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# AUTUMN, WINTER, NEVER SPRING: BREXIT SEASON

Eleanor Byrne

## Abstract

*This essay discusses the depiction of the post-Brexit British landscape in the first three novels in Ali Smith's season-themed State of the Nation quartet, Autumn (2016), Winter (2017) and Spring (2018). It engages with contemporary ecocritical and feminist conceptualisations of climate change, and debates about the relationship between ecological crisis and the current political landscape to consider the ways in which these subjects are embedded in Smith's trilogy named for the seasons. It reflects on the potential for the novel form to attempt to bear witness to the present political moment and argues that Smith's fragmented and polyvocal texts represent an ethical and politically engaged approach to the contemporary crisis, where the novel can seek to enable or rehearse dialogues between groups whose positions are entrenched and at an impasse. It discusses the ways in which the novels dramatise the necessary ways out of seemingly irreconcilable differences through a celebration of empathy, ecological awareness and hospitality.*

**Keywords:** Brexit, queer hospitality, refugees, environment

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## Biographical note

Dr Ellie Byrne is Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Literature at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her research and teaching covers twentieth-century British, American and postcolonial literature and theory, feminism and queer theory. With Fionna Barber she convened the *Brexit Wounds* symposium in 2018, sponsored by the Manchester Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence (MJMCE). She has published on Hilary Mantel, Muriel Spark, Tove Jansson, Ali Smith, Queer Hospitality, Hanya Yanagihara and Jamaica Kincaid. She was co-investigator on the British Academy funded network 'Troubling Globalisation: Arts and Humanities Approaches' 2016–17.

Banner image: Rita Duffy, *Soften the Border*, 2017 (detail). Recycled fabrics, installation on the Belcoo, Blacklion Bridge - Co. Fermanagh / Co. Cavan border, 2.5 x 30m. Image credit: Copyright of the artist, Rita Duffy. Photo credit: Stanislav Nikolov

# AUTUMN, WINTER, NEVER SPRING: BREXIT SEASON

Eleanor Byrne,  
Manchester Metropolitan University

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1859

This article will explore the ways in which the first three novels in Ali Smith's season-themed state-of-the-nation quartet, *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017) and *Spring* (2018), have attempted to articulate in a series of contemporaneous narratives, the experience and meaning of events following the Brexit referendum result in June 2016 up to the present. Smith devotes her attention to each of the seasons in her three published novels of the sequence, weaving multiple literary and cultural sources that have evoked, scripted and eulogized each season from both canonical and marginal literary archives in the English language. She also attends to the ways in which the political and cultural impact of Brexit has been experienced as a sudden shocking 'event' – the referendum result – but also where 'hostile environments' instituted by Theresa May before the Brexit vote, have created a public sphere gorged on populist ethno-nationalist and far right discourses, producing an extended terrible contradiction of interminable frenzy/stasis/repetition that is 'Brexit Season'. It will explore the ways in which Smith's novels attempt to address the paradox of the Brexit referendum result, experienced both as a singular and unanticipated event, and as an 'old new story', a spectral revenance.

## I Brexit season

In Smith's first novel of the sequence, *Autumn*, her heroine Elisabeth registers the exponentially increasing hostile environment of the post-referendum vote as a new 'climate', a change in the terms of exchange and debate in the public sphere. Whilst visiting her dying friend Daniel in his care home, she recalls a fraught discussion that morning on the radio, where both sides of the debate harangues the other. 'It is the end of dialogue. She tries to think when exactly it changed how long it's been like this without her noticing' (2016a, p.112), and later on in the narrative she recoils from a discussion on BBC radio:

*You lot are on the run and we're coming after you, a right-wing spokesman had shouted at a female MP on a panel on Radio 4 earlier that same Saturday. The chair of the panel didn't berate, or comment on, or even acknowledge the threat the man had just made. [...] Elisabeth had been listening to the programme in the bath. She'd switched the radio off after it and wondered if she'd be able to listen to Radio 4 in any innocence ever again. Her ears had undergone a sea-change. Or the world had.*

(pp.197–8, italics in original)

In *Winter*, early on in the novel Charlotte, the disaffected girlfriend of Art, a nature blogger, rages at a seasonal 'naturalcultural' shift in Britain, in the post-referendum present.

When pre-planned theatre is replacing politics, she said, and we're propelled into shock mode, trained to wait for whatever the next shock will be, served up shock on a 24 hour newsfeed like we're infants living from nipple to sleep –

[...]

– from shock to shock and chaos to chaos like its meant to be nourishment, she said.

[...]

[...] Never mind literal climate change, there's been a whole seasonal shift. It's like walking in a blizzard all the time just trying to get to what's really happening beyond the noise and hype.

