TRANSLATING ANGER INTO CARE: AN EXAMINATION OF BLACK FEMALE IDENTITY AND BONDING IN ZADIE SMITH'S *SWING TIME* (2016)

TRANSFORMANDO LA IRA EN CUIDADO: ANÁLISIS DE LA IDENTIDAD Y LA RELACIONALIDAD DE LA MUJER NEGRA EN LA OBRA DE ZADIE SMITH *SWING TIME* (2016)

TERESA MARTÍNEZ-QUILES
Universidad de Alicante
mariateresa.martinez@ua.es
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9898-9248>

Abstract

This article attempts to explore the political possibilities of anger as a potential source of Black female identity construction and solidarity in Zadie Smith's *Swing Time* (2016). I will argue that Audre Lorde's insights into anger in *Sister Outsider* (1984) are particularly suited to understanding how anger functions in Smith's fictional work, where this emotion is presented as a powerful "energy" (Lorde 2019: 120) that has the potential to move the subject towards a more empowered selfhood. Nevertheless, I also explore, through the discourses of Lorde (2019) and bell hooks (1995, 2012), the social boundaries and potentially damaging effects attached to this emotion. More specifically, I consider how anger, by itself, is not enough to ensure a stable sense of self because it does not directly motivate the development of female solidarity. Instead, Smith demonstrates how anger may be effectively complemented through the paradigm of care, which does encourage the protagonists to move towards each other, and towards the liberating potential of a more outward view of the world.

Keywords: anger, care, affect theory, female identity, female bonding.

Resumen

Este artículo tiene como objetivo la exploración del potencial político que posee la ira en la construcción de identidad y el desarrollo de la solidaridad femenina de la

mujer negra en la obra *Swing Time* (2016), de Zadie Smith. Sostengo que los argumentos expuestos por Audre Lorde en *Sister Outsider* (1984) son especialmente adecuados para entender cómo funciona la ira en esta obra, donde dicha emoción se presenta como una poderosa fuente de energía que tiene la capacidad de mover al sujeto femenino hacia una identidad más liberadora (Lorde 2019: 120). También exploro, a través de los discursos de Lorde (2019) y bell hooks (1995, 2012), los límites sociales y los efectos potencialmente dañinos vinculados a esta emoción. Concretamente, considero cómo la ira en sí no es suficiente para garantizar una identidad estable porque no motiva de manera intrínseca el desarrollo de la solidaridad femenina. Por el contrario, Smith demuestra cómo la ira puede complementarse eficazmente a través del paradigma del cuidado, que sí anima a las protagonistas a conectar entre ellas, y expone el potencial liberador de una visión más colectiva del mundo.

Palabras clave: ira, cuidado, teoría de los afectos, identidad femenina, relaciones femeninas.

1. Introduction

In what is probably her most female-focused novel to date, Zadie Smith's *Swing Time* (2016) traces the identity search of three Black female protagonists and their relationships to each other. Despite the fact that the novel is a first-person account that mainly focalises on the maturation process of the unnamed narrator through the past memories of her childhood, adolescence and young adulthood, the protagonist also provides a close look at the trajectory of the two most significant women in her life: her mother (also unnamed) and her childhood best friend, Tracey. This conforms to the feminist narrative trend identified by Marianne Hirsch, which establishes women's bonding and identity as interrelated processes (1989: 133). By drawing on Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic theory of female identity, which maintains that the constitution of the woman's psyche is rooted in the pre-oedipal connection with the mother (1978: 166), Hirsch claims that many narratives from the 1970s onward tend to depict female relationality as a determinant factor in the construction of women's ego boundaries (1989: 133). This is also the case in Smith's fiction. As Lourdes López-Ropero maintains, *On Beauty* (2005) is the first novel where the author touches on this issue (2016: 129). Despite the growing animosity between their husbands, the female characters Kiki and Carlene manage to establish a significant yet "short-lived" (129) relationship that allows them to see beyond their opposite ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Similarly, *NW* (2012) presents a portrait of friendship that emphasises difference as an important conduit for female bonding. Aside from the fact that

Leah and Natalie belong to different racial ethnicities (Leah is white-Irish and Natalie is a second-generation Black Jamaican), Smith presents the characters' individual personality traits and goals as elements that not only add value to their mutual relationship but also motivate the characters towards personal growth and self-betterment (Taylor 2016: 457). Smith is, therefore, clearly interested in depicting female relations among women who are different from each other but who nevertheless find ways to support each other and achieve further individual growth. In the case of *Swing Time* (2016), the mother-daughter bond and the female friendship relation that are at the centre of Smith's novel constitute an extremely influential and ultimately necessary element for the narrator's self-development. As this article will demonstrate, even though these dynamics are imbued with a series of interpersonal conflicts and social differences that must be resolved, the end of the novel suggests a hopeful turn towards female solidarity and the construction of an autonomous and self-fulfilling Black womanhood.

