



Is this London? Chance, Crisis, Aggression, Weirdness and Expense

by Amy Sergeant

ABSTRACT: The article discusses a number of post-millennial London narratives in print and on screen. Significantly, these use chance as a structural device, contrive chance encounters between disparate characters and/or twists of fate in individual characters' lives. It is concerned with the changing fortunes of different areas of the metropolis by way of economic and cultural capital, migration within and beyond London, immigration and shifts in generic representations of the city. Chance here designates lucky, improbable, arbitrary and coincidental occurrences: modern inflections of a mythologised metropolitan theme.



KEY WORDS: Fleabag; Daphne; Capital; Brakes; NW; Portobello

Time Out, the London listings freebie, in November 2016 volunteered the latest of many variations of the original Monopoly board (Hill 2016: 27-35). This indicated the status of new East End attractions – the 2012 Olympic Stadium sitting between yellow-banded Granary Square and Canary Wharf (beneficiaries of gentrification by capital) displacing the prestige of Piccadilly. Red-banded vibrant locales, such as Silicon Roundabout, Commercial Street and Broadway Market (promoted, not least, by *Time Out* itself), in place of Fleet Street and the Strand, marked shifts and fragmentations of economic and cultural status since the board's inauguration in 1936.¹ Chance cards included a hipster figure announcing “get out of jail free” as a reward for responsibility for the financial crisis and “gentrification!” requiring an extra payment of £100 for every street acquired. “100 likes” for an avo toast Instagram received brand sponsorship and rent paid for a month: £800. One utility square was occupied by the Boris bike.

This article discusses fragmentation within particular London “pockets”, between long standing residents and incomers gentrifying by collective social action, the upwardly and downwardly mobile, indigenous communities and first and second generation migrants.² It is concerned with the television adaptations of John Lanchester's 2012 *Capital* and Zadie Smith's 2012 *NW*, while also making reference to the 2016 BBC series, *Fleabag* (adapted from a sketch and stageplay), Blake Morrison's 2007 *South of the River* and a number of Ruth Rendell novels, equally firmly located in London. In these post-millennial narratives, life in London is often depicted, like Monopoly, as a game of chance. Some use chance as a structural device; some deal accidental twists of fate to individual characters' fortunes. Generically, the narratives considered cover “slice of life” drama, romantic comedy and, in its recent oppositional guise, the “anti” rom com (Peter Mackie Burns' 2016 *Daphne* and Mercedes Grower's 2017 *Brakes*), featuring *not* “so happy to be modern women”.

CHANCE AS STRUCTURAL DEVICE

Love Actually (Richard Curtis, 2002) can in many ways be understood as both an amalgam of, and an inspiration for the uses of London seen in earlier and later films. It deploys tropes familiar from several other Working Title rom coms. There is a chase sequence

¹ For the contentious history of Monopoly, see Moore (2003) and Pilon (2015).

² On the distinction between gentrification by capital and gentrification by collective social action, see Butler and Robson (2003: 26).



culminating in a public declaration of love (as per Roger Michell's 1999 *Notting Hill*), a flight-inducing family gathering (as per Sharon Maguire's 2001 *Bridget Jones's Diary*), an ill-fated love (as per Mike Newall's 1994 *Four Weddings and a Funeral*) and recognisable celebrity cameos (as per Sharon Maguire's 2016 *Bridget Jones's Baby*). The film uses familiar London locations (the Albert Bridge, the Embankment, Oxford Street and a mews). In the texts which are my focus here, these uses of location are recalled and invoked anew.