(2017a, p.57)

The shocking emergence of a 'Brexit Season' as depicted in Smith's fiction, would be understood as a kind of suspension of seasonality itself, as a marker of predictable change and cyclical movement, where repeated calls to action, cross-party talks, deadlines and final ultimatums have consistently resulted in stasis, deferral and a sense of déjà-vu, with the political ramifications of the referendum result extending as an ongoing (non)event since 23 June 2016, past many of its supposed hard deadlines. This dawning realisation of the ways in which the political and cultural ramifications of Brexit might represent an epochal change has become increasingly prevalent in US and UK journalistic assessments, depicting Brexit as the 'never-ending story', that cannot be over, no matter what the outcome of any vote or agreement. Brexit is understood here as a dystopic, never-ending 'season' of disorientation, disconnection and division: of the UK from the EU, of different factions from inclusive ideas of nation and cosmopolitanism, of families and

communities subjected to a continuous bombardment of factional fantasies and international misinformation by global media. This political and cultural period can be usefully understood as an impasse, or more properly an interregnum, in Antonio Gramsci's sense (1971, p.276). This captures the sense of an uncertain political moment, along with its morbid symptoms, which ultimately confounds the separation of seasons, weather, climate or environment from the political and cultural activities of humans, positing a 'naturalcultural' environment in which the securities associated with seasonal cycle have been lost, replaced by the new 'now' of post- (and pre-)referendum hostile 'climates', in which as Lindsay Stonebridge notes, 'the moral obscenities continue to mount up' (2018, p.10).

In her reading of *Autumn in Brexit and Literature*, Petra Rau wonders 'whether this climate was best viewed in hindsight, was the novel up to it? If the pace of political developments exhausted commentariat and electorate alike, how on earth could fiction keep step with, let alone digest the contemporary?' (2018, p.31). She alights on a phrase from author Claire Messud which captures the sense of this moment as a tangible experience of a 'storm': 'the pace of madness seems so intense. We are all like Linus and Snoopy in front of the TV with our hair blowing back' (in Adams, 2017). This image echoes Elisabeth's comments about listening to the radio, as a kind of assault on the senses, where open aggression, intimidation and lies pass as information and news. As an EU citizen teaching in the UK, Rau comments on her response to the referendum result and her reading of *Autumn*:

I was radically disoriented by the new 'now' and impending 'soon'. Autumn did little to relieve this peculiar feeling of unmoored reality. Certainly my students were still reeling from the referendum result, although in a different way. They felt increasingly determined by elders who could not be trusted with their future while at the same time lumbered with mountains of debt and ever decreasing prospects. The election of Donald Trump in November appeared to continue a surreal trajectory of deeply implausible political nightmares.

(2018, p.32)

In Rau's description, the unfolding future seems impossible, unreal, and the referendum result deeply connected to the rise of the far right globally. Not a single event, but a trajectory of many piling up.

We might fruitfully rephrase Rau's questioning of the possibility for the novel of narrating the present moment, after Jacques Derrida, as questioning if 'saying the event' is possible. He comments:

a certain impossibility of saying the event or a certain impossible possibility of saying the event, forces us to rethink not only what 'saying' or what 'event' means, but what *possible* means in the history of philosophy. [...]

[...]

[...] Saying the event is also what happens, trying to say what is presently, what comes to pass presently, saying what is, what happens, what occurs [...].

(2007, p.445, italics in original)

Derrida warns that 'saying the event' is always somewhat problematic because the structure of 'saying' is such that it comes after and secondly it always misses the singularity of the event. 'One of the characteristics of the event is that [...] not only does it disrupt the ordinary course of history, but it is also absolutely singular' (p.446). There is only ever 'event-making' – which is to say that accounting for an event even in as close to real time as possible, as it unfolds, means to interpret, select, filter. A further difficulty as Derrida sees it, is that an event can only come to pass if it is impossible. '[T]he coming of the other overwhelms me [...] I insist in the verticality of this coming, because surprise can only come from on high. [...] Horizontally,' 'there is a horizon of expectation' (p.451). A predicted event is not actually an event, all events are 'impossible possibles' that could not be seen before they happened. However, Derrida also argues, counterintuitively, that 'the coming of the inaugural event – can only be greeted as a return, a coming back, a spectral *revenge*' (p.452). In the context of a cultural 'saying' of Brexit this is true of responses on both sides of the political divide around the result – in its most simplified form, it either inaugurates a return of Blitz spirit without the bombs and should be understood as a return to a strong British national identity and a replaying of the victories of the Second World War or, it is a return of fascism and xenophobic nationalism, in a dispersed and populist mode and an assault on British institutions notably the NHS.

