

About Change: Ali Smith's Numismatic Modernism

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Abstract

In Ali Smith's Hotel World (2001), a diverse group of women comes together within a chain hotel. Here, they misuse and redirect money. They transform coins and notes into a liberatory language, capable of countering the commerciality of the contemporary moment and the lexicon that upholds it. This essay charts that numismatic narrative, taking the creative, interventional treatment of cash in Hotel World as a case study through which to think through Smith's model of contemporary modernism, a sustained political project that can be traced across her oeuvre. It proposes "numismatic modernism," and theorizes it as a mode that constructs a creative, critical response to capitalist modernity by closely engaging with its materials and contexts, carving out an alternative to the marketplace from within it.

In a 2015 interview, the scholar Tory Young asked Ali Smith a million-dollar question: if she won the lottery, would she carry on writing? Smith replied, "If I won, I'd give it all – the money – away" (147). This was not the first time Smith has expressed an aversion to money, the ubiquitous market phenomenon that serves as our shared medium of exchange, a unit of account, and a store of value, manifesting itself in coins, notes, debit, credit, and fluctuating figures on digital screens. In a 2003 interview, Smith was asked why she no longer wrote for the stage. Smith said she would love to do so again, but only under the right circumstances. Those circumstances would be "Art not money – I'd have to be paid but I don't want the thing to turn into money – that's why I'm not interested in working for film and television. It's all about money, and I'm not" (Winterson).

Smith's personal relationship to money, then, is one of detachment and even divestment. However, although Smith may be markedly and, perhaps, unusually uninterested in money when it comes to surprise windfalls or her own level of remuneration within the cultural industries and literary marketplace, many of her texts are all about money. Her works explore contemporary worlds that have turned into money – times and places in which “money and power” are “the real magic words,” to quote a dinner party guest from Smith's 2011 novel *There But for The* (151). At once critical and wishful, Smith's works test out the possibilities of instating other magic words in the place of money and power: creativity, bodiliness, intimacy, community, autonomy, to name just a handful. These experiments are dexterous, accommodating, and imaginative in their strategies. Anything – from tattered old books, to leaf matter, to dirty coins and crumpled five-pound notes – might be seized upon as a potentially oppositional force, capable of re-authoring the status quo, if only for a moment. Inside Smith's texts, art and money are not divorced. On the contrary, Smith's 2001 *Hotel World* is a novel in which money, in its material form, is re-authored through a series of art-like acts, and arises as a potential medium for change.¹

In this essay, I begin by closely charting the numismatic narrative that runs throughout *Hotel World*. Firstly, I examine the novel's delineation of a commercial language, from which the fabric of postmodern space is constituted, setting the Global Hotel, the locale of Smith's novel, in dialogue with the Westin Bonaventure Hotel, as theorized by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). I show how, within this space, cash money is transformed through a series of affective, performative rituals, and arises as a potential alternative language, capable of countering the dominant commercial lexicon. Stepping back from the text at hand, I then argue for Smith's status as a practitioner of contemporary modernism, in order to swiftly home in and align her present-day activities with the ethically driven, economically engaged projects of many twentieth century modernists' projects that are only just beginning to be appreciated in both their moneyed, metallic grubbiness and their political import. I go on to use my reading of the unusual treatment of money in *Hotel World* as a case study – one representative of countless similar activities depicted across Smith's oeuvre – through which to name and theorize Smith's own broader, sustained political project. I name her mode “numismatic modernism,” and define it as a model of modernism that constructs a creative, critical response to capitalist modernity by closely engaging with its materials and contexts, carving out an alternative to the marketplace from within it.

A Money World: Late Capitalist Space

Hotel World explicitly occupies a specific temporal moment, the historical present in which Smith was writing it. The novel belongs to “new postmodern Britain,”

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a “turn-of-the-century” time in which “the scent of the new” is palpable and “all anyone is talking about . . . is the millennium” (112, 226, 208). This sense of newness and the unprecedented is combined with one of lateness and exhaustion. What emerges is the feeling that, as Jameson puts it:

something has changed, that things are different, that we have gone through a transformation of the life world which is somehow decisive but incomparable with the older convulsions of modernization and industrialization, less perceptible and dramatic, somehow, but more permanent precisely because more thorough going and all pervasive (xxi).

This moment and mood – characterized by the ultimate expansion of the money form and the absolute entrenchment of the money motive – is concentrated in the space of the Global Hotel, the chain hotel in which the novel’s narrative unfolds. Across Smith’s oeuvre, her exploration of money is often highly spatialized, an approach that is true to the function of capital today, reflecting the ongoing erosion of the public sphere, and the increasing privatization and commodification of space. The Global is a prime case in point. A meticulously branded site of uniformity, built more of marketing than bricks and mortar, it is a place where the bottom line is the bottom line. The novel’s “Hotel World” represents the totality and force of what we might call today’s ‘money world’. Echoing Jameson, and Slavoj Žižek, Mark Fisher has argued, “It’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (1).

As well as evoking a Jamesonian late capitalist, postmodern climate, Smith’s text can be mapped onto Jameson’s ideas more precisely.² Smith’s Global seems to be modeled on, or even inspired by, the hotel Jameson explores in *Postmodernism*: the Westin Bonaventure Hotel, built in 1976 in the new Los Angeles downtown by the architect and developer John Portman. The two hotels are physically and ideologically congruent. Just as Portman authored numerous other hotels, including the various Hyatt Regencies, and is credited with popularizing the multi-storied interior atrium – his trademark style – all of the Global Hotels boast identical lobby design by a Swiss interior designer, in order to “preserve the climate of repeated return in worldwide Global clientele” (111). For Jameson, the Bonaventure is representative of the “global multinational and decentred communicational network” that is late capitalism, a wedded scope and flattening that is echoed in the Global’s slogan: “All Over The World... We Think The World Of You” (73).

