



# Gendered, Post-diasporic Mobilities and the Politics of Blackness in Zadie Smith's *Swing Time* (2016)

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**Abstract:** Zadie Smith's novel *Swing Time* (2016) traverses the geographies and temporalities of the Black Atlantic, unsettling conventional definitions of a black African diaspora, and restlessly interrogating easy gestures of identification and belonging. In my analysis of Smith's text, I argue that these interconnected spaces and the characters' uneasy and shifting identities are representative of post-diasporic communities and subjectivities. The novel's representations of female friendships, mother-daughter relationships, and professional relationships between women, however, demonstrate that experiences of diaspora/post-diaspora are complicated by issues of gender. Forms of black dance and African diasporic music represent the novel's concerns with mobility and stillness; dance is used by its young female characters as a "diasporic resource" (Nassy Brown 2005, 42), a means of negotiating and contesting existing structures of gender, class and culture.

**Keywords:** Zadie Smith, *Swing Time*, post-diaspora, dance, mobility, race, gender

**How to cite**

Scafe, Suzanne. 2019. "Gendered, Post-Diasporic Mobilities and the Politics of Blackness in Zadie Smith's *Swing Time* (2016)." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, Issue 13: 93-120

The title of the novel *Swing Time* (2016) is taken from a 1936 Hollywood musical of the same name, featuring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. In the course of the movie, Astaire dances and sings the number “Bojangles of Harlem” in blackface as a tribute, it has been suggested, to Bill “Bojangles” Robinson (Hill 2012). The novel also includes important references to Robinson and Astaire's little-known female contemporary, the dancer Jeni Le Gon, whose presence in the narrative illustrates ways in which dance, as a form of cultural production and expression, continues to reflect and reproduce racial and gendered inequalities. As the title suggests, the narrative's use of dance as the novel's dominant motif and its numerous references to swing era musicals, to dancers and dancing, present a reconsideration of how, in the context of contemporary Britain, racial, cultural and gendered identities are structured and reconstructed across transnational contexts. Black performances of popular dance forms are represented in the novel as a “diasporic resource” (Nassy Brown 2005, 42). They are used by its young female protagonists to counter the challenges of a racist, classist society. Representations of black dance forms are also used to reveal the asymmetrical power relations that structure its protagonists' coming of age. While the novel's locations and its references to various forms of cultural production and consumer commodities are presented in specific realist detail, its style, structure and the register of its first person narrator, reflect contemporary preoccupations with time-space compression and with the ways in which time and space are refracted by diverse technologies. Zadie Smith's novel traverses the geographies and temporalities of the Black Atlantic, unsettling conventional definitions of a black African diaspora, and restlessly interrogating easy gestures of identification and belonging. In its representations of mother-daughter relationships and female friendships, the narrative demonstrates that the experience of diaspora is complicated by issues of gender. Characters in the novel are both compelled by and resistant to the home/hostland paradigm that discourses of diaspora construct: with its focus on mobility, border and boundary-crossing, and mixing the narrative suggests the need for a “new homing sensibility” (Zhang in Rollins 2010, 232). The uneven, dislocated, but also felicitous and unexpected cultural connections that are the novel's focus, create intra and international communities, that in their shifting formations and

identifications, can be defined as post-diasporic, a term used in this essay to privilege aspects of diaspora theory's open-endedness and ambiguity (Rollins 2010). Post-diaspora does not signal a rejection of concepts of diaspora, rather the "post" represents another way of thinking about diaspora in an era of increased globalization (Laguerre 2017).

### **Diaspora, (Post-) diaspora**

In his essay on the Canadian poet Fred Wah, Jonathan Rollins (2010) argues that Wah's repeated question, "What am I?" should be interpreted as a "statement of identity" (239), as an expression both of his plural, multiply-hyphenated identity and his unfixed, open-ended relation to his diasporic location, Canada. Such an identity situates Wah and his work in a post-diasporic space. As Rollins argues, the term "post-diaspora" moves discussions about place, time, belonging, and displacement into a conceptual space that is "beyond diaspora" (246) and better reflects "newly emerging forms of identity on a local and global stage" (247). Making a similar point, but focusing his more sustained theoretical argument on issues of citizenship and statehood, Michel S. Laguerre argues that "Postdiaspora identity develops and is made possible through the acquisition of full citizenship rights" in the homeland and hostland: it is to "become cosmopolitan", rather than to be attached to a single, identity-defining nation state (3). It is an identity, philosophical world-view or "condition" made necessary by the transformation of the global landscape by emigration and the remaking of nation states into what Laguerre defines as "cosmonational states" (161-3). In Laguerre's work, a concept of "postdiaspora" opposes what he identifies as the negative connotations of diaspora, which consolidate diasporic individuals into a "subordinate relationship to a mainstream group" (14) and which categorise and rank diasporic identities, thus reinforcing racialized structures of inequality. Rollins and Laguerre's use of the term post-diaspora/postdiaspora attempts to address concerns about diaspora's insufficiency when applied to the contemporary transnational moment. It is a concern that other theorists of diaspora have shared. Khachig Tölölyan, for

example, laments that the term diaspora, its “very multiplicity”, has brought with it the danger of becoming “a promiscuously capacious category that is taken to include all the adjacent phenomena to which it is linked but from which it actually differs” (Tölölyan 1996, 8). Despite this later position, he inaugurated the journal *Diaspora* in 1991 with an affirmation of the potential for concepts of diaspora to describe our contemporary, globalized world, arguing that “diasporas are the exemplary communities of the transnational moment” (Tölölyan 1991, 5). Diasporas, he argued, reflect an increasingly deterritorialized world “whose varying intersections in real estate constitute every ‘place’ as a heterogeneous and disequibrated site of production, appropriation and consumption, of negotiated identity and affect” (6). Rather than expressing a contradiction, however, Tölölyan’s attempts to reconfigure concepts of diaspora reflect the urgent need to theorise and narrate how increased migration and the creation of “cosmonational states” differently construct individuals, and shape cultural practices and cultural transmission in the contemporary transnational moment.

