SHADES OF BLACK AND WHITE. ALTERITY, IDENTITY, MULTICULTURALITY IN CONTEMPORARY MEDIA AND LITERATURE

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Abstract: Zadie Smith, a prominent figure of contemporary British literature in her 2013 novel, NV offers a metaphorical mapping of 21 century London. Through the life of the protagonists coming from different social, ethnical, racial backgrounds she describes Willesden, a district of a multicultural city.
In my essay I will present the different ways alterity and identity (cultural, racial etc.) are constructed and deconstructed using the earlier novels of the author, White Teeth and On beauty as well. In the multicultural context of metroplitan London one's identity is permanently changing, the conflict with the Other and the need for cooperation leeds to a heterogenous identity in which the neighbourhood, the place one is living, and the Joycean use of language becomes a force of identity forming.

Keywords: alterity, identity, multicultural, urban

1. White Teeth

"She's young, black, British – and the first publishing sensation of the millennium." The Guardian presented the twenty-four year old Zadie Smith, freshly graduated from Cambridge, with this title on January 16, 2000. The journalistic title is a genuinely good summary of the reality, as the then-forthcoming debut novel *White Teeth* (published in 2000) was indeed one of the great sensations of the new millennium's British literature.

The career start of Zadie Smith is every young writer's dream: her first (practically unwritten) novel was bought at auction by the Hamish Hamilton publishing house in 1997, based on a narrow 80 page fragment, allegedly for a quite high price. The novel, ample as it is, to some extent reminiscent of Salman Rushdie regarding its atmosphere, capturing at the same time the present-day multicultural, multiracial and linguistically diverse London, lived up to the expectations. The story of the nearly fifty-year-long friendship of Archie, the working man from London, and Samad Iqbal, the Muslim of Bengali origins, deals with the formation of inevitably given and consciously chosen identities.

The leitmotif of "white teeth" represents a cohesive force in the story: irrespectively of the characters' skin colour, religion, country of origin and the values they embrace, their teeth have the same white shine. They keep drawing attention to the fact that the human emotions (love, friendship, anger, jealousy, etc.) that move certain characters are much more powerful than their (racial, religious, etc.) attributes. To the fact that one cannot get to know a person based on his/her belonging to a certain group, moreover, unreflectively adopting the stereotypes specific to a particular group expressly leads astray. If we did so, we would end up in a situation similar to that of the worthy Samad Iqbal who – disillusioned with western society – sends Magid, the smarter and more gifted one of his ten year old twin sons back to Bangladesh so that he would grow up among relatives passing over the spirit of Islamic

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teachings, while Millat, the restless eternal troublemaker stays in London. A decade later, when done with the juvenile unquietness, packs and chasing girls, Millat participates in a demonstration against Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* as a member of a conservative Islamic fundamentalist organization, while Magid, to his father's despair, returns to London as an atheist biologist, and he is "more English than the English".

White Teeth is the novel of assimilation and identities in formation, written with slightly comical and ironic overtones. While the parents' generation thinks that their different nature manifested in contrast to the dominant white culture is an inevitable attribute, their children fight it at first. "What was wrong with all these children, what had gone wrong with these first descendents of the great ocean-crossing experiment?" – asks the novel. (Smith, 2000, 218.) The half Jamaican, half British girl dreams of having a white body and smooth straight hair, while the son of Bengali parents rejects his parents' religion. However, by the end of the novel, the members of the second generation realize that neither the unreflective acceptance of traditions, nor the assimilation to the white culture would lead to success, thus they themselves must decide on which aspects of the different (inherited, receptive, desired, etc.) cultures they embrace. At the same time, there is a greater distance between the deliberately formed, "customized" identities, than between the traditional identities that are inherited and considered to be unquestionable. Archie and Samad manage to stay friends for a lifetime even though the rapprochements of their families, value systems and cultures often fail. Among the members of the new generation there is an insuperable, consciously chosen distance connected to their innermost values.

