

Caught in a Swinging Loop: Music, Dance, and Rhythm in Zadie Smith's Swing Time

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In her fifth novel *Swing Time* (2016) Zadie Smith builds a narrative dance room in which real-life and fictional stories of the Swing Era, African American tap dancers, and two inter-ethnic girls from twenty-first century London perform a manifold social dance. In Smith's intermedial novel, music, dance, and literature are superimposed components of the same narrative ensemble, whose story line and structure resemble those of 1930s Hollywood musical duets, tap solos, and swing music. Swinging connections, mood modulations, repetitions, and counter-narratives reproduce swing rhythm and trigger the swing 'feel' – a kinaesthetic and emotional response to dance and music in literary forms. Thus, Zadie Smith gives life, sound, and movement to the swing feel, catching readers in the novel's narrative loop.

Keywords: *Swing Time*, Zadie Smith, music in literature, dance in literature, swing.

«What can an art of words take from the art that needs none?» (Smith 2018: 136). This question is addressed by the award-winning novelist Zadie Smith in the essay *Dance Lessons for Writers*, in which she elaborates on the connection between writing and literature (an «art of words») and dancing (the «art that needs none»). Smith analyses the language of the routines performed by Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, Harold and Fayard Nicholas, and the stories told through dance by Michael Jackson, Prince, Madonna, or Beyoncé. At the beginning of the essay, the novelist describes what she has learned from these performers in

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a nutshell: «Dance lessons for writers: lessons of positions, attitude, rhythm and style, some of them obvious, some indirect» (ivi, p. 137).

I will argue that this question – «What can an art of words take from the art that needs none?» – propels the narrative in Zadie Smith's fifth novel *Swing Time* (2016). The novelist builds a narrative dance room in which real-life and fictional protagonists of the Swing Era, African American tap dancers, and two inter-ethnic girls from twenty-first century London perform a manifold dance. Their movements, attitudes, and positions, as well as Smith's narrative performance, are modulated by swing rhythm: the novel's story line and structure resemble those of 1930s Hollywood musical duets, tap solos, and swing musical compositions. In this context, swing can be considered as an intermedia form of art that needs no words. As we will see, in the novel swing refers to tap and social dancing as well to jazz music, which became popular in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s (sections 2 and 3); but swing also indicates a unique, rhythmic impulse and feeling that has been the brand of jazz music and dancing performances since then, a kinesthetic response to music, and, ultimately, to literature (section 4). These intermedia references to swing resonate in *Swing Time*, in which dance and music conflate into a literary composition. In the following section, I will lay out the theoretical coordinates that direct the present analysis of the musical and rhythmic elements of Smith's literary composition.

1. Intermedia relations: music in the art of words and in tap dancing

In *Swing Time*, music, dance, and literature are inextricably connected, since words reconstruct the swing rhythm and feel produced by sound and body movements. For this reason, in this analysis music and dance are also inextricably connected: I will take into consideration the musical and rhythmic dimension in the intermedia art of swing (music and dance), and I will describe the way in which it is reproduced in the art of words.

I should start from the premise that this study of the relations between words, music, and dancing in Zadie Smith's novel has what Werner Wolf (2009: 133) calls a «literary bias»: it focuses on literary elements, and on how and to what extent literature can resemble the rhythmical and musical techniques and structural features of swing music and dance. As Wolf points out, the intermedial relations between literature and music have been studied from different disciplinary and

theoretical standpoints, namely, literary, and musicological criticism (Wolf 2009). Traditionally, the literary perspective has dominated, triggering both musico-literary research – «dedicated to collecting evidence of references to, or occurrences of, music in individual literary texts, and to elucidating their uses and functions» – and comparative investigations into structural affinities, as in Calvin S. Brown's *Music and Literature: A Comparison of the Arts* (1948). Both Brown's pioneering volume and his later work (Brown 1970) have greatly contributed to the recognition of musico-literary studies as an important research field in comparative literature, leading to the development of Word and Music Studies from the 1980s (Allis 2017; Ciompi *et al.* 2018).

