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Aware and In Denial: Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* as Climate Fiction

Jesse van Amelsvoort, Department of European Studies, University of Amsterdam, NL, j.d.vanamelsvoort@uva.nl

With each of its four books named after a season, Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* (2016–20) is structured according to life's cyclical time patterns. As with all of Smith's fiction, these novels are characterised by metamorphosis and transition. The *Seasonal Quartet*, however, also registers a sense of loss, as when one of the characters in *Autumn* laments the time "[w]hen we still had seasons, not just the monoseason we have now." In this paper, I take up these and other references strewn through the novels and propose to read these four novels as climate fiction. Rather than representing grand-scale destruction and dislocation, however, the *Seasonal Quartet* registers the minute disruptions of and changes in our everyday lives due to anthropogenic climate change.

The narrative form of *Autumn*, *Winter*, *Spring*, and *Summer* shows how the conditions of life in the present are affected and altered by climate change, whether it concerns changing weather patterns, migration patterns, and so on. The novels house both characters who are acutely aware of the current crisis, as well as those who remain in denial; as novels, however, they do make visible the effects of humanity having entered the Anthropocene.

The *Seasonal Quartet*, therefore, shows how the radically other of our planet's ecological and meteorological systems has entered and started to shape human lives. If these novels disclose the loss of the world as we have known it, they also find a more hospitable home in the world of art. In art, there is connection and the potentiality of a new world.

Introduction

Towards the end of *Summer*, the last novel of Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* (2016–20), we follow Grace, one of the novel's protagonists, as she tours England's east coast with her theatre group in 1989. She tells them that in *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare 'infects things with winter precisely so that he can *have* a summer' (Smith 2020: 284, original emphasis). Just like Shakespeare needed his contrasts four centuries ago, so the *Seasonal Quartet* plays with and blurs opposites and binary pairs: for metamorphoses to be real and effective—for these to be able to cross and undo borders— there need to be contrasts. Winter makes summer, and vice versa. In the contrasts contained by this duality lay differences to be enjoyed, played with, and done away with.

Summer's narrator emphasizes the importance of contrasts and opposites once more: 'But that's summer for you. Summer's like walking down a road just like this one, heading towards both light and dark. Because summer isn't just a merry tale. Because there's no merry tale without the darkness' (289). The image of summer Grace and the narrator evoke here also includes its photo negative. Just like the metamorphosis needs two opposites to exist—without reifying either—, the seasons can only mean something when we know what should happen roughly three, six, and nine months later. Throughout the *Quartet*, however, characters voice their concerns that this stability is about to end. This is the paradox that, as I argue in this article, animates the *Seasonal Quartet*: while in theory the seasons offer a perfect vehicle for a Smithian emphasis on and play with change and renewal, and on the cyclical nature of time, in the world the novels of the *Quartet* aim to represent this continuous change is close to coming to an end. Climate change not only implies the end of life as the novels' characters know it, but presents another threat in the *Quartet* as well: it also disrupts Smith's own poetics.

Climate change often appears as an 'unspoken topic' in culture and media discourses, Min Hyoung Song writes in his discussion of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go*, manifested by the 'inability to follow the implications of what a candid acknowledgement of the facts of climate change says about the current system of extraction, production, and distribution of goods and services that depends so much on the burning of fossil fuels' (Song 2021: 24). This inability is a form of denial, of not speaking about a subject—of, specifically, not speaking consistently about a subject. It entails a mix of the 'strange possibility of simultaneously knowing and not-knowing' (24, original emphasis removed), which, Song points out, is a 'social function' (26). This dynamic between the severity of climate change coming to the surface and then disappearing again from view plays out in wider social groups and even society as a

whole—but also, as is my contention in this article, in literature, and specifically in Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet*. Smith's novels put various types of denialism on full display; similar to the 2021 apocalypse film *Don't Look Up*, they make visible the slow disruption of climate change as media, politicians, and most people are busy looking somewhere else.

To read Smith's *Quartet* as climate fiction is perhaps not the most self-evident reading strategy. Climate fiction is widely considered as stories engaging more openly and directly with climate change (Caracciolo, Vermeulen; cf. Bould); the study of more implicit, realist literature imagining life in the Anthropocene is less established. Conversely, while it certainly is difficult to gloss over repeated references to the environment and the impact global warming has on the characters' daily lives in the *Quartet*, there are other themes—primarily Brexit and migration—that present themselves much more forcefully to the reader. It is therefore no surprise that contributors to a recent Post45 *Contemporaries* cluster on the *Seasonal Quartet* do mention climate change as one of the novels' themes, but choose to largely focus on how the novels represent a post-2016 Britain (e.g. DeGooyer 2022), which—by the rather slim margin of 4%, reflecting a deeply divided country—had voted to leave the European Union and which is rife with xenophobia and virulent nationalism. Yet if we read these novels from the perspective of climate change—deploying what Jennifer Peterson has called an 'Anthropocene viewing condition'—we make visible how the *Seasonal Quartet* offers its readers a deeply unsettling truth about the effects of climate change in our shared world today. In other words, the *Seasonal Quartet* may not be immediately recognizable as climate fiction—but, as I will argue, if we read these novels as climate fiction, we come to appreciate the depth of their thematization of contemporary life's instability.

