

“It’s a Shadow Life”—Zadie Smith’s *Swing Time*

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Abstract

Shadow and limelight constantly, often imperceptibly change places in Zadie Smith’s 2016 novel *Swing Time*. This is a fictional world where the narrator/main character can never become a true protagonist, and her namelessness gives her both universality and invisibility. Appearances deceive, success and failure are not separated, and binaries are questioned, even erased. Zadie Smith is a young English novelist born to a Jamaican mother and an English father; she spent her childhood and early adulthood in Northwest London—a place defined by hybridity and poverty—and recently moved to New York. Her oeuvre to date is a complex insight into questions of race, friendship, personal identity, belonging, and other issues, all connected to life in a globalized world. Her *Swing Time* presents a mature, objective outlook on various lives connected through race, dance, and fates.

Zadie Smith’s latest novel is a representative work of literature for tracing the manifestations of (in)visibility in a globalized world. This novel builds on visibility: movies, songs, and dances from the swing era come to life, it features a Madonna-like international pop star and two young protagonists who attempt to define themselves through dance. Here the visible and the invisible are interlinked, and superior and inferior are interchangeable. The novel actively challenges readers’ preconceived notions of character, good and bad, progression and degression, and it prompts an unbiased look at the fates of its various characters. The investigation of the ways the visibility–invisibility binary is redefined through the novel leads us to a view into current social phenomena, such as race in a global world, (post-) diaspora, minorities, class hierarchy, political agency, mobility, and identity.

Keywords: literature, race, mobility, cosmopolitanism, identity

Introduction—"Now Everyone Knows Who You Really Are"

Zadie Smith's *Swing Time* (2016) ends where it begins: the unnamed protagonist is a 30-something woman recently fired from her job, returning to London after ten years spent traveling as the personal assistant of a Madonna-like pop star. The quote from the heading: "Now everyone knows who you really are" (Smith, 2016, p. 5) sets the tone and the theme of the entire novel: the reader follows the narrator (from here on out "N") from childhood into her thirties, and they together try to figure out who this person actually is. The quote promises an answer to this search for identity; however, the issue proves to be quite complicated: N is the child of an English father and a Jamaican mother, situated between two races, trying to find her own "tribe." Her search for identity is always related to various role models she chooses for herself, women who are supposed to help her define who she is. This goal, though, is never attained, as the narrator proves to be a person living in the shadow of others, mainly defined by what and who she is not.

Smith's literary output to date clearly shows the transformations of her literary persona. While *White Teeth*, her debut, was written by a young and optimistic writer, critics see in *Swing Time* a different approach to multiethnicity, cosmopolitanism, race, and the various other issues her novels are concerned with. For instance, Marta Figlerowicz, upon comparing her latest book to the earlier ones, concludes that it is "much darker and more polemical" (2017, p. 155). Reviewer Adam Kirsch writes lengthily about a deeper thematic, even philosophical discouragement that is palpable in her 2016 novel. As he claims, the liberal Anglo-American "hope that pluralism can be a source of joy and creativity rather than hatred and frustration" (2016) has been under growing tension for some time, one that can be sensed in the shifts in Smith's prose.

Her first novels center on/in London and present an intimate and at once global picture of this metropolis Smith calls her home. For instance, besides the *White Teeth*, *NW* is also a great example of her local engagements, with a distinct focus on a private and personal experience of London. However, many of her works have gradually started to show a preoccupation with a spatial in-betweenness, manifesting in the form of a movement between two cosmopolitan cities: London and New York. Starting with *On Beauty* (2005), a novel that juxtaposes not just the two cities but two families, too, basically, as a pattern of dichotomy she utilizes in almost all her literary works, her subsequent works present a growing interest in the two countries, two cultures, and the self often stranded between them.

Smith paints a world peopled by individuals compelled to define themselves through a binary system, only to realize that the experience of in-betweenness is the most defining one. *Swing Time* continues in this vein, with such dichotomies gradually refuted as the ones

defined along the lines of popularity, visibility, mobility, race, talent, gender. “*Now everyone knows who you really are*” situates the individual and their identity questions at the core of the novel and this analysis. The sentence sounds ironic, a banalization of one’s identity, and thus, it hints at the impossibility of figuring out who N truly is. This already points to the need to discard the binary system meant to define the protagonist.