In this context, Steven Paul Scher's work has also been pivotal, laying the groundwork for the classification of the connections between literature and music: «music and literature» (vocal music), «literature in music» (program music), and «music in literature». The latter is the most relevant for this analysis of Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*. In his seminal essay *Literature and Music* (first published in 1982), Scher claims that the music-in-literature category is the only one that pertains exclusively to literary works of art. Texts that aim at the «musicalization of literature» or at the «verbalization of music» (Scher 2004: 179-180) are intrinsically verbal, and thus they can only attempt to resemble the quality and texture of music: «Literature lacks the unique acoustic quality of music; only through ingenious linguistic means or special literary techniques can it imply, evoke, imitate, or otherwise indirectly approximate actual music and thus create what amounts at best to a verbal semblance of music» (ivi, p. 180).

According to Scher, verbal constructs which are related to music can be divided into three broad categories: word music, verbal music, and literary works that display musical structures and techniques. The latter category is particularly significant for this analysis, as it implies «recognition and interpretation of certain corresponding formal designs and organizing strategies in literature that create the impression of comparable progressive movement» (ivi, p. 182). This comparative music-in-literature approach is defined not only as mere detection of musical references in literary works but also as a critical investigation into the structural affinities and corresponding strategies and forms in literature and music. Scher notes that the «two major types of [borrowing musical strategies for literary purposes] are the adaptation of larger musical structures and patterns and the application of certain musical techniques and devices common to both arts» (ivi, pp. 182-183).

In order to exemplify his classification of structural affinities typical of music-in-literature, Scher recurs to a literary reference: Aldous Huxley's novel *Point Counter Point* (1928). He quotes a passage from the novel in which the transposition of music techniques to literature is described: at the level of construction, the musicalisation of fiction can be expressed by mood-to-mood modulations, which approximate musical key-to-key modulations («a theme is stated, then developed, pushed out of shape, imperceptibly deformed, until, though still recognizably the same, it has become quite different»), and by abrupt transitions, for which «[a]ll you need is a sufficiency of characters and parallel, contrapuntal plots» (Huxley quoted in Scher 2004: 183). While questioning Huxley's equivalence of (musical) key modulation and (literary) mood modulation, Scher claims that repetition, variation, balance, and contrast are the organising elements in both music and literature. By using these elements adroitly, literature can aspire to resemble musical techniques and structures. This translation of music into literary forms is based on «an aesthetic impulse on the part of their authors to transcend the limitations of their own medium of expression (literature) and cross over into another medium (music), while still remaining necessarily confined to the original medium» (ivi, p. 186).

As mentioned above, in *Swing Time* words resemble two arts that need no words – music and dance. If we turn our attention to the latter, we can observe that tap dance provides an example of transgressing the limitations of the media of expression, relevant to this analysis of *Swing Time*. This dance style is the product of inter-ethnic and intercultural connections. Originating in the United States as a blending of African slave dances, Irish jigs, and English clog dancing, tap developed in minstrel shows from the second half of the eighteenth century and in vaudeville acts in the early twentieth century. It became more and more mainstream in Broadway revues and musicals, and reached its peak of popularity with the motion pictures of the 1930s, where it was often merged with swing dance styles (namely, Lindy Hop).

Not only does tap cross cultural boundaries, but it also crosses the boundaries between arts by combining dance and music. According to Brian Seibert, this is the defining characteristic of tap dance:

it falls between categories, or across them; [...] it is dance *and* music, sound *and* movement. [...] Most dance arises from an interaction between music and movement. But because tap can be both dancing to music and dancing as music, it's especially concerned with the combination. As the tap dancer Paul Draper once explained, "What the eye sees is sharpened by what the

ear hears, and the ear hears more clearly that which sight enhances” (Seibert 2015: 4).

