

Ethics and Aesthetics in Ali Smith's Fiction

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10 The transformative power of art

10.1 Introduction

In this book, I propose an intertextual (dialogical) approach to Ali Smith's text continuum, rooted in my contention that Smith's fiction is intensely dialogical in both form and meaning (see Chapter 1). I have thus provided ample evidence in previous chapters that dialogue underpins Ali Smith's novels, which not only interact with her earlier works but also "converse" with a variety of other art forms. This interaction mirrors the dialogue presented in each novel as a way of confronting the trauma that plagues her characters. Interestingly, solutions are typically revealed through art. As a result, if such traumas reflect the tragedies of the extradiegetic present, Smith's primary message becomes apparent: dialogue facilitated by art can significantly contribute to the construction of a better world. In turn, this highlights the ethical dimension of Smith's literary project.

The contention outlined above has largely shaped the structure of this book. In Chapter 3, I analysed Smith's recurring character types and their personal traumas, which echo the tragic elements of the extradiegetic present explored in Chapters 4 and 5. Moreover, I have investigated Smith's preferred mode of *dénouement*, which typically centres on art-enabled dialogue. Thus, Chapter 6 explored the disruptive figures that facilitate this dialogue as well as the implications of the magical realism with which they infuse Smith's novels. Additionally, Chapters 7–9 provided a detailed analysis of the literary mechanisms through which Smith exposes her characters and readers to art.

I will now conclude my examination of Smith's fiction by analysing the impact of the artistic encounters facilitated by her disruptive characters. In what follows I shall scrutinise this through a dual lens. First, I will explore the nature and extent of this impact, focusing on the characters affected and their own personal struggles. Following this, I will examine how this influence relates to the extradiegetic crises mirrored in the characters' personal traumas, thereby enabling a discussion on the ethical and political nature of Smith's fiction.

10.2 Personal transformations

10.2.1 *Personal transformations from Like to How to Be Both*

My study begins with Amy, from Smith's first novel, *Like*. As argued in Chapter 6, Amy shares important features with the disruptive characters that typically bring about the dénouement in Smith's fiction. However, her role in the novel is particularly intriguing, as it is not limited to "enlightening" Ash. This is, in fact, a task that she performs unconsciously, the result being that she ultimately learns as much from Ash as Ash learns from her.

Amy has been blessed with physical beauty and a privileged background. This makes her feel superior to Ash, whom she treats with condescension. However, she is deeply conflicted about her own sexual orientation, resulting in a simultaneous desire for, and resentment towards, Ash. Interestingly, Smith uses art—or rather, Amy's views on it—as a metaphor for her moral flaws. As discussed in Chapter 2, Smith considers that her fiction is firmly anchored in "reality." Accordingly, not even the magical elements present in her novels distract the reader from "the real." In fact, as Liebermann has put it, her fiction "connects us back to 'the real'" (2019, 136). This quality is what Armitstead (2019) refers to as "fictional truth," further linking Smith's work to reality. Amy, however, regards art as a mere object of theoretical inquiry and does not let herself be affected by it. In a lecture—an eye-opening experience for Ash—Amy deems language "meaningless," considering words "fiction" and, as such, incapable of "express[ing] anything but the ghost of truth" (Smith 1997, 269).

Amy's "art for art's sake" views, therefore, starkly defy the notion of "fictional truth," which is central to Ali Smith's fiction. By way of example, in *The Accidental*, fiction is said to have "the unique power of revealing something true" (2005, 82). In *There but for the*, Brooke learns that "another way of describing what's real" is "[m]etaphorically" (2011, 314). She wants the story she will write for Miles to be "a work of the imagination that's simultaneously rigorously true" (352). As the ghost of Katherine Mansfield puts it in "The Ex-Wife," "[f]iction [...] is impossible but enables us to reach what is relatively truth" (2015, 108; italics in the original). In Smith's own words, "fiction is one of our ways of telling the truth" (Smith, qtd. in Armitstead 2019).

Amy's conception of art, however, rests on the opposite premise. Her words, therefore, cannot relate, ethically or otherwise, to reality. This is evident in her diary, which completely erases Ash: "Not once did I get a mention. I wasn't there, anywhere. She'd left me out" (305). This painful realisation catalyses change in Ash, who sets fire to Amy's college room, using her treasured collection of literary masterpieces as kindling (304). Understanding this act sheds light on the mysterious trauma that has led

to Amy's losing her ability to read. Ash's arson makes Amy realise that art made with words (i.e. literature) can express much more than merely "the ghost of truth." Amy's "vision" of "fictional truth" involves a radical reconceptualisation of language, literature, and art in general, which she needs time to process. The Amy whom the reader encounters at the beginning of the novel seems to have forgotten how to read. The Amy that the reader witnesses during and after her short trip to Italy gradually recovers her reading skills. More precisely, she learns to "read" and observe art differently, not only intellectually but also affectively, letting herself be moved by it—as in her aesthetic moment at the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii (114; see Chapter 7).

However, not all the art encounters propitiated by Smith's disruptive characters are equally successful. The art to which Else (the homeless beggar in *Hotel World*) exposes Penny (the privileged journalist at the *World on Sunday*) is life itself, and the very fact that Else is still alive in a country where her life does not "make good copy" (2001, 170) is nothing short of a beautiful miracle, or indeed a work of art. This again reinforces the usefulness of ecocritical approaches in general, and Neimanis and Hamilton's (2018) concept of the "naturalcultural" in particular, when it comes to analysing Ali Smith's fiction and her aim to challenge the nature/culture binary.

Smith hints at Else's links to the world of culture and art with no small dose of irony. As seen before, Penny first mistakes her beggar clothes for those of a "minor ex-rock star" (Smith 2001, 139). She also asks Penny about the meaning of a word, "rebegot" (172), coined by John Donne in his poem "A Nocturnal upon St Lucy's Day." This clearly inspires a sense of rebirth or renewal "even at the darkest of times" (Germanà 2017, 101), thereby strengthening the miraculous nature of Else's existence. Last but not least, Else takes Penny on an instructional tour of the city's suburbs, during which Else peeps "through the windows of all those houses" (Smith 2001, 162), catching glimpses of the lives of those who, irrespective of their actual positions on the social ladder, are infinitely better off than Else herself (159).

All this, however, is lost on Penny. Because of her privileged life and prejudiced views—symbolised by her writing down Else's reference to Donne's poem as "rebiggot" (172)—she takes a long time to realise that Else is not an eccentric rock star but a homeless person. However, when the "Penny Drops" (171), she briefly experiences empathy and writes Else a cheque (173). Shortly afterwards, she cancels it and, back in her comfortable room, she numbs her senses with pay-per-view porn (175).

Far more successful is Amber's intervention in *The Accidental*. After their holiday in Norfolk Astrid confronts her school bullies, comes to terms with her parents' divorce, and begins to view life with the optimism of a thirteen-year-old. Magnus realises that real sex should be bidirectional

(i.e. dialogical) and thus overcomes his porn addiction. Additionally, he somehow atones for his “sins” by coming clean to Astrid about his involvement in the cyberbullying case that led to a fellow student’s suicide. With his university lecturing position terminated, Michael begins a new relationship with words (like Amy in *Like*) (Smith 2005, 260; 263). Freeing himself from theoretical frameworks that obscured his appreciation of true beauty in art and isolated him from reality, he discovers the “naturalcultural” and begins to write poetry (290). Furthermore, he overcomes his sex addiction (263) and starts a new chapter in his relationship with Eve’s children (281).

Substantial though these changes are, they pale in comparison with Eve’s personal transformation. In *The Accidental*, Eve gives up on her “autobi-otruefictinterviews” (which, in the best of cases, can only express what Amy calls “the ghost of truth” in *Like*) and takes a gap year. While in the USA, she looks back on her life, realising that much of it has been spent thinking exclusively of herself and ignoring multiple opportunities for connection—something poignantly symbolised by her referring to her dying mother’s last words as “meaningless” (290). Eve’s transformation is precipitated by the “naturalcultural.” While sitting in her car at night, Eve suddenly sees an enormous cat, the remains of its latest hunting expedition still warm in its mouth. Before it disappears from her sight, Eve is deeply impressed by how intently it looks at her. “Fuck, Eve said under her breath” (296).

Eve’s reaction, conveyed through an expletive interjection, closely mirrors Richard’s response to Tacita Dean’s *The Montafon Letter* (a visual expression of the sublime, as discussed in Chapter 8). Additionally, this ekphrastic moment literally suspends time: a whole section in the chapter concludes with the information that Eve “fell asleep in the driver’s seat and when she woke up again it was light” (297). A new, short section follows (the last in the novel’s main narrative), offering a glimpse of Eve’s transformation. The new Eve, like Amber before her, is reluctantly accepted by the members of a dysfunctional US family and will disruptively lead them towards a more ethical, responsible life.

A similar transformation, also enabled by a “naturalcultural” encounter (see Chapter 5), is presented in *Girl Meets Boy*. The magnitude of this transformation has been studied by Coppola (2015). Anthea suddenly discovers that she can love another woman. Nevertheless, it is Imogen who changes even more as she confronts her homophobia and essentialist conceptions of nationhood while discovering the damaging links between neoliberalism and globalisation.

As noted by Calder, the discussion of art at the dinner table precipitates the main event in *There but for the*, namely Miles’ withdrawal from the party. Immediately before this happens, the hosts and guests have been discussing “controversial examples of contemporary art practice such as Emin’s *My Bed* (1998) and Martin Creed’s *Work No. 227: The lights*

going on and off (2000),” which ironically “are deemed ‘pointless,’ not ‘mak[ing] anything happen’” (Calder 2023, 358). Additionally, and as shown in Chapter 9, Miles has an impact on Brooke through their collaborative story writing, teaching her not only the difference between reality and its perception but also that fiction and truth are by no means antonyms (Smith 2011, 345–46).