N is supposedly at the center of *Swing Time*: we read about her life, her aspirations, her school years, her friendships, her struggles, her search for herself, her travels. Despite the detailed, journal-like accounts of all these data, despite the first-person narration that is supposed to convey a personal, intimate rendering of one’s life, N is elusive. In her namelessness, she becomes both an “everywoman” and a no-one, a person stuck forever in the shadows. The question is whether she wishes to come out of these shadows or prefers to stay there. By implication, whether this is the state of the cosmopolitan self in the 21st century.

N’s trajectory in the novel could eventually be proven to function as a kind of diagnosis of our times: she is a young woman who manages to overcome her fate (which stems from her family, racial identity, environment), but the complete breakthrough is eluding her. She is presented with multiple possibilities, she has mobility and connections, and she is a cosmopolitan, but maybe it is exactly this richness of impulses, of possibilities that debilitates her.

I believe that *Swing Time* is indeed a critique of the cosmopolitan subject. Smith’s novel lines up various characters, typically female, through whom it manages to problematize the contemporary phenomenon of cosmopolitanism and disperse its utopian understanding. Therefore, in the following, I wish to investigate two interconnected aspects of this novel—one materialized in the cosmopolitan experience, and the other one in the novel’s engagement with its characters’ identity formation, with a particular focus on biracial identity as featured in *Swing Time*.

Identity in *Swing Time*

In *Swing Time* we encounter a first-person narrator, an amalgam of various selves: the biracial girl, the woman, the working-class social subject, the performer, the assistant. She is a complex person, and the novel revolves around her identity crisis. Consequently, in the following, I put emphasis on her identity formation, or rather its failure, and the various factors contributing to it.

From among the myriad identity theories and approaches, I wish to narrow the scope by analyzing N primarily through the lens of biracial identity, by also choosing as a starting point some of the findings of psychoanalyst Erik H. Erikson, whose theory of the eight stages

of development, in the context of society, proves insightful when considering N's biracial origin and the effect of her environment on her identity formation. As Erikson is interested in how social interactions and relationships affect the development of human beings, his approach proves helpful in analyzing the fictional character of N, whom we always witness in conjunction with other characters of the novel.

Erikson defines identity as "a sense of who one is as a person and as a contributor to society" (Hoare, 2002). As Justin T. Sokol formulates it, "[i]t is personal coherence or self-sameness through evolving time, social change, and altered role requirements" (2009, p. 142), and as such, it allows the individual to know their place in the world. It provides one with a sense of well-being, a sense of being at home in one's body, a sense of direction in one's life, and a sense of mattering to those who count (Erikson, 1968). According to Erikson, having a solid sense of identity is crucial, and hence the question arises: what happens if the development of this identity is unsuccessful?

Erikson's fifth stage of psychosocial development—identity v. role confusion—captures the period of adolescence. It takes stock of the various factors complicating the formation and strengthening of a young adult's selfsameness. These factors include one's family, friends, schoolmates, social groups, pop culture—basically, various social factors that we encounter in *Swing Time*, too. N, the nameless protagonist, is stranded among these people, these influences, in the form of her parents, Tracey—her classmate and childhood friend,—her home in Northwest London, and Aimee, the Madonna-like pop star, who starts as the girls' childhood idol, and later turns into N's employer.

As family relationships are crucial in the formation of a stable identity, a child's biracial identity creates by default a sense of confusion, a failure of belonging. In biracial children, such as N, there is a palpable tension to conform to one racial identity over the other. Theories, for a long time, used to favor the choice of a singular racial identity, but nowadays, they have evolved into supporting a more fluid, multidimensional racial identification.¹ The possibilities of choosing from border, protean, and transcendent identity would provide young people with the necessary freedom to figure out where they belong, thus leading to a successful fifth stage in Erikson's scheme of identity development, and to the formation of a strong, confident identity. In the following, I will consider what factors lead to N's failure to achieve this solidification.

¹ Various models outline biracial identity in the contemporary psychosocial context. For the sake of simplicity, and because I consider it thorough and all-encompassing, I resort to briefly outlining K. A. Rockquemore's multidimensional model, which argues that biracial individuals can choose from among four different racial identities: singular (Black or White), border (biracial), protean (sometimes Black, sometimes White), and transcendent (no racial identity) (1999, p. 200).