This tension between repetition and singularity is also captured in Smith's reference to Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* in the opening lines of *Autumn*: '**It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times**' (2016a, p.3, emphasis in original); and later in a more sustained gesture to Dickens's original text: 'All across the country, there was misery and rejoicing.' 'All across the country people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country people felt it was the right thing' (p.59). *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens's novel about the French Revolution was, as Sally Ledger notes, one of many efforts by British writers to process and recover from the revolution's impact on British culture

in the nineteenth century, where the revolution acted as a generator of cultural trauma and compulsive retelling (2009). 'The English mob of 1780 is, as is ever the case in Dickens's historical novels, very much a reflection on the volatility of contemporary British culture: he never regarded the 1850s with the equanimity of subsequent historians' (2009, p.78). Ledger's reading here suggests that Dickens' revisiting of the events of the revolution across the channel are not from a place of geographical and historical safety but, instead, from an apprehension of the volatile political present. For *Autumn*, Dickens' earlier novel operates as a point of orientation for Smith's engagement with another national political turmoil in the present, and a lesson in the ways that past events replay and return in the imaginary lives of the present. Dickens's presence is everywhere in the seasonal sequence, *Winter* operates around the structure of *A Christmas Carol*, as Sophia is haunted at midnight by different incarnations of a floating ghostlike head, in an attempt to prick the conscience of her modern-day Scrooge, and in *Spring* Smith's blistering denunciation of immigration detention centres resurrects all of his great prison writing, both fiction such as *Little Dorrit* (1855–7) and his accounts of Newgate Prison in London and of the evils of solitary confinement in Eastern State Penitentiary outside Philadelphia (1836, 1842).

Smith's novels illuminate the present crisis with a fresh contemporaneity whilst also trying to slow the present down and make this relation between the present crisis and a longer British and European history more complex, nuanced and coloured by a wider range of antecedents, to ask what has returned, and what continuities and patterns can be excavated in the archives of history, literature and everyday culture. Seasonality addresses the 'event' in the present, and in its insistence on a cycle embraces repetition and continuity. Smith comments in an interview that she had been thinking about writing a series of seasonal books for about twenty years. In particular, she speaks of her fascination with time and narrative and her desire to explore 'how closely to contemporaneity a finished book might be in the world, and yet how it could also be, all through, very much about stratified, cyclic time' (Smith & Anderson, 2016). Her interest was to explore a tension between consecutive and cyclical models of the human experience of time: 'we're time-containers, we hold all our diachrony, our pasts and our futures [...] in every one of our consecutive moments/ minutes/days/years, and I wonder if our real energy, our real history, is cyclic in continuance and at core, rather than consecutive' (Smith & Anderson, 2016). This is reflected in the capacious nature of each of the novels, that combine an environmental documenting

of a season moving through its different stages, whilst the narrative ranges widely through time, season and location, incorporating memory and celebrating seasonal repetition as well as the promise of the future.

Although often now referred to as the first post-Brexit novel, *Autumn* was not initially envisaged as such, but was being written as the events leading to the referendum unfolded. Smith had laughingly discussed the possibility of an EU referendum on New Year's Eve, on the cusp of 2016, with a Scottish friend, as highly unlikely: 'we laughed, because we knew that referendums take whole lives to happen. Scotland had been thrumming with an astonishing level of analysis and vitality for years leading to the [Scottish independence referendum] in 2014' (in Armitstead, 2019). That Smith could adapt the manuscript to write in the earliest post-referendum moment reflects her writing style: deploying a collage and montage effect, where a number of narrative strands interweave with one another, each claiming equal weight, voicing different characters at different points in their lives. Her non-linear approach to time enables her to move backwards and forward across different time frames in her characters' memories and their present situations, the narrative also sometimes jumps spatially to different incidents happening simultaneously, reflecting her fascination with the narrative challenge of depicting events not distanced by time but by space. She comments: 'the concept was always to do what the Victorian novelists did at a time when the novel was meant to be new. Dickens published as he was writing *Oliver Twist*. He was still making his mind up about the story halfway through. That's why it's called the novel – what it can do, what it's for, what it does' (in Armitstead, 2019). It also reflects her thematic preoccupations: 'I found, as Brexit started to happen round us all, that what I'd been writing was already about divisions and borders and identities and, yes, slightly more historic parliamentary lies' (Smith & Anderson, 2016). For Smith, the writing of *Spring* also presented another level of challenge in terms of her ambitions of writing simultaneously with events, as the two 'failed dates' for Britain leaving the EU were 29 March and 12 April 2019. The speed at which entrenched positions and expectations in British politics have unravelled in the face of continued deadlock, with a 'final deadline' from the EU as 31 October 2019 followed by a December general election, has created such radical unpredictability as to deter any contemporary novelist from writing the present. If Brexit had happened on Halloween, it would surely have been the most fitting date for an event that threatens to perpetually haunt the next generations for decades to come and one whose ghoulish presence can be traced back to the

Second World War, and then back to imperialist and colonialist versions of national identity from centuries earlier in British history.

