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“Don’t tell me this isn’t relevant all over again in its brand new same old way”: imagination, agitation and raging against the machine in Ali Smith’s *Spring*

John Masterson

Lecturer in World Literatures in English, University of Sussex, United Kingdom

j.e.masterson@sussex.ac.uk, ORCID 0000-0002-0347-1540

John Masterson is a lecturer in World Literatures in English at the University of Sussex and a Research Associate of the School of Literature, Language and Media at the University of the Witwatersand. He is the author of *The Disorder of Things: A Foucauldian Approach to the Work of Nuruddin Farah* (Wits University Press, 2013) and works on a range of contemporary texts and authors, with a particular focus on African and American diasporic writing. His articles have appeared in journals including *Research in African Literatures, American Literary History* and *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*. He is currently completing his second monograph, *Singular Stories, Shared Destinies: Re-Routing African and American Literature in the Obama Era*.

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This paper explores the third novel in Ali Smith’s seasonal quartet, Spring. Using Achille Mbembe’s Necropolitics as a conceptual frame, I analyse Smith’s rendering of a Britain grappling with Brexit in times of transnational populism. As with Autumn and Winter, Smith’s prose is saturated with intertextual borrowings from pop and “high” culture, also interrogating the links between “nanoracism” and the “immunity and community” knot (Dillet). This paper reads Spring alongside Smith’s contribution to and advocacy of the Refugee Tales project regarding the diverse discourses surrounding migration, xenophobia, and indefinite detention. Smith’s writing traces the darkness of our populist present with its rhetorical and material violence, as well as the possibilities for creative response and resistance. I argue that her seasonal quartet to date and her work with Refugee Tales aesthetically and ethically defend the principle that human dignity, both individual and collective, rests on the ability to tell stories.

Keywords: Ali Smith, Brexit, immigration, xenophobia, indefinite detention, populism

Everything is now about preferring ourselves to others, who, in any case, are scarcely worthy of us . . . The era is therefore one of strong narcissistic bonds . . . the functions that an imaginary fixation on the stranger, the Muslim, the veiled woman, the refugee, the Jew, or the Negro play are defensive ones. There is a refusal to recognize that . . . our ego has always been constituted through opposition to some Other that we have internalized . . . but in a regressive way; that, at bottom, we are made of diverse borrowings from foreign subjects and that, consequently, we
have always been *beings of the border*— such is precisely what many refuse to admit today. (Achille Mbembe)¹

[I]t is hard to know how to measure time, how to orient oneself when horror and shock begin to embed themselves into the pulse of daily life. (Maaza Mengiste)²

In the maelstrom of our geo-political present, many ask who or what we can turn to for sanctuary. Literary escape from the “increasingly shrill populist debates [which] traffic in a number of core anxieties that hinge on certain iconic figures of non-belonging” may seem quixotic.³ Yet Ali Smith’s seasonal quartet provides an antidote to the dual shocks, if not horrors, of Britain’s exit from the European Union (Brexit) and Donald Trump’s election to the presidency of the United States. Citing these seismic events, Lindsey Stonebridge asserts, “we are experiencing the zero-gravity political cultures that only two years ago we assumed belonged to other times and other places.”⁴ Returning to Hannah Arendt as ethical touchstone, as she does in *Placeless People* (2018), Stonebridge reminds us that resistance need not be futile. This is especially heartening for those invested in the humanities and what they might teach, both within and beyond our institutional spaces: “Literature, writing, poems, songs, and plays are the natural enemy of banality. *Writing is the staging of two-in-one thinking.* . . . Literature is where meanings and morals are put in place and put on trial” (emphasis is mine).⁵ I revisit this allusion to Kafka below. At the outset, however, Stonebridge’s foregrounding of cultural interventions as bulwarks against banality frames my

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2 Mengiste, “This is What the Journey Does,” 131.
5 Ibid., 9.
consideration of a writer who has consistently interrogated the borders that police and the lies that bind.\textsuperscript{6}

*Spring* (2019), like *Autumn* (2016) and *Winter* (2017) before it, defies conventional plot summary. That said, Ceri Radford gives a helpful overview for the uninitiated:

The story revolves around four key characters: Richard Lease, a washed-out, suicidal film director mourning the death of his closest friend [Paddy]; Brittany Hall, a thwarted young woman working in a detainment centre; Alda, an out-of-work librarian and underground activist; and Florence, a brilliant 12-year-old girl searching for her mother.

In the dramatic crux of the story, the three female characters witness Richard’s suicide attempt at a remote train station in Scotland, and it’s the gifted, garrulous Florence who coaxes him off the tracks. What they’re all doing there forms the basis of a narrative that pings through time and place with the energy of a small nuclear missile.\textsuperscript{7}

In this paper, I supplement Kristian Shaw’s sense that “[t]he construction of fences (both physical and psychological) is central to Ali Smith’s *Autumn*, arguably the first significant post-Brexit novel.”\textsuperscript{8} I see *Spring* as amplifying its predecessors, offering readers a suitably estranging compass to chart the often toxic tides of official discourse. My epigraph from Mbembe suggests the scope of this intervention, which examines the dialectic between displacement, conceived both physically and

\textsuperscript{6} Appiah, *The Lies that Bind*.
\textsuperscript{7} Radford, “*Spring*, by Ali Smith. Timeless Novel.”
\textsuperscript{8} Shaw, “BrexLit,” 20.
psychically, and Brexit-era populism. This relationship is imagined through Benoit Dillet’s knotting of “immunity and community.”9 As I trace these immunopolitical preoccupations, I argue that Smith’s writing, across both Spring and The Refugee Tales project (which she is patron of and contributor to) interrogates nationalist populisms “animated today by a perversely thrilling sense of being under siege.”10 This occurs principally through immigration. Mbembe’s “nanoracism,” therefore, provides further conceptual and contextual scaffolding: “in its banality and capacity to infiltrate into the pores and veins of society, [nanoracism] is racism turned culture and into the air one breathes, at a time of the general idiotizing, machinic decerebration and bewitchment of the masses.”11 Like Stonebridge’s approach via Arendt, the foregrounding of “banality,” particularly as somatic affect and effect, is as suggestive as the critique of “machinic decerebration.” So too, as I revisit below, is Mbembe’s reference to “the air one breathes.” This is something Smith explores against the peculiar backdrop of the Brexit vote.