Deep, profound change is experienced by the first-person homodiegetic narrator in *Artful* who, reading through her deceased partner’s essays on (the transformative power of) art, finds her grief alleviated as she finds a new meaning in life. This applies equally well to George/ia in *How to Be Both*, whose exposure to Francesco del Cossa’s art enables her to come to terms with her mother’s death. Interestingly, it is her mother who, seemingly in dialogue with some of the dinner guests in *There but for the* according to whom “[n]o art has ever really changed anything” (2011, 152) and building on a famous line by W. H. Auden, states what in fact becomes the novel’s central tenet: “[a]rt makes nothing happen in a way that makes something happen” (2014, 46). Smith’s extensive use of ekphrasis in this novel presents the act of beholding (art) as a dialogic event in which “[t]he object that I behold is a co-actor with me in a visual happening” (Lewis 2019, 141).

As argued in Chapter 8, painting is used here as representative of all arts. Consequently, a similar case can be made for literature, the reader, and the act of reading. This “happening” is experienced vicariously through a literary creation, George, whose aesthetic gaze leads her to discover what Evans (2018) calls the “necessary contingent” and the complex, non-binary nature of reality. This has a healing effect on George, who begins to overcome the trauma of her mother’s death, largely due to her realisation that the past is always present (Lewis 2019, 136) and, consequently, that her mother, although deceased, is still very much alive.¹ Ultimately, this leads George to accept her own attraction to Helena.

10.2.2 *Autumn: interpreting collage and bagatelles*

In *Autumn*, Elisabeth becomes an open-minded individual concerned about the breakdown of social consensus through her prolonged exposure to Daniel’s ekphrastic descriptions of Pauline Boty’s collages and his love of art. Collage metaphorically represents Britain’s social and political fragmentation but crucially also “suggest[s] a response to it. Collage constitutes a reassemblage of fragments into a new whole” (Schmitz-Justen 2022, 334). Additionally, Daniel’s exercises in co-creative storytelling open Elisabeth’s eyes to the discursive construction of reality, the ethical function of art and the notion of “fictional truth.”

Transformation also affects Elisabeth’s mother, Wendy, who initially embodies “the conventional frames of thinking” (Pittel 2018, 62). Thus,

she suspects that Daniel is gay and fears he may negatively influence her daughter. In addition, she seems to suffer from the “cruel” nostalgia (Eaglestone 2018, 95–96) that informs contemporary English nationalism. However, her romantic involvement with Zoe suggests that her original suspicions about Daniel’s sexuality were tied to her own repressed desires.

Crucially, Wendy’s transformation also concerns nostalgia. Towards the end of the novel, she is arrested for throwing a barometer purchased at an antiques centre at the fence enclosing the village commons (Smith 2016a, 254), where an Immigration Removal Centre (IRC) is being built (of which more below). These antiques signify “cruel nostalgia” (Eaglestone 2018) when first described as part of the TV show in which Wendy participates (see Chapter 5). However, her unexpected reaction transforms them into a symbolic weapon against cruel nostalgia, now identified as a poisonous element contributing to the country’s current state. This “weaponisation” of applied art objects echoes Ash’s arson in *Like, Anthea* and Robin’s “artivism” in *Girl Meets Boy* and Carol’s “*Internet Guerrilla Interventionis[m]*” in *How to Be Both* (2014, 20). Accordingly, it adds a (tongue-in-cheek) dimension to the transformative power (and ethical function) of art which draws Elisabeth to Pauline Boty’s work in *Autumn* and is central to Ali Smith’s fiction.

10.2.3 Winter: defrosting estrangement between dialectical opposites

Not one but three personal changes are portrayed in Smith’s second seasonal novel. Pittel defines Art(hur)’s as his discovering “that his interest in nature must be thoroughly transformed so as to quit regarding nature as a place beyond politics” (2018, 66). Consequently, Art revamps his “Art in Nature” blog in collaboration with his former partner Charlotte, thereby once again bringing to the fore Neimanis and Hamilton’s (2018) concept of the “naturalcultural.”

However, I would argue that Art’s transformation goes beyond his adoption of a political approach to nature. As mentioned in Chapter 9, Smith’s ecocritical sensibility entails fostering a dialogue-based “naturalcultural” sense of community that Heise (2008) would probably define as “eco-cosmopolitan.” This has an impact on Art’s estrangement from his mother. Having earned Sophia’s trust, Lux knows the identity of Art’s real father and strongly advises him to “talk with her.” To bring down Art’s initial reluctance, based on the argument that they have “[n]othing in common,” Lux replies,

Everything in common She’s your history. That’s the other difference between meat and humans. I don’t mean between animals and humans. They know how to evolve. We’re more gifted than them, the chance to

know where we came from. To forget it, to forget what made us, where it might take us, it's like ... [f]orgetting your own head.

(Smith 2017, 311–12)

Lux's counterargument is firmly grounded on Wolfe's (2003) species grid. It challenges anthropocentric views by rejecting human sovereignty over the environment, particularly through the category of "animalised animals" ("meat"), while denying animals a subjectivity that is exclusively human (Mallory 2009, 8). This, in turn, entails an extra degree of responsibility for humans, which recalls Mallory's re-interpretation of Scholz's concept of "political solidarity": humans must "act politically" for the "natural other" while "recognizing and accounting for [its] difference" (Mallory 2009, 13). To act politically, however, humans must first unite, for which a sense of "community" needs to be created—hence the dialogue Lux insists on as a means of bringing Sophia, her son Arthur, and her sister Iris back together. In turn, building this community involves activating the "cultural" element of the "naturalcultural" continuum, fostering a sense of origin that acknowledges the "pastness in the present," central to Smith's fiction. However, this notion of origin should not be misconstrued as supportive of essentialist identities (see Chapter 5). Rather, Smith advocates for the shaping of culture (unavoidably present in human life) to accommodate a relational concept of identity (Bailey 2010, 7).

Recognising the need for dialogue is also key to Sophia's and Iris' transformation. Having been estranged for years, the aesthetic moments they experience in the novel not only bring the sisters together but also rekindle their dialogue. This is something I shall return to but I first need to clarify that my take on these two characters differs substantially from those put forward by scholars like Byrne (2020, 86) and Šnircová (2021, 167), who identify Sophia as a modern, female adaptation of Dickens' Scrooge. My view also diverges from Greer's, who contends that Smith's "work is ... distinctly partisan, unambiguously anti-Brexit and clear about its judgments towards conservative, xenophobic figures, who are represented in flattened caricature" (2024, 2). While I recognise Dickens' character as Sophia's literary ancestor, I find both Byrne's and Šnircová's interpretation too extreme, as it indirectly fosters a reading of Iris's and Sophia's respective worldviews in terms of right and wrong.

For her part, Greer recognises the influence of Hannah Arendt's philosophy on Smith's fiction, arguing that Arendt claims that "the common world" is a "performative achievement, a space generated when and where people meet and regard the same objects from different vantage points." However, Greer emphasises that, for Arendt, not all viewpoints are equally valid (2024, 16–17), which would seemingly justify Smith's use of caricature to portray certain characters. This notwithstanding, the polyvocality

of Smith's fiction precludes this interpretation. My contention is that Smith aims to explore the circumstances influencing these characters' thoughts and actions, fostering empathy in readers so they can understand—yet not necessarily endorse—their motivations and choices.

Iris is an anti-Brexit environmental and human rights activist who left home young, joined hippie communes, participated in the Greenham Commons Protest, provides humanitarian aid to fight the so-called refugee crisis, and, as seen in *Summer*, offers shelter to asylum seekers released from IRCs during COVID. In contrast, Sophia is a pro-Brexit “identity conservative” who built a successful career as an entrepreneur, honours her family, values tradition, and suffers from “cruel” nostalgia.

This seems to suggest that the reader is expected to sympathise—not simply empathise—with Iris (see Chapter 9). However, Smith's portrayal is slightly more nuanced. Iris' activism leads her to reject the career path their parents envisioned for her, much to their disappointment (Smith 2017, 116). Sophia considers Iris' time at a squatting hippie commune as a flimsy justification for a careless, burden-free life (117). Iris' activism has resulted in multiple arrests and caused her parents considerable distress (138–39), ultimately estranging her from her family. Consequently, Sophia cannot forget her sister's inexplicable absence at their mother's funeral while resenting just as much Iris' attendance at their father's after years of silence (123; 172–73).

Equally complex is Sophia's portrayal. While the reader may admire her entrepreneurship, her first clothes import business had dubious moral foundations, relying on the exploitation of cheap labour in the developing world (121–22). On the other hand, she claims to treasure family values. By way of example, at her father's funeral, although she has lost her faith, Sophia takes communion to honour her father and his legacy. She also keeps her father's family name after marriage so that her son can inherit it (172). However, such family values did not prevent her from prioritising her career over her relationship with her only son, who is left in her father's care and is subsequently sent to boarding school.

In essence, the reader encounters two extremes identified by Šnircová as “passionate commitment” versus “detached reason” (2021, 165), each revealing its own contradictions. Sophia's aesthetic experience with Barbara Hepworth's sculpture reminds her of the need to “see different things from different positions” (Smith 2017, 273). What is more, her maternal instincts towards the disembodied head that she sees (part of her protracted aesthetic experience) reflect the painful realisation of her insensitivity towards others, including her own son. The germ of new encounters with people, beginning with her family, can therefore be found in Sophia's aesthetic encounter with Hepworth's sculpture and is further encouraged by Lux, who draws a parallel between divisions among the

characters in Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* and the three family members with whom she spends Christmas (201).