Tap makes music visible, and it makes it audible: the movements of heels, toes, and feet, shuffling and beating the floor, produce hearable sounds, which in turn are as much part of the performance as the dancing steps.

In a way, tap dance also crosses the boundaries between dance and words: as Seibert claims, it is not only connected with music but also with story-telling. By using the body as musical instrument, and by assembling steps, taps, and rhythm in unique ways, tap dancers «both discover and create themselves, commonly in public». Thus, they tell their own stories, which are not narrative in the strict sense, but involve a narrative dimension. Tap dancers call this process of telling who they are through tap «story dancing» (Seibert 2015: 6). From this point of view, we can say that tap dance combines sound, movement, and narratives.

However, this combination of music, body transitions and positions, and stories can be traced in dance in general. As Marcsek-Fuchs (2015: 1) notes, whereas the musical dimension of dance is evident, dance and literature are seemingly «medial antagonists» since «dance is kinetic, while literature as the written word on the page seems to be static». As a matter of fact, «these two forms of artistic expression can enter into various kinds of intermedial encounters», and literature is far from mono-medial (2). Zadie Smith’s *Swing Time* displays this kind of intermedia encounter of music, dancing, and literature, by making sound and rhythmic body movements audible and visible via words. Tap, along with swing dancing, rhythm, and feel serve as vehicles for giving shape to Smith’s multifaceted intermedia novel, in which music, dance, and literature are superimposed components of the same narrative ensemble.

2. A narrative social dance room: dancing partners and swinging connections

Swing perfectly summarises the interconnections that shape *Swing Time*, as it encompasses jazz culture, the Swing Era, music, dance, and rhythm. On the whole, the novel refers to different nuances of swing: multiple swing features are verbalised using intermedia constructs, at the levels of subject matter, plot, and structure. The references to swing culture, music, and dance are numerous, starting from the

correspondence with the title of the homonymous 1936 film, starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Swing is also present in scenes that refer to the Swing Era or depict dance and music performances; and it is one of the main topics in the conversations and thoughts of the unnamed woman protagonist and narrator, who is obsessed with Hollywood musicals and tap dancers. Furthermore, swing informs the woman's relationship with the other characters in the novel, as well as its story line and rhythm.

In *Swing Time*, swing culture transcends geographical, chronological, and cultural borders, and well-established social hierarchies. The narrator's childhood education in 1980s London is rooted in the 1930s and 1940s Swing Era, «that remarkable period in American musical history when jazz was synonymous with America's popular music, its social dances and its musical entertainment» (Schuller 1989: 4). Her lasting (albeit discontinuous) friendship with her 'dancing partner', as I would call Tracey, starts in a tap dance class in 1982 London and is cemented by the hours they spend together watching VHS tapes of Hollywood musicals. These childhood years of common education in swing constitute the sound- and dance-track to which the two girls (and the narrative) are tuned, despite the different directions they take across space and over the years, and the different rhythms of their life stories. In the first section of the novel, Zadie Smith opens what I would call a 'social dance room', in which fictional and non-fictional characters perform to the same music, across temporal, spatial, and social boundaries. *Swing Time*'s narrative social dance room is peopled by fictional characters – with a specific focus on the narrator and Tracey – and by the most popular American tap and musical performers of the 1930s and 1940s.

On this narrative dance floor, Zadie Smith spins the narrator's manifold stories (which are told in the first person and in the past tense) by approximating the pattern and rhythm of a common routine of swing dance duos. Attending their first tap lesson, the girls are immediately drawn to each other. From that moment and over the 1980s and 1990s, they mirror each other in the manner of two dancing partners: they are at once similar and opposite. They are of the same height, and have the same «shade of brown» (Smith 2016: 9) and inter-ethnic origins (both have black-white parents); they live in the same north-west London neighbourhood and in nearby estate flats; and they share the same dream – to become professional dancers. At first, they exist only as exclusive partners in the same dance: solely focused on each other, they follow their own shared rhythm, and their