The Global, then, like the Bonaventure, is a physical manifestation of late capitalist society, an example of postmodern hyperspace. Such space, for Jameson, has a complex relationship with its surroundings. Meditating on the Bonaventure, he contends it “aspires to being a total space, a complete world, a kind of miniature city.” It does not seek “to be part of the city, but rather its equivalent and its replacement or substitute” (48). Conforming to this model, the Global

2 Smith’s relationship to theory is complex and ambivalent. Though she has personally expressed her dislike of and lack of interest in theory (see Young), many of her texts and their contexts and narratives echo contemporary theory – including Jameson’s works – uncannily closely. They often seem directly inspired and informed by such thinking.

engulfs the novel's narrative and eclipses the nondescript, nebulous town in which it is situated, becoming the novel's world, as the title "Hotel World" seems to know. Crucially, though, and perhaps paradoxically, Jameson argues that the Bonaventure does not seek to differentiate itself from the landscape in which it is situated – it does not strive for distinction (50). Jameson illustrates this point by gesturing to the reflective glass skin of the Bonaventure, which hides the hotel itself and reproduces "the distorted images of everything that surrounds it" (50).

Voicing Late Capitalism: The Language of Money

Importantly, and aptly for Smith given her reputation for wordplay and narrative experiment, this question of a lack of distinction and contrast is primarily a matter of language and form. For Jameson, the Bonaventure and other postmodern buildings:

respect the vernacular of the American city fabric... that is to say, they no longer attempt, as did the masterworks and monuments of high modernism, to insert a different, a distinct, an elevated, a new Utopian language into the tawdry and commercial sign system of the surrounding city, but rather they seek to speak that very language, using its lexicon and syntax as that has been emblematically "learned from Las Vegas" (47)

Whereas, here, "language" has an architectural meaning, more recent theory has highlighted the presence of literal spoken and written language in postmodern space, too. Calls to submit to forms of authority and social control are spoken and written in space, as well as communicated covertly through its fabric. Marc Augé, for example, charts "the invasion of space by text," from supermarket shelves and food labels to the scripted dialogue between credit card holder and checkout worker (80). He asserts, "all the remarks that emanate from our roads and commercial centres" are "addressed simultaneously to each and any of us," serving to "fabricate 'the average man,'" "defined as the user of the road, retail or banking system" (80–81). Such spaces speak, then, both audibly and inaudibly, and do so in the language of money. Complicit in a global capitalist project, they repeat its words, disseminate and maintain its values, and communicate its orders via a web of text, or world-text. In *Artful* (2012), Smith teases out this idea by quoting from the introduction to the French edition of JG Ballard's *Crash* (1973): "We now 'live inside an enormous novel,' he writes, 'a world ruled by fictions of every kind - mass merchandising, advertising, politics conducted as a brand of advertising'" (35).

The Global is particularly vocal and prolific. Indeed, all the better for speaking with, the entrance is figured as a giant mouth, with "doors that go round breathing the people out and in," swallowing them up (30). Time and again, it addresses its

3 Research has highlighted the prevalence of “emotional labor” and “affective labor” in our modern economy. These forms of work are key to both domestic and customer service roles, particularly those performed by women. See Cederström.

guests and employees, speaking and writing in terms of capital, transaction, and accumulation, illustrating Augé’s observation. Guests’ experiences of the hotel are fabricated from a series of price lists and promises – offers that are simultaneously restrictions. Upon entering her room, Else (a homeless woman who has been secretly offered a free room for the night by hotel receptionist Lise) is greeted by a card on her pillow comprising instructions for a turndown service and the hotel’s slogan, by a “Room Tariff” on the back of the door, by a notice on the mini bar stating “Anything removed from the Minibar for more than twenty seconds will automatically register on your Room Account,” and, in the wardrobe, a sheet listing dry-cleaning prices. (72–73). Meanwhile, employees’ experiences are generated by a web of explicit written and spoken prohibitions, sharing the same commercial imperative. The “Global Quality Policy” included in “The Quality Policy Training pack,” which outlines the “worthwhile” actions staff members must take, includes the giveaway line “The way we measure quality is to find out just how much money we spend sorting things out.” (116). Lise’s name badge which, as a lower member of staff depicts only her first name in line with Global Quality Policy, transforms her personal identity, via text, into an affective customer service product (117).³ Beyond the hotel, gross ventriloquizations, translations, and transpositions of such language and its economic logic serve to articulate its violence, inequity, and all-pervasiveness. Out on the street, Else is pleased to see she has collected a decent sum of money for the day from passersby, reflecting, “she could eat well tonight and maybe even buy some sleep too” (42). The tone and lexicon of the homeless shelter’s rule sheet mirrors that of both the employee-facing Global Quality Policy and customer-facing material: “Customers will be asked to vacate the Shelter by 9 a.m. of the following morning” (65).

Smith’s Ethical Impulse: The Desire for a New Language

Such echoes and reverberations assert the ethical, critical stance Smith’s text occupies. She does not simply evoke or reproduce a “Hotel World,” or a ‘money world’, and its logics and language to facilitate a postmodern backdrop for her contemporary novel. Rather, she scrutinizes it, revealing the scope and nature of its effects. The text asks us to see how money’s language, disseminated in space, serves to reproduce and maintain the cash nexus – the reduction, under capitalism, of all human relationships and identities to monetary exchange. Smith’s novel shows that, in the postmodern hyperspace authored by such language, there is no room available for autonomous selves, bodies, and actions, or for community or connection. Only transactions, obedient employees and consumers, and faceless producers are accommodated. Money’s language builds walls, partitions, and boundaries as real as those of the Global Hotel.

