is hence related to her reluctant coming of age. On a literal level, it can be perceived in her loyalty to her home, her native Willesden: "I don't want to move, it's my home." (*NW* 92), which leads to regular disagreements with Michel, who dreams of moving to a better neighbourhood. On a metaphorical level, it is evident from her refusal to grow into adulthood: "She does not want to arrive." (*NW* 24), as well as from her strong desire to preserve her relationship with Michel as a childless couple by secretly taking birth control and having several abortions: "She wants just him and her forever." (*NW* 91). While in the colonial paradigm deviancy is usually projected

[1] In the following, quotes from Smith's novel will be documented by *NW* and page numbers. For a detailed assessment of space and agency in Smith's novels, see Pirker 2016.

onto the 'non-white' other, here it is the white woman who refuses to subject herself to normativity, albeit clandestinely and with a portion of shame in the face of societal pressures surrounding her third abortion: "She is ashamed before an imagined nobody who isn't real and yet monitors our thoughts." (*NW* 59). For Pérez Zapata, Leah's rejection of motherhood might be connected to her wish for standstill and fears of losing her identity (2014: 89-90). Another instance of Leah's 'deviance' from the norm are the lesbian desires of her youth that still resurface in her fantasies as an adult.

Part 3, the "Host" section, traces Natalie's coming of age in 185 mini-chapters. Free indirect speech and omniscient narration unfold a more reliable portrait of her than Leah's subjective stream of consciousness does. The close childhood friendship between the girls — going back to Natalie's rescuing Leah from drowning — also finds expression in the latter's spending much time in her friend's family home:

> Her [Natalie's] mother was of the opinion that anyone who is in another person's flat as often as Leah Hanwell was in the Blakes' forgoes the right to be a guest and should simply be treated as a member of the family, with all the dispensation and latitude that suggests. Cheryl took a third position: 'She's always hanging round here. Don't she like her own place? What's she up in my make-up all the time for? Who does she think she is?' (*NW* 175)

When Leah's status as a guest is changed to that of a family member, this means that she is exempt from obligations normally associated with a guest but is, in turn, subject to a set of rules that the Blake family lives by. Cheryl challenges Leah's new status in her home, perceiving her as an intrusion that bothers her.

In view of the cramped confines of the Blakes' home, it is all the more surprising that Leah is their constant 'guest' and not the other way round: "Though they were five, the Blakes occupied a three-bed, one-bathroom unit" (*NW* 189) in Caldwell. This means that home, in the sense of a domain of privacy, which "for her own person […] was a necessity" (*NW* 189), could not be granted to Natalie. Even as a teenager, she had to share a room with her sister, as chapter 31, entitled "Permission to enter," underlines. In debates with her mother, she claims privacy as a basic human right and insists on a lock for the door, which Marcia Blake rightly identifies as an indication that her daughter has something to hide. Even more than privacy, freedom seems to have been Natalie's highest goal from early on:

> […] parental legacy meant little to Keisha Blake; it was her solid sense that she was in no way the creation of her parents […]. Indeed, a non-existent father and/or mother was a persistent fantasy of hers, and the children's books she had most enjoyed always began with the protagonist inheriting a terrible freedom after some form of parental apocalypse. (*NW* 181)

This statement reveals how uprooted she has been all her life and how much she has longed for independence. At the end of her legal studies, at her first Sponsorship Night dinner (out of the twelve necessary to be called to the Bar), it becomes clear how much Natalie has aspired to the role of the hostess: "No longer an accidental guest at the table […] but a host, with other hosts, continuing a tradition." (*NW* 216-7). Consequently, Natalie's ties to her old community are much more ambivalent than Leah's. Willesden has always repelled and attracted her at the same time. Keisha Blake, the successful barrister who has decided to adopt the name Natalie to boost her social and professional advancement, "was crazy busy with self-invention" (*NW* 209); on the other hand, "[a]mbitious though she was, she was still an NW girl at heart" (*NW* 218). After her studies, it begins to painfully dawn on her that she has "no self to be" (*NW* 208). This exploration of the two characters' relation to home as young adults paves the way for the following assessment of their relation to home as adults through the lens of hospitality.

Adulthood in *NW*

This part will zoom in on the individual, private homes of Leah and Natalie as adults — the Willesden council flat and the posh house on Queen's Park. Both homes will be explored through Derrida's concepts of unconditional hospitality, including the "*right of resort*," and conditional hospitality, with the "*right of a guest* to be entertained" (Derrida 2000b: 5), respectively.