This article thus offers a discussion on Smith's *Swing Time* from the perspective of affect theory, with a particular focus on the articulation of anger in the text, which is an unexamined aspect of this novel. In order to do this, it combines the theoretical insights of Sara Ahmed (2004) with those of Black critics such as Audre Lorde (2019) or bell hooks (1995, 2012), whose valuable contribution to affect theory needs to be addressed. In fact, it is these latter studies that have extensively delved into the useful effects of anger as well as the boundaries underpinning this emotion. By drawing on all these theories, among others, this study explores three main aspects of the novel: the potential and limits of anger as a source of identity construction and personal and political empowerment —that is, the gaining of self-recognition and social status; the issues derived from the collective expression of anger; and the possibility of combining anger with the paradigm of care. It is my contention that the affect discourses employed in this paper and Smith's novel mutually illuminate each other. While the theories put forward by Ahmed (2004), Lorde (2019) and hooks (1995, 2012) help shed light on certain aspects of the novel, Smith's work simultaneously contributes to these discourses by pointing out the limitations of anger as a facilitator of female agency and solidarity. More specifically, I argue that, although it is through anger that the characters of *Swing Time* manage to find the strength to challenge social norms and move towards more politically-assertive identities, this emotion alone is not enough to ensure the permanence of this change. One of the reasons for this is that the adequate expression of anger in Smith's novel is shaped by the subject's intersectional oppression, a premise that is not sufficiently emphasised in most critical affect discourses outside the sphere of Black feminist theory. Furthermore, *Swing Time* demonstrates that the energy with which the subject is endowed through anger does not directly motivate female bonding —especially across social boundaries—

151

which is crucial for the process of female self-construction. Instead, I maintain that the novel endorses the paradigm of care as a necessary complement to anger, as this is what ultimately encourages female connection and, subsequently, a more balanced sense of selfhood. While some affect theorists establish that the angered feminist subject should move towards other affective states like wonder or hope (Ahmed 2004: 178, 183), Smith concurs with those Black theorists who present care as the necessary destination of female anger (hooks 1995, 2012; Lorde 2019).

2. The Potential of Anger as a Source of Black Female Identity Construction

It is worth noting that, although the concept of emotion has been traditionally stigmatised as the absence of rational thought (Ahmed 2004), anger, in particular, has long been legitimised by reason of its masculinisation. According to Philip Fisher (2003), the theorisation of anger as a positive emotion is rooted in Aristotelian theory, where it is rendered as a valid response to injustice. Although Aristotle relies on the rational political system to take care of the more serious crimes, he endorses the expression of anger and the subsequent act of revenge — these two are inextricably linked— in those cases where one's "self-worth" or that of their loved ones has been "transgressed" (Fisher 2003: 120). In fact, failing to express anger when the subject has been purposefully diminished or insulted is considered a shameful act, as this presupposes a lack of agency (118-119). Although the act of revenge has lost the legitimation it used to possess (122), the expression of anger in contemporary society continues to be of a gendered nature. One only need to look at the negative images and stereotypes that exist in exclusive connection to femininity, such as the angry Black woman, which is particularly relevant to the discussion expounded in this article. Rooted in 19th-century minstrel shows, the caricature of the hostile Black woman has been predominant in American popular culture and has endured in our present time as a racist stigma that censures Black women's emotional expression (Kent 2021: 357). As Jacinta Kent maintains, "if a woman of colour is angry, raises her voice, or demonstrates open hostility, she is likely to receive the label of 'aggressor', 'intimidating', and/ or 'overly sensitive'" (2021: 357). Therefore, when a Black woman expresses anger, her discourse is usually "dismissed" (Ahmed 2004: 177), because her tone is perceived as intimidating, which may also be automatically associated with a lack of rational thought. This closely relates to Ahmed's conceptualisation of the "feminist killjoy" (2017: 37), someone —usually a woman— who is viewed by others in a negative light for disrupting the atmosphere of a conversation by drawing attention to the racist and sexist attitudes being displayed. As Ahmed

maintains, "When you expose a problem you pose a problem" (2017: 37). Feminist killjoys are thus usually categorised as troublemakers, their anger becomes the origin of the problem rather than the consequence of it.

Despite the challenge that these popular images entail, feminist discourses have attempted to re-evaluate the notion and use of anger as an adequate response to patriarchal oppression and as a powerful expression of female agency. Here, it is relevant to underline the definition elaborated by Lorde (2019), whose discussion on anger is much more detailed than those of the rest of the authors mentioned in this article. In her landmark work *Sister Outsider* (1984), Lorde connects anger to racism, particularly to the way Black women may connect with their everyday reality:

> My response to racism is anger. I have lived with that anger, ignoring it, feeding upon it, learning to use it before it laid my visions to waste […]. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change […]. [A]nger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification, for it is in the painful process of this translation that we identify who are our allies with whom we have grave differences […]. Anger is loaded with information and energy. (2019: 117-121)

As can be seen, Lorde's notion of anger is quite multifaceted. First, she draws on her own personal experience to depict anger as an inner *energy* that lives repressed within the individual, and which endows the subject, through that emotional state, with a new consciousness that motivates positive and radical change. This focus on the individual as the origin of anger contrasts with other contemporary theories like the one developed by Sara Ahmed, which emphasises emotion as an external social element, one that arises as a result of the contact between different bodies (2004: 6). While Lorde also ponders on the communication and interpersonal transference of anger (2019: 157), as this is a natural capacity that is shared by all emotions (Brennan 2004), her focus on the individual may serve to outline how each person's anger is unique at its core. At the same time, she reveals the possibility that specific groups of women may share a similar kind of anger, such as the one Black women usually feel in response to racism (Lorde 2019: 117). As one may observe in the fragment above, Lorde is particularly concerned with how Black women may utilise that anger not only to express their agency and pain, but also to give them the strength they need to search for a more liberating self-construction, one that resists patriarchal rule. This means that anger is considered a dynamic emotional state, as it simultaneously responds to the past while moving the subject towards the future or, as Ahmed claims, towards "new ways of being" (2004: 175). It also means that this metamorphic process requires the use of rational and political thought. Aside from the fact that anger is "loaded with information" one

