



## Swing Time: In the Land of Flat Feet Societal Impacts on Individual Recollective Identity

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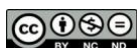
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### ABSTRACT

Studies on fictional and factual narratives suggest the prominence of memory and culture in the formation of individual self-portrait(s). This study aims to foreground the milieu in Zadie Smith's *Swing Time* (2016), zeroing in on social semiotics underlying the narrative's structure. Drawing on Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora's theories, the paper dissects the mechanisms of diachronic memory in the conception and development of the narrator's lived experience, hence her collective and individual identity. Through Juri Lotman's semiotic ideation of memory, the prevailing web of collectivity in *Swing Time* will be explored. In this fashion, the eminence of collective memories in life narratives will be pinpointed. The life of the narrator in *Swing Time* manifests how dominant discourses in societies give rise to the deprivation of subjects from interpreting their memories autonomously, thereby, transforming the individual to a witness to a pre-fabricated existence rather than a participant in a lived reality.

**Keywords:** Collective Memory, Socio-semiotics, Life Narrative, *Swing Time*, Spatiotemporal Dynamics.

### Introduction

When it comes to memory studies one might make a distinction between the phenomenon of 'memory' and the act of 'remembering'. According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology, (VandenBos 636), memory is: "the ability to retain information or a representation of past experience, based on the mental processes of learning or encoding, retention across some interval of time, and retrieval or reactivation of the memory". In contrast, the act of remembering is defined as: "the process of consciously reviving or bringing to awareness previous events, experiences, or information" (VandenBos 903). Not only does this differentiation sound imperative, but we also need to note that any act of remembering entails an inevitable act of forgetting.

The inevitable forgetting happens on two different levels. Firstly, there is the gradual loss of memories as a result of the passage of time and their lack of gravity, or stereotyping certain memories recounted several times to the degree that the unmarred content is almost lost<sup>1</sup>. Secondly, there is the unavoidable involvement of language in narrativizing memory. Donald Spence argues that our very first memories are visual. In this sense, no matter how diligently the subject tries to put the visual into the verbal, certain episodes are lost or inadequately conveyed to her.

<sup>1</sup> Primo Levi, Italian Jewish Holocaust survivor in his *The Drowned and the Saved* (1988), states: "It is also true that a memory evoked too often, and expressed in the form of a story, tends to become fixed in a stereotype, in a form tested by experience, crystallised, perfect, adorned, which installs itself in the place of raw memory or grows at its expense" pp. 11-12.

While one may not make conscious choices between remembering and forgetting, the role of ideology as well as group dynamics in such processes is undeniable. In the current study, I aim to employ Maurice Halbwachs' ideas of collective memory in pinpointing the role of space as well as time in the construction and recollection of memories as individuals. Likewise, I will draw on Pierre Nora's discussions of the sites of memory, conceived as personal and communal archives.

*Swing Time* is a narrative consisting of a succession of memories. The nature of memories that the narrator shares with the reader turn out to be communal, therefore, the theories of the aforementioned scholars will help clarify the architecture and the marrow of the text. The narrative begins with the narrator in her early thirties trapped in a condo in London, recounting her life story from childhood onwards. Born into a mixed marriage, the narrator is torn between the ever-present ideologies of her Jamaican mother, who aspires to educate herself and make progressive changes in society, and the white father with no particular interest and belief in ideology or progress.

She grows to learn about the dimensions of the world of politics, art, friendships, the separation of her parents during her adulthood, and the undeniable hierarchies governing every aspect of her life. Eventually, she finds a job as an assistant to a celebrity -Aimee-, as a result of which she gets to travel not only to numerous corners of the globe, but particularly, to Africa. Since Aimee wishes to build an all-girls school in West Africa, the narrator spends months in the rural sectors of the region and familiarizes herself with the culture and the societal norms. Once she feels courageous enough to act on her own initiative and antagonize Aimee, she is dismissed from the service altogether. Thus, she is instantaneously set aside, with no friend or social ties whatsoever, neither in Africa -symbolic of her mother's origins- nor in her paternal homeland, England.