Leah as a Hostess

"Visitation" is the title of the first and last parts of the novel and echoes Derrida's concept of unconditional hospitality. At the beginning of *NW*, Leah falls for the scamming drug addict Shar, who knocks at her door and pretends to need money for a cab trip to the hospital her mother has allegedly been taken to: "A woman thumps the front door with her fist. Pulling the lock aside, she [Leah] finds it stops halfway, the chain pulls tight, and a little hand flies through the gap." (*NW* 5). Leah grants hospitality to the stranger and asks her in: "She releases the chain. The stranger's knees go, she falls forward […]. Tears shake the stranger's little body. […] Woman in a war zone..." (*NW* 5). Shar is repeatedly referred to as 'the stranger,' and Leah mentally locates her in a war zone, thus framing their relation as enemies on either side of the threshold of her home. "[T]he troubling analogy in their common origin between *hostis* as host and *hostis* as enemy, between hospitality and hostility" identified by Derrida (2000b: 15) is reflected in the encounter between Leah, the unconditional host, and Shar, the (hostile) visitor.

Leah's reaction to Shar's appeal illustrates Derrida's ideal of unconditional hospitality, which demands complete openness: "Let us say yes *to who or what turns up*, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any *identification*." (2000a: 77).

Derrida insists that we need to accept the risks involved. The foreigner has a right to be well received but has to stay in the role of a foreigner and guest. Yet, Shar challenges the dichotomous nature of hospitality in a number of ways. First of all, she is not a stranger in need of protection from persecution or seeking a temporary abode. She is a trickster — but still in need of help. She is a stranger — but her "face is familiar" (*NW* 6). She even turns out to have attended the same school as Leah. Ultimately, she is received as a guest but does not really stick to this role. Derrida uses the term 'parasite' to label this type of visitor: "Without this right [to hospitality], a new arrival can only be introduced […] in the host's 'at home' as a parasite, a guest who is wrong, illegitimate, clandestine, liable to expulsion or arrest." (2000a: 61). In the course of the scene, Shar's behaviour definitely unmasks her as this kind of parasite ignoring her duty to behave as a guest. Leah directs "her guest" (*NW* 8) to the kitchen and offers her tea. It is obvious that she is not behaving naturally, "[s]he arranges her face to signify compassion" (*NW* 6), which implies that she fails in feeling true empathy — one of Amiel Houser's (2017: 128)[2] core arguments — and she "turns too quickly, makes irrelevant motions with her hands" (*NW* 8), being anxious to counter Shar's compliment about her home ("Nice place," *NW* 8) with the downplaying remark "Not ours — we rent — […] It's council." (*NW* 8). Eager to keep the conversation going, Leah suddenly shares the most intimate secret[3] of her pregnancy with Shar, who, in turn, starts examining the latter's belly with her allegedly expert hands: "She walks back to Leah and presses her hands flat against Leah's stomach" (*NW* 11), predicting that it "[g]onna be a girl" (*NW* 11). Thus, she has not only secured access to Leah's home but is about to take possession of her body. Leah is on the point of losing her status as a hostess who has sovereignty over her own home. Shar's intrusive gesture points to the danger of the power relations of host and guest being turned around, to the risk of becoming the guest's hostage in Derrida's terms: "Anyone who encroaches on my 'at home,' […] on my power of hospitality, on my sovereignty as host, I start to regard as an undesirable foreigner, and virtually as an enemy. This other becomes a hostile subject, and I risk becoming their hostage." (2000a: 53/5).

Leah's risk of becoming a hostage is tangible in Shar's encroaching on her home. Shar asks inappropriate questions, such as "How come you ain't at work?" (*NW* 12), is unduly curious about the approaching Michel ("He local? […] African, though," *NW* 14), and ashes "her cigarette on the kitchen floor, though the door is open and the grass only a foot away" (*NW* 12-3) — a clear violation of her role as a guest. Leah has to leave the room, goes upstairs, and "sits on the floor and cries" (*NW* 13). After opening the front door for Shar to leave, "Leah is growing into a new meekness" (*NW* 13), while "[t]here is

[2] Amiel Houser (2017) reads *NW* as a critical response to the problematic connection between neoliberalism and the ethics of empathy. Part of her argumentation includes a discussion of Smith's use of Derrida's concept of hospitality as shedding light on the tensions between similarity and alterity, which can lead to different failures of empathy, as is demonstrated with Leah, Felix, and Natalie.
[3] Wells (2013) reads Smith's novel in the light of Derrida's 'secret' and mentions the connection between *NW*'s titles and his concept of hospitality without, however, analysing it.

a shade of pity in Shar's face" (*NW* 13), again indicating a reversal of roles between hostess and guest. After an unusual "God bless you […] Leah presses the money into Shar's hand with defiance" (*NW* 14). Shar has completely taken over and in the end does not even seem interested in the money any longer. This episode of their home being invaded serves Michel as a further argument for the necessity of moving house.