My use of the term post-diaspora in this essay owes much to the work of the theorists cited above whose use of concepts of diaspora/post-diaspora address the speed at which migratory flows in the contemporary period are transforming identities, cultures and concepts of statehood at a national and local level. Although Smith’s two young female protagonists are what is popularly termed in Britain “mixed race”, and both have a Jamaican and white British parent, I am resisting using post-diaspora as a way of situating an individual’s experience of either mixedness or multiple ethnic identities. Rather I am using the term to theorise the unevenness of African diasporic affiliations and the asymmetrical relations of power within which diaspora’s resources are produced and consumed, and to examine the significance of the narrative’s representations of multiply diasporic spaces. Post-diaspora in the context of this essay is also used in a specifically political sense to describe the character of the mother and her black internationalist sensibilities and political practice. Her politics, I argue, specifically reflect the feminist praxis of black British feminist activists organising in the later decades of the twentieth-century. Theirs was a political identity with

roots in a version of Pan-Africanism articulated by Caribbean political theorists and activists such as George Padmore and Walter Rodney who saw “their struggles as not only involving black people everywhere but also as being organically related to Third World struggles generally and to the worldwide struggle of proletariat and peasantry regardless of race” (Drake in Rushdy 2015, 293). I am suggesting that the politics of post-diaspora, as expressed by the mother’s black British feminist praxis, reflects a dialectic between the transnational black social movements of the past and the contemporary present of the narrative (Lee 2009). Although resistant to her mother’s black internationalist politics and, when younger, defiantly claiming a “half-caste” identity (37), the daughter’s self-positioning as a young adult and her social and cultural affiliations suggest that she identifies as black, rather than mixed race. As the citations above suggest, however, emerging discourses opposing the inequalities inherent in concepts of diaspora, which have settled on the more emancipatory meanings of post-diaspora (Laguerre 2017), have omitted to include a consideration of the gender inequalities that persist in concepts of diaspora and post-diaspora. By focusing on the intergenerational relationships between the novel’s female characters, representations of female friendship, the coming of age of young black British girls and the marginalization of black women dancers both in the era of Swing and the novel’s present, I use this analysis of Smith’s *Swing Time* to address this omission.

In the scenes analysed below, set in the North West London community of the novel’s protagonists, Smith creates a post-diasporic space formed of intersecting migrant communities who share the same local resources, but whose difference is not, in the narrative, based on culture or race, but on class. The unnamed first-person narrator, her white English father and black Jamaican mother, also unnamed, live in specific areas in Kilburn and Willesden, North West London. Although Louie, the father of the narrator’s childhood friend Tracey, is also Jamaican and frequently escapes to Jamaica to avoid the consequences of his criminal activities, neither of the two families which are the narrative’s focus are situated in a community that might be defined as having a shared diasporic identity. In fact, in several scenes used to characterise this area of

London, the community is represented as a complex interconnection of cultural sameness, difference and inequality. The narrator's primary school, for example, is contrasted with that of her best friend, Tracey: Tracey's is a single-sex school, where "almost all the girls were Indian or Pakistani, and wild ... A rough school, with a lot of fighting" (Smith 2016, 34). The narrator's mother's more aspirational choice is a school in Willesden, a middle-class area, where the pupils are "more mixed: half black, a quarter white, a quarter South Asian. Of the black half at least a third were 'half-caste', a minority nation within a nation, though the truth is it annoyed me to notice them" (34). Here Smith's narrator provocatively uses what is, and was during the period in which the novel was set, a derogatory term. As Nassy Brown (2005) argues in her study of "Black Liverpool", "half-caste" was a deficient identity, transformed to "black" during the ascendancy of Black Power in Britain (51) but also, as I suggest above, redefined in the context of a black internationalism that framed the ideological context of a significant strand of black/ "Black" community politics of the 1960s to the early 2000s, and used in the narrative to contextualise the politics of the narrator's mother.<sup>1</sup> "Half-caste" then, is the daughter's implied rebuke to her mother, as is the following:

I could not avoid seeing in front of me all the many kinds of children my mother had spent the summer trying to encourage me towards, girls with similar backgrounds but what my mother called 'broader horizons' ... Tasha, half Guyanese, half Tamil, whose father was a real Tamil Tiger, which impressed my mother mightily... There was a girl called Anoushka with a father from St. Lucia and a Russian mother whose uncle was, according to my mother, 'the most revolutionary poet in the Caribbean' (Smith 2016, 34).

