Emplaced sounding: voice, identity and place in Zadie Smith’s NW

Alexandra Halligey

Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study, University of Johannesburg with Supervision from the SARCHI Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture, South Africa

Abstract

Through a close reading of Zadie Smith’s portrayal of the character Keisha/Natalie’s voice and relationship to voice in the novel NW, this article considers how people’s speaking, sounding voices are both emplaced (coming from, made by place) and are key place-making acts. This paper argues for how analysing sound in literature might serve sonic geographic interest in the ‘whole’ voice, with all sound’s representational and more-than representational elements. Through its fictional and poetic expressivity the literary offers propositional perspectives on experiences of sound and its material and affectual role in our world making. From this departure point, the paper proceeds to consider the entangled issues of place and identity politics in NW, motivating that a reading or ‘listening’ in terms of voice might offer valuable insights into these concerns. Attending to three moments in NW centred around the character Keisha/Natalie, the paper argues for how human’s speaking voices might enact and contain the complex difficulties in the co-construction of place and personal identity.

Keywords

identity, literary urban studies, place-making, sound geographies, voice

Corresponding author:
Alexandra Halligey, South African National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences Postdoctoral Research Fellow with the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study, University of Johannesburg with Supervision from the SARCHI Chair in South African Art and Visual Culture, 1 Tolip Street, Westdene, Auckland Park 2092, South Africa. Email: alexhalligey@gmail.com
These direct speech quotes and descriptions of speaking are some of the ways in which Zadie Smith represents voice to establish character and place in the novel *NW*, evoking how with our voices we are always maintaining and becoming ourselves in relation to our environment and impacting on our environment with our sound. In spite of their ephemerality, our voices carry histories of family, community and place, as well as our personal biographies, to create an overall distinct consistency that can be read in *NW*, unpacking how Smith’s use of voice in relation to the character of Kiesha/Natalie might speak into these concerns.

The first section of this paper provides a discussion of scholarly discourse on sound, voice in particular, building into a motivation for using literary representations of voice as suitable case studies for contributing to sonic geographies. The second section considers Smith’s writing generally in terms of place, voice and personal identities, followed by a review of existing literary criticism of *NW* focused on identity politics. The final section gives a close-reading of three moments in the novel in terms of voice and centred on the character Keisha/Natalie.

**Sound and voice**

There has been considerable work in sonic geographies to pay attention to voice beyond the content, experiences and opinions that people speak or ‘give voice’ and beyond the more metaphoric sense of voice as a personal style, the idiosyncratic idiom in which a particular person or group of people might speak. These sonic geographers advocate for including all that is extra-linguistic in considerations of the geographical effects of human vocality: pitch, pace, volume, phatic responses, sighs, gasps, yawns, pauses, accents and the pure sonority of the words we speak, whatever their signification in language.5

Championing taking into account what we might think of as ‘the whole voice’, stems from sonic geographies’ investment in sound for its material, relational qualities. Sonic geographers consider how both sound’s significations (what it represents) and all in it that is material and affectual interacts with others’ ears, whole bodies, voices, objects, environments.6 Sonic geographies scholarly foundations from recent decades are non- or more-than-representational theory, with Nigel Thrift as a leading geographic thinker in this regard,7 but also work like Doreen Massey’s for thinking through space as temporally inflected and formed through ongoing, relational actions over time.8 Vital materialism, actor network theory and affect studies all also have key theoretical offerings which support a sonic geographic investment in the material, the relational and the affectual and which sonic geographies in turn feedback into. Studies of sound inform thinking about affect, the vitality in all that is beyond the human and how we understand our worlds as shaped through relational interaction.

In a lineage of critical theoretical discourse about humans and space, sound in sonic geographies is also posited as a way of extending Lefebvre’s concept of rhythmanalysis to understand how space is produced through interrelating daily actions, where sounding is one of the actions.9 Focus on voice in particular serves as an extension of Bhaktin’s theorising around the dialogic. The contemporary focus on materiality and affect emphasises all in Bhaktin’s thinking that is not only a dialogue of meanings, but also of physical and affectual interactions.10 More recently in this line of critical thinking which contemporary sonic geographers build on practically and theoretically, are Mladen Dolar’s11 and Jean-Luc Nancy’s12 philosophical explorations of speaking and hearing or listening.

Contemporary sonic geographer, Anne Kanngieser, however highlights a certain paradox in engagements with sound invested in the more-than-representational:
How sound is translated and interpreted, how it mediates, through oral, written, and other forms of language, is contested.13 Engaging critically with the materiality of sound (talking about it, writing about it, notating it) is still a representational mediation of that which is ‘non-representable’. Sonic geographic scholarship in recent years has done much to both bridge and highlight the gap between engaging critically with sound and its raw material form. Focusing here on literature concerned with voice: scholars have included audiorecordings as companions to written articles and incorporated graphic and notational representations alongside written description and analysis.14 Scholars have returned to archived audio recording from research projects to recuperate the material voices of respondents more fully.15 They have also continued to develop theoretical lenses for attending more closely to the whole voice in research16 and to develop methods for correlating the spatial, bodily and affectual/emotional information voice conveys.17

This paper makes something of a seemingly counterintuitive move in turning to the written form of the novel to consider the role of voice, in its whole form, in the relationship between humans and place. Yet as Keld Buciek argues literature is both expressive of affect as well as communicating ‘epistemological’ insights, which positions it as a useful resource for attending to sound more fully.18 Buciek’s argument for using literature as sonic geographic case study is supported more generally by the material turn in literary theory and its use in human geography. The material turn in literary theory enables considerations of how literature contributes to our geographies not only through real world actions and material products (books, book shops, publishing houses etc.), but also in how literature’s imaginative worlds both offer insights into everyday realities and are themselves contributing to those realities.19 I engage NW in terms of the second two points: how the novel provides insights into the role of voice in place-making and personal identity in the north west London and through this is itself a cultural practice contributing to the vocal specificity of north west London.