synchronised movements are modulated by a swing soundtrack that no one else hears at the same frequency. Their fixation with dance and musicals, and with each other, blurs their idiosyncrasies, which, to the narrator, become visible only in retrospect (and at the beginning of the novel). For example, Tracey lives in a high-rise estate of «poor reputation» (ivi, p. 12) and the narrator in a «nicer, low-rise» one. They have different bedrooms and «different modes of being in each flat» (ivi, p. 29). Tracey and her white mother are focused on the former's career on stage, whereas the narrator is not equally gifted, and her lack of ambition prevents her from climbing from working class to middle class status, which is her Jamaican-descent mother's dream.

In this partnered narrative dancing, Tracey is the leader and the narrator is the follower. At first, the latter lives under Tracey's shadow, and follows her lead. This condition informs her entire life. When they are teenagers and they separate (attending different schools), the narrator recollects feeling like «a body without a distinct outline. The kind of girl who moved from group to group, neither welcomed nor despised, tolerated, and always eager to avoid confrontation. I felt I made no impression» (ivi, p. 214). Later on, when she is hired to work as the personal assistant of a white Australian pop-star (Aimee), the narrator realises that «devoting all time and energy to somebody else's existence, to somebody else's desires and needs and requirements» is like living «a shadow life» (ivi, p. 431). And when she goes to an unspecified country in West Africa, where the popstar wants to found a school, she feels as immaterial and out of place in the African village as she was in New York or London.

These transitions across temporal and spatial dimensions interpolate in a non-linear fashion. The element that gives coherence, rhythm, and directionality to the narrative is the recurring (explicit or structural) reference to Tracey and to swing and dance. In a duo dance act (*i.e.* Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers's duets in the movie *Swing Time*), the leader swings the follower in the open position, to the ends of their arms, and the two perform the same routine separately and facing in the same direction, and then snap back towards each other, into the closed position (Stevens *et al.* 2011). Zadie Smith connects the narrator and Tracey in a similar narrative duet: in the narrator's words, «[t]here was always this mutual awareness, an invisible band strung between us, connecting us and preventing us from straying too deeply into relations with others» (Smith 2016: 16). When they are teenagers and the narrator is forced to start performing her own solo life-act, unable to follow Tracey's moves, the reiterated references to the swing

era or tap preserve her connection with childhood and her distant dance partner. Thus, the narrator and Tracey are related by a swinging connection (simultaneously close and distant), and this connection is the impulse that triggers and twists the narrative.

3. Tap solos and mood modulations

In *Swing Time*'s narrative social dance room, numerous swing dancers can be spotted, such as Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, or the African American tap dancers Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson (1878-1949) – who performed in minstrel shows, in the vaudeville circuits, and then in Broadway theatres and in motion pictures – and Jeni LeGon (née Jennie Ligon, 1916-2012), whose solo dance act in the movie *Ali Baba Goes to Town* (1937), accompanied by Edie Cantor singing *Swing Is Here to Stay*, was both outstanding and a rarity (for a Black woman performer) in 1930s Hollywood. Tap dance and musical shows offered African American artists the chance to change their economic and social condition. Firstly, they could earn a living in the entertainment circles of early nineteenth century, by borrowing and refashioning dance and music forms that linked back to the African slaves and the Irish labourers in the United States (Crawford 2014; Scafe 2019; Seibert 2015). Then, thanks to these forms of entertainment, they also had the chance to climb up the social ladder. For instance, Bill Robinson was one of the first Black performers to break the vaudeville 'two-coloured rule', which forbade Black artists to perform solo; and Jeni LeGon was one of the first African American women to establish a solo career as a tap dancer in the US.