Although the daughter continues to present her mother's political affiliations ironically, the narrative point of view echoes the mother's political perspective, emphasising throughout the ways in which race and class define and structure routes to social mobility in multiply diasporic or in post-diasporic spaces of intersected migrant communities. By indicating the mother's privileging of other characters' political exile, Smith introduces the idea of exile as a diasporic identity that is also marked by class and education. Exile, as the narrative suggests, brings with it a political consciousness and social understanding that

allows for the marginalized spaces assigned to the migrant to be transformed into emancipatory spaces of possibility, even privilege. As Edward Said argues, even though the two positions – of the exiled and the migrant – must be in dialogue, there is a great difference between the “optimistic mobility” of the exiled intellectual and the “massive dislocations, waste, misery, and horrors endured in our century’s migrations and mutilated lives” (Said 1994, 403). In its representations of difference and contestation within and between migrant communities, Smith’s novel creates a space within which to construct a dialogue between the intellectual as theoretician or activist, who distils then articulates “the predicaments that disfigure modernity – mass deportation, imprisonment, population transfer, collective dispossession, and forced immigrations” (403), and the subjects of that collective dispossession. This difference permeates the locations of the narrative. The theorizing perspective of the intellectual is explicitly expressed in most scenes involving the mother and is one that shapes the narrative, informing the point of view of the narrator, who admits to “channelling” (Smith 2016, 112) her mother when responding to scenes and experiences that need historical or sociological underpinning. Her mother, she narrates, was proud of not being like other mothers: at the same time, because she recognises a sameness of cultural and/or class origins, her mother maintains an affiliation with those from whom she has also separated as a result of educational success and class aspirations. As the narrator observes, “channelling” her mother, for many of “our mothers” who had become mothers not long after leaving school, Parents’ Evening was like detention: “It remained a place where they might be shamed. The difference was now they were grown and could not be forced to attend” or if they did, could “begin shouting at the teacher” (Smith 2016, 41). Her mother was affiliated, or sympathetic, but different: “I say ‘our mothers’, but of course mine was different: she had the anger but not the shame” (42).

The narrator observes a similar difference and distance between her mother and Louie. Having discovered that Louie, Tracey’s absent father and recidivist, had destroyed or at least had organised the burning down of the bike shed which the narrator’s mother had refurbished and transformed into a



“‘community meeting space’” (238), the mother is able to situate reports of Louie's inadequacies and transgressions in the context of a history of slavery: he becomes to her, a “sociological phenomenon or a political symptom or a historical example or simply a person raised in the same grinding rural poverty she'd known herself – a person whom she recognised ... *that* Louie my mother could deal with” (Smith 2016, 245).

The mother's and Louie's cultural sameness is represented in her migratory journey, which repeats a familiar pattern of migration from the Caribbean to Britain from the late 1950s and '60s to the mid-1970s. Having followed her own mother to England and having experienced a childhood that was full of emotional and physical violence, the narrator's mother chose to return to study as a mature student and young mother herself, passing her A Levels then working for a degree at a local polytechnic.<sup>2</sup> Her route to social mobility and intellectual achievement is enabled by her commitment to her own emancipation as a woman. While the narrator's father was relegated, reluctantly, to the domestic sphere, the mother embraced the “life of the mind”, rebutting his resentments by emphasising “the importance of having a revolutionary consciousness, or the relative insignificance of sexual love when placed beside the struggles of the people, or the legacy of slavery” (35). Her difference is therefore a reflection of her education but also of a black feminist praxis that frames her choices about her role as a wife and mother. She opposes the role of care that, as Eudine Barriteau argues in her work on Caribbean women's empowerment, continues to subjugate women including those who have access to considerable economic resources and social capital (Barriteau, 2012). The mother's achievements are possible because, the narrative suggests, she already understands the economic and psycho-social contexts and implications of the intimate and the sexual: for the mother, “The Personal is Political”. She does not perform the role of carer or caretaker in either of her subsequent relationships; not coincidentally, perhaps, she has claimed what Audre Lorde defines as “the erotic” – “a passion to live fully, to experience feeling” as a source of power within herself (Lorde in Barriteau 2012, 75). The political contexts of her personal choices and her social and intellectual

achievements thus mark her as different from other black diasporic subjects such as Louie, or her brother Lambert. This can be understood as a difference between the perspective of the intellectual (and exile) and the migrant, and is evidence of narrative's repeated preoccupation with the extent to which concepts of diaspora are strained by poverty, class and racism. The exile or diasporic intellectual might, in dialogue with the migrant, ameliorate or contextualise experiences of racism but her difference cannot but disarticulate concepts of diasporic unity.

The mother's black internationalist politics are characterised by what Michelle Stephens, locating her analysis in the black internationalism of the early twentieth-century, defines as a "resistance to Empire", characterised by the forms and traditions of a "diasporic blackness" that emerged after the first World War (104). In that moment, "black internationalism as a real political philosophy, radical epistemology, and institutional practice" emerged from an understanding of the material conditions of Empire. Such a theoretical understanding created a context for black solidarities across nations: "black subjects found themselves asking deeper structural questions of capital and the political world around them, questions that would then lead them to an analysis of the very forces that produced the differences that divided them in the first place" (Stephens 2005, 104). These structural questions were given material significance as the colonial subject journeyed from the periphery to the centre, "a journey toward seeing and mapping the bigger picture within which you were articulated" (Stephens 2005, 107). Stephens's focus on radical black Caribbean intellectuals such as C.L.R James, however, omits important black internationalists such as Claudia Jones.<sup>3</sup> Smith's representation of the mother inserts a consideration of gender into this representation of black internationalism. Through Smith's historically contextualised representation of the mother's politics, she places her in dialogue with the past, situating her in a political space that Christopher Lee defines as "postdiasporic", a contemporary political consciousness that is in dialogue with the past (Lee 2009, 144).