My sense is that turning to literary representations of sound, and in this case of voice in particular, serves a number of methodological investments in sonic geography. Kanngieser’s point above about translation comes from her ‘Five Propositions for Sound’, which stands out as a current lodestar for working with sound for social, political and ecological justice. I use her propositions here to detail how I see the value in ‘listening’ to sound in literature. Kanngieser marks the ‘polyphony’ of sound and how attending to the diversity and coexistence of multiple sounds might serve as a way in to negotiating the complexity of difference and relationality towards a commons (of land, water, air, but also social systems and resources) for greater equality.20 She also speaks of listening to sound in service of a ‘slower, more careful and reflective. . .activism’ to become aware of the ‘less visible processes’ in the world.21 In literature multiple voices are both contained and highlighted. Their individuality is marked, their simultaneity and relationality mapped through how they are described in words. In literature the processes of the world are slowed down for consideration through description, metaphor, analysis, imagery, and no less when it comes to processes of sound. If we want to know more about how sound is made, heard, listened to, how it resonates through space and things, how it is physical, affectual and significant, then literature serves as a creative form which experiments with expressing how sound might be experienced and understood in all these ways.

To return to Kanngieser’s translation point, she suggests that the gap between actual sound and its translation in representational form is so evident it invites a healthy skepticism. Representations and interpretations of sound are less likely to be conflated with absolute truths about sound, encouraging a closer listening to actual sound which in turn opens up a listening to what is being sounded metaphorically in many different paradigms for interpreting our world ‘geophilosophically’.22 I
would argue that the literary, as artistic form playing explicitly with fictionality, presents a similarly self-aware gap between the material world and its textual representation. The literary then creates a space for self-aware, slowed down and polyphonic consideration of sounds in ways that engage both with meaning and affectual, sensual experience. Giving close critical attention to how sound is represented in literary forms furthers the workshop initiated by the literary of the ways in which sound operates in the world.

As the quotes at the beginning of this paper evoke, Smith gives considerable attention to the sonority of voice in *NW*, as well as the content of what is spoken, as part of the whatness she is exploring of north west London, and in the context of London more broadly. It is this exploration of voice in *NW* that I am interested in engaging in further dialogue and which the following section frames through an overview of the novel and of Smith’s concerns with place and voice.

**Place, voice, Smith and NW**

Kanngieser, drawing on language from Bakhtin, writes that ‘the dialogic processes of utterances may enact different collective and public spaces’. 23 This paper is concerned not only with how voice is part of spatial construction, but how it is key to place, identifiable moments (long, ever-morphing moments) of space, what Massey defines as: ‘spatio-temporal’ events. 24 Place, as Tim Cresswell, suggests is ‘about attachments and connections’, ‘a rich and complicated interplay of people and the environment’. 25 Across her oeuvre 26 Zadie Smith is concerned, often explicitly, sometimes implicitly, with place in just this sense. We watch her characters move through their lives with deep attachments and knowledges of places, real (*White Teeth*) and fictional (the suburb of Mountjoy in *The Autograph Man*), within London (*White Teeth; The Autograph Man; NW; Swing Time*), places within other cities and places outside of cities in relation to places within cities (*On Beauty; Swing Time*). Smith gets into the specificities of place that make them complex, unsettling, but also that make them distinctive, attractive. We see characters, people and, in her non-fiction writing, 27 Smith herself identify with and become identified through relationships to place. Smith offers a striking literary contribution to how we think through geographic concerns of place as they connect to the intersections of urbanity, mobilities, identity politics and the everyday practices of place-making.

Smith is also concerned with voice. She writes about the difficult ethical line of representing ‘the other’ in fiction, of ‘presuming’ to construct a voice, in the sense of an identity, an idiom, a personality, not your own. 28 Speaking from her own vocal journey, considering Barack Obama’s and analysing Bernard Shaw’s Eliza Doolittle character, Smith also speaks/writes about the difficult ethical line of how your voice sounds if you range between accents and vocalized idiomatic expressions which ‘place’ you differently racially, ethnically, in education and class. 29 In both these reflections on voice – writing fictional ‘voices’ of others, speaking in differently accented voices – Smith comes out on the side of valorising a certain shape-shifting in fiction writing and sounded voice. These conclusions are built through careful, self-reflexive arguments for variation in voice as not inauthentic, but rather speaking to the layered political complexity of our relationality in the world, such as it is with its historically informed and ongoingly enacted, intersectional differences and inequalities.

In *NW* I see these concerns of place, personal identity and voice in its spoken, sounded, accented, linguistic and extra-linguistic, ‘whole’ form, as usefully informing each other. 30 The novel tells the lives of two childhood friends, Keisha/Natalie Blake and Leah Hanwell, who grow up on a council estate in North West London and continue to live in the ‘NW’ postcode through their adult lives. The two make career choices, partner choices, choices to have or not have children, choices about where to live, about who to make friends with and keep being friends with, even choices about their
names. In her late teens Keisha changes her name to Natalie along a path of studiousness and upward social mobility that sees her becoming a successful lawyer. The novel continues to find both Keisha/Natalie and Leah in the middle of trying to come to terms with these decisions and with their identities on the basis of their histories (ancestral, familial, personal), inflected as they are through sociopolitical, socioeconomic, sociocultural dynamics. The two characters are beset with doubts about their actions and the authenticity of what finally compels them to choose one thing over another. Yet continuing to live in the ‘NW’ postcode is a choice both characters make with an active, personal desire. As the title of the book itself suggests, the geographic area of NW and all that it contains of ‘place’ is a containment too for Keisha/Natalie and Leah with their acts and crises of self-making, contingent as they are on relational dynamics with other people, things, objects, landscapes, histories.

