

## The Cultural and Intersectional Politics of Nomadism in Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*

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The complexity of individual identity has been central in Zadie Smith's fiction to date. Her characters are often portrayed in tension with dominant social norms because their heterogeneity clashes with hegemonic discourses of identity. Smith's debut *White Teeth* (2000) depicts how different diaspora generations struggle with prevailing notions of pure and authentic identities in British society.<sup>1</sup> In *NW* (2012), Smith further refines her inquiry into the variety and complexity of such clashes: Leah, one of the protagonists, faces conflicts due to her being bisexual in a heteronormative and patriarchal society, while her friend, Keisha—later renamed Natalie—struggles as a member of the second-generation black diaspora in predominantly white Britain. Beatriz Pérez Zapata has read the confrontation between the two women and their environment as one between dominant monolithic discourses on subjectivity and deviant individuals, whose differences emerge at the intersections of such embodied identity dimensions as class, race, and gender—dimensions which dominant discourses aim to occlude (87). Zapata's analysis is informed, among others, by Rosi Braidotti's feminist theory of nomadism, which offers a performative model to overcome the essentialism and corporeal determinism underlying Western hegemonic concepts of identity.

Smith's most recent novel, *Swing Time* (2016), further explores the clash between individual identities and identity discourses. This time, both women in the center of the action, the unnamed narrator and her childhood friend, Tracey, are members of second-generation British-Jamaican diaspora in London, and it is their cultural and racial hybridity that positions them against hegemonic discourses in contemporary British society. The text vividly portrays the consequences of their deviance, particularly how the specific intersections of race, gender, and class they embody limit either their cultural or socio-economic agency and impair their capacity to construct a sustainable identity. Here, I will explore the complex relationship between intersectional difference and agency in *Swing Time*, through the double theoretical lens of Braidotti's nomadic model of identity and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality. It is my contention that Smith's novel does not simply bear out Braidotti's theory but rather interrogates it, especially its insufficient attention to the diverse and disempowering effects resulting from certain

intersections of what Braidotti calls “variables,” or “axes of differentiation,” such as class, race, gender, ethnicity, age, and disability (25).

*Swing Time* is particularly capable of exposing the shortcomings of a nomadic perspective on identity because Smith locates the roots of her protagonists’ struggles in the context of postcolonialism. As binary thinking and ideas of purity and homogeneity still persist in Western societies, diaspora people from former colonies tend to be perceived as “different.” Diaspora subjects’ awareness of themselves as the Other incapable of approximating omnipresent notions of homogeneity renders them incapable of forming an empowering identity. Since nomadism, as described by Braidotti, challenges homogenizing and essentializing notions of subjectivity, in theory, the narrator’s and Tracey’s racial and cultural heterogeneity should facilitate their engagement in empowering nomadic identity performances. As a result of colonialism’s continuing material and symbolic impact on diasporic identity, however, their heterogeneity functions, first and foremost, as a source of vulnerability and disempowerment, which inhibits nomadic practice. Thus, one cannot discuss postcolonial diasporic identity without taking into consideration colonialism’s continuing impact on individual agency. It is with respect to the question of individual agency that Crenshaw’s intersectional theory offers a corrective to Braidotti’s nomadic theory which is pertinent for my inquiry.

Braidotti’s anti-essentialist nomadic theory seeks to overcome the essentialism and corporeal determinism underlying Western hegemonic—fixed, unitary, and exclusionary—concepts of identity by re-imagining the body as a site of a performative becoming. Nomadic identity performances—performances of “as if”—rely on a political, critical consciousness (Braidotti 65), and are empowering in that by subversively re-enacting “dominant poses” (28), socially coded modes of thought and behavior, they “open up in-between spaces where alternative forms of political subjectivity can be explored” (28). As a result of such identity performances, then, subjects become capable of transcending apparently fixed, power-saturated embodied identity categories, in Braidotti’s words, “variables,” or “axes of differentiation” (25). What Braidotti’s nomadic model does not call sufficient attention to—and what Smith’s text also exposes—however, is that such nomadic transcendence is not universally available but presupposes cultural and material privilege, since a political consciousness, individual awareness of power relations—the prerequisite of nomadic performances—does not cancel out the cultural and material impact of power relations on individual agency. It is this gap in Braidotti’s theory that Crenshaw’s intersectionality fills in, as it highlights the social and material effects of discursively constructed identity categories, and,

therefore, offers a more nuanced perspective on corporeal identity and individual agency.