Even after "[t]he door closes" (*NW* 15) on Shar, she keeps haunting Leah, holding an enormous and lingering power over her: Leah is "[o]n the lookout for her, still, almost a month later. Expecting her out of this shop, from behind this corner, by that phone box." (*NW* 43). Working on the Fund Distribution Team, Leah sees herself as empathetic. When it comes to Shar, however, she seems torn between empathy and contempt. She almost pleads "Let me help, maybe I can … there are places that … that help" (*NW* 54), while on other occasions she shouts: "*Thief*. I want my money" (*NW* 41) or "resorts to a reflex emotion: contempt" (*NW* 54). This highly ambivalent relationship between Leah and Shar finds a terrifying culmination in the final chapter of the first part. When collecting her photos at the pharmacy and being given Shar's instead, Leah speaks of "an insane coincidence" (*NW* 95); she "is shouting, and people look at her like she is mad" (*NW* 95). This resonates with Derrida's reflections on compassion and substitution: "And this compassion is perhaps also the very test of substitution: to be one at the place of the other, the hostage and the hôte of the other." (2002: 387). The scene with the mixed-up photos is the epitome of such a substitution, which is also visible in their swapping of roles when Shar takes the reins and Leah is almost a hostage in her own home.

Natalie as a Hostess

Natalie's role as a hostess is of a completely different nature, namely that of entertaining guests. The newly acquired family home seems to be the perfect setting for this purpose. For Siccardi, the "house becomes a symbol of the deconstruction of [Natalie's] diasporic identity"; Natalie does not want to "have her place challenged by her racial or social origins" (2020: 218). After the key handover at the estate agency, she meets her mother, Marcia, and Leah at the front door to show them around and reveal her plans for interior decoration. Chapter 163, entitled "Architecture as destiny," focuses on the individual pieces of furniture and elegant centrepieces that tell "a story about their lives" (*NW* 272), the story of Natalie's successful class aspirations, and mark the house as unmistakably theirs, different from "past residents, present neighbours" (*NW* 272). Still, when Natalie is alone with her baby, the thought that they are like all the other inhabitants in the vicinity creeps over her. This conflict between feeling both extraordinary and common is typical of her identity, as is her ambivalence about Caldwell and the family she was born into. The constant transformation she undergoes is addressed by Stuart Hall in more general terms: "Cultural identity [Caribbean in

particular] is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being.' It belongs to the future as much as to the past." (2007: 131). Natalie's "various attitudes" are listed as "[d]aughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each required a different wardrobe. But […] she struggled to think what would be the most authentic." (*NW* 278). While Butler's use of drag expresses a certain ambivalence and "mocks […] the notion of a true gender identity" (2007 [1990]: 186), drag here extends beyond gender to other categories (Pérez Zapata 2014: 92) such as class or nationality, underlining the insubstantial and performative quality of Natalie's sense of self.