In a journey that seems to take some inspiration for its fiction from Smith’s own vocal transformation, how Keisha speaks changes too as she becomes Natalie, and continues to become Natalie in all sorts of evolving ways. In the section that follows I give a short close reading of NW in terms of intersectional identities in the context of urban place characterized by diversity, drawing on the novel’s existing literary criticism of NW. I then propose how my analysis of NW in terms of Keisha/Natalie’s vocal journey and her relationship to voice might offer an alternative to these somewhat polarized interpretations of the novel either as representing the oppressive marginalization of people on the basis of identity markers like race, gender, nationality and sexual orientation or as representing new, emergent identities, multiple, fluid and complex in a globalizing world.

**Reading place and identity politics in NW**

In one of the numbered fragments the book is composed of, the character Keisha/Natalie is described as thinking of her different roles in life as drag performances:

> Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each required a different wardrobe. But when considering these various attitudes she struggled to think what would be the most authentic or perhaps the least inauthentic.31

Beatrice Pérez Zapata picks up this anxiety over authenticity of self in NW as a critique of the ‘persistent influence of patriarchal and colonizing attitudes’.32 She challenges the positivism in the postmodern concept of identity as multiple and fragmented, arguing that this view can be problematically idealized in identity politics discourse. The subject might be rendered schizophrenic or a dissipated object by fragmentation, rather than be a unified whole containing a multiplicity.33 She champions a feminist, intersectional argument which critically engages with the enmeshment of multiple, simultaneous axes of oppression on the basis of identity markers and the female subject as ever emergent through the negotiation of these.34 She argues for an interpretation of both Natalie/Keisha’s and Leah’s anxieties as entirely the product of the weight of their marginalized identities as women growing up working class, and in Natalie/Keisha’s case, as Black and second generation Jamaican-British.

Lyn Wells makes a similar argument, but with more emphasis on the drive for personal individuation in NW’s characters. Wells uses Derrida’s writing on the importance of ‘secrecy’ to ‘individual liberty’ to unpack Keisha/Natalie’s and Leah’s secret behaviours (Keisha/Natalie’s infidelities; Leah taking contraceptives without telling her partner) as part of their crises of self.35 She draws on Derrida’s sense of ethics where ‘the alterity and absolute uniqueness of the Other’ is key to an autonomous subjecthood36 to suggest that:
Seen in this light, the characters in *NW*, with their secretive double lives, play dual roles as representations of certain aspects of the multicultural reality of contemporary urban Britain and as manifestations of the ethical danger of reducing others to essentialized identities based on race or other factors while denying their uniqueness.37

Like Zapata she proposes that caught between their identity markers and realizing themselves as autonomous subjects, Natalie/Keisha and Leah are uncomfortably, unethically split.

Wendy Knepper, in contrast to Zapata and Wells, proposes that *NW* ‘maps new relations to locality through a spatial aesthetics that registers the anxious dynamics of a globalizing neighbourhood’.38 Knepper speaks to identity politics in her argument, but suggests more hopefully than Zapata and Wells that *NW*’s ‘textual journey. . . is not bound by the conventional identity politics of race/gender, but operates through the disclosure of formerly unrecognized correspondences and points of convergence’.39 In contrast to Zapata’s reading, Wells sees that the *NW* characters do find moments of flow and coherence through their emergent, intersectional subjecthood in a hypermobile, globalizing world. In my reading of *NW* I come out on the side of Wells, but argue that looking closely at Smith’s representation of voice as it relates to place through the character of Keisha/Natalie allows for a sense of both the oppressive difficulties of identity intersections and the subjecthood of self as emergent and the moments where the differences within self and the ever unresolvedness of self can feel, even if only momentarily, harmonious – multiple notes held together at the same time in a way that feels coherent to and of the self.

Although the literature review section of this paper above is far from a complete picture of discourse on sound and voice, it gives some sense of the wealth of writing and the range of disciplines that connect to sonic geographies, which my discussion here speaks into. However in the close reading that follows of three moments in *NW* in terms of place and Keisha/Natalie’s voice and relationship to voice, I narrow the focus of my interlocutors even more, turning specifically to Deleuze and Guattari, Jean-Luc Nancy and Kathleen Stewart for language to articulate my argument.

**Becoming sound**

The first moment I consider is one of Natalie/Keisha falling out of vocal identity, of pure affectual sounding with little-to-no anchoring signification. In one of the climactic sections of the novel, ‘Crossing’, Keisha/Natalie finds her husband in the act of discovering her online profile seeking couples for once-off threesomes:

‘Why are you looking at my computer?’ asked Natalie Blake in a small, ludicrous voice.40

This comes in reply to her husband reminding her of her status as a wife, mother, an adult. Keisha/ Natalie cannot find the voice she needs to account for herself, to ask for forgiveness or express defiance. She is described as leaving the house without response, walking north from her home in Queen’s Park ‘making a queer keening noise, like a fox’.41

Smith writes:

She was nothing more or less than the phenomenon of walking. She had no name, no biography, no characteristics.42

Deleuze and Guattari use ‘a plane of organization’ as a concept to define the ways in which individuals or situations might be constructed with particular, identifying patterns of relationality,
sustained by and sustaining certain power dynamics. In contrast they offer ‘a line of flight’ as moments when something or someone escapes this plane of organization. Deleuze and Guattari understand these moments as a freedom from identity. The actor, in the actor network sense of actor, is not in a line of flight but rather is the line of flight. This seems to be exactly what Smith is describing for Keisha/Natalie: not as simply choosing to flee but rather that she has become the act of fleeing itself. She drops out of the plane of organization that is her composite identity, her various ‘drags’.