Smith's final version of *Autumn* reflects her experience of writing as events happened, causing her to request a month's extension from her publisher so that she could fully address the historical events overtaking her writing. For some readers *Winter* might be seen to dramatise the immediate fallout of the Brexit result more comprehensively, where *Autumn* registers a country in shock, struggling to recognise its multiple selves. *Winter*, with its central plot of a split family, and the difficulty of healing its longstanding political rifts and estrangements, captures a division at the heart of the nation and traces some of its histories as felt in the lives of sisters Iris and Sophia. For the third novel in the sequence, *Spring*, instead of tying herself to specific events, Smith bears witness to an intensely hostile environment, voicing the hate speech and violent headlines of a manic anthropomorphised social media, whose vitriol intrudes into sections of the narrative. It focuses on the fate of the refugee and migrant in these conditions, through its creation of the miraculous character of Florence, in a narrative that insistently pushes back against a Europe-wide political abdication of responsibility for others, and a media onslaught of dehumanising and exterminatory discourses. *Spring* conjures Florence, daughter of a refugee on the run from a detention centre, who has magical powers that let her walk into locked spaces, get on trains without a ticket and convince those in power to help her. She is a miraculous Marina, referencing Shakespeare's *Pericles*, but something of a 'Jedi' too, who can coax authorities to open doors and one can imagine her coining the famous *Star Wars* line: 'These are not the droids you are looking for' (1977). Like the heroes of the famous 'A New Hope' episode, she emerges as a miracle out of hopelessness. Her sheer unbelievability does not stop her being an almost perfect rendering of *Zeitgeist* writing by Smith, who manages to imagine eco-protester Greta Thunberg just as Greta was imagining herself.

*Spring* shares the same ethical concerns as her work stemming from her participation in the *Refugee Tales* project of which she is patron. The outreach project which calls for an end to indefinite immigration detention, matched writers with refugees in order to publish their stories. Smith wrote 'The detainee's tale' for it, which acts as an account of her meeting with a victim of people trafficking (2016b). The peculiarly cruel status of the detainee without rights for access to medicines or legal redress, is a case of what Jacques Derrida identifies as the hostility at the heart of state-sanctioned forms of hospitality: hostipitality (2000b, pp.3–18). The detainee, is not afforded hospitality but is 'detained', not hosted but

taken hostage. In David Herd's prologue to *Refugee Tales*, he writes: 'How badly we need English / To be made sweet again / Rendered hostile by act of law / So that even friendship is barely possible' (2016, p.6). With *The Canterbury Tales* as a frame he introduces the collected stories, by a series of writers, that bear witness to lives that have not been documented, as the tribunals are not recorded, calling for 'an end / To this inhuman discourse' (p.6). He insists on the duty of the listener to write and tell these stories that have been erased. In *Spring*, Smith's novel goes to the heart of the new hostility, the extended cultural winter spreading its tentacles globally, and bears witness to the hidden world of the migrant and refugee detainee centre, showing its 'lessons' to those who administer and accept it; how the material structure creates behaviours and bodily effects, a culture and a climate (2018). As she voices this hidden world, Smith seeks narrative strategies that can speak differently, imbue an English novel with radical hospitality: hopeful in the face of hopelessness.

## II Hospitality

In the face of a rising public discourse of hostility to the 'Other' and the increasing evidence of xenophobic ethnonationalism, this article argues that a radical hospitality is at work in Smith's project, both as theme in all three novels, and in terms of form, which means that even as a number of characters appear deeply locked into a trajectory of their own demise, their interiority and isolation is broken open by an insistence on connection and care. As the novels seek to parse current events, they insist on dialogue as a source of understanding and learning; dialogue between estranged family members, in the case of Sophia and Iris in *Winter*, between generations in the case of Daniel and Elisabeth in *Autumn*, host and stranger between Lux and Sophia in *Winter*, guard and prisoner between Brittany and Florence in *Spring*.

The sequence of novels shares openings, each introducing a confusing landscape where a single character is deep in an interior monologue or hallucination that confuses the real with imagined. Alone with their dreams, their altered perceptions and visions disorient and require the reader to seek ways of interpreting each narrative, sharing the confusion of the characters. In *Autumn*, Daniel, a dying man, is dreaming, swimming through memories of his life making associations between disparate objects and thoughts. In *Winter*, Sophia is struggling to distinguish between real and imagined experience; living alone and deteriorating, she begins to hallucinate a disembodied head that follows her from room to room. In *Spring*, Richard, a film director, grief-stricken following the death of a beloved friend, has walked out of his life, thrown his phone in a bin and is contemplating suicide

on a railway platform in Scotland whilst hallucinating a conversation with an imagined version of his estranged daughter. All three characters are in crisis and in extreme states of mental distress, the texts hold or 'host' them and provide routes out of their current suffering.