In contradistinction to Braidotti's nomadism, Crenshaw's intersectional approach does not aim to outline a model for the transcendence of embodied identity categories. Her inquiry rather focuses on how varying intersections and interdependences of multiple embodied identity categories lead to socio-economic stratification, which impacts individual agency and experience, and fuels various forms of social and material subordination or privilege. Thus, it can be claimed that the discursively constructed meaning of intersecting identity categories and their material consequences can overshadow the socio-symbolic changes that nomadic transcendence of embodied categories seeks to accomplish.

Since the desire to transcend bodily determination in performative ways is as crucial a dimension of the characters' life journey in Smith's novel as is the experience of the effects of socio-economic stratification arising out of intersectional difference, I read the text with this double theoretical focus. More particularly, I map how Tracey's lack of socio-economic agency and the narrator's lack of cultural agency render them both individually unable to overcome the cultural limbo hybrid diasporic subjects are thrust into, and how their hybrid diasporic identities can become individually empowering by means of a nomadic practice only when the impact of intersectional difference on the formation of individual identity and agency is collectively recognized. Both nomadic politics and intersectionality emphasize the crucial role of the collective in creating individuals' social awareness, even if in different ways. In Braidotti's view, the political practice of "bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections" (42) between nomadic individuals facilitate the exchange of experience and knowledge (27), this way building an awareness of the social forces at work in identity formation. Crenshaw further refines this, as intersectional collective politics also draws attention to intra-group difference, the "difference [her] difference ma[kes]" (1299). To achieve this, an awareness of social or material inequality is not enough—one has to trace inequality back to the intersections of identity categories and their difference to other constellations.

Both the narrator of *Swing Time* and Tracey display a performative approach to identity, repeatedly engaging in identity performances of "as if." The socio-economic consequences of the intersectional difference between them, however, account for a fundamental difference in their performances. Tracey, the daughter of a black Jamaican man and a long-term unemployed white British woman, lacks socio-economic agency and upward social mobility due to the discrimination that both people of color and white working class

women have to face on the labor market. Her continuous exposure to discrimination, witnessed or experienced, however, increases her political consciousness, and leads to her engaging in subversive and transgressive nomadic performances of “as if,” which is suggestive of her cultural agency. The narrator, by contrast, enjoys upward social mobility, even though she grows up in the same working class estate as Tracey. This is due to the fact that her white British father, despite growing up among the working class and having a criminal record—like Tracey’s father—managed to get promoted in his job at the postal service. His income facilitates both his daughter’s and his wife’s academic education and their ascent to the top layers of the societal and the political arena.

While this implies a socio-economic agency for the narrator, it does not automatically translate into cultural agency; rather, it appears that her embeddedness in Western (British) education and discourse renders her unable to view socio-economic structures and cultural discourses as critically as Tracey does. As a result of her lack of political consciousness, her performances of “as if” reproduce and adapt to dominant identity concepts, thus they cannot be described as nomadic. It is only towards the end of the novel that she becomes politically more aware. For the most part, however, her political awareness is blocked by her socio-economic positioning and agency, which protect her from being as vulnerable to the consequences of embodied intersectional difference as Tracey is. The trajectory of Smith’s two protagonists suggests that, contrary to Braidotti’s claim, a political consciousness alone is not sufficient to overcome intersecting embodied “axes of differentiation” (25). It necessitates both cultural and socio-economic agency to ensure a sustainable success of nomadic performances.