As well as documenting and offering up for critique this resolutely capitalist, restrictive, and exclusionary world-text, then, Smith suggests that business cannot,

or must not, continue as usual. This late capitalist world-text, at once exhausted and stronger than ever, dominant and in crisis, is explicitly pathologized through the body of Lise, the receptionist, who feels “faint or dizzy or physically strange” when she enters a shop “because of the number of people buying things and the number of things available to them to buy all crammed inside one roofed space” (83). Her name badge draws blood, her uniform stifles her, and her “glands are raised” (118). Her ensuing period of debilitation, it seems, is connected to the uniformity and dominance of late capitalist space and the pervasiveness of its commercial language. Overwhelmed and unwell, she retreats to her bed where her world, and the language from which it is formed, spins: “the names of all its places” are “loosened and jettisoned off the sides of it,” leaving “nothing but blanks, outlines waiting to be rediscovered and renamed” (119). The commercial language from which the contemporary environment is composed must be countered, it seems. If the world is a text, it might be rewritten. A new language is called for.

Money Talks Anew: A Liberatory Counter-Language

Unexpectedly, in *Hotel World*, money itself arises as the unlikely potential source of a liberatory counter-language. As well as being loud with the language of commercialism, and shaped and animated by the money motive, Smith’s money world is also densely populated with ‘real,’ physical money. This is money of the numismatic variety – cash – and it is prominent in the rhetorical hierarchy of Smith’s novel; the numerous coins and notes woven throughout the text form their own numismatic object narrative that intersects with the narrative of Smith’s characters.⁴ At first glance, this material money might also appear to belong to the commercial sign system of the world it inhabits, as we would expect from currency – a physical representation of monetary value. Indeed, the novel’s whole narrative – driven by the death fall of a Global employee down a dumb waiter shaft – is set into motion by a fiver. The soon-to-be-dead girl bets her colleague Duncan that she can fit inside the dumb waiter (25). This gambled cash, knowingly or otherwise, playfully recalls Jameson’s assertion that the Bonaventure, and other postmodern hyperspaces, learned their language from “Las Vegas” (47). However, things change. Later, the anguished Duncan gives a fiver, tightly folded into a tiny square, to the dead girl’s sister, who permanently removes it from circulation and inserts it into an alternative economy of remembrance and intimacy, altering its meaning and transforming it from currency to talisman, or totem. It no longer functions as a monetary universal equivalent but rather comes to equal her deceased sister: “I put the five pounds in the cabinet too I won’t ever spend it is yours in a way it means you maybe because it means you it will call you back . . . I will keep it for you it is worth more than anything” (216).

This emphasis on money’s meaning (“it means you”) is key. The very word *means*, of course, encompasses the semantic and the economic. Smith capitalizes

4 Elaine Freedgood has helpfully proposed the concept of “rhetorical hierarchy” to describe the way in which literary texts ascribe more meaning to some objects than to others (2).

5 See Woodmansee for a comprehensive, interdisciplinary overview of influential work in the new economic criticism, including thinking by Shell.

on the linguistic character of material money, drawing out the equivalence of money and language, and presenting money as a potent sign system. Here, Smith shares a mission with the proponents of formalist new economic criticism. Pioneered by Marc Shell, Jean-Joseph Goux, Walter Benn Michaels, and Kurt Heinzelman, this approach focuses on the homologies between linguistic and economic domains, highlighting their shared instabilities. It sees economies as a system of circulating signs and a mode of symbolizing, texts as marketplaces of meaning, and language as a form of exchange.⁵ Smith's project is similar, but she has her own rationale, methodology, and purpose. For Smith, it is money's incongruous progressive potentiality that marries it to language. Money is, or is like, language; it is flexible and might undergo change. Indeed, here, as we have seen, and across Smith's text, material money begins to mean and communicate new things and to enter into novel relationships with the world, because of imaginative human action. Significantly, the dead girl's sister places the fiver "flattened out" "between two books Linda Goodlan's *Sun Signs & your dictionary you had from school*" (216). Wedged between two compendiums of signs and mingled with the sea of words – "so many fucking words" the dead girl's sister has thought out into her room and is now "swimming" or "sinking" in – this cash, it seems, it is to be given a new schooling. It is to accrue fresh significations and associations.

About Change: Unlocking the Radical Potential of Coins

If this five-pound note is a prototype, coins are the real deal. Littering the novel, choreographed and interrogated in innovative ways by Smith's characters, they are rendered uncannily present and made strange. Far from reinforcing the commercialism of the space they occupy, they come to counter it, circulating in unusual and unruly ways. Their original meaning, monetary value, is dissolved, or suspended, and their base materiality is brought to the fore; they come to communicate and facilitate bodiliness, intimacy, physicality, sensation, connection, memory, and the momentary. The homeless Else – a knowledgeable numismatist – muses on ten pence pieces, versus coppers. "Which metal is harder, silver or copper? It is not real silver. It is an alloy" (36). Besides density, money's other properties and peculiarities are unlocked: texture, weight, sound, width, and, strikingly, taste, subverting the cliché of "the smell of money," which is, of course, far more about its buying power than sensuousness. Else recalls passing coins between mouths with a lover. They had kissed "the different sizes of coin . . . back and fore, like a game, to see what each felt like" (36). The weight of a pound is "surprising" (38). The coins taste "metal," the "same as the taste of catarrh" (37, 38). They make a "jarring" sound (152). Later, inside the hotel, a group of women come together to search for money that is "thin" but not "too thin" – "a two or ten pence piece" with which the sister of the deceased girl, who has snuck into the