An Elusive Narrator-protagonist

Swing Time presents a narrator-protagonist who sounds inauthentic, insecure with no distinct identity. We see her environment—the other characters more clearly than herself. Franziska Quabeck calls her not simply unreliable but “inauthentic,” as she remarks that the heroine’s unreliability “results from her split self and lack of identity” (2018, p. 469). This manifests in the form of a clear discrepancy between her experiences and the stories she tells (herself) about them. She seems to constantly lie to herself and shelter herself from a reality she might be negatively affected by. What is important to consider is why these two personas never meet: why she is alienated from her own experiences and not in control of her own life. The narrator’s inauthenticity and insecurity seemingly stem from her experiences as a biracial girl/woman, someone who feels that she does not belong exclusively to either of the binary categories others seem to be able to choose from. Several instances from her childhood testify to a weakening in her self-identification.

As both Erikson’s theory and those concerned particularly with biracial identity formation emphasize, parents play a crucial role in the development of their children’s identities. One of the paradigmatic examples of this influence in N’s childhood is her black mother. As a Jamaican immigrant woman, she embodies all the hardships and struggles in gaining autonomy over her life, and she feels like her family holds her back. Despite her husband and child, she shows great ambition, is a self-made woman, and even succeeds in becoming a member of Parliament. Her advice to N reflects on her own life path, as she cautions her daughter to avoid being tied down by children: “I promise you, you’ll end up a shade of yourself. Catch a load of babies, never leave these streets, and be another one of these sisters who might as well not exist” (Smith, 2016, p.188). These words follow N everywhere, as her life will be greatly defined by the dichotomy of limelight and shadow, by the duality of mobility and immobility.

However, as she recognizes herself as one of the restraining forces her mother evokes, the effect of this advice is rather complex. N escapes this life, but, ironically, the novel and N seem to wish to prove her mother wrong; it is indeed possible to “end up a shade of yourself” even without children, without being tied down. N is never the protagonist of her own life. Instead, we see her in the shadow of other women, such as her childhood friend Tracey, or her employer, the Australian pop star Aimee.

Thus, N’s choices in life all gyrate around her, unconscious, wish to rebel against her own mother. N will actively fight against her mother’s version of feminism—ironically, through remaining largely passive. As Sarah Jilani remarks, the young woman “quietly rebels against her mother (...) by disappointing with her chosen university, her PA job,

and her more color-blind, but perhaps also more naïve, understanding of identity” (2016). Quabeck goes even further by remarking how her job as a PA, which “requires an existence in service at the constant disposal of someone else and at the cost of giving up her own life completely” (2018, p. 466), is the greatest refutation of her mother’s fears and ambitions.

N’s biracial identity is first and foremost complicated by her own mother’s identity and expectations, as the quote above shows. In addition to that, her family—a black mother and white father—continues to further complicate it in various instances. She feels out of place, stranded between two races. As N considers herself not dark enough, she spends most of her childhood “on our balcony on any hot day, aiming at exactly the quality [Tracey] seemed to dread: more colour, darkness, for all my freckles to join and merge and leave me with the same dark brown of my mother” (Smith, 2016, p. 179). She experiences her lighter skin tone as a shortcoming, which makes her a mere shadow of her mother, who embodies “the essence of Blackness” (2016, p. 212).

Her desire to be black manifests most strongly in a scene in the Gambia, during one of the few moments of, supposed, authentic experience. While she identifies herself as black and dreams of finding her roots, maybe even a family in The Gambia—“I thought: here is the joy I’ve been looking for all my life” (2016, p. 165)—she is considered white:

I was, in the strictest sense of the term, good-for-nothing. Even babies were handed to me ironically, and people laughed when they saw me holding one. Yes, great care was taken at all times to protect me from reality. They’d met people like me before. They knew how little reality we can take. (Smith, 2016, p. 178)

Thus, her sense of inauthenticity is further complicated by this experience, as in London she is deemed brown, whereas in the Gambia she is white. Consequently, there seems to be no place for her: neither in Africa nor New York or London, her hometown.

During celebrations, women take turns and dance to tribal music; when it is N’s turn, she easily copies the movements of the women of the tribe to the amazement of her audience. The women exclaim “*Toobab*,” with which they are saying: “Even though you are a white girl, you dance like you are a black!” (Smith, 2016, p. 417).² With this, even a rare authentic moment is tainted by the realization that she does not and never will belong here. This instance thematizes her need and failure to belong to a community, and thus, her being defined by in-betweenness and alienation.