By the end of the novel Art not only reprises the writing of his—now politically-engaged—“Art in Nature” blog but he also ensures the continuity of uninterrupted dialogue between himself, his mother Sophia, and his aunt Iris. He does this by texting, asking them questions à la Charlotte. One of them inquires about “*the difference between politics and art*” (317). Sophia's polished reply is that both “*are polar opposites. As a very fine poet once said [a reference to John Keats], we hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us.*” In contrast, “*THE HUMAN will always surface in art no matter its politics, & THE HUMAN will not be absent or repressed in most politics no matter its art*” is Iris' sloppy answer (317; italics in the original).

These replies illustrate Smith's understanding of “style as content” (Smith 2012b). Sophia's meticulously crafted text embodies her belief in “beauty” as “the true way to change things for the better” (2017, 211). Conversely, Iris' hasty typing captures her belief that (the) beauty (of art) is secondary to politics. Most importantly, however, they demonstrate that Smith does not invite the reader to sympathise with either view. In her profoundly ethical literary project, beauty and political commitment are intertwined. This commitment is all about fostering empathic dialogue to understand and respect but not necessarily agree with different world-views. As Masters notes, “her novels' multi-perspectivalism seems to be more about shifting angles of vision than faithfully representing or evaluating the consciousness of another” (2021, 989). Accordingly, *Winter* “ends on a reconciliatory note,” suggesting that empathy and dissent can co-exist in an advanced society (Pittel 2018, 66).

10.2.4 Spring: *hope amidst despair*

Spring invites the reader to witness different degrees of transformation in Richard and Brit(tany). Richard's protracted encounter with Tacita Dean's art, fostered by Paddy, allows him to grasp the transient yet transcendent nature of human life, offering him hope as he faces Paddy's impending death. Paddy's demise, however, proves too great a shock for Richard. He needs Florence's intervention, the other disruptive figure in this novel. Florence literally saves him from death and aids in his self-discovery. This occurs through another protracted aesthetic encounter that reconnects him to Paddy, revealing that the insights gained from her had not been “unlearned” but simply lay dormant in him.

The scene unfolds at the Bronze-Age burial complex of the Clava Cairns—another example of the “pastness in the present” that permeates Smith's fiction. He chooses one tomb and, while standing in its passageway, he “looks up at the clouds” (Smith 2019, 285). By now the reader can

easily associate these clouds and Tacita Dean's cloud drawings (discussed in Chapter 8). To strengthen this connection, Richard also produces Paddy's favourite poem, Shelley's "The Cloud," from his pocket. At this moment, the third-person narrator reproduces the poem's last verse (287–88), linking Dean's drawings and Shelley's poem to the apophatic theology tradition represented by the fourteenth-century treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing*. This Shelleyan "poetics of doubt," where doubt expresses the presence—not absence—of faith (Porter 2016, 1), is the foundation on which the new Richard will now stand.

The other instance of personal transformation is Brit's, a character whom I find interesting on multiple levels. First, her transformation is not entirely successful. Second, unlike most other characters, she is not a middle- but working-class woman whose hard, poorly-paid, morally-questionable job in an IRC represents an "internal conflict" that "feels like a real predicament and provides much-needed narrative tension" (Thomas-Corr 2020, 45). Third, Brit can be read synecdochically as representative of her whole country: significantly, she is called "Britannia" by a work colleague and even her own boyfriend, Josh.

Determined to repay her mother for the sacrifices she made to raise her singly, Brit resigns herself to a non-academic life, taking a job that she detests as a detention custody officer (DCO) in an IRC, while Josh prefers to remain unemployed rather than work in such a capacity. This points to the morally questionable nature of Brit's choices, including her reporting on Florence's whereabouts, which leads to the girl's and her mother's detention. These two crucial aspects can cause Brit to be negatively perceived in the novel (see, for example, Byrne 2020). However, I will argue for a more positive interpretation of her character.

Brittany agonises over the nature of her job, even attempting to deny its existence linguistically. When her mother asks her to explain what she does at work, Brit replies that she is a "DCO at one of the IRCs employed by the private security firm SA4A who on behalf of the HO run the Spring ... and one or two others too" (Smith 2019, 133). By deliberately using opaque jargon, including professional-sounding acronyms, she conceals the darker aspects of her duties from her mother and, more importantly, from herself, as this indirect naming symbolically denies existence to the non-named referents.

I shall return shortly to the issue of IRCs and the role they play in Smith's seasonal quartet. Suffice it to say here that, through Brit's eyes, *Spring* offers a sombre portrayal of detainee conditions. Despite her efforts to numb her senses, the brutal reality surrounding Brit is painfully clear. Thus, she is taken aback by the realisation of the unconscious unkindness with which she treats others, as well as by the negative emotions that her unkindness is causing her (304). This alone makes Brit a very different character from Penny, who, in *Hotel World*, has been "blessed with the gift of no guilt" (2001, 154).

Brit's transformation is triggered by Florence, although the not entirely successful outcome of their collaborative artmaking (see Chapter 9) suggests that her transformation will not be complete. While on the train from London to Scotland, Brit already feels that she has begun to recover part of her lost wit and *joie de vivre* (198). However, their drive through the Highlands tests Brit's endurance, as she is excluded from a conversation dominated by Alda and Richard (292–93). This scenario is suggestive of the theme of invisibility that Smith explores in her fiction, which can be traced back to Ash in *Like or Else* in *Hotel World*. Unsurprisingly, it evokes the same sensation Brit experiences earlier in the novel when BBC reporters ask her how she voted in the Brexit Referendum—a question to which Brit refuses to respond—and then incorrectly take down her profession and—most importantly—name. Ironically, by miswriting “Brittany” to match the (potentially homophonic) name of one of the most famous pop stars on the planet, the BBC reporters symbolically deny Brit her very existence (164).

This contextualisation, which unmistakably identifies Brit as one of those “left behind,” is key to interpreting the turn of events in the novel. Having dropped Richard off at a supermarket, Alda and Florence leave without Brit, which makes her realise that she has been used as an escort for Florence. Consequently, driven by a sense of “loss” that makes her recall the devastation she felt at her father's death when she was just a little girl, Brit calls SA4A (the company operating the IRC where she works) and reports on Florence (317). Brit thus has the dubious honour of being the catalyst for one of the most tragic outcomes portrayed in Smith's fiction. However, this outcome is a natural reaction to her feeling invisible, allowing the reader to empathise with Brit and understand the nature of her actions. Moreover, it also connects to what in all likelihood was her Leave vote in the Brexit Referendum. Considering that this was the majority vote in Britain (and most especially in England, as discussed in Chapter 5), it would not be too far-fetched to posit that Smith presents Brittany as a kind of *every(wo)man*, thereby encouraging careful reflection among a broad cross-section of her readers. Brit's symbolic name, as well as her choice of words when she notices Alda's suspicions when she sees her in her SA4A uniform, seems to confirm this interpretation: “I might be anybody ... at all,” Brit states (215).

Despite this tragic outcome, Brit does not revert to her previous self before meeting Florence. Unlike Penny in *Hotel World*, Brit is a changed woman. After seeing SA4A staff surround Florence and her mother, she runs away from the site. However, feeling “as sick as a dog,” she has to stop, ironically by “a sign with the words Conservation in Action” (321). The sign's double meaning is impossible to ignore, referring literally to the preservation of a historic site and indirectly to the ongoing

enactment of the country's racial bordering policies. However, Brit's Anglocentrism remains unchanged. Back at work, the sound of a Scottish colleague speaking Gaelic makes her want to cry (326), her reflection being that only English should be spoken "in England. ... Britain. She meant Britain" (327).

Nevertheless, Smith leaves the door open for hope. The reader knows that Brit keeps Florence's scrapbook. The possibility remains, therefore, that reading it, once her present pain is gone, might lead to another enlightening aesthetic encounter. Even if this is not the case, the reader has at least been provided with crucial insights into Brit's perfectly human behaviour, thereby fostering the reader's "emotional identification," if not "conformity or agreement" (Cuddon 2013, 233) with her.

10.2.5 *Summer and Companion Piece: models of symbiotic co-existence*

In *Summer*, Charlotte is given her own stellar moment as a disruptive figure, inspiring change in the dysfunctional Greenlaws. The "con-senting" message (Cranfield 2018) conveyed by Lorenza Mazzetti's film *Together*, ekphrastically described by Charlotte (see Chapter 8), is absorbed by Robert, who begins to show signs of transformation after Charlotte and Arthur's visit. Embarrassed by Charlotte's awareness of his latest prank—gluing an hourglass onto Sacha's hand—he is also relieved by what he perceives as "con-senting": Charlotte winks at him and "[i]n the blink of her eye the world is made possible all over again" (Smith 2020, 114). This prompts Robert to apologise to Sacha and seemingly puts an end to his pranks.

Evidence of Robert's transformation is provided on two further occasions. While in Suffolk, 104-year-old Daniel mistakes Robert for his beloved sister Hannah, from whom he last heard before World War II (WW2). Daniel expresses how much he has missed her by saying, "I thought time had quite undone us" (195). Although Robert does not quite understand why the elderly man calls him "Hannah," he refuses to interrupt dialogue: "time and space are what lace us all up together," he replies. "[W]e tend to think we're separate. But it's a delusion. ... It makes you and I more than just you and I It makes us us" (196–97). Robert's answer is not only empathic; it also reinforces Einstein's theory of general relativity, giving it an ethical dimension. For Einstein, whom Robert admires, "[s]pace and time ... are no longer flat (as implicitly assumed by Newton) but can be pushed and pulled, stretched and warped by matter" (Overduin 2007). Such tenets, mirrored in Smith's radically non-linear narrative, intersect with the sense of con-senting in or beyond time that Robert has absorbed from Charlotte via Lorenza Mazzetti's film *Together*.