Her character can be further understood within a context of black British feminist activism that is now, in the second decade of the twenty-first-century, being recovered, archived and celebrated in local and national institutions in the UK. Testimonies from black feminist activists reveal a commitment to what has been termed “political blackness” or a black socialist internationalist politics shaped by their experience of a “diaspora of Empire within the nation” (Williams 1999). Like the mother’s activism, theirs was shaped both by the demands of specific, geographically located, multiply diasporic communities and an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist ideology. As interviewees in *Heart of the Race* (2018/1985) explain, theirs was a politics of affiliation, of shared histories, rather than of a corporeal or narrowly defined cultural identity:

Despite the differences in our histories and our culture, the racism in this society affects the Black community as a whole. Afro-Caribbean as well as Asian women are victims of deportations and Home Office surveillance tactics ... Asian youths as well as Afro-Caribbean youths are harassed and victimised by the police. During 1981, the most serious of all charges during the uprisings were made against Asian youths in Bradford” (Bryan, Dadzie and Scafe 2018, 171).

Interviewees who discuss their involvement in the Peace Movement for example, argue that for a black British feminist, the politics of peace necessitates an international context that takes into account the raced politics of global capital: “uranium mining in Namibia, the nuclear testing that’s been going on on the Aboriginal’s land” (175). Such internationalism brings together activists who identify differently in relation to nation and culture, but whose practice of interconnection and collectivity works to strengthen a liberationist politics (Ambikaipaker 2016), thus creating a multiply diasporic or post-diasporic space of political activism. Theirs is a way of organising that opposes the politics of nationalism and refuses narrow identitarian categories. In *Swing Time* such post-diasporic spaces are in part constructed around its focus on the mother’s activism: her regular attendance at Saturday demonstrations, her commitment to nuclear disarmament, her affiliation with the politics of the IRA and the Tamil Tigers, her opposition to the shrinking state.<sup>4</sup>

**The politics of blackness: “Our People! Our People! I am a Duck! I am a duck! Quack and babble” (Smith 2016, 311)**

The novel constructs its characters within the geographies of the Black Atlantic – London, New York, West Africa – locations that are used to demonstrate the ways in which black identities are shaped by the unevenness of global power relations. The use of these locations also allows for a reconsideration of how diasporic subjectivities are constructed in a world characterized by greater mobility, bringing into proximity and seeming reachability the “things”, experiences, people and relationships that not long ago would have seemed distant and unreachable, and problematizing the value of stillness. The speed of technology, the narrative suggests, heightens the characters’ experiences of inequality. The instability of forms and processes of racial and cultural identity are expressed in large part through representations of the conflicted relationship between the narrator and her mother. In her role as PA for a Madonna-like pop singer and dancer, the narrator travels to the Gambia, where her employer is building a school for girls, equipped with sophisticated educational technology. While there her employer also adopts a young child: “White woman saves Africa... Very old idea” (153), says the mother. The narrator’s adjunct position involves so much travel and at such speed, that she senses that she had passed her twenties “in a weird state of timelessness” (149). As her mother, now a Member of Parliament for the fictional constituency of “Brent West” and a thorn in the side of the government, observes: “People come from somewhere, they have roots – you’ve let this woman pull yours right out of the ground. You don’t live anywhere, you don’t have anything, you’re constantly on a plane” (155). This comment, juxtaposed with a scene at the father’s funeral during which the narrator reflects on the limited spaces offered to her as a child to negotiate her own mixedness, brings into sharp focus questions of home, belonging, racial and cultural identity. Smith’s representations of place as specific and material allow questions of difference in the construction of a black diasporic identity to be articulated. Although the mother roots her identity in Africa, used as a cultural signifier of resistance to white European dominance, her participation in Britain as a full citizen including her role as a Member of Parliament defines her, according to LaGuerre, as “post-diasporic”: her “sense of belonging is located

in one territory but distributed over many sites" (3). Through its representations of the accidental nature of cultural encounters, combined with the occasionally breezy, unselfconscious tone of the first-person narration, Smith's novel allows for a rethinking of the "the workings of 'race'" in an articulation of black diaspora that is "inherently *décalé*, or disjointed, by a host of factors" and cannot be "propped up ... into an artificially 'even' or 'balanced' state of 'racial' belonging" (Edwards 2003, 14).

All black diasporic identifications are, in this novel, provisional, uncertain, and contradictory. The scenes set in the Gambia intersect those in London or New York and are used to trouble unexamined assumptions of an African, home, origin, roots, or claims to what Saidiya Hartman (2008) refers to as a singular "we". Although Smith's narrator remembers having said, perhaps for her mother's benefit, that a visit to the "old slave forts that once held my ancestors" would have been a form of "'diaspora tourism'" (176), once in the Gambia, she feels the need to make that journey, describing it as a reconnection and search for origins. At other points during her extended visit to the Gambia, she refuses a collective, homogenizing notion of belonging: "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. There were only the Sere women, the Wolof, and the Mandika" (205), yet her mother's face is recognizable everywhere, and in a busy street scene a woman reminds her of "a Jamaican lady at Lord's, following a day's cricket" (165). Her relationship with Hawa reveals a similar unevenness: Hawa does not inhabit a pure, originary cultural space to which the narrator can return. Rather, Hawa is caught in a web of globalized consumerism to which she has little material access and, despite being "middle-class" (219), both her relative poverty and the traditional roles she occupies as a young Gambian woman function to separate her from the narrator. Like many young girls the narrator remembers from her London school days, Hawa has a determinedly optimistic, lighthearted view of life: African-American popular music is the soundtrack to the drudgery of her everyday village routine that includes cooking, cleaning, and teaching in an impoverished classroom. The narrator sees no connection between herself and "the small army of women" in

her compound and across the Gambia's rural landscape. Their work was a world away from hers: "Everywhere I looked women were working: mothering, digging, carrying, feeding, cleaning, dragging, scrubbing, building, fixing. I didn't see a man" (178-9).