153

must carefully examine, the energy that the body is left with should also be correctly projected for the change that is yet to come. Anger, according to Lorde's description, cannot rely on simple impulsivity, otherwise such energy will probably be futile. Here we find a similarity with Aristotelian theory, as Lorde also claims that anger must be necessarily followed by concrete actions. However, her understanding of what those actions should be are notably different, as will be further explained. Finally, the connection that this critic makes between the use of anger and the connection with the other, two actions that she believes to be compatible, should be emphasised. Anger, for Lorde, forces us to confront other people's individual painful experiences, which will be necessarily *different* from our own. Her conception of difference specifically refers to the social particularities that define each subject's position in society, and which inevitably shape individual experience. This is what Kimberle Crenshaw has coined "intersectionality" (1991: 1244), which will be key to the discussion of this paper, especially when the issues related to anger in the process of female bonding are explained.

Swing Time (2016) depicts two of the main characters as being filled with anger: the narrator's best friend Tracey —who is, like the protagonist, a second-generation mixed-race British girl— and the unnamed narrator's mother (a Black Jamaican woman). Ironically, it is through the eyes of the narrator, an extremely passive character, that the reader bears witness to how these characters express their anger. Unsurprisingly, the novel draws many similarities between Tracey and the mother, such as the fact that they are both burdened by a violent childhood (Baillie 2019: 298), and that they have a will "made of iron" (Smith 2016: 54) through which they attempt to assert themselves within an oppressive system. Contrary to the narrator, these characters are *energised* from the beginning, which drives them to construct themselves in whichever way they can, thereby exemplifying Lorde's premise that action must always follow anger (2019: 122). Nevertheless, one should note how these characters' respective attempts at self-construction are sharply dissimilar, a difference which must be understood in the context of intersectionality (Kürpick 2018).

According to Crenshaw (1991), the subject's experience is inextricably connected to the multiple and *intersecting* systems of oppression that structure society, such as race, gender, or social class. Bearing this in mind, one must consider how the socioeconomic and class disparity that underlies Tracey's and the narrator's mother's trajectories has a significant impact on their projection of anger. On the one hand, the mother seems to channel her energy most effectively, according to Lorde's description. After all, by dedicating her entire life to her own education and upward-class aspirations, the protagonist is finally able to achieve her goal of becoming a Member of Parliament. Of course, while the mother is depicted as a

highly intelligent and perseverant woman, one cannot deny that her and her daughter's access to education is also made possible through her white husband's financial resources (Kürpick 2018: 334). Also important is the fact that, while the mother tends to rationalise every situation as a result of her self-assigned role as an intellectual, her inner anger will occasionally seep through the daily lectures she gives to her husband and daughter, normally on the history of slavery. For the mother, the remembering of the past is a painful endeavour that is paramount to encourage the search for Black individuality (Pérez-Zapata 2021). Tracey's anger, on the other hand, is activated on account of her precarious social condition, as she is unable to escape, unlike the other protagonists, from the "cycle of poverty" (Smith 2016: 167). This is where I would contend that Smith makes a slight contribution to Lorde's theory of anger. While the critic explains that anger will be uniquely felt by each individual on account of their particular social reality (Lorde 2019: 121), she fails to consider how intersectional difference will also necessarily curtail the capacity of such individual to find effective and precise conduits of anger. In the case of Tracey, her working-class position inevitably forces her to assert herself, though unsuccessfully, in quite subversive and hostile ways, as these are the only possible means of empowerment that are made available to her. As a student, Tracey constantly defies the school teachers, an emblem of authority, and is openly cruel towards many of her white classmates, who evoke the image of the oppressor. Yet these attempts at empowerment only serve to place her as a social outcast in the eyes of everyone at school. It is only when Tracey begins her dancing career that she finds more productive expressions of anger, even if these remain subversive and ethically questionable. When she begins a secret affair with one of her older male colleagues, a relationship which interrogates the racial and gender "hierarchies" prevalent in the world of theatre (Kürpick 2018: 336), Tracey feels empowered as she degrades and manipulates a person who has more social value than her. That said, one should bear in mind that underlying Tracey's and the narrator's mother's respective trajectories lies the emergence of a political consciousness that constantly drives them forward.

Meanwhile, the narrator's lack of anger can be attributed to an absent political mindset, which essentially subsumes the protagonist in a static passivity that renders her unable to constitute herself for most of the novel. As the narrator herself claims in the prologue, all throughout her life she has been a "shadow" self, someone who has survived by "attach[ing]" herself to others rather than seeking her own self-construction (Smith 2016: 4). This is probably because the narrator, unlike her mother and Tracey, is unable to translate her inner pain into anger. As Ahmed maintains, "responding" to pain, which is a prerequisite for the emergence of anger, demands a correct identification of the former (2004: 174).