Robert's (and Sacha's) transformation is fittingly completed at the end of the novel. Charlotte takes them both to Roughton Heath, where Einstein spent a month in a hut after fleeing Nazi Germany. Following in Einstein's footsteps, the three of them open up to each other, Robert revealing his disgust for what he considers "primal" human behaviour (Smith 2020, 373). Charlotte uses him as an example of the primal: "[l]ike, you know. Someone who'd stick a glass thing to his sister's hand?" Immediately afterwards, she adds that "the primal stuff inside us all ... surfaces so we have to decide what to do about it" (373–74). This makes him see that the primal is just as central to the human as the sublime.

Charlotte also addresses Robert's Anglocentric xenophobic views. It will be remembered that, earlier in the novel, the reader learns that Robert had told Ashley, his father's Welsh partner, that "she wasn't welcome in this country as anything but a tourist now" (17). In response, Charlotte likens languages to families in what is possibly Smith's most evident instance of "linguistic hospitality" (Andeweg and Janković 2024, 9), adding that "[t]here's no such thing as an isolated language" (361). The main narrative concludes with Charlotte, Robert, and Sacha "*together,*" trying to identify the stars in the sky (374–75; my italics). This emphasises that the "con-senting togetherness" that the concept of "family" implies has struck a chord with both Robert and Sacha.

Similarly, Grace finds inner peace by embarking on a journey of self-discovery before returning to Brighton. She seeks relief through nostalgia by retracing her steps to an old church she had visited by chance in the summer of 1989. This happened after realising that a fellow theatre group member had given her the wrong cue out of revenge for her dating two actors simultaneously. Grace remembers this moment bitterly, identifying it as the end of her acting career. In that church and on its surrounding churchyard, she experienced an aesthetic encounter with the "natural-cultural" that revealed the beauty and power of "simple pleasures" (295). This lesson, however, does not seem to have made a lasting impression, as the Grace the reader meets at the beginning of the narrative is a bitter, nostalgia-ridden, Brexit-voting middle-aged woman with a failed marriage and two children whose lives she cannot control.

However, the reader realises that this trip, made possible by Charlotte, also propitiates change in Grace. Thus, the intrusive narrator clarifies that the perfect summer day Grace nostalgically longs to relive was not as she remembers (290). Likewise, the reader learns that, while Grace has been tormented by the shame of receiving the wrong cue by a fellow actor in a performance of *The Winter's Tale*, she has completely erased the memories of her immensely moving acting in what was in fact her last triumphal performance of *David Copperfield* upon her return from that church in 1989.

This strongly suggests that it was not her actual performance in *The Winter's Tale* but Grace's perception of it that truncated her acting career. Furthermore, upon finally arriving at the church, she initially fails to recognise the building. When she does and takes a picture of a tombstone that had moved her on her first visit, she realises that, while "beautiful," the photo is but a poor "record of ... a blur of twigs, a surface of old stone, some bright lichen" (317). In short, the photograph fails to capture the essence of her aesthetic experience.

The lesson that Grace learns in Suffolk closely resembles those learnt by Brooke in *There but for the* and Elisabeth in *Autumn*. It pertains to what Althusser called "ideology" (1999, 317), serving as a powerful reminder of the difference between reality and our subjective perception of it. Poignantly, all these implications arise in the text as the reader learns that Grace reflects on the reasons behind her failed marriage and, ultimately, on the motivations behind the way the people cast their votes in the 2016 referendum, which—she acknowledges—has divided the country and even her own family (Smith 2020, 312). By linking Grace's own crisis to the country's social and political unrest, a connection is established between personal and collective memory, both presented as constructed and, therefore, ultimately unreliable.

Charlotte, the instigator of change in the Greenlaws, is portrayed as a more humanised disruptive figure than most of her literary predecessors, with Amy in *Like* being a potential exception. Charlotte has her own weaknesses and is deeply affected by Arthur's love at first sight for Elisabeth, whom they meet in Suffolk as they visit Daniel. By this time, the narrative present is March 2020 and COVID has already struck. Charlotte relocates to Cornwall with Iris, assisting her in transforming Sophia's house into a hostel for IRC inmates released by the British Government because of the pandemic.

However, probably because of her lingering feelings for Arthur and the self-isolation imposed by COVID regulations, Charlotte falls into depression. Like Miles in *There but for the*, she locks herself in her room, losing her fundamental belief in the ethical function and transformative power of art. Indeed, Charlotte, who had derided Arthur's "Art in Nature" blog as "*irrelevant*" and "*reactionary*" (Smith 2017, 58; italics in the original), now believes that "[w]hat art *does* is, it exists ... [a]nd then because we encounter it, we remember we exist too. And that one day we won't" (2020, 330; italics in the original). This perspective runs counter to the main tenets of Charlotte's former (and Smith's own) personal and artistic credo, based on the belief that relevant art combines beauty with political commitment. Such art seeks to effect profound change in individuals, helping them identify the strengths and pitfalls of human society ("fictional truth") and guiding them towards more "con-senting" forms of

co-existence with fellow human beings and the surrounding natural environment. It is precisely through this sense of togetherness that individuals may transcend their otherwise transient existence.

In her depression, Charlotte's views resemble those of Amy in *Like* or Sophia in *Winter*, for whom art and reality exist independently of each other.² However, it is significant that Charlotte ultimately overcomes her depression and recovers her former views through collaborative art, echoing the collaborative storytelling and writing practices seen in *There but for the, Autumn*, and *Spring*. Arthur calls her and suggests they text each other daily to say hello and “make it an aesthetic practice,” “tell[ing] each other ... something we've happened to see or experience that day” (324). This, he believes, may be the embryo of a reconceptualised *Art in Nature* blog during COVID: writing what they say to each other and making it available online, free for everyone to comment on, is seen as “a gift ... to the rest of the world” (326). Otherwise put, and to use the words Sandy would probably use in *Companion Piece*, this would be a powerful reminder of how very *not* alone people are, even under enforced self-isolation.

The idea, a metatextual reflection on the profoundly intertextual nature of Smith's writing, captivates Charlotte. As a result, she leaves her room after three days and re-joins life and art with renewed energy and enthusiasm. At any rate, and as suggested in the previous paragraph, Charlotte is a fitting link between *Summer* and *Companion Piece*. In the latter, Sandy evokes the figure of Charlotte (and, to a lesser extent, Amy in *Like*), as she both experiences and effects change. Like Charlotte, Sandy undergoes a deep personal crisis that makes her lose faith in herself and, in this case, her own art. Unlike Charlotte, however, Sandy does not lock herself away, but she does isolate from the exterior world as a reflection (or consequence) of the COVID times (Smith 2022a, 80).

The truly disruptive figure in this novel, the unnamed Boothby Lock girl, helps her restore her faith in herself and her art by embracing a sense of togetherness—she warns Sandy that her father's dog requires much better care than she has so far provided (100). This sense of togetherness, which Andeweg and Amelsvoort identify as “the animating question in the Seasonal Quartet” (2024, 2), is already evident in the “naturalcultural” foundations of Arthur and Charlotte's revamped *Art in Nature* blog in *Summer*. Consequently, their blog clearly emerges as a project of creative and political solidarity—as understood by Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) and Mallory (2009)—advocating a model of symbiotic co-existence (Kostkowska 2013, 6), first, between humans and, second, between humans and their natural others.

What is enormously inspiring about Sandy in this novel is her ability to spark change in others, even amidst her own existential crisis. Martina seeks Sandy's literary skills to decipher the mysterious “Curlew or curfew”

riddle, and this experience transforms her. In a turn of events that recalls Margaret's refusal to continue carrying out her wifely and motherly duties in "The History of History" (2008, 50–55), Sandy learns that Martina has abandoned her husband and daughters.

Like the Smarts in *The Accidental* or the Greenlaws in *Summer*, Martina's family is fraught with problems. Although these are not presented in detail, the tension within this family unit is palpable. Everyone seems to depend on Martina in her multiple roles as wife, mother, and grandmother. Her husband devotes far more time and effort to his real estate business than to keeping his family together, while Lea's gender identity problems have been ignored at best. Towards the end of the narrative, unity is humorously restored as the different members of Martina's family turn up uninvited at Sandy's house while the latter feels forced to move to her father's home. As Lea puts it, Sandy is "what our family's needed all this time" (2022a, 138).

Beyond its evident humour, *Companion Piece* conveys a serious message through Sandy, with important ethical implications. This is a reminder of the unique capacity that humans have to make a deliberate impact on their human and more-than-human environment. It is ultimately up to each individual to decide whether to consciously "cause pain to another living being" (152) or, on the contrary, favour "models for a symbiotic rather than ecologically competitive co-existence, where cooperation replaces hierarchy and value dualisms" (Kostkowska 2013, 6).

10.3 Beyond Smith's fictional characters: activism against the "immoral imagination"

10.3.1 Dismantling borders

According to Schmitz-Justen, in her seasonal quartet, Smith "ask[s] questions about how to live ethically, how to read ethically, and how to create meaning ethically" (2022, 335). As this book has demonstrated, however, fundamental questions about the nature, function and, ultimately, power of art are already present in Smith's first novel, *Like*. According to Calder, Smith demonstrates an unshakeable belief in the "political capacities of art to reimagine modern society," offering "alternative perspectives beyond dominant ideologies" (2023, 352–53). Such "capacities"—encapsulated in Carol's motto in *How to Be Both*, "[a]rt makes nothing happen in a way that makes something happen" (Smith 2014, 46)—are especially notorious in "formally intricate art forms," as these "require greater attention" (Calder 2023, 356; 358). This in turn goes a long way towards accounting for Smith's distinctly experimental style, which requires a good deal of "slow reading" (McNeill 2019, 357).

For Calder, Smith's novels navigate the space between fiction and art criticism (2023, 365). In a way, Cowtan (2023) elaborates on this, arguing that Smith's non-linear narrative and the suspension of narrative time through her regular use of ekphrasis are key to the way readers may interpret both her novels and the artworks they describe. Uprooted from the logic of temporal sequence, readers are invited to join the author in co-creative dialogue (see Terrell 2020, 286) and are thus compelled to find new, ethically-based modes of meaning-making. These are activated throughout and *beyond* the reading process and invariably entail the replacement of causality "with a network of contingent relations" (Cowtan 2023, 178).