2. New British literature

White Teeth naturally fit into the range that in the 50s and 60s was still called „black British" literature, not differentiating between British Caribbean, British Asian, or British African authors and subjects. Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul were primarily the reason why the culture of immigrants received more and more attention and appreciation through the works and personalities of immigrant authors from different South Asian countries. Among the authors and works that fall into this category Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of the Suburbia* (1990) or *My beautiful Launderette* (1985), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and Nadeem Aslam's *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) can be mentioned, of course, without striving for completeness. It should be added that, besides redefining the concept of Britishness, these works focus on several aspects of alterity: homosexuality in Kureishi's works, the role of women in Monica Ali's works or the working class in Aslam's works emphatically appear as such aspects.

The term "black Britishness" is inherently complicated, as Jim Pines states that such an unified sense of cultural identity can only be achieved when the „black" element in the equation has been secured. (Pines, 2001, 61.)

"Britishness" itself is a term with constantly changing content undergoing carious changes through the decades of the 20th century. After the experience of two Word Wars that a „New World Order" shall come, in which all the world would follow America and the West into the „end of History" characterized by hegemony of liberalism and market capitalism (Fukuyama 1993), at the beginnings of the 21st century became ethnocentric fantasies.

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According to David Morley and Kevin Robins „as western culture comes to be recognized as but one particular form of modernity, rather than some universal template for humankind, and as Britain attempts to adapt to its sense of displacement from the centre of the world stage – and at the same time, tries to come to terms with its own ethnic and cultural complexity – a whole new scenario begins to emerge." (Morley, Robins, 2001, 3.)

This new scenario manifests itself in the construction of cultural memories, as much of the western multicultural diversity goes back to previous colonial sway, causing an "asymetrical relation to an apparently shared history" (Sharratt, 2001, 314), as each ex.colony' s relation to the global history was connected to the metropolitan power but not necessarily shared in any specific way with those other histories.

At the end of the 1980-s we can notice a shift of emphasis away from the dominant discourses of black/immigrant experience which tended to identify this experience with social problems towards a perspective which presents instead the way first and second generation black people experienced settlement in the United Kingdom and how the second generation young black people were not accepted as British, despite the fact that they were born in Britain.

This emphasis on the immerse differences between the historical, social and cultural experiences of black people also marks the end of what Stuart Hall called „the innocent notion of the essential black subject.". (Hall, 1989.)

Zadie Smith's creations can be seamlessly integrated into this range of works, as her later novels (*The Autograph Man*, 2002; *On Beauty*, 2005) capture the same colourful, culturally and linguistically diverse, socially multilayered and, at the same time, ever-evolving "multicultural" metropolitan world. However, perhaps in contrast to the aforementioned authors (Kureishi, Ali or Aslam) , she emphatically seeks dialogue with the classical, modernist English literary traditions at the level of language. *On Beauty*, for example, is a tribute to E. M. Forster's novel, *Howard's End*.

"It should be obvious from the first line that this is a novel inspired by a love of E. M. Forster, to whom all my fiction is indebted, one way or the other. This time I wanted to repay the debt with *hommage*" – says Smith in the preface of her novel. (Smith, 2005.7.) *On Beauty* does not depict the London known from her previous works anymore; instead it captures Boston's academic world through the family histories that reflect and reformulate the plot of the aforementioned Forster novel. The pretentious liberal professor of West Indian origin, Howard Belsey from Boston and Sir Montague Kipps, the conservative and homophobic Christian from London are academic adversaries, both being recognized Rembrandt-experts. Just like in Forster's work, the two families come into contact through love affairs and friendships during the Kipps family's stay in Boston. The conflict of their different value systems and the family members' own, personally motivated actions inevitably affect both families. In addition to painting, music plays an important identity-forming role in the novel. The youngest Belsey child tries to build his own black identity by fraternizing with Haitian rappers and denying his middle-class intellectual background. For his sister, rap is a project of career-building and love; to her, it is a matter of prestige to be included into the circles of an acclaimed poetess, a group with whom she attends slam-poetry evenings where she falls in love with Carl, the suburban rapper, who is seen by her as the way towards music/poetry, self-expression and (an eventually failed) advancement.