155

This includes recognising both the psychological or physical imprint that this emotion leaves on a particular subject and the way it is structurally transmitted to others (174). Although the narrator is, thanks to her mother's stories, intellectually aware of the historical roots of Black oppression, she is unable to reconcile this information with her self-perception as a Black woman. On the contrary, she is completely overwhelmed by the pain her mother constantly associates with the Black community (Pérez-Zapata 2021). Everyday conversations with her mother usually transform into aggressive sermons that the narrator is unable to process: "I drew back as she [the mother] ranted […]. I didn't know what to do with all the sadness" (Smith 2016: 244). The narrator's inability to emotionally digest this inherited pain should be understood as partly the result of her mother's neglect (Quabeck 2018: 473). Aside from the fact that the mother fails to endow her daughter with positive images of Blackness that may counterbalance the tragic roots of Black identity, she simultaneously falls short in her role as a nurturing maternal figure due to her own goal of self-construction, which takes up most of her energy. In fact, according to Franziska Quabeck, the narrator's passivity may be read as a conscious act of "rebellion" against the mother (2018: 466), one that culminates with her job as a personal assistant to a white world-famous celebrity, Aimee.

In line with Malou Kürpick's study (2018), the narrator's embodiment of a shadow self for Aimee clearly demonstrates how social status and economic resources do not automatically enable an autonomous Black selfhood, in the same way that a political consciousness like the one Tracey develops remains insufficient if the subject lacks financial power. Although the narrator's job as a celebrity assistant provides her with significant social privileges —mainly in the form of extensive travel and luxurious commodities— it simultaneously demands that the protagonist submit her personal agency, which directly contradicts the mother's emphasis on Black female independence. For almost a decade of her adult life, until she is fired, the narrator's whole existence is shaped around Aimee: "I lived on Aimee, ate with Aimee, went out with Aimee" (Smith 2016: 431). Not only does her job demand a complete physical dedication to Aimee, it also furthers the erasure of political thinking. For instance, in a scene where the characters are discussing the issue of motherhood, Aimee firmly tells the narrator that the only requisite to become a mother is that "you've just got to *want* it enough" (111, emphasis in original). Because of the power imbalance between the women and Aimee's rigid-minded personality, the narrator decides to agree with her boss rather than assert her own opinion about the problematics of balancing work and motherhood within working-class contexts. The repetitive nature of this dynamic, along with the narrator's seclusion from the rest of the world —which further curtails her connection to her childhood neighbourhood and her personal relationships with

others— will have a significant impact on the protagonist's view of the world, and contribute to her adoption of an individualistic ethos.

However, in line with the narrative structure of the *Bildungsroman*, the narrator does by the end of the novel move towards a more assertive and political self-construction, a shift that is rooted, as in the case of the other characters, in the emergence of anger. This happens after she is fired by Aimee for sleeping with Lamin, the latter's Senegalese lover. Upon reading the non-disclosure contract that the narrator was forced to sign prior to becoming Aimee's assistant, the narrator is confronted, for the very first time, with the enforced and legitimised particularities of her *shadow* self: "Within its [the contract's] inflexible terms the things that came out of my mouth did not belong to me any longer, not my ideas or opinions or feelings, not even my memories. They were all hers [Aimee's]" (Smith 2016: 434). This creates an immediate affective response in the narrator: "Rage rose up in me instantaneously: I wanted to burn her house down" (434). The narrator's sudden feeling of anger can be read according to Clare Hemmings' notion of "affective dissonance" (2012: 154). This term may be equated to the *knowledge* or political consciousness that Lorde claims is embedded in this emotion, but Hemmings' description of this particular event is far more comprehensive and, therefore, preferable. Hemmings explains that affective dissonance occurs when the subject experiences an inner discordance between the perception they have of themselves and the social "possibilities" that such personal imaginary has in society (2012: 154). In other words, one experiences affective dissonance when they come into conflict with the structural mandates that dictate how the self should or should not be constituted. Hemmings believes this will usually lead to one of two situations: either the subject represses that feeling of dislocation, or they let it "flood" their being, the second of which may potentially bring change (2012: 157). After the narrator learns of the physical extent of her victimisation, she is finally able to translate her pain into anger. Her previous consideration that Aimee may provide a more positive and unencumbered model of selfhood —in contrast to the pain and the knowledge of structural oppression that the narrator exclusively relates to Black identities (Quabeck 2018: 464)— is disrupted only after she realises that she actually lacks the agency that her boss has so incessantly promoted. This creates a significant dissonance between her self-perception and her lived reality, which motivates the emergence of a political consciousness and compels her towards the construction of a new identity.