Thus, in Euros Lynn's television adaptation of *Capital* (BBC, 2015) "Bogdan" – Zbigniew Tomaszewski – the Polish builder (Radoslaw Kaim) takes Matya, the Hungarian nanny (Zrinka Cvitesic), to the London Eye on their first date; by night, the lights of Canary Wharf blink, distantly. Meanwhile the heroine of *Fleabag* is unceremoniously dumped by her latest attachment outside Oxo Tower Wharf, Bankside, and in *Brakes*, one couple makes an appointment for Friday evening at the Oscar Wilde statue, one (Kate Hardie and Paul McGann) meets by chance in the British Library, while another (Kerry Fox and Roland Gift) becomes accidentally re-acquainted at St. Pancras International. *Love Actually* also shares with a number of recent London narratives an array of disparate characters whose paths cross during the course of the action. Here, coincidental connections are somewhat tortuously (but rewardingly) contrived. Mia (Heike Makatsch) initiates an affair with her boss, Harry (Alan Rickman) which is duly discovered by his wife, Karen (Emma Thompson). Karen's brother, David, the Prime Minister (Hugh Grant), acknowledges his feelings for a Downing Street household assistant, Natalie (Martine McCutcheon) and pursues her to her family home at the "dodgy" end of Wandsworth, where Mia is discovered to be Natalie's next-door neighbour. Meanwhile, Sam (Thomas Sangster) learns to play the drums in order to impress his beloved, Joanna, at the local schools' Christmas concert, likewise attended by Harry and Karen, David and Natalie, and a couple of recently hooked-up film stand-ins, John and Judy (Martin Freeman and Joanna Page). Miraculously, Sam's bereaved step-dad, Daniel (Liam Neeson) – friend and confidant of Karen – finds his fantastic object of desire, Claudia Schiffer, materialises as Carol, a fellow proud parent at the concert. The shop assistant (Rowan Atkinson), who has sold the tell-tale necklace to Harry, just happens to reappear at Heathrow Airport to abet Sam's last minute dash for Joanna. There is a generous sprinkling of fairy dust over proceedings, as decoratively gift-wrapped and sweet-smelling (with the merest hint of a sour note) as Selfridge's can seasonably offer. The easy conviviality of a village in the city is a microcosm of the international love fest of *Love Actually's* opening and closing sequences.

Chance occurs as a structural device in Ruth Rendell's novels *Thirteen Steps Down* (2004), *Portobello* (2008) and *Dark Corners* (2015), but chance is also commented upon by way of inheritance and placement as contingencies of London life. As the *Guardian* puff for *Portobello* observed:

Rendell's take on Notting Hill restores some of the rawness taken away by gentrification and the saccharine stammer of the film of the same name, tapping



into its former reputation for slum landlords, racial tension and nasty cops, who had a trick of stepping on your foot as they threw you downstairs [...] The plot is driven by the anxiety of things ending badly, a sense of urban shiftiness and the frailty of privileged enclaves. (Rendell 2008: ii)

In terms of Notting Hill's screen representation, the novel has more in common with Bryan Forbes' 1962 *The L-Shaped Room*, John Boorman's 1969 *Leo the Last* and, in retrospect, Lone Scherfig's 2010 *An Education*. Rendell's *13 Steps Down* reminds its reader of the association of the area with the notorious serial killer John Reginald Christie and Richard Fleischer's 1970 film, *10 Rillington Place*.

Rendell displays a keen ear for shifts in accent and idiom, between classes and across generations and religions. She likewise comments on the vicissitudes, the decline and resurgence of neighbourhoods:

When the houses were built around the top of the Portobello, "road" was a classier name than "street". And the houses are becoming classy again, tall ones divided into flats, smaller ones, the size of Uncle Gib's, smartened in ways that would be unrecognisable to their early owners. New front doors, new windows, discreet cladding, window boxes, bay trees in tubs – anchored down because this place is rich in crime [...] this is twenty-first century Britain where everyone has luxury and no one has any money. (2008: 133)

Twenty-first century residents of Notting Hill leave their hall lights on when they are away, in the vain hope that this will deter burglars. Eugene Wren, who remembers the cuff he received as a boy for knocking a lemon from Sid Gibson's stall, has inherited his antiques business from his father. Its premises have meanwhile moved up to Kensington Church Street, where "gallery" is designated as more appropriate than "shop".