By highlighting the deeply ideological, discourse-based nature of human perception, Smith's fiction undoubtedly qualifies as the kind of literature that both "create[s] beauty" and "allow[s] us to rethink the world" (Rylance 2016, 6). For Smith—and this is reflected in Sophia's and Iris' antagonistic positions in *Winter*—beauty and the activation of critical thinking can only be artificially separated in literature. In this regard, Masterson interprets Alda's etymological explanation of the meaning of the word "slogan" ("war cry") in *Spring* as "a metatextual celebration of capacious fiction" (Masterson 2020, 361).

In fact, the Gaelic origin of the word "slogan" is first revealed in *Girl Meets Boy* (Smith 2007, 145), a novel in which Anthea and Robin's "activism" is another metatextual reference not only to "capacious" fiction but also to Ali Smith's fiction itself. The same could be said of Carol's "internet guerrilla interventionism" in *How to Be Both*, the revamped *Art in Nature* blog after Arthur's transformation in *Winter*, and even Ashley's book project in *Summer*. The latter, an "Updated Lexicon" that tracks changing meanings in language (thereby echoing Smith's love of etymology), is aptly entitled *The Immoral Imagination*.

Indeed, Smith's novels may be seen as "activism" denouncing this "immoral imagination." As Charlotte puts it, it is about unveiling "who and what are influencing a mass imagination" (Smith 2020, 86). In Althusser's terms (1999, 317), this would involve unmasking the discursive procedures through which the individual is "interpellated" to (immorally) imagine their "relationship to their real conditions of existence." This entails the identification and questioning of the "truth" disseminated by what Lyotard (1979) called "grands récits," which is exactly what Sandy means in *Companion Piece* when she tells Lea that "a story is never an answer. A story is always a question" (Smith 2022a, 155).

At the root of this discourse-based "immoral imagination" lies binary thinking, which Smith's fiction unambiguously targets (Masters 2021, 982), perhaps most visibly in *How to Be Both*. The novel's title explicitly highlights its central theme of "bothness," communicated through Smith's microtextual stylistic strategies (discussed in Chapter 2). Features like "the

absence of speech marks” and the notoriously “unjustified text” reveal “what is usually present but is absent in her texts,” highlighting the power of these blank spaces (T. Young, 2018, 996). Even more interestingly, as a consequence of the inseparability of past and present in the novel—largely achieved through the radically non-linear nature of the narrative and the systematic use of the narrative present (Shigematsu 2022)—“Carol is both dead and alive” (T. Young 2018, 997). However, there is more:

there are countless instances of ... bothness, throughout. In the interchangeability of the Renaissance narrative with the contemporary story, ... the novel places the before and after of chronology into a dynamic relation that conflates the then and the now of historical time, in a formula that could be described as the *becoming-simultaneous of narrative sequence*.

(T. Young 2018: 996; italics in the original)

Indeed, Smith’s fiction reflects a constant engagement with dismantling long-held binary opposites. Relevant examples have been addressed in this book, including Smith’s anti-essentialist conception of national identity (in Chapter 5) or the “pastness in the present” that permeates her novels (first mentioned in Chapter 2). The same applies to the real/fictional binary, discussed earlier in this chapter to emphasise the centrality of the concept of “fictional truth” to Smith’s literary project, to which I shall return shortly. Likewise, the fine line continuously explored in the novels between physicality and spectrality, on the one hand, and the real and the imagined, on the other, has been explored in Chapter 6, while ample evidence of the rejection of gender and sexual binaries has been presented in Chapter 3.

Naturally, then, the theme of the border, introduced in Chapter 5 as part of my analysis on Smith’s take on the nation and nationalism, recurs throughout her oeuvre. While globalisation theory once foretold a “borderless world,” scholars now highlight the increasing centrality of borders in global, regional, and domestic political contexts (Ali 2023, 21). Consequently, borders are literally omnipresent in Smith’s works. In *Like*, Ash experiences Cambridge as a space with “signs up saying Keep Out and Members Only” (Smith 1997, 230). There seems to be a certain autobiographical ring to such words, as Smith spent time in Cambridge as a postgraduate student, later making it her home. In “The Commission,” the third and arguably central text in *Shire*, Smith reminisces about her time at the University of Cambridge, describing it as a place “where I can’t stop thinking uneasily about the word privilege” (2013, 88).

In *There but for the*, the concept of the border is symbolised by the Meridian line in Greenwich (Evans 2018, 642). While standing on this imaginary line dividing the planet, Brooke recalls her own experience

with Britain's racial bordering policies, remembering how she and her black British parents were detained for hours after landing at a British airport (Smith 2011, 307–8). In turn, this echoes Martina Pelf's detention in *Companion Piece*, which results from her inadvertently attempting to re-enter the UK using a different passport from the one she used on the outward leg of her journey. The border control officer's attitude to Martina's dual citizenship—"[i]s one country not enough for you?" (Smith 2022a, 7)—strongly resonates with nationalist sensibilities in post-Brexit Britain.

Evans interprets the dinner party in *There but for the* as a "symposium on the nature of the border," ultimately highlighting "the absurdity of conceiving of the world as borderless" (2018, 642–43). While globalisation appears to have dismantled borders globally, the morally questionable nature of the global multinationals in Smith's novels suggests otherwise. Thus, Pure in *Girl Meets Boy* or the ominously omnipresent SA4A in the seasonal quartet (which appears as an energy supplier, a security firm, an IRC operator, and even a major player in media and entertainment, among various other guises) are cases in point. For Richard, a dinner party guest in *There but for the*, the world has become "more or less borderless" (Smith 2011, 146). However, this seems to apply only to a privileged few and to "global fluids" (Urry 2004) like Pure or SA4A, which are literally ubiquitous, as Art tells Lux in *Winter* (Smith 2017, 70). In contrast, Brooke's family and Anna Hardie's former job as an asylum application evaluator in *There but for the* testify to the fact that borders have multiplied for the rest. This novel, therefore, poignantly signifies that "the carceral is ... a defining factor" in an increasingly globalised world (Evans 2018, 643).

The carceral is further highlighted in Smith's post-referendum fiction, where the erection of both visible (physical) and invisible (personal) borders is an important trope. Notably, Elisabeth faces challenges when trying to renew her passport in *Autumn*. The passport functions as a powerful symbol (see Bennett 2018, 325), as it is the instrument that enables its holder to cross borders. In the novel, it refers to the visible and invisible borders constantly alluded to in the narrative.

Elisabeth's passport renewal requires two visits to the Post Office. Two aspects are worth highlighting in relation to these scenes. First, the breakdown of communication between Elisabeth and the two staff members processing her application, who fail to understand her sense of humour. Second, the preposterously ridiculous obstacles that she faces to have her application processed (Smith 2016a, 23–25). Both elements clearly identify this as a piece of absurdist humour, demonstrating that Smith does explore "the ironic possibilities that the chaos of Brexit affords," which Jones (2020) finds missing in Brexlit authors.

However, Smith does not always address borders humorously. The significance of IRCs in the seasonal quartet illustrates this point. IRCs are central to the “hostile environment,” resulting from Britain’s racial bordering policies, as outlined in Chapter 5. Although British racial bordering attempts have deeper historical roots, Ali (2023) sees the London bombings in July 2005 as a turning point in the relationship between the British state and the racialised (especially Muslim) population living in the country. As Emily puts it in “After Life,”

it’s OK to be friends with Hana at school ... but out in the world I’m supposed to think she’s one of them not us and that her family are them not us too and that if her big brother isn’t a terrorist already it’s only a matter of time.

(Smith 2015, 147)

British counter-terrorism policy is showcased in the so-called Prevent programme. The Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (2015) introduced “Prevent Duty,” which forces teaching, lecturing, and medical staff “to detect extremists in the midst of students and patients they see every day. Those suspected of exhibiting signs of radicalisation are referred to Prevent, setting in motion a change reaction of state intervention” (Ali 2023, 69). Simultaneously, Britain has become a “hostile environment” thanks to the passing of the Immigration Acts (2014, 2016) and, more recently, the Nationality and Border Bill (2022). This was followed by other measures, such as the failed Rwanda policy, which would have allowed the UK to relocate illegal immigrants and asylum seekers in this African country while their asylum applications were being assessed.

The “hostile environment” has introduced “a set of immigration controls embedded in the institutions of everyday life” (Ali 2023, 87). Consequently, Britain has become a “carceral archipelago” (90) where primary, secondary, higher, and further education institutions, banks, potential landlords, and even the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency and the NHS are now statutorily obliged to check the immigration status of their students, clients, tenants, and patients. Failure to pass any of the immigration checks automatically triggers state intervention (99), resulting in raids, detention and, possibly, deportation.

In this context, IRCs emerge as the cornerstone of the detention system, representing a form of institutional violence that Smith addresses alongside the interpersonal violence characteristic of the “age of distraction” (see Chapter 4). There are currently fourteen IRCs across Britain where individuals who have failed to pass immigration checks are detained, including pregnant women and children. The situation is especially delicate for those accused or convicted of terrorism-related offences, as the Home

Office (HO) increasingly imposes citizenship deprivation on them. Ali highlights the morally troubling connections between neoliberalism and racial bordering in Britain. Indeed, “the state’s ability to enforce borders” is not only “explicitly violent” but also “financially lucrative,” as IRCs are operated by “hugely profitable global private security companies like GEO Group, G4S and Serco” on behalf of the HO (Ali 2023, 112–13). Smith contributes to exposing this connection through her portrayal of fictional companies like Pure and, especially, SA4A, which clearly evokes G4S.