While eager not to conflate very different concerns and contexts, I join others in suggesting that the “hostile environments” experienced by those othered through the biopolitical and/or necropolitical hegemony of a Trump-era United States and grappling-with-Brexit Britain are parasitically dependent on discourses of taint, contagion, and immunisation.12 As David Herd asserts in his afterword to Refugee Tales II, these discourses are informed by and have real-world symptoms, motivations and consequences: “we continue to call for an immediate end to the UK’s policy of indefinite detention. What has changed, however, is the prominence of detention as a

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10 Valluvan, The Clamour of Nationalism, 190.
11 Mbembe, Necropolitics, 59.
12 Goodfellow, Hostile Environment.
political concern [globally].” 13 Smith foregrounds the primacy of detention and removal centres as chronotopes of an era in which “[the] other exists in contradiction, or perhaps in paradox, being either invisible or hypervisible, but rarely just visible.” 14

As Spring ranges across these and other geo-political pressure points, the novel amplifies a strain that has been apparent throughout Smith’s oeuvre, from The Accidental (2005) through Artful (2012) and beyond. With Mbembe’s epigraph in mind, her approach also brings the poetics and politics of “diverse borrowings” into starker relief. By showing the indebtedness of her work to much longer cultural and discursive traditions, where cross-pollination, transposition, and intertextual insemination are necessary goods rather than evils, Smith sharpens its formal and thematic spikiness. While working in very different modes, Mbembe’s attention to stylistic felicities resonates with Smith’s seasonal cycle: “this text is one on whose surface the reader can glide freely, without control points or visas, sojourning as long as desired, moving about at will, returning and leaving at any moment and through any door.” 15 In short, both Mbembe and Smith are asking their readers to think more carefully about the blurry borders between form and content. This is particularly urgent in a context where one of the most pressing questions of our times—if not the most pressing question—is: how do we agitate for and imagine new stories of displacement and disruption given the contours of our populist present?

15 Smith, Spring, 1.
“There is a new meanness in meaning”\textsuperscript{16}

Much of Spring’s second half pivots around the precocious twelve-year old Florence. As she exposes and explores everything from the carceral politics and obfuscatory rhetoric of immigration removal centers to discourses on environmental atrophy, Florence resembles Greta Thunberg. Reading Spring in light of recent protests, refrains such as the following are peculiarly resonant: “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.”\textsuperscript{17} As this remark recalls the preceding Autumn, it also suggests that, in an era of populist sloganeering, we may need more Greta-like thinking, as well as action, to prevent our house from burning down.\textsuperscript{18}

As recognized by more and more scholars, there is a palpable and portentous entanglement between climate change denial, nationalist political bluster, and very material effects and affects when it comes to imagining human displacement in the future.\textsuperscript{19} As David Wallace-Wells robustly maintains, the structural inequality embedded in the distribution of “the industrial world’s kamikaze mission” depends on the very rhetoric that animates populist debates.\textsuperscript{20} These rely on the weaponization of slippery collective pronouns: “How you assess that future, muddied by some now-unknowable amount of climate suffering, how much it horrifies you and motivates you and angers you and scares you, probably says a lot about how you think about ‘we,’ and ‘us,’ and ‘them.’”\textsuperscript{21} In Spring, Florence (also a “Smith”) disaggregates these and other signifiers, railing against the Machine in an attempt to humanize it. This chimes

\textsuperscript{16} Smith, Winter, 125.
\textsuperscript{17} Smith, Spring, 184.
\textsuperscript{18} Thunberg, No One Is Too Small, 24.
\textsuperscript{19} Newell, Global Green Politics.
\textsuperscript{20} Wallace-Wells, The Uninhabitable Earth, 4.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 238.
with Mbembe’s sense of “machinic decerebration,” figuring it in terms of the alternative pop-cultural “bewitchment” of the musical collective. These concerns are made explicit in her interactions with the conveniently named Brit or Brittany (for which readers are encouraged to read the national figure of Britannia), who works as a detention centre guard.\textsuperscript{22}

As readers navigate these sections, it is precisely Florence’s clarity of wit and vision that allows her to offer excoriating critiques of neoliberalism. As commentators note, the nexus of neoliberalism, populism, and bio/necropolitics is embedded in our contested present, as well as recalling longer histories of close interimplication. Echoing the Fanonian orientations of \textit{Necropolitics}, Shaw suggests that the emergency of Brexit, as framed by discourses of (in)hospitality, (un)belonging, and (anti)cosmopolitanism can support, if not indeed bring about, renewed conditions of cultural agitation.\textsuperscript{23} This is evident in Smith’s foregrounding of organic motifs, here and throughout the quartet. \textit{Spring} is the connective season with the ability to inspire new growth and hope. Far from being naively utopian, however, this accords with the sense that “hope is something you have to earn.”\textsuperscript{24} The text’s form asks us to imagine, read, and think differently, in the hope we may all emerge from a dazed and confused winter.