As Gunther Schuller notes, economic depression and job scarcity in the late Twenties and early Thirties had a negative impact on soloists, bands, and performers in general, who strived and, in many cases, abandoned the scenes. This meant that new and non-mainstream artists had the chance to perform in front of a public. Also, public tastes began to change. People sought more spiritual, immaterial forms of fulfilment in order to escape from unemployment and financial stress:

[d]espite the Depression – or perhaps because of it – the thirties were for many people a new beginning. For some minorities the period represented another small but significant step up the ladder of social and cultural integration (or what passed for integration then); and, for many blacks, opportunities in music – in jazz, that is – were to open new vistas of economic and social status. In the wake of the initiative begun in the Jazz Age, in the 1920s, more black musicians saw jazz for the first time as a profession (Schuller 1989: 5).

In the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s (and later, in the 1990s), the swing music and dance scenes offered two opportunities: social entertainment, and rebellion against mainstream culture and society (Renshaw 2006: 83).

In *Swing Time*, swing stories, movements, and patterns are repeated, with subtle or abrupt variations. However, there is nothing of the sense of rebellion and promise of change of this culture when, in their childhood years, the narrator and Tracey compulsively watch, talk about, and imitate the tap routines of the Swing Era. Eventually, when the narrator goes back to those clips, she changes her interpretation of them, seeing issues of segregation and resistance. Thus, the narration repeatedly oscillates between the pure joy of two girls watching Broadway shows and Hollywood movies, and moments of revelation in which the adult narrator finally sees the counter-narratives hidden in those shows, which were actually full of stock characters and stereotypical representations of Black people (the slave, the mammy, the dandy, or the mulatto young woman). This strategy recalls the above-mentioned definition of musico-literary mood modulations: «a theme is stated, then developed, pushed out of shape, imperceptibly deformed, until, though still recognizably the same, it has become quite different» (Huxley quoted in Scher 2004: 183). It also resembles counterpoint, that is, several independent yet related parts in a musical composition (Schuller 1968: 376). Mood modulation and counter-narratives strengthen *Swing Time*'s polyphony and are exemplified by the simultaneous presence of several stories, which are repeated, juxtaposed, disconnected, and modified.

At first, the stories of the narrator's favourite tap dancers from the Swing Era do not hold the promise of change: they are enjoyed in a carefree manner. The narrator recalls:

to me a dancer was a man from nowhere, without parents or siblings, without a nation or people, without obligations of any kind, and this was exactly the quality I loved. The rest of it, all the detail, fell away. I ignored the ridiculous plots of those movies: the opera-like comings and goings, the reversals of fortune, the outrageous meet cutes and coincidences, the minstrels, maids and butlers. To me they were only roads leading to the dance. The story was the price you paid for the rhythm (Smith 2016: 24).

The girls respond to these dances physically and joyously. By repeating these non-fictional dancing stories, Zadie Smith emphasises the fictional nature of this kind of response. The early jazz and the swing eras were impregnated with the asymmetrical power relations and racist social conventions and cultural prejudices dominant in the US at

the time. Still, the young narrator is unaware of these counternarratives characterising the lives of African American tap dancers in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s. For instance, with the light heartedness of childhood, the narrator and Tracey enjoy watching the clip of LeGon's solo act in *Ali Baba Goes to Town*, noticing only the similarities between LeGon and Tracey (including skin colour). As the narrator recalls, «[a]ll we had was her name, we found it in the credits. Jeni LeGon. We had no idea where she'd come from, if she was alive or dead, if she'd made any other films, we had only these four minutes from *Ali Baba*» (ivi, p. 199). Later, the adult narrator realises that she is also similar to LeGon, as they are both shadows in their different, but equally discriminatory, social contexts:

Researching her [LeGon], [...] I realized how much I had fantasized about her as a child, how fundamentally naïve I had been about almost every aspect of her life. 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 [...]. But Astaire never spoke to LeGon on set, in his mind she not only played a maid, she was in actuality little different from the help, and it was the same with most of the directors, they didn't really see her, not for anything except maid parts, and soon enough even these roles dried up (ivi, pp. 427-428).

