Interrogating the 'achievement principle' in Afroeuropean contexts: Zadie Smith's *NW* and *Swing Time*

Suzanne Scafe[1]

Zadie Smith has said, referring both to herself and to the subjects of her fiction, that she is always thinking of the 'what if': "'What if I'd had this friend? [...] What if I'd failed my exams instead of passed them?'" (92 Street Y 2017, 00:27:11-18). What if she herself had been, *not* a Cambridge graduate and celebrated writer, but one of her classmates or friends on the same low income housing estate, who had ended up either in prison, or in poorly paid, unreliable employment? What made her different, and is that difference something that can be examined and traced to her success? The questions Smith asks haunt the work of contemporary black British writers, and connect that work to previous decades of African and Caribbean semi-autobiographical fiction in the anti-colonial and immediate post-independent period. This work focuses on the figure of the ambivalent achiever, conflicted but poised to rise socially through well-harnessed ability. Their achievement, I argue, is a form of *passing*, from an African-centred culture of the 'folk' to a world defined by white, European colonial values. In order to pass unnoticed the subject, these novels suggest, has to have discarded the often rurally situated cultural practices and performances of their past.

As is also evident in African American fiction focusing on racial passing, such as Nella Larson's novel *Passing*, or Langston Hughes's short story of the same name, the subject bears a psychic cost for that transition. In the Caribbean literary contexts, in works such as Merle Hodge's *Crick-Crack Monkey*, the moment of transition from one culture to another is marked by the protagonist's experience of traumatic symptoms: a loss of voice, and immobility. Furthermore, the incommensurability and lack of resolution of that trauma is evidenced in the repetition and return to this theme in the body of writing of this pre- or immediately post-independence period, itself suggesting a lack of closure.

In *No Longer at Ease*, another example among many, the narrative's description of Obi's flat in the European enclave of Ikoyi expresses the cultural context of his character's achievement spatially and racially. He writes that the demarcation of Lagos, "always reminded him of twin kernels separated by a thin wall in a palm-nut shell. Sometimes one kernel was shiny-black and alive, the other powdery white and dead" (Achebe 1960, 16). Success would require Obi to cross into that dead, white space, itself a kind of death; and failure is the inability to make that transition.

1 scafes@lsbu.ac.uk

Zadie Smith: *NW* (2012) and *Swing Time* (2016)

Zadie Smith's fictions return to this problematic of achievement, and in the context of contemporary Britain her work, in the words of Achebe's narrator, looks words like "'education' and 'promise' squarely in the face" (Achebe 1960, 2). The immediate post-independent moment can be compared to the contemporary period in Britain. The postcolonial subject living in the UK experiences a moment of transition from immigrant to what Michel Laguerre calls "identitarian citizenship," (Hassenteufel quoted in Laguerre 2017, 3) where the second or third generation postcolonial "immigrant" (Laguerre 2017, 2) not only acquires full citizenship rights but identifies with Britain as a place of belonging. Like Achebe's Obi Okonkwo or Hodge's Tee, they achieve success as part of a generation that newly belongs to what critics like John McLeod define as a postcolonial Britain (McLeod 2000). In place of the political optimism of the anti-colonial and immediate post-independence period, however, "belonging" in the contemporary Britain of these texts is experienced within a developing ethic of a high-achieving, self-activating subjectivity, itself reflective of a changing political climate, one that has encouraged us to turn our attention *away* from the structural and ideological contexts that situate individuals, that enable success, or make failure more likely.

NW

Mary Eagleton situates novels such as Zadie Smith's *NW* in the context of a Thatcherite and post-Thatcherite neo-liberal politics in Britain, the US and Europe that privileges individualism and personal choice. As Eagleton argues, this neo-liberal politics

> tells us that the world is full of choices; that everyone has the right to choose and, indeed has the capacity to choose; that by choosing you make yourself and your future; and that if you do not succeed then it is your fault – the result of a lack of effort and/or the making of bad choices. (Eagleton 2018, 147)

The narrator in *NW* describes Keisha's journey towards success as a series of stepping stones, beneath which lies treacherous, turbulent water. At University and the bar, Keisha/Natalie sees those treacherous waters and understands the significance of class as it intersects and supersedes race. She experiences herself to be included on merit, to be no longer an "accidental guest at the table" (Smith 2012, 217) but at the same time, like Hodge's Tee, she is silenced by and excluded from the shared cultural knowledge and experiences of those dinner-table guests.

