## **‘A Ridiculous Thing that Passes for a Passport’: Seeking Asylum in Ali Smith’s Fiction**

Ali Smith’s *There but for the* (2011) represents a change in Smith’s work from metaphorical meditations on the stranger who enters domestic space to a more literal representation of the specific politics of asylum issues. In *There but for the* this political intervention takes the form of explicit engagement with the stories of people seeking asylum, and runs alongside Smith’s activism with the Refugee Tales Project. Through some dialogue with Derrida’s *Of Hospitality*, this essay argues that Smith’s recent fiction uses the passport and things that are offered in its absence – things that pass for a passport – as a way of exploring broader processes of analogy that compare the welcome offered to the stranger in the home to the welcome offered to strangers at the border.

## **‘A Ridiculous Thing that Passes for a Passport’: Seeking Asylum in Ali Smith’s Fiction**

Ali Smith’s 2016 novel, *Autumn*, was fêted in newspaper reviews as the first Brexit novel.[[1]](#endnote-1) The novel is the first of a quartet of planned ‘seasonal’ books, of which the second was published in 2017 and the third and fourth are projected for 2018 and 2019. In *Autumn* some of the shakiness of post-referendum national identity appears most prominently in the scenes in which we follow the novel’s British protagonist, Elisabeth Demand, to a post office where she attempts to apply for a passport. The passport application begins as bureaucratic farce, reinforced by the postal assistant’s comments, ‘You can’t joke about passports’ (20); ‘Witticism. [. . .] Will get you. Nowhere.’ (23). The hollowness of these jokes is increasingly obvious when laid alongside some of the other instances of documented and undocumented travel that appear in the novel, from opening images of tourists ‘holidaying up the shore from the dead’ (12), as bodies of adults and children wash up onto the beach, to the German woman in Nazi-occupied France with false identity papers (64), and the children seeking asylum at the end of the novel who are about to be sent to a detention centre rather than housed in the community (254). After another farcical encounter with bureaucracy as she attempts to prove her identity in a doctors’ surgery, Elisabeth Demand asks the novel’s central question about the physical nature of identity documents: ‘So what does a piece of paper prove, exactly, in the end?’ (106). The nature of the identity document as a ‘piece of paper’ – a physical document, a textual object – is reinforced when Elisabeth eventually receives her passport, which she comments is illustrated like a ‘Ladybird book on acid’ (195). The status of the passport as a document and a text – like a children’s book, just another piece of paper – establishes passports as textual objects and invites comparison with Smith’s book itself. At the same time, however, the passport itself is undermined by this comparison with a children’s book. It has become, according to Elisabeth’s mother, a ‘ridiculous thing that passes for a passport’ (196).

What, exactly, passes for a passport in Smith’s novels? In the recurrence of things that substitute and pass for a passport, I understand the resurfacing of long-held preoccupations in Smith’s work about the kinds of welcome that can be afforded to strangers. The figure of the undocumented person, whose very lack of a passport allows for the keenest delineation of its properties, always emphasises aspects of the passport that balloon out of the absence of the document itself. The seeker of asylum – without papers, textless, impossible to name (yet) as refugee or immigrant – is the ultimate manifestation of the stranger or foreigner, the representative of radical alterity.[[2]](#endnote-2) In accounts of the treatment of the stranger that are rooted in the ethics of hospitality – as in Jacques Derrida’s late work, or Emmanuel Levinas’s foundational ethics of the other – the unknowability of the stranger is central to the relationship of difference between the other and the self. A stranger is a stranger to the extent that their story is, as yet, untold. At the same time, the requirement for identification is a central part of the legal processes of hospitality that are enacted at a border. As Bridget Anderson has observed, in thinking about migration and the movement of people, the most important border may not be the border policed by guards and crossed with a passport, but the border ‘between citizen and migrant, between us and them’ (2).In Smith’s work, the passport is shown to be the paper-thin identity document that draws this division between self and other. Smith’s passports are resolutely material objects – quasi-books that invite us to compare literary documents and identity documents – but they operate as part of a system of self-identification through storytelling that stretches beyond the material object of the passport. Without passports, Smith shows, other things pass in their place. Ultimately, Smith’s investigation of ‘what passes for a passport’ becomes both an overtly political interjection into discourse surrounding migrants and refugees and an attempt to think through the place of literature in these debates.