3. The Social Boundaries of Anger

Having established the potentiality of anger as an energy that motivates the subject towards a desire for an autonomous identity formation, and the way one's expression

of anger is influenced by their socioeconomic power, I would focus now on the complex relationship that may be drawn between anger and female bonding, which is also inevitably connected to the complexities of intersectional difference. The reality is that, while much has been said on the transformative possibilities of anger for the individual female subject (Ahmed 2004; Hemmings 2012), there are but a few discourses focused on how this particular emotion may or may not contribute to the enhancing of female connection, which is deemed crucial for Black self-definition. Lorde, for instance, maintains how cultivating healthy female relations is paramount for the construction of Black women, as these enable the healing of psychic wounds that the Black self has inherited from racist society (2019: 160). After all, Black women are the only ones who really understand the inner pain and strength that they all carry within them as a result of their historical otherness (155). Patricia Hill Collins also conforms to this premise, stating that Black female bonding usually operates on the basis of a mutual "shared recognition" of the past (2000: 103). Thus, for these critics, female self-definition and empowerment are necessarily related to a specific political consciousness that evokes solidarity with the Black community and the racial cause. Lorde also emphasises how the cultivation of anger and female bonding need not be incompatible processes if handled accordingly. It has already been shown that she views anger as an emotion that cannot be simply contained within the individual, something that would serve no therapeutic or political purpose. At the same time, the critic is careful to consider how, if one's particular social reality is unlikely to fully correspond with that of another person's, their expression of anger will also probably differ (Lorde 2019: 121). Although trying to connect with someone else's anger may appear a difficult task, Lorde believes this is where the self is motivated to grow (121). For her, it is not only one's personal anger that provides them with the knowledge they need in order to position themselves in society, but rather the learning of someone else's anger, which is *loaded* with a whole new set of ideas and challenges that may complement the self's perception of reality and infuse them with more energy.

Nevertheless, this may not be initially the case in Smith's novel, where the anger is actually unable to transcend social boundaries. According to bell hooks's study *Killing Rage* (1995), this emotion is class-bound by nature, which means that one's social class will be what mainly determines the object and direction of their anger: "The rage of the oppressed is never the same as the rage of the privileged. One group can change their lot only by changing the system; the other hopes to be rewarded within the system" (hooks 1995: 30). Although hooks's distinction is also inherently racialized —she speaks about the rage of the working-class minorities of colour and the rage of the white middle-class— this pattern may be useful for understanding the antagonistic relation that develops between Tracey and the narrator's mother. If, as Ahmed maintains, women must share a "directionality" of

anger in order to bond (2004: 176), we can understand how the social disparity that separates the two characters already constitutes a significant communicative barrier. Rather than empathise with Tracey's anger and see this as a response to her social vulnerability —her mother is unemployed and her father is regularly in and out of prison— the narrator's mother deems the former's rebellious actions and her poor academic performance as a result of a lack of ambition and parental discipline. Furthermore, one cannot deny that the mother's dismissal of Tracey is founded on her own selfish desire for upward mobility. According to hooks, those with social aspirations tend to reject bonding with the "underclass", as this may curtail their capacity for integration (1995: 166). It is no secret that the narrator's mother is highly discouraging of her daughter's friendship with Tracey, whom she sees as a bad influence. Although she never forcibly separates the two girls, she constantly communicates to the narrator her prejudiced evaluation of Tracey. She tells her, for instance, that Tracey's choice of a dancing career is "silly", while she is "clever" for wanting to go to university (Smith 2016: 31), a distinction that not only perpetuates the stigmatisation of the body as inferior to the mind, but also denies Tracey her agency, as it is through dancing that the protagonist is able to achieve some sort of social power, as seen earlier through her secret liaison with a male dancing colleague. Ultimately, the mother's prejudiced evaluation of Tracey will come to eventually determine the narrator's perception of her friend, thus conforming to the premise originated in Chodorow's (1978) study that the mother-bond influences the daughter's formation of adult relationships.

Social discrimination is also at the heart of Tracey's unproductive use of anger, which subsequently risks psychological consequences for both her and the narrator. It has been mentioned earlier that, in order to be effective, anger must be correctly managed and focused. However, because of the level of intensity that anger may reach, its expression may not necessarily result in a "coherent response" (Ahmed 2004: 176). Even if the subject is able to correctly distinguish the reasons underpinning this emotion, which is not always the case, there is always the possibility that the subject will remain "stuck" in a cycle of anger, unable to move towards a positive conduit of change (175). Furthermore, as mentioned in section 2, Smith considers something that many affect theorists seem to have overlooked, which is the way in which intersectional discrimination may also contribute to the ineffective managing of anger. This is the case for Tracey, who is entrapped not only by her social precarity but also by her exposure to violence and sexual abuse as a child (Baillie 2019: 298). This leads her to find ways in which she can release that anger and feel temporarily empowered, often at the expense of other people, like the narrator. One evening, after their teacher Mr Sherman seizes a valued possession of Tracey's in retaliation for her refusing to sit down, an action which the narrator claims is a "point of principle" (Smith 2016: 54), Tracey projects her

159

frustration towards the protagonist. When the narrator fails to think of an activity they might do together that evening, Tracey replies to her in a hostile tone: "Well, what's the point of coming round if you don't fucking know?" (55), to which the other begins to cry. Tracey's insensitive reaction to the narrator's unresponsiveness may be viewed as especially dangerous due to the narrator's fragile ego boundaries, but it also reveals how anger may easily constitute a potentially destructive force for all personal relationships: "Our anger, when generali[s]ed against the injustice of the world, can become directed toward those who happen to be nearest, often those who are dearest" (Ahmed 2017: 172). Because Tracey feels as though she has lost her battle to the oppressor, in this case Mr Sherman, she unconsciously turns to depriving her friend of power, to the detriment of the other's wellbeing. At the same time, because the narrator is unable to defend herself on account of her lack of autonomy, she lets herself be driven by others, sometimes to the point of self-destruction.