While holding these complex, unsettled feelings about her African heritage and differences of gender identity, she visits the original slave trading posts and slavery museum, a scene of dusty desolation and failed commerce. The narrator reflects on her inability to feel the desired emotional connection to this site of diasporic origins. She realizes instead that this was yet another example of the exercise of power over the weak: "Power had preyed on weakness here: all kinds of power – local, racial, tribal, royal, national, global, economic ... But power does that everywhere ... Every tribe has their blood-soaked legacy: here was mine" (316). Mitigating against an experience of tragedy and blocking the narrator's ability to feel the pain of capture, incarceration and enslavement are the crowds of informal entrepreneurs, hoping to make a living from that past. For them, the traumatic slave past can be understood as one of diaspora's resources. In Jacqueline Nassy Brown's work, "diasporic resources" are forms of cultural production, people, places and ideologies that circulate around the African diaspora. Rather than referring simply to products, however, a concept of "diasporic resources" can serve as an analytical tool, used to identify the power asymmetries revealed in the ways in which these resources are appropriated and consumed. They are a means of "map[ping] diasporic space, helping to define its margins and centers, while also crucially determining who is allowed to go where, when, under what conditions and for what purposes" (41-2). In its representations of the repurposed slave ports as commemorative sites that are primarily a diasporic tourist location, and its characterization of African popular culture suffused by Caribbean or African-American cultural forms, I suggest that the narrative remaps black America as the economic and cultural centre on which the home, Africa, is dependent. As Sadiya Hartman observes, in contemporary West Africa, simulated commemoration represents a commercial opportunity underwritten by American and European multinational corporations. Shell Oil, USAID, the

Ghanaian Ministry of Tourism, encourage the promotion of diaspora tourism around a model of what Hartman refers to as the “McRoots tours to Gambia and Senegal”, Ghana’s equivalent of a “fried chicken franchise” (163).

Every town had an atrocity to promote – a mass grave, an auction block, a slave river, a massacre ... Few of the tour operators, docents, and guides put any stock in the potted history of the ‘white man’s barbarism’ and the ‘crimes against humanity’ that they marketed to black tourists or believed the Atlantic trade had anything to do with them. They only hoped that slavery would help make them prosperous (163).

Africa’s scattered descendants experience the economic dislocations and complex inequalities that were begun with the trade in slaves and are continued and repeated in the present. By exposing those inequalities of power, *Swing Time* refuses to construct diaspora as a replica state of kinship and belonging.

Hartman’s extensive historical research serves to separate her from the African scholars with whom she travels on her second research visit to Ghana but her book ends with a spontaneous moment of connection through her participation in a scene of song and dance. Although Smith’s narrator also reflects, as she watches the kankurang, “here is the joy I’ve been looking for all my life” (165), the narrative only rarely allows even such small moments of unproblematic connection. Rather, in its continued return to the raced inequalities and thwarted mobilities that have characterized black dance and other forms of black diasporic cultural production, inequalities exacerbated by mobile communication technologies and the technologies of travel, it repeatedly exposes what Hayes Edwards (2003) refers to as the prosthetics of diasporic unity. Discrepant juxtapositions are used to present provisional gestures of racial unity where, as with the scenes of Aimee’s gay African-American minder in the Gambia, such moments of identification are destabilized by an unassimilable trace of difference used not simply to negate or undermine the integrity of the experience, but to create a dialogue between discrepant perspectives:

“Granger had loved it here ... despite the existential threat the visit had surely represented for him ... Where I saw deprivation, injustice, poverty, Granger saw simplicity, lack of materialism, communal beauty” (222). That love is represented in his exuberant participation in all forms of black dance, transnational forms of black music and what he experiences as a life with meaning, and is reciprocated – if not unconditionally – by the villagers.

### **Post-diasporic mobilities: Dance, Dancers and Dancing**

During the narrator’s time at university, she embarks on an unhappy relationship with “a conscious young man called Rakim” (287) who “was repelled by the media that I was supposed to be studying – the minstrels and the dancing mammies ... even if my purpose was critique” (290). She continues:

Too stoned in company once, I made the mistake of trying to explain what I found beautiful about the origins of tap dancing – the Irish crew and the African slaves, beating out time with their feet on the wooden decks of those ships, exchanging steps, creating a hybrid form – but Rakim, also stoned and in a cruel mood ... said: *O massa, I’s so happy on this here slave ship I be dancing for joy* (Smith 2016, 290).

The narrator’s wistful misrepresentation of the origins of tap marks a key moment in the narrative’s use of dance as a diasporic resource in order to map the complex and uneven histories of American Hollywood musicals of the Swing era on to the lives of its protagonists in contemporary North West London. The narrative’s use of Kilburn as one of its main North West London sites provides a context in which the overlapping histories of American Irish and African dancers can be examined, and past and present collapsed. After leaving university, the narrator meets her childhood friend, Tracey, in a local pub that had once been described as “Irish”: while there Tracey reveals that she will be dancing in the chorus of a West End revival of *Guys and Dolls* (1955), “one of our favourite shows” (329). Kilburn’s Irish roots, and in particular its reputation for harbouring members of the IRA at the height of the “Troubles” in the mid-twentieth-century, are referred to several times in the novel. Kilburn’s contemporary Irish/African identity is more explicitly the focus of Smith’s novel *NW* (2012), which also centres



on the friendship between two girls as they grow into adulthood, one of Irish descent and another of African-Caribbean parents. Like *Swing Time*, *NW* examines the uneven interconnection between the two communities and the area's changing demographic. As Pauline, an Irish Protestant nurse in the novel *NW* and migrant from Ireland to Kilburn, reflects: "... and the Nigerians wily, owning those things in Kilburn that once were Irish, and five of the nurses on her own team being Nigerian where once they were Irish" (Smith 2012, 17). This complex, interwoven history of racial difference and discrimination repeats the history of tap as it emerged in the U.S and that history opens up a space within which to reflect on how discriminatory practices simultaneously mutate and remain the same.