# **‘Their story is their only passport’**

Smith’s work from around 2010 onwards has demonstrated a concrete concern with passports, border controls, and refugee rights, and this concern can be considered both a continuation and an overt politicisation of her long-standing interest in the dynamics of guest and host. These dynamics surface in many places in her fiction, including the guests, hosts and hotel ghost in *Hotel World* (2001) and the uninvited guest, Amber, who puts the plot of *The Accidental* (2005) into motion. Previous critical work on Smith’s novels has seen the figures of the intruder and the stranger as crucially significant, but has tended to read these figures fairly apolitically. Ulrike Tancke, for instance, has analysed Smith’s work in terms of intrusion, showing how outside events – often personified as individuals – intrude upon domestic space. Tancke argues for the universality of Smith’s topics, suggesting that ‘while at first glance both *The Accidental* and *There but for the* employ references to contemporary events’ they are not, in the end, ‘commenting on a particular zeitgeist or sociocultural condition’ (76). Patrick O’Donnell, in a similar vein, suggests that Smith’s work constructs a ‘community of strangers’ that is able to mediate between the cosmopolitan imperatives of universal care and respect for particular difference and that there is a universality to this ethical stance that is not limited to a particular historical moment (94). It is clear that there is some critical consensus that abstract, philosophical questions related to the figure of the stranger have long been a feature of Smith’s work, but there is less agreement about the extent of her fiction’s direct engagement with present-day political concerns. I argue, then, that Smith’s more recent work has taken up a position that unambiguously responds to the demands of the present moment and that represents a considered political intervention in that moment.

This change in Smith’s work is most obviously marked in *Autumn* and *Winter*, which are self-consciously responsive to emergent occasions. It is hard to ignore the explicit contemporaneousness in *Autumn*’s hot take on 2016’s news-cascade that was, as the novel puts it, **‘**like a flock of speeded-up sheep running off the side of a cliff’ (38). However, Smith’s turn to the zeitgeist does not begin with her ‘seasonal’ quartet.Smith’s short story, ‘The Detainee’s Tale’, published in support of the Refugee Tales Project in 2015, responds directly to the position of people detained while seeking asylum in ways which comment on the present day but also give some thought to precisely how literature might effect change to the policies on immigration detention. In the case of Smith’s patronage of the Refugee Tales Project, the direct intervention involves writing stories for a charitable campaign group for refugee rights and using the project’s annual walks and storytelling as a way of thinking about a ‘debate that criminalises / Human movement’ and the relationships involved in ‘listening to the tales / That other people tell / Of others / Told by others’ (Herd (4).[[3]](#endnote-3) In her most recent story collection, *Public Library and Other Stories* (2015), Smith includes ‘The Art of Elsewhere’, a piece originally commissioned by the Edinburgh International Book Festival in 2010. The story describes an imagined ‘elsewhere’ which, among its other utopian qualities, is without borders, passports or immigration controls:

Elsewhere there are no borders.  Elsewhere nobody is a refugee or an asylum seeker whose worth can be decided about by a government.  Elsewhere nobody is something to be decided about by anybody. (132)

Her 2014 novel, *How To Be Both*, also includes a brief scene in which characters exclaim over a (sadly, all too real) TV programme, *UK Border Force,* which depicts people ‘being checked and failed at passport controls’, as one of the characters asks, ‘When did this become light entertainment?’ (226). From around 2010 onwards, it seemsSmith’s fiction has offered new insights into hospitality and cosmopolitanism, but has framed these insights very pointedly through a focus on the concrete political realities of border controls and the passport as a marker for the legal processes of asylum and immigration. Concern about the treatment of people seeking asylum has therefore developed out of Smith’s much longer interest in hospitality and the stranger into something much more pointedly political and contemporary.

*There but for the* (2011)is Smith’s most lengthy engagement with issues of asylum and the rights of refugees, centred around two characters: Anna Hardie and Miles Garth.[[4]](#endnote-4) Miles is a dinner-party guest who locks himself in his hosts’ spare room and refuses to leave, trespassing dangerously upon their hospitality, and whose story connects those of the characters in the book’s four sections, ‘There’, ‘But’, ‘For’, and ‘The’. Anna’s story is told in the first of these parts. She has recently resigned in protest from a job compiling claims for asylum at the place she and her colleagues ruefully called the ‘Centre for Temporary Permanence’ (6). Anna thinks of her employer as the Agency – presumably the UK Border Agency, which was eventually dissolved in 2013 in a set of measures intended to intensify what Theresa May famously called a ‘hostile environment’ for undocumented migrants. The ‘hostile environment’ intensified by Home Office legislation in Britain in 2013 and 2014 was marked most strongly in the public consciousness by the deployment of vans reading ‘Go home or face arrest’ as part of measures to remove failed seekers of asylum and undocumented migrants in the summer of 2013.[[5]](#endnote-5) *There but for the*, published in 2011, precedes these legislative changes but not the larger ideological shift towards the ‘hostile environment’, which in Britain we might mark as simply escalating in 2010 with the start of Theresa May’s tenure as Home Secretary. The ‘hostile environment’ could be considered to extend to the treatment of people during the asylum process too, particularly through measures such as immigration detention, which Smith recognises in ‘The Detainee’s Tale’. One of Smith’s acknowledged sources for her novel is Caroline Moorehead’s *Human Cargo: A Journey Among Refugees* (2005), which traces an attitude of hostility to seekers of asylum back to the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Moorehead’s book tells of a growing international crisis of people seeking asylum who are both forced to wait for their claims to be considered and then refused asylum because their stories are not believed. There is, therefore, a specific context for Smith’s growing interest in the rights of those seeking asylum in the first decades of the twenty-first century. What I find intriguing about *There but for the* is the way in which the novel enacts the meeting of Smith’s older, metaphorical mode of dealing with philosophical universals with the specificity of a present-day political emergency. Miles’s story is a thought experiment (what are your obligations if a stranger takes up residence in your back bedroom?) but Anna’s draws together real testimony that comes directly from some of Moorehead’s interviewees. The philosophical questions about hospitality and dwelling that present as slightly surreal social comedy in Miles’s plot strand are real-world dilemmas for readers who take the stories in Anna’s part of the book seriously. I will return to the question of precisely how far we can draw an analogy between their two plots in the final part of this paper.