If Tracey's damaging use of anger prevents the cultivation of female solidarity, so does the narrator's response to this emotion. At one point during their adult years, when the friends have long been estranged on account of their separate life paths, the narrator confronts Tracey about a series of abusive emails she has been sending her mother. These emails aggressively accuse the narrator's mother, now a local representative of Tracey's housing estate, of neglecting the interests of her working-class community, although some of them also become distorted into a sort of "personal vendetta" against the other woman, for having discriminated against Tracey in childhood (Smith 2016: 399). Despite the fact that the narrator considers many of Tracey's arguments to be potentially valid, she ultimately "frames" her ex-friend's political commentary as "harassment" against her mother on account of its aggressive tone (Kürpick 2018: 342). Similarly, when Tracey turns to accuse the narrator of being complicit in the class-system oppression, the narrator classifies such comments as the opinion of a "delusional" woman (Smith 2016: 406). She even reassures her mother that Tracey is "not stable" as a sufficient justification for not reaching out to her former friend or consulting the veracity of her claims (391). Although it is quite possible that Tracey's violent demeanour may be the result of unresolved trauma (hooks 1995: 137), the way the narrator employs this predicament to dismiss her friend's political commentary is highly problematic, as it merely serves to consolidate the stereotyping of the Black woman as being chronically angry. Furthermore, censoring anger not only does nothing to solve the issue at hand, but it can further aggravate it by making the angry person feel even "angrier" (Ahmed 2017: 38). In an attempt to change this dynamic, feminist discourses have attempted to change the focus on the receiving end of anger. In line with Lorde's study (2019), Ahmed emphasises the need to "hear the anger of others" and remain open to criticism (2004: 178). *Swing Time*

suggests that the narrator's refusal to hear Tracey's anger is rooted in two main reasons: the narrator's lingering resentment towards Tracey for the times she has felt disempowered as a child, and the prejudiced evaluation of her friend, which the protagonist has inherited from her own mother and consolidated through her learnt individualistic mindset. Even while covertly agreeing with some of Tracey's claims, the narrator focuses all her attention on the other's hostile tone, which essentially allows her to dismiss any sense of guilt or responsibility she may have towards her old friend. The fact that Tracey is reminding the narrator of the intersectional differences between them constitutes a burden that she wants to ignore at all costs, as this would force her to interrogate her own view of the world, in which Tracey's precarious condition is primarily a result of her own doing.

As has been seen through the dynamics established between the protagonists, anger presents many obstacles for the cultivation of female bonding. On the one hand, the class-bound nature of anger prevents the narrator and the narrator's mother from accurately reading Tracey's anger. They either stigmatise her as a failed subject who chooses to further victimise herself or as a mentally-unstable angry woman who cannot help but abuse others. This is due to the characters' failure to look beyond Tracey's angry tone as well as their inability to identify the intersectional nuances underlying their respective life experiences, a result of their adopted individualistic ethos. Meanwhile, Tracey does not realise how her abrasive demeanour may have a psychological impact on others. She is too subsumed in her own self-preservation and her desire for revenge that she lets herself be driven by impulsivity, which simultaneously renders her unable to find more positive conduits for her anger. This does not mean, however, that social boundaries are impenetrable in the novel, but rather that the energy provided by anger is not, at least by itself, adequate for overcoming the conflicts that derive from such barriers. Although Lorde believes women can find ways to effectively communicate through their anger, she also considers the possibility that it may drive them apart, especially "when there is a great deal of connectedness that is problematic or threatening or unacknowledged" (2019: 164). Lorde's view on anger, then, seems to be more politically promising for the bonding between women who do not have unresolved interpersonal conflicts, as is the case in Smith's novel. As we have seen throughout this section, underlying the characters' inability to communicate across their anger is a latent animosity towards each other. Firstly, because the narrator's mother sees Tracey as an obstacle in her upward-mobility schema, she treats her in a derogatory manner that ultimately creates a psychic wound in the latter. As a result, Tracey comes to deeply resent both the mother and her former friend, for inheriting the mother's prejudiced evaluation of her. Finally, the narrator seems to covertly hold a grudge against her mother and her old friend, for the pain they have each caused her in the past. Within this entangled web of relational hostilities, the expression

161

of anger cannot function as a source of female bonding. On the contrary, it only serves to further entrap the protagonists within their self-absorbed views of the world. In addition, given the underlying connection between female self-construction and women's bonding, the characters' mutual disaffection ultimately prevents them from achieving a more fulfilled sense of self. They all seem to be isolated, one way or another. Even the narrator's mother, who is the only one to successfully achieve her desired ambitions by the end of the novel, eventually comes to realise that she is regrettably alone and in need of human connection.