As several recent dance historians have demonstrated, tap dancing emerged over a three century period of musical and social exchange, appropriation, exclusion, mixing, and borrowing between African slaves and their descendants and Irish indentured labourers in North America and the Caribbean (Dixon Gottschild 1996, 2003; Johnson 2003; Hill, 2010; Crawford 2014; Siebert 2015). Rakim's more knowing comments suggest that the emergence of tap dance is inextricably woven into North American traditions of minstrelsy where, in the early nineteenth-century most of the blackface minstrels performing a mixed version of the Irish jig and African *juba* or *gioube*, were Irish immigrants (Hill 2012). The white blackface minstrel was often selected to perform instead of the African American dancer, thus Fred Astaire's blackface imitation of or tribute to Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson in *Swing Time* stands as a metaphor for the ways in which, as Constance Hill demonstrates, the performance history of tap dance "inevitably takes on the history of race, racism, and race relations in America" (3). Robinson's erect pose, his careful precision were, according to Hill, carefully crafted to oppose the stereotype of the shuffling, shabbily dressed African-American jig dancer (66), or the loose body movements and exaggerated limb gestures that came to characterise American tap. As she notes, however, whereas his posture and iconic stair dance represent "Robinson's aspirations for ascendance", the stairs lead nowhere (66). It is both ironic and inevitable that his most famous roles were not ones where he starred

in his own right, but where, as in *The Little Colonel* (1935), he played the loyal Uncle Tom to a six-year old tap dancing Shirley Temple (Hill 2012, 121).

The novel's detailed description of Jeni Le Gon's dance in *Ali Baba Goes to Town*, containing an angular dance movement repeated decades later by Michael Jackson (Smith 2016, 190-192), reflects tap and contemporary black dance's indebtedness to Henry William Lane, the "proto tap dancer" credited with inspiring the Africanist postures that characterised black tap dancing during the Swing Era (Dixon Gottschild 2003, 111-112). The narrative's repeated references to Jeni Le Gon also illustrate the gendered dimension of black performance and the near impossibility of "ascendance" for black female performers. Tracey's career as a dancer is situated in the historical contexts of tap dance and movie making in the 1930s and '40s Swing Era but is specifically refracted through the dance biographies of Bojangles and Jeni Le Gon, the latter of whom becomes the two girls' childhood obsession. Le Gon was Robinson's first African American dance partner in *Hooray for Love* (1935) but was consistently overlooked for parts in big productions such as *Easter Parade* (1948) or *Broadway Melody* (1936). In the latter, despite being used to choreograph the lead female role, she was dropped from the cast (Hill 2010, 124-5). In the novel, the girls watch *Ali Baba Goes to Town* (1937), where Le Gon performs solo alongside a blackface Eddie Cantor and where, as a member of the chorus, she is dressed like the others in "loincloth and feathers, outlandish head-dresses" (Smith 2016, 191). In this film, as in many others, she was consigned, according to the cast list, to a "speciality spot", defined as such because it could be neatly excised from the plot when the movie was played in the American South (Hill 2012, 99).

Smith's narrator's imagining of both Tracey's father, a repeated offender and perhaps not a dancer at all, and Tracey herself as Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, reflects her deliberate reconfiguring and regendering of a problematic past and its repetitions in the present. Despite her mother's efforts to point her to dance's raced past, for her eleven-year self, her dream of the film *Stormy Weather*

(1943), featuring Cab Calloway and the Nicholas brothers, Fayard and Harold, performs a much needed counter-narrative: "In my dream we were all elegant and none of us knew pain ... None of our people ever swung by their necks from a tree, or found themselves suddenly thrown overboard, shackled, in dark water" (Smith 2016, 100). In contrast to the narrator's desire for an alternative reality with which to "shore" herself up against the injustices of the past (Smith 2016,100), however, the novel's repeated references to historically resonant figures such as Le Gon, Astaire, Judy Garland, Bojangles among many others, perform its own time-space compression, demonstrating history's repetitions, and mapping progress as recursive rather than linear. As the novel demonstrates, dance can be read as a form of cultural knowledge; moreover, social and cultural contexts assist in the interpretation of dance. In other words, in its use of dance as a diasporic resource and dominant motif, the novel asks, "how does the movement mean" (Cresswell 2006, 59) and in turn, what does the dance aesthetic reveal about its socio-historical origins?

