Affirming Power of Bodily Rhetoric in the Face of Precarity in Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*

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Abstract

Zadie Smith's Swing Time fictionalizes a world of 'humans' in postmodernity that reveals the dissolution of many of identity markers in the mainstream culture(s) and foregrounds the reversal of previous binary oppositions that stabilized the previous epistemological categories. In both London and Africa, individuals in the underprivileged segments of the community face a devastating kind of precarity in the absence of regular income, formal education or social network. These individuals make up the current inhabitants of the mobile world(s) and translocality characterizes their porous experiences. Locality as a concept embodies in itself borders and territoriality, but translocality signals transgression. Characters in London transgress the epistemological limits/ borders in their psychic space on an individual level through the bodily rhetoric, especially the dance, accordingly the narrator says: "… to me a dancer was a man from nowhere, without parents or siblings, without nation or people, without obligation of any kind, and this was exactly the quality I loved" (24). Through dance which offers a non-discursive or extra- linguistic site of existence, the narrator's best friend Tracey can achieve stability in her formative years. Dance offers a non-teleological form of Becoming to her: "The trouble with dancing is You go, go, go, but you don't get anywhere" (120). Unlike the inhabitants of London who go with the flow in the absence of a stabilizing mode of thinking, African people base their life experiences on their collective cultural practices which also involve dance. They do not acknowledge the limiting and containing force of the official borders, and their seemingly local stability bears within itself a constant movement across borders, in fact, across continents. In their world of precarity, movement and change become the norm as actual borders prove insufficient to divide the ethnic groups or social classes from each other and limit their mobile experiences. Rather than their roots, they are more concerned with their routes. They don't idealise the Western norms, in fact, the Westerners in Africa are labelled as 'ignorant of truth', but they enjoy the securities offered by the advanced communities they come from. In the novel different forms of precarity resulting from translocality characterize the individuals who empower themselves through the psychodynamics of cultural/ artistic production in both Africa and London. In their case, the notions of bodily rhetoric inject a strange kind of jouissance to them and give them the stimulus to go on in life despite unpredictability. This paper claims that the bodily rhetoric (on an individual or a collective level) offers an alternative site of Becoming to these individuals in both London and Africa against precarity

in their conditions, and discusses the ways in which this bodily rhetoric can function to stabilize their fluid and unpredictable reality.

Keywords: Zadie Smith, Swing Time, translocality, bodily rhetoric, dance, postmodernity

Introduction

Modernity, which means the "globalization of Europe" (Serequeberhan 143), not only in a territorial or geographical sense but also in terms of the normative patterns of the mind is the chronological period that refers to the changes that took place in the West during the Renaissance and later accelerated in the Age of Enlightenment. The rise of humanism in the West during modernity meant the configuration of a definite form of 'human' reflecting the norms of bourgeois epistemology. In the beginning, this was a socially radical project to create a 'human' centered epistemology and aimed to create a reason-based system, as in More's Utopia, departing consciously from the previous epistemology. Thus, in this critique of humanism, we should acknowledge the intellectuals who had universal idealism/ humanitarianism in the true sense of the word and who recognised the rights of humans and non-humans alike, putting them on an equal footing when the humanist project reached its peak in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the aftermath of the views suggested by the earlier humanists, we can also count the intellectuals of the Romantic era in Britain, although some of them changed their progressive political views in their mature years. Coleridge's utopian idea of Pantisocracy, in which all living beings were to live in absolute egalitarianism, is a case in point. For these intellectuals and writers, humanism was coupled with humanitarianism, but in the course of Western history with its imperialist ideology, humanism of modernity metamorphosed to "a civilizational model, which shaped a certain idea of Europe as coinciding with the universalizing powers of reflexive reason" (Braidotti, *The Posthuman* 13). This category triggered the illusion that the reason-based self is "autonomous, unified, self-determining, and free" (LePage 9). However, due to the different forms of crises in modernity and the postcolonial emigration to the West, Western intellectuals tried to account for the shortcomings in this 'human'. In the aftermath of the Nietzschean critique of man in modernity, we see other attempts that undermined this ideological project. Freud is a case in point as he problematized the givens of the Cartesian self as a totalised and rationalising entity. Michel Foucault proclaimed the "death of Man" in *The Order of Things* (1970), and in his footsteps, Ihab Hassan came up with something new that refers to a yet undefined phenomenon in the West: *posthumanism* in "Prometheus as Performer: Toward a Posthumanist Culture?" (1977). At a conference in 1976, Ihab Hassan defined posthuman for the first time as "a creative, Promethean trickster split by language, in intimate, shaping contact with technology, obeying only the law of change, and charged with the Nietzschean task of evolving humankind beyond humanism's dangerously oppressive "Man"' (qtd. in Weinstone 8)