² Interestingly, this (as many other details of the novel) is based on Smith’s actual visit to Africa, quoted by Jeffrey Eugenides. Smith remarks that while she had thought she was having a profound, “spiritual experience,” she came to realize that the black people she encountered in Africa thought she was white (2016).

While her mother considers N's lighter skin tone a privilege, "wasn't I so much freer than any of them—born in England, in modern times—not to mention so much lighter, so much straighter of nose" (2016, p. 212), N is visibly confused and frustrated. This frustration follows her into her adulthood, when she chooses to cater to a white woman's every whim, and meanwhile tries to define herself in connection/as opposed to her.

These details of her life show very strong identity confusion in the young girl/woman. Her mother's wish for N to identify as white can be explained by the often-experienced pressure of interracial couples "to align their biracial children with one racial group," often White, "in hopes that the child will avoid discrimination and gain advantages of White privilege" (Weaver and Masalehdan, 2020, p. 14). N's confusion and experience of constantly feeling out of place is further complicated by the effects of choosing one racial identity over another and, consequently, siding with one parent over the other. As Weaver and Masalehdan remark, this often causes distance between child and parent and can lead to feelings of guilt and shame (2020, p. 15).

For instance, in a scene where her white father's children from a previous marriage visit their family, upon looking at her half-brother, N feels that "[i]t was right that he should be my father's son, anyone looking at him would see the sense of it. What didn't make sense was me" (Smith, 2016, p. 46). This time, she feels too dark-skinned and, consequently, excluded from her white father's family.

Despite her strivings to conform to one or the other racial identity, N still often has to identify as biracial, which leads to further complications with her family and also with her relationships in her wider social context. According to Dorcas D. Bowles, this difference between children and their parents results in a lack of role models and further confusion, leading to a strong feeling that they do not belong (1993, pp. 422–23). In the distinct case of our protagonist, this could be the key to understanding why N chooses to be in the shadow of other women, in constant search of role models, of people she could finally belong to.

N stands for various people who fail to recognize themselves as conforming to the social system, which is supposed to help them define who they are. She cannot identify with her own self. Zadie Smith, being biracial herself, expressed some of her own insecurities through this narrator. In the essay titled "The I Who Is Not Me," she confesses: "I understood myself, as a child, to be a third, impossible option in an otherwise binary culture: neither black nor white but both" (2018, p. 337).

As Smith states, a child can suffer due to this state of in-betweenness, experiencing a "feeling of impossibility: anger, sadness, despair, confusion" (Smith, 2018, p. 337).

I believe *Swing Time* captures the various manifestations of these feelings and how they affect the self. Smith refuses to create a protagonist for her novel; instead, what we encounter is this inauthentic character—one that will feel real exactly because of her insecurities, because of her anger, envy, vindictiveness, and even fakeness.

Dance and Identity

As we can see, Zadie Smith complicates the life of her protagonist by giving her a biracial background and a post-diasporic existence. For a further analysis of this identity, it is useful to take a closer look at dance and how its meaning shifts and changes for N in the novel. When she first attends dance classes, the racial and class differences are palpable: she is the only one whose ballet shoes do not have the characteristic pink color, she is lacking in equipment, and she is trying to learn the dance of the white people, often feeling out of place.

Starting from the novel's title, which invokes the 1936 American musical featuring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Smith's novel is not only infused with dance, but it centers on dance as the key to the approach to identity. Dance defines the lives of N and her friend Tracey, the two working-class biracial girls, and their greatest questions referring to their identity are also rooted in dance. For these girls, one particular dancer from these musicals, Jeni LeGon, becomes the symbol of their own lives. LeGon, in N's words, is more than a dancer, she is a "person, actress, dancer, symbol" (Smith, 2016, p. 427). An elusive dancer, talented, a living and breathing symbol of identity, race, and invisibility, but also of the possibility of freedom provided by this very invisibility. Is this what N aspires for?

The words of N's mother—"you'll end up a shade of yourself" (2016, p. 188)—echo throughout the novel. However, despite the negative charge of the mother's words, it seems for a long while that N dreams of being as invisible, as elusive, as free as a shadow. This dream of hers materializes through her wish to become a dancer, who, in her understanding, embodies the rootlessness she craves. To her, dancing gives the opportunity to become unattached, autonomous, a free-floating individual who enjoys this freedom. This may be the reason why, despite her lack of real talent, she is still obsessed with dancing and movement. She dreams of becoming a dancer, whom she defines as "a man from nowhere, without parents or siblings, without a nation or people, without obligations of any kind" (2016, p. 24). To her, the dancer embodies an ethereality and mobility she desperately craves: "a great dancer has no time, no generation, he moves eternally through the world" (2016, p. 38). This would be the opportunity for her to cut all ties with her past, with the fate she was predestined to have.