The characters in John Lancaster's original 2012 novel *Capital* also find that the cultural and monetary connotations of 'capital' are intrinsic to their experience of the city. Matya understands that the same London locality can be called Brixton (when people want to sound "cool") and Herne Hill (when people want to sound "posh"). Uncle Gib (Gilbert Gibson) has a house at the "dodgy end", right up by the Westway and the Hammersmith and City line. A long standing resident, he is something of the equivalent of widowed Petunia Howe (Gemma Jones) in *Capital*: a flashback sequence summarises her being carried over the threshold after her marriage, the birth of her daughter, Mary, and her departure with Mary for the funeral of Albert, Petunia's husband. Mary Leatherby (Lesley Sharp), like many of her generation of Londoners, has moved out to Essex. But their fates are undeservedly and randomly unequal. Uncle Gib lets out a room, unofficially, to a Romanian migrant, Dorian Lupescu, who is accidentally killed in an arson attack intended as retribution against Gib's nephew, Lance Platt – who opportunistically cases then burgles Wren's house – in addition to other local residences. Lance replies to an advert posted by Wren following the accidental discovery of a sum of



money dropped in a random assault on another Notting Hill resident (coincidentally, the son of the purchaser of a painting which secured Wren senior's fortune). By way of dramatic irony, Gib is, himself, responsible for the fire from which he benefits (in Monopoly terms, he draws on the community chest by way of house insurance): "When his house in Blagrove Road was finished he would let it out in flats. It would make three fine apartments. Uncle Gib grew almost dizzy at the prospect of the money he could make in rents" (Rendell 2008: 368). Zbigniew, in *Capital*, discovers a suitcase of money hidden by Albert in a wall cavity, combining, says Mary, on its return to her, her father's two hobbies: "DIY and miserliness". It appears that the stash is no longer legal tender, almost as useless as token currency in a board game. It seems a pity that Petunia did not have the benefit of it during her lifetime. While Zbigniew is saving the earnings garnered from work at Pepys Road properties on behalf of his father's retirement in Poland, Mary, in view of a lucrative sale, hires Zbigniew while her mother is still in residence. *Portobello* and *Capital* both address the shifting social and economic demography of particular London pockets.

CASUALTIES OF CHANCE

The television adaptation of *Capital* underscores the changing fortunes of London localities through interspersed game machine graphics: house prices rocket monthly, from September (£2,750,000) to the following June (£2,895,000). Pepys Road residents receive harassing personalised notices which escalate by way of DVDs into intimidating postings of dead rodents and capitalised lettering along the length of the road. A prank turns nasty. Some sort of normality is eventually restored by neutral estate agent postings, of which Uncle Gib, in *Portobello*, is likewise a recipient, of the same message: WE WANT WHAT YOU HAVE. Aerial shots, reminiscent of David Lean's 1944 *This Happy Breed*, suggest that this straight-ranked Clapham road is representative rather than exceptional.

Freddy Kamo, a Senegalese football prodigy, signed to a Premiership London club, is one of Lanchester's characters omitted from the screen version of *Capital*, writer Peter Bowker's decision to exclude him presumably prompted in part by Kamo's lack of interaction with his fellow Pepys residents. A snapped knee on pitch – the consequence of a minutely misgauged tackle – abruptly brings to an end his promising and potentially lucrative career (he starts on a salary of £20,000 a week). Freddy and his father do not own the house. However, they are similarly targeted by the sender of the abusive postcards – begging the question of an anonymous sender's unthinking presumptions.