If oppositional hope springs eternal, the novel recalibrates what Edward Said calls “nonharmonious, nonserene tension.”\textsuperscript{25} This is shown in \textit{Spring}’s three opening parts. In bursts of about two pages, some of today’s dominant, invariably media, clarion calls are ventriloquized: “Now what we don’t want is Facts. What we want is

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Smith, \textit{Spring}, 170.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Shaw, “BrexLit,” 29.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Thunberg, \textit{No One Is Too Small}, 40.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Said, \textit{On Late Style}, 7.
\end{itemize}
bewilderment. What we want is repetition. What we want is repetition.” By ending
her opening section with “What we want is need. What we need is want,” Smith
suggests her preoccupation with market morphologies.26 These are framed by our
“contemporary politics of speed,” informing narratives of migration filtered through
the neoliberal.27 In doing so, Smith readily riffs on Kafka and Orwell, two mainstays
of the carceral and/or detention literature that has emerged in the last few years.
Prominent examples include Mohamedou Ould Slahi’s Guantánamo Diary (2015) and
Behrouz Boochani’s No Friend but the Mountains (2019).

Given her fascination with politics and/as play of language in fictive, legalistic
and other settings, Smith demonstrates how semiology and semantics are some of the
first casualties of an age defined by what Anshuman Mondal calls “the political recoil
of Brexit.”28 This distortion dovetails strikingly with Rachel Holmes’s tragi-comic
“The Barrister’s Tale,” from Refugee Tales II: “Temporary indefinite detention. How
do you measure time that’s both temporary and indefinite? . . . Waiting indefinitely to
be removed imminently. It’s like Beckett and Orwell met for a bender on Bloomsday
in The Kafka’s Head.”29 Beyond and beneath its intertextual pyrotechnics, Holmes’s
parody of language-as-carceral-nightmare speaks to Refugee Tales’ interventionist
imperatives, with their focus on the epistemological policing of speech and stories
themselves. The overlaps with Spring are clear and compelling: “the person seeking
asylum in the UK is locked out of language . . . in a way that simply isn’t metaphorical,
the language is the border.”30

26 Smith, Spring, 6.
27 Nixon, Slow Violence, 11.
28 Mondal, “Scratching the Post-Imperial Itch,” 90.
29 Holmes, “The Barrister’s Tale,” 55.
Herd’s emphasis on the multifarious identities and impacts of the border on “intimately vulnerable” displaced bodies has affinities with the epigraph from Mbembe. It also, therefore, invites the comparative reader to consider *Spring* in the company of other diasporic writing. An example from *The Good Immigrant* (2016), Chimene Suleyman’s playfully tautological “My Name is My Name,” also dwells on the politics and poetics of language in an age of coerced movement: “Words, names, and their noises are careless in England. They are not put to use in the way that obstructed communities have learned to pronounce every violence put upon us as though it is sacred.”32 When Suleyman’s story is read alongside *Spring*, in relation to the representational challenges presented by a climate of broiling populism, the weight carried by such collective pronouns is crushing. Arguing over who constitutes “them” and “us,” once again captured in Mbembe’s epigraph, lies at the heart of the defining politics of our time.

In *Spring*, it similarly falls to Paddy to serve as historical consciousness-bearer. With her suitably slippery gender assignation, she operates in this manner at strategic points throughout the novel. In doing so, she reminds Richard and Smith’s readers of the realities of globalized culpability and complicity. That she emphasizes this both then and now is critical: “There isn’t a history we’re not deep in the pigfat of the money of. We’re the factory. We’re eaten alive. That makes us the hungriest ghosts.”33 The factory association is clear in terms of the reach of industrialized death captured in Morton’s “whirring machine of capitalism.”34 Similarly, hauntological motifs provide a bridge to *Necropolitics*, which views contemporary populist lineages via much longer

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33 Smith, *Spring*, 252.
histories of disavowal, dispossession, and the disposability of bodies in imperial and neo-imperial contexts. With this in mind, it is enabling to compare the beginnings of the novel’s first, second and third parts.

“The pungent onion-layers of fraud”35

Smith’s interest in the entanglements of neoliberalism and commodity fetishism is captured when Florence asks what “refugee chic” is, having come across the phrase in a fashion magazine.36 The opening of the novel’s second section is inspired by Facebook, illustrating how “connectivity,” one of Spring’s central themes, morphs over the text, which plays with the sense that social media networks and re-established connections bring us closer together rather than alienating us. Once again, the pronominal tussles between “we,” “you” and “us” are central to the novel’s concern with populism. This tension is given ultimate vitriolic force at the outset of part three, which pivots around what the narrator describes as “140 seconds of cutting edge realism.”37 Smith highlights those obscenities which are familiar to many from the Twittersphere, offering a suitably unsettling parody of the unspellchecked, ungrammatical bile, laced with misogyny, racism, homo- and transphobia, that blights this virtual space.

This preoccupation accords with Petra Rau’s rhetorical survey of a contemporary linguistic landscape defined by exclamation-marked doublespeak: “How did we get here, to this historic ‘now’ in which such phrases [‘Control our borders!’ ‘Build that wall!’] were shoutable, and what could the generally softly spoken literary

35 Smith, Winter, 62
36 Smith, Spring, 308.
37 Ibid., 223.
novel say about this moment and its “structure of feeling”? As she reviews an array of post-financial crash texts, Rau asserts that “[in] many ways, the novels worked as a (homeopathic) archaeology aimed at retrieving a measure of complexity from the banality of populist arguments and rash commentaries: this debacular ‘now’ had a long run-up and a number of equally catastrophic predecessors.” Once more, the emphasis falls on recognizing and being responsive to a series of historical antecedents in a manner often occluded in the virtual arena. As above, the foregrounding of “banality” is revealing.

Linking such concerns to the particular overlaps between media and/as consumption in the echo-chambers of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and a whole host of other supposedly networked platforms, Richard’s reflection is particularly striking:

Always on television now, always the same awful pieces of footage, the same faces, same thugs shouting don’t buy from Jews, same shopfronts with the slogans painted on them, same terrorized bullied people being filmed . . . As if such terrible history’s a kind of entertainment . . . Terrible times, easily resurrected . . . I have this same thought in supermarkets too when they play, you know, music from decades ago as if it’s the soundtrack of now. Well, it is the soundtrack of now.