The problematisation of the human of modernity gained force in postcolonial and feminist thinkers, particularly after the postcolonial emigrations. Posthumanism joined them and evolved into an ethical confrontation of Western thinkers to come to terms with the West's history. As Rosi Braidotti notes, the emancipatory movements that are led by the "structural others of modernity" (*Transpositions* 32), such as "the women's rights movement; the anti-racism and de-colonization movements … also inevitably mark the crisis of the former 'centre' or dominant subject-position" (Ibid 32). Therefore, the posthumanist turn taking place in the 90s was an ethical reconsideration of Western history as well as an attempt

to redefine the unprecedented subjectivities emerging in the West. Posthumanist thinkers also looked at the current course of things for a 'possible' problematisation of the Cartesian human in digital capitalism and the enhanced reproductive technologies, which reshaped the human's basic paradigms as well as their material conditions of being in technologically mediated societies:

> As its name suggests, a defining characteristic of posthumanism is its rejection of traditional Western humanism. Although the term 'humanism' itself may be applied to a complex set of assumptions and disciplinary commitments developing over centuries (from the early Renaissance to the late 20th century), posthumanist scholars focus on a few core characteristics: above all, the notion that the proper study of man is man. (Bolter 1)

Dobrin summarises the agenda of *Writing Posthumanism, Posthuman Writing* as follows, and the same agenda can be taken as a general statement for posthumanism. Posthumanism refers to a moment of "inquiry in which the human subject is called into question via its imbrications with technologies such as cybernetics, informatics, artificial intelligence, genetic manipulation, psychotropic and other pharmaceuticals, and other biotechnologies…" (Dobrin 3). The term 'posthumanism' is applied to a range of contemporary theoretical positions put forward by researchers with different disciplinary backgrounds for whom, posthumanism designates a series of breaks with foundational assumptions of modern Western culture: in particular, a new way of understanding the human subject in relationship to the natural world in general. Posthumanist theory claims to offer a new epistemology that is not anthropocentric and therefore not centered in Cartesian dualism. It seeks to undermine the traditional boundaries between the human, the animal, and the technological. In brief, they aimed to bring in a leveling effect to the previous hierarchy between the human of modernity and his Other(s).

The term posthuman came to imply many things, along with the new subjectivities populating the Western metropoles. These heterogeneous, multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi coloured groups have gained space and visibility with the second and third generation of immigrants. These subjectivities are far from fulfilling the expectations of modernity to live up to the image of 'human' and Smith is one of the writers who give voice to these new subjectivities and it is because of this reason that we opt for discussing the predicament and felicity of this new phenomenon against the background of one of Smith's recent novels, *Swing Time* (2016).

Different forms of precarity in the lived experience of the posthuman characters in
Swing Time

Zadie Smith's *Swing Time* fictionalizes a world of 'humans' in postmodernity that reveals the dissolution of many of the previous symmetries and identity markers in the mainstream culture(s) and foregrounds the reversal of previous binary oppositions that stabilized the previous epistemological categories. These individuals make up the current inhabitants of the mobile world(s), and translocality characterizes their porous experiences. They do not have stable identity markers, and their subjectivities are fluid, multidimensional, and Philip Tew calls this new phenomenon "New Britain" in *Zadie Smith* (2010). David James refers to "the upbeat multicultural backdrop of *White Teeth*" as a "happy hybridity" (58). We think that referring to these subjectivities as "happy hybridity" would give a partial picture of these people whose lives can be characterized by precarity in social, financial, cultural, and professional terms. Scholars offer different interpretations about the meaning of the term

'precarity' and its variations, such as the 'precariat' and 'precarious/ness'. For Pierre Bourdieu, *prècaritè* is "the radical disorientation, uncertainty and loss of meaning that is caused by the new forms of flexible, casualized labour associated with neoliberalism" (qtd. in Hogg and Simonsen 3). For the economist Guy Standing, *the precariat* is a class that lacks "labour-related security" (10) and has emerged as a result of neoliberal policies and market flexibility. The concept of precarity, however, encompasses more than just job market insecurity. In *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* Judith Butler notes, "[l]ives are by definition precarious: they can be expunged at will or by accident; their persistence is in no sense guaranteed" (25).[1] For Butler, an ethic based on the interdependency of 'humans' and their shared vulnerabilities is crucial because "[p]recariousness implies living socially, that is, the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know; a dependency on people we know, or barely know, or know not at all" (14). These characters live in their 'part' of London in the margins of the mainstream culture and lead a hand-to-mouth existence in *Swing Time*. In both London and Africa, in the underprivileged segments of the community, they face a devastating kind of precarity in the absence of regular income, formal education, or social network. They are not homed in any culture, any place, or psychic space. They constantly flow through porous translocal lived experiences. In the novel, interestingly, different forms of precarity resulting from translocality characterise the individuals; however, they empower themselves through non-discursive mechanisms. In their case, these non-discursive practices inject a strange kind of *jouissance* to them and give them the stimulus to go on in life despite unpredictability. This paper claims that the bodily rhetoric and cultural performances (on an individual or a collective level) offer an alternative site of *Becoming* to these individuals in both London and Africa against precarity in their conditions, and discusses the ways in which they can function to stabilize their fluid and unpredictable reality and how it can stimulate them to go on living in the face of precarity. This paper discusses that non-discursive mechanisms and psychodynamics of bodily rhetoric take place on an individual level in London (also in the West at large due to Aimee's travels in the wider world) and on a collective level in Africa. This paper also claims that this is the reversal of the previous mind/ body dualism, as these people find solace in different spaces of signification through these non-discursive mechanisms. However, this way out of the symmetries of the human of humanism doesn't always lead to ethically accountable results. That is, this doesn't imply that the current subject positions as alternative to the human of modernity inspires respect as in the case of Aimee. They can be more oppressive and ethically problematic than the 'human' of modernity.