Her epiphany comes with the musicals she becomes infatuated with, and one in particular: *Ali Baba Goes to Town*, in which she notices Jeni LeGon. LeGon's fate, despite the girls' impression of her success, represents the shattering of illusion and a realization

of the racial discrepancy and power dynamic in show business. Although the two girls see in her the successful artist in the limelight, N's later realization will confirm LeGon's incapacity to get out of the shadow.

LeGon, the image of this mesmerizing dancer proves to be fiction. When older, N has the opportunity to research her childhood idol—the girl who looks like them, who is a talented and accomplished dancer, a star—, and the mirage suddenly disperses. As N confesses:

I'd imagined, for example, a whole narrative of friendship and respect between LeGon and the people she worked with, the dancers and the directors, or I'd wanted to believe that friendship and respect could have existed, in the same spirit of childish optimism that makes a little girl want to believe her parents are deeply in love. (Smith, 2016, pp. 427–28)

But she realizes, as an adult, that LeGon was only hired for “maid parts,” and after a while not even those. This meant

that the person Tracey had imitated so perfectly all those years ago [...]—that was not really a person at all, that was only a shadow. Even her lovely name, which we'd both so envied, even that was unreal, in reality she was the daughter of Hector and Harriet Ligon, migrated from Georgia, descendants of sharecroppers, while the other LeGon, the one we thought we knew—that happy-go-lucky hooper—she was a fictional being, born of a typo, whom Louella Parsons dreamed up one day when she misspelled ‘Ligon’ in her syndicated gossip column in the LA Examiner. (2016, p. 429)

This is how the fantasy of this successful dancer suddenly evaporates. And with it, the failure of the girls' search for their identity is even more pronounced. They both work for their attainment of success—and, by implication, of an identity—but they also actively sabotage it again and again. According to Fleur van der Laan,

Swing Time dislodges what identity is or should be. It presents something plural, the ‘I’ as a range of possibilities, albeit a limited range: one's race, class, gender, and location in place and time determine the limits of this dance of multiple identities. (2018, p. 23)

Musicals are central symbols in Smith's 2016 novel. *Swing Time*, *Ali Baba Goes to Town*, and other iconic shows become the artistic representations of the two girls' formation and the various changes they undergo as they mature. The girls' interpretation of these musicals, though, proves rather problematic and even shifting. For instance, *Ali Baba Goes to Town* is a musical through which the novel captures a shift in perspectives: N first wants to see in it the possibility of equality, of blacks and whites happily dancing together, finding common ground in a language that is represented by the famous song

of "*Hi dee hi dee hi dee hi!*"—the call of Cab Calloway, which the Africans recognize, and cry out the response: "*Ho dee ho dee ho dee ho!*" (2016, pp. 190–191). While N recognizes a beauty in this scene and the origins of tap dancing, her date, "a conscious young man called Rakim" (2016, p. 287), provides a sobering parody of the actual situation: "*Oh massa, I's so happy on this here slave ship I be dancing for joy*" (2016, p. 290, emphasis in original).

At the time, however, not even this wake-up call can shake N out of her illusion of dance having this freeing and equalizing power. Several years need to pass, and another experience, that of working for Aimee will prompt her to recognize: Fred Astaire in the 1936 musical *Swing Time* is wearing blackface, and this is undoubtedly "an instance of the stereotypical, racist portrayal of people of color by white actors with their faces painted black. It depoliticizes race and asserts white dominance over the discourse about race. Actors in blackface 'play' black as spectacle and keep black actors off stage and screen" (Kürpick, 2018). This paradigmatic scene in the movie is largely based on a game of shadow and light, a multiplication of the dancer's body, and a dance competition acted out among these bodies. Whereas it first seems like Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson is the centre and winner of this scene, N's (late) realization reveals the blackface-wearing Astaire to be the actual center and protagonist.