In his discussion of memory, Nora emphasizes the role of historiography in the construction or damnation of sites of memory. He also points out that not only does memory find a legitimate space through the separation of history and memory, but this recently-earned freedom is partnered with a burden, a burden to remember and commemorate. The narrator of *Swing Time* gains the freedom to remember once she is excluded from her social circle with no ties to protect her. Quabeck observes that the narrator avoids exposing herself, as "she tries to hide the fact that she does not know who she is" which is why I argue that this remembrance is not a voluntary act, but one that should essentially result in her finding herself along with a sense-making of her lifetime of struggles.

While discussing the mechanisms of remembering in the context of family life, friendship, socio-economic and ideological conditions of the narrator's experience, Juri Lotman's theories of interpretation of societal semiology will be implemented into the paper. I will attempt to dissect the narrator's becoming a self through her search into her memories, thereby arbitrating amongst the various forces involved in her personal and communal history.

### **Navigating Collective and Individual Memory in Spatiotemporal Spheres of Culture**

In his discussion of collective memory, Halbwachs showcases a trip to London in the company of other individuals, each an expert in a field. He remarks how the memories he possesses are of collective nature as a result of their construction through the lenses of his companions. <sup>2</sup>Assuming that memories are perceptions of certain experiences retained in humans' psyche, and that perception occurs within naming, defining, and using metaphors<sup>3</sup>, one is almost always in the company of others, in other words, dominated by discourse and specific contexts at the moment of remembering. Therefore, Halbwachs considers memory and the act of remembering a collective experience.

As social beings, our very first experiences are perceived within the confines of our families. "... family thoughts become the ingredients of most of our thoughts. Our kin communicate to us our first notions about people and things" (Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* 61). In this respect, it is imperative to bring familial attributes into the equation. "...family is not just a group of relations but can apparently be defined according to the position it occupies, the professions its members engage in, its social level, etc." (Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* 63). Thus, not only do individuals interpret their existence in the confines of family, but the probable alterations in the family structure travel a long way in delineating the act of remembering.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Halbwachs, *Individual Memory and Collective Memory*, 23. *The Collective Memory*.

<sup>3</sup> Nicola King in *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (2000) suggests: "... it is impossible to imagine or formulate memory and its operations without the use of metaphor. The dominant metaphors employed -often quite unconsciously- within a culture then come to seem part of 'common sense', and to determine the ways in which memory can be thought" (p. 26). Therefore, one can equalize metaphors with making judgements that constantly take place through living within a culture and discourse.

<sup>4</sup> To clarify the matter, Halbwachs suggests: "A child nine or ten years old possesses many recollections, both recent and fairly old. What will this child be able to retain if he is abruptly separated from his family, transported to a country where his language is not spoken, where neither the appearance of people or places, nor their customs, resemble in any way that which was familiar to him

In addition to familial factors, Halbwachs develops an argument focusing on the spatiotemporal elements' role in stimulating individuals' memories. In other words, the component of space or what he occasionally terms 'landmarks' coupled with time, act in tandem to restore certain memories. In retrospect, he holds that being separated from one's habitat entails the loss of certain memories. Let us note that Halbwachs' notion of habitat encapsulates language, family members, and the immediate societies the subject is surrounded with. Discussing the role of society in collective recollection, Halbwachs identifies the importance of temporal elements. "Collective frameworks are, to the contrary, precisely the instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord, in each epoch, with the predominant thoughts of the society" (*On Collective Memory* 40). Therefore, Halbwachs views memory as a narrative 'reconstructed' in the proximity of one's environment and time, and each time resurrected and appropriated according to the current ideologies.

The idea of reconstruction of memories can be discussed through Halbwachs' ideation of discoursing upon memories. "One cannot in fact think about the events of one's past without discoursing upon them" (*On Collective Memory* 53). Similarly, to Pierre Nora, memory is a collective and cultural phenomenon. Nora approaches memory as a phenomenon prone to disappearing, since he believes that *milieux* of memory no longer exist. He suggests: "There are sites: *lieux de memoire*, in which a residual sense of the continuity remains. *Lieux de memoire* exists because there are no longer any *milieux de memoire*: setting in which memory is a real part of everyday experience" (*Between Memory and History* 1). Nora maintains that the present is subject to such an accelerated change that the social context can no longer be a container for memories of a nation, albeit a minor social circle, rather there are certain objects, places, monuments as sites of memory that will forever insinuate collective memories.