After an estrangement of several years, the narrator sees Tracey on stage when she performs in the chorus of a West End revival of the musical *Showboat*. In this scene, as throughout, the novel uncovers the contexts of black dance and interrogates its potential as a vehicle for social and geographical mobility and escape. Dance, in the novel, is freighted with the historical and cultural meanings of the black African body in the diaspora, objectified, strong, with an enormous capacity for labour but at the same time servile and passive (Thomas 1996). Tracey's role as one of the chorus, dancing in the infamous "In Dahomey" scene, constitutes her as the failure already predicted by the narrator's mother for whom dance was, for black girls, a means of entrapment in a long-term limbo, and a poor alternative to academic achievement. Whereas Tracey spent most of her time at dance school and in dance competitions, the narrator's weekends, "as [her] own middle passage approached", were spent accompanying her mother at political demonstrations: "I was told there was 'no time for dancing' or, in a variation, that 'this was not the time for dancing', as if the historical moment itself forbade it. I had 'responsibilities', they were tied to my 'intelligence'" (Smith 2016, 209). The narrator's decision to refuse the

mother's route to achievement, mobility and freedom, is presented through the image of the train, itself connected to the earlier metaphor of the 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 (212).

The mother, and the narrator retrospectively, are situating their aspirations for movement in the context of the enforced stuckness of the chained and incarcerated slave: the train represents mobility as escape and the hard-won passage to freedom. The daughter's flagrant failure is her attempt to resist the entanglements of history.

In summarising recent trends in what has been termed "the now established mobilities turn" (Cresswell 2012, 645), cultural geographer Tim Cresswell argues for the need to see stillness or "stuckness" (645) as a corollary of mobility. Stillness, he argues, is everywhere, taking the form of waiting, a deferral or a kind of blockage. Now Tracee Le Roy, Tracey's role as one of the "Dahomey Dancers" in the musical production of *Showboat* mirrors Le Gon's role in the Hollywood Africa of *Ali Baba Goes to Town*, and is evidence of stuckness precisely as the mother defines it. The musical itself, as the narrative explains in some detail, is deeply problematic, though no less so than the musicals the girls watched over and over again. And, like many of the movies cited in the narrative, its history is deeply implicated in the politics of race and the raced and gendered contexts of the black body (Dekker 2013). Despite the self-conscious subversions of the Dahomey scene's original meanings in the production of *Showboat* described in the novel, her participation as a dancer in the chorus represents for Tracey, mobility without agency. As the narrator comments, its difficult performance history cannot be overwritten: "They saw that what they were watching was intended to be funny, ironic ... These folks weren't from Dahomey after all! They were good old Negroes, after all, straight from Avenue A, in New York City itself!"

(361). Despite the performance's postmodern inflections and attempted subversion of the racist depictions of Africa evident in the original script, its black dancers are still compliant performers, dancing to a white script.

Thinking of stillness only in relation to mobility, however, constructs stillness as a condition without value: as "stuckness", as a gesture of refusal, as a moral imperative against the rapid advance of consumerism or, as illustrated in the narrative's descriptions of the narrator's pop-star boss Aimee's meditation routines, as "stillness sanctioned by capital and compliant with the need to recharge and re-energize the body to respond to the demands of working life" (Bissell and Fuller 2011, 5). The novel's closing scene, which sees the narrator return to North West London after her mother's death and having lost her job with Aimee, seems to point to a way of viewing stillness that is not synonymous with being stuck. As she watches Tracey and her three children by three different fathers dancing on the small balcony of the same council flat in which she grew up, the narrator considers that this image of Tracey might represent not a return to failure but an alternative to frenetic, unproductive mobility. This might be Tracey just being. Here too, the narrator's watching stillness can be defined as "attunement or perception", a reflective moment that is "*without* investment; without allegiance and without trajectory" (Bissell and Fuller 2011, 6-7), a moment of unreadability: after so many hundreds of thousands of air miles, the narrator is, if only for a moment, brought back down to earth.

### **Mobile Technologies**

Smith's last three novels are concerned with the ways in which technology and the speed of technological innovation make possible and transform our expectations and experiences of reading literary forms such as the novel. In her essay, "Two Directions for the Novel" (2009), Smith questions the value of literary realism, its relevance to contemporary society, and the mobilities within which we are almost all networked: "the ghost of the literary" she seems to suggest, has become a distraction, over-valued in and of itself. It has become self-serving, indulgent, "a nicely constructed sentence, rich in sound and syntax,

signifying (almost) nothing" (81). Such literary forms cannot, the essay argues, ask the right questions of the twenty-first century:

Do selves always seek their good, in the end? Are they never perverse?  
Do they always want meaning? Do they sometimes want its opposite? ...  
Do our childhoods often return to us in the form of coherent, lyrical  
reveries ... Do the things of the world really come to us like this,  
embroidered in the verbal fancy of times past? Is this really realism? (Smith  
2009, 81)

These questions form the core of her previous novel, *NW* (2012), where the long passages used to mimic txt and Twitter messages, blog postings and messages to online dating sites interrupt an otherwise realist narrative and signal its anti-literary intentions. Moreover, the protagonist Keisha/Natalie's inexplicable unravelling in the novel's penultimate scenes, signify a self-conscious abdication of authorial control (Scafe 2015). While the narrative of *Swing Time* is not so frequently interrupted by the language of other technologies, there is an absence of literary framing, the nicely constructed sentence and embroidered verbal fancy. As the narrator observes, the earliest emails mirrored novelistic prose, or the prose of the literary letter but are now bare, functional, and often abbreviated; it is a style this novel reflects without completely abandoning its attachment to the literary. The mobile phone, almost a character in the novel, signifies the ways in which space, personal relationships, identities, individual and cultural, are shaped and transformed through mobile information technology. In a satirical gesture to readers and literary critics who still rely on libraries and physical archives for information, the narrator explains that her description of the cultural contexts of the Gambian kankurang dance was taken from information she had looked up on her mobile phone once she'd returned to New York, and later that she had "googled" LeGon's dance and personal history on her phone, during a car ride across the border of Luxembourg (427). The novel's own networked and remediated identity is evident in the internet postings that follow You Tube clips of Astaire dancing blackface in the movie *Swing Time*, where the first of sixteen comments is: "*Anyone else here because of Swing Time by Zadie Smith?*". In response to footage of Jeni Le Gon dancing in *Ali Baba Goes to Town*, the first of twenty-four comments is: "*How many people came*

*here after reading Zadie Smith?"* Discussions about the parodic status of Astaire's blackface, or the routine excision of scenes with black dancers are exchanged in subsequent replies.