Tracey’s awareness of intersectional discrimination that operates on the basis of the corporeal is present from an early age, fostered by her parents’ awareness of colonial-racist power and of the body as a site of difference and resistance. In the course of the novel, she repeatedly engages in subversive practices of “as if,” exaggerating corporeally grounded binary identities, or transgressing the borderline between them, in order to escape pre-figured subjectivities and gain access to socio-economic agency and control. All aspects of Tracey’s performative “as if” converge in the events occurring at her classmate’s, Lily Bingham’s tenth birthday. Tracey initially emphasizes the difference between Lily’s middle class- and her own working class habitus as she takes on a Cockney accent (Smith 76), but then she slowly builds up her authority at the expense of Lily’s mother by transgressing social norms attached to binary identity categories. During the car ride to the cinema, she directs sexually obscene gestures at the driver in the car behind (77),

transgressing—within the heteronormative context—gender norms as well as age conventions whilst entertaining the other children. At the cinema, she continues to perform working class stereotypes through theft of sweets and distractive misbehavior. Her actions checkmate Lily's mother in between the pressure to exert authority over children and her unwillingness to further disrupt the audience, and thus enable Tracey to seize authority over the party (77). Having discontinued power relations, she moves on into her acquired performative freedom (78) to eventually transgress race categories by calling a schoolmate "Paki" (78)—a mortification so tremendous that Lily's mother and the other children fail to respond to it.

The silence induced by Tracey's subversive linguistic performance can be described in terms of what Braidotti describes as a power vacuum opened up by busted dichotomies (29). In Smith's novel, the vacuum opens up because Tracey simultaneously conjures up racial dichotomies and upsets the power relations inscribed in them by adopting and, thus, reclaiming their discursive register. The bafflement of the other children and Lily's mother testifies to their adherence to a binary conception of subjectivity and power, as they are unable to respond, let alone condemn the transgression that "Paki" as a racist slur would signify had a white person used it. As Tracey's utterance removes the discursive register out of the particular context that provides its meaning, it shifts the signifier and its signification beyond her audience's grasp, and exposes the discursive constructiveness of racial hierarchies—or, as Braidotti puts it, "the illusion of ontological foundations" (65). Through her performance then, motivated by a radical nomadic political consciousness, Tracey opens up and occupies an emerging "in-between space"—resonant with Homi Bhabha's concept of "third space"—to exert an alternative "political subjectivity" (Braidotti 28). The social power she gains through this act allows her to surpass the power relations of age, race, and class at work in the context of Lily's birthday, and determine the tasks and subjectivities of the guests in the following game of "Putting on a Show" (Smith 79-80). Tracey's performative techniques and tactics, therefore, equip her with cultural agency to upend hierarchies and construct subjectivities beyond dominant models.

Tracey's temporally situated performances of identity also form the basis of her economic agency. As a dancer, first in voluntary classes, then professionally on London stages, she seizes the institutionalized concept of constant transition between identities to make a living—whilst subverting equally institutionalized power hierarchies. As she strives to refine her performance skills to perfection (26), including ballet (51)—which she associates with "white music" (24)—she earns parts in musicals where people of color occupy only marginal roles. Apparently abiding by the artistic codes

of dominant Western culture, she performs to subvert its underlying power relations. In *Guys and Dolls*, she uses gender and the excessive performance of femininity in order to deflect the audience's attention from the white female star to herself, a black dancer in a minor supporting role (347). In *Showboat*, she is, again, cast in a supporting part, having adapted her outer appearance to dominant western beauty standards, especially by straightening her hair (356), while the main part of a "tragic mulatto" is given to a white actress (359). Yet, within her part, she re-appropriates choreographic elements of Fred Astaire in *Royal Wedding* (359). This is significant in that Astaire did not only appropriate the moves of Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, but also did it in blackface (4).<sup>2</sup>