Although racism has always been a concern for Smith, it is through the constant presence of IRCs in her post-referendum quintet that she most clearly challenges the “perversely thrilling sense of being under siege” (Val-luvan 2019, 190). This presence is sometimes evoked indirectly. For example, the two storylines in *Companion Piece*, one set in the early modern period and another in present-day Britain, serve to compare the Tudor and Stuart vagrancy laws to twenty-first-century immigration regulations. Likewise, *Summer* also conflates two main stories (Daniel’s in the 1940s and the Greenlaws’ in 2020), Daniel’s internment as a suspicious alien during WW2 mirroring Hero’s as an asylum-seeking, undocumented migrant in an IRC in 2020.

Quoting Nguyen, Masterson contends that “Smith foregrounds the primacy of detention and removal centers 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” (Masterson 2020, 357). This combination of invisibility and hypervisibility is evident in *Autumn*. As noted earlier, Wendy and Elisabeth are astonished by the mysterious enclosure of common land. Soon afterwards, Elisabeth realises that the fence is twice as high (Smith 2016a, 139). The large, enclosed space and its mysterious function—a guard responds to Elisabeth’s question about the purpose of the fence by typing something on his mobile and then taking a picture of her (142)—evoke the simultaneous *invisibility* and *hypervisibility* of the (generally racialised) other in contemporary Britain, implying that Elisabeth is witnessing the construction of an IRC. The guard’s uniform identifies him as SA4A staff, marking the company’s first explicit appearance in the quartet. SA4A is later revealed in *Spring* as the operator of the Gatwick IRC where Brittany Hall works as a DCO and where Hero is detained.

Indeed, much of *Spring* gravitates around Britain’s detention estate and its IRCs, which first entered Smith’s fiction through her patronage of the Refugee Tales initiative. Refugee Tales is one of several “collaborative projects built upon the use of storytelling to give voice to the unheard and thus turn hostility into hospitality” (Lojo-Rodríguez and Pereira-Ares 2024, 3). Within the framework of this project, the Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group has organised summer walks since 2015 inspired by *The Canterbury*

Tales, “Chaucer’s great poem of journeying” (Refugee Tales n.d.). These inclusive walks “bring together refugees, former detainees, asylum seekers, immigrants, support workers, and ordinary citizens, creating a walking community to protest against current practices of detention in the UK” (Baumbach 2024, 67). Resulting from these walks are four volumes which, edited by David Herd and Anna Pincus under the title *Refugee Tales I–IV*, compile “tales” (although some texts also use poetry or even mix genres) translating the experiences of Britain’s Detention Estate from the oral to the written. The writing has involved some of Britain’s foremost writers and poets, including Jacky Kay, Kamila Shamsie, Monica Ali, Bernardine Evaristo, or Ali Smith herself (in Volume I) (see Sandten 2020).

It is precisely in her contribution to this volume that the sordid world of IRCs first enters the realm of Smith’s fiction. Her text, simply titled “The Detainee’s Tale” (Smith 2016b), was first published in *The Guardian* the year before, i.e. when the writing of *Autumn* was already under way. The characters are referred to simply as “I” and “you,” a narrative technique often found in her short stories, heightening the dramatic nature of the harrowing tale. Notably, the “I” merges narrative and authorial voices, whereas the identity of the other character—a thirty-year-old African man sharing his painful story of misery, human trafficking, forced labour, and detention—is obscured behind the pronoun “you.” This is another instance of animalisation (Wolfe 2003) effectively used by Smith. In fact, this literary erasure of identity echoes the fact that, to access “college” (his dream, should he ever be freed from detention), the proof of identity he possesses is “not enough” (72)—a poignant reminder of the pervasive nature of the hostile environment that Britain has become.

In this short story, the detainee’s tragic account compels the narrator to visit an IRC. The description—“It’s a place so close to a runway that the sound of the planes taking off and landing is its only birdsong” (66)—allows readers to identify it as the Gatwick centre where Brit works in *Spring* and where Hero, a Vietnamese asylum seeker, is detained in *Spring* and *Summer*. In fact, the writing of this short story, along with Smith’s interview with the detainee and her subsequent visit to the IRC, appears to have inspired her to address detention specifically in her seasonal quartet. Thus, from her visit, the narrator remembers a Vietnamese detainee whose situation closely resembles Hero’s. In addition, she remarks on the suffocating, maddening effect that the constant presence of the guards, “bang[ing doors] on purpose, to make the great noise that it makes” and “rattling their keys and their keychains incessantly up and down the length of the room” (65; 69), has on the inmates.

This certainly echoes the far more detailed portrayal of life and work in such centres provided in *Spring*. The drama of this narrative largely arises from the narrator’s focalisation on the mind of a reluctant agent

of the “Detention Estate”—Brit—rather than that of a victim. Thus seen, the short, factual descriptions of distressing cases, made accessible to the reader as Brit reads through the detainees’ files, take on new significance, especially against the backdrop of the harsh realities that Brit encounters soon after landing her job as a DCO. These include the alarming fact that DCOs are informally permitted to dare suicidal detainees to attempt to take their own lives; the inhumane conditions endured by detainees in overcrowded, unsanitary prison-like cells; their systematic humiliation by both DCOs and the HO, under whose authority IRCs operate; the immense profits generated by the insanely high number of detainees in IRCs across the country; and the necessity for DCOs to desensitise themselves to ensure effective work performance (Smith 2019, 149–53; 165–67).

The dehumanisation of IRCs becomes evident when examining both the text’s content and its form. The harsh realities encountered by Brit are (re) presented as shopping list items or as learning goals in two different parts of the novel. This cold format mirrors the desensitisation that Brit develops to do her job effectively. Individual items often end with comments revealing a fusion of the narrative (focalised on Brit’s mind) and the authorial voices. This is particularly clear in the final part, which subverts the lawfulness of what are presented as statements attributed to the British HO:

Detention is the key to maintaining an effective immigration system
HO
Nobody is detained indefinitely and regular reviews of detention are undertaken to ensure that it remains lawful and proportionate
HO HO HO

(Smith 2019, 167; italics in the original)

Subversion is achieved by converting the acronym into the onomatopoeic representation of irreverent laughter, thereby depriving such statements of any truth value. This risky formal choice—true to Smith’s motto “style is never not content” (Smith 2012b)—may suggest a veiled reference to Virginia Woolf, whom Smith admires as “one of the world’s great literary innovators” (Smith 2022b). Woolf’s radical focus on form cannot be separated from her stern belief that civilisation must prevail over the generalised culture of violence that she witnessed in her lifetime (Cole 2012, 197–286).

At any rate, Smith seeks to make visible one reality (that of those kept in Detention Estate), often concealed not only by the prison-like nature of IRCs but also by the notorious absence of their voices in media discourse. In this regard, *Spring* complements *The Refugee Tales*, providing a powerful narrative in which invisibility is used politically as a trope to empower those rendered powerless by their absence from public discourse (Baumbach 2024, 66). Simultaneously, the harrowing portrayal of Brit’s

desensitisation—necessary to cope with the morally dubious nature of her duties, and somehow relatable to the desensitisation that Smith links to the “age of distraction”—may be seen as a weapon with which to re-sensitise the reading public.

The visibility of the detained migrant community arguably reaches its zenith with the figure of Hero in *Summer*. This character is first introduced in *Spring* as one of the residents in Brit’s care. According to the information in his file, he is a Vietnamese man who reached Britain after being confined in a transport container for weeks (Smith 2019, 160). Sacha learns about his existence through Charlotte and Arthur. His English name—a rough translation of his real Vietnamese name, as revealed in *Summer* (2020, 378)—symbolically dignifies the victims of Detention Estate. As Arthur puts it, his being an innocent prisoner makes him “truly heroic” (103).

Significantly, *Summer* not only gives this character visibility but also, and most importantly, provides him with his own unmediated voice in a highly prominent place. The novel is divided into three parts, each preceded by a frame narrative introducing Lorenza Mazzetti’s art and life. Similarly, each concludes with a letter. Parts 1 and 2 feature letters from Sacha to Hero, while Part 3 ends with Hero’s reply to Sacha from the safety of Iris’ home in Cornwall. Thus, it is Hero’s own voice—not that of a main character or the narrator—that brings the novel to a close, conveying an unambiguous message of hope. In his letter he writes about the swifts, which herald the arrival of the English summer. He knows about these birds through his earlier correspondence with Sacha, who, in turn, has learnt this from her mother. Hero’s letter thus continues the seasonal theme that permeates the entire quartet. However, the text also uses the image of the swifts in reference to their nature as migratory birds: the swift is a “[b]ird of all nations,” Hero writes (379), and therefore a symbol of a utopian, truly borderless future.

Consequently, the seasonal quartet should be seen as an instance of what Lojo-Rodríguez and Pereira-Ares call “counter-hegemonic practices” (2024, 2) aimed at destabilising the existence of borders, constantly challenging “simplistic notions of place as it might be used to prop up discourses of Britishness, or its reduction to Englishness” (Byrne 2020, 88). Indeed, Smith’s texts suggest that borders should be seen as “places of meeting rather than division” (Cowtan 2023, 191). However, my analysis demonstrates that this concern extends beyond Smith’s latest fiction, as it is a theme evident since her debut novel. Thus, in *Like*, when Amy takes Kate on the train to England, the girl is eager to catch a glimpse of the border, peering intently out of the window. To her dismay, despite her efforts, she cannot see it. Eventually, she discovers that what she believed to be Scotland was actually England (Smith 1997, 51).