Given her interrogation of “high” and “low” cultural boundaries, Smith’s musical analogies are purposive, with all-too clear analogs between, for example, white supremacism in the Civil Rights era and now. These associations figure explicitly when

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38 Rau, “*Autumn* after the Referendum,” 32.
39 Ibid., 33.
Richard, trying to comprehend contemporary turbulence, maintains that “‘It’s like the 60s all over again.’”

This comment echoes a memorable sentence of Paddy’s, used in my title (“Don’t tell me this isn’t relevant all over again in its brand new same old way”), which speaks to Smith’s novelistic project as a whole.

Returning to the passage, however, Smith offers a suitably Gramscian reminder that hegemony is never totalizing or entirely replicable. If Smith’s text shows vivid affinities with Chantal Mouffe’s assertion that new opportunities for resistance emerge from what we perceive as the saturating crises of the present, the narrative also fizzes with the kind of historical contrapuntalism that animates Stonebridge’s writing from a Eurocentric perspective, as well as Mbembe’s transnational preoccupations.

Smith nurtures this oppositional urgency through a careful appreciation of archives as collective cultural memories. It is crucial, for example, that, in the narrative’s latter stages, when we learn of the Underground Railroad-type arrangement to assist migrants who have fallen victim to indefinite detention, it is Alda (one of the mission’s architects) who advocates genealogical sensitivity:

Did you know . . . that the word slogan was a Gaelic word originally? . . . From the words for the shout of the army. Slaugh-ghairm. Slogan. It means war cry. Tells you all you need to know about what slogans are always about, whether it’s take back control or leave means leave or don’t buy from Jews or I’m lovin’ it or just do it or every little helps.

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41 Ibid., 240.
42 Ibid., 41–2.
43 Mouffe, For a Left Populism, 23.
44 Smith, Spring, 243.
Typically, Smith offers a metatextual celebration of capacious fiction. The key, both poetically and politically, as suggested here, is once again etymology. Language evolves, crosses borders, morphs and perpetually reproduces itself in new constellations. Given the primacy of the Northern Irish “backstop” in Brexit negotiations and their ongoing fallouts, as well as the importance of Smith’s Scottish identity and Scotland more generally as the novel’s backdrop, the Gaelic inflection of Alda’s comment is vital.

The passage’s final note is particularly suggestive. We move from Fascist Germany to the multinational branding of Tesco, exemplifying “finance capital’s twinkle-toed global mobility” across geographical borders, as well as Smith’s quartet more broadly.45 That Mouffe talks about the need for a leftist movement of populist resistance to adopt a different language and recalibrate the alt-right’s vocabulary is illuminating in this regard. She vitally reminds us that populist discourse is not (and has never been) the provenance of any one side of the political spectrum.46

As is the case throughout Spring, we only come to appreciate the broader significance of Paddy’s interventions as we approach the novel’s close: “There’s ways to survive these times . . . one way is the shape the telling takes.”47 In many ways, this encapsulates Smith’s primary preoccupation in Autumn, Winter and Spring: the knot, slippery or secure, between storytelling and survival. This is captured in Daniel’s plea: “always try to welcome people into the home of your story.”48 In a legalistic context where it often seems that “language, which is to say bureaucracy, speaks people, and not the other way around,” there is a political urgency to Smith’s more than linguistic

45 Valluvan, The Clamour of Nationalism, 195.
46 Mouffe, For a Left Populism, 23–4.
47 Smith, Spring, 21.
48 Smith, Autumn, 119.
concern with naming, etymology, and narrating.\textsuperscript{49} This is heightened when filtered through the semiotic prism of detention, with an emphasis on the camp as exceptional space, or otherwise.\textsuperscript{50} Mbembe fleshes out a wider discursive and disciplinary context in strikingly Fanonian terms:

\begin{quote}
[T]he distance that separates the phobia of the dump from the camp has always been very short. Refugee camps, camps for the displaced, migrant camps . . . administrative detention centers . . . This endless list does not stop referring to an ever-present reality, though often largely invisible, not to say all-too-familiar and in the end banal.\textsuperscript{51}
\end{quote}

Given Mbembe’s rendering of the camp’s banality, Smith’s creative and critical project with regard to the bureaucratic violence of the detention center is captured in a couple of examples, oriented around the central pairing of Florence and Brittany. The first takes place at Brit’s work. Smith typically elevates Florence’s legend as some kind of mythical creature believed to hypnotize the sophisticated face-recognition security software in order to gain access. Channelling the force of another contributor to \textit{Refugee Tales}, Marina Warner, Smith invests in fairytales as “deeply serious, all about transformation.”\textsuperscript{52} Strip back the magic and/or mystery and Florence is tasked with posing irritating, embarrassing questions which speak some form of truth to power. If that power will not answer, it at least has to listen:

\textsuperscript{49} Consider the narrator of Smith’s “The Pruner’s Tale”, 181.
\textsuperscript{50} Gilroy, \textit{Between Camps}, 87.
\textsuperscript{51} Mbembe, \textit{Necropolitics}, 60.
\textsuperscript{52} Smith, \textit{Spring}, 276.
I read online yesterday that the High Court has said it’s also illegal to detain, in detention centres like this one, people who have been tortured. And then I read that the Home Office redefined the word torture to give it a more “narrow” definition. So I wanted to ask someone who might know. What is a narrow definition of torture and what is a broad definition of torture?53

That the manager is unable to respond, BoJo blustering about how a child has punctured the biopolitical security bubble, is at once beside and precisely the point.54 It echoes the absurdist tragedy of Holmes’s “The Barrister’s Tale.” This is spliced with veneration for the alacrity of children as the real “teachers of men.” The result is that Smith invests Florence with the inquisitive innocence to expose pomp, sanctimony, and epistemic violence. This is crystallized in the detention facility’s “micro-control and macro-control governmentality.”55 In so doing, Smith offers a more radical antidote to the supposed critiques of liberal elites promulgated by those demagogues of the alt-right.