Significantly for the purposes of this article Keisha/Natalie as line of flight moves through space, while sounding. The ‘queer keening noise’ she makes does not offer any identifying signs that could be tied either to place or an identity of self. This movement of Keisha/Natalie’s material body through the material geographic area of NW while sounding, suggests to me the site of Keisha/Natalie moving through the site of NW, where her sounding is also a form of movement – a resonation of the site of Keisha/Natalie within and through the site of NW. I see this moment as suggestive of all that is inherent and latent in the mutual constitution of spatial and human identities. Inherently humans are always part of the context of space informing it and informed by it. Latently the relational co-construction of space and self means there is always the potential for new ‘unrecognized correspondences and points of convergence’, for space to become a different kind of place, for self to become a different kind of self.

Nathan Boggle seeing Keisha/Natalie pacing the wall outside her old home, Caldwell Council estate, calls her into a recognizable identity:

Placed on its own line with a hanging indent and no inverted commas, there is a graphic marking here of the singularity of Keisha Blake brought into being by the voice of Nathan Boggle. For the remainder of this ‘Crossing’ section Keisha/Natalie is no longer a walking, sounding force without identity. She finds her voice, both semantically – she speaks to Nathan – and in quality of sound. She sounds like a human, like Keisha Blake, grown up and married with a changed name. She ‘don’t look too good’ and she probably don’t sound too good either but she sounds like herself, or rather an identifiable version of herself.

Keisha/Natalie and Nathan walk north to Hornsey Lane Bridge where she contemplates taking her own life. Their walk through the boroughs of NW is mainly charted in direct speech, marked only by hanging indents. The walk is also a talk. They talk about their shared history growing up and the course of their lives since. This is the content, but from the direct speech the reader is also aware of Nathan speaking in the NW council estate accent of their youth and Keisha/Natalie speaking in the tones of the successful lawyer and moneyed circles she now inhabits. These ‘voices’ are made ‘audible’ through idiomatic use of speech, words written phonetically and the rhythm Smith as narrator comments on in the epigraphic quote to this paper. The confrontation Natalie/Keisha is in between her past and present selves, plays out not only in the content of the two characters’ sounding but in how Smith represents the quality of their sounding.

In considering the sonic nature of this ‘Crossing’ passage, I think it is also important to mark that there is a further Bakhtinian dialogue at work: that between the reader and the text. The ‘audibility’ of Keisha/Natalie and Nathan’s dialogue is more nuanced the more familiar the reader might be with north west London and the north west London of the early twenty-teens when NW is set. The greater the familiarity with this spatio-temporal moment, the greater the potential for critical engagement with complexity of place and personal identity as enacted through the voice.
When Keisha/Natalie and Nathan reach the bridge, Keisha/Natalie is described as realizing this is where she was heading all along – as if the line of flight that she is has intersected with the line of the bridge, the lines of London she can see from it. Yet in this intersection she resolves not to jump. My sense is that there is a literal death proposed here but also a figurative one. As her illustratively literal line of flight on that afternoon brings her to contemplate actual death so she sees that the perpetual fleeing from what she perceives to be the inconsistencies in her living as Keisha/Natalie can only lead to destruction.

Good bye, Nathan. Said Natalie Blake.

In closing this ‘crossing’ passage, Smith as narrator resolves the character back to her present day ‘Natalie’, where all her identities so far might agglomerate into the present. Smith uses direct speech and qualifies it with a sense of who is speaking to do so, suggesting that Keisha/Natalie sounds like Natalie as she speaks. Smith’s choice of sonic representation to describe an identity resolution in the narrative, points to the voice as expressing the shifting quality of identity generally, that is constantly and contextually reperformed with similarity but difference, moment to moment.

Zapata offers a very different reading of this passage to the one I propose here. She sees that Natalie/Keisha’s desubjectification marks her struggle to become a subject against the oppressive power of racism, sexism and classism. Zapata sees that Natalie/Keisha is giving herself over in this ‘Crossing’ moment to being an object, and ‘one can only wonder if Keisha has ever stopped being an object’. Zapata considers that it is Natalie/Keisha’s “strong instinct for self-defence, self-preservation”, that makes her choose to continue to live her life, to pick up her various performances of self, because she is caught between living within the matrices of oppressive socio-spatial power dynamics or dying: ‘in this new survival of the fittest, her identity as Natalie is the only way out for her’. I take Zapata’s political point and how it supports a call for more radical systemic changes of power structures and legacies of oppression and discrimination on the basis of fixed identity markers, however I would strongly motivate for a less despairing reading of Keisha/Natalie’s resolve to pick up her identity as Natalie as cynical and strategic.

A survival instinct might be part of Keisha/Natalie’s choice but Smith also gives us: ‘She didn’t know what had been saved exactly or by whom’, implying that something had been saved and whatever it was, was worth saving. She has a ‘self’ – complex, multiple, always ever in the making through a meshwork of relations between people, things, landscape, waterscapes, buildings, a meshwork across across time and space – but a self that she defends the right to keep enacting. Keisha/Natalie comes through something in ‘Crossing’: a rite of passage, a claiming of the place of NW’s boroughs as a liminal space where she can renegotiate herself, come to a provisionally more resolved physical and metaphorical emplacement of herself. She does this through walking but also through her voice, from ‘keening’ to the ‘Keisha’ Nathan calls into identity and who talks to him all the way to Hornsey Lane Bridge to the ‘Natalie’ who says good-bye to Nathan, decides to live and returns to her life.