Roger Yount, the banker (Toby Jones) and, more forcefully, his wife Arabella (Rachael Stirling), demand that the police identify and prosecute the perpetrator: materially, Arabella presumes, they have most to lose and is surprised to learn that the shop-keeping Kamals are also recipients of the postings. "What use is thirty grand to anybody!", Roger exclaims. Meanwhile, Arabella has, mentally at least, already spent



Roger's much larger anticipated bonus. "Your car, my car, the family car, Conrad's school fees, nannies, tax, pensions, holidays, the extension on the weekend home, the basement, gardeners on both houses, your frock money", lists Roger. "Name one of those things that isn't essential", snaps Arabella in reply. Arabella sniffs at the prospect of spending a "dowdy" summer holiday at the weekend home in Minchinhampton – to which the family is ultimately obliged to move when Roger loses his job, as a result of his professional negligence, his failure to check on his overweeningly ambitious deputy. Arabella is more familiar with Waitrose than with the local corner shop and – a subtle yet extravagant distinction – suggests to "Bogdan" that the incomers will regret their choice of cabbage white paint to replace the existing chalk (which he duly recommends to Mary Leatherby). Roger gives Matya the Federer shirt bought with her at a charity auction as a parting gift. It is a gift – but one which he can still well afford.

For Zimbabwean Quentina Mkfesi (Wunmi Mosaku), £30, 000 is not an inconsiderable sum and there is no possibility of a safe haven in the Cotswolds. She is not in London voluntarily. Bereft of choice, she lives in a refugee hostel, a "not nice place", and works illegally as a parking warden, under an alias and, under duress, pays for this privilege. Her patch of London includes Pepys Road. In 2007, Free Parking in London is strictly regulated. She is betrayed, put in detention (the equivalent of Monopoly's "Go to Jail") and discourages Mashinko Wilson, the man whom she has befriended at church, from visiting her – it would be better for him to forget, she says. Meanwhile, the Kamals "Visit Jail" when Ahmed's younger brother, Shahid, is arrested on suspicion of terrorist offences. Coincidentally and unaware of their connection via Quentina, Mashinko and Roger meet at a park bench commanding a fine view over the metropolis. Quentina's acceptance of the cruelty of fate is set against Arabella's expectations of idle luxury. The encounter also suggests that London itself, as the centre of a former empire, has dealt differently with latterday inheritors of imperialism. London's place is no longer secure as global financial capital, with Roger's German boss, Lothar, serving as a reminder of the challenge of Frankfurt. Old school manners are no longer sufficient to save Roger from sharper-toothed competition. Roger leaving the office, in sight of Canary Wharf, with his personal possessions hastily deposited into a plain brown cardboard box, is an image redolent of news reports of the 2008 banking crisis. Matya and Zbigniew, and Dorian in *Portobello*, migrant workers from a newly expanded European Community, serve as a reminder that, as Pamela K. Gilbert has noted, "metropolitan capitalism requires poverty, both local and peripheral, as a resource". (Gilbert 2002: 29)

Fleabag, directed by Tom Kirkby and Harry Bradbeer, written and starring Phoebe Waller-Bridge as its eponymous anti-heroine ("a snarky sexed-up Bridget Jones", commented critics), is a dark comedy of contemporary manners. Fleabag and her older sister, Claire (Sian Clifford) are mourning the death of their mother and coming to terms with the marriage of their father (Bill Paterson) to their former godmother (Olivia Colman). This stepmother is not just evil – she's "a cunt", Fleabag tells us – and so she appears. In addition, Fleabag is bereft at the loss of her BFF, Boo (Jenny Rainsford), cued in flashback, with whom she has opened a small cafe (as per the titular chef of Daphne,



evidence of London female employment in the service sector). Boo has been killed in a traffic collision (sadly, a typical London aggressive cycling pile-up, covered by the local press). Boo had stepped into the road deliberately, hoping that a broken finger might put her into hospital and thereby arouse attention from her philandering boyfriend. Hillary, the guinea pig, a present from Fleabag to Boo and the inspiration for the cafe's unique decor (sufficiently weird to merit a *Time Out* mention, indeed, albeit not a cafe for guinea pigs) serves as a reminder of her loss, as do the "messagios" from Boo retained on Fleabag's phone, perhaps both comforting and painful. It transpires, by way of snatchy, suppressed, momentarily surfacing visual memories, that Fleabag betrayed Boo and is thus guiltily implicated in the staged "accident" gone wrong. Fleabag recalls a time when she and Boo together contentedly sang "happy to be modern women". Visual glances (cringeing grimaces, raisings of eyebrows etc.) and verbal asides to camera invite the viewer's confidence – sometimes jokingly complicit, sometimes confessional, sometimes downright desperate. Occasionally, Fleabag delivers what might be dubbed a "vagina monologue".