Tracey's practice of "as if" uses identity performance not only on, but also off stage to gain socio-economic benefit. Her affair with fellow dancer Chalky, as the narrator notes, disturbs gender hierarchies in the context of theatre and musical production (343). It also overturns class and patriarchal hierarchies outside the world of theatre in that it is Chalky, a man from an upper middle class Kenyan family (344) who occupies the inferior position. A vivid example of this is that Tracey brusquely rejects his offer to leave his wife for her (342), since she views the relationship as another performance where she "do[es] him" (347) in order to gain money and "a free education" (346). Tracey, therefore, employs gender as a conscious on- and off-stage performance to access material resources. On stage, she constructs the "illusion of an abiding gendered self" in Butler's sense (519), a canopy that complies with patriarchal structures, such as the male gaze and its objectification of the feminine body, in order to subtly subvert race hierarchies—as in *Guys and Dolls*. Off stage, in her personal life, in turn, she performs the role of a woman in another transgressive manner. She consciously keeps her relationship with Chalky outside established patriarchal modes, reducing it to an extra-marital affair, thus securing her superior position over him, exploiting and gaining material benefit from him by way of a reversal of the predominant and gendered pattern of the male "breadwinner."

Within the context-specific "freedom" that Tracey acquires, she temporarily discontinues the symbolic effect of colonial discourse. She furthermore assuages its material consequences at the intersection of race and gender, as she earns a living from dancing, and pockets money and education from Chalky. The latter can be read as an ironic echo of what Braidotti calls a nomadic political "bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections" (42), since it provides Tracey with "those necessarily situated connections that can help [her] to survive" (64). Tracey's situated connections link social capital—

“broadly understood as the values that people hold and the resources that they can access” (Reynolds 1088)—and economic capital.<sup>3</sup> Her relation to Chalky provides her with social capital in the form of material resources, which enable her to improve or, at least, stabilize her socio-economic situation. Yet, this is not an exchange of social capital in Bourdieu’s altruistic sense due to Tracey’s rather exploitative and transgressive approach. It should be noted, however, that it is her socio-economically marginalized position depriving her of supportive networks and access to social capital that almost inevitably compels her to rely on transgression and exploitation to get into a position where equal terms of exchange may apply.

In the ultimate analysis, Tracey’s transgressive nomadic performances produce ambivalent results, mainly because of the persistence of corporeally grounded binary identity conceptions in Western societies, which is heavily pronounced in the case of postcolonial diaspora subjects. Their racial difference makes them particularly vulnerable during performances that seek to transgress gender and class boundaries. As a result, nomadic performances fail to be consistently empowering; they rather lead to social isolation and the reinforcement of boundaries in the long run, as is repeatedly demonstrated by Tracey’s story. Already as a child, she is snubbed by her female schoolmates when she excessively displays her feminine body and gender, staging a performance of taking her coat off “with terrible relish, unzipping slowly and in such a way that her breasts were presented to the rest of us with as much impact as possible, barely contained by an unsuitable top that showed off her abundance where the rest of us still had only nipples and bones” (Smith 168). Her female classmates are further outraged because “everybody ‘knew’ it cost 50p to ‘touch Tracey’s tits’ . . . all the girls united in shunning her, black, white and brown” (168). In another instance, the narrator’s father humiliates her when she wears middle class clothes and performs a middle class accent during a casual encounter. Initially, he reacts with disbelief to her “brand-new style [of speech and clothing] from a different neighborhood, a different world” (263), and her enumeration of skills she took up in stage school: “But you’re not serious, are you, Trace? Stop it with all that—it’s just us here! No need to talk fancy with us. We know you, we’ve known you since you were this high, you don’t have to pretend to be Lady Muck with us!” (262-63). As Tracey maintains her accent and speaks faster, the narrator’s father “los[es] control of himself entirely and giggle[s] at her, in the middle of King’s Cross Station, in front of all those rush-hour commuters” (263). Both reactions imply the expectation of unchanging and unitary gender and class identities with specific discursive and material registers attached.