hotel, might undo a screw to open up the boarded-over dumb waiter shaft where her sister perished (136). Like the fiver, these coins are reread, rewritten, and redeployed by Smith's characters. Watched by Else, a journalist hotel guest named Penny, and the receptionist Lise, the sister of the dead woman throws handfuls of coins down the dumb waiter shaft and muses on gravity's leveling powers. Gravity, she asserts, renders everything, "A piano, a pea, a feather, a coin, anything," equivalent. "All much the same, everything . . . It makes everything as small or as big as everything else." (150). Coins, here, cease to be part of a commercial system. Rendered pure matter but also made to symbolize nonfinancial ways of being in the world, they are transported to a revelatory physical, metaphysical plane.

These women's behavior may seem rare and idiosyncratic, but recent work on the anthropology and sociology of money shows that – at its root – it is far from rare. Such scholarship counters the familiar narrative about money, a narrative anthropologist Bill Maurer names "the great transformation" (17). This is the story told and legacy left by Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, and others; that money universally transforms, deadens, homogenizes, and flattens, erasing difference and evacuating social possibility. In the nineteenth century, Marx saw money "confounding and compounding [. . .] all natural and human qualities" (169). At the turn of the twentieth century, Simmel argued its "colourlessness" repainted the world in an "evenly flat and gray tone" (414). More recently, as I have shown, Jameson, Fisher, and others have been inspired by such thinking, focusing on broader processes of commodification and financialization and the ways they universally foreclose nonrationalized cultural meaning.

Nevertheless, embedding itself in everyday life, recent anthropology and sociology counters this tale, uncovering evidence to the contrary. Surveying the field, Maurer gives a comprehensive and illuminating overview of "money's pragmatics" and anthropology's unique and productive contribution to money's story. The contributions of Viviana Zelizer are the most valuable here, though. *The Social Meaning of Money* (1994) surfaces the intimate, dense, complex social meanings and ties money accrues within social life. Focusing largely on marginalized communities and individuals and their distinct, creative engagements with money, she shows how people commonly assign separate meanings and uses to particular monies through earmarking, and exposes how money often circulates through personal networks. For women, the poor, and others, social connections exist not just in spite of money, but through it. Difference persists. As Zelizer asserts and shows, "the traditional dichotomy between the market and personal relations" frequently does not hold true: "it is very hard to suppress the active, creative power of supposedly vulnerable social relations" (34–35). She asks, "how does money really work," showing that, routinely, it does not work as prescribed (5).

In *Hotel World*, Smith sets these two competing stories about money in dialogue. She paints a picture of a money world fraught with homogeneity and impasse and then depicts actors, especially women, exerting their creativity on money to unlock heterogeneity and possibility. However, she and her characters

go further than Zelizer, offering something newer and more radical. Zelizer observes actors working with and inside money, bringing cultural richness to its use and inventing new currencies, but never ultimately suspending its monetary value or redirecting it to an alternative purpose. Smith takes the same root knowledge about money's movability and malleability and uses it to transform, pause, and stop money. In Smith's pages, money is changed. Moreover, it brings change. Made new through a series of rituals or performances that are at once affective, haptic, and personal and linguistic, artistic, philosophical, political, and social, it opens up new possibilities for inhabiting postmodern space, and new ways of being. Repeatedly, we see money either disposed of – abandoned on the street, thrown down the shaft, chucked in a wastepaper basket – or suspended as currency, making room for moments of community, intimacy, and bodiliness: those coin kisses, that collection of women (guest, receptionist, trespasser, and homeless) brought together off the corporate map. Again, Smith's text seems to encode this potentiality, and the radical meaning of these acts and their effects, here, through the double meaning of the word *change*. We meet Penny, the upper middle-class journalist, through the gaze of the ghostly dead woman and learn "Her life could be about to change." We see Lise, too: "Life, about change." And Else: "Her life, change" (30). Else, on the top deck of a bus, thinks about "people looking for change:" bus fares and transformation (66). In self-reflection, Lise concludes, "I am no world changer" (88). Moreover, Penny encourages Else to join the unusual activities in the hotel corridor: "It makes a change, fun at work" (141). In Smith's novel, change enacts change. Material money is made to work against the commercialism and associated quietism of the postmodern environment.

To return to where I began, for Jameson, postmodern hyperspace, unlike "the masterworks and monuments of high modernism," does not attempt "to insert a different, a distinct, an elevated, a new Utopian language into the tawdry and commercial sign system of the . . . city" (47). While the Bonaventure, and such space, allows the status quo to continue, with "no further effects, no larger protopolitical Utopian transformation" "expected or desired," material money, misused and remodeled by Smith's characters, becomes interventional (49). Driven by an imaginative, critical, ethical imperative, as opposed to a commercial one, it strives for distinction and instigates transformation, or change, if only for a moment. After the evening's metallic events, Penny retreats to her room and reflects on the night's goings on and that "gash in the wall" that is at once physical and ideological (178). She remembers "the width and narrowness of money . . ." and considers how "For a minute there, the universe had shifted. . . ." (177, 178). While she returns to her usual self and – in the service of capital – begins typing a fawning weekend supplement review of the Global that more closely resembles advertising copy than editorial, something of her transformative experience lingers: "A transcendent time is ready and waiting to be had by all" (181).