Several scenes set in the Gambia repeat the narrative's concerns with the gendered contexts of mobility, technology and stuckness. Lamin's more successful trajectory and his achievement of freedom and independence through dance cast a shadow across Tracey's inability to achieve social mobility through her career as a dancer. Hawa's escape through marriage and a more pious performance of religious obedience is indicative of the ways in which gender shapes opportunities for freedom. Her brother Babu, in contrast, is able to return to the Gambia and immediately find a job with the Treasury: his achievements in North America have constructed him as an ideal returning diasporic subject (Mullings and Trotz 2013), in comparison to characters such as Hawa's father who, by leaving the "back way" and finding himself in Milan, exchanged his position as a university teacher for a job as a traffic warden. Once married to an Italian and therefore a legal resident, he sent for Hawa's brother, "but that was six years ago, and if Hawa was still waiting for her call she was far too proud to tell me" (220). The factual, unsentimental tone of the narration echoes Hawa's pragmatic acceptance of gender inequalities and thus her decision to leave the village via the culturally and socially sanctioned route of marriage.

Everywhere in Banjul, the narrator hears reggae, hip-hop, soca, high-life, "the whole glorious musical diaspora could be heard" (197) but at the same time that technology allows connectedness and the virtual experience of mobility, access to technology is economically contingent. As descriptions of Bachir, stuck in a run-down café with his fake American accent, and laptop possibly without internet connection demonstrate, communication technology can exacerbate the experience of displacement and estrangement, even when the subject is at home. And in fact, as Hawa explains, even as migration from West Africa to Europe and the US has increased, leaving villages emptied of fathers,

sons and husbands, technology in the form of highly securitized actual and virtual borders, has also increased its difficulties and the dangers of taking the “back way” (272-73).

Neither Africa nor the Caribbean is, in the novel, an easily available diasporic home; Africa neither presents itself as such nor, as the narrative demonstrates, can its characters experience it as such. The novel’s black diasporic characters seek connections, however transient or provisional, through moments of recognition that might be historically determined, culturally or racially defined, and economically contingent. These connections, as the novel suggests in its representations of dance histories and of music and dance as diasporic resources, are refracted by issues of gender. Intergenerational and transcultural female relationships are used to represent the narrative’s claim throughout that possibilities for freedom, mobility and achievement are complicated by cultural and gender roles and identities. The fact that the novel is routed around the geographies of the Black Atlantic suggests that its preoccupations can be mapped within discourses of black diasporic identification. However, it unsettles the very triangular connections it maps, indicating a desire to construct new subjects and places from which to speak. The novel reaches into a less clearly defined space, a post-diasporic space that reflects the complex liminalities of its fictive subjects who are both defined by and at a distance from diasporic communities.



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<sup>1</sup> I have used "black" in this essay to refer to characters of African descent. The descriptor "Black" was used by political activists and theorists in Britain from the 1960s to 2000 to refer to a politically defined identity. As Jenny Bourne argues, "...because Black, in the UK, had taken on a political meaning derived from its anti-colonial provenance, it attracted to its standard immigrants from the Indian sub-continent, Africans, Indo-Caribbeans" (Bourne, J. "When Black Was a Political Colour: a Guide to the Literature." In *Race and Class* 58:1 (2016): 122-130. The authors of *Heart of the Race: Black Women's Lives in Britain* (2018/1985) also use "Black" to emphasise the political meanings and contexts of race. Black is also, of course, frequently capitalised by contemporary academics, including those who oppose the use in British contexts of of so-called "political Blackness" (see Andrews, K. "The Problem of Political Blackness: Lessons from the Black Supplementary School Movement" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 39:11 (2016): 2060-2078).

<sup>2</sup> In 1992, "Polytechnics" were designated Universities. This term makes the mother's trajectory time-specific.

<sup>3</sup> Claudia Jones (1915-64) was a Trinidad-born black feminist activist. She was active in anti-racist, anti-imperialist organising in Britain during the 1950s and until her death in 1964. While in the US, she was a member of the Young Communist League, and worked with Amy Garvey, Paul Robeson.

<sup>4</sup> See Gerlin Bean, *The Heart of the Race: Oral Histories of the Black Women's Movement*. London: Black Cultural Archives, 2009. Audible audio. Bean, a founder member of the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD), Brixton Black Women's Groups and several community activist groups in South London, talks about anti-imperialist activism and describes going to Northern Ireland with other black feminists in in solidarity with the 'Troops Out' movement.

See also Pragna Patel. *Sisterhood and After*. Interviewed by Rachel Cohen. London: British Library 2011. Audible audio. Pragna Patel speaks of going to mining communities in Yorkshire and Kent with the black feminist activist group Southall Black Sisters.

Stella Dadzie states that black feminist activists celebrate the connections between women of Caribbean and African descent. They recognise cultural differences between African-Caribbean, Caribbean and South Asian women but are committed to a common endeavour, grounded an anti-imperialist politics. Stella Dadzie *Sisterhood and After*. Interviewed by Rachel Cohen. London: British Library, 2011. Audible audio.



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