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Thus, the novel makes many references to art and beauty, however, we can constantly feel the analytical rigidness of the perspective. The characters (especially the two opposing professors) know much about the aesthetic approach of the concept of beauty, but they are less familiar with its manifestations in everyday life. What happens around them – adolescents in search of their identities, marriages collapsing, deadly diseases, a series of social injustices – is anything but beautiful, though Smith describes these occurrences in a balanced calm tone, setting off comic scenes, not denying us humorous remarks either.

In her new 2012 novel, *NW*, Zadie Smith returns to the location already known from *White Teeth*: the London district Willesden.

With a postal code in its title, the London novel *NW* is an urban novel, although it would be more appropriate to call it an urban district novel, the novel of a micro-world, as to the characters nothing is significant but what happens in their immediate environment, the rest of London being alien, practically unknown and completely uninteresting to them.

While in Zadie Smith's earlier novels self-definition was the concern of adolescent characters, here we come across the identity crisis of characters in their thirties. The four main characters of the novel, Leah Hanwell, Keisha/Natalie Blake, Felix Cooper and Nathan Boggle grew up in the same suburban residential area, and the common physical space of their interconnected and occasionally intersected life paths is Caldwell. The white, Irish-born Leah is an underpaid social worker; her childhood friend, Keisha/Natalie is a lawyer due to her diligence and perseverance; Felix is an unsuccessful film director and former drug addict who is trying to find a new foundation to his failed life; and finally, Nathan, once the girls' favourite, is a homeless drug addict pimp in the residential district of their childhood.

Thus, *NW* is an urban novel in terms of the "endangered species" (as it is also shown by the predominantly black main characters). This is what one of the characters, Frank De Angelis, the son of a Caribbean railway employee and a rich Italian woman, calls himself (and other blacks in a similar position). He feels like they are the target of a well-meaning social plan of Britain, a plan that aims at virtually cancelling out racial identities using the disguise of "globalism" and "multiculturalism".

The process of consciously constructing identities, the constant comparisons with the Other/others plays an important role throughout the novel. Below I examine the processes of identity formation from two perspectives: first from the point of view of racial identity and – strongly related to it – gender identity, then by reflecting upon the identity forming role of the location.

3. Questions of racial/gender identity

"We have a very effective diversity scheme here – said Dr. Singh primly and turned to speak to the blonde girl on her left." (Smith, 2012,191.)

The above cited conversation takes place at an academic event, in an atmosphere set by youth and professionalism, which is not only about equality, equal opportunities, but more than that, as the character Natalie Blake puts it, it is "friendship". Natalie's original name is Keisha, but she changes her name "bearing black associations" as soon as she leaves the suburban residential district she grew up in to become a college student. The post-colonial era's great struggles for equality are over (a suggestive indication of this is the fact that one of the students is dressed as Frantz Fanon at a costume party), and apparently full equality has

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been reached. However, this idyllic image turns out to be the illusion of a twenty-year-old searching for her place in the world (and occasionally consuming party-drugs).

"When Natalie now thought of adult life (she hardly ever thought of it), she envisioned a long corridor, off which opened many rooms – each with a friend in it – a communal kitchen, a single gigantic bed in which all would sleep and screw, a world governed by the principles of friendship. For how can you oppress a friend? How can you cheat on a friend? How can you ask a friend to suffer while you thrive? In this simple way - without marches and slogans, without politics, without any of the mess you get ripping paving stones out of the ground - the revolution had arrived. (…) I will be a lawyer and you will be a doctor and he will be a teacher and she will be a banker and we will be artists and they will be soldiers, and I will be the first black woman and you will be the first Arab and she will be the first Chinese and everyone will be friends, everyone will understand each other." (Smith, 2012, 187.)

Most of the characters in the novel are black, among the main characters only the weak and vulnerable Leah is white. She is the one who as a child nearly drowns in the pool and gets grabbed by her red tresses and pulled out by Keisha (this is how their friendship begins); she is the gullible good-hearted person who is deceived and taken advantage of in the first part, and who, by the end of the novel, gets in an almost catatonic state, her friend being called for help again. In contrast, Keisha/Natalie is already single-minded as a child, "she builds herself up", she graduates law school and thereby breaks out from the environment she was born into and which the others (her siblings, former classmates, etc.) were unable to escape from.