As reflected in these musicals, N is struggling to see a possibility for her biracial self to be autonomous, to prove history wrong, or at least create a world, out of time and out of space, where she can be equal, strong, herself. Dance is supposed to be a universal language, one that can transcend race, sex, class, and even time, but history shatters this vision and instead proves how even dance fails when it comes to social and racial barriers. As Suzanne Scafe remarks, dance in the novel represents a diasporic resource used to "map the complex and uneven histories of American Hollywood musicals of the Swing era on to the lives of its protagonists in contemporary North West London" (2016, p. 108). N wants to believe in the ethereality dance promises, in the freedom she wishes to attain, but wherever she turns, it proves to further confuse her instead of bringing clarity and the coveted freedom.

Dance fails, it is incapable of suppressing racial inequalities, so the cosmopolitan life is the other means by which N tries to find her autonomy, herself. But her visits to Africa reveal the constructed and commodified nature of black identity. N is considered the wealthy white privileged "savior," all authentic experiences are tainted, and the true extent of her rootlessness comes to the surface. Such further examples evoked by the novel—as Michael Jackson's skin bleaching or the representation of slavery in museum tours—all point not just to N's failure to find an authentic self, but to a more global issue of race and its representation, too. N's in-betweenness and problematic cosmopolitan identity reflect a universally experienced disorientation and insecurity.

Cosmopolitanism in *Swing Time*

The identity crisis witnessed in *Swing Time* is rooted in a combination of factors exerting their influence on our protagonist. The above-discussed biracial identity and its challenges, her relationship with her parents (especially her ambitious black mother), London, and its council-housing estate, all contribute to a tension within the child and later woman, whose distinct self fails to materialize, instead being always tied to the shadows of other women around her. Her fight against her mother's pressures, against her working-class background, and a wish to escape her fate are what together contribute to another major aspect of her self: her cosmopolitan life. Therefore, in the following, I will take a closer look at the formation of this cosmopolitan identity and N's complex relation to mobility in the 21st century.

The compendium of multiple cosmopolitanisms coexisting is a well-known fact today—see, for instance, the extensive list Robert Spencer provides in his book (2011, p. 2). Furthermore, in their introduction to *Cosmopolitanisms*, Bruce Robbins and Paulo Lemos Horta remark that cosmopolitanism was born out of a mixture of two impulses: negative and positive. According to them,

the negative impulse asserts detachment from one's place of origin or residence, a refusal of the jurisdiction of local authorities, a stepping outside of conventions, prejudices, obligations. The positive impulse asserts membership in some larger, stronger, or more compelling collective. (2017, p. 2)

This duality they recognize proves helpful in approaching *Swing Time*'s unnamed protagonist, whose struggle, as I intend to show, is rooted in this dual effort of distancing herself from her environment and her allotted fate, and of belonging to a different collective, one defined by the freedom and mobility cosmopolitanism promises.

N and the Utopian Cosmopolitanism

Cosmopolitanism is still largely understood as "utopianism, escapism, and condescension" (Spencer, 2011, p. 2)—the privilege of the jet-setting elite. Cosmopolites are thus described as free, careless, and largely untouched by the realities of the places they visit, inhabiting a perfect bubble comprised of the airports, hotels, resorts, conference rooms, and restaurants they frequent. They embody luxurious mobility, contrasted with the restricting immobility of people stuck in one place, constrained by their economic, racial, and social background.

N's dreams of becoming a cosmopolite, her choice to leave her childhood home in London and work as the PA to an international star, all testify to her similar limited understanding of what cosmopolitanism entails. She dreams of being unattached, of limitless mobility, of freedom, and for a long time fails to wake up from this utopian dream. N's aspiration to become a cosmopolite is connected to the idea of cosmopolitanism as "uncritically celebrat[ing] hybridity and the exchange of commodified cultural products" (Johansen, 2014, p. 40). However, with characters struggling to climb the social ladder, who seem to embody success and cosmopolitan ideals, but gradually prove that they are lost and immobile, Smith paints a picture of how the idealized cosmopolitanism fails to materialize, what barriers one encounters, what struggles one needs and fails to overcome.

As we know, cosmopolitanism is traditionally defined as a "disruptive stance" as it is supposed to reject "some narrower claim—that of a tribe, polis, community, or state" (Ingram, 2013, p. 48). N's rejection of her community in London, in the council housing estate is evident. She, as a biracial girl, stranded between two races, feels like she does not belong to any tribe, she is the constant outsider, living a shadow existence. Thus, her rejection is already more complicated than it would seem at first glance: in her dream of mobility and freedom, she is dreaming of finding her own tribe, a community she would belong to. It is not surprising thus that the idea of a "tribe" functions as a leitmotif in *Swing Time*.