“A path out of the nightmarish now?”56

To recall the earlier anthropocentric critique, we must consider the relationship between “ecocide” and human displacement in terms of populist discourse.57 When Florence asks the strikingly fundamental question, “[Is] migrating to another country because you need help actually a crime?”, this is another version of Mbembe’s: “[in] this era of great brutality . . . is it necessary to continue to stigmatize those who flee

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53 Ibid., 205.
54 BoJo is an abbreviation for British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson.
55 Boochani, No Friend but the Mountains, 209.
57 Mbembe, Necropolitics, 100.
death because they seek refuge in our countries instead of stoically consenting to dying in the same place they were born?”

This awareness compels us to project not too far forwards to an era when those members of a truly transnational precariat will be the ones most directly affected by shifting metrological conditions. This is powerfully captured in Wallace-Wells’ demand that “the problem of environmental justice” be replaced with “a sharper, less gauzy phrase . . . ‘climate caste system.’ The problem is acute within countries, even wealthy ones, where the poorest are those who live in the marshes, the swamps, the floodplains, the inadequately irrigated places with the most vulnerable infrastructure—altogether an unwitting environmental apartheid.”

Continuing along the climatological trail in response to this polemic, it is revealing that we are introduced to one of Brit’s most robust critiques through the imagery of weather. Our narrator informs us that, post-EU referendum, “[all] the hot summer, people everywhere had been . . . near purple with rage.” If such political-temperature-taking is another manifestation of the organic repository that runs throughout the quartet, it also reverberates with the confusion and fatigue that are fundamental to Smith’s novel. This is seen in Brit’s refusal to tell a BBC reporter how she voted:

what’s the point, if nobody in the end is going to listen to or care about what other people think unless they think and believe the same as them? . . . You just want us to fill your air ... You’re making us meaningless, and the people in

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58 Smith, Spring, 205, and Mbembe, Necropolitics, 33.
59 See the discussion in Behrmann and Kent, eds., Climate Refugees.
60 Wallace-Wells, The Uninhabitable Earth, 24.
61 Smith, Spring, 162.
power, doing it all for *us*, for *democracy*, yeah, right, pull the other one. They’re doing it for their pay-off. They make us more meaningless every day.⁶²

As throughout *Spring*, Smith foregrounds the entanglement between political discourse and media circus in “the attosecond pace of our age.”⁶³ Once again, the result is that two of, if not *the* two most important paradigms in any populist moment and/or movement, right, left or somewhere in between—“*us*” and “*democracy*”—melt into air.

Brit’s moment of political education or ennui also estranges the teleology equating age with accretion of knowledge. If she articulates the kind of post-political hollowness captured by Mouffe, a more oppositional and therefore hopeful antidote emerges if we apply the same frame to a later reference. Here, Smith once again imagines the mythic story of a young girl who refuses to accept her sacrificial role in a long-standing communal ceremony. Her voice is imagined as follows: “[Y]ou know as well as I do, though I’m so young and you’re so old, that I’m older and wiser right now than you’ve ever been.”⁶⁴ Whether or not Smith was listening to Bob Dylan’s “*My Back Pages*” as she wrote these lines, the resonance is uncanny.⁶⁵ Another revealing facet of Brit’s exhaustion in the face of BBC-driven lip-service to participatory democracy is Smith’s focus on hot air. The idea of our so-called political representatives as columns of neoliberal gas is nothing new. Smith’s turn to air as essential property through a peculiarly artistic prism does, however, hold out resistant promise.

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⁶² Smith, *Spring*, 163.
⁶⁴ Smith, *Spring*, 229.
“Getting under the skin of her times”

As throughout her oeuvre, Smith intersperses her prose with visual material. In *Spring*, the endpaper artwork extracts Tacita Dean’s *Why Cloud* (2016). Dean is cited in the novel itself. In the section just before the pastiche of Twitter vitriol, readers are given a reflection on the installation’s enigmatic power. This allows Smith to riff on the multivalence of “cloud,” in terms of contemporary notions of personal and public archives, what remains and reminds in these populist times. Our suitably floating narrator maintains that,

The film is a piece of pure joke-vision. But in it, breathing takes flight. Alchemy and transformation become matters of good spirit . . . what’s left is the story of human beings and air, something we hardly ever notice, or think about, something we can’t live without.

This is enabling when thinking through the relationship between the various entanglements of a global populist moment and how these might frame both our practical and philosophical approaches to institutions, including the university. Particularly urgent are the debates concerning what role a properly critical humanities (decolonized or otherwise) might play within them. As such, the link Smith forges between stories and oxygen as equally essential for survival is vital. The emphasis on defamiliarizing that which we take for granted in order to appreciate our reliance on it is striking.

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67 Smith, *Spring*, 220.
68 See Bhambra, Gebrial, and Nisancioglu, eds., *Decolonising the University.*
In light of this commitment to plugging these debates and issues into much longer genealogies of resistance, there is another connection between Mbembe’s exploration of colonized breathing in Fanon and Smith’s fiction. If both are variously concerned with the necropolitical in its abject reality, Mbembe’s Fanonian recalibration is timely:

It aims to bring about a new humanity. It engages everything: muscles, bare fists, intelligence, the suffering from which one is not spared, blood. A new gesture, it creates new respiratory rhythms. The Fanonian fighter is a human who breathes anew, whose muscular tensions unclench, and whose imagination is in celebration.  

If the visceral register evokes Fanon’s own approach in *The Wretched of the Earth*, it also echoes with Nixon’s call to think beyond and through him. It is the idea of breathing anew, however, that connects to *Spring*.