Composing the *Quartet*

The history behind the *Quartet*'s composition will be relatively well-known by now. After experiencing how quick production times could be when the novel *How to be Both* (2014) moved from writing to the production stage, Smith realized it was possible to incorporate real-life events in literature and publish books as these events were still fresh. The *Seasonal Quartet* realizes this aspiration. It is writing that tries to capture human life as closely as possible as it unfolds against the backdrop of socio-political events, with everything that comes with it: the social and the individual, the present and the past, the small and the large, the political and the artistic, and so on. Thus, *Autumn*, published in 2016 in its titular season, takes place after the June 2016 Brexit

vote; *Winter*, published in 2017, responds to Donald Trump's barely one-year-old presidency; *Spring* (2019) incorporates the then-unfolding debates on #MeToo and contemporary feminism; and *Summer* (2020) ends with its characters in the first UK lockdown following the outbreak of the Coronavirus. Through this contemporaneity, the novels weave artistic and cultural references, principally four Shakespeare plays (one for each novel) and women artists—from Katherine Mansfield and Barbara Hepworth to Pauline Boty and Lorenza Mazzetti.

As so much, if not all, of Smith's work, the novels are also deeply and poetically invested in themes of change, metamorphosis, and renewal (Mitchell, Ranger). As *Summer*'s narrator remarks (Smith 2020: 320), 'Things can change fast. They just do.' These seven words are perhaps the purest encapsulation of Smith's poetics and politics of transformation, which not only accept, but also propagate, change as a given and reified borders as unnatural. As Joel Evans put it, Smith's work suggests that 'contingency is elevated to the level of necessity.' (Evans 2018: 635). From this perspective, it only seems logical that Brexit—with its stationary promise to 'take back control' over Britain's borders and sovereignty—and nationalist xenophobia come into view in the *Seasonal Quartet* as adversarial politics, at odds with the novels' own hospitality and openness (see also Andeweg and Janković in this issue).

Whereas socio-political events contemporary to the novels' inception and publication form a threat to the *Quartet*'s overall ethical disposition, climate change promises to be a wholly different, if ambiguous kind of threat: when one character laments 'the monoseason we have now' (Smith 2016: 215) in Britain—or, by extension, in this particular part of the world, where seasonal variation is (or was) pronounced—, what comes under threat is not only characters' lifeworlds and ways of going about, but also the very possibility of change. Anthropogenic climate change, in other words, carries the possibility to alter, if not outright end the seasonal variations and transformations in Britain from which the *Seasonal Quartet* derives its name, its overarching idea, and its affective power. In the rest of this article, I take the novels' meditations on transformation and metamorphosis as an entry point to analyse their aesthetic commitments and formal strategies in the face of and in response to a world-altering climate crisis.

Control over the Nation

Upon publication, the novels in the *Seasonal Quartet* have been hailed as 'state-of-the-nation' novels, with *Autumn* for example being welcomed by the *Guardian* reviewer as the 'first post-Brexit novel.' (Kavenna 2016). Analogous to the idea of the 'Great

American Novel,' state-of-the-nation novels—sometimes also called 'condition of England' novels—offer a 'broad panorama of the social, political and intellectual life of their time' (Lusin 2018: 248), often hosting a broad array of characters. Historically, this genre came into being with early-nineteenth century industrialization; collectively, the novels responded to what was known as 'the factory question.'[1] In later decades and centuries, the focus of such novels obviously shifted; most recently, Caroline Lusin suggests, post-2010 fiscal economics and British politics of austerity have come into view. From this perspective, novels such as *Capital* (2012) by John Lanchester or Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018) appear as representatives of this genre, concerned as they are with banks, the financial sector, and economics. 'The times' certainly also arise in the *Seasonal Quartet* in this way. This perspective, however, tends to prioritise a reading of these novels as being about the political and economic dimensions of control, borders, and Brexit, crowding out issues of change and the climate—and thus moving away from the perspective I put forward here. The *Seasonal Quartet* suggests state-of-the-nation novels now also deal with climate change.