10.3.2 *Hope in (fictional) truth*

Smith's fiction demonstrates a distinctly postmodern preoccupation with the notion of "truth," especially relevant in an era dominated by the "authentic lie." This is shown in various ways throughout the novels. Thus, Smith's characters often discuss sources of information and their reliability (Smith 2005, 251–52; 2020, 8–9). In *Hotel World*, Clare feels impotence as she confronts the rumours surrounding her sister's alleged suicide, despite uncovering evidence to the contrary (2001, 194). In *There but for the*, fact-obsessed Brooke learns that even the reliability of history is questionable because "how do you know that the *records* are true? ... Really the phrase should be, not the fact is, but the fact seems to be" (2011, 289; italics in the original). Personal memory is also regularly questioned in Smith's text continuum—relevant examples can be found in *The Accidental* (2005, 227), "No Exit" (2008, 56–63), *How to Be Both* (Smith 2014, 336), and *Winter* (Smith 2017, 175).

Yet not all is postmodern doubt in Smith. In *Artful*, she quotes J. G. Ballard to allude to what Armitstead (2019) would years later refer to as Smith's sense of "fictional truth":

In an introduction to his 1973 novel, *Crash*, ... he describes this upside-down world We now "live inside an enormous novel," he writes, "a world ruled by fictions of every kind—mass merchandising, advertising, politics conducted as a branch of advertising, the pre-empting of any original response to experience by the television screen." Now we need our novelists to "invent the reality." His own novels tick like bombs.

(Smith 2012a, 35)

Smith's novels also "tick like bombs," as the "reality" they "invent" not only represents but also questions the principles underpinning contemporary British society. The extradiegetic issues addressed in Chapters 4 and 5, including the digitalisation of modern society and the adoption of essentialist notions of national identity, are clear evidence of this. However, these are merely the foundations of more specific ailments also reflected in Smith's fiction, in which her unwavering defence of a borderless world is as pronounced as her critique of a technology-driven, globalised, neoliberal economy that privileges the rights of a few with the complicity of those wielding political power.

It is therefore safe to state that Ali Smith's fiction is firmly anchored in reality. What it systematically challenges is what can be termed "discursive truth," i.e. the discursive mechanisms through which individuals are persuaded to accept as true what are merely representations of their real

condition of existence. While Ali Smith's polyvocal, intertextual, magical realist works exhibit postmodern traits, it would not be accurate to claim that these are employed in the postmodern endeavour of rejecting truth. On the contrary, Smith's playful, lyrical prose may well defy verisimilitude but it also "connects us back to 'the real'" (Liebermann 2019, 136).

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Masters posits that trans-/metamodernism differs from both the modernist pursuit of truth and the essentially postmodern pledge to deny it, suggesting instead a perpetual quest for truth with the proviso that this truth may never be uncovered (2021, 987). Based on the preceding evidence, my contention is that Masters' definition of metamodernism does not quite fit the nature of Ali Smith's fiction. As Smith herself explains, her work explicitly challenges the formal conventions of realism *not* to argue whether or not a fictional representation of the real is possible but to "ask [her]self"—and the reader—"questions that ... are very much to do with reality" (Smith 2012b). These capture the "authentic depth of representation" identified by Šnircová (2021) in her analysis of Smith's *Winter*.

More suitable, I would argue, is Vermeulen and van den Akker's (2010; 2015) approach to metamodern literature and art. For them, metamodernism represents, above all, the vision of a better world. This translates as the emergence of utopian longings, albeit somehow tainted by postmodern uncertainty regarding the feasibility of this project. In my view, the utopian longing that characterises Smith's fiction is the realisation of a society whose members, freed from the discourses that distort their perception of reality, engage more ethically with themselves and their human and natural others. This begins with acknowledging the transient nature of life, which can be transcended by contributing to a more harmonious, symbiotic model of ecological co-existence (Kostkowska 2013). In Smith's ethical model, the exercise of the moral obligation to contribute to this model reveals the greatness of human nature.

A degree of postmodern doubt is certainly detectable in Smith's fiction, represented by the instances of not entirely successful personal transformation portrayed. However, and this is important, hope is never completely lost (Amelvoort 2024, 14). *Like* is an open-ended novel, suggesting that Amy may become a more self-accepting, empathetic person. If Penny experiences empathy once in *Hotel World*, she may well experience it again. Sophia's bequest to Daniel in *Summer* reveals the depth of her own inner fight in *Winter*, suggesting that she may have ultimately embraced the multi-perspectivalism represented by Barbara Hepworth's sculpture. Charlotte (like Sandy in *Companion Piece*) emerges from her crisis with renewed strength, while Brit, regretting her betrayal of Florence, is a changed woman by the end of *Spring*.

Crucially, all these transformations are facilitated by art in Ali Smith's fiction, which points to the role that, according to Smith, literature and art can play in today's world. Speaking to the then Scottish First Minister

Nicola Sturgeon during the 2018 Edinburgh Book Festival, Smith emphasised the hopeful message conveyed by the novel form as “a unifying force. All art reminds us to engage and it reminds us to enter, even just with itself, dialogue” (Smith, qtd. in G. Young 2018). Indeed, ample evidence suggests that Smith’s fiction is in no small part a vindication of the relevance of literature and art (and, by extension, the humanities) in a fragmented yet globalised, neoliberal world.

In *Artful*, Smith laments living “in an era where the fact that studying the humanities has to be rhetorically and economically justified,” which is indicative of the “contemporary ... mindset” (2012a, 202–3). This mindset can already be glimpsed in *Like*, in which the music and philosophy departments of an unidentified university have closed (1997, 282). In “The Book Club,” Iona has to fight “for nearly a year to be allowed to do English at university, not Law or Languages but something that meant I would never have a proper job” (2003, loc. 1404). Sandy Grey’s father epitomises this new utilitarianism in *Companion Piece*, displaying minimal faith in his daughter’s capacity to earn a living from what he perceives as useless art (2022a, 33). Not surprisingly, a random Google search pronounces art “dead” in *Winter* (2017, 47).

In this context, characterised by the moral and social disengagement of the “age of distraction,” Smith’s fiction emerges as an ambitious attempt to re-sensitise an otherwise desensitised society through art, replacing “depthlessness” with what Vermeulen (2015) would call a “new depthiness.” Her novels are meticulously crafted to convey her own—and awaken the reader’s—appreciation for art. This includes her neo-modernist micro-textual stylistic choices, which highlight both the beauty of language *per se* and its potential for “linguistic” hospitality (Andeweg and Janković 2024, 9). However, to grasp the full scope of her artistic vision, two further aspects must be considered. First, her texts are profoundly intertextual and intermedial, engaging in permanent dialogue with numerous (literary and non-literary) works of art, which Andeweg and Janković interpret as “narrative” hospitality (2024, 12). Second, her complex fusion of text and paratext not only pushes the boundaries of the novel to hitherto unexplored latitudes but crucially also foregrounds the physical book as an art object in its own right.

Relevantly, however, the immense value that Smith attributes to art extends far beyond aesthetics (Andeweg and Amelvoort 2024). Her characters are transformed—and, in some cases, literally saved—by art to varying degrees. A case in point is Daniel, who survives his detention by engaging with fellow artists in Hutchinson Camp, participating in various artistic activities (Smith 2020, 168–71; 173; 176). This transformation, which revolves around the questioning of discursive “truths” and subsequent overcoming of the binary thinking these sustain, is aptly encapsulated in the title of *How to Be Both*.

In her reading of Smith's seasonal quartet, Schrag argues that these four novels "generat[e] alternatives to the inertia of political cynicism, while still acknowledging the limits of art's effects on politics" (2023, 2022)—a reading that, I would argue, applies to her entire oeuvre.

I do concede that Smith seems to be fully aware of the limited impact that her fiction may have on the public sphere, as suggested by the not always complete personal transformations she portrays. Nonetheless, her literary project remains significant in a society in which the individualism and competitiveness fostered by neoliberalism undermine individual and family well-being (McGregor 2001, 87; Davies and Bansel 2007) and, therefore, the model of symbiotic co-existence championed in her work. Thus seen, every single instance of "readerly hospitality" (Andeweg and Janković 2024, 16) matters. In other words, each reader whose views are disrupted by Smith's profoundly ethical literary project, rooted in "her belief in the novel as a moral form" (Masters 2021, 981), is of qualitative significance.³ Utopias have long been recognised as powerful motivators of social change and, as such, are key to "humanity's striving to self-regulate our own cultural dynamics" (Kashima and Fernando 2020, 105). This is what Iris metatextually refers to in *Winter* when she dispels Arthur's fears of going mad by asking, "where would we be without our ability to see beyond what it is we're supposed to be seeing" (Smith 2017, 287). For this, "another pair of eyes" is required, as Smith puts it in "The Third Person" (2008, 39), a suggestive metatextual reflection on the ethical nature of (her own) fiction.

Smith undoubtedly believes in the power of the novel, perhaps because it relies primarily on the most sophisticated form of communication (Rylance 2016, 182). In this regard, Sandy's memories of her father's admiration as she prepares for college in *Companion Piece* are particularly significant. "You've language," he says. "That's a power beyond any punching" (Smith 2022a, 66). Smith has demonstrated a life-long pledge to make a moral use of her talent and the power it entails. As Miles tells Brooke in *There but for the*, "[c]leverness is great. ... But there's no point in just having it. You have to know how to use it" (Smith 2011, 344). In a notable metatextual reference, the academic in *Artful* praises Peter Hobbs' 2012 novel *In the Orchard, the Swallows* for nurturing the "healing forces in generosity and hospitality," thereby creating a "gift" that "radiates beyond the story's protagonists and passes to the reader of the novel" (Smith 2012a, 160). It is impossible not to draw a parallel with *Autumn*, where Elisabeth internalises the recommendation to "try to welcome people into the home of your story" while playing Bagatelle (2016, 119). Generosity and hospitality are fundamental to Smith's ethical literary project, since "gifts tend to breed gifts" (2012a, 166) and therefore contribute to the symbiotic model of ecological co-existence (Kostkowska 2013) that is Smith's ultimate utopian longing.