This, to an extent, was recognized by Beatriz Pérez Zapata too, when she remarks that "contrary to the alleged rootlessness of global and glocal societies, the fact is that roots do *still matter* in Smith's writings" (2021, p. 64, emphasis in original). Thus, while seemingly N aspires for rootlessness, she is searching for different roots, for a tribe where she could finally belong. Dancing is one of the stronger manifestations of this dream. She recognizes the possibility of reinventing oneself through dance, the appeal of the free-floating individuals who are autonomous and comfortable in their bodies. This may be the reason why, despite her lack of real talent, she is still obsessed with dancing and movement.

N's dream of utopian cosmopolitanism seems to be manifesting with the help of Aimee, the Madonna-like pop star who embodies the free-floating cosmopolitan ideal N wishes for herself. As Pérez Zapata remarks, Aimee presents N with an opportunity not just to escape but to move "from her suburb to Aimee's centre, perceived as an unreal place that amounts to a different world altogether, 'the centre of the centre' (Smith, 2016, p. 103)" (2021, p. 69). Conversely, though, it is also going to be Aimee who hinders N from belonging to a new tribe, and from the liberating feeling she is dreaming of. Thus, the utopian vision of cosmopolitanism gradually disperses in *Swing Time*.

Disillusionment

"How do we think about cosmopolitanism when it is no longer a utopian possibility that lies beyond the limiting horizon of a national culture but a limiting condition in its own right?" (Stević & Tsang, 2019, p. 3). Zadie Smith is preoccupied by this question. Besides *Swing Time*, she shows a distinct preoccupation with the limiting conditions of cosmopolitanism in both her other fictional works and her non-fiction alike. In the case of *Swing Time*, N's trajectory could eventually be proven to function as a kind of diagnosis of our times: here we have a young woman, who manages to overcome her fate, and rises above it, but complete breakthrough is eluding her. She is the character who is presented with multiple possibilities, she has mobility, she has connections, she is a cosmopolitan, but maybe it is exactly this richness of possibilities that debilitates her.

We witness a character who tries to find her own "tribe," and her own self in the process, but they both seem to elude her: she is out of place, between two races, between mobility and immobility. Mobility is an integral part of the cosmopolitan experience. As a privilege, it is understood as belonging to the wealthy elite who can afford luxurious trips and an escape from the confinement of their space. However, this is only one facet of mobility.

It is helpful to consider the three prototypes of the cosmopolitan mindset that Vladimir Zorić introduces in his chapter written for *The Limits of Cosmopolitanism*: the *flaneur*, the exile, and the traveler. What is most in focus in *Swing Time* is the prototype of the traveler, which, according to Zorić, "negotiates and reconciles" the previous two categories (2019, pp. 14–15). N's complex background and her life testify to this combination, especially when considering her biracial origin on the one hand, and her relation to the spaces she inhabits, on the other.

N's mother, though we do not get substantial details about her previous life, can be understood as the exile in this framework, who "reaches a liberal metropolis from a political and economic backwater and effectively surrenders to its class mechanism, accepting the necessity to become a nobody before *becoming a somebody*" (Zorić, 2019, p. 15). This process of becoming a somebody is captured as her life path materializes in conjunction with her daughter's: she is first a nobody (or at least in her definition): wife and mother, confined to her home, with no prospects; but fights for her autonomy, attends university and succeeds in becoming a member of Parliament. Her life path seemingly captures a kind of mobility that leads to her liberation, however, as we see in the cases of all characters of *Swing Time*, this proves illusory: at the end of the novel, we find her on her deathbed, realizing that London, filled with promises at the beginning, ends up being a kind of prison, a site of her immobility.

She wishes for a more privileged life for her biracial daughter, one in which she is not tied down by children, by a family, and can practice free mobility. She fears that N will be tied to the estate, which would be a failure, an identity-less existence, but N's high mobility, her job as a personal assistant—so basically the idealized life of a cosmopolitan citizen—proves to lead to this exact thing. So luxurious mobility becomes nothing better than the immobility experienced by her mother, or Tracey even, who both remain stuck in London.

This is a novel about movement. It is about dance, about the history of dance, it is about travel, movement in space and time, an escape from one's past, a return. As Songyun Zheng contends, through a character that embodies an exploration of the self, existential crisis, and controversy, *Swing Time* presents a "deromanticized cosmopolitanism" (4). N's idealism comes off as naivety, and it is systematically dispersed by the events of the novel. Cosmopolitanism is presented as more complex and more problematic than the utopia of mobility for pleasure.