Keisha/Natalie’s voice is an ideal vehicle for synecdochically representing these movements by her whole, multiple self. Voice is only ever relationally constructed over time as audio material and signifying meaning. Vocal identity is only established and reestablished and shifted through the recurrence of the relational act of sounding in space, but also in place – both informed by and creating an identity of space through intonation, accent, inflections, pitch, volume, phatic gestures and idiomatic use of language. So Keisha/Natalie must sound to enact her vocal identity, sound to escape this identity altogether and sound to return to it and to both maintain and shift it with each iteration, all of which is an auditory co-construction with place.
Hearing place, sounding place

If there is anxious performance of self (which drag is the least inauthentic?) or dissipation into desubjectification as described in the section above, there is also a third quality of engagement in the co-construction of self and place: attachment, recognition, belonging. In this section I consider a moment when Keisha/Natalie hears a song in a park café. The musician is not named in the text but inferred as Amy Winehouse:

The lovely voice came through the speakers in the park café. Natalie Blake and her friend Leah Hanwell had long ago agreed that this voice sounded like London – especially its northern and north-western zones – as if its owner were patron saint of their neighborhoods. Is a voice something you can own?57

Keisha/Natalie recalls seeing a TV interview with the musician and a sense of her in her bodily form all but having disappeared, even though her singing voice was as much of a ‘miracle’ as ever.58 Keisha/Natalie’s question of ownership of voice echoes Jean-Luc Nancy’s sense of sounding being a crisis of self:

. . . he thinks himself or represents himself, approaches himself and strays from himself, and thus always feels himself feeling a “self” that escapes [s’échappe] or hides [se retranche] as long as it resounds elsewhere as it does in itself, in a world and in the other.59

By this the voice is not unpossessable but nor is it entirely owned. Coming from the subject, the sound of the voice is the affirmation of subjecthood, but always something is escaping as long as the voice is resounding not only in the subject’s ears and whole body, but in those of the listener, in the space, in the world. The voice creates an ‘infinite referral’ where the self is approached but never reached.60 The voice is linked to the subject producing it while in the ‘participation, sharing or contagion”61 implicit in the voice production, the voice becomes linked to its auditors, to space, as discussed with Keisha/Natalie’s keening trajectory above. Keisha/Natalie’s description of Amy Winehouse’s thinness and fragility as a ‘disappearing’ creates an image of someone almost lost to the extent their voice has escaped them – a voice becoming so much about the space within which it is sounded, the physical, sounding self starts to seem acutely ephemeral.

Keisha/Natalie’s musing makes for a complex image of place as understood through voice. Keisha/Natalie and Leah hear in Amy Winehouse’s singing voice an affectual charge that they associate deeply with the place of north and north west London. This is something more than the speaking voice of Amy Winehouse with its accent that can be decoded for the recognized, ‘essentialized’ identity markers’ (race, gender, nationality, ability, sexuality) that Lyn Wells points to as frequently becoming the key definers in the intersectional identity politics of city areas characterized by diversity.62 Keisha/Natalie and Leah feel something in Winehouse’s singing voice which is about the feeling of the place Winehouse participates in. In hearing in Amy Winehouse’s voice a patron sainthood, an emplaced divinity, there is a loving recognition which encompasses and exceeds identity markers. Critically, Keisha/Natalie’s ruminations on the physicality of Winehouse and the ownership of her voice make the association far more than metaphoric, but point towards the material acts of sounding, moving, acting through and with the world that makes place. Winehouse’s voice both represents and makes place. It is sensed and experienced over time, though it cannot be held onto or pinned down in concrete form. The ‘disappearance’ of Winehouse represents the tenuousness of making self and place that is never fixed but always in the making.

Social anthropologist Kathleen Stewart’s work speaks powerfully to that which is identifiably familiar in place at the same time as any qualification – this is what makes this place – is always contingent
and shifting, always about being in time and not only space. Place for Stewart is ‘something’ which ‘throws itself together in a moment as an event and a sensation; a something both animated and inhabitable’.63 Stewart’s writing about ethnography64 reads as an attentiveness to the ongoing acts of relational placemaking, a slowing down for the careful listening Kanngieser speaks to:

A kind of attending to the textures and rhythms of forms of living as they are being composed and suffered in social and cultural poesis. A noticing that gropes from a haptic space in the middle of things. The objects of such a practice are things noted obliquely, as if out of the corner of the eye, but also, often, as punctums or punctures. Things that have impact. Things caught in a circuit of action and reaction.65

Three things in this quote strike me as particularly useful in considering place and placemaking: an attentiveness to ‘poesis’, to the ‘haptic’ and to ‘punctums’ or ‘punctures’. Etymologically ‘poesis’ means to make, signifying the creative act of daily living, but it also speaks associatively to an expression and appreciation of affectual charge. To talk of the feeling of a place or of a person is to talk of that which draws out an empathetic recognition, a resonance which can hold both the difficulties of that person or place and their beauties. It is this poesis that leads Keisha/Natalie to recognise Amy Winehouse’s voice as anthemic of north and north west London. ‘Haptic’ as touch points us to where the feeling of poetry is communicated: through the senses. That through our ears, eyes, taste buds, skin, noses we receive our sensual experience of the world and make both meaning and feeling (emotion/mood feeling) sense of it. The ‘haptic’ grounds us out of cerebral notions of affect or identity into the ways in which we act and respond materially through the senses.