There is sibling rivalry and also bonding (not least in the women's recognition of one another as "bad feminists") between Claire and Fleabag. The careerist older sister (two degrees, a husband and a Burberry coat) extends her assiduous planning to her own surprise birthday party (actually, more of a business venture). Fleabag advises Claire's obnoxious American husband that "this is London [...] buy her something weird and expensive". Claire is concerned about the accumulating stack of final demands at the cafe, which fails to attract sufficient customers, and one potential "customer" shamelessly avails himself of a table simply to plug-in his laptop and accessories (again, the cafe as workplace is a recognisable contemporary London scenario – "good" for scroungers). By way of compensation, Fleabag overcharges her sister in preference to borrowing (a vestige of pride) and denies change on a £12.55 demand for a cheese sandwich: "London" prices she explains with a shrug in response to a genuine customer's incredulity – who, nevertheless, pays. The vicious self-adoring stepmother undermines Fleabag's already low self-esteem by referring to her *little* (as opposed to Claire's beautiful) coat and to the cafe as a *little* restaurant (less hip nomenclature), discarding flowers brought by the daughters in memory of their mother, sniping at Fleabag's inability to retain a boyfriend and dismissive appraisals of candidates (rabbit-toothed appropriate, too good-looking inappropriate), labelling Fleabag as "Here to Help" wine waitress at her exhibition launch. "You really do look ghastly, darling", she says (this is not kindly meant).

Time Out puffed *Daphne* as "like a romantic comedy with all the bullsh*t taken out". Reviewers made comparisons to *Fleabag*. The film's trailer carried the tagline "in a city that has everything the hardest thing to find is yourself". In truth, there is not much humour, here, and little romance but, finally, some glimmer of hope as Daphne (Emily Beecham) makes and restores connections with fellow Londoners. Unlike Boo, in *Fleabag*, Daphne manages to dodge aggressive cyclists. An irrescuable white bike on railings serves as a shrine to a sadly typical London traffic incident. Daphne drinks and



snorts more than is good for her. An exotic and expensive imported cheese is gleefully shared with her Irish boss, Joe (Tom Vaughan-Lawlor) as if it is a parcel of a rare strain of illicit drug (evidence, along with a free magazine of the same name, of the rise of "Foodism" in the capital – not least in Daphne's Southwark). Daphne, on her own admission, has "given up on people" – she's a bitch, she says – resenting a friend's relationship with another woman and refusing to reunite with other school friends. Weirdly, she keeps a pet snake, Scratch, for company. One delivery man is informed that she'll make up the £2 shortfall in payment by screwing him on his next visit; a second delivery man tells her that she looks rough – and the comment is kindly meant. She tells a one-night stand that "love is a sickness – the psychosis of ordinary people like you". As in Saul Dibbs' *NW* (C4 2016), casual sex is a form of escape. Freudians might choose to describe Daphne's behaviour as abject. David (Nathaniel Martella-White), a bouncer who has refused Daphne's re-entry to a club, invites her out on a date but she subsequently fails to return his calls. David thinks her a cynic; Daphne thinks of herself as a realist. When it comes to sex, she is crudely materialistic. Perhaps she is reading the wrong philosophers. Joe is more pragmatic: "Love and sex – we make do – it's whatever works".