Thus, on the one hand, nomadic performances in a professional context allow Tracey to temporarily transcend binary identity categories by expressing her hybridity, as well as to gain access to resources through interconnectedness. On the other hand, the rejection her performances provoke from her peers in her private life results in her isolation, which reduces the scope of her supportive network and shrinks her socio-economic agency. In short, her job as a professional dancer becomes the sole anchor of her agency, the dangers of which surface when she is forced to quit working as a dancer after the birth of three children. The corporeal in both dimensions of intersectional and cultural identity underlies this dynamic and renders Tracey vulnerable and marginalized when she has to raise the children as a single mother with no relatives or friends to support her (404). Contrary to Braidotti's claim, then, Tracey's embodied identity categories, along with their social and material consequences, cannot be overcome beyond the temporal and contextual specificity of performance. As a site of colonial-racist power intersecting with gender and class, the corporeal socio-economically marginalizes her, just as it stratifies and individualizes the diasporic community at large. Reduced to the corporeal—without a supportive network and resources—she is bereft of socio-economic agency and of the ability to professionally perform a nomadic cultural identity.

The narrator's social trajectory counterpoints that of Tracey's. Not only does she have parents whose background is diametrically opposite to that of Tracey's—it is her mother who is Jamaican, while her father is a white British postal worker—she also grows up with the socio-economic agency and upward mobility that Tracey lacks. Propelled by way of inherited intersectional privileges from university first to the position of broadcaster on YTV (346) and then into the inner circle of the white global pop star, Aimee, by becoming one of her assistants (128),<sup>4</sup> the narrator of *Swing Time* is able to overcome any potentially negative impact of her corporeally defined identity. In the course of her employments, she embarks on a stream of changing spatial and cultural contexts that provide her with shifting identity positions and the benefits of interconnectedness. Yet, the crucial difference from Tracey's nomadism lies in the narrator's lack of political consciousness, which renders her practice of "as if" non-nomadic, while her reproduction of hegemonic identity discourses inadvertently also complies with the reproduction of colonial power structures. The narrator, thus, functions as a mirror-image of Tracey: her socio-economic agency is built at the expense of cultural-political agency. Her firm embeddedness in the British education system produces individual privilege along with a solipsistic mindset—"I just want to be responsible for myself" (338)—and an utter neglect of broader social contexts. Her extensive

travels around the world, however, and her encounters with critical and self-reflective peers eventually make her aware of colonial power structures, and prompt her to reflect on her own positions and actions.

Spatial mobility maintains and extends the narrator's socio-economic privileges through the networks and resources she has access to. Already at YTV in London, she and her colleagues are given "freebies," among them free travel (86). Once Aimee employs her, she travels between London, New York City, and West Africa, with occasional detours to other destinations. London and New York City are the two main home bases for Aimee's musical career, places where she resides and works on her public and artistic image. West Africa also becomes a recurrent destination, once Aimee sets her mind on conducting a charity project there. For her purposes, she chooses a village in what is implied as Gambia and, subsequently, builds a girls' school. Her activity receives great public attention from the local population, although the president never arrives to the scheduled meetings, and Aimee herself scarcely bothers to attend festivities organized in her honor. Accordingly, it is mostly her staff who travel to represent her. The flights are conducted with Aimee's jet, and even when she rebukes the narrator for scrutinizing her plan to enable the local villager and project worker Lamin to get a visa to the United States, the narrator still receives refunds for commercial flights (331). The same benefits appear in housing: the narrator gives up her London flat (143), as she is provided with a room in Aimee's house, or an alternative flat in New York City (363-64). She remains in a privileged position even after being fired due to her affair with Lamin: she is not bound to find a place of her own because Aimee's assistant organizes a separate apartment for her in London (436). The benefits derived from the narrator's professional affiliations elevate her into upper middle class conditions, and eclipse potential socio-economic disadvantages that could stem from her initial class and race categorization. The material benefits of upward social mobility help her when Lamin insists that she cannot take a narrowboat after they missed the last ferry to get to the village in West Africa (172-73). As a woman, she is not allowed to wait in public for the next ferry, so Lamin wants to send her to a waiting room. She overcomes her gendered immobility, however, with her financial advantage, paying "what Lamin considered an exorbitant amount" for the boat passage (172-73).