Locality as a concept embodies in itself borders and territoriality, but translocality signals transgression. Characters in London transgress the epistemological limits/ borders in their psychic space on an individual level through the bodily rhetoric. Through dance, which offers a non-discursive or extra-linguistic site of existence, the narrator's best friend Tracey can achieve stability in her formative years. Dance offers a non-teleological form of *Becoming* to her: "The trouble with dancing is *You go, go, go, but you don't get anywhere*" (120 emphasis in the original). Unlike the inhabitants of London, who go with the flow in the absence of a stabilizing mode of thinking, African people base their life experiences on their collective cultural practices, which also involve dance. They do not acknowledge the limiting and containing force of the official borders, and their seemingly local stability bears within itself a constant movement across borders, in fact, across continents. In their world of precarity, movement and change become the norm as actual borders prove insufficient to divide the ethnic groups or social classes from each other and limit their mobile experiences. Rather than their roots, they are more concerned with their routes. They don't idealise the

Western norms; in fact, the Westerners in Africa are labelled as 'ignorant of truth', but they enjoy the securities offered by the advanced communities they come from.

The rhetoric of the body and porousness of identity markers in London

Initially, the novel begins with the friendship of two female characters of mixed heritage, the unnamed narrator and Tracey. Their life experiences are shaped by their socio-economic standings. While the narrator enjoys her relative middle-class privileges, Tracey lacks access to such resources. Both Tracey and the narrator have dysfunctional families. Thus, throughout the novel, Tracey's and the narrator's emotional needs are not adequately fulfilled by their parents. Tracey's father is a violent man who is mainly absent from her daughter's life due to his recurring incarcerations. To cope with the emotional damage caused by her father, Tracey constantly escapes into her own imaginary world. Although Tracey's mother supports her daughter's efforts, mainly in dancing, and sides with her, Tracey's past traumas continue to resurface, causing challenges she struggles to overcome. The narrator's family relationships are equally complicated. The narrator's mother prioritizes her own academic and political endeavours, even if it means neglecting her loved ones. Therefore, she disregards anything that is not concerned with intellectual pursuits. Compared to the mother, the narrator's father seems to be much more unambitious and passive, although still caring. In the course of the novel, the two parents eventually break up.

In the beginning, Tracey and the narrator are brought together by their passion for dance, and they immediately form a bond. As the narrator reflects, between Tracey and her there is "this mutual awareness, an invisible band strung between [them]" (16). Their friendship continues throughout their childhood. They visit one another's flats, watch films and music videos, and play games together. Their friendship, however, starts to deteriorate through the years, and after high school, their paths in life start to change. The narrator graduates from college and later goes to an unspecified West African country as an assistant to a pop star named Aimee to build a girls' school. Meanwhile, unable to achieve a successful career in dancing, Tracey finds herself living in poor conditions in London. Although Tracey has extraordinary dancing skills, it is revealed that her attempts to make a living through dance are obstructed by systematic racism. The narrator, meanwhile, earns her living as a personal assistant, yet she soon finds that being an assistant renders her invisible. She, then, quits her job and returns to London, not with a triumphal tone but in a very precarious and anxious position, not knowing what to do with her life. Although the novel seems to be a coming-of-age story because it follows the development of characters from their formative years to adulthood, its generic structure defies traditional conventions (Lamothe 144). It is not a traditional coming-of-age story where the protagonist returns transformed. Returning to England, in a circular fashion narrated at the beginning of the novel, rather than a peaceful transformation, the narrator is faced with utter 'creative' disorientation: "I had been out of England long enough that many simple colloquial British phrases now sounded exotic to me, almost nonsensical" (2), she says. What is at hand is nothing more than a loss of stable ground. Living in "a temporary rental in St John's wood" (1), she loses her job (4), and the uncertainties lurk: "He asked me where I was going; I said I didn't know" (2) she says to the doorman as she leaves the house. Thus, as the title suggests, 'to swing' becomes the central force of the novel; characters swing not only between places but also in time.