The fracture lines, the differences are not so much formed based on race or skin colour, as they develop based on social classes.

Leah is well aware of the fact that as compared to her college degree (she studied philosophy, that is "learning how to die") she works as an underpaid social worker, and she considers her situation of being the only white employee at her workplace somewhat uncomfortable. In this context, white skin is associated with weakness and lesser physical attractiveness. At the end of the workday "in the corridor the women spill out of every room, into the heat, cocoa buttered, ready for a warm night out on the Edgware Road. From St. Kitts, Trinidad, Barbados, Grenada, Jamaica, India, Pakistan, in their forties, fifties, sixties, and yet busts and butts and shiny legs and arms still open to the sexiness of an early summer in a manner that the women of Leah's family can never be. For them the sun is fatal. So red, so pale. Leah is wearing long white linen everything. Looks like a minor saint" (Smith, 2012, 32.)

The differences between social classes are not necessarily articulated based on skin colour in the turn-of-the-century metropolis, however they strongly determine the characters' judgements on themselves and others. The role of family background in identity formation played an important role in Smith's previous novels, as well; here, it becomes clear especially in the third part of the novel focusing on Keisha/Natalie. It is at the Hanwells where Keisha first sees tea served on a tray and listens to a public radio show, as at home she was used to tea poured directly into the mug and commercial radio shows. Keisha/Natalie, having seceded from her environment through her extraordinary sense of purpose, even as an adult has to constantly face the seemingly minor differences which are nevertheless able to determine one's worldview and outlook on life. Her university of choice was once determined based on

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the travel costs of the preliminary examination; then as an adult the only thing indicating her "ghetto" upbringing is the fact that she eats the dubious-looking cheap food bought from street vendors without hesitation. As an adult woman she realizes that she "had completely forgotten what it was like to be poor. It was a language she'd stopped being able to speak, or even understand." (Smith, 2012, 243.)

It seems that the question of identity as formulated through its racial aspect is much more powerful in the case of Keisha/Natalie, who aspires to rise, than in the case of her later husband, the half-caste Frank De Angelis, who – through his mother – belongs to the Italian upper middle class. On their first night spent together, Natalie feels extremely tense and strange in Frank's bourgeois home, and she is glad to discover James Baldwin's book, *The Fire Next Time*. The American social critic's book on the relation between races played an important role in the 60s, primarily in the movement for black emancipation in the United States. Natalie's wondering/hopeful question whether he has read the book is casually answered by Frank: „I think he knew my grandmother in Paris." (Smith, 2012,193.)

The development of her lawyer career, forgetting the "language of poverty", however, does not happen smoothly. From the perspective of the socially less successful Leah or the other former schoolmates who perform physical work or have even become homeless, Natalie's life is a success story. However, Zadie Smith emphasizes the specific difficulties this character has to go through as a black woman, in two scenes. One of these is the story of the "math genius" Michelle Holland, who had an even worse background than Natalie (with her parents in prison, and with the complete lack of a religious culture or the warmth and support of a familiar neighbourhood), and who drops out of college in her last year without any rational explanation.

"Avoid ghetto work" – an older colleague advises Natalie, the young lawyer. "When I first started appearing before a judge, I kept being reprimanded from the bench. I was losing my cases and I couldn't understand why. Then I realized the following: when some floppy-haired chap from Surrey stands before these judges, all his passionate arguments read as 'pure advocacy.' He and the Judge recognize each other. They are understood by each other. Very likely went to the same school. But Whaley's passion, or mine, or yours, reads as 'aggression.' To the judge. This is his house and you are an interloper within it. And let me tell you, with a woman it's worse: 'Aggressive hysteria.' The first lesson is: turn yourself down. One notch. Two." (Smith, 2012, 210.)