Daphne's cynicism, her lack of sensitivity to work colleagues and her hostility – not least towards her own mother – may be seen as a self-protecting pose, a tough carapace worn as a defence against, as Joe reminds her, a tough world. Yet, in spite of herself, Daphne is capable of small acts of kindness. At the end of a long shift she makes and wraps a sandwich then hands it to Francis, who sits on the pavement outside the restaurant – she bothers to acknowledge his name and his existence. On a bus, she embarks on an everyday conversation with a young woman and her baby but cuts it short by her out of the ordinary frankness: her life is terrible and her mother is dying of cancer, an illness with which Rita (Geraldine James) "copes" by adopting Buddhism (a rare moment of levity) and homeopathy (of which Daphne disapproves) – but these strategies appear to work for her. Fleabag's fashionable mindfulness "retreat" weekend with Claire, funded by their father, is met with equivalent – and justifiable, by way of its representation – scepticism.

Significantly, Rita's slow death is set against a potential sudden death in Daphne's bumpy path to self-awareness. She witnesses the stabbing of a shopkeeper, Benny (Amra Mallasi) – a match for Ahmed Kamal in *Capital* – is initially stunned then calls an ambulance and accompanies him to hospital. She picks his dried blood from her fingernails. As a consequence of this trauma, she is offered counselling by Victim Support – which she initially rejects (a pretence at coping). Daphne's friend, Rachida (Rita Arya) asks whether the victim of the attack was black – statistically more probable, she says (sadly true) – but Daphne claims not to have noticed (perhaps a defensive attempt to erase or suppress the memory, perhaps resisting an acknowledgement of Rachida's own ethnicity, perhaps thinking that indifference to colour is some form of white politeness). Moving out to Richmond or Wimbledon might be safer, suggests Rachida, kindly (also, quite possibly, true). On the second encounter with the counsellor, Adam (Jewish, she clumsily surmises), Daphne has become more accepting of her need for



help. She doesn't want to talk, she just wants to sit for a bit. London life has become just that much too frenetic. Daphne shares a convivial supper with Benny's family – the mother, like Rohinka Kamal in *Capital*, is a star cook – and Daphne is cast as the star of the shopkeeper's therapeutic re-enactment of the attack. Daphne remembers his wanting her to put into his hands the treasured photograph of his family. By way of an aggressive chance encounter, Daphne approaches a sense of self-worth. As Daphne walks through market stalls to work, just another day in the city is good enough.

DIVERGENT PATHS

Various routes draw characters into London and Londoners sharing a common background may proceed to lead unpredictably different lives.

Portobello refers to waves of immigration: Portuguese, German Jewish (as per Paul King's 2014 *Paddington*), Asian and Caribbean. In Euros Lyn's *Capital*, Petunia disapprovingly, anxiously enumerates a series of migrations into her neighbourhood while (as a matter of politeness) excluding her neighbourly Kamals from her rant – “not you, of course”. Yet, in spite of their long acquaintance, Ahmed (Adeel Akhtar) needs must gently correct Petunia – he is Pakistani, not Indian. Daphne, equally, insists on her Sicilian, as opposed to Italian, ancestry: “there's a difference”. As the regular *Time Out* column, “How to be a [...] Londoner” reminds its readers, London is a thoroughly multi-cultural city, reassuringly erasing tension between distinct communities while promoting itself on its incorporation of diversity. In Morrison's *South of the River*, Harry, a local newspaper journalist, comments on the survival of racism on his patch and antagonism within his supposed community: he covers the Stephen Lawrence murder enquiry and gives up owning a car when he tires of being pulled-over by the police. Meanwhile, his mates mock him as a “coconut”, moving into an “Uncle Tom's cabin” on the Thames, a Deptford studio flat in a former tea warehouse (gentrification by capital) with a distant view of Canary Wharf: “is Peckham not good enough for you, brother?” (Morrison 2007: 82). While *South of the River* features the construction and launch party at the Millennium Dome, Rendell comments on bendy buses, the introduction of the euro, imitation designer bags, the smoking ban, the *Evening Standard* as a freebie (while Lanchester's *Capital* nods at *Metro* as a freebie and the launch of ITV 3). While, in Rendell's Notting Hill, the Electric Cinema survives in its newly re-vamped guise, followers of Banksy adorn available surfaces on the centripedal street and its off-shoots with useless graffiti. Zadie Smith's route from NW8 to NW6 takes in underground and bus routes – as per Rendell's *Dark Corners* – Polish, Turkish, Arabic, Irish, French, Russian and Spanish newspapers and the Islamic Centre of England opposite the Queen's Arms (Smith 2012: 34). Fleabag picks up one of her attachments on a bus; a hoodied Graham Leatherby (Robert Emms) – aka trendily Shoreditch-based millionaire artist Smitty, a Banksy surrogate, passes Roger incognito on an underground escalator in *Capital*. Such references serve not only to locate the narratives' action at a particular time but also