In her interview for *The Guardian,* Smith states that: "[W]hat was done to black people, historically, was to take them out of the time of their life…" It is a traumatic experience to be uprooted from a linear, communal, and historical continuity, as she further

elaborates, "The consequences of that are pretty much unending. Every people have their trauma... And this one is about having been removed from time" (Eugenides). Consequently, *Swing Time* revolves around the idea of 'swinging' in a world where locating oneself within a relatively stable ground proves to be more difficult than ever. This is a world that is characterized by movement. From London to West Africa, characters constantly cross borders, and the movement within spaces informs and transforms the characters' sense of self. According to Lamothe, there is an "active ambivalence" in the novel that functions as "a generative framework for understanding subjects as they navigate social and spatial geographies that call forth the sometimes-conflicted performance of personal and social identities" (145). The narrator, who has a Jamaican mother and a British father, is positioned in different categories at different times in the narrative. While in London, biraciality shapes her experiences, in her travels to West Africa, she is seen not only as a part of "the Americans" (415) but also as a "white girl" (417) as well. This mobile, non-unitary, and contradictory aspect of the identities is also pointed out by Fern, a man who helps the narrator and Aimee with the girls' school. During one of their conversations, Fern says to the narrator: "You think far too much about race – did anyone ever tell you this? But wait: to you I am white? . . . In Brazil we don't understand ourselves as white, you understand?" (252). To account for the complexity, the reader is called forth to navigate through the simultaneous existence of all the conflicting categories. Just like the existence of the local pub that is "known as Irish but which was now neither Irish nor anything else" (328), in the novel, there are "double-faced facts" (36) that are "at one and the same time absolutely true and obviously untrue" (36). By showing these contradictory positions, Smith's novel embodies a "heterogenous style of politics" (*Transpositions* 7) which Rosi Braidotti defines as "… a variety of possible political strategies and the non-dogmatic acceptance of potentially contradictory positions" (Ibid). *Swing Time* represents such a mobile world. Throughout the novel, characters move from one place to another, and epistemological categories that are suggested by modernity in their lives are called into question. This brings about one of the fundamental questions of the novel: How to maintain one's grasp in a world when the stabilizing discourses are rendered ineffective?

The different perspectives of the narrator and her mother exemplify contrasting positions. The narrator's mother is an idealist and spends her life on a political career, first serving in a local council, and then in Parliament. The narrator's mother stands for an irony of situation as, being an individual of Jamaican origin, she represents and tries to achieve the main coordinates of the human in modernity. White characters in the novel are losers in modernity's criteria, but the narrator's mother can climb up the social ladder. However, as the forthcoming pages will illustrate, this comes at a price. She is an autodidact and her shelves are filled with "Open University textbooks, political books, history books, books on race, books on gender, 'All the 'isms' . . ." (19). The mother, therefore, maintains her psychic coherence through intellectual efforts even if it means repressing the body: "All that matters in this world,' [the mother] explained, 'is what's written down. But what happens with this' — she gestured at my body — 'that will never matter…" she says. For the mother, the body is not a site of knowledge, and perhaps that is why, as the narrator ponders early on in the novel, there is something "chilly and unfeeling" (49) in the way her mother regards people:

> Long before it became her career my mother had a political mind: it was in her nature to think of people collectively. Even as a child I noticed it, and felt instinctively that there was something chilly and unfeeling in her ability to analyse so precisely the people she lived among: her friends, her community, her own family. We were all, at one and the same time, people she knew and loved but also

objects of study, living embodiments of all she seemed to be learning up at Middlesex Poly. She held herself apart, always. (49)