Continuing to Make New: Smith's Contemporary Modernism

Hotel World's terrain is thoroughly postmodern, then, but its narrative drive is not. The change Smith and her characters enact belongs to a different tradition. Critics have sought to challenge Smith's status as a postmodern author. In their introduction to *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (2013), Monica Germanà and Emily Horton acknowledge the prevalence of "postmodern motifs, structures and influences" in Smith's oeuvre, but underscore the way in which most of the essays in their edited volume "challenge Smith's postmodern designation, highlighting her concern with ethics and notions of authenticity and materiality as extending her work beyond the dominant scepticism in the postmodern era" (6). However, few of the essays in the collection make a claim for Smith as a modernist writer. Stepping back from close textual analysis, I want to suggest that the interventional, numismatic practice I have been exploring, and Smith's own writing practice, might well be designated modernist. In the most basic terms, Smith's characters experiment with language and form, and make new. So far, so textbook modernist. But, at this point, a practitioner of modernist studies – or a scholar of contemporary fiction engaged with modernism and its shifting meanings and status – should ask more. Which modernism? What model of modernism does Smith fit, and what "use vale" does she find for modernism today? Or, indeed, in what ways does she adjust our understanding of modernism and invent her own brand of it?

Several critics and writers have bemoaned the demise of the modernist project, chiming its death knell. Whereas Ian McEwan often adopts modernist techniques and sentiments, evoking Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) in his Bloomsbury-set single-day novel *Saturday* (2005), David James has highlighted how McEwan also negates this activity, seeking to "distinguish himself from any influencing tradition or precedent" (136). McEwan has expressed his desire to "write without supporters" and has cursed what he calls "the dead hand of modernism" (James 137). In the critical realm, Gabriel Josipovici seeks modernism in the present moment, but is unable to find it. Lamenting the state of the contemporary novel in English, he views it as a poor relation of its avant-garde modernist predecessors. He sees a difficulty at modernism's heart. For him, modernism is a mode that refuses to submit to norms of representation and thus only represents the impossibility of representing reality. Whereas he pinpoints modernism's origins as far back as the early 1500s, he finds it missing today. Asking "Whatever happened to modernism?", he asserts that now it is as if modernism never happened (1). Stephen Ross goes even further. Rather than bemoaning the state of modernist activity today, he designates modernism a phenomenon of the past. He argues that those past modernist works have themselves become defanged, because of academic institutionalization; through this codification, such works have accrued a petrifying, paralyzing respectability. Ross asserts that, "through the tireless efforts of T.S. Eliot, F. R. Leavis, and the New Critics, modernists' pronouncements took on an authoritative hue and became doctrines

rather than objections to be heard and responded to” (7). He considers “Modernism” a retroactive term that emerged “as the reified counterpart to the disruptive energies of the avant-garde” (Ross 7–8). Such arguments at once define modernism as interventional and position that interventional value as under attack. For these thinkers, antimodernist forces win out, and the presence of modernism in the present moment is negated.

However, although voices like these have been mourning the passing of modernism’s capacity for critique and innovation, a greater number of voices have been noticing, celebrating, and thinking through literary modernism’s vibrancy in the present moment, showing it to be both alive and well, with clout. Smith can be read as a present-day modernist, as a practitioner of what is increasingly being referred to as “contemporary modernism.” New work in modernist studies has paved the way for this nascent category. In *Modernism and Theory*, Neil Levi has argued that, when imagining modernism, we should consider “the idea of a contemporary perpetuation of artistic modernism,” as well as seeing “modernist works as events whose implications demand continued investigation” (121). Scholars such as Levi, Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, and Susan Stanford Friedman have ushered in and codified the temporal expansion of modernist studies.⁶ Such work expands the definition of modernism to encompass modernisms produced throughout the late-nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries and beyond, investigating current modernist activity within contemporary fiction, as well as debating potential modernist futures. More recently, as testament to the growth of this new conversation, the British Association of Modernist Studies devoted a whole conference to modernism’s contemporary status. Entitled “Modernism Now!” the gathering – its timeliness highlighted by the emphatic exclamation mark – sought to explore “the ongoing use of ‘modernism’ as a cultural, philosophical, and artistic category, analysing how and where modernism functions as a continuing aesthetic in the twenty-first century” (The British). Within this new critical climate, modernism is understood as an ongoing, unfinished phenomenon, rather than a period, a time-bound movement, or a set of styles and sentiments tied to a particular network or group. This accommodating conception complicates narratives of “late modernism,” modernist “afterlives,” and modernist “inheritances,” many of which serve to bracket and limit present-day modernisms’ autonomousness and originality. Rather than simply charting modernist pastiche, homage, stylistic activity, and other evidence of indebtedness, contemporary modernism allows writers to be thoroughly modernist in the present moment.

This new category, poised slightly uncertainly between modernist studies and contemporary fiction studies, is evolving alongside Smith’s oeuvre, gaining velocity and critical real estate as Smith’s works become more political, more experimental, and more modernist. This mutual growth is, perhaps, no coincidence. Smith has emerged as a poster child or favored case study for contemporary modernism, alongside other practitioners including Will Self,

6 See Mao and Friedman.

7 See Smith's introductions to *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield* and to *The Hearing Trumpet*.

Tom McCarthy, Kazuo Ishiguro, and, more recently, Zadie Smith. However, it is Ali Smith – ever vocal about the value of modernist writing and modernist writers – who serves as the principle creative advocate or brand ambassador for literary modernism in the present day, fueling the interest in and currency of contemporary modernism within the critical marketplace and the wider culture. Among other activities, she reads and speaks at talks on the topic, and writes enthralling introductions for new editions of works by modernist women writers.⁷ In her own texts, she self-consciously engages with modernism, setting twentieth-century modernist texts, authors, styles, and concerns to work in the present moment. More essentially, her novel experiments with voice, genre, narrative, and form to continue a modernist project, proposing something different from the stylistic and political conservatism of much contemporary British fiction. In doing so, she enlivens and adjusts the literary culture, paving the way for further experimental works to enter the literary marketplace.