In its close attention to socio-political events, the state-of-the-nation novel affirms Homi Bhabha's (1990) suggestion that the nation must be narrated. The continuous telling of stories around national subjects—and the accompanying suggestion that certain topics are national in focus—is in line with the attention Benedict Anderson (2006; cf. Connor; Culler and Cheah) pays to the novel as a carrier of national identity. Yet if the genre is 'premised upon the delineation of a national totality through the orchestration of typifying patterns of social experience' (Begley 2002: 34), then we see the tension inherent in categorizing the *Seasonal Quartet* as an example of it: in their use of metamorphosis as a poetic device and their positioning of change as something that 'just' happens, these novels continuously not only interrogate who belongs to a given—in this case, British—national totality, but also question the very idea of such a monolithic social marker. Indeed, the last name of a number of important characters in *Autumn*—Demand and Gluck, linking respectively to France and Germany—already indicate transnational connections between Great Britain and the rest of the world, specifically Europe.

The room given to characters who came to England as migrants or refugees—such as the originally-German Daniel Gluck in *Autumn* and *Summer*, the Croatian Lux in *Winter*, or the various groups of often undocumented migrants whose presence looms in the background of the entire *Quartet*—signals the novels' openness to difference and

[1] In the context of this paper, the phrase 'condition of England' also evokes weather conditions. Discussions on climate change and the Anthropocene often touch on the Industrial Revolution and mid-nineteenth Britain as an important turning point in the relation between humans, fossil fuels, and the climate (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016, 3–18).

their aesthetic opposition to culturally narrow politics of nationalism. Additionally, the *Quartet*'s deployment of multiple narrators recalls Alexander Beecroft's (2015) suggestion that 'entrelacement' is a key technique of global fictions. In contemporary literature (and cinema), the weaving-together of various storylines and protagonists serves to tell the story of globalization beyond exemplary individuals who, in the story's universe, would succumb under the representational, if not symbolic, weight. In Beecroft's analysis, contemporary stories that wish to narrate a certain 'globality' must make do with a multiplicity of narrators, stories, and plot lines, and thus avoid a singular focus on one elevated individual—which was able to anchor 'national' novels. In a similar vein, Victoria Googasian (2022) has coined the term 'massively multi-protagonist novel' in specific reference to climate fiction's investment in a multitude of main characters to represent the varied and multi-layered effects of climate change. Although Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* is not set in multiple continents or even countries, preferring instead to remain in Great Britain (and mostly in various parts of England), it does feature a large cast of characters and shifting narrators. We could characterize this multitude as Bakhtinian (1981) polyphony, yet to consider this multi-strand narration as emblematic of Beecroft's global fiction also shows how the novels narrate and imaginatively give shape to the condition of Britain as a fractured, contested space.

Autumn registers the Brexit vote most strongly, including the run-up to it and its immediate aftermath. In addition to various characters quarrelling over the results of the 23 June 2016 referendum—fifty-two to forty-eight per cent voted in favour of leaving the European Union; a result indicative of the British being historically 'fundamentally "reluctant Europeans"' (Sanders and Houghton 2017: 135)—the novel conceptualises England in particular as being in a state of confusion. In *Autumn*'s sequence of stylistic repetitions, the narrator remarks that '[a]ll across the country, there was misery and rejoicing,' continuing:

> All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. All across the country, people felt they'd done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing. (59)

The list goes on for more than two pages in total, capturing in the polyphonic repetition of 'All across the country' a nation deeply divided. The opposition is not between separate places, but within social communities; earlier, Elisabeth Demand's mother, who lives in a small village, tells her daughter that 'half the village isn't speaking to the

other half' (54). The vote has left village life quietened; awaiting its summer festival festivities, and unsure how these will proceed, the streets are empty.

Near the bus stop, one house has its front painted over with the words 'GO HOME,' suggesting it is home to migrants. *Autumn* incorporates references to the too strong attachment to borders and the different identities they regulate and sustain that the Brexit vote entails. The political project of Brexit is thus one that runs counter to the emphasis in these novels on metamorphosis' play with borders and change (cf. Doloughan). The politicians behind Brexit, and the slightly more-than-half of the population that supported them, reify exactly those boundaries the *Seasonal Quartet* would like to ignore, transcend, or deconstruct. As Hannah Gluck—Daniel's sister—puts it in *Summer* (196): 'The problem is, we tend to think we're separate. But it's a delusion.' The *Seasonal Quartet* espouses a poetics of connection, hybridity, and attachment, not one of separation and rigid border control: that is, its immediate concern with Brexit and migration policies is at odds with its emphasis on fluidity and transformation, but also with climate change's promise of change.