One of the most significant ideas that Smith takes from Moorehead’sbook is the suggestion that there are powerful ways in which stories themselves comes to replace the passport as a physical, textual object. Moorehead writes that, for people who have ‘thrown away their documents and tried to reinvent themselves’, the only thing left is the story that they can tell about their past: ‘their story is their only real passport’ (136). Moreover, the veracity of this story becomes absolutely central to the ways in which people seeking asylum are processed by the UNHCR and by border agencies, as border staff are, impossibly, asked to judge traumatised people’s abilities to construct a coherent and plausible account of their experiences as a condition of granting them refugee status.Moorehead therefore finds a demanding fictionality in the stories that are presented in place of a passport by people seeking asylum:

As I had learned from other refugees, it is not easy for people who have fled violence and persecution, or even poverty and despair, to cope with truth.

It is hard not to embellish the hardships of the past. Refugee life is rife with rumour. [. . .] The buying and selling of ‘good’ stories, stories to win asylum, has become common practice in refugee circles, among people terrified that their own real story is not powerful enough. How easy, then, how natural, to shape the past in such a way that it provides more hope for a better future. (136)

As Moorehead observes, in reality, ‘The tragedy comes when the real story, the true story, is stronger than the made-up one and would guarantee refugee status, while the false one does not’ (136). Rather than seeking out inconsistencies to identify the ‘bogus’ asylum claim, a more thoughtful response to the refugees’ stories is to ask why someone might need to reshape their past through storytelling. Fiction is the place where we ask these questions about the power of untrue stories.

The key phrase that Smith takes from this aspect of Moorehead’s investigation is ‘lack of credibility’, which Moorehead finds is a recurrent term of art in the refusal of refugee status; ‘lack of credibility’ signifies that those processing the claim do not believe the account they have been given (Moorehead 166). In *There but for the*, a modified version of this phrase becomes a terrible litany in Anna’s recollections of her work recording applications for asylum:

Anna had written it down in as shorthand a form as possible, what one man could remember of seeing his mother’s head being used by the border guards as a football. (This man was finally judged not credible.)

[. . .]

Anna had written it down in as shorthand a form as possible, which was easy in this case, what the woman who had been a university professor said, it is like my chest stops and the words will not, just will not, who had proved unable to finish that sentence and say what it was that the words wouldn’t do, and about whom it was decided by Anna’s superiors that she couldn’t possibly be as clever as her summary indicated, being so demonstrably inarticulate. (This woman was finally judged not credible.) (40-1)

These case studies, in their repetitive presentation and anonymity, offer a devastating critique of the process of identification that they are meant to perform. In the case of Smith’s university professor, for instance, the formal qualities of her story become a judgement on the authenticity of her self-identification, and therefore of her credibility.[[6]](#endnote-6)

It is easy to see why these questions of form might be of particular interest to a writer of fiction. Fiction’s long history of verisimilitude, as well as its more recent adoption of the fragmented, dissociative forms of the trauma narrative, seem perfectly placed to dramatise the impossible dilemma of telling a true story in a credible way. Contemporary readers are exquisitely aware of the falseness of the techniques that create a sense of realism, but also familiar with the other set of narrative techniques that give the effect of trauma’s absences and ruptures. As one of the four sections of Smith’s fiction/non-fiction hybrid, *Artful* (2012), ‘On Form’, explains, ‘Form is a matter of clear rules and unspoken understandings [. . .]. It’s a matter of need and expectation’ (66). The prevalence of the conventions of narrative verisimilitude therefore seems to bear some responsibility for the Home Office’s failure to recognise the credibility of stories that break the unspoken rules of coherent, essentially realist, story. We might even go so far as to say that reading contemporary novels might help people making decisions about refugees’ status to understand the forms of their stories more effectively. Smith’s own attention to style, form, and textuality – her puns, her play with titles, her novels that regularly burst into song lyrics and film scenes – invites a comparison with the asylum claimants’ either too-artless or too-artful stories, thereby politicising form itself.