Functioning within a centered frame of logic, the mother's search for an origin is a testament to her political optimism. However, her teleological drive and easily offered political idealism are questioned by the novel. Time and time again, the mother's attempts to hold onto an imaginary origin fall short. When she undertakes the task of digging up the land to build a communal garden, the project miserably fails. The narrator notes: "Someone told my mother that clay is only a layer of the earth, and if you dig deep enough, you can get past it" (60). However, digging through the ground, the mother finds out that "under the clay was more clay" (60). If we take the act of digging as a metaphorical expression for searching for one's roots or origin, ironically, what it reveals is nothing more than what is already on the surface, that is, more clay. Although the mother seeks security in origins or roots, communal identification is unattainable in the novel. The very pronouns that provide unity – 'we' and 'our' – are revealed to be empty signifiers whose referents are undefined. When the mother passionately and confidently utters: "Our people, our people" (311), the narrator mocks this oratorical discourse by remarking that, shouting "Our people" (311) is nothing more than a "quack and babble of those birds, repeating over and over the same curious message. . . 'I am a duck!' 'I am a duck!'" (311). Thus, what the mother fails to notice when she declares, "Weren't we all Africans, originally, weren't we people of the land" (60) is that the monolithic 'we' is an imaginary construct. In the novel, what is at hand is not hegemonic identity formations but complex intersubjective relations that are irreducible to simple schemas. Thus, unlike the mother's relentless desire for stability, *Swing Time* asks us to imagine a space where rigid categories dissolve, and boundaries constantly cross, overlap, and conflict with one another. Belonging to another generation, the narrator does not signify her reality from the vantage point established by her mother. There is a stark difference. In the narrator's mind, there is no origin to return to. When her mother warns her not to "drag back" (22) into the past, the narrator's initial response becomes: "Into what?" (22). The linearity between the past and present is broken. For the narrator, Jamaica – the past – is her uncle Lambert's garden, located in South London: "I thought that when I visited Lambert I was visiting Jamaica, Lambert's garden was Jamaica to me, it smelled like Jamaica…" (21), the narrator says. While the mother wants to take root in politics, the narrator is rootless. Thus, although the narrator's mother tells her "you know where you came from and where you're going" (31), the novel reveals a different reality. At the very end, loitering in the streets of London, the narrator is routeless and doesn't have any security about the future. After losing her job, she contemplates the direction of her life and is devastated by the precarity of it: "Every question sprouted more questions: where will I live and what will I do and where are my books and where are my clothes and what is my visa status" (430). All the changes in her life happen very quickly: "West 10th Street apartment and the locks had already been changed. My visa status was linked to my employer: I had thirty days to leave the country" (431). And the question that haunts the novel persists at the end: "Where else? Where next? I had no coordinates" (431-32), says the narrator. This is the very social reality the characters inhabit, and only dance offers them a stabilizing ground, a communal language. This is what the narrator experiences in her travels to West Africa, there, dance becomes the universal language that unites differences: "I could hear Lamin beating out a rhythm on the roof, . . . and for two hours it was the only language I understood" (174), says the narrator. Dance, however, is not only a universal language but also a source of *jouissance*, an act of affirmation in the face of uncertainty. As she remarks in the beginning: "I'd lost my job, a certain version of my life, my privacy, yet all these things felt small and petty next to this

joyful sense I had watching the dance, and following its precise rhythms in my own body. I felt I was losing track of my physical location, rising above my body. . ." (4).

Affirming Power of Dance

In *Swing Time,* dance allows the creation of an alternative historical narrative. "A different kind of history" (*Swing Time* 101) that is unwritten but "felt" (Ibid). Thus, the disorientation caused by being removed from time is remedied by the act of dance. That is why, at one point in the narrative, while watching a scene from the film *Ali Baba Goes To Town*, the narrator describes the singing and dancing by using the phrase "to swing time itself" (191). Compared to 'swinging' where you have no control, "to swing time itself" (191) assumes the act of dance to be the reclamation of time. In a world that is constantly changing, dance, therefore, provides the characters with a feeling of connectedness to the past and a counter memory:

> I read about steps passed down over centuries, through generations. A different kind of history from my mother's, the kind that is barely written down – that is felt. And it seemed very important, at the time, that Tracey should feel it too, all that I was feeling, and at the same moment that I felt it, even if it no longer interested her . . . you know how you jump into a split and you said your dad can do it, too, and you got it from your dad, and he got it from Michael Jackson, and Jackson got it from Prince and maybe James Brown, well, they all got it from Nicholas Brothers, the Nicholas Brothers are the originals, they're the very first, and so even if you don't know it or say you don't care, you're still dancing like them, you're still getting it from them (101).

Unity is established not through discursive practices but through bodily movements. Baillie notes that "dance provides, in its timeless and raceless exchanges, connections that run from Africa, to the Middle Passage, from the Harlem Renaissance to Michael Jackson, and is expressive of the complexities of cultural and artistic appropriation" (302). Similarly, Nathaniel points out, for the narrator, dance is a desire for "a universal language of the body that might transcend the complexities of her biracial identity and the ponderous heritage of colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade that shapes her life" (285). This aligns with the narrator's ideas, she says: "… to me a dancer was a man from nowhere, without parents or siblings, without a nation or people, without an obligation of any kind" (24). Such a universalized, communal, and anonymous figure of a dancer allows her to transcend the complexities and contradictions of an unstable world. As Greenidge writes, "Smith suggests, exist another way – a way to play with time, to move of time, to recognize all of the incongruities and historical rhymes of the last century and this strange, destabilizing new one, and to respond by turning it all into a dance" (198). Since the representation of dance movements always has an excess that cannot be 'captured' in language, the act of dance functions as something that is always changing and transforming, in other words, a *becoming*. Instead of a teleological drive, which is most clearly seen in the narrator's mother's thinking, who operates in the "beloved realm of language" (*Swing Time* 245), dance allows for a centerless meaning-making.