Aimee, the Cosmopolitan Traveller

Aimee is a pop icon N used to idolize; a woman she looks up to, one who seems to materialize everything N is dreaming of, and everything N's mother is not. As the various details showcase, she is the embodiment of cosmopolitanism. For instance, the narrator describes her thusly:

The palest Australian I ever saw. Sometimes, without her make-up on, she didn't look like she was from a warm planet at all, and she took a step to keep it that way, protecting herself from the sun at all times. There was something alien about her, a person who belongs to a tribe of one. (2016, p. 97)

Aimee does everything in her power to not belong to a particular culture, to a particular part of the world. She is originally from Bendigo, Australia, but has left it behind, traveling across the globe as a successful pop star. She is described as "uncontained by space and time" because "all ways were her ways" (2016, p. 74). Everything about her is global, even her speech: she abandoned her Australian accent and instead speaks like "New York and Paris and Moscow and LA and London combined" (2016, p. 95).

To N, this kind of fluidity, the prospect of becoming a "world citizen" must be really appealing, especially because N comes from a world of binary oppositions where she felt "wrong" all her life. As Anna Arslanova remarks, "those expressions of 'cultural transcendence' (Dieme, 2018, p. 114) that Aimee possesses seem to open the possibility of a new version of identity for the narrator, one that is not based on choosing, but rather denying" (2019, p. 56).

Aimee is indeed the epitome of the careless, blind cosmopolitan. She is either an idealist or an ignorant: she refuses to recognize economic, social, and political differences, as she perceives them as “never structural or economic but always essentially differences of personality” (2016, p. 111). She prefers empty non-places, as it happens with the prototypical cosmopolitans who fail to see the real place, and instead encounter the same airports, hotels, restaurants, everywhere they go.

Even though for a while, N lives in the illusion that she shares the center with Aimee—meaning that she could accomplish this cosmopolitan existence and erase all her roots—after years she comes to the realization that her life is governed by Aimee, and her identity never manifests itself. She trusts that a change of scenery, a different place will gift her the identity and authenticity she is searching for, but the epiphany fails to come. Instead, what she gets is the painful realization that she is alone, uprooted, with no career and no support system.

Conclusion

By the end of the novel, N’s thoughts about the character of the dancer need to change: her initial understanding of the dancer embodying freedom and a coveted rootlessness reveals her own wish of becoming free and finding herself—of being capable of defining herself despite or through her biracial identity. This approach changes as a result of a series of failures and realizations she has in her childhood and adulthood, disillusionment happening in her life, and mirrored in the musicals she feels closest to.

The figure of the dancer, the supposedly unshackled self that incorporates everything N is dreaming of, is manifested in the characters of dancers and stars from the past and present, flesh-and-blood human characters who disprove the supposed freedom and present struggling individuals who cannot succeed against racial stereotypes, against art as commodity, or simply against the laws of the world. Thus, Jeni LeGon, Fred Astaire, Michael Jackson, Tracey, and Aimee all represent the illusion of success, of mobility, of a strong identity, only to reveal the complexities of the self and the manifold injustices one faces.

Swing Time makes us ask hard questions, questions that destabilize the idealized image of the successful, happy cosmopolitan. Taiye Selasi formulates it thus:

By the rules of the 21st-century success story, blessed are they who can reinvent themselves. *Swing Time* asks us to reconsider. Does one who succeeds in leaving home gain power or lose it? Has one necessarily bettered oneself by moving, say, into a more impressive house or do the truly powerful feel at home just where they are? (2016)

Different kinds of movement comprise the center of *Swing Time*: dance as a manifestation of the girls' search for identity, and international travel—the cosmopolitanism embodied by Aimee, and also adopted by N. This 2016 novel, commonly recognized as striking a more pessimistic chord in Zadie Smith's oeuvre, with a more mature approach to people, chooses as its protagonist a woman who is a true citizen of the 21st century—a cosmopolitan. However, despite expectations, despite Aimee—who embodies the textbook example of the privileged, oblivious jet-setting cosmopolitan—, *Swing Time* manages to paint a complex picture of the downside of this life. With a character who is lost between various parts of the world, lacking a stable home, and losing—or even abandoning—her roots, N comes to embody some of the greatest fears in today's world.

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