4. Moving beyond Anger: Establishing Ethical Caring Relations

Despite seemingly offering a bleak portrait of female bonding that exposes the limits of anger as a collective feminist affect, Smith's novel manages to end on a hopeful note that ultimately does suggest the possibility of solidarity, a change that is necessarily connected to the introduction of a new affective paradigm, the paradigm of care. After the protagonist loses her job as Aimee's assistant, she returns home to visit her mother, who is now dying of cancer. The feeling of betrayal —which we have seen motivates the development of a political consciousness— and the imminence of death are factors that compel the protagonist to reflect on her past actions and her relationships to others, primarily Tracey. During her last interactions with her mother, and following the latter's death, we see a crucial change in the narrator's mindset, something which is clearly demonstrated through her decision to reconcile with Tracey. The novel ends with a scene at Tracey's house where the narrator sees her old friend dancing with her children, a significant action that brings the novel full circle, as it is through dancing that the characters were able to connect at the beginning of the story. Before delving into the particularities of the narrator's ethical turn, it should be mentioned that, for most affect theorists —such as those mentioned in this article— anger is an emotion which, while potentially empowering, should not shape the extent of the subject's emotional state. As Ahmed maintains, "[f]eminism cannot be reduced to that which it is against [...]. Feminism is also 'for' something other, a 'for-ness' that does not simply take the shape of what it is against" (2004: 178). For Ahmed, then, anger is a form of opposition that must be necessarily oriented towards something else, specifically towards other affective states that are not constructed on opposition. This relates to the dynamic nature of anger that was highlighted in section 2, through Lorde's definition. Anger, as Lorde maintains, does not simply react to racism, but moves towards possible changes, and therefore new affective states,

while also retaining the energy that is left from the initial surge of anger (2019: 117). While Ahmed endorses wonder or hope as possible destinations of female anger (2004: 178, 183), Black feminist critics like Lorde (2019) or hooks (1995, 2012) endorse the subject's movement towards the establishment of ethical caring relations. As will be argued in this section, this is also depicted in Smith's novel, where the transformation of anger into care promises not only to motivate female connection, but also to enable vulnerable subjects like Tracey to move beyond their damaging permanent angered state.

As Carol Gilligan maintains, the foundation for any sort of ethical relationship based on care, whether between family members, friends or strangers, lies in the notion of interdependence (2018: 36). Because care considers the self to be inextricably "connected to others", the attempt to wilfully detach oneself from society is viewed as "morally problematic" (36), since this would mean a failure to attend to someone else's needs for self-construction, as well as one's own. Relationships that are based on the paradigm of care interrogate the individualistic discourse that prevails in capitalist society, which deems individuals as self-contained beings who are free from external influence (43). Care, on the other hand, considers how one's self-definition is affected by their intersectional particularities, which may make the individual more or less vulnerable than others (Jaggar 2018: 194). In *Swing Time*, the narrator's attempt to reconcile with Tracey necessarily goes through the process of accepting the latter's class oppression, as well as admitting an ethical responsibility towards the friend: "I was her [Tracey's] only witness, the only person who knows all that she has in her, all that's been ignored and wasted, and yet I still left her back there, in the ranks of the unwitnessed, where you have to scream to get heard" (Smith 2016: 448). This inner monologue, which develops as the narrator approaches Tracey's house in a scene towards the end of the novel, demonstrates a shift in consciousness that moves the narrator towards a more ethical position that may allow her to *care* for her friend from her acknowledged position of economic and social privilege.

If Smith's novel displays the narrator's emergent political consciousness as a necessary ingredient for the development of an ethically-oriented identity, it also suggests that the only way to transform one's anger into the practice of care is through the act of compassion and forgiveness. According to hooks, showing compassion for others is an active way of escaping the role of victim that is inherent in the event of revenge (2012: 198). This is because, unlike revenge, caring for others demands that we identify "our own essential worth and value" (198), as well as that of others. hooks also believes that practising compassion and forgiveness is also especially necessary when bonding across social boundaries, as conflicts are an inevitable part of the communicative process (150-151). After acknowledging

163

the obstacles her mother must have had to overcome when balancing her own self-construction and the task of raising a child, the narrator decides to forgive the former for her past lack of maternal availability and finally accepts that her mother has always made her best effort to care for her. By forgiving her, the narrator is effectively renouncing her previous rebellion against her mother, and accepting the latter's encouragement towards a more politically-conscious selfhood. This action also inevitably reverberates in the narrator's compassion for Tracey, thereby reiterating once again the connection between the mother-bond and female friendship. This can be observed in the closing scene of the novel, when, following her mother's death, the narrator decides to approach Tracey once again, this time to aid her friend: "there might be something else I could offer, something simpler, more honest, between my mother's idea of salvation and nothing at all" (Smith 2016: 453). By reflecting on the things she might "offer" her friend, the narrator reveals her desire to reconnect with Tracey in a more ethical manner. Not only is the protagonist implying that she is no longer resentful but, more importantly, that she is considering taking an active part in the betterment of her friend's life, essentially disrupting her previous passive role. Furthermore, the fact that the narrator does not reach a pre-established conclusion on what she should actually do to help Tracey, which also includes rejecting her mother's radical idea of adopting Tracey's children, is an important sign that points to the narrator's growth as an autonomous ethical subject. According to hooks (2012: 148) and Lorde (2019: 121), it is only by actively communicating and listening to the other that the subject will be able to transgress social boundaries and learn from the other's individual differences. The narrator knows that she cannot decide for herself what her future actions will be, Tracey must also be a part of such a decision. And while Smith does not reveal the contents of that conversation, she does hint at the possibility of a successful communication by bringing back the element that first united the characters when they were children: dance. By closing the novel with the image of Tracey happily dancing with her children at home, Smith is suggesting that the characters may be able to find a way back to each other, and towards an improved relationship based on an emotional and practical care that may allow Tracey to move beyond her anger.