Jeni LeGon's career in the entertainment industry illustrates «the near impossibility of 'ascendance' for Black female performers» (Scafe 2019: 110). Her solo dance in *Ali Baba Goes to Town* and her movements (later appropriated by Michael Jackson) have gone unrecognised. Generally, she was given subordinate roles (mainly, as the Black maid). Even her name was not authentic but the product of misspelling. Her personhood was reduced to the stock roles she played: «the person Tracey had imitated so perfectly all those years ago, the girl we'd watched dance with Eddie Cantor, kicking her legs, shaking her head – that was not really a person at all, that was only a shadow» (Smith 2016: 429). LeGon's experience of de-personalisation and exclusion is similar to that of the narrator, who wishes to feel like a person one day, just as, she says, LeGon felt later in life when she was far from the US (in Paris). In this moment of revelation (told almost at the end of the novel), the narrator sees her own shadow, which has become «huge» but also «knife-like» (ivi, p. 428), at once augmented and strengthened by 'shadows' of the likes of Jeni LeGon.

Another repeated real-life and fictional story in the novel is that of Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson. It also provides an example of mood modulation and counter-narration. Quoting from Constance Hill's *Tap*

Dancing in America: A Cultural History (2010), Suzanne Scafe (2019: 109) argues that «the performance history of tap dance ‘inevitably takes on the history of race, racism, and race relations in America’». In the minstrel and vaudeville circuits, white performers (often in blackface) were favoured over African American dancers. In this context, despite his fundamental contribution to the history of tap dancing and his trailblazing solo performances, Bill Robinson was best known for his duets with Shirley Temple. It is symbolically significant that, in one of his most iconic solo routines, the stair dance, he would sublimely tap up and down a set of stairs, which, as a matter of fact, led nowhere, as if exemplifying the impossibility of Black people’s aspiration for ascendance (ivi, pp. 109-110). With this in mind, «Bojangles in Harlem», Fred Astaire’s blackface solo act in *Swing Time* (the movie) – one of the most beloved clips of the narrator in *Swing Time* (the novel) – can be interpreted both as tribute to the Black tradition of tap dance (Macaulay 2011) and as a form of caricatural cultural appropriation and a story of discrimination and exclusion.

«Bojangles in Harlem» is the first reference to swing in the novel. The prologue is set on 25th October 2008 – «the first day of my humiliation» (Smith 2016: 1): the (now unemployed) narrator has moved back to London to flee from an unspecified scandal, which (it will be disclosed later) involves an illegal adoption and a video tape from the past. The pivotal moment in the prologue takes place at the Royal Festival Hall, where the narrator has hidden, and attends an event with a film director. In the middle of the interview, they show «Bojangles in Harlem» from the movie *Swing Time*:

a film I know very well, I only watched it over and over as a child. I sat up tall in my seat. On the huge screen before me Fred Astaire danced with three silhouetted figures. They can’t keep up with him, they begin to lose their rhythm. Finally, they throw in the towel, making that very American ‘oh phooey’ gesture with their three left hands, and walking off stage. Astaire danced on alone. I understood all three of the shadows were also Fred Astaire. Had I known that, as a child? No one else paws the air like that, no other dancer bends his knees in quite that way (ivi, p. 3).

This first revelation («the shadows were also Fred Astaire») is soon followed by a second one: on the same day, the narrator watches the clip again, on her laptop, together with Lamin, a young Senegalese man with whom she has had an affair. Only when she watches the Bojangles act through the eyes of this Black man is she aware that Fred Astaire is dancing blackface:

I hardly understood what we were looking at: Fred Astaire in black face. In the Royal Festival Hall I'd sat in the gods, without my glasses on, and the scene opens with Astaire in long shot. But none of this explained how I'd managed to block the childhood image from my memory: the rolling eyes, the white gloves, the Bojangles grin (ivi, pp. 4-5).