At the beginning of the novel, Anna has been recalling the lyrics of the song ‘Bye Bye Blackbird’: ‘No one here to love or understand me. Oh what hard-luck stories they all hand me’ (9). Her job has been to take in hand all the ‘hard-luck stories’ of incoming asylum claims, but without receiving or giving love or understanding. As Anna puts it, her job was ‘to make people not matter so much’ (54), to treat their stories as unaffecting but also to reduce them spatially, to take up less than two-thirds of a piece of A4 paper. Like many of the details of Anna’s work, the pathetic brevity of these official profiles for people seeking asylum comes from Moorehead’s *Human Cargo*. The documentary nature of these case summaries, their textual slightness and (lack of) presence on the page appear elsewhere in Smith’s writing on the asylum process: ‘What kind of a life are we living on this earth when a photocopied piece of paper can mean and say more about your life than your life does?’ (‘The Detainee’s Tale’). It is the privileged status of the document and what it signifies of human value that Smith returns to in thinking about the imperfect analogies between passports, these hard-luck stories, and her own literary fiction – these objects that all overlap but don’t quite align, which pass for a passport. If a story can attempt to pass for a passport, Smith also finds that all kinds of objects get pulled into the passport’s orbit as a substitute for or supplement to it. Anna dwells on her collection of identity documents in *There but for the* – credit cards, debit cards, a driving license, and a membership card to the Tate gallery (63) – all of which emphasise movement, identity and belonging. In ‘The Detainee’s Tale’ the narrator – a version of Smith (successful author, regular speaker at literary festivals) – focuses on the identity card on a lanyard she is given to access the detention centre: ‘a beaten-up lanyard, a lanyard with a history’ (n.pag.). All these objects invite comparisons with the passports, but they will never pass for it or substitute in its place, just as the piece of paper should not ‘mean and say more about your life than your life does’.

 Smith reinforces the problem of receiving these hard-luck stories that fail to pass for a passport by showing Anna’s difficulties in hearing and summarising them. She is praised by her supervisor for her work in transcribing and editing the testimony without offering too much time or sympathy: ‘You are really good at this [. . .]. You have exactly the right kind of absent presence’ (61). In a novel that is full of absent presence – a rhyming ghost, an elderly woman with dementia, a man dwelling on the other side of a locked door – absent presence becomes a feature of the whole asylum process, from the claims managers who should not get humanly attached to the cases, and the people seeking asylum themselves who are both there and not-there while they are in the process of proving their identity as individuals and as refugees. Indeed, the real stories fictionalised in the novel are both present and absent, framed as they are by the reminders of the novel’s fictionality and textuality. The analogy between story and passport collapses because they so often fail to function in place of a passport by being judged not credible, bogus, artificial, artful, fraudulent, or fictional.

# ‘Crossing a border is a not a simple thing’

Alongside Anna’s sober set of reflections on the hostile welcome of the asylum system runs the social comedy of Miles’s occupation of his well-to-do dinner-party hosts’ back bedroom. Ben Davies offers a very convincing account of Miles’s strange central/peripheral place in Smith’s novel that begins by thinking about empty rooms and the 2013 British legislation introducing the ‘bedroom tax’, before reflecting on the novel’s awareness of dwelling in the context of ‘catastrophic refugee crises, mass homelessness, and other forms of human displacement’ (510). Dominic Head, on the other hand, understands Miles’s occupation as a ‘local gesture of protest’, which is comparable to a spectacular piece of performance art (106). Head identifies a parallel between Miles’s withdrawal and the way that Smith has, elsewhere, framed the writer as someone withdrawn from the social world. Writing happens, she has explained, ‘In a room with a pencil with nobody watching’, but she also worries that this might just be a misanthropic ‘perverse and antisocial response’ (‘Creative Writing Workshy’ 25). While Head frames this aspect of Smith’s work as a concern with the institutions of teaching literature and creative writing, it also seems clear that during the time of writing *There but for the* Smith became much more of an activist in the area of refugee rights – particularly through her involvement with the Refugee Tales Project – suggesting that her concerns about the writer’s isolation in a room of her own is something that she found limiting and unjustifiably narrow. *There but for the* therefore marks this turn outwards into much more explicitly political work and away from the writer’s natural ‘antisocial’ position.