5. Conclusion

Through these characters' interconnected journeys towards selfhood, I have attempted to bring to light certain affect theories on the potential benefits but also the limits of anger as a source of Black female self-construction and solidarity, which can illuminate the discussion on female identity in Smith's fiction.

Although the author presents anger as a crucial energy that motivates the narrator to assert herself against a society that continues to oppress her, this is simultaneously deemed as insufficient for the shaping of the Black female self, thus revealing a view of anger that is not largely explored in many discourses. In accordance with the works of Lorde (1995) and hooks (1995, 2012), which do underline the social boundaries and limits of this emotion, Smith presents the inefficiency of this emotional state when the individual is confronted with financial precarity. The novel suggests that, without a supportive network —like the one the narrator's mother has through her husband— the subject's anger can only move towards destruction, as is made evident through Tracey's life trajectory.

Furthermore, Smith demonstrates how anger need not necessarily motivate female connection, especially in social contexts where there are unresolved issues. It has been argued that the narrator's animosity towards Tracey and her own mother and the mutual resentment developed between the latter two characters create a significative communicative barrier that prevents the protagonists from connecting with each other across social boundaries. It is only by introducing the complement of care that the narrator, specifically, is able to revitalise her strained female relations and approach a new selfhood that promises to be more personally fulfilling and politically-significant. After the narrator becomes energised on account of her anger, it is the love and compassion she develops for her mother and her friend that finally encourages her to abandon her previous individualistic values and instead adopt a more outward view of the world. The narrator's forgiving attitude towards her mother and her final encounter with Tracey suggest not only an emotional reconnection between the women, but the protagonist's abandonment of her previous shadow self. Finally, this shift from shadow to political agent also seems to suggest a hopeful future for Tracey. Although this is only mentioned in passing, the protagonist's desire to help her friend and the latter's final dancing scene point to a positive change that may enable Tracey to escape her cyclical angered state and maybe even mitigate her social vulnerability. Therefore, the reconciliation between the women is directly equated to the possibility of mutual empowerment.

Acknowledgements

Works Cited

AHMED, Sara. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P.

AHMED, Sara. 2017. *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham: Duke U.P.

BAILLIE, Justine. 2019. "Morrison and the Transnation: Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child* and Zadie Smith, *Swing Time*". *Contemporary Women's Writing* 13 (3): 287-306. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cww/vpaa009>.

BRENNAN, Teresa. 2004. *The Transmission of Affect*. Ithaca: Cornell U.P.

CHODOROW, Nancy J. 1978. *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

COLLINS, Patricia Hill. 2000. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

CRENSHAW, Kimberle. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color". *Standford Law Review* 43 (6): 1241-1299.

FISHER, Philip. 2003. *The Vehement Passions*. Princeton: Princeton U.P.

GILLIGAN, Carol. (1995) 2018. "Moral Orientation and Moral Development". In Held, Virginia (ed.): 31-46.

HELD, Virginia. (ed.) (1995) 2018. *Justice and Care: Essential Readings in Feminist Ethics*. New York: Routledge.

HEMMINGS, Clare. 2012. "Affective Solidarity: Feminist Reflexivity and Political Transformation". *Feminist Theory* 13 (2): 147-161. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700112442643>.

HIRSCH, Marianne. 1989. *The Mother/Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana U.P.

HOOKS, bell. 1995. *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

HOOKS, bell. 2012. *Writing beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge.

JAGGAR, Alison M. (1995) 2018. "Caring as a Feminist Practice of Moral Reason". In Held, Virginia (ed.): 179-202.

KENT, Jacinta. 2021. "Scapegoating and the 'Angry Black Woman'". *Group Analysis* 54 (3): 354-371.

KÜRPICK, Malou. 2018. "The Cultural and Intersectional Politics of Nomadism in Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*". *HJEAS: Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 24 (2): 331-345.

LÓPEZ-ROPERO, Lourdes. 2016. "Searching for a 'Different Kind of Freedom': Postcoloniality and Postfeminist Subjecthood in Zadie Smith's *NW*". *Atlantis* 38 (2): 123-139.

LORDE, Audre. (1984) 2019. *Sister Outsider*. London: Penguin Books.

PÉREZ-ZAPATA, Beatriz. 2021. *Zadie Smith and Postcolonial Trauma: Decolonising Trauma, Decolonising Selves*. New York: Routledge.

QUABECK, Franziska. 2018. "'A Kind of Shadow': Mirror Images and Alter Egos in Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*". *Zeitschrift Für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 66 (4): 461-477.

Translating Anger into Care

SMITH, Zadie. 2016. *Swing Time*. London: Hamish Hamilton.

TAYLOR, Judith. 2016. "Beyond 'Obligatory Camaraderie': Girls' Friendship in Zadie Smith's *NW* and Jillian and Mariko Tamaki's *Skim*". *Feminist Studies* 42 (2): 445-468.