The privilege of great social and spatial mobility during her work for Aimee, however, is underpinned by an all too strong dependence on exactly these resources. Apart from her flat, the narrator also gives up her friendships (143), the strong ties to her mother, and the prospect of a partner and children (149), because Aimee's lifestyle demands her staff "to be untethered" (150).

She is willing to comply, having “been somewhat primed for it” (149) due to her scarce relations and relatives. Yet, the downside effects of having solely Aimee at the center of her life are much less voluntary: “I’d never really paid for anything in New York: I lived on Aimee, ate with Aimee, went out with Aimee,” she realizes after she is deprived of a home in New York and a supportive network beyond Aimee and her affiliates (431). Eventually, Aimee’s entourage, as a source of mobility and resources, dispose of her, drive her out of the United States within thirty days (431), and send her back to London at the turning point of the novel.

Until then, however, the mobility that came along with her work for Aimee produces multiple contexts and identity positions that the narrator seizes to express facets of her diasporic hybridity. While still at YTV, she adapts to the traditional office drinking parties, having “perfect[ed] that very British skill” (86). Within Aimee’s orbit, she returns to the dance and singing performances she last enjoyed during her childhood with Tracey: in New York, she sings a song from the musical *Gypsy* at the pianist’s request (136-37); in West Africa, assuming she found “the joy [she’d] been looking for all [her] life” (165), she immediately connects to dance and joins the villagers during a celebration, using “only instincts” to align herself to the beats and fellow dancers (417). Despite her view of herself as a “natural” singer (137) and an instinctive dancer, however, the performances fail to live up to the desired performative freedom of Nina Simone, and her ability to “[control] the time of [her] life” (137). The fact that the narrator accidentally continues to sing after the end of the song (138), and that the villagers merely perceive her dance as an approximation of black people’s dance skills, implying that she is white (417), suggests her lack of control and incompatibility with the prefigured identity conception she seeks to impersonate.

The narrator’s attempts to assimilate to singular cultural contexts, and her lack of intention to cut across the borders of local, exclusive identity positions in order to bend their constraints to her heterogeneity, are at odds with her racial and cultural hybridity, and the political practice of “as if” that Braidotti describes as nomadic. In Gambia, she resembles what Braidotti calls a “cartographer,” who reads “invisible [cultural] maps” (45). She believes she has “mastered local time” by dressing appropriately, applying Wolof phrases she has picked up, and timing her journey according to the ferry schedule (Smith 297).<sup>5</sup> Her apolitical intent to adapt, however, reproduces what Hall calls “inner expropriation of cultural identity” (226), because within the confines of unitary identity discourses, her hybridity repeatedly resurfaces as alienating difference to her own consciousness and to her environment. Instances include the first meeting with her white half siblings (Smith 46), but,

particularly, the sharp contrast between her effort to adapt to the villagers' ways in Africa and their perception of her as white (417). Thus, although she is not affected by the structural socio-economic consequences of her corporeal difference in terms of gender, race, or class as Tracey is, her performative practice of "as if" is a repeated effort to assimilate, which continuously reproduces the rift between her hybridity and her surroundings. This hybridity leads to her being caught up in a limbo between cultures—contrary to her mother's downplaying of the situation in her childhood: "*Life is confusing!*" (157).

The narrator's lack of a nomadic political consciousness is also reflected in her insensitivity to power structures, and her conscious detachment from social collectives and responsibility, which further complicate her relationship to Aimee. Apart from being entirely dependent on Aimee's resources, the narrator also becomes complicit in Aimee's practices of neo-colonialism and cultural appropriation. She assists Aimee in the establishment of a girls' school in West Africa that recreates patterns of colonial dependency and socially divides the villagers: the boys excluded from this school show growing resentment because they had been "left to fester in the old school," while the withdrawal of government subsidies since Aimee's arrival leads to a deterioration of medical and infrastructural conditions and water quality (300). Moreover, she organizes an exhibition of photographs that replicate images taken of various dancers (426), and witnesses how Aimee appropriates the villagers' dance moves for her show (366).