One aspect of Miles’s role in the novel that has not been much discussed is a collection of ideas about borders and passports that surround him in the book. For instance, in the dinner-party exchange that precedes his withdrawal to the spare bedroom, the other guests discuss the merits of a neo-liberal ‘more or less borderless world’, interrupted by an objection from the precocious child at the table, who notes that the world may be borderless, ‘Except for the borders where they check your passport for hours’ (97). The novel also eventually explains that Anna and Miles knew each other briefly in adolescence when they went on a school visit to France together. Anna’s passport cements their friendship during this first encounter, when Miles recognises that she wants to go home and would ‘rather be there than here’ and messes around with a baguette, playing that it is ‘a passaporte’ and he has eaten his (45) – another object failing to pass for a passport. After renaming her with a punk-rock identity that holds up transnationally – ‘Anna Key in the UK, and Anna Key when she’s not in the UK too’ – Miles brings her back to herself by retrieving her passport from the teacher and giving her the choice about whether to go home (46).

If Anna’s part of the book bids us accept the challenge to welcome strangers through national borders, it does not necessarily follow that the same ethical rules apply in welcoming an individual into the home. Conventionally, the analogy between the nation and the space of the house is always present in the question of hospitality. As Derrida writes in *Of Hospitality*:

[T]he problem of hospitality . . . is always about answering for a dwelling place, for one's identity, one's space, and one's limits, for the *ethos* as abode, habitation, house, hearth, family, home. (149)

Smith’s novel, I argue, establishes Miles’s and Anna’s plots to test whether the analogy really holds between one’s home and the country as a whole – whether there are incongruencies or incompatibilities between a domestic model of hospitality and the ethical claims of refugees on a whole society. *There but for the* can be read as an answer to the too-facile substitution of the individual for the collective that can occur in all sorts of ways, from the claim that the national economy should be balanced like a household budget to the demand that before we welcome seekers of asylum as a nation, individuals supporting this collective decision should open their own homes to refugee families.[[7]](#endnote-7) It is this problematic analogy between the hospitable welcome into the home and the hospitable welcome at the border that the second part of this essay will explore.

In spite of her own professed resistance to theory (see Young 136), many readers have found Smith’s work illuminated by dialogue with Derrida’s writings on exchange, the gift, ethics, hosts, and hospitality.[[8]](#endnote-8) In *Artful*, Smith explains – and seems to disavow – an interpretation of border crossings and border security that echoes the model of the conventional, transactional model of hospitality that Derrida identifies as ‘the pact of hospitality’ in *Of Hospitality* (25). As Smith explains it, proof of identity is required before crossing a border:

Edges involve extremes. Edges are borders. Edges are very much about identity, about who you are. Crossing a border is not a simple thing. Geopolitically, getting anywhere round the world in which we live now requires a constant producing of proof of identity. Who are you? You can’t cross till we’re sure. When we know, then we’ll decide whether you can or not. (*Artful* 125)

At a border, the passport is the legal document that represents this process of reciprocity that starts with an exchange of identity information. In Derrida’s explanation of the role of the host in *Of Hospitality*, we see the same primary imperative towards controlling entry through identification:

[T]his foreigner, then, is someone with whom, to receive him, you begin by asking his name; you enjoin him to state and to guarantee his identity, as you would a witness before a court. This is someone to whom you put a question and address a demand, the first demand, the minimal demand being: ‘What is your name?’ or then ‘In telling me what your name is, in responding to this request, you are responding on your own behalf, you are responsible before the law and before your hosts, you are a subject in law.’ (27)

Conditional hospitality – the hospitality of passports and border controls – is an exchange in which I offer my identity for entry. The conditional hospitality of the law is not offered to the anonymous (and neither are the protections of the law).[[9]](#endnote-9) In contrast, the radical model of hospitality and ethics that Derrida goes on to explore is for unconditional, absolute or pure hospitality, hospitality that is available without recourse to identification. Genevieve Lee, the dinner-party hostess whose spare bedroom Miles occupies, sells her story to a newspaper’s Real Life column, writing, ‘I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that among our friends we’re renowned for our hospitality’ (68). However, for Derrida, hospitality extended to friends is no pure hospitality: ‘absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I *give place* not only to the foreigner, . . . but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I let them come, let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names’ (*Of Hospitality* 25). Genevieve therefore has an opportunity to extend this absolute hospitality to Miles, her ‘unwanted tenant’ whose imposition on her hospitality means that their relationship will never risk becoming a reciprocal exchange (7). Hence, if we accept that the passport represents the laws of hospitality, in which identification is traded for a welcome, it is Genevieve who provides the novel’s fullest test of the limits of those laws of hospitality and the unreasonable demand of the infinite welcome that absolute hospitality would put in its place. The demand of this pure hospitality is, of course, excessive and impossible. Reflecting this excess, Miles and Genevieve’s plotline is framed by the images of overload or supplementarity – from the occupation of the Lees’ ‘spare’ bedroom, to Miles’s status as a plus-one guest, to Genevieve Lee’s surname (the ‘toast to our hosts’ at the dinner party is ‘To the Lees of happiness’ [100]) – all reinscriptions of the excessiveness of absolute hospitality.