To Nora, memory is the very core of culture, yet the sort of culture that thrives on and continues to exist in the present. It is a result of change rather than continuity. "Memory as it is defined today is no longer what we need to preserve from the past to prepare the future. It is what makes the present, present to itself" (Nora, *Memory: From Liberty to Tyranny*). Nora suggests that memory is in essence a phenomenon of the present and always in dialogue with the present consciousness of the interlocutors. Likewise, Halbwachs considers memory to live, very much similar to an organic being, which continues to evolve through the passage of time.

The frameworks of memory exist both within the passage of time and outside it. External to the passage of time, they communicate to the images and concrete recollections of which they are made a bit of their stability and generality. But these frameworks are in part captivated by the passage of time. They are like those wood-floats that descend along the waterway so slowly that one can easily move from one to the other, but which nevertheless are not immobile and go forward. (Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* 182)

In this sense, memories consist of specific components, yet at the moment of resurrection, they carry novel and diverse messages to the interpreter. "To remember is not simply to restore a forgotten link or a moment of experience, nor is it 'unproblematically' to repossess or re-enact what has been lost" (Nicholls 53), rather it is an act of rewriting of the time past. Therefore, Halbwachs' 'discoursing upon memories', which in this sense is the gist of the mnemonic view of memory<sup>5</sup> is juxtaposed with the willful floating aspect of them. In this respect, any act of remembering is accompanied by the interpretations of the present ideological lenses of the subject.

Relying on Nora's notion of unified memory belonging to certain groups in societies -e.g., those whose voices have not been reflected in the history-, one can imagine how this collective phenomenon transforms into an ideological as well as a cultural text, which can be analyzed, and put under scrutiny in terms of its role in forming identities. Having explored the role of architecture and city space as well as group dynamics and morals in underlining certain memories, Yanushkevich suggests:

By citing as examples the events from the historical past of the people, the society is imposed on with a certain set of values, and the transmission of social norms, morals, and rules of conduct takes place, i.e. in the broad sense the reproduction of culture is fulfilled, and on the basis of the proper image of the past the national and group identity is shaped. (45)

In line with Yanushkevich and Nora's view of memory as cultural texts, in *On Collective Memory*<sup>6</sup>, Halbwachs goes into detail dissecting the bourgeoisie and their morality, and how it is disseminated through collective memories. Such beliefs under the guise of collective memory last as long as enough members of a given people object and suggest possible alternatives. Consequently, as observed in Halbwachs and Nora's theories, memories are

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up to this moment?... it is necessary that the child, in the new society that he is a part, at least be shown images reconstructing for a moment that group and the *milieu* from which the child had been torn." (*On Collective Memory* 37-38)

<sup>5</sup> See Assmann, p. 9, "Mnemohistory is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered. It surveys the story-lines of tradition, the webs of intertextuality, the diachronic continuities and discontinuities of reading the past... it has an approach of its own in that it deliberately leaves aside the synchronic aspects of what it is investigating."

<sup>6</sup> See Halbwachs, p. 136. *On Collective Memory*.

communally formed. They are then diachronically and synchronically resurrected in various social contexts. Halbwachs' dialoguing upon memories, i.e. being in a constant flux of ideologies and dominant discourses of the time reflects Nora's contemporaneity of memories.

Having discussed collective memory and its function in societies to some extent, one may wonder about the locus of individual memories. Regarding the possibility of forming individual memory, Halbwachs observes unless an individual lives their entire life outside of communities, their perceptions leading to memory formation are collective. He introduces the ideas of interiority and exteriority of perception. To Halbwachs, interior perception is possible under the condition that individuals experience life in utter solitude:

".. there are no recollections which can be said to be purely interior, that is, which can be preserved only within individual memory. Indeed, from the moment that a recollection reproduces a collective perception, it can itself only be collective; it would be impossible for the individual to represent to himself anew, using only his forces, that which he could not represent to himself previously unless he has recourse to the thought of his group." (On collective Memory 169)

Apart from collective perceptions, in the case of resuscitating individual memories, Halbwachs discusses how members of particular groups forget certain memories as a result of separating from them. Furthermore, individuals are prone to avoiding the retention of memories that are not in accord with the ideologies of their social circles.