With a new pair of lenses, the narrator sees unexpected counter-narratives in Astaire's act: its connection with the minstrel shows, the two-colour rule, and the process of cultural appropriation of Blackness become evident to her, and to readers. These are only some examples of how Zadie Smith gives shape to the repetitive, interconnecting, and everchanging nature of her swing stories. As we will see, the way in which she interweaves these stories also resembles the swing rhythm and triggers the swing feel.

4. Closing/Opening act: swing rhythm and feel

Zadie Smith's novel moves back and forth through time and across space in a non-linear manner: the narrative shuffles spatially (from London to New York and West Africa) and temporally, following a syncopated rhythm; it spans from the 1930s to the beginning of the twenty-first century; and it encompasses childhood, teen, and adulthood ages, in a non-chronological way. Holi Bass draws a parallel between this «herky-jerky story line» and that of musical movies: neither relies on «plot or character development but on a series of skillfully rendered passages to propel the story as it swings back and forth through time, though not necessarily with perfect rhythm». Paraphrasing the narrator's words, the story is the price paid for the rhythm (Bass 2016).

I would add that, in this way, *Swing Time* re-plays the unique rhythm of swing, which is characterised by unequally-divided pulses, an alternation of long and short durations. Likewise, the plot is built as a social dance with different performers and different storylines that swing at different lengths of time. This narrative rhythm is unequivocally swing. In Schuller's definition, the swing element in jazz music is an aspect of rhythm with two main characteristics: «(1) a specific type of accentuation and inflection with which notes are played or sung, and (2) the continuity – the forward-propelling directionality – with which individual notes are linked together» (Schuller 1968: 6-7). Likewise, we could say that the novel's intermedial connections, its multiple layers of time and space, modulations, repetitions, and counter-stories all shape the narrative into a «swinging loop» (Smith 2016: 27), which

propels the narrator – and readers – forward. I would say that this narrative loop is double-framed by the Prologue and the Epilogue: the reading process begins at the end of the story, with the adult narrator in London in 2008 (Mayumba 2016); and it ends where it begins, with the narrator drawn towards Tracey's magnetic energy, in London, in 2008, as described in the last lines of the Epilogue:

I left the path and crossed diagonally through the grass, heading for the covered walkway. I was about to enter the stairwell when I heard music, stopped and looked up. She [Tracey] was right above me, on her balcony, in a dressing gown and slippers, her hands in the air, turning, turning, her children around her, everybody dancing (Smith 2016: 453).

The narrator's geometrical (almost choreographed) movements towards Tracey's home and the memories of their childhood friendship; the stairs she has to climb to reach the flat; Tracey's hands turning rhythmically; and everybody dancing, following the leader's moves: this last scene is shaped like a dance scene, at once identical and opposite to the other dancing narrative scenes in the novel. This Epilogue episode of Tracey moving her body rhythmically with her hands in the air takes the readers back to one particular dance, Astaire's «Bojangles in Harlem» act in the movie: «no one paws the air like that» (ivi, p. 3). The narrator witnesses the two dancing performances on the same timeline but they are told from narrative lines at opposite ends. The beginning and the ending of the novel double upon themselves, encircling the story in the swinging loop in which the narrator is caught and, with her, the readers.

For this reason, we could say that, in *Swing Time*, swing dance is a social dance, and also a rhythmically coordinated performance that aims at involving readers in the narrative rhythm and feel. Walton Mayumba highlights the role of readers in the hermeneutic process that is activated:

Smith asks her readers to relinquish their expectations for a life rendered in plot and a realist mode that might be enjoyed in passive comfort. The narrative's swinging movements offer a sense of how memory lies in the mind and how the stories we tell ourselves about our experiences deny or escape ordering. Readers must follow and catch up with the narrator shuffling among her story lines, the work's internal patterns. As they do, they will notice that the made-ness of the movement evokes the novel's major metaphor: dance (Mayumba 2016).