Smith's novels, therefore, convey a profound faith in artistic creation, particularly fiction—including her own—designed for “slow reading” (McNeill 2019). It is perhaps in the “slow reading” that fiction requires that (Smith's faith in) its power lies. Interestingly, Rylance highlights a Norwegian-led study comparing screen and print reading for complex texts, revealing cognitive deficits among screen readers. Notably, these included “an inability to be ‘transported’ by reading and therefore develop empathy” (Rylance 2016, 39). Indeed, fiction uniquely immerses readers in imagined worlds so intensely that, for a time, they seem real. This effect is mirrored in a dialogue from *Spring* in which Richard speaks to his imaginary daughter, emphasising the paradox of her existence: while she is not real, her presence feels undeniable to him (Smith 2019, 108–10).

This is perhaps the feeling that Rita Felski has described as “being so entirely caught up in an aesthetic object that nothing else seems to matter” (Felski, qtd. in Rylance 2016, 173). Kidd and Castano (2013) have found that reading literary fiction temporarily enhances the skills needed to understand others' mental states, essential for the social relationships upon which human societies are based. For their part, Bal and Veltkamp (2013) further argue that empathy increases significantly when readers are emotionally transported into a story. Rylance (2016) makes a strong case for the transformative, empathy-building power of fiction, citing numerous studies that provide evidence in this respect. For example, Jenny Hartley and Sarah Turvey's *Prison Reading Groups* initiative⁴ shows that reading fiction changes the mindsets of inmates—especially men, who do not often read fiction—by fostering empathy, a quality many lack (Rylance 2016, 177).

Finally, a recent *Applied Linguistic Review* special issue explores “art as social practice” in contexts of exclusion, drawing on Raymond Williams' view of art as “integral to ‘the process of discovery and creative effort’” (Piazza et al. 2025, 287). The issue highlights how art fosters self-reflection and, at times, emotional restoration, illustrated through two key case studies. Piazza (2025) examines an art project for homeless people, while Whitecross (2025) analyses a creative writing workshop for imprisoned women. Both involve collaborative art creation, akin to those in Smith's fiction (see Chapter 9), generating transformative narratives. Among rough sleepers, the project promotes “relationality ... in a choral context in which subjectivities are encouraged to develop jointly” (Piazza 2024, 420). Meanwhile, the incarcerated women's writing allows “the internal gaze [to roam] into new ways of seeing,” facilitating personal change and challenging social norms (Whitecross 2025, 340).

There is, therefore, evidence that the effects of fiction go beyond the purely aesthetic. As Rylance notes, “[c]omplex fiction stimulates the growing mind, and one way it does so is through awareness of others” (2016, 179). This, in turn, has broader implications. If “[p]rejudice shapes

perception,” then fiction-altered “perception alters prejudice” (180). Last but not least, Rylance also refers to Steven Pinker’s 2011 volume *The Better Angels of our Nature: A History of Violence and Humanity*, which links the decline of human-to-human violence over centuries to “the growth of reading and the intellectual transformations of the Enlightenment” (Rylance 2016, 192), highlighting the role of literature in shaping empathy and social change.

These perspectives are perfectly compatible with Keen’s (2007) scepticism regarding fiction’s ability to prompt social pro-action. As seen in Chapter 1, Keen finds no evidence of short-term effects, yet the scholarship reviewed here suggests that literature’s transformative social impact develops over time but is no less important because of this. What ultimately matters is the building of a cultural imaginary informing worldviews that bring us closer to the symbiotic model of ecological co-existence that Ali Smith envisions—an “elsewhere” akin to what the narrator seeks in “The Art of Elsewhere.” “Elsewhere” is a place where mobile phones are replaced with art; a “welcoming” place with “no borders,” no pollution, and no prisons, because “Elsewhere poems cancel imprisonment. Elsewhere we do time differently” (Smith 2015, 131–32).

As mentioned above, this is a process in which every single instance of personal transformation matters, since changed individuals can in turn inspire change in others. Last but not least, it is also possible that the nature of such transformation need not be so ambitious. As seen in Chapter 9, and even if Smith has recently referred to fiction as “a lesson in both sympathy and empathy at every level” (qtd. in Calder 2024, 10), what Smith demands of her characters (and, ultimately, her readers) is not sympathy but empathy, which essentially involves respecting—not agreeing with—others.

In conclusion, therefore, there is a reasonable degree of doubt in Smith about the *immediate* social and political effects that art and fiction can bring about, although in many ways this makes her profoundly ethical literary project all the more relevant. Ultimately, for Smith it is all about restarting dialogue. Or, as expressed in *Autumn*, bringing an end to “the end of dialogue” (2016, 112). I cannot think of a more beautiful example of creative solidarity (Gaztambide-Fernández 2012).

10.4 Concluding remarks

This chapter has examined the impact of art encounters in Ali Smith’s fiction, exploring not only their effects on the deeply traumatised characters that populate her novels but also what such effects may indicate regarding the problematic extradiegetic present that such personal traumas mirror. The analysis reveals Smith’s profound belief in the transformative power of literature and, by extension, art. In her novels, art encounters catalyse

personal change, although its extent varies—Penny remains unchanged, while transformation in Sophia, Iris, and Brit is incomplete. Yet, these cases highlight a crucial potential for change, which cannot be overlooked.

In Smith's fiction, personal transformation is sparked by disruptive characters who introduce others to art in its broad "naturalcultural" sense. Engaging with art, often through discussion, becomes in most cases an eye-opening experience, as recognising its beauty typically leads characters to uncover general truths to which they had hitherto been blind. Crucially, this suggests a symbiosis between aesthetics and knowledge. The journeys of discovery which most characters embark on lead to the same destination. Thus, characters generally discover the discursive nature of their understanding of the world; the intricate yet real connection between the multiple aspects of life; and the power of fiction (and art in general) to relate to "the real"—what Armitstead (2019) calls "fictional truth."

The most pressing issues of the contemporary world that Smith brings to light involve the desensitisation resulting from an increasingly digitalised society and the divisions caused by nationalism, as examined in Chapters 4 and 5. However, both the isolationism and the fear of the other that respectively result from desensitisation and nationalism can be seen as manifestations of the more general Manichean or binary thinking fostered by hegemonic discourses. As a result, anti-binarism (which has been addressed transversally in this book) permeates Smith's oeuvre. Her fiction, therefore, emerges as a prime example of "artivism." Smith's is thus unveiled as a deeply ethical and political literary project, which may be seen to mirror Robin and Anthea's protest art in *Girl Meets Boy*, or Carol's subverts in *How to Be Both*. The implication is clear. The knowledge of "the real" is not an end in itself. It cannot be approached only intellectually but also affectively. In other words, the beneficiary of such knowledge needs to be moved and must therefore act.

This chapter has explored how Smith seeks to move the reader, providing an in-depth discussion of the role that the theme of the border plays in her fiction. Present in all her novels, borders symbolise class, racial, and national divisions. However, borders gain visibility in Smith's more recent novels, which reflects the role that national identity discourses played in the run-up to, outcome, and aftermath of the Brexit referendum. So much so, in fact, that fragments of her post-referendum novels (and, most especially, *Spring*) blend humour with starkly harrowing portrayals of the consequences of the carceral archipelago that Britain has become as a result of the adoption of its "hostile environment" policy.

However, as *Summer* and, perhaps especially, *Companion Piece* illustrate, Smith's post-referendum quintet ends on a note of hope, interpreted here through a trans/metamodern lens. Thus, despite the elements of doubt that can indeed be detected about the ultimate effectiveness of her project

(as the instances of not always entirely successful personal transformation depicted in her fiction suggest), what ultimately transpires is a strong faith in the important role that literature and art can and should play in today's fragmented, neoliberal, dramatically desensitised world.

Smith's fiction, therefore, aims at re-sensitising society with and through art, by (1) exposing readers to the beauty of her language; (2) literally filling her texts with countless art forms by means of complex intertextual and intermedial strategies; and (3) using this art ethically, invariably showing the way to a symbiotic model of ecological co-existence eminently based on dialogue. Crucially, the dialogue that Smith pursues mirrors the essentially dialogical form of her texts, based as they are on dialogue not only between characters (hence their radical polyvocality) but also between the arts (hence their equally radical intertextuality and intermediality).

The faith in the transformative power of literature that Smith's texts exude is in line with the abundant research that demonstrates that the impact of fiction (especially in the form of a physical, not digital, book) transcends simple aesthetic enjoyment. Additionally, this is consistent with the existing research that highlights the novel's potential to foster the kind of empathy which may later result in social change. Indeed, textual evidence has been found suggesting that Smith creates a cultural imaginary based on empathy (i.e. recognition of, and respect for, the other), without which solidarity, as understood by Mallory (2009), cannot take place. In turn, by offering a solidarity-based cultural imaginary upon which a better world could be founded, Smith's fiction reveals itself as a beautiful example of creative solidarity (Gaztambide-Fernández 2012).

Notes

- 1 In a fascinating study, Shigematsu (2022) demonstrates how this effect is also largely achieved through Smith's use of the narrative present, i.e. the use of the present tense not only to signal the narrating time (discourse) but also the narrated time (story), in what is clearly a violation of the storytelling norms that prevailed until at least twenty years ago. T. Young (2018, 997) attributes the effect to Smith's non-linear narrative, as will be seen below.
- 2 Such crises are also present in Smith's short stories. By way of example, the narrator in "Last" has experienced an unspecified trauma. Before this, words "mattered" to her but "what had happened in my life ... make[s] them not matter" (Smith 2015, 11).
- 3 Smith has recently opened up about this: "My partner Sarah told me ... she was in the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Arts] one day, ... and she was sitting in front of people and they were saying 'yeah but I can't wait for them to come out, it's really important' and she realised that they were talking about the books. It was between *Spring* and *Summer*, and ... the books were making a difference to people" (qtd. in Calder 2024, 13).
- 4 For further information on this initiative, please visit <https://www.pointsof-light.gov.uk/prison-reading-groups/>.

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