Halbwachs also explains the ironic loss of our most private thoughts as a result of never having been shared with others.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, it is very common that individuals may opt for recollecting certain memories and interpret or reconstruct them in reference to the element of diachrony. In this respect, the current "I" of the subject makes the memory travel, reconfigures, and reshapes it with a different signification than the one it possessed at the moment of composition.

### Socio-semiotics of Memory and the Cultural Implementations

Reflecting on our memories and rearranging them, human beings observe that memory and the interpretation processes involved have strong ties not only with the time of remembrance but also with the semiotics of their community's current social behavior. In this respect, there are rather substantial connections between individuals' cultures and the frames of interpretation that operate within its paradigm. In this regard, Semioticians such as Eco and Lotman consider culture as a bundle of signs.<sup>8</sup> Juri Lotman's theories on the utility of culture in cognitive abilities address the inadequacy and insufficiency of individuals' thought processes while interpreting memories.

Lotman is of this belief that the complexity of cognition and judgment-making in a world where supposedly omniscient entities such as religion no longer make the impacts they used to, leads individuals to cling to an apparatus of the 'other', in this case, 'culture'. He asserts: "Culture as supra-individual intelligence, represents a mechanism designed to compensate for the shortcomings of individual intellect, and in that respect represents an inevitable addition to it" (46). In this respect, a significant portion of the understanding and interpretation as well as individuals' identity formation is under the direct influence of culture.

Lotman emphasizes the multiplicities of messages transmitted in the game of culture, which are interpreted in various ways. What allows this multiplicity of transmission and interpretation is what Lotman calls "creative consciousness" (72) which facilitates the creation of infinite new messages in the context of culture. In this respect, Lotman maintains a strong belief in the involvement of complex webs of identification and definition beyond the borders of one's consciousness, perception, and social class on micro and macro levels. "An essential component of cultural contact involves the naming of a partner into one's own cultural world, the coding of that partner with one's own code, and defining that partner's place in his or her picture of the worlds" (Lotman 78). Thus, there is a constant appropriation in process. In this sense, defining oneself, boundaries, and values in the proximity of any 'other' as well as interpreting the other based on one's in-flux codes are the components of the cultural transaction.

Similar to Halbwachs, Nora, and Yanushkevich Lotman holds: "culture represents collective intelligence and collective memory, that is, a supra-individual mechanism for preserving and transmitting messages (texts) and for

<sup>7</sup> In *The Collective Memory* p. 47, Halbwachs suggests: "The remembrances we evoke with most difficulty are our concern alone and constitute our most exclusive possession. They seem to escape the purview of others only at the expense of escaping ourselves also". On such occasions, he believes that later in life the chances of remembering these thought processes and memories would be minimal, as a result of the absence of potential companions.

<sup>8</sup> Eco considers culture a space where everything takes place based on a signification system, therefore, "The whole of culture *should* be studied as a communicative phenomenon based on signification systems" (*A Theory of Semiotics* 22). Thus, it follows that not only *can* culture be studied in this way but only by studying it in this way will certain of its fundamental mechanisms be clarified. He adds "meanings are cultural units" (p. 83), and further elaborates the very basic yet crucial act of perception would not be possible unless individuals had access to a concrete reservoir of culture and memory. Thus, there seems to be a triangle of culture, memory, and perception/interpretation involved in human judgment and human consciousness.



creating new ones. In this sense, the field of culture can be defined as a space of shared memory, within which certain common texts are preserved and actualized" (133). Viewing cultures, animate or inanimate entities, and human beings as texts, situates them in a flux of redefinition and reconfiguration relying on the infinite possibilities of and in culture. Hence, a human subject viewing and defining their entirety, perceives themselves as texts.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, one can imagine the possibility of self-definition, identity formation, and reformation to be in the manner of interpreting any other text.