Set against a backdrop of constricted oxygen supply, the following meditation, again during an exhibition, venerates the liberatory potency of art: “They’d made space to breathe possible, up against something breathtaking.” Just as important, of course, is the narrative privileging of alchemy, transformation, and its links with the imagination’s shapeshifting propensity, recalling Warner’s *Signs and Wonders* (2004). That the preternaturally wise Florence upbraids the cynicism of older-but-none-the-wiser Brit, mimicking the language of procedural democracy used earlier in the text, is

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69 Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, 141.
71 Smith, *Spring*, 79.
more than coincidence: “Brittany, you are vetoing all my imaginative plans.”\textsuperscript{72} That critiques of everything from the populism of climate denial to the EU referendum resort to the rhetoric of imagination, most specifically its defeat, is striking when considering Spring. This is illustrated in Wallace-Wells’ commentary, from the appropriately titled “Storytelling” chapter: “[today], the moves may be millenarian, but when it comes to contemplating real-world warming dangers, we suffer from an incredible failure of imagination. This is climate’s kaleidoscope: we can be mesmerized by the threat directly in front of us without ever perceiving it clearly.”\textsuperscript{73}

Just as Nixon calls for a recalibration of literary studies to prevent their becoming “uncoupled from worldly concerns,” so Smith’s political preoccupations throughout Spring cannot be divorced from her wider investment in and defense of educational and particularly humanities spaces.\textsuperscript{74} The declaration of another Scottish writer committed to thinking through refugee movement against various populist backdrops is therefore powerful. It also takes us back to where this paper began. For A.L. Kennedy,

\begin{quote}
\citeauthor{Kennedy}{true art is not an indulgence, but a fundamental defence of humanity. We seem condemned to forget, to learn and to forget this truth. Each time we do, some of us die. Those defined as Others go first. The strangers, the migrants, those forced into desperate motion by cascading cruelties . . . Harming others recoils upon us.}{209.}
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
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\item\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 197.
\item\textsuperscript{73} Wallace-Wells, \textit{The Uninhabitable Earth}, 143.
\item\textsuperscript{74} Nixon, \textit{Slow Violence}, 31.
\item\textsuperscript{75} Kennedy, “The Migrants,” 209.
\end{footnotes}
While the rhetorical reliance on “cascading cruelties” uncannily anticipates Wallace-Wells’s “cascading violence,” the idea that harm done to others has a boomerang effect recalls Aimé Césaire’s _Discourse on Colonialism_. This is a pivotal text, grappled with in both _Necropolitics_ and Gilroy’s _Between Camps_. In a more avowedly Brexit context, Kennedy’s defense of the urgency of humanities study and artistic endeavour or interventions also accords with Thomas Docherty’s assertion that “[t]he intellect—thinking—is what takes us beyond our own body, our own physical self. It is the intellect that _opens us to foreignness_, to things previously undreamt of in our philosophies. Brexit is a steely closing of that and every other door” (emphasis mine). The resonance with the “diverse borrowings” of Mbembe’s epigraph is clear. Using both Kennedy and Docherty as springboards, the final section of this paper considers Smith’s call-to-imaginative-arms as a mode of resistance, specifically through the paradigms of breathing and opening.

“[Stories and books] can make more than one time possible at once”

One way of figuring Smith’s sense of the imagination as necessarily metamorphic, expansive and expanding territory, is to set it against Mbembe’s sketch of the imaginary of transnational populism, captured in my epigraph. In both _Refugee Tales_ and _Spring_, Smith plays with the quasi-Brechtian commitment that artistic production can activate critical consciousness and, therefore, political action. This can only come into being, however, as and when we acknowledge “we are [all] poems about the hyperobject Earth.” Continuing with the reappropriation of oxygen and air, it is

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76 Wallace-Wells, _The Uninhabitable Earth_, 21.  
77 Césaire, _Discourse on Colonialism_, 20.  
79 Smith, _Winter_, 224.  
80 Morton, _Hyperobjects_, 51.
no coincidence that Florence’s notebook is called the “Hot Air Book.” When Brit delves into it, she realizes the wider-ranging import of the creative and critical play captured in its pages. In essence, Florence finds her own voice by ventriloquizing as a way of parroting others: “Though it’s naïve, the kind of stuff a school student would write, it’s witty too, and it makes Brit think … Even a twelve-year-old girl can see through a lot of what’s happening in the world right now.”

Considering art as potential activism and recalling the explicit policy goals of *Refugee Tales*, the inscription from Florence’s absent mother is particularly poignant: “I want you to write your thoughts and ideas in this book . . . it will help lift your feet off the ground and even to fly like you are a bird, since hot air rises and can not just carry us but help us rise above.” Once again, readers are tasked with being as well-versed as Smith. Given the toxic discourse that has attended everything from MeToo to Black Lives Matter to the erroneously labelled migrant and refugee crisis, the Maya Angelou allusion to “rising above” is vital. Once more, emphasis is placed on the precociousness of youth which cuts through the rhetorical obfuscations of discourses and institutions still dominated by those of a pale, male and stale persuasion.

With reference to the above, one of the most significant (because slippery) terms in the entire text, particularly when thinking of it as a counternarrative to those of Brexit atrophy, is “afterlives.” This notion casts a long shadow over Paddy’s last letter to Richard, given her Saidian emphasis on the possibilities of late style (“not as harmony and resolution, but as intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction”) as the ultimate antagonist of death itself: “Expect the unexpected afterlives . . . Life goes on.”