4. Location as an identity-constructing force

"Leah is as faithful in her allegiance to this two-mile square of the city as other people are to their families, or their countries. She knows the way people speak around here, that *fuckin*, around here, is only a rhythm in a sentence." (Smith, 2012, 52)

Willesden appears in the novel as Dublin in James Joyce's *Ulysses* or London in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. This similarity is not a coincidence; as her previous novel, *On Beauty* was written in the spirit of E.M. Forster, here, these two outstanding works of modern literature stood as examples. The motif of "human life compressed into a single day" favoured by modernism also appears in the second part of *NW* which is an account of Felix's one day, a day that begins vigorously, with the hope of change, and ends with the pointless

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death of the character. (He is robbed, then gets stabbed on the street. Additionally, this happens in the exact neighbourhood where he was born and where he spent his childhood, the neighbourhood he has held on to.)

Whether they spend their thirties there, or they try to avoid it, the residential district of Caldwell determines each protagonist's life. If there is beauty in this world, then it lies in its vibrant diversity and its receptive openness. At first sight, it is a typical urban residential district: "five blocks connected by walkways and bridges and staircases, and lifts that were to be avoided almost as soon as they were built".

The location has a strong appeal to the characters: Leah is unable to leave it, while Natalie automatically starts walking towards the streets known from her childhood when trying to walk away from her collapsing marriage, her problems. The professional/personal crisis that suddenly questions everything she has achieved and dissolves her identity perceived as coherent up till then, forces her to return to the origins and try to rebuild this identity by, in a way, collecting strength from the power of this location.

"Walking down Kilburn High Road Natalie Blake had a strong desire to slip into the lives of other people. It was hard to see how this desire could be practicably satisfied or what, if anything, it really meant. 'Slip into' is an imprecise thought. Follow the Somali kid home? Sit with the old Russian lady at the bus stop outside Poundland? Join the Ukrainian gangster at his table in the cake shop? Listening was not enough. Natalie Blake wanted to know people. To be intimately involved with them." (Smith, 2012, 225.)

The characters' behaviour is lead by their loyalty to this location, to the neighbourhood. This is what makes Leah let herself be fooled in the opening chapter; this is what Natalie is unable to break away from, when – ignoring her superiors' advice – she takes cases pro bono for her old acquaintances; the specific language of this world is captured when Felix visits her father; and this is the environment where Nathan, the drug addict and former womanizer disappears after ending up on the periphery of society.

Caldwell is home to a multiracial, multicultural community with a relatively uniform economic status, a community whose members practically all know each other, as members of isolated communities do.

Out of the set of characters facing different problems living in an urban "collective solitude", the author presents the friendship of Leah and Natalie as one reminiscent of a gay relationship. The two women are not only connected by their current problems. (Neither of them gets along with their mother, they both find their jobs, marriages and their attitudes towards motherhood to be problematic. Leah does not want children, but she is afraid to confess it to her husband, while Natalie cannot handle her children, they tire and annoy her.) They do not talk about them. Their childhood and the memories they share of Willesden and Caldwell are the things through which they are able to capture everything that is important to them. While reading the novel, we constantly feel the magic of names: names of streets, buildings, institutions and stores are listed. "Kennedy Fried Chicken. Polish Bar and Pool. Euphoria Massage. Glad we took the scenic route. This can't still be Willesden. Feels like we're in Neasden already" (Smith, 2012,59.) – says Natalie with a sigh while carrying her children around on a trip.

In one of the most powerful scenes of the novel, the two women come across a hidden, old little church in the neighbourhood they thought they knew perfectly. The statue of Virgin

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Mary in Willesden becomes the symbol of home and childhood to them, the symbol of themselves, acceptable without fractures and question marks.

"How have you lived your whole life in these streets and never known me? How long did you think you could avoid me? (...) Don't you know that I have been here as long as people cried out for help? (...) I am older than this place! Older even than the faith that takes my name in vain! Spirit of these beech woods and phone boxes, hedgerows and lamp posts, freshwater springs and tube stations, ancient yews and one-stop-shops, grazing land and 3D multiplexes. (...) Could things have been differently arranged, in a different order, in a different place?" (Smith, 2012, 64.)

The metropolitan London is an obvious choice to project in space the existential questions of multicultural, post national cultures. According Kevin Robins, London has always been left out of discussions on British national culture and identity as if not genuinely "British". The city is the "… hub for all the global flows that are now profoundly complicating our established models of cultural coherence and order. London is where the processes of global change that now appear to be subverting the integrity of the nation have their most intense and dynamic existence. " (Robins, 2001, 486.)