One may raise the question of individual memories and their place in this field, to which Lotman responds by suggesting the existence of two poles. One pole encircles the diversity of cultural memory, whereby innumerable memories of different capacities and scales are welcome, in other words, in which "dialectics of memory" take place. The other pole creates a space for "local semantics", a *lieu* for individualized memories intermingled with local cultures. (Lotman 132-134). Lotman points out the fluidity of culture and the fact that the emergence of new variations of culture and new texts is a result of the dialogue between remembrances of the time past and present outlooks. It is the conversing with the past and its occurrence in the present that makes the future possible: "memory is not a passive storehouse for culture but a constitutive part of its text-generating mechanism" (137). Therefore, Lotman, similar to Nora, reminds us of the crucial role of memory in the formation of culture, but more importantly, insinuates the reciprocity between the two constituents. What occurs is a selection of memories at a given point of time according to the culture of the time, which itself is a hybrid of certain memories. Thus, what survives the bundle of memories today is symptomatic of the semiotics of culture today. This way, once again we observe how memory and culture are synonymous in many cases. In the next section, I will attempt to dissect how collective memory within the cultural and communal milieu of the novel, *Swing Time* leads the narrator to interpret her identity, reading signs and symbols moving forward.

### ***Swing Time*: Towards Identity Formation Through Recollective Communal Semiotics**

The unnamed narrator of *Swing Time* is trapped in a modern condo, "in which everything had been designed to be perfectly neutral, with all significant corners rounded" (Smith 1). The neutrality of the space the narrator ends up in, devoid of anything she can connect with, is symptomatic of Halbwachs' idea<sup>10</sup> of the importance of space in creating meaning through memory interpretation. This void, in turn, signifies the absence of Nora's site of memory, i.e. remnants to trigger remembering cultural and collective memories. Moreover, this "process of remembering and of identity and heritage creation is neither autonomous, nor uni-directional" (Whelan and Moore 20). Therefore, the unnamed narrator urges herself to remember, initially not as a separate entity, but precisely as a member of a community, yearning to belong to a meaningful space of existence, which may only be constructed relying on her collective memories. Only after locating herself within communal narratives, her pursuit of a unified identity begins.

The narrator's voice, coming from the outlook of a non-belonging upheaval, projects a full-force determination towards homogenizing her life narrative, i.e. her memories. Therefore, the choice of events to be recollected and narrated is far from chance-driven.<sup>11</sup> I find it crucial to take notice of the fact that the subjectivity that makes this collage of memories and interprets them is that of the *present* 'I' of the narrator, rather than the ones experiencing the memories first hand. Therefore, juxtaposing the qualities of the current 'I' of the narrator, speaking from the position of loss<sup>12</sup>, with the diverse cohort of subjectivities present at the moment of the actual memories insinuates Halbwachs' idea of the diachrony of memories as well as his theory of 'discoursing' upon them.

<sup>9</sup> In other words, "the capacity for self-description (self-reflection) and for the translation of itself onto a metalevel is present in the very nature of the monad. A monad at any level is, in this way, an elementary unit of meaning-making and, at the same time, has inherent within itself a sufficiently complex immanent structure" (Lotman 86).

<sup>10</sup> Halbwachs suggests in many occasions it is the space where the subject is situated in that triggers memories. He suggests: "collective memory does not preserve the past but reconstructs it with the aid of the material traces, rites, texts and traditions left behind" (On Collective Memory, p. 175).

<sup>11</sup> Also, one needs to note that there is an indirect and unconscious selectiveness when it comes to memories. Charlotte Linde suggests: "both children and adults learn what is memorable as they learn what can be, or should be told as a story, and how it may and may not be told to a particular audience. This kind of learning is part of the process of identity construction" (p.1).

<sup>12</sup> Nicola King in *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (2000) remarks that: "But experiences such as war, migration, abuse, assault or serious accident may make the relationship between the self 'before' and the self 'after' much more problematic" p. 3. In this sense, the narrator in the *Swing Time* speaks to the audience from the point of view of the new or 'after the accident' self.

While the narrator shares with the reader a thread of episodic memories<sup>13</sup>, there are stages and people in her life that surface recurrently, including her family, her childhood and adolescent friend -Tracey-, and her employer, Aimee. Since her first communal experiences belong to her family life, initially, she revives her childhood memories. She recalls her parents' marriage encapsulating a gap, which only continued to grow as the mother of Jamaican descent kept educating herself and eventually ended up being a member of the parliament. In contrast, the father and her maternal uncle, Lambert- "shared a dry sense of humour and a neutral lack of ambition" (Smith 20), which the mother despised. The divide between the mother and her brother, Lambert, serves two purposes: not only does the narrator's visits to Lambert's garden<sup>14</sup> fail to connect her to her heritage -as she identifies with the bourgeois society as an adult, rather than the under-represented diaspora-, but ironically it further separates her from her mother's ideology.