The grace implied – but not stated – by the novel’s title (There but for the *grace of God go I*) is what would, theoretically, enable the impossible gift of absolute hospitality. The grace of God is excessive, undeserved and unearned, an example of the pure gift which will not become a reciprocal exchange – absolute hospitality which will never even require identification or explanation. There is, nevertheless, a kind of grace – a kind of pure hospitality – involved in some understandings of the passport itself; while the passport presented at the border is part of a transaction, the passport is not earned in the first place, but often granted through an accident of birth. The response, ‘There but for the grace of God go I’, acknowledges the chance good fortune of benefiting from a passport and legal hospitality that others lack. Grace also appears in the most unexpected places in the novel: it is the name of the automated system for international calls that makes Anna’s mother redundant from the telephone exchange in the 1970s; it echoes through the recounting of a Gracie Fields film by May, the main character of the ‘For’ section of the book; it appears in the epigraph from *The Winter’s Tale*: ‘Every wink of an eye some new grace will be born’. Grace is therefore the missing piece of the novel’s title, whose absent presence is the sign under which the rest of the text operates. As Smith writes of Christine Brooke-Rose’s *Next*, the novel can become a vehicle for ‘purposefully luding the excluded’; playing with marginalised experiences to make absent stories present (‘The Armchair, the World’). Grace is moved, ludically, through the ‘deep punning optimism’ that Smith shares with Brooke-Rose from something excluded to an imagined possibility in the novel. There are a number of other references to Brooke-Rose and to *Next* in *There but for the.* The child, Brooke Bayoude, who is the central character of the final part of the novel, seems named for Brooke-Rose, and the title of the novel has lots of affinities with Brooke-Rose’s enigmatic one-word titles. [[10]](#endnote-10)

Mark Currie has read Smith’s persistent play with chapter titles that are both outside (heading the chapters) and inside (the first words of chapters) as a ‘recurrent game’ which ‘blurs the boundary between a title and what follows’, as well as pointing onwards to something missing (49). A title therefore *ought* to be a passport, and introduce and identify what’s inside, but Smith’s titles fail to perform that task of identification – they pass themselves off as passports but are incomplete and require supplementation. One source for this method of titling, linked as it seems to be to the passport’s mode of identification at the border, might be Kafka’s short story ‘Before the Law’. Kafka’s story, of course, also deals with the legal processes of hospitality that take place when someone must identify themselves ‘before the law’, even though, rather than having to identify himself the applicant at Kafka’s door finds that the door has been created specifically for him. In ‘Before the Law’, like the chapter titles of *There but for the*, thetitle is also the first word(s) of the story. Derrida’s reading of ‘Before the Law’ identifies those words – both the title and the first line– as the phrase that crosses ‘the invisible line that separates title from text’ (‘Before the Law’ 189). ‘Before the Law’ identifies the text itself but also the situation in which the character finds himself in the story. ‘Before the Law’ is therefore, disconcertingly, on both sides of a textual border at once. The connection with Kafka and the processes of legal hospitality are a part of the novel’s content as well as its form. The story offers commentary on the status of legal hospitality with the stranger at a border being ‘before the law’, as Derrida expresses it, meaning that he is both subject to the law and excluded from the law’s protections. Like an undocumented person seeking asylum, the stranger at the border is without and within the law at the same time – before the law in both senses of the word. Smith, in an interview, has recalled that *There but for the* began through a dialogue with Kafka’s work, starting with the image of Miles in the bedroom, before ‘the shadow of Kafka began to interplay with the image’, raising questions about what forces were compelling the man to stay in the room (‘Questions and Answers’). Kafka is also notably central to the rather tenuous connection between Anna’s story and Miles’s story: Anna is addressed as ‘Anna K’ in the email which brings her into the ambit of Miles’ bedroom dwelling, a name which reminds her of the paperback copy of Kafka she had read as a teenager (9).