establish the texture of their urban localities. London public transport, before Anthony Asquith's 1928 *Underground* and since Peter Hewitt's 1998 *Sliding Doors*, has served as the location of potentially romantic chance encounters.

Whereas Harry, in *South of the River*, has distanced himself from mates (not really mates) the friendship of black Keisha (Nikki Amuka-Bird), in the television adaptation of *NW*, and white Leah (Phoebe Fox), survives school into adulthood, in spite of their different career paths. Although her parents "moved-up" to Maida Vale, Leah, a social worker, still lives on the estate on which she and Keisha grew up and is happy to stay put. She doesn't want children. She loves her partner, Felix (O-T Fagbenle) – a descendent of French colonialism in Africa – but doesn't agree with his "to-do" list. In "ungentrifiable" Kilburn (once an enclave of Irish immigration), boom and bust never come: "bust is permanent". (Smith 2012: 42) The Willesden church of Leah's childhood has been converted into luxury apartments. Keisha, meanwhile, has ferociously, assiduously, pursued education as a means of escaping her Caldwell roots, studied law at university, trained as a barrister and married a banker of mixed racial heritage with differently inherited cultural and material capital: the Jubilee line takes him to his job in Canary Wharf. Keisha now prefers to be known as Natalie. The Queen's Park house in which she lives with Frank (Jake Fairbrother) (once Franco – as the son of an Italian aristocrat) and their two daughters is a measure of the distance she has travelled from Caldwell. Topically, as in *Capital*, a basement extension to the house is discussed.³

A fellow school-mate of Leah and Keisha, Nathan Bodle (Richie Campbell), once tipped as a professional footballer, has fallen on hard times and scavenges by begging, pimping and dealing drugs. The estate is witness to a fatal stabbing, matching Rachida's claim, in *Daphne*, that London's victims of violence are all too predictably black. Having, effectively, re-made herself, Natalie begins to unravel and undergoes an identity crisis. She seeks escape by way of anonymous sexual encounters which oblige her to traverse different zones of the city (including Asian "brothers") – demographic, geographic and social – this journey taking Natalie far from the romantic ideal realised for her namesake in *Love Actually* and failing to resolve her traumatic anxieties. By chance, at night, she encounters Nathan on a bridge and he persuades her against suicide as an alternative, even more desperate, option. London's promise of social mobility has not brought Natalie happiness. For Zadie Smith, expectations of race and gender are as much an issue as presumptions and assumptions of class and draw on shared histories of European imperialism beyond Britain.

CONCLUSION

Historically, London has been imagined as a site for the achievement of a variety of aspirations. It has promised sanctuary to refugees from religious and political

³ For commentary regarding London basement extensions, see Sargeant (2017: 144).



persecution abroad – conspicuously disappointing Quentina's hopes in *Capital*. It has promised the achievement of material ambitions – although, in the narratives here discussed, reversals of fortune are as likely as gains: Canary Wharf is no longer a reliable beacon. London has presented itself as a conglomeration of communities in which individuals enjoy neighbourly relations – here, again, sometimes suggesting that neighbours may know or care little about one another. Exuberant metropolitan optimism is here tempered by resigned pragmatism. These post-millennial narratives comment not only on the haphazard fate of their individual characters but also on the state of London Actually.

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