Lastly, Stewart’s use of Roland Barthes’s ‘punctums’ or ‘punctures’66 I see as relating to her sense of the ‘something’ that ‘throws itself together in moments’.67 Barthes unpacks two etymologies for ‘punctum’ which he ties together: a wounding by a pointed instrument but also the point of punctuation.68 Photographs for Barthes are ‘speckled with these sensitive points’.69 Stewart thinks of ethnography of place as registering these ‘impactful’ punctums.70 I would like to tease out Barthes’s joining of the two etymologies for punctum and unpack Stewart’s proposition to suggest: though a resolved sense of place or self may never be achieved, in the continual becoming there are ‘punctums’ as punctuations when a sense of the whole becoming is felt; moments of resonant belonging that the individual consciously, ‘pointedly’ registers. Equally these moments of ‘impact’ might be more like Barthes’s sense of the punctum as wound: temporary, pointal piercings or rup- tures consciously registered in the evolving of place and self.

Smith’s writing generally and in NW specifically has all the qualities Stewart describes for engaging the relationship between people and place. As Knepper defines, Smith offers ‘spatial poetics’71 in NW and these are all about attention to ‘textures and rhythms’, to what is ‘being composed and suffered’, and no less in how she represents her character’s material voices in direct speech and qualifies the sounding of their voices with description.72 Smith traces the haptic, what moves and what touches what as it moves, to represent the poesis of everyday place and self-making and to register the resonant moments, the ‘punctums’ where ‘something’ is felt: understanding that ‘around here. . .fuckin. . .is only a rhythm in a sentence’73 or feeling a singer’s voice to offer a distillation of the sound of a particular place.

In Keisha/Natalie’s narrative the first movement of the ‘Crossing’ section could be understood as a puncture in the co-construction of her own identity and the identity of NW. This is an identifiable moment of rupture in identity as Keisha moves and keens, through space, touching it, making a pure affectual, sounding trajectory with the moment of that space-becoming-place of NW. Listening to the Amy Winehouse song is a punctuated moment where the touch of Winehouse’s voice gives Keisha/Natalie a self-aware knowing and belonging to place, of emplacement.
For the final moment discussed in this article I turn to the last line of the novel as marking through voice a presence to the discomforts and complexities of identity of self and place, a presence to their nature as ongoing, relational performances and a presence to the hopeful punctums – the pointal moments when all the complexities and dissonances can be held together.

**Disguising your voice with your voice**

The final line of *NW* reads:

‘I got something to tell you’, said Keisha Blake, disguising her voice with her voice.74

After coming to a decision with Leah, Keisha/Natalie phones the police with information she has on a murder and uses her council estate, NW ‘Keisha’ voice from her childhood to disguise the ‘Natalie’ voice she has developed in her complex and conflicted self-identity journey as an adult. This concluding line of the novel is rich with information on vocal use, identity and place. It draws our attention to all the vocal ranging Keisha/Natalie has done throughout the novel which has been implicit in the narrative and marked in direct speech but not always overtly qualified. Our attention is drawn to what her voice expresses of locality, of the identifying markers of place: the listener on the other end of the phone can tell where she is from – NW – and an aspect of how she fits into the socio-spatial configuration of NW, in a socio-economic identity marker sense. Beyond what the listener might define about Keisha/Natalie’s identity within NW, the acts of speaking and hearing contribute to the repeated, ephemeral acts of place-making of NW. Most significantly, she disguises her voice with her voice. For all her concern with which ‘attitude’ is ‘the least inauthentic’,75 in this moment of speaking Smith’s description suggests the character inhabits ‘Keisha’ fully, authentically, disguising an equally fully inhabited vocal identity that is ‘Natalie’ in other moments. She is heard by her best friend, her childhood friend, who has heard Keisha/Natalie range through all her vocal identities and knows the less easily identified identities that emerge between those that might be corralled under markers like class, race or ethnic heritage. Keisha/Natalie’s voice in this moment is not an assumed accent or a drag, but an identity deeply known, embodied and recognized, although unfixed, realised in the ephemeral moment of speaking. She inhabits with her voice a particularity of Keisha, holding layers of individual specificity beyond and tangled up with any broader identity markers signified.

I would like to turn here to Nancy’s notion of the *mêlée* and the *mélange* as an extension of his thinking around ‘being singular plural’. Nancy argues that a person is not one, identifiable thing, but many singularities of self that come into being through each contextual moment of ‘being with’ others.76 Nancy finds the ephemerality and refrain of sounding and listening,77 a compelling illustration for his conception of identity and place as constantly in production and reproduction through the moments of ‘being-with-one-another’.78 As referenced earlier, Nancy registers that this iterative process is deeply confronting: ‘isn’t [sonorous] sense first of all, every time, a crisis of self?’79 because in sounding and listening we make and remake our ‘self’, always partly escaping ourselves, always slightly different and so always a ‘self’, in crisis.

Nancy developed the concept of the *mêlée* and the *mélange* in response to the effects of the Bosnian war (1992 to 1994) on Sarajevo.80 He defines the *mélange* as a mixing of identities and by this mixing, a fixing, not just of separate distinct identities prior to mixing but also a fixing of the result of the mixture. In understanding identities he argues instead for the *mêlée* which is ‘an action rather than a substance’.81 Like Zapata82 he fears definitions like ‘cosmopolitan’, ‘multicultural’ and ‘hybridity’ are reifying. He proposes instead that cultural identity attached to place is in itself a mixed gesture: it is to affront, confront, transform, divert, develop, recompose, combine,
Like Zapata’s feminist, intersectional argument for understanding identity, he uses the mêlée to propose an understanding of identity and place that is in the ‘action’ or interaction; in the activity of being-with.