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81 Smith, *Spring*, 199.
82 Ibid., 324.
The inclusion of “unexpected” makes for a prescient link with Mbembe’s non-Western metaphysical sketch and the openings it might precipitate.\(^{85}\) If the letter ends on a quasi-Beckettian note, a couple of pages later, and just prior to Richard’s returning to Shelley’s touchstone poem “The Cloud,” he muses on how the radical randomness of unexpected encounters, invariably with young people, has renewed his lust for life. In the narrative context of Florence’s saving him from suicide, this assumes even greater poignancy. Given concerns with another buzzword of our age, “risk” carries a different inflection here: “I meet people all the time who are risking themselves and they fill me with their confidence.”\(^{86}\) If Florence can be read as analog for Greta Thunberg, this sense of youth as/and risk recalls the latter’s plea for civil disobedience.\(^{87}\) While she places the emphasis on climate resistance, there are wider implications of “cathedral thinking” when it comes to assessing the aims of Smith’s literary project more broadly: “We must lay the foundation while we may not know exactly how to build the ceiling.”\(^{88}\)

Smith’s decision to have Richard’s political and existential ennui revitalized by those willing and able to risk themselves is critical. Similarly, while the following is not the novel’s final line, its echoing of unexpected afterlives is as powerful as it is poignant: “Unbuilding, undying, the cloud of unknowing, changing its shape as it crosses the sky. The unexpected afterlives. Quite often after that autumn day when his life ended so that it could begin again, Richard will think back to those cloud and mountain pictures . . .”\(^{89}\) The life-in-death/death-in-life play in terms of the failed suicide attempt is key once more.

\(^{86}\) Smith, *Spring*, 287.  
\(^{88}\) Ibid., 67.  
\(^{89}\) Smith, *Spring*, 288.
If this emphasis on hot air seems overdetermined, I conclude by attending to the urgency of Spring’s concern with the all-too-material realities of indefinite detention. Consider, for example, the following exchange between the ironically named Hero and Brit in her role as gatekeeper of fortress Britannia:

Why can’t we open window in this prison? he said.

Open a window, she said. And this isn’t a prison, it’s a purpose-built Immigration Removal Centre with a prison design.

When you’re live in Immigration Removal Centre with a prison design you dream air, the deet said.

When you’re living, she said. Or, when you live. You dream about air.

Hero was his name. Vietnamese. His casenotes said he’d got here by being sealed in a haulage container for seven weeks.90

Brit’s hollow desire to project linguistic mastery over Hero is another variation on the surface-depth trope that runs throughout the text. As the all-too-material frame of the passage suggests, however (we move from the carceral description of the center as prison to the dehumanizing claustrophobia of the haulage container, reminiscent of so many testimonies from Refugee Tales), the re-grounded urgency of Smith’s intervention is evident. Indeed, Smith’s own contribution to the first volume of Refugee Tales, “The Detainee’s Tale,” is a laboratory for her 2019 novel. Here the narrator figures her innocence as criminal:

90 Smith, Spring, 160.
You look at me and you say: you would ask God not to send your enemies to
detention, where fellow human beings treat you not like human beings. . . . But
still, I’m thinking to myself as you speak. It can’t be that bad . . . and there’s a
window. Albeit a window that doesn’t open. A window all the same. I am an
idiot. But I’m learning. A mere hour or two with you in a university room and
I’m about to find out that what I’ve been being taught is something world-
sized.91

As this piece foregrounds the central thesis of this paper, it also adds substance to
Herd’s description of the UK’s exceptional rendering of migrant bodies in labyrinths
of indefinite detention as “slow violence.”92

Thinking historically about the politics of breath and breathing, we might recast
both the dialogue between Hero and Brit, and that between Smith and the anonymous
detainee, through the oppositional lens of Discourse on Colonialism once more,
drawing specifically on Césaire’s idea that true “exchange is oxygen.”93 In the example
from Spring, Brit does not talk to Hero; she talks across and above him in a bid to cut
off the potentially transformative impact the air of any real exchange might have. As
such, this stands as a metonym for a wider, more systemic “official hostility of non-
listening,” in what Abdulrazak Gurnah labels “a machine which is programmed to be
cruel.”94 It is only when the carnivalesque Florence disrupts the haulage container of
Brit’s ideological convictions that oxygen and light start to trickle in. Her namesake,
Ali Smith, once again probes the relationship between transgressive imagination and

91 Smith, “The Detainee’s Tale,” 55.
93 Césaire, Discourse on Colonialism, 11.
prescriptive national imaginary through linguistic play. This is done via the very word “detainee,” abbreviated to “Deet” by Torq, one of Brit’s co-workers: “Everything about this job is repellent. And you got to be careful with DEET. Your speech can get slurred, you can feel really sick, it’s a neurotoxin, under your skin going right into you.”95 If the immunopolitical association is far from subtle, it captures the relationship between cleansing and contagion at the heart of “biopolitical rationality” on both micrological and macrological scales: “the drive to remain untouched.”96 As writers, readers, and thinkers, we can never allow ourselves to remain untouched.

As the DEET section plays with the ethno-nationalism undergirding much populist xenophobia in terms of “the sedentary poetics of either soil or blood,” it also refocuses attention on that most crucial of concerns: the disposability of those lives deemed “other.”97 This is ventriloquized in a section of Spring that could easily sit in Refugee Tales. It concerns those multiple modes of administrative and other weaponization through which migrant bodies and experiences are rendered invisible:

My being ineligible makes you all the more eligible.

And it’s this face, like the faces on the poster-lorry the white man in the suit posed in front of, of a great queue of people, I mean non-people, at a border, which proved once and for all that all the people on the poster were faceless nobodies while his face was the face of a somebody. He had the only face that matters.