One way that Smith does this, in all three novels, involves the insistence on modes of kinship beyond blood relations and normative nuclear families, as well as a radical openness to strangers, all held within an exploration of the importance of storying, memory and forgetfulness to ethical and meaningful models of identity, community and society. Her seasonal quartet shares with her other works a sense of the novel as performing a kind of radical 'queer' hosting of guest, stranger, other, opponent or outcast, focusing on forms of 'forgotten kinship' and relations that were hidden or unknown, lost family members, connections never understood. This is enacted formally as each novel hosts its characters, in apparent defiance of Derrida's discussion of the limits of hospitality, unconditionally. Smith pushes at the limits of hospitality through a radical overturning of the conventionally understood guest-and-host dynamic, where the migrant or outsider figure in each novel, who might be constructed as a guest/intruder/alien by the establishment, Daniel (*Autumn*), Lux (*Winter*) and Florence (*Spring*), each host and provide refuge to the other more established characters in the novels, whose claims to national belonging are not under question by the state as their own might be. The novels' mix of free indirect discourse and extended dialogues where characters attempt to talk and struggle to persuade each other of their world views, whilst Smith insists on threads that connect the most dispersed of lives. Despite entrenched positions and hardening hearts between neighbours, family members and lovers, Smith insists on these dialogues, on placing conflicting positions adjacent to one another in order to see the bigger picture. Smith's writing is a plea for an understanding of all truths as partial and positional; in *Autumn* Elisabeth receives a lesson on semiotics from Daniel, she says: 'There is no point in making up a world, [...] when there's already a real world. There's just the world, and there's the truth about the world', to which he replies: 'You mean, there's the truth, and there's the made-up version of it that we get told about the world' (2016a, p.119).

Like her earlier writing Smith's seasonal novels are marked by a radical polyvocality, where multiple narrative voices and modes proliferate in a sophisticated juxtaposition of ekphrasis, the retelling of film plots, popular song, social media, historical fragments, newspaper and television snippets, whilst she holds on to two or three key characters and a story. This also speaks to her own sense of the arts as

themselves a kind of family:

'all the arts are family, related, and I tend to think at their best when they meet up or cross over into each other [...].

[...]

And because the novel is, like the language that goes to make it, naturally rhythmic, it can sing anything and everything from the three-minutes-of-happiness pop song to the opera cycle, or both at once, and because every story tells a picture and every word paints a thousand of them, and because the novel's footwork, its choreography with its partner in the dance, the reader, is why and how it moves us, there are the novels, [...].'

(Smith, 2017b).

As Smith manages these many strands, they move between dispersal and a sense of their breaking down into unrelated parts, to at other moments, something approaching symphony where Smith conducts with a light touch or sometimes intervenes more heavily, lumbering into the narrative to drive it in a particular direction. This narrative openness, which involves calling up of old stories, entering and rummaging through the archive, is radically democratic, conjuring Shakespeare and Dickens, alongside Charlie Chaplin and Elvis Presley and Christine Keeler, also carefully ethical and political, involving the retrieval and inclusion of female artists, Pauline Boty, Barbara Hepworth and Tacita Dean in *Autumn*, *Winter* and *Spring* respectively. Whilst each artist is very different, their aesthetic colours events in each of the novels they occupy, producing a continuity of form across the novels.

Just as received notions of host and guest are undone, so the novels also each implicitly question simplistic notions of place as it might be used to prop up discourses of Britishness, or its reduction to Englishness. In *Autumn*, Daniel embodies a cosmopolitan identity, his memories point to how much of British history and culture is to be found in continental Europe. In *Winter*, Sophia and Iris celebrate Christmas in their family home in Cornwall, a region with its own national claims for independence and its own language, the house's name, *Chei Bres*, is Cornish. When Sophia's son, Art, visits with his pretend girlfriend, Lux, a Croatian refugee arrived in the UK via Canada, she asks what it means, he replies: 'No idea', somewhat ironically as the name means 'House of the Mind' (2017a, p.80). Cornish (Kernewek) is a Celtic language sharing some mutual intelligibility with Breton, and some common roots with Welsh, pointing to national histories that exceed and