Smith’s novel therefore moves between the injustices of laws of hospitality, as represented by the processes for managing asylum claims, and a consideration of the unreasonable, infinite demand that characterises Derrida’s Levinasian re-reading of absolute hospitality in terms of the gift. It is Genevieve who both represents this form of absolute hospitality and fails at the impossible task of maintaining or upholding the responsibility of the administration of something so demanding it begins to approach divine grace. In occupying the bedroom of the Lees’ house, Miles reveals the paradoxes at the heart of the guest/host relationship: is he a parasite, living off the resources of his unwilling hosts? Are his hosts unjust when they create a hostile environment for him in their home? Given what we have seen of the position the novel advances on welcoming strangers seeking asylum, we would expect the answer to these questions to be no, but the novel is significantly equivocal on this point. The Lees’ sections of the novel were relished by many reviewers for their satire of the Lees and their petty concerns; Sarah Churchwell in *The Guardian* is representative, describing the dinner party scenes as ‘sending up middle-class philistinism, complacency and cruelty’. Nevertheless, it is not completely clear that the Lees should be condemned for their vested interest in their own spare bedroom. The heavy-handed satire of these parts of the novel – Genevieve and Eric’s names become ‘generic’, for instance – does sometimes endanger the delicacy of the interaction between Miles and Genevieve, so it’s worth emphasising that Miles’s demands *are* troublesome and unreasonable, in spite of Genevieve’s offences.

Following Derrida, these should be the things that would enable Genevieve to demonstrate absolute hospitality, by gracefully ceding control of her bedroom to the stranger at the heart of her home and allowing her sense of herself as a subject to be transformed by the appeal of the other. In defence of Genevieve, she is the only character to experience the reformation of self and identity – the process of ‘answering [. . .] for one’s identity’ that Derrida names in *Of Hospitality* – which occurs through her reluctant, forced, hospitality. Reflecting on the stranger living in her house, she writes, ‘It is strange having a stranger in your house all the time. It makes you strangely self-aware, strange to yourself’ (69-70). Her understanding of herself is reshaped in the face of the stranger in her house, and she is forced to answer for her identity, as she becomes ‘strangely self-aware’. Her sense of herself is disturbed as, in Levinas’s terms, she encounters ‘the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself’ (*Totality and Infinity*, 39). Davies finds that Genevieve’s estranged discomfort is not sufficiently long-lasting and that she returns to her ‘comfort zone’ and does not allow ‘the strangeness of the stranger to open her up to new modes of thought and dwelling’ (513). In contrast, Davies suggests that Anna responds more readily to the challenge of Miles’s ‘call to thinking’ about the charged space of the spare room (513). Nevertheless, Genevieve *is* the one with a strange man in her spare bedroom and who does – at least momentarily – perform the role of the Levinasian subject, estranged from herself by the stranger. My point is that the demands on the two characters are not evenly matched, and that the novel uses this difference to bring to light the incongruous analogy between the neighbours, doorstep, and threshold of the country, and those of the home itself.

Through Miles’s occupation of the bedroom, I find that *There but for the* questions the infinite demands of absolute hospitality, while at the same time condemning the absolute hostility that exemplified by the official ‘hostile environment’ that extends even to seekers of asylum. While it is reasonable to extend a welcome to people seeking asylum, the same welcome does not have to follow in the home; the analogy between the country and the home is not a reasonable one.[[11]](#endnote-11) In the context of people asking for asylum, those demands have the weight of suffering behind them; in Miles’s case, there is no evidence that he needs to be accommodated in Genevieve’s home. When Miles squats in the Lees’ spare room, requesting vegetarian food and using the en-suite bathroom, he does not even have a ‘hard-luck’ story offered in place of a passport to explain his behaviour.

Smith has worked across the length of her career on the motif of the stranger who arrives on the doorstep and transforms the home from the inside. I began this essay by arguing that her turn outwards to the expressly political questions of refugee rights could be considered a move from the universally metaphorical to the politically specific in exploring the figure of the stranger. At the same time, however, a reading of her work suggests a very precise suspicion expressed towards this mode of analogy. *There but for the* is careful to put stress upon the obvious metaphor that would consider the ethical obligations of the hostess in the home and the welcoming of refugees to be exactly equivalent. When objects that ‘pass for a passport’ surface and resurface in Smith’s work, they are also representatives of some of these questions about the shortcomings of substitution or analogy. Hence, the symbolic mode of equivalence that is represented by analogy has come under some measure of suspicion. In an interview just after the publication of *There but for the*, Smith explains that literature allows for the possibility of being ‘symbolic and social at the same time’ (Young 138). I understand this to refer to the ways in which literature can deal in both the universal openness of symbolic resonance – in Smith’s case, her recurrent motif of the stranger who enters the domestic space of the home – but also with the specific social concerns of its own moment which, in the most recent stage of Smith’s career, has presented through her activism for asylum issues and the treatment of refugees. Engaging with literature’s social potential is not a disavowal of its symbolic power but, as this reading of *There but for the* has argued, Smith’s novel succeeds in identifying some of the limits of how one thing can, through analogy, pass for another.