Thus, the narrator's practices of "as if" that merely assimilate to shifting subject positions have no subversive effect. On the contrary, as a consequence of her intersectional privilege, her oblivion about corporeal difference and implied colonial structural and cultural power relations reproduces them. The structural intersectional marginalization of the village due to Aimee's charity work mirrors the structural constraints on Tracey's development. Cultural appropriation and the narrator's perpetuation of unitary subjectivities are evidence of the Western cultural forces and hegemonic identity formations that Tracey attempts to subvert through her performances.

The tensions, which have been present between Tracey and the narrator with shifting intensity since the beginning of their friendship, eventually boil over into an argument between them. The narrator confronts Tracey about the numerous emails she sent to the narrator's mother, who had, in the meantime, ascended to the position of a parliamentary representative of their constituency. Hostile and reproachful in tone, Tracey's mails accuse the narrator's mother of complicity with the manifold structural neglect that

constitutes her everyday lived experience. Without consulting Tracey, the narrator dismisses her accusations as “a surreal mix of personal vendetta, painful memory, astute political protest and a local resident’s complaints” (399), and frames the mails as harassment of her mother (402). During their personal confrontation, Tracey asserts that the narrator reproduces her mother’s negligence and abetment, and denies the existence of any basis for mutual understanding (405) on the grounds that “there is a system, and you and your fucking mother are both a part of it” (406). Although Tracey is unaware of the term “intersectionality,” she intuitively implies that the narrator and her mother actively support a power structure based on the repeated intersectional marginalization and silencing of people like herself.

By way of the climax, Tracey publishes a video tape to force the narrator into realizing her conformity with the system (438-39). The tape contains a recording of a childhood dance she and the narrator performed together during the game of “Putting on a Show” at Lily Bingham’s birthday party (79-81), which vividly demonstrates both the narrator’s habit of adaptation and her being caught up in a cultural limbo. Whereas Tracey consciously uses a song by Aimee to transgress boundaries of race, age, and sexuality, the narrator passively joins in on the dance, and fulfills the role Tracey assigns to her (80-81). The publication of the tape functions as a breakthrough that inescapably pushes issues of cultural and structural power relations into the narrator’s consciousness, and makes her reflect on her compliance with Aimee’s practices and her role in Tracey’s marginalization (448). This, however, is not an isolated incident, but forms part and parcel of her political—structural and intersectional—awakening, which is, to a great extent, facilitated by the situated connections she makes during her extensive travels. Her witnessing the transformation of Hawa, her closest friend in the West African village and a central figure among the local women, from a feminist ally (303-04) into a married woman who gives up her passion for dance, even during her husband’s absence (416), is a crucial case in point. The narrator’s shock is conveyed by her observation that what happened to Hawa shows the impact of vague “evil spirits, whose existence in the world [she] no longer doubted” (416). The use of a religious register that, up to this point, has been utterly uncharacteristic of the narrator, can be read as simply symptomatic of her effort to assimilate to the local community’s spirituality. In my view, however, it can also be read as a sign of her awakening political consciousness, as the expression echoes an earlier debate she witnessed between Hawa’s brother, Babu, and Lamin about the local economic stagnation and the increasing emigration of the village’s men (412-14). In this reading, the narrator’s expression suggests that Hawa’s radical change

demonstrates to what a great extent people are determined by social and structural constraints.

Another crucial step in her political awakening is her encounter in London with a former colleague, Fernando Carrapichano, a project manager with extensive knowledge in international development, who coordinated the construction of Aimee's girls' school in West Africa. As he discusses the ethical issues in Aimee's charity project, which, eventually, motivated him to resign from his job, the narrator realizes that she "had always been quick to interpret everything personally, where Fern had seen the larger, structural issues" (449). In the wake of this encounter, she becomes "ashamed" (449) of her self-centered view on things, especially of her previous interpretation of Tracey's emails as a personal attack, which barred any serious inquiry into the issues Tracey raised.