In the context of hospitality, Natalie — in Leah's perception — insists on her role as a hostess as "all meetings happen here, at Nat's house, […] this beautiful house!" (*NW* 63). Leah's status in Natalie's lofty house is no longer that of a family member like in their youth but that of an invited guest with the right to be entertained. Still, she turns out to be potentially unwelcome to the hostess. Here, her Shar experience is replicated as a topic for discussion on several occasions. When Leah and Michel are invited, she tells their hostess: "I keep bumping into her." (*NW* 60), but Natalie is distracted by her children. Leah is keenly aware of the tense atmosphere in the house and garden. This is why she quarrels with Michel over their role as guests and about the fact that he "can't see that we're boring them, and they wish they were free of us, of this old obligation" (*NW* 62). For Leah, "[i]t's humiliating being the cause of so much abject boredom in your oldest friend." (*NW* 63). Their relationship as (former) friends is precisely the reason why Leah is more critical of Natalie and her dominant and condescending role as a hostess than Michel is. Perceiving her as an absent-minded hostess, she wonders what she may be thinking about: "work [or] some glamorous extramarital passion? Or just wishing these people would leave." (*NW* 65). Leah's close observation of Natalie elicits negative feelings, which capture the hostility component in Derrida's concept of hospitality: "She looks up at her best friend, Natalie Blake, and hates her." (*NW* 60). Leah harbours hostile and angry feelings about the upwardly mobile and ambitious Natalie, who, in her eyes, has lost contact with her roots: "Leah watches Natalie stride over to her beautiful kitchen with her beautiful child. Everything behind those French doors is full and meaningful. […] How do you get to be so full […] of only meaningful things? Everything else Nat has somehow managed to cast off. She is an adult." (*NW* 65-6). Again, notions of home are related to notions of identity and growing up. Being an adult is denying or cutting off one's roots, according to Leah. This is why she herself refuses to grow up, why she wants to be forever eighteen and forever stay in Willesden. Despite her powerful role as a hostess, Natalie is in a defensive position when Leah implies that Natalie "done too good, maybe, to recall where she came from" and "lives just far enough to avoid" (*NW* 63) the old estate, which Leah passes every day. Leah blatantly accuses Natalie of denying her roots and mentally even frames her as a "coconut" (*NW* 63), i.e., black (or brown) on the outside, white on the inside — in other words, betraying her

Caribbean (working-class) background. Unexpectedly, Michel assists her by confronting their hostess with her name change from Keisha to Natalie. The latter is desperate to change the subject, to regain sovereignty over her house and self. Leah's views might lack objectivity as, formally speaking, this first part of the novel is dominated by her stream of consciousness intended to make us aware of the subjective nature of her description. Although she is indeed envious of Natalie and irritated by her ostentatious perfection, she is right about the superficial, inconsiderate, and complacent role that Natalie performs as a hostess. Leah's satirical depiction of "the grandeur of this Victorian house, the length of the garden" (*NW* 60) and "[t]his bourgeois existence!" (*NW* 67), is outdone by her direct speech. She sounds almost offensive when finding an excuse to leave the conversation: "I think Olive [the dog] needs a shit and I don't want her to do it on your perfect lawn." (*NW* 66). Still, Leah's reservations seem justified as is also evident from Frank's "mild panic of being left with his wife's strange friends" (*NW* 66), his "subtle form of humiliation" (*NW* 66) when reacting to Michel's modest steps into day trading, or the "corrective finger [he places] on [Leah's] shoulder" (*NW* 66). Here, the tacit complicity of the host with power is most visible and confirms Derrida's observations about the "collusion between traditional hospitality, hospitality in the ordinary sense, and power" (2000a: 55) and about the host defining the conditions of hospitality. Frank can mock his guests and even humiliate them although he — or his wife for that matter — chose to invite them.

The power hierarchies between host and guest are equally evident in Natalie and Frank's lavish dinner parties, which Leah and Michel regularly attend. Leah is again the guest who feels rather awkward at these "parties […], where she and Michel are invited to provide something like local colour" (*NW* 85). On these occasions, they lack the skills of polite conversation: "Neither of them knows what to say to barristers and bankers, to the occasional judge. […] They are shy. […] They have no gift for anecdote. They look down at their plates […], letting Natalie tell their stories for them." (*NW* 85). One such story is the Shar episode, "[o]ffered to the table for general dissection" (*NW* 85): "Lee, tell them about the girl. — Sorry? — […] Who came to the door. It's a really sad story. All right: I'll tell it." (*NW* 88). Natalie's patronising behaviour and Leah's lack of autonomy again reveal the power relations between hostess and guest.

Another topic at the party touches upon the guests' shared unwillingness to be permanent hosts to their ageing parents. Here, it is interesting to see how hospitality and its interaction of hosts and guests enables a debate about ideals of home and family. The dinner guests discuss their parents' expectations in a blend of irony and determination:

> Meanwhile parents have become old and ill at the very moment their children want to have their own babies. Many of the parents are immigrants — from Jamaica, from Ireland, from India, from China — and they can't understand why they have not yet been invited to live with their children, as is the custom in their

> countries. Technology is offered as a substitute for that impossible request. Stair lifts. Pacemakers. Hip replacements. Dialysis machines. But nothing satisfies them. They worked hard so we children might live like this. They 'literally' will not be happy until they've moved into our houses. They can never move into our houses. (*NW* 86)