trouble the conflation of geographical borders with cultural heritage. In *Spring*, the characters head to Scotland in search of an underground railroad for migrants fleeing across the English border ‘out’ of England. Smith is quick to undo any uncritical and essentialist embracing of Scottishness as a nationalist discourse, untainted by legacies of empire. As Richard stands looking around him in Kingussie, he reads the plaque on a water fountain, which names the benefactor, Peter Mackenzie, Count de Serra Largo, linking the small Scottish town to Portugal and Brazil. It is one of the many threads that Smith leaves unfollowed, that point to the need for a bigger picture. Richard has thrown away his phone so he cannot Google the history, instead he simply asks rhetorically, ‘*What does Serra Largo have to do with here?*’ as if the two worlds can never have touched (2018, p.56, italics in original). With the benefit of technology, we can establish that MacKenzie was knighted by the King of Portugal for services to the Portuguese people in Brazil, where he worked for many years as a salesman for Singer (sewing machines) during the period of Brazil’s fight for independence from Portugal. The fountain inscription acts as a paratext, a lead, that if followed reveals the nation appears to be far more than its constituent parts, translocational and transtemporal, never decipherable without reference to its myths, legends, colonial and global histories and globalizing presents, its multiple languages, its shifting borders and transnational connections.

### III Weathering

[W]eather is the totality of our environments – natural/cultural, all the way down.

(Neimanis & Hamilton, 2018, p.81)

In any weather conversation, one of you is going to mention global warming at some point. [...] The] failure of the normal rhetorical routine, the[...] remnants of shattered conversation lying around like broken hammers [...], is a symptom of a much larger and deeper ontological shift in human awareness.

(Morton, 2013, p.85)

Elisabeth was crying [...]. Crying came out of her like weather.

(Ali Smith, 2016a, p.210)

Weather is everywhere in Smith’s seasonal novels, not only in reference to the changing weather associated with seasons, but, as one might expect, it is an uncanny and anxious preoccupation with

weather, when writing about seasons during an era when the popular understanding is transforming around the climate as in crisis. Smith’s work has been written alongside environmental protesters calling for declarations of climate emergency on a global level, as much as it has been a reflection of the bleak political ‘climate’ globally. One of the ways in which Smith’s novels seek to go beyond a national agenda is through attention to the imbrication of the local event, or events, within a global context, to think beyond the event as such, as it is experienced in the political sphere, but as part of multiple inter/intra-actions. As Namara Smith notes: ‘One of *Autumn*’s recurring themes is our willed blindness to the anomalies that threaten our sense of order. Signs of ecological disturbance are everywhere, but [...] Smith[’s ...] characters acknowledge these deviations from the norm only in passing and without admitting to their larger significance’ (2017). In *Autumn*, Elisabeth’s mother takes on this role. She has recently moved to a small coastal village and has found an older map of the local area which she sticks on her wall, outlining in red with a marker pen, the new coastline, over the top of the printed one, indicating how much land has been lost to the sea. There is no discussion of melting glaciers or rising sea levels, just a kind of mute witnessing, a marking of change and loss. Later her mother reminisces about watching outdoor cinema with Daniel in his back garden, commenting ‘[t]hat was back in the years when we still had summers. When we still had seasons, not just the monoseason we have now’ (2016a, p.215).

However, in *Winter* there is a shift in Smith’s approach. What was a troubling background to the previous novel becomes foregrounded. But as this movement happens a new uncanny intimacy occurs that collapses the distinction between the two. The novel opens with something strange coming into view, a distant speck in the eye that gradually becomes a disembodied floating head in Sophia’s line of vision. Sophia first notices something in the corner of her vision and searches Google, ‘she types in *blue green dot in eye* then, to be more precise, *blue green dot at side of vision getting bigger*. [...] Then she googles, seeing *a little green-blue sphere off to the side of my vision*’ (2017a, p.12–13, italics in original). In Smith’s *Winter*, an ecological *Christmas Carol* plays itself out, earth appears as a ghost, a blue green dot, that transforms into a child’s face and then a kind of ‘green man’ that silently implores Sophia during midnight visits. This ‘earth haunting’ offers a narrative place and form for the world to make its presence felt. For Timothy Morton, one of the effects of this perceptual shift caused by increasing anxieties about global warming is an uncanny awareness of climate change as a ‘hyperobject’— something so large and dispersed that it



is too big to grasp, only ever partially visible. It changes human encounters with and understandings of nature:

When massive entities such as the human species and global warming become thinkable, they grow near. They are so massively distributed that we can't directly grasp them empirically. We vaguely sense them out of the corner of our eye while seeing the data in the centre of our vision. These 'hyperobjects' remind us that *the local is in fact the uncanny*.

(2015, p.113, italics in original)

Sophia's 'vision' appears as an assault on an anthropomyopic state, a term that might usefully characterise the difficulty of conceiving of the human relationship to 'earth' (a speck in Sophia's eye) where global warming and apprehensions of a climate in crisis can only be 'felt' in uncanny and anxious ways, not seen head on.