Such transformative experiences make the narrator revisit Tracey's emails, their altercation, and the issue of her complicity. She concludes that she "had a sacred duty towards [Tracey]," yet, she "left her back there, in the ranks of the unwitnessed where you have to scream to get heard" (448). It is this realization that marks the narrator's emergence into a nomadic political subject. She becomes conscious of the importance of collective interconnectedness for the "[reconciliation of] partiality and discontinuity" (Braidotti 26), and of the way neglect of interconnections amplifies the effects of colonial power. The narrator realizes that not only did her previous lack of care for Tracey deprive the latter of social capital, and, therefore, of the means to overcome the socio-economic burden of corporeal difference, but that both she and her mother had also actively contributed to Tracey's discursive marginalization, as neither of them seized the narrator's mother's political agency to focus on the problems Tracey identified in her emails. Instead, both of them have subjected Tracey to class bias from an early age, denying her a voice and social participation, which is amply demonstrated by the text. For instance, shortly after their graduation from school, the money they had collected from an event at their church disappeared, and the narrator's mother and the dance teacher concluded without further investigation that Tracey was the prime suspect. This suspicion emerged despite the fact that Tracey had shared access to the keys with the narrator, and became consolidated when the teacher, Miss Isabell commented: "With a family like that . . ." (Smith 280), and the narrator's mother agreed. As a long-term consequence of this incident, the narrator's mother cancelled Tracey's drug counsel and "sever[ed] all connections" (394), and thereby diminished Tracey's circle of friends and affiliates. Instead of recognizing intersectional difference and the contribution of power to its material and social effects, the narrator and her mother did not

empower but pushed Tracey to “a location that resists telling” (Crenshaw 1242), and marginalized her as they withheld a supportive network and resources.

As the final scene of the novel suggests, the narrator’s recognition of the social and material effects of intersectional difference opens up the potential for the two protagonists to conjoin their individual resources and agencies, that is, to build nomadic interconnections in Braidotti’s sense, in order to reduce their vulnerability to the lingering effects of colonial structural and cultural power, and embrace their hybrid cultural identity. Shortly after realizing her contribution to Tracey’s marginalization, the narrator walks up to her housing block and sees her dancing with her children on the balcony. The encounter is left undescribed, yet, the narrator approaches the estate with “an idea, new to me, that there might be something else I could offer, something simpler, more honest, between my mother’s idea of salvation and nothing at all” (Smith 453).

In conclusion, Smith’s text suggests that nomadic interconnectedness and subversive practices of “as if” enable the formation of empowering cultural identities. It also calls attention to the fact that the recognition of intersectional difference and its consequences is a crucial component of the knowledge and resources exchanged through interconnectedness, which highlights a theoretical blind spot in Braidotti’s concept of nomadism. In Tracey’s case, the transcendence of embodied categories through subversive “as if” performances is only possible as long as she is not subjected to their socio-economic disempowerment. Consequentially, cultural and intersectional identity need to be considered jointly in order to culturally and socio-economically empower hybrid diaspora individuals by way of the collective.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Zapata has read Smith’s debut novel in such terms (87).

<sup>2</sup> Astaire’s performance is 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 (Rogin 4).

<sup>3</sup> In Bourdieu’s view, the lack of social capital contributes to the reproduction of inequality, particularly with respect to race, class, and gender. Reynolds emphasizes the importance of social capital exchanges for the formation of ethnic identity (1091).

<sup>4</sup> Aimee is from Bendigo, Australia, and already a star during Tracey’s and the narrator’s childhood.

<sup>5</sup> Wolof is the primary language the inhabitants of the West African village use. It is spoken among Hawa and her friends, as well as Lamin and his age mates. Although the text

never discloses the name of the country, Wolof, just like the geographic hints in the novel, is indicative of Gambia.

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