Although dance is central to both the narrator's and Tracey's development, out of the two, it is Tracey who finds a sense of coherence in her formative years through dancing.[2] Dance is not a mere pastime activity for her; caught up in structural poverty, Tracey finds a way of clinging to life through it. As the narrator says: "Other girls had rhythm in their limbs, some had it in their hips or their little backsides, but [Tracey] had rhythm in individual ligaments, probably in individual cells" (26). Although the narrator's mother offhandedly

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claims, "That silly dance class is [Tracey's] whole world" (31), what the mother fails to understand is that for Tracey, dance is an act of defiance. This is what the narrator comes to understand at the end of the novel. When she sees Tracey "on her balcony, in a dressing gown and slippers, her hands in the air, turning, turning, her children around her, everybody dancing" (453), the narrator comes to the realization: "that there might be something else I could offer, something simpler, more honest, between my mother's idea of salvation and nothing at all" (453). Thus, through her body, what her mother deems to be unimportant, the narrator finds a way to connect and form a bond with Tracey once again. Within all this uncertainty and gloom, in this instance, dance is represented as a source of "joyful affirmation" (88), what Braidotti defines as "[b]earing witness, receiving and containing the pain of others, just being there . . . affirming bonding, not in spite of, but across the wounds and pain" (88). Although both the narrator and Tracey are dealing with economic uncertainty, emotional distress, and future insecurity, Smith does not leave her characters dwelling in despair. In the end, as a tool of solidarity, dance allows the characters to connect with one another through a shared love of life despite the hardships they endure. In other words, dance allows them to feel the circulation of power in their bodies.

In a world where the characters confront the harsh reality of their inability to thrive within the confines of late capitalism, *Swing Time* shows how precarious bodies come into contact and form collectivities through dance. In the face of uncertainties, swinging to the rhythm of the beat, characters gain a sense of accordance with the world that is constantly swinging and changing. While the novel depicts a world where identity markers no longer prove sufficient to form coherent identities, dance is presented as an alternative ontological site that melts the contradictions and differences that cannot be stabilized discursively. It suggests a different temporality – circular, not linear – through rhythm and beat. And presents an affirmation of life in the midst of fragmentation. Perhaps what *Swing Time* shows is that, when experienced collectively, joy is something that is both political and nurturing.

Aimee, a negative posthuman figure of technologically advanced societies

Aimee, a celebrity figure of Australian origin, refers to a kind of precarity and translocality in a different and negative form. She cannot inspire respect in the readers as she manipulates the ways in which the non-discursive bodily rhetoric is commodified. She seems to be one of the winners in late modernity; however, the way she is fully dependent on others to survive and keep her image, the way she transgresses the ethical boundaries, and the lack of substance behind her image define another form of subject position. The textual evidence suggests that she can manipulate the marketing games in the music industry and commodifies everything, her body, voice, biography, or the authentic dance figures in Africa. As a woman, she is a transgressor. To sell more, she can transgress all the norms without any ethical consideration: "She might be completely naked on the cover of her single, she might be on top of a man- or a woman- doing sex, she might be holding her middle finger up, as she had, for a moment, on a live children's TV show…" (75). She seems to be without any essence or origin regarding her gender or temporal markers. She is, "a woman who has created her own myth for herself, using sex and youth and pop music to forge a destiny that would not have been available to any woman a generation before her" (Greenidge 196). Boyne likens Aimee to Madonna as she

> is a vital presence. Unapologetic and determined, she flits through each day in a
> bubble of private jets, trailed by an enormous entourage, all of whom are desperate to
> be the one walking next to her. As Madonna herself sang on *American Life*, "I got a

lawyer and a manager, an agent and a chef, three nannies, an assistant, and a driver and a jet. A trainer and a butler and a bodyguard or five, a gardener and a stylist, do you think I'm satisfied?" Actually, Aimee does seem quite satisfied. Her work is well received by critics, she moves between artistic projects with enthusiasm, is enormously wealthy, and has little patience for what she calls "customers", those people who will do anything to get close to her (Boyne).

Aimee is just a simulation without a solid substance behind it. Her financial success seems to pacify her scars for the moment, but, as readers, we have reservations about how long her seeming stability might last. Moreover, she is a female oppressor figure. She literally exploits all the time and energy of her employees without giving any space to them. Her employees, most of whom are women or queer individuals, seem to point to modern-day slavery. Her philosophy of life emphasizes resilience but, as stated before, there is something fishy about her ethical standing: "Whatever doesn't kill you makes you stronger, … If my dad hadn't died young? No way I'd be here. It's the pain. Jews, gays, women, blacks- the bloody Irish. That's our secret fucking strength" (113). Aimee's intellectual capacity is also shallow; accordingly, she sees things as "differences of personality" rather than "structural or economic" (111).

The novel offers ample evidence about Aimee as a mother, but we don't know much about how her children feel. The emphasis is put on her feelings and activities as a mother. She hires nannies and assistants to raise her children and doesn't stop fulfilling her ambitions as a dancer/singer. She feels free to be away from home for a long time, or if she wishes, she can relocate all the household to another city. She has a passion for motherhood, but even there, she is selfish. She becomes a mother because she fulfils her passion; it is not because it is a social role designated for women. Through Aimee, the narrator seems to have integrated into the kind of social life she has longed for and enjoys the acknowledgment this integration brings with itself: When she starts working for Aimee, she has "the sense of having travelled further: not just from the centre back to the suburbs but from another world back into theirs, the world seemed to me, aged twenty-two, to exist at the centre of the centre, the one they were all so busy reading about" (102-3).