Keisha/Natalie’s voice, pointed by Smith in the novel’s final line, proposes that the self that does not reside in an individual’s essence, but rather, like our voices, resides in the constant making of selves through the being-with-one-another; through speaking to be listened to; through the mêlée that creates both self and place. That Smith concludes the novel with Natalie/Keisha drawing on her ‘Keisha’ voice and with the qualifier of ‘disguising her voice with her voice’ suggest that there has been a shift in Keisha/Natalie’s crisis of self. It is not resolved nor is it resolvable, but she returns to the mêlée of making herself and place in NW. There is a playfulness to ‘disguising her voice with her voice’ which marks a performance of self that is not anxious or in crisis, but can in that moment hold the duality (or more truthfully, the complex mêlée) of Keisha/Natalie’s identity.

Conclusion

This paper started by advocating for how engaging with sound, and voice in particular, as represented in literature might serve a sonic geographic attention to both the representational and more-than-representational elements of voice. It then turned to Zadie Smith’s NW as case study for considering the co-constitution of place and self in terms of voice. I use a close reading of Keisha/Natalie’s voice and relationship to voice in NW to argue that social injustices enacted spatially, on the basis of intersecting, reified identity markers might be heard in how we sound. However I also use this reading of voice in NW to argue that our emplaced sounding exposes our longings, belongings, attachments and joys in the ongoing intersecting trajectories of place and self-making and exposes the complexity and newness in ever-emerging identities. I suggest that thinking place and human identity through the voice returns us again and again to the mêlée, to the eternal relational becoming with all its difficulties and pleasures and crises in the emergence: ‘a crossing and a stop, a knot and an exchange, a gathering, a disjunction, a circulation, a radiating’. However I also suggest through Stewart’s sense of place as identifiably sensed through momentary ‘punctums’ that within the mêlée, our voices, like in a music score, reveal punctuated moments of harmony or disharmony where a sense of the emergence is sensed fully to be resisted (a falling out of an identifiable voice), relished (finding belonging in a voice) or held in tension (using one voice, aware of your others), in a moment, in the ongoing movement of place and self-making.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to South Africa’s National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences for the post-doctoral funding to complete this research. Thanks too to Ed Charlton, British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at LSE Cities, for editorial advice; to Ed, Malika Ndlovu, Lara Buxbaum and Baeletsj Tsatsi for joining me in a seminar to explore these notions of voice and place as co-constructive and to the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study for hosting the seminar.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This research was completed during a South African National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences funded post-doctoral fellowship.

ORCID iD

Alexandra Halligey https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3125-173X
Notes

1. Z.Smith, *NW* (London and New York: Penguin, 2012), p. 3.
2. Smith, *NW*, p. 6.
3. Smith, *NW*, p. 283.
4. Smith, *NW*, p. 284.
5. See for example M.Gallagher, ‘Sounding Ruins: Reflections on the Production of an ‘Audio Drift’, *cultural geographies*, 22(3), 2015, pp. 467–85; M.Gallagher, ‘Voice Audio Methods’, *Qualitative Research*, 20(4), 2020, pp. 449–64; M.Nieuwenhuis, ‘Ephemeral Language: Communicating by Breath’, in S.Choi, A.Selmeczi and E.Strausz (eds), *Critical Methods for the Study of World Politics: Creativity and Transformation* (Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, 2019), pp. 39–62; A.Kanngieser, ‘A Sonic Geography of Voice: Towards an Affective Politics’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 36(3), 2012, pp. 336–53.
6. See K.Doughty, M.Duffy and T.Harada (eds), *Sounding Places: More-Than-Representational Geographies of Sound and Music* (Cheltenham, UK and Northhampton, MA: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019) and K.Doughty, M.Duffy and T.Harada, ‘Practices of Emotional and Affective Geographies of Sound’, *Emotion, Space and Society*, 20, 2016, pp. 39–41.
7. N.Thrift, *Non-representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (New York: Routledge, 2008). See also P.Simpson, *Non-representational Theory* (London: Routledge, 2021).
8. D.Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005).
9. H.Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis: Space, Time and Everyday Life* (London and New York: Continuum, 2004).
10. See for example of application in sonic geographies: M.Duffy, G.Waitt and T.Harada, ‘Making Sense of Sound: Visceral Sonic Mapping as a Research Tool’, *Emotion, Space and Society*, 20, 2016, pp. 50–52.
11. See for example Kanngieser, ‘A Sonic Geography of Voice’, 339, with reference to M.Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).
12. J.Nancy, *Listening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).
13. A.Kanngieser, ‘Geopolitics and the Anthropocene: Five Propositions for Sound’, *GeoHumanities*, 1(1), 2015, p. 82.
14. See for example Kanngieser, ‘A Sonic Geography of Voice’; Duffy, Waitt and Harada, ‘Making Sense of Sound’, pp. 49–57.
15. See for example S.Mills, ‘Voice: Sonic Geographies of Childhood’, *Children’s Geographies*, 15(6), 2017, pp. 664–77.
16. See for example M.Gallagher, ‘Voice Audio Methods’.
17. Duffy, Waitt and Harada, ‘Making Sense of Sound’, pp. 49–57.
18. K.Buciek, ‘Soundscape and Heritage: The Sonic Environment in Roskilde Juxtaposed with James Joyce’s *Ulysses’*, *GeoHumanities*, 5(1), 2019, p. 86.
19. For an unpacking of material considerations in the literary see Shari Daya, “Words and Worlds: Textual Representation and New Materialism”, *cultural geographies*, 26(3), 2019, 361–77 and specifically in the context of literary urban studies see L.Ameel, J.Finch, S.Laine and R.Dennis, ‘Urban History and the Materialities of/in Literature’, in L.Ameel, J.Finch, S.Laine and R.Dennis (eds), *The Materiality of Literary Narratives in Urban History* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp. 3–4.
20. Kanngieser, ‘Geopolitics and the Anthropocene’, p. 83.
21. Kanngieser, ‘Geopolitics and the Anthropocene’, p. 82.
22. Kanngieser, ‘Geopolitics and the Anthropocene’, pp. 82–3, p. 80 for ‘geophilosophical’ reference.
23. Kanngieser, ‘A Sonic Geography of Voice’, p. 337.
24. Massey, *For Space*, p. 130.
25. T.Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), p. 11.
26. See Z.Smith, *Grand Union* (London and New York: Penguin, 2019); Z.Smith, *Swing Time* (London and New York: Penguin, 2016); Z.Smith, *The Embassy of Cambodia* (London and New York: Penguin, 2013); Z.Smith, *Martha and Hanwell* (London and New York: Penguin, 2005); Z.Smith, *On Beauty* (London and New York: Penguin, 2005); Z.Smith, *The Autograph Man* (London and New York: Penguin, 2002); Z.Smith, *White Teeth* (London and New York: Penguin, 2000).
27. See Z. Smith, *Intimations* (London and New York: Penguin, 2020); Z. Smith, *Feel Free* (London and New York: Penguin, 2018); Z. Smith, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (London and New York: Penguin, 2009).