Meanwhile, Smith's conception of her own identity (modernist or otherwise) is more complex. She typically responds irreverently and evasively when asked if she considers herself a modernist. When questioned at a talk on contemporary modernism, she asserted, "I'm never just an ist." She went on to joke, "If I call myself anything, I'd call it rather laughingly" and, paradoxically, aligned herself with Katherine Mansfield's modernist identity, which she termed "a sly, laughing modernism that doesn't really commit itself" (*Inventing*). However, that tentative, interwoven insider/outsider dynamic and the desire to shrug off the fixity of labels is in itself highly modernist. It recalls Virginia Woolf's courting of the press, popularity, and book sales, and her simultaneous fear of fame and publicity, and the way it "freezes one in an image" (Caughie 152). Indeed, at the same talk, Smith commented, "As I grow older, I find myself turning to Woolf" (*Inventing*).

Ethics, Politics, and Economics: A Welcoming Home for Smith's Modernist Mode

So what makes Smith modernist, especially at a time when the definition of what constitutes modernism has become so stretched and open that it is in danger of becoming a meaningless term? What does it mean to be thoroughly modernist today? Of what kind of activity do we speak? Smith's own sentiments can help lead us to an answer here. Smith's handling of modernism betrays no preciousness; she stresses that "one of the gifts of modernism" is that "we can do what we like with the structure" (*Inventing*). Rather than seeing contemporary modernism as a purely stylistic project, she seems to believe that modernist techniques are best brought to bear on the present moment and its pressing social concerns, to ethical and political gain. Her assertion that "The modernists were fascinated by the present moment, immensely aware of the pressure of time" and the need to "find a way to express in art a kind of actuality of things" suggests this drive and recalls her own

close attention to today's Jamesonian late capitalism (Young 138). She expresses it as a matter of doing something "which is symbolic and social at the same time." (Young 138). Modernist literature, Smith argues, is "symbolic of something larger, something more and else" (Young 138).

Here, Smith's language is vague or even euphemistic, betraying a conflicted desire to take stock of modernism's unique power and capabilities, while also avoiding theorizing – or making crude – both modernism and her own practice. But let me be crude. Cross-referencing Smith's comments with her own literary activities, it is possible to arrive at a clear translation. Smith sees modernism as possessing a unique political dynamism, one that is unlocked by imaginative activity that is motivated by an associated desire or imperative to interrogate the contemporary economic, social, and political milieu. Smith's modernism, then, is most potently located in a critical, interventional drive. Rejecting mere pastiche or homage, she rigorously 'makes it new' by putting modernist experimentalism and modernist sentiments to work in our own contemporary moment, arresting our particular, shared iteration of capitalist modernity. As such, I want to align Smith with another model of modernism that is currently emerging, and being retrieved, within modernist studies – namely an ethical, committed modernism. For example, Jessica Berman's *Modernist Commitments* reevaluates modernism's relationship to ethics and politics and makes a case for the political potential of the literary movement. Through a nexus of ethics, politics, and aesthetics, she examines "narrative experimentation as a force of social activity" and highlights modernist texts that offer "formal resistance to consensus-based realism in their oppositional political engagement" (8). Rather than seeing modernism as "a static canon of works, a given set of formal devices, or a specific range of beliefs," Berman conceives of it as "a constellation of rhetorical actions, attitudes, or aesthetic occasions, motivated by the particular and varied situations of economic, social, and cultural modernity worldwide and shaped by the ethical and political demands of those situations" (7).

Homing in, it's also crucial to consider recent qualifying and cautionary responses to landmark texts such as Lawrence Rainey's *Institutions of Modernism*. Although, thanks to the revisionism of Rainey and others, much work now explores the relationship between modernism and the marketplace, and the complicity of modernist writers and texts with capitalist culture, it is important to remember modernism's ability to resist norms and go against the grain, especially when it comes to the economic.⁸ Glenn Willmott has challenged what he sees as a "market fatalism" with which modernist texts and authors are branded by scholars. He argues, "there is an outside to the market" and asserts that it is vital we examine nonmarket activities and noncapitalist structures inside and outside modernist texts (199). This important revisionary activity, overwhelmingly, has been put to work to reevaluate early twentieth-century writings and writers, and accommodate a discussion of the various cultural forms – high and low – that they commingled with. Eyes are trained backward, extremely productively, yet

8 See also Willison.

at the expense of vital investigations into contemporary modernism. However, this promising, hospitable scholarly space, embracing politics, economics, and aesthetics on the same level, could prove a welcoming and fitting home for Smith's model of modernism: one that uses formal experimentation, aesthetic play, and other modernist strategies to construct a critical, interventional response to capitalist modernity in its current incarnation.