Halbwachs' idea of spatiotemporal memories juxtaposed with Lotman's semiotics of social behavior within culture helps us grasp from the narrator's perspective her being a part of a larger community: "Long before it became her career, my mother had a political mind: it was in her nature to think of people collectively..." (Smith 58). Noticing Aimee's accent<sup>15</sup>, devoid of any local or national touches, hence her universality, the narrator recognizes the effect of her childhood nonbelonging on a personal level as a result of her mother's communal ideologies. Thus, we realize that she interprets her memories diachronically, by 'discoursing' upon them through the semiotics of her current ideologies and observations. That the narrator never finds a hospitable soil in her family environment to define and identify herself as an autonomous and independent individual, compels her to search through her friendship memories, as an alternative zone of finding roots.

Reflecting on her memories of Tracy, as a result of having no ties with any welcoming social circle, the narrator navigates herself using the compass of her current ideologies. As Nora points out: "The changes in our lives are of the same nature as the changes in the way we present our lives" (*Between Memory and History* 2). What follows then, is that claims such as "I was -I am- in awe of Tracey's technique. She knew the right time to do everything" (Smith 26) should not be considered as a childhood realization, rather a reconstruction of factual events of the past and to a great extent, interpretive techniques of her present consciousness, culture, and ideology. Accordingly, Tracey's 'technique' that the narrator *is* in awe of reflects a fascination with a subjective authority over one's existence. In other words, the narrator envies Tracey's control over her narrative, as that is precisely a quality she lacks at this stage.

The significance of Tracey is not limited to her friendship with the narrator. Tracey makes it as a professional dancer, which the narrator recalls as a common aspiration of them both, an ambition that she fails to materialize. This, along with the fact that the narrative itself revolves around the idea of dance -Swing Time-, creates a symbolic liaison.

The recurrent symbols of dance and friendship, merge and emerge at different intervals and are interpreted in reference to different variants. Eventually, Tracy ends up a single mother of three children, each with a different man. Not having the resources to make ends meet, Tracey constantly harasses the narrator's mother on the account of her assumed political power -being a parliament member. Years into the future, the narrator's elderly mother advises her to take custody of Tracey's children as she would be a much more conscientious guardian than Tracey herself. Therefore, the mother's communal ideology once again reminds the narrator of her being a member of a community and the imperative of being of service to it, rather than impersonating an individual. In this respect, she recalls how her mother tried to teach the whole neighborhood healthy pastimes of children, such as creating artifacts out of clay, as *the community* offspring deserved to be raised better, and not just the narrator herself. She remembers being taken to the balcony accompanied by Tracey playing with clay so that everyone could see leaving the children in front of the TV was not the only alternative. Sadly though, as an adult, neither her childhood nor the current community is supportive of the narrator's revival of her personal identity.

Relating to her childhood memories of friendship and dance, the narrator thinks of Tracey, the very essence of dance and a reminder of the narrator's inadequacy. On the other hand, the very symbol of dance turns out to be the basis of her disillusionment by her mother. Therefore, the narrator lacks the potential to become a dancer and

<sup>13</sup> See Linde p. 2 where she suggests: "Within psychology, memory has been divided into three basic types: episodic memory—the memory of a specific personal event or a sequence of events; semantic memory—the memory of general facts or occurrences; and procedural memory—the continuing knowledge of how to do something like ride a bicycle, cook a meal, or use a keyboard".

<sup>14</sup> The attempts she frequently makes in order to find roots are intermittently mentioned throughout the childhood narratives. She would always accompany her father to her uncle Lambert's house off the city limits. "Lambert's garden was Jamaica to me. It smelt like Jamaica" (Smith 21). This notion, contrasted with the Jamaica she knew her mother would represent, does not generate a genuine sense of belonging in her.