28. Z. Smith, ‘Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction’, *The New York Review of Books*, LXVI(16), 2019, pp. 4–10.

29. Z. Smith, ‘Speaking in Tongues’, *The New York Review of Books*, 26 February 2009, n.p., <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2009/02/26/speaking-in-tongues-2/> (Last accessed 21 March 2022).

30. Smith, *NW*.

31. Smith, *NW*, p. 332.

32. B. P. Zapata, ‘“In Drag”: Performativity and Authenticity in Zadie Smith’s *NW*’, *International Studies: Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal*, 16(1), 2014, p. 94.

33. Zapata, ‘“In Drag”’, pp. 83–95.

34. Zapata, ‘“In Drag”’, pp. 85–6, referencing specifically Rosi Braidotti, 1994 on the female subject as a nomad.

35. L. Wells, ‘The Right to a Secret: Zadie Smith’s *NW*’, in P. Tew (ed.), *Reading Zadie Smith: The First Decade and Beyond* (London: Boomsbury, 2013), pp. 97–110.

36. Wells, ‘The Right to a Secret’, p. 99. Referencing J. Derrida and M. Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).

37. Wells, ‘The Right to a Secret’, p. 100.

38. W. Knepper, ‘Revisionary Modernism and Postmillenial Experimentation in Zadie Smith’s *NW*’, in P. Tew (ed.), *Reading Zadie Smith: The First Decade and Beyond* (London: Boomsbury, 2013), pp. 111–26.

39. Knepper, ‘Revisionary Modernism’, p. 116.

40. Smith, *NW*, p. 354.

41. Smith, *NW*, p. 359.

42. Smith, *NW*, p. 360.

43. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 270.

44. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 270.

45. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 270.

46. Smith, *NW*, p. 359.

47. Knepper, ‘Revisionary Modernism’, p. 116.

48. Smith, *NW*, p. 361.

49. Smith, *NW*, p. 361.

50. Smith, *NW*, pp. 364–84.

51. Smith, *NW*, p. 385.

52. G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

53. Zapata, ‘“In Drag”’, p. 93.

54. Zapata, ‘“In Drag”’, p. 93, citing Smith, *NW*, p. 399.

55. Zapata, ‘“In Drag”’, p. 93.

56. Smith, *NW*, p. 385.

57. Smith, *NW*, p. 345.

58. Smith, *NW*, p. 345.

59. Nancy, *Listening*, p. 9.

60. Nancy, *Listening*, p. 9.

61. Nancy, *Listening*, p. 10.

62. Wells, ‘The Right to a Secret’, p. 100.

63. K. Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), p. 1. See also K. Stewart, ‘Precarity’s Forms’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 27(3), p. 519.

64. K. Stewart, ‘Weak Theory in an Unfinished World’, *Journal of Folklore Research*, 45(1), 2008, p. 71–82.

65. Stewart, ‘Weak Theory’, p. 71.

66. For her use of ‘punctums’ Stewart references R. Barthes, ‘The Third Meaning: Research Notes on Some Eisenstein Skills’, in *The Responsibility of Forms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), R. Howes (trans) pp. 41–7.
Author biography

Alexandra Halligey has a PhD in Drama and Urban Studies through the University of Cape Town’s African Centre for Cities and the Centre for Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies (CTDPS), a Master’s degree in Performance Studies from New York University and a BA in Theatre and Performance, also from UCT’s CTDPS. Her research is concerned with theatre and performance as research tools and conceptual lenses for exploring the relationship between people and the built environment. As of 2022 she is a National Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences postdoctoral fellow with the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study at the University of Johannesburg. Her monograph Participatory Theatre and the Urban Everyday: Place and Play in Johannesburg was published by Routledge in 2020 and 2021 saw the publication of a scholarly volume she co-edited with Sara Matchett on women-lead theatre organisation, The Mothertongue Project: Collaborative Conversations: Celebrating Twenty-One Years of The Mothertongue Project. Alongside her scholarly work she has an ongoing practice as a theatre maker.