“They knew the dirt there is on money”: Smith’s Numismatic Modernism

Across her oeuvre, as well as in *Hotel World*, Smith confronts the violent cultural logic of today's money world, not by carving out a removed, elitist space of retreat, cleansed of the marketplace, but by using that status quo as creative fodder. She makes it the stage for her narratives and seizes upon its fabric to represent, interrogate, and, ultimately, counter it. As Berman asserts of modernist works, Smith's "rhetorical actions" and "aesthetic occasions" respond to and are shaped by "the power structures and discourses of our social life and institutions" (7, 6). Our world is "described and redescribed," as Smith explores what is "right and possible" within those structures, as well as "what we ought to be and do" (Berman 7, 5). In the case of *Hotel World* and many of Smith's other texts, the matter that is being scrutinized and reworked, "described and redescribed," is money itself, alongside space, labor, ideology, language, and plenty else (Berman 7). Smith's text, then, is inspired by cash. Inspired by the cash that flows through *Hotel World* and Smith's characters' experimental engagements with it, I want to name Smith's model of modernism "numismatic modernism." The creative use, or misuse, of coins in *Hotel World* is synecdochic of this whole project, and a helpful way in to theorizing it. Zooming in to the novel again, Else's practice is particularly pertinent. The homeless numismatist, together with her partner, gets up close to and grapples with money's grimy materiality, not in a debasing act of contamination or complicity, but in one of discovery, creation, opposition, and progress. Speaking through Else's interiority, the narrator tells us, "they knew the dirt there is on money and they still put it all into their mouths" (37). This is a productive slogan to articulate that which Smith seems to most value in "they," earlier modernists – namely their readiness to engage with and work with the economic in all its grubbiness, absorbing it and spitting it back out renewed and reminted, always in their own way.

This fragment also recalls the gumption and lack of preciousness that characterizes Smith's project, her desire to build an outside to the marketplace from within the marketplace, using its own tools and materials. In *Hotel World*, cash is deployed creatively to offer up something alternative yet recognizable, and is seized upon in an effort to voice resistance to the late capitalist, commercial status quo, from its own territory. Like Smith herself, Smith's numismatists can

be classified as modernists; the two practices are alloyed. To return once again to Jameson, Else and the others seek, like the projects of high modernism, to “insert a different, a distinct, an elevated new . . . language into the tawdry commercial sign system of the . . . city,” incongruously with money itself (47). Nevertheless, suspicious of binaries, divisions, and absolutes, Smith asks us to reread this idiosyncratic, culturally crisscrossing activity, and cease to see it as incongruous. Although the modernism I have been describing might appear to be a homogenized, utopian one, neither *Hotel World’s* numismatists’ efforts, nor Smith’s, should be designated utopian, as Jameson labels the projects of high modernism. Here, then, I deviate from Jameson, for the mode I analyze is not “high” modernist. It proposes something new, something more workable, something messier. Numismatic modernism does not strive to carve out an impeccably new space, cleansed of existing structures and materials. It does not seek escape or retreat, or to scrape clean and rebuild afresh. Rather, it is critical and pragmatic, working imaginatively within the limited realm of possibilities available to us in the contemporary wasteland. Unafraid to get its fingers grubby, numismatic modernism sorts through, scavenges, collects, and assesses the debris that strews the late capitalist landscape, uncovering new, alternative use values. In wedding change (cash) to change (transformation), it challenges our notions of ‘inside’ and ‘outside,’ unlocking dormant possibilities. The interventional clout of Smith’s text, I argue, lies in the way in which it challenges the integrity and grip of the money world, and the money form, through experimenting with money itself. In *Hotel World*, Smith succeeds in turning money into art.

Reading for Money: Uncovering Smith’s Numismatic Modernism

Smith’s numismatic modernism has earlier modernist precedents, and it is wholly her own. In an interview, Smith articulated her belief in modernism’s ability and desire to at once accommodate and comment on the stuff of capitalist modernity. As both a reader and a creative practitioner, she discerns and articulates the same commercial concerns revisionary scholars have begun to note in modernist works. Seeing modernism as a mode uniquely primed for tackling grubby economic subjects, she celebrates the way James Joyce knits an advert for Plumtree’s Potted Meat into the fabric of *Ulysses* (1922). Discussing the effects of Joyce’s choice to blur the lines between his words and those of advertising, she notes how this textual moment works productively on a personal level and a metaphysical level, while it also “shows up the ways in which those huge symbols attached to trivial everyday things cheat us, work us, make us feel, so that we’ll buy something” (Young 138). The commercial is at once mined and made use of, and critiqued. Such inspiration has shaped the concerns and content of her own unique works. Although Smith’s numismatic modernism encompasses broader, more diffuse economic targets such as the advertising and consumption she discusses in Joyce’s

work, she betrays a unique, almost purist interest in money itself. Numismatic modernism reaches its apex when it grapples with the money form – be it traditionally, straightforwardly numismatic coins and notes, or new, increasingly intangible and ‘fictional’ forms of money, from online banking, chip and pin, and contactless payment technologies to bitcoin.

Reading Smith for money, searching and studying like a coin collector; these experiments can be uncovered and connected across her oeuvre, as Smith continues, focuses, and extends the work of economically engaged early twentieth-century modernists. Numismatic modernism is present in Smith’s 2005 novel *The Accidental*, for example. Eve, a writer and mother, sets out on a journey, gradually and willfully divesting herself of all her money, taking up her position as another of Smith’s unconventional numismatists. In Las Vegas, she disposes of “coins in slots” – a false start (288). She wins, but then heads to the Grand Canyon, where she “flicked what she’d won . . . over the side,” “meaningless small change thumbed into the biggest slot in the world.” (288). The sum is uncertain, but the insinuation is that even if it were large, it is still “meaningless,” because her act of disposal removes it from circulation and deprives it of economic meaning. Eve wonders, “What would the payout be? What would thud down at her out of the world’s most massive machine?” (288). She is looking for a return of a different form – metaphysical, rather than monetary. When her husband calls to complain about the family finances, she tells him, “I’m nearly out, myself” (292). This cryptic admonition suggests a complex, intermeshed insider/outsider dynamic; Eve carves out an alternative to the marketplace through grappling with its most potent form, money. Disposed of and misused, money and commerce nonetheless linger, embedded in Eve’s language and imagination. This grimy residue is integral to the new meaning Eve is producing. It tells of the creative redirection that has made it possible.