In contrast to the power relations between Leah and Natalie as guest and hostess, hospitality here is rejected altogether, highlighting the power of the host to decide about offering it. There is general agreement that inviting one's parents to move into one's house is out of the question. Instead of the personal integration and emotional support they would expect to enjoy in their home countries, their parents are fobbed off with technological devices meant to make life easier.[4]

After dinner, the farewell scene at the door makes the imbalance of power between Natalie and Leah more than explicit again: "It's only when they have been kissed on both cheeks, when the heavy front door closes, when they are released once more into the night, that Leah and Michel come alive." (*NW* 88). This sounds like a liberation from a hypocritical invitation, from their irksome and paralysing role as guests. They feel uncomfortable and are glad to leave the party and its condescending and shallow hostess. Leah, again more sensitive than Michel, "complain[s] too much" on their way home so that "the delicate spirit level of their relation, their us-against-them, slips" (*NW* 88). Michel, socially more ambitious than Leah, accuses her of being "a snob, just in the other way" (*NW* 88). Sharing Natalie's class and status but not entertaining a lifelong friendship with her, the other guests seem to be content with their hostess, who does, of course, not embarrass them. Leah's particular vulnerability in this respect is due to their former friendship, the loss of which results not only from hospitality but also (subliminally) from the inevitable socioeconomic gap between them. This leads to her disappointment about Natalie's dismissive behaviour.

Natalie as a Guest

Towards the end of the novel, Natalie turns from hostess into guest herself. Frank's detection of her activity on dating websites during Carnival preparations on Saturday afternoon leads to an intense crisis: "[s]he walked out of the house with nothing [not even the keys] and closed the front door behind her" (*NW* 295) and "[w]alked quickly away from Queen's Park. She passed into where Willesden meets Kilburn. Went by Leah's place, then Caldwell." (*NW* 299). It seems as if ending this chapter of her life and

[4] Derrida addresses the impact of technology on home considering the telephone, the email, the fax, or the Internet as "machines that introduce ubiquitous disruption, and the rootlessness of place, the dis-location of the house, the infraction into the home" (2000a: 91). Just as he debates "the new teletechnologies and the way in which they affect the experience of place" (ibid.: 139), the dinner topic in the novel illustrates how technical innovations like lifts and medical facilities affect the notion of home and family.

giving up her role as a hostess reinforces the bond to her roots, manifest not only in her nocturnal ramblings through her old neighbourhood but also in the email account, KeishaNW@gmail.com, she has chosen for her sexual dates. At the Notting Hill Carnival party on Sunday, which both couples attend (with Natalie joining them later), the actual host is unknown to Leah, Michel, and a number of other guests: "The doorbell rings continuously. It would be easier just to leave the front door open but the host is anxious to see each guest on the video phone before they come in. People stream into the party like soldiers into triage." (*NW* 92). This strong military simile elucidates the powerful position of the host who performs a selective job: Not everybody can be invited to the party, especially in view of the fact that not only personal acquaintances are celebrating. The host controls the threshold and decides who enters.

It is conspicuous that, as a host in his own house, Frank can hardly cope with Leah and Michel, whereas he has kept encouraging them to join this friend of a friend's party for years. When they are all guests, when the host-guest hierarchy is gone, so is the power gap, and their relationship is less strained. This holds true for Leah as well, who "surprises herself: she has a great time" (*NW* 93). On the other hand, they might not only stand on an equal footing for both being guests but also for their shared vulnerability in the context of their problematic marital relationships. The drunken Leah observes the late arrival of Natalie (returned from her wandering) on the balcony and Frank in the doorway: "She sees the husband look at the wife, and the wife look at the husband. She sees no smile, no nod, no wave, no recognition, no communication, nothing at all." (*NW* 93). Their marital conflict remains unresolved in part 5, "Visitation," starting on Carnival Monday with Frank and Natalie as "[t]wo silent enemies" (*NW* 323), making arrangements for childcare. After Frank has left, Natalie ruminates about how her home, the house that was the setting for her role as a hostess, will reflect their changed relationship:

> She closed the front door and looked up at an expensive pile of bricks and mortar. Soon it would surely be divided, have all its contents boxed and redistributed, its occupants separated, resettled. Finally a new arrangement of optimistic souls, intent on 'building a life' for themselves, would cross its threshold. (*NW* 325)