My face is a breaking point.98

95 Smith, Spring, 134.
96 Dillet, “Suffocation and the Logic of Immunopolitics,” 250.
97 Gilroy, Between Camps, 111, and Valluvan, The Clamour of Nationalism, 5.
98 Smith, Spring, 126.
The imprimaturs of Emmanuel Levinas and Sara Ahmed linger over such passages, as does Mbembe’s opening association of our age with “strong narcissistic bonds”.\textsuperscript{99} This is amplified in another passage (“My face is all about you”), with the somatic emphasis on the face as contact zone.\textsuperscript{100} By playing with the very discourse of reception and hospitality in the context of populist debates, Smith’s novel takes us back to where we began. We wrestle with the omnipresent topic of borders in terms of where “home” ends and “away” begins, where my face stops and the other’s starts, wandering between the boundaries designating what is and is not acceptable in our contested here and now, always already framed by a longer “then.”

\textit{“The bruised hope of redemption”}\textsuperscript{101}

\textit{Spring} puts the very rhetoric within which so much purportedly populist debate is couched under the kind of interrogative microscope that might allow, if not compel, us to breathe life into tried and tired discussions. This challenge is addressed by Nguyen in his introduction to \textit{The Displaced}: “But if borders are legal, are they also just? Our notions of borders have shifted over the centuries, just as our notions of justice and humanity have.” He continues:

\begin{quote}
The dissolution of borders is the utopian vision of cosmopolitanism, of global peace and of a global place where no one is displaced, of humanity as a global community that is allowed its cultural differences that lead us to exploit, punish, or kill. Making borders permeable, we bring ourselves closer to others, and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{99} Mbembe, \textit{Necropolitics}, 30.
\textsuperscript{100} Smith, \textit{Spring}, 126–7.
\textsuperscript{101} Radford, “\textit{Spring}, by Ali Smith. Timeless Novel.”
others closer to us. I find such a prospect exhilarating, but some find this proximity unimaginably terrifying.102

As the following suggests, such concerns provide a conceptual canvas on which Florence projects her disarmingly clear treatise: “What if, the girl says. Instead of saying, this border divides these places. We said, this border unites these places. This border holds together these two really interesting different places. What if we declared border crossings places where, listen, when you crossed them, you yourself became doubly possible.”103 In light of Stephen Clingman’s generative notion of grammars of identity, the jarring nature of these lines, playing with incongruous commas and dissonant full-stops, is purposive on a number of levels.104 Similarly, if Florence’s statement chimes with Nguyen’s, as well as Reece Jones’s Violent Borders: Refugees and the Right to Move (2017), it also connects with Mbembe’s paradigm of “borderization”:

Everything begins with [borders], and all paths lead back to them . . . these dead spaces of non-connection which deny the very idea of a shared humanity . . . What, then, is “borderization,” if not the process by which world powers permanently transform certain spaces into impassable places for certain classes of populations? What is it about, if not the conscious multiplication of spaces of loss and mourning, where the lives of a multitude of people judged to be undesirable come to be shattered?105

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103 Smith, Spring, 196.
105 Mbembe, Necropolitics, 99.
In essence, I feel this passage captures Smith’s creative and critical project. It is signalled in the title of an earlier novel, *How To Be Both* (2014), as well as in Stonebridge’s defense of “[writing as] the staging of two-in-one thinking.” The notion of containing multitudes is perhaps most disarmingly captured when Florence tells a security guard, “I am capable of being a person of more than one name.”

As is the case throughout the various contributions to *Refugee Tales*, etymological sensitivity reminds us of the intimate connection between translation and crossing itself. Similarly, as suggested by these lines, we as readers are once more in the realm of identity as “a noun of process,” rather than a destination and/or fixity. Seen in this way, metamorphosis is neither the preserve of Ovid nor the alternative mythologization of migrancy fetishized by Homi Bhabha. Rather, metamorphosis is the condition of all. In the interests of those committed to contesting the rise of alt-right populism, it can be harnessed to define ourselves in affiliative terms that are always already networked across race, class, gender, sexuality, and national divides in the service of counter-hegemonic and therefore collective goals. An indication of the slippery power-knowledge nexus we are confronting comes when Smith once again plays with the use and abuse of legalese through a tragi-comic lens:

>Detention is the key to maintaining an effective immigration system

HO

Nobody is detained indefinitely and regular reviews of detention are undertaken to ensure it all remains lawful and proportionate

107 Smith, *Spring*, 234.
HO HO HO.\textsuperscript{109}

The first HO explicitly targets the Home Office, while the Santalike refrain takes satirical aim at the façade of civilization it supposedly upholds. We therefore revisit one of \textit{Spring}'s central ideas: that of double possibility. In particular, we are asked to consider how and why the very organic nature of the seasonal cycle teaches us about the reality of dialectical promise.

In her creative and critical work, I see Smith as an interlocutor of a defamiliarized and defamiliarizing populism, riffing on the chains of equivalence attended to by Mouffe and Richter, amongst others.\textsuperscript{110} Smith celebrates and enacts artistic multitudes to counter the invariably reductive, toxic rhetoric of the neoliberal status-quo. This endeavor is captured by Paddy who, like Smith, rages against the machine. Her intention, however utopian, is to humanize by breathing life into it:

\begin{quote}
Oh, I understand Brexit, she’d said. So many people angered into democracy for all the reasons. What I don’t understand is Windrush. What I don’t get, can’t get my head round, is Grenfell. Windrush, Grenfell, they aren’t footnotes in history. They’re history.

The whole of history is footnotes, Pad, he said.

Common wealth, she said. What a lie. Why hasn’t there been an outcry the size of this so-called United Kingdom? Those things would’ve brought down a government at any other time in my life. What’s happened to all the good people of this country?
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{109} Smith, \textit{Spring}, 167.
\textsuperscript{110} Richter, “The Two Bodies of Biopolitics,” 6.
Compassion fatigue, Richard said.

Fuck compassion fatigue, she said. That’s people walking about with dead souls.\(^{111}\)

By provoking her readers, across *Autumn, Winter, Spring* and the forthcoming *Summer*, Smith invites us to keep our social distance from soul death. In so doing, we may prevent our humanity from becoming zombified. Who knows what might happen then?

**References**


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