<sup>15</sup> The narrator suggests that Aimee's accent belonged to no specific geographical region whatsoever. She describes Aimee's accent, as a form of socio-semiotic behavior, devoid of any local or national touches and belonging to New York and Paris and Moscow and LA and London.

simultaneously is taught by her mother that admitting to this fact is to open other possibilities for her, which epitomizes a separation from Tracey and becoming something that she is *not*. Lotman discusses the fluidity of symbols and their potential of transforming individuals' understanding of texts, i.e. memories.<sup>16</sup> Based on this view, the notions of 'dance' and 'dancer' in multitudes of memories that the narrator recalls should be taken as symbols signifying different readings each time in accordance with the cultural implications that they are embedded in. In this sense, the young African teacher's -Lamin- dance scene in the village in West Africa should be interpreted both diachronically and ideologically in reference to Africa, as well as the narrator's relationship with her best friend and her own unfulfilled aspiration.

During the latter periods of working for Aimee, since she finds herself no longer a friend, but merely an assistant, the narrator feels the obligation to establish herself as an autonomous and self-determining entity. She does so, by having a short-term affair with Lamin, with whom Aimee has already formed an affectionate relationship. This initiative is the very reason for which she is no longer trusted, hence dismissed from service at the beginning of the narrative. Lamin -a rather skilled dancer and in a sense symbolizing Tracey- is yet another symbol of friendship that fails the narrator, only this time, it is the narrator herself who brings about this blunder.

Lamin's dance scene as a cultural sign in the context of nostalgia -Africa-, should be interpreted as a symbol of the narrator's mother's ancestry. Ideologically speaking, however, in the context of Aimee's power play, it signifies the powerlessness of the narrator, Lamin's ethical failure -him, in turn, betraying Aimee-, and the narrator's moral despair. In this respect, the symbols are culturally and ideologically tied, in other words, not only has she failed herself through betraying Aimee, but she also seems to have betrayed her mother's strong moral imperatives, as well as the community she cherished and worked hard for.

The symbolic nature of each of the episodic memories that the narrator recaps, allows constant regenerations of significations. A considerable portion of individuals' interpretation and comprehension of their recollections is carried out on the basis of the semantic messages carried by cultural symbols or symbols within cultural and communal memories. In this respect, Lotman suggests: "As an important mechanism of cultural memory, symbols carry over texts, plotlines, and other semiotic formations from one cultural stratum to another" (163). Therefore, on the axis of spatial or geographical interactions, a symbol, such as a young biracial British woman in Britain is perceived as a regular member of the bourgeois society, a subject capable of leading a typical life, which is not in harmony with her childhood life. On the other hand, the same symbol in a rural area in Africa, where typical urban resources are scarce, is a "good for nothing" (Smith 178) entity, as she does not embody a practical member of the society. Based on this, the narrator herself as a text, or a cultural symbol is interpreted in consonance with the context, i.e. geographical and temporal dimensions. As Dieme points out: "Written beyond the lines of monolithic cultural belonging, *Swing Time* is both a transcultural journey through time and art that recaptures the wealth of the cultural traits of our cultural history while challenging old clichés that still govern the world" (112). Such an analysis in the proximity of the axis of diachrony is a causatum of an accumulation of historical and cultural readings of certain symbols, hence the narrator's multifaceted interpretation of herself and her essence.

In the search for delineating her personal identity, the narrator recounts a childhood memory of her mother sprinkling flour on the balcony. She is then asked to walk barefoot in the presence of Miss Isabel -her dance teacher. "Ah, well there you are", said Miss Isabel, but where were we? In the land of flat feet"; the teacher then does the same as the narrator, walking on the flour. "In her print you saw only the toes, the ball of the foot, and the heel, in mine, the full, flat outline of a human tread" (28). From this point onwards, realizes that she would no longer make it as a ballet dancer, therefore, defeated. Although once again, dance as a cultural and communal symbol signifies the narrator's disappointment in herself, and the failure of her friendship with Tracey and Lamin, this time it also connotes her mother's path-laying for her.

Paralleled with her communal alienation and striving to define her existence as an individual, reflecting upon the fact that she is in her early thirties and owns almost no economic capital, the narrator reminisces over her lifestyle while working for Aimee. "It felt like being in an extended period of playtime, in which we were forever expecting the arrival of adults who never appeared" (86). Benefitting from the bourgeois privileges, that is, the coverage of her expenses by Aimee and her freedom of substance use in Aimee's company signifies the normalization of the bourgeois norm of expenditure. Eventually, this bourgeois principle dominating the narrator's plane of thought functions as an impulse for her claiming autonomy and individuality -of which she was denied for a long time-, i.e. rebellion against Aimee, despite her mother's communal commandments.

