

Historiographic Metafiction Against the Story Economy in Zadie Smith's *The Fraud* (2023)

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In today's "story economy" (Mäkelä et al. 2021) beset by authenticity, authors' life experiences and identities are often instrumentalized to determine their "narrative capital" (see ENN8 call for papers). However, contemporary authors with intersectional identities, such as the Black British women writers Helen Oyeyemi, Zadie Smith, Andrea Levy, and Natasha Brown, increasingly and emphatically refuse this economy by turning to metafiction in their writing. Their novels deploy experimental form and genre reflexivity to confront readers with the often racialised and gendered "valorization of storytelling" and reflect on authorial ethos in telling the "saga of other people's [lives]" instead of "the story of one's own" (Smith 432). This paper analyses how Zadie Smith's *The Fraud* uses metafiction to reflect on diachronic changes in form and attitude towards the genre of realism and how the novel itself embodies "generic change" (Hauthal 2013) by combining the neo-Victorian novel with the neo-slave narrative.

Specifically, this paper proposes that, in *The Fraud*, Smith embeds a neo-slave narrative into a neo-Victorian novel to develop these genres through genre-reflexive comments whilst her embedding of narrative perspectives connects the sentimental function of realist writing and the prominence of the sensation-driven "treadmill of literature" (Smith 347) in Victorian colonial society with the 'identity-first' story economy we live in today. Set between the 1830s and the 1870s, *The Fraud* links the "phallogentric" dissociation between social realism and more feminine sensation literature (Walezak 14, see also Cox and Tuchman) to the gendered historicization and moral evaluation of modern literary values "like complexity, ambivalence, self-reflexivity, impersonality and polyphony" (panel description). In this way, the novel echoes arguments made by narratologists Paul Dawson and Joan Peters, who propose that contemporary metafiction urges us to revise the gendered "story" from the rise to the death of the novel, propagated by Ian Watt and his contemporaries. However, *The Fraud* is not just invested in the rewriting of literary history and valuation, but its metafictional complexity also refutes the moral expectations imposed on authors in the story economy, such as "clear affective stance" (panel description), which earlier neo-slave narratives, e.g. Andrea Levy's *The Long Song* (2008), adhered to more closely by ascribing to the postcolonial paradigm of 'writing back'. Critics expecting a similar straightforwardly postcolonial use of historiographic metafiction lament that Smith's historical novel replicates, through her choice of narrative perspective, the racialized power dynamic between a Victorian white woman and a formerly enslaved man. Yet, as indicated by the predominant focus on the sensational lives of canonical authors in the mainstream reception of *The Fraud*, critics crucially failed to grasp the self-reflexive reading strategy the novel models for its readers as well as Smith's intersectional critique of the feminist ethics of her Victorian female author figure. By tracing these complexities, this paper ponders the socio-political affordances and limits of deploying metafiction to reflect on, mimic and/or counter the story economy.

Works cited:

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