I would argue that the impulse that triggers (metaphorically but also structurally) this intricate narrative, which the narrator and readers are

invited to follow, is made up of dance *and* music, merged together in the swing rhythm and feel, as epitomised in the title. This emphasises the temporal and swing dimensions, *i.e.* the rhythmic and kinesthetic components of both dance and music, and of literature. According to Brian Seibert, «the most powerful part of our response to any kind of dance is kinesthetic: the way we seem to feel in our own muscles and bones what we see in the muscles and bones of the bodies we're watching». In particular, he continues, tap dance «combines this with what I think of as the kinesthetics of hearing: the way that hearing is a kind of touch, blasts of air knocking against the eardrum» (Seibert 2015: 5). In tap, body movements, seeing, hearing, touching – they all conjure up and trigger a 'feel' response.

This response is considered to be the core of swing. While acknowledging that swing is a word that defies definition, «for most musicians protest that swing cannot be regarded wholly as a matter of rhythm», R. B. Nye (1937: 48) describes it as «a personal emotional response to rhythm that cannot be written in any musical notation. As one musician says, 'A man either has swing in him or else he hasn't, and if he hasn't, nobody can teach him how to swing'». Aiming at demonstrating what actually makes a piece of music swing, Datseris and colleagues define the swing feel in jazz as «the fascinating power to elicit a pleasant sensation of flow in listeners and the desire to synchronize body movements with the music» (Datseris *et al.* 2019: 1).

In my opinion, in *Swing Time* the swing feel is repeatedly illustrated in literary forms (and triggered in readers) as an emotional and kinesthetic response to music and dance. In the Prologue, when the narrator watches the «Bojangles in Harlem» clip at the Royal Festival Hall, readers can witness (and respond to) one of these swing feeling moments:

the same clip, for some reason, played again, and my feet, in sympathy with the music, tapped at the seat in front of me. I felt a wonderful lightness in my body, a ridiculous happiness, it seemed to come from nowhere. I'd lost my job, a certain version of my life, my privacy, yet all these things felt small and petty next to this joyful sense I had watching the dance, and following its precise rhythms in my own body. I felt I was losing track of my physical location, rising above my body, viewing my life from a distant point, hovering over it (Smith 2016: 3-4).

This is a physical and emotional response to music and dance. Together, they connect the narrator (and readers) to the ground, to her feet dancing in sympathy with Fred Astaire. They make her transcend the limits of her body and her present position, and they

elicit self-awareness, from which change can stem: «[a] truth was being revealed to me: that I had always tried to attach myself to the light of other people, that I had never had any light of my own. I experienced myself as a kind of shadow» (ivi, p. 4). If, as Seibert (2015: 5) claims, «tap dancers have a potent set of kinesthetic responses to work upon», *Swing Time* proves that novelists like Zadie Smith can exercise this power too. Through writing, she gives life and, I would add, sound and movement to the swing feel, inviting readers to be caught in the novel's narrative loop and to respond to this hermeneutic experience accordingly: intellectually, physically, and emotionally – so to say, at once tapping our feet, changing our posture and attitude, and rising above our physical and emotional location.

Resembling the loop in which readers are involved, I would like to conclude this analysis of *Swing Time*'s intermedial reconstruction of social dance rooms, tap solos, partner dancing, mood modulations, and swing rhythm and feel, by referring to the very first lines of the novel. In the epigraph, Zadie Smith sets the rhythm for an intermedial process of reading, from the novel's opening to its closing act: «When the music changes, so does the dance» (Smith 2016: epigraph). This Hausa proverb anticipates and fastens the key themes in *Swing Time*: music, dance, and change. The latter is represented as transition across and transgression of media, temporal, spatial, cultural, and social borders. The proverb also functions as a leitmotif throughout the novel, reminding readers that acts of (individual and social) change can flow from the interconnections between sound, movement, and words.

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