<sup>16</sup> Lotman discusses the distinction between symbols and memories constructed within a culture or community. "The opposition of a symbol and a reminiscence is constructed differently. A symbol exists before being included in a given text and exists independently of it. It enters the writer's memory from the depths of cultural memory and comes to life in a new text like a seed falling onto new soil. Reminiscences, references, and citations, on the other hand, are organic parts of a new text and only function within its synchrony. They move from a text into the depths of cultural memory, while a symbol moves from the depths of cultural memory into a text" (p. 165).

Despite her attempts at defining herself as an autonomous being, the narrator admits experiencing herself as a shadow: "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 shadow" (4). Such a realization aligns with her mother's beliefs in community's primacy over the individual. Metaphorically speaking thus, having separated from her only friend, not being considered an individual by her mother, and spending ten years of her adult life as a dispensable assistant to Aimee sustains her feeling like a 'shadow'. The narrator of *Swing Time* begins a journey to re-own her existence on the earth upon receiving the PDF she has signed long ago, once she began working for Aimee:

I looked at a PDF of a piece of paper I must have signed, aged twenty-three... within its inflexible terms the things that came out of my mouth did not belong to me any longer, not my ideas or opinions or feelings not even my memories. They were all hers. Everything that had happened in my life in the past decade belonged to her. (434)

Having lost ten years of her life along with its memories, Smith's protagonist is left with no name, and her endeavors at claiming one for herself, alas, settles her on the land of the flat feet, where swing time no longer signifies the vitality of dance, yet its antithesis, lassitude.

The narrator recalls being reminded by her mother, not to dwell on the past. "But don't you realize how incredibly lucky you are, she said, to be alive, at this moment? People like us, we can't be nostalgic. We've no home in the past. Nostalgia is a luxury. For our people, time is now" (310). This remark reflects the narrator's ironic situation rummaging into and pondering upon her past at the time of utter confusion and abandonment. Essentially, recalling this memory of her mother, that is, belonging to a people whose history does not leave any room for nostalgia and remembrances terminates her journey towards finding and founding herself. In other words, this very cultural and communal fact, that social class as well as race determines a people's approach towards memory, turns the whole process of recollection towards identity formation for the narrator to an abyss.

## Conclusion

The narrator of *Swing Time* begins a journey of reviving her communal memories from childhood onwards in the hope of constructing a unified and clear individual narrative of her life. As indicated in the discussion of semiotic systems of interpretation, one observes that not only symbols travel diachronically from cultures to cultures and from narratives to narratives, but they certainly have the potential to generate narratives and life stories. Searching through her collective memories within the circles she was allowed, the narrator realizes the strong imperatives and moral standards of her mother on the one hand, and her own lack of subjectivity and clinging to other people's 'light' on the other.

*Swing Time's* protagonist's odyssey reminds us of the fact that memory has the utmost power of regenerating perceptions and understanding of one's existence. In other words, the narrator, in an utter loss of gravity, struggles to bring her childhood, adolescence, and adult life together, in the search for a comprehensible image of her 'self'. However, the regeneration process that she goes through inevitably coincides with her current ideologies. The causal relationship she is aspiring to build between her current self and the multitudes of subjectivities in the past aligns with her present understanding of her reality.

According to the agreement that she is obliged to sign, she is denied the right over her memories. The audacity of the claim, metaphorically illustrates the communal nature of her memories, i.e. Aimee's possession of the narrator's memories. In other words, the narrator exists with her entirety and memories as long as she functions within the context of the bourgeois community, i.e. Aimee. Although the contract howls a lack of compassion for the narrator, ironically this deprivation of owning individual memories is the actual gist of her experience throughout the narrative. Detached from the communities she once was a part of, she struggles to find any memory that solely belongs to her. The narrator thus, mnemonically interprets her lived experience within the context of her family, friendship, and love affairs as an entity with no individual weight. Her journey towards unraveling her personal identity resolves, making her recognize herself as a witness to a game of culture and discourses being played by an entity who is not quite and necessarily her.

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