The metropolitan London becoming almost a fictional character in Zadies Smith' NW underlines that „urban cultures and identities are more provisional, more transitory and negotiable – less constraining and less sustained – than national ones." (Robins, 2001, 491.)

5. Multikulti light?

Instead of a large overall multicultural diversity or structures based on cultural self-expression, Smith appears to emphasize the principles of small communities, personal decisions and "community cohesion". Beginning from the 2000s, spreading awareness of "community cohesion" has played an increasingly important role in British politics, in contrast to the principle of multiculturalism, which is hard to define and hard to put into practice.

Critics have repeatedly held against Smith's novels that they have some sort of didactic feature, nevertheless, her works often present a light and digestible version of multiculturalism ("multiculty light") with a tendency of sweeping problems under the rug.

In turn, multiculturalism is a concept hard to define: it can be used descriptively as an attempt to describe cultural diversity, but it can also be used normatively/prescriptively as referring to a set of ideologies and measures promoting diversity. In this sense, a society is multicultural if it is "at ease with the rich tapestry of human life and the desire amongst people to express their own identity in the manner they see fit." (Bloor, 2010)

Zadie Smith' daring debut novel, *White Teeth* can be interpreted as a literary attempt to embrace the "Cool Britannia"-project launched by the New Labour after the election of Tony Blair in 1997. Before the turn of the millennium " from the Spice Girls to British Airways (…) British industries and institutions alike seemed interested in actively participating in the production of new national identities. In its own way, this too was a response to not only to a fracture in the connection between unspoken normative whiteness and British nationality, but also to a fracture in the assumed relationship between ethnicity and cultural identity. The gates were suddenly open to a broad and lively project of identity formation. " (Turner, 2003, 212.)

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However problems that remained unspoken and unsolved persist, and a decade later *NW* can be interpreted as an attempt of painful awakening from the dream of "Cool Britannia", and an attempt to capture the formation of fragmented identity.

NW is free from monolithically capturing the complicated concept of multiculturalism, say, at least due to the modernist stream of consciousness technique used by the author. We see the individual and his/her momentary impressions and feelings; there is no omniscient narrator who could summarize, interpret or control the process of reading.

Perhaps this is why the most powerful parts of the novel are the scenes – partly reminiscent of Joyce and partly of Virginia Woolf – where a preoccupied character wanders the streets of north-west London, instead of the second chapter which makes up one third of the novel with its 184 parts (each with a title), where the process of Keisha becoming Natalie is described in a distant manner.

We get a kaleidoscope-like image of the world made up of fragments like colours, smells, names and impressions. The characters do not interpret this world as being multicultural, they just experience it and its diversity while focusing on their personal problems and feelings.

They perceive a path from A to B as follows:

"Sweet stink of the hookah, couscous, kebab, exhaust fumes of a bus deadlock. 98, 16,32, standing room only - quicker to walk. Escapees from St. Mary's, Paddington: expectant father smoking, old lady wheeling herself in a wheelchair smoking, die-hard holding urine sack, blood sack, smoking. (…) Polish paper, Turkish paper, Arabic, Irish, French, Russian, Spanish, News of the World. Unlock your (stolen) phone, buy a battery pack, a lighter pack, a perfume pack, sunglasses, three for a fiver, a life-size porcelain tiger, gold taps." (Smith, 2012, 34.)

The multiculturalism-image of *White Teeth* was nuanced by some optimism, a belief that cultural differences can be preserved without conflict based on common interests and some sort of natural benevolence. *On beauty* revealed that identities and differences appear much more pronouncedly at the boundaries of social classes than related to racial differences. *NW* takes on the basic ideas of both books, but it assumes human personality to be too complex to be describable in terms of race, culture or social class. Despite the adult characters' rather nostalgic attachment to the scenes of their childhood, especially during the critical periods of their lives, the novel itself suggests with some kind of tired, nostalgia-rejecting maturity: "maybe it doesn't matter that life never blossomed into something larger than itself." (Smith, 2012, 132.)

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