This confirms how interchangeable the inhabitants of a house may become — a house that no longer is, or perhaps has never been, a home: "When a home is emptied, it becomes a shell, a mere house, and loses its homeyness." (Fox 2016: 77). The short fifth and final part of the novel makes ample use of the Derridean lexicon of hospitality, like "enemy," "threshold," "house," and "door," with the latter being the most conspicuous of all. Derrida claims that a door can exist only in a setting of conditional hospitality or invitation. Still, the fact that houses tend to have doors once again points to hospitality's aporia:

> […] for there to be hospitality, there must be a door. But if there is a door, there is no longer hospitality. There is no hospitable house. There is no house without doors and windows. But as soon as there are a door and windows, it means that someone has the key to them and consequently controls the conditions of hospitality. (2000b: 14)

After Natalie and her children have left the house and paid a visit to Poundland, they set out for Leah's place. On the bus, freedom pops up in Natalie's mind again while the landmarks of Willesden pass by through the window: "Whoever said these were fixed coordinates to which she had to be forever faithful? How could she play them false? Freedom was absolute and everywhere, constantly moving location." (*NW* 329). On entering Leah's home — for the first time in the novel and on Michel's request to persuade his wife to break her silence — she finds her friend "lying in the hammock in the garden" (*NW* 330) like in the novel's opening. Michel has found out about her secret strategy to stay childless just as Frank has about Natalie's secret dating. The consequences of Natalie's unfaithfulness (which she does not confide to Leah), first and foremost the loss of her role as a hostess, now act as a leveller in the women's power relation. Former hostess and guest seem to be on equal terms although their friendship lacks mutual trust. Their joint call to the police to report on Nathan's probable involvement in Felix's murder might signal the renewal of their friendship. Natalie feels reminded of the "calls the two good friends used to make to boys they liked, back in the day, […] two heads pressed together over a handset. 'I got something to tell you,' said Keisha Blake, disguising her voice with her voice." (*NW* 333). As the novel ends abruptly with these final words, it does not allow for a definite conclusion about the future of Natalie and Leah. The circular structure of the novel with the same subtitle for parts 1 and 5 would, on a formal level, corroborate the assumption of a return to their beginnings as Keisha and Leah. Hospitality has not worked out for them; it has not consolidated their friendship but seriously jeopardised it. Their friendship can only be restored when the power relations created by hospitality are broken down. This new relation can even become something like home to them, as Siccardi, who speaks of "the shelter of friendship" (2020: 223), suggests.[5] What finally emerges might be a de-spatialised notion of home independent of a physical place. Home is neither Willesden nor the women's respective dwellings, which are no (longer) sanctuaries due to their marital crises and their problematic roles as hostesses. Rather, for both women, home can be found in friendship as an emotional haven, with a sense of freedom being a promising alternative for Natalie. Ultimately, without necessarily being sceptical of NW as a place of home, Smith seems confident in personal bonds as well as individual autonomy as practices that may establish home(s).

[5] Siccardi (2020) explores Smith's female protagonists seeking shelter and home as transcultural identities by using Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of territorialisation and reterritorialisation.

Conclusion

When looked at through the lens of hospitality, home in *NW* emerges as a tricky and not altogether positive notion that is related to (mis)conceptions of identity and power. Hospitality destabilises idealised notions of home by exposing its uneasy facets. When Leah's flat becomes the site of unconditional hospitality, she acts like a naïve hostess almost turned hostage who cannot cope with her visitor, Shar, and keeps perceiving her as a threat to her identity. Her home, which was not an uncontroversial common space of well-being in the first place, is more than ever a contested site of dwelling for the couple. Natalie's posing as the perfect hostess, barrister, wife, and mother and the (ab)use of her home as a stage for the performance of her successful persona turn out to be a sham disguising her true self and its needs. Derrida's concept of hospitality proves appropriate for unpacking the women's complex identities and their diverging views of home. The inevitable power gap between hostess and guest in conditional and unconditional hospitality erodes their homes as settings of privacy and safety. Moreover, the practice of hospitality with Natalie as a hostess and Leah as a guest strains the women's friendship — beyond their gradual alienation looming in the wake of their conflicting trajectories as young adults — to the point of hostility. It is only when hospitality no longer obstructs their sense of belonging, when Natalie abandons her carefully fabricated role as an ideal hostess in an idealised home, that she and Leah can be on equal terms and that their friendship seems to be rekindled, turning into something like a home for both of them.

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