Translocal relationalities in Africa

The narrator's business trip to an unnamed country in Africa introduces her to new relational dimensions. She goes back to her roots, yet she is at a loss: "Even the simplest ideas I'd brought with me did not seem to work here when I tried to apply them …" (205), the narrator says regarding her experiences in West Africa. Therefore, what she discovers in her travels is the shattering of her epistemological categories: "I was not, for example, standing at this moment in a field with my extended tribe, with my fellow black women. Here there was no such category" (205), she admits. The irony of the situation is that, during her college years, she embraces the "spirit of the times" (287) and becomes more conscious about politics. She recalls lectures such as "Thinking the Black Body: A Dialectic" (286) and remembers that in those times she let her hair "frizz and curl ... wearing a small map of Africa around [her] neck" (286). Yet, it seems that her intellectual awareness does not help her, as the reality in West Africa differs from her perception. Although utterly disoriented at first, she also gains the first-hand experience of non-discursive mechanisms of bodily rhetoric in Africa. By joining their dances, she feels "the joy … [she has] been looking for all [her] life" (165). She sees that these African characters don't acknowledge the limiting and containing force of the official borders. For them, what puts borders in their lives is the cultural practices or their

religious/philosophical standing in life. In West Africa, for example, as the narrator observes, through dance, the linear understanding of time gives way to a new spatio-temporality: "the moves jumped to other times and places, more familiar to me, through hip-hop and ragga, through Atlanta and Kingston . . ." (271). Therefore, the bodily rhetoric reduces discursive conflicts by seemingly transcending time and space.[3]

Unlike the inhabitants of London, who go with the flow in the absence of a structuring and stabilising mode of thinking, these people base their life experiences on their principles or ideas. That is, they re-tailor themselves to embrace new ideas and normative patterns, as in the case of Hawa and Musa. Their current ethnospaces are gradually being dominated by humanist ideas from the West or Islamic doctrines. When we look at African individuals in the novel, we see two things: the elderly people are trying to retain the markers of their ethnospaces, but the members of the new generation are following new translocal and porous mindmaps. They are changing into new forms and adopting survival mechanisms because the previous ethnospace promotes only hunger, hard work, and physical difficulties to them. Hawa, for example, is a school teacher, and she is the daughter of two "university teachers" (219). Being a "middle-class girl," she is a "relative rarity" in the village. (219). Initially, the narrator wants to get information about topics such as politics, poverty, religion, and things that are related to their experiences. But none of these interests Hawa. As the narrator says, "all of [these topics] repelled our guests and severely tested Hawa's patience" (221). On the contrary, Hawa is interested in talking about Western music and likes to gossip as her "preferred topic was the R&B star Chris Brown …" (223). There is a departure from the previous traditions. Another example regarding this is Musa, who is Hawa's cousin. Musa subscribes to radical Islamic doctrines and becomes the man of "*Da'wah*" (257 emphasis in the original), calling people to Islam. He moves away from the traditional practices of the village people, and regards music and dancing, two activities that dominate their ethnospaces, as "Shaytan" (256), meaning devil. Both Musa and Hawa want to break away from the previous customs in different ways. Interestingly, as Hawa remarks: "We are too old-fashioned for [Musa] now. He wants to be modern" (258). The word modern here does not refer to Western modernity but is a breakaway from the previous traditions to embrace an Islamic lifestyle in a city. However, others, as the narrator observes in a village gathering, want to be modern by wearing 'Westernized' clothing:

> All the young male teachers in the village dressed in this way, in traditional bishop-collars or sharp chinos and shirts, with big watches and thin black bags, their flip-phones and huge-screened androids always in hand, even if they didn't work. It was an attitude I remembered from the old neighbourhood, a way of representing, which in the village meant dressing for a certain part: I am one of the serious, modern young men. I am the future of my country (180).