We have gone from having 'the whole world in our hands' [...] to realizing that the whole world, including 'little' us, is in the vicelike death grip of a gigantic entity –ourselves as the human species. This uncanny sense of existing on more than one scale at once has nothing to do with the pathos of cradling a beautiful blue ball in the void.

(Morton, 2016, p.25)

Morton rejects the sublime image of Earth from space, for this uncanny sense 'of being caught in hyperobjects is precisely a feeling of strange familiarity and familiar strangeness' (2013, p.49)

Early on in the novel as part of their breaking up, Charlotte angrily takes issue with Sophia's son and her boyfriend Art's approach to his nature blog, 'Art in Nature', in which he makes up accounts of walks and other encounters that he has never actually done. Art's new hobby is Googling to see what can be 'killed off' by the internet search engine:

**God was dead:** to begin with. And romance was dead. Chivalry was dead. Poetry, the novel, painting, they were all dead, and art was dead. Theatre and cinema were both dead. Literature was dead. The book was dead. [...] [...] Thought was dead. Hope was dead. Truth and Fiction were both dead. The media was dead. The internet was dead. Twitter, instagram, facebook, google dead.

(2017a, p.2, emphasis in original)

He types in *nature is*.  
It's one of the ones that need the extra *d*. When

he adds it, up come these suggestions:

*nature is dangerous*

*nature is dying*

*nature is divine*

*nature is dead*

Nature writers, however, doesn't come up as dead. When you type it in, a row of thumbnails comes up, little pictures of the healthy looking faces of all the greats, past and present.

(2017a, p.47, italics in original)

Art, like his mother Sophia, has killed his relationship with 'nature', it is without ethics or politics. Charlotte rages against the complacency of nature writing and refuses Art's claims for his blog:

I'm just not a politico, he said. What I do is by its nature not political. Politics is transitory. What I do is the opposite of transitory. I watch the progress of the year in the fields, I look closely at the structure of hedgerows. Hedgerows are, well, they're hedgerows. They just aren't political.

She laughed in his face. She shouted about how very political hedgerows in fact were. Then furious rage came out of her, plus the word narcissist several times.

Art in Nature my arse, she said.

(2017a, p.59)

Whilst Art wants to prepare his blog about the upcoming solstice, Charlotte refuses his political quietism:

Solstice, she said. You said it. Darkest days ever. There's never been a time like this.

Yes there has, he said. The solstices are cyclic and they happen every year.

(2017a, p.58)

Charlotte's argument with Art is about the urgency of the present, and the politics of nature. It dramatizes a transformation in human accounts of 'nature', away from being stable backdrop, outside of politics and culture, to an entangled, naturalcultural presence. Later in the novel, as Art visits his mother and tries help her to recover from her breakdown, he, too, has a visitation that performs the same uncanny work. Earth comes calling in the form of a large floating rock that appears above his head in the dining room. 'The underside of it is the colour that happens when black meets green. The size of it throws into shadow everyone at the table, him too – when he looks at his own hands in front of him their backs and the backs of his wrists are black-green' (2017a, p.216). Art who has constructed elaborate fabricated accounts of his relationship to nature, finally, 'sees' earth, an event

that happens vertically (floats above his head) as Derrida notes, because it appears from no horizon. As Morton suggests, the experience is profoundly uncanny: 'The proximity of an alien presence that is also our innermost essence is very much' [... the] structure of feeling' of the hyperobject that is an apprehension of the anthropocene (Morton, 2013, p.113).

In *Winter*, as Smith notes, there can be Epiphany (2017a), but 'Spring's gifts are different' (2018, p.336). By the time that Smith gets to writing *Spring*, the seasons are anthropomorphised, Brittany, the security guard, playing Winter and Florence, the refugee, playing Spring:

If we were seasons, I would be following you.  
You'd be the end of me, Brit said. You'd kill me off.  
No, you'd make me be possible, the girl now leaning against her fast asleep had said.

(p.201)

However, seasonality itself is at risk, as they exchange stories on the train to Scotland Florence comments:

If the force of just five more nuclear bombs going off anywhere in the world happens, she said, an eternal nuclear autumn will set in and there'll be no more seasons.  
[...]  
[...] It's a bona fide warning for the future, the girl said. Don't you know about how hot the seas are? If you don't you can find it on the net.

(p.184)

Seasonality is derailed, by climate change as much as by world political events. Even as Florence embodies the sheer life force of Spring, what Smith calls, 'the buzz of the engine' (p.336) inside any tree or flower, she only temporarily hypnotizes Brit, the novel ends with a cruel scene of defeat as Brit calls the authorities about Florence and she and her mother are taken away by security services north of the border on the Culloden battlefield tourist site. Smith's move to Scotland links the current national crisis of Brexit to 'the last battle fought on British soil', where the battle visitor centre shows a CGI re-enactment that 'really brings the battle to life' (p.334). Smith is quite aware of the ghosts she is conjuring and the ways they might speak to the present as it unfolds into the future post-Brexit political life of Scotland.