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**Notes**

1. Sophie Gilbert in *The Atlantic* called it ‘a post-Brexit masterpiece’; Alex Preston in *The FT*, ‘the first serious Brexit novel’; Sarah Lyall in the *The* *New York Times*, ‘the first great Brexit novel’; Joanna Kavenna in *The* *Guardian*, ‘the first Brexit novel’. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This paper uses ‘seekers of asylum’ or ‘people seeking asylum’ to identify people who have not (yet) been granted official refugee status. There are good arguments in favour of applying the term ‘refugee’ to everyone in the process of seeking that status as a way of counter-acting the culture of suspicion about ‘bogus’ or ‘not credible’ requests for asylum. Nevertheless, for the clarity of some of the arguments I am making here, I have tried to be precise and internally consistent in terminology. At the same time, I have avoided using the term ‘asylum seeker’ because it has tended, in British popular discourse at least, to be tainted with some of the same air of condemnation associated with a broader assumption of fraudulence among people seeking asylum. I have also used the term undocumented migrant rather than illegal migrant, because the former term reflects more accurately the ways in which someone’s legal status might change over time, or even fail to be confirmed properly by the state’s procedures or record-keeping. For more on the terminology of refugee issues – and particularly for terms in translation – please see the UNHCR’s Refugee Thesaurus: RefugeeThesaurus.org/. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The Refugee Tales project grew out of a group that visited people kept in indefinite immigrant detention at Gatwick, and has expanded in its attempt to change the discourse around refugee rights more broadly to embrace ‘the language of welcome’ (RefugeeTales.org). Smith is their most high-profile patron. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Like most of Smith’s characters, their names have some punning significance. I will go on and identify Anna’s limited ‘hardy’ resilience to the ‘hard-luck stories’ presented to her during the asylum process but Miles’s name is meaningful too: a garth is a walled garden or yard, recalling his enclosure in the Lees’ bedroom. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The *Telegraph* interview in which May began using the ‘hostile environment’ phrase dates from 2012 (Kirkup and Winnett). The contrast between the ‘hostile reception’ May promises in the interview and the ‘language of welcome’ imagined by the Refugee Tales Project marks very clearly the distance between these two stances. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This character is also based on one of Moorehead’s case studies: Nsamba, a professor of economics at Kinshasa University, who was refused asylum by the Home Office on the grounds that ‘as an educated man, he would have described his journey more articulately had it been genuine’ (Moorehead 146). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Here, for instance, is Peter Hitchins in the Daily Mail, instructing exactly this: ‘Every one of the posturing notables simpering ‘refugees welcome’ should be asked if he or she will take a refugee family into his or her home for an indefinite period, and pay for their food, medical treatment and education. If so, they mean it. If not, they are merely demanding that others pay and make room so that they can experience a self-righteous glow’. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Lisa McNally has noted the influence of Derrida’s *The Politics of Friendship* on Smith’s use of the ethics of the other in her short stories (141-166); Stephen M. Levin calls upon Derrida’s notion of spectrality to understand *Hotel World*’s ghost and its engagement with international capitalism. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. This is a point that Derrida made explicitly in thinking about the *sans papiers* in France in the 1990s, noting that their status placed them nakedly outside the covering of the law; without papers, they were also without rights and virtually without the law (‘Derelictions of the Right to Justice’135). The observation is also one that Smith has made in her 2015 objections to the British government’s proposals to replace Britain’s adoption of the European Human Rights Act with a British Bill of Rights. ‘The government keeps calling it Labour’s Human Rights Act,’ she writes, ‘It’s not. It’s ours. It was a cross-party formation. It belongs to all of us. They want to replace it with a British bill of rights, as if all nationalities are equal, but some are more equal than others’ (‘Celebrating’). As Smith identifies, human rights law has to transcend national borders and citizenship, or it leaves migrants, stateless people and refugees open to violations of their basic rights and liberties. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Smith’s choice of a David Hockney painting of an armchair for the cover of the novel also recalls the quotation from *Next* she uses to title her essay on Brooke-Rose’s *Next*: ‘The armchair, the world’. See also Tory Young’s interview for more on Smith’s choice of the artworks for her books’ covers. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Genevieve also allows for questions about the gendering of hospitality that are implicit when this discourse of hospitality moves into the space of the home. As Judith Still has noted: ‘Host and guest are traditionally marked as masculine; hostess is a generally denigrated term in both French and English. It has overtones that are commercial, including the commercialisation of sex. . . If not commercial, the hostess implies hospitality offered by the master of the house, the true host, *by means of* his woman, the hostess’ (21). The role of the hostess is, traditionally, a delegated role, an identity always under instruction, under a master. Smith’s *There but for the* is significant in its gendering of the role of the hostess in the figures of both Anna and Genevieve; if Anna is the resistant representative under the instruction of the hospitality/hostility of the law, Genevieve is the hostess who is asked to extend pure, impossible, excessive, unreasonable hospitality *by means of* herself. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)