Along with its hardships in their current ethnospaces, there is also the uniting energy of dance and music or other rituals inspired by these ethnospaces, but this is no longer enough for them. They demand more in life. First of all, they demand to be acknowledged on an equal footing by Westerners, or they want to assert their autonomy elsewhere. In either case, the radical religious groups are prepared to disconnect themselves from the previous ethnospaces, including ritual practices, extended family structures, the authority of elders who enforce traditions, and various forms of communal bonding that foster non-Western forms of attachment. This change implies a collective change to the local African ethnospaces. Only the elderly people remain committed to the codes of the current ethnospaces. Customs such as boys' initiation rituals continue in the village. The narrator watches one of the initiation rituals in which a "kankurang" (166) dancer comes. As she

learns later, this ritual acts as a "threshold, between youth and maturity" (166) for the boys. A dancer comes and takes the boys "to the bush, where they are circumcised, initiated into their culture, told the rules and the limits, the sacred traditions of the world in which they will live, the names of the plants to help with this or that illness and how to use them" (166). Yet the textual details tell that they are doomed to disappear or at least radically change in the near future when the elderly people die. The fact that the new generation doesn't adopt the normative patterns and collective cultural performances of these ethnospaces and look for a sense of belonging elsewhere forces us to look for a new word for their experience. By disconnecting themselves from their roots, the new generation translocate themselves in an imagined territory which will become actual in Africa (as in the case of the radical Islamicist groups) or elsewhere, as in the case of the immigrants leaving for Europe through the back road. In both of these cases, this transformation involves new forms of the unknowable, thus, precarity. It raises questions about the possible insecurities or cultural alienation that might harm not only their collective culture but also their psychological coherence. Waning social bonds might lead to new dystopian routes for the Africans, particularly for women. Then, in their case, through translocal relationalities, they depart from the collective non-discursive practices and the bodily rhetoric that enriched their previous site of signification and suggested an alternative to the human of modernity.

Conclusion

The characters in *Swing Time* signal a departure from the stable symmetries of the human of modernity and objectify Clifford's expression of 'dwelling-in-travel'.[4] Even if they don't change places, they feel dehomed in London, New York, or in Africa, or they flow through uprooted transnationalism of porous lived experiences. Whether these posthuman characters are winners or losers in late modernity, their lives are characterised by precarity. Tracy finds a means of achieving a vulnerable kind of stability and psychological coherence in dance. Aimee, too resorts to dance (and also singing) but she exploits the experience of affect she makes possible for her audiences. The older generation of characters in Africa are content with the bodily rhetoric and collective non-discursive practices in their ethnospaces, but the new generation looks for the previous sense of stability and coherence elsewhere, thus embracing unpredictable forms of precarity. In this line of thinking, Tracy finds her means of holding on to life despite its precarity in the bodily rhetoric, thus avoiding psychological collapse and achieving coherence, while we observe the opposite move in the lives of the African characters. They depart from the previous non-discursive collective practices and their bodily rhetoric of Becoming towards a more alienated/ alienating space of Being characterized by rationalism and repression of the bodily rhetoric.

End Notes

1. We need to account for the social and political structures that make up the experiences of different groups as not everyone experiences precarity to the same degree. As Butler notes: "… social and political organizations … have developed historically in order to maximize precariousness for some and minimize precariousness for others" (*War* 3). Therefore, "[w]e have to ask about the conditions under which it becomes possible to apprehend a life or set of lives as precarious, and those that make it less possible, or indeed impossible" (*War* 2).

2. The novel cleverly separates the dance from the industry. This is the reason why Tracey cannot sustain her mental stability by dancing in her adulthood. The entertainment industry is built upon structural inequality, racism, and exploitative practices, perfectly represented through Aimee's character. Aimee exploits and appropriates West African dances in her music videos to make a profit. In order to survive in such a system, Tracey changes her full name to Tracee Le Roy and straightens her hair (356). But when the narrator looks up Tracey's bio, she is rather surprised by the failure: "It lacked the ubiquitous accomplishments of all the other bios: no TV, no film, and no mention of where she'd been 'trained', which I took to mean she'd never graduated" (357). After years of hard work and with such talent, at the end of the novel, Tracey's life is also marked by its precarity. When the narrator asks whether she still dances professionally, Tracey says "Do I *look* like I'm still dancing? . . . I know I was the smart one but . . . get a fucking clue" (403). We learn that she is now a single mother, who lives in an underprivileged area with her two children.

3. However, it is not without problematization. Smith also shows that the institutions that shape the entertainment industry are found upon racist and exploitative practices. Lamothe writes that although in *Swing Time* art is shown as something that transcends boundaries, this also depends on misrecognition. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator transcends her ego boundaries while watching Fred Astaire's dance, but as Lamothe argues "the narrator's ecstatic reaction depends on her misrecognition of the fact that Astaire dances in blackface" (150). It is only later when the narrator shows the video to Lamin, she is embarrassed by the fact that she just now realizes that Astaire was in blackface. "I hardly understood what we were looking at: Fred Astaire in blackface . . . none of this really explained how I'd managed to block the childhood image from my memory: the rolling eyes, the white gloves, the Bojangles grin. I felt very stupid" (5). Dance, therefore, transcends boundaries and provides a source of stability as long as the underlying power relations that shape the entertainment industry are misrecognized.

4. In his book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*(2015), JamesClifford introduces the term "dwelling-in-travel". It is a concept that troubles the assumptions of both travelling and dwelling by concerning itself with the "practices of displacement" and treating them as "as *constitutive* of cultural meanings rather than simple transfer or extension" (3 emphasis in the original).

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