Smith’s genre-bending *Artful* also enmeshes the literary or linguistic and the economic, to political effect. It theorizes the interplay at the heart of numismatic modernism by showing “Art is always an exchange,” and vice versa (160). The book’s title nods to Charles Dickens’s *Artful Dodger*: the pickpocket’s tricks and tactics inform the text’s playfulness. They are economic, trained toward monetary gain, but also intensely deft and artful. Smith’s own creative theft and redirection of Dickens’s character and his traits mingles art and money still further. An open and expansive passage in the section titled “On form” could be applied to this – seemingly paradoxical – oppositional yet fruitful synergy:

There’ll always be a dialogue, an argument, between aesthetic form and reality, between form and its content, between seminality, art, fruitfulness and life. There’ll always be seminal argument between forms – that’s how forms produce themselves, out of a meeting of opposites, of different things; out of form encountering form. Put two poems together and they’ll make a third (69)

This is the experiment enacted in Smith's short story "The human claim," from the collection *Public Library and Other Stories* (2015). Two forms, one economic, the other literary, modernist, and metaphysical, are trained on each other like particles in the Hadron Collider. The narrator documents their experience of Barclaycard fraud, while pondering a possible deception involving DH Lawrence's ashes. Brought together, opposed and entwined, the two narrated stories bring forth Smith's actual, textual story. The story is the product of a push and pull, but also of a productive, meaningful mingling. We are invited to consider the stolen money as mere ashes, and the ashes, which "could be anywhere" as a precious unit of exchange (95). Lawrence's modernist force inspires the narrator, bleeding into and changing the terms of their financial predicament: the economic is connected to, or turned to, art when the narrator takes control of their economic subjecthood and writes an authoritative, playful, creative, disruptive letter to Barclaycard's customer services department. The narrator thanks them for "allowing me to find out how easy it is to be made to seem like a liar when you aren't one," for allowing them to understand "a sliver of what it must have felt like for a couple of writers I like very much from the first half of the twentieth century to have suffered from consumption," and for having "brought a new layering of meaning to the word consumer for me" (93). The narrator is empowered to disrupt our "money world" still further: in their dreams, they multiply into an army of "freed-up me's" who daub text on the "doors and windows of the banks," empty cash machines then "[throw] the money on to the pavements," and wipe people's debts for fun. They "sneaked up and down the liftshafts" and "slipped into the systems," suggesting the construction of meaningful opposition through direct engagement with the economic forces being opposed: an intentional, creative infiltration that forges an outside within. The narrator finds a use value for modernism today, setting Lawrence's inspiration to work on "automaton messages," "surveillance," "porn shoots," and disproportionately remunerated "CEOs" (94–95). This militant ending is an affront to the distinctly 2015 context the wider collection speaks to, one in which privatization and cuts have rendered the concept of a public library – a space of art, not commerce – increasingly fictional. Notably, the narrator signs their, or perhaps her, letter to the bank "A. Smith" (93). Smith's writerly project – her numismatic modernism – affords her an imaginative space in which to take action, breaking the law of money.

Conclusion: Is Numismatic Modernism Modernism Now?

These are just a handful of examples. Together, Smith's texts form an economy through which the numismatic is constantly thought through and remade, via seemingly endless intertextual exchanges. Her oeuvre, then, can also be conceived of as an experimental, alchemical laboratory. Smith uses the prime material of our contemporary world – money – to propose a modernism that is at once

continued and new. In doing so, she gestures to what modernism might look and act like today: messy and so enmeshed with the contemporary world as to seem almost elusive, but in fact all the more ‘fanged’ because of that interplay. Although numismatic modernism is Smith’s unique, idiosyncratic mode, and a product of her attraction/repulsion relationship to money, it is also, more broadly, highly contemporary: an entirely timely mode. The escalation of our “money world” strengthens the imperative we see in Smith’s texts, and provokes the production of other oppositional, economically engaged art: diverse efforts many of which could also be named “numismatic modernism.” This dynamic, and many such modernisms, are documented in *The Contemporaneity of Modernism*, an edited collection that responds to our present-day context and explores associated, new iterations of modernism. It takes today’s rapidly increasing financialization and commodification at its root, suggesting modernism has a renewed purpose and mission in this climate. Editors Michael D’Arcy and Mathias Nilges argue “contemporary culture is returning to modernism” as we arrive at:

a juncture in which there is a critical reconsideration of the (postmodern) collapsing of modernist distinctions – the distinction between the commodity and aesthetic production, between the critical function of the artwork and the realm of culture more generally, between aesthetic autonomy and heteronymy, between aesthetic innovation and kitsch (2)

These are the distinctions numismatic modernism carefully considers and reconfigures for our contemporary moment. It creates a point of exchange between the postmodern and the modernist, continuing a modernist project by updating it, refitting it, and making it new. Numismatic modernism is highly relevant: a modernism our present-day situation needs and provokes. It is a form of creation that arises organically from the everyday meeting of our ‘money world’ and our artistic impulses. Is numismatic modernism, then, what it means to be a thoroughly modern (read: contemporary) modernist? Is this what happened to modernism?

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