Brit is left with her book – a collections of fragments, scraps and quotations (a microcosmic mirror of Smith's own working practices), juxtaposed to create a narrative, the 'Hot Air' book. This work she attempts to decipher, and which sends her thinking spiralling off in new directions and wakes

her up. Ultimately, it is a book of hope, a kind of resource that Brit dips into even as it catalogues the many violent and abusive discourses of the present, as it refuses to submit to hopelessness. Just as Art produces his 'fake' nature blog and Florence her 'real' political scrap book, so Smith herself attempts to render the natural/cultural shocks of the present into art. Just as Art learns he can't write about nature in an apolitical way, and that to attempt to do so betrays the urgent questions of the present, Brit learns how to turn events and texts over in her mind to reveal their multiple resonances and meanings and Smith's seasonal works persist in seeking out the culture of nature and the nature of culture.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe* ([1950] 1988), Narnia suffers in the depths of a perpetual winter that will not give way to spring. Imposed by the White Witch, it is symbolic of the climate of fear, the privations of war and the ascendancy of fascism that her occupation of Narnia represents. '[I]t is she that has got all Narnia under her thumb. It's she that makes it always winter. Always winter but never Christmas; think of that!' (p.23). The joys of Christmas through a child's eyes are fully realised in the narrative when Father Christmas finally does arrive on a sleigh to give gifts and signal that a great thaw will soon arrive. His visit restores seasonal change putting winter into its rightful place. Nature and culture work together, with the symbolic rebirth of Christmas inaugurating the rebirth of spring which also represents the overcoming of the fascist grip over Narnia.

In *Winter*, Smith ends her book with a passing reference to the 2017 July Scout Jamboree in West Virginia, addressed by Donald Trump in which he also promises to 'bring Christmas back'. 'And by the way, under the Trump administration', he says, 'you'll be saying "Merry Christmas" again when you go shopping, believe me' (in Regan, 2017). In the middle of summer it is winter. 'White Christmas, God help us every one' (Smith, 2018, p.322). In his notoriously rambling and offensive speech, Trump mobilises far-right discourses that operate around a politics of white supremacy, where whiteness is depicted as under duress, understood through a poetics of loss characterised as multicultural and multi-faith assaults on Christian festivals. The premise of his statement, a spurious claim, the idea that it has no longer become acceptable to say Christmas in the United States produces a discourse of whiteness as a minoritized culture, besieged by immigration and globalization, and the target in his sights: Muslims and other religious minority communities. Smith's novel ends on this jarring note of *Winter* in July, with the tyrant shaking his bloody robe as Slavoj Žižek would have it (2009, pp.1–7).

As the promise of Christmas is transformed into deeply reactionary white supremacist posturing, it insists on producing a permanently hostile climate, what critical race theorist Christina Sharpe calls the 'total climate' of racism in the United States, or simply, 'the weather'. 'In what I am calling the weather, anti-blackness is pervasive as climate' one that produces premature black death as normative (Sharpe, 2016, p.106, italics in original). Understanding how to move through and survive this environment, one that openly seeks the destruction of black life, the weather or climate is not simply a metaphor for human experiences, it is a way of capturing the scale and scope of the afterlives of slavery. For Sharpe this necessitates the production of new ecologies by those most endangered by such a climate, 'the weather necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies' (p.106).

### Conclusion

In their work on the politics of climate change, feminist, materialist ecocritics Astrida Neimanis and Jennifer Mae Hamilton deploy a concept of 'weathering', that shares some aspects with Sharpe's proposal, as a way of acknowledging 'how bodies, places and the weather are all inter-implicated in our climate-changing world' (2018, p.118). Elsewhere, they insist that we apprehend the 'totality of our environments' as 'naturalcultural, all the way down' (p.118). Both of these critical approaches propose strategies of weathering, or the production of new ecologies, as a form of survival, a way of living in a hostile climate. It is with both of these propositions in mind that a reading of weather and climate in Smith's novels can be deployed as a way of approaching her own narrative strategies in the face of the unforgiving relentlessness of a Brexit Season, as critical apprehensions of the long-term impact of Brexit move increasingly to seeing the referendum as less about reclamation of political or economic autonomy and more, as Lea Ypi argues 'influenced by a transnational cabal of ethnic nationalism doing the dirty work of capitalism' (2018). As 'weathering' texts, *Autumn*, *Winter* and *Spring* engage with the multiple crises of the present, a change in the political weather and present strategies for living and thinking together, for dialogue and for becoming alert to the ways histories are imbricated with geostories.

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