As the title *NW* – referring to North West London postcodes – suggests, and as Eva Ulrike Pirker has argued, in Smith's fiction, place and space are used as markers of success or economic failure (Pirker 2016, 70); "who is able to move; where is one's legitimate space; who owns the desirable spaces" (Eagleton 2018, 138). One of only six black bar pupils, none of whom share her working-class or lower middle-class background, her

feelings of black outsider-ness are intensified, paradoxically, because of a sense of entitlement. Smith's subjects are acutely attuned to an incomplete experience of belonging to which they feel entitled. They are, however, both resentful of and ill-equipped for the experience of themselves as out of place or, as Nirmal Puwar writes, as trespassers: "social spaces are not blank and open for anybody to occupy … Some bodies are deemed as having the right to belong, while others are marked out as trespassers" (Puwar 2004, 7-8). The expectation is that an ambitious and driven figure such as Keisha/Natalie will succeed on the terms set by these British institutions – on merit, as she says – *and* as a black woman. That is, without having to compromise her blackness but, as Angela Robbie points out – echoing here, as I read it, the concept of passing – there are codes of acceptability which constrain the aspiring subject: "The pleasingly lively, capable and becoming young woman, black white or Asian, is now an attractive harbinger of social change [...] she is the ideal late modern subject" (quoted in Eagleton 2018, 145). She is ideal, however, only in so far as she maintains cultural invisibility. Natalie encounters head on the failures of her school friends, most of whom had been in fact, in one way or another, exceptional. She speaks of tracking the progress of one of the girls at her school and registers that despite having been a "maths prodigy" (Smith 2012, 212) and having attended an elite university, she becomes a casualty of that promised success: "She had been asked to pass the entirety of herself through a hole that would only accept a part" (212).

Swing Time

Zadie Smith's latest novel *Swing Time* explores in more detail this difference between the "success" as experienced by first generation colonial or ex-colonial "immigrants" and second and third generation black British citizens. Events in the novel suggest that those who, like the unnamed mother in *Swing Time*, migrated in the late fifties and sixties, experienced themselves as definitively on the outside of British society and thus they incorporated into their success an ideologically defined resistance to their exclusion (Scafe 2019). Sitting in the garden of her lover's apartment in Hampstead, an upper middle-class suburb of North London, the mother remarks lightly: "Imagine two island kids like us, two barefoot kids from nothing ending up here" (Smith 2016, 310). In contrast, her daughter, a second-generation black British subject refuses those politics and her refusal is described in a section entitled "My Middle Passage":

> And then there were all the outrageous historical cases I heard of at my mother's knee, tales of the furiously talented women … who might have run faster than a speeding train, if they had been free to do so …. I didn't feel like travelling on their train, wrote a few words here and there, ignored the pages of maths and science, flagrantly failed. (Smith 2016, 212)

Here we see that the daughter's flagrant failure is her attempt to resist the entanglements

of history, though in fact her refusal to see success as a kind of bond or duty to the past, is itself historically situated in what McRobbie calls the "late modern" period (in Eagleton 2018).

Conclusion

The work I've referred to in this paper asks us to think about how achievement is valued and by whom; we're reminded that every success is ideologically positioned and that this positioning deserves to be interrogated particularly as we begin to think about participation, entitlement, and citizenship for a second, third and fourth generation of black and postcolonial British subjects, and the renewed requirement to pass, invisibly, into social spaces still marked as white.

References

Achebe, Chinua. 1960. *No Longer At Ease*. London: Heinemann.

Eagleton, Mary. 2018. *Clever Girls and the Literature of Women's Upward Mobility*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Hodge, Merle. 1970. *Crick-Crack Monkey*. London: Heinemann.

Laguerre, Michel. 2017. *The Postdiaspora Condition: Crossborder Social Protection, Transnational Schooling, and Extraterretorial Human Security*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

McLeod, John. 2000. *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis*. London: Routledge.

Pirker, Eva Ulrike. 2016. "Approaching Space: Zadie Smith's North London Fiction." *The Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 52, no.1: 64-76.

Puwar, Nirmal. 2004. *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place*. London: Berg.

Scafe, Suzanne. 2019. "Gendered, Post-Diasporic Mobilities and the Politics of Blackness in Zadie Smith's *Swing Time." Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, 13 (forthcoming https://sta.uwi.edu/crgs/)

92 Street Y, "Conversation and Reading with Zadie Smith," YouTube Video, 58:43, January 6, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nuQIZia6oJI. Accessed 21st June 2019.

Smith, Zadie. 2012. *NW*. London: Penguin.

———. 2016. *Swing Time.* London: Penguin.