Besides the theme of the Brexit vote and the biographical background of certain characters, the shadowy company SA4 A—a fictionalization of security firm G4S—is the third major way through which migration finds its way into the *Quartet*. SA4 A runs a number of Immigrant Removal Centres or IRCs in the novels' Britain; in *Autumn*, these centres block the otherwise pastoral English landscape (140–143); in *Winter*, protagonist Art works for the company; in *Spring*, Richard Lease helps a young girl disappear from SA4 A's sphere of control; and in *Summer*, a contrast is drawn between Second World War internment of Germans in Britain and contemporary detention of migrants and refugees. As these IRCs are built with the purpose of maintaining clear lines of difference between the British—or, perhaps, more properly speaking, the English—and 'outsiders,' in their denial of the kind of change and transformation that comes with life they are once again at odds with the *Quartet*'s poetical disposition. Their politics of conserving what is—at seemingly any cost—and preventing what could be directly violates the novels' dictum that '[c]hange just comes,' as Art puts it in *Summer* (82).

To be sure, although there are characters who voice support for this politics of control—and others who are indifferent—as a whole, the *Quartet* condemns it and sympathizes with characters who contest it one way or another, either by expressing discontent or actively helping refugees escape SA4 A's, and thus the government's, hands. This multiplicity I consider an example of the novels' polyphony, which is however ultimately curtailed by its poetic commitment to change and transformation (see Greer in this special issue). Voices that aim to arrest change and reaffirm borders,

ultimately cannot garner the novels' sympathy—limiting the polyphonic multiplicity that is so inherent to Bakhtin's theorization of the novel.

Yet change is not only registered in the *Seasonal Quartet* as the arrival of migrants, newcomers who did not 'already' live where they arrive, but also by steady environmental change and alienation the novels' characters feel in their daily life (cf. Campos 2022). After Elisabeth has arrived at her mother's place, in *Autumn*, they look at an old Ordnance Survey map of the area around the village together. With a red sharpie, her mother has been marking where 'the new coast' is. '[Q]uite far inland,' she points out the spot 'where the World War II pillbox fell into the sea ten days ago' (54). Similarly, in *Summer*, the narrator draws attention to 'the eroding edge of eastern England' (311), with the use of 'edge' reminding the reader of the fact that Great Britain is an island, surrounded by a sea: its borders are not only cultural and geographical, they are (geo) physical, too.

As these two examples show, the *Seasonal Quartet* continuously draws attention to the place of its human characters in the world at large, suggesting it is also impossible to stop change there. Although critical attention has so far mostly focused on human relations between insiders and outsiders, concerns about the climate and climate change lurk at the edges of Smith's narrative, waiting to be noticed. Thus, even if the examples given are related to processes that would occur regardless of anthropogenic climate change, at other moments the novels point to the changing climate—to the Anthropocene, the Age of Mankind in which humanity discovers at once their immense influence on the planet's ecosystems and their futility vis-à-vis those systems. If the *Quartet* as a whole suggests such an awareness, however, not all characters follow suit.

'When a Continent Burned and Another Melted: *So*?'

The *Seasonal Quartet* is scaffolded by a number of elements that return in each novel, including, as already mentioned, the attention to female artists and writers. Similarly, each novel includes a highly lyrical chapter characterized by frequent repetition of a particular word or phrase. In *Summer*, this is the repeated use of 'so?' in the opening chapter, to express how people do not care about what happens to others or to places they do not live. Two of the events people do not care about have to do with the effects of anthropogenic climate change: 'when a continent burned and another melted: *so*?' (2020: 4) Referring to Europe's 2019 melting glaciers and Australia's wildfires in early 2020, *Summer* suggests people do not care—which is a form of denial.

In this sense, just as there are characters who are indifferent to deportations and Britain's treatment of immigrants in the novels, so, too, do they not care about climate

change. At other moments, the *Quartet* registers other voices from outside its narrators and main characters. As such, the novels' Bakthinian polyphony—limited though it is—echoes societal discussions and political disagreement. Take Sacha Greenlaw's observation, in *Summer*, that 'people here too [i.e. Brighton] on the local news are saying *global warming's a hoax*' (26, original emphasis). The *Quartet* has many characters, some of whom are aware of climate change and voice concerns and attempt to give shape to alternative ways of living, while others remain in denial and wish for things to remain as they are. Overall, however, the *Quartet* clearly sympathises with those characters who express the urge to combat climate change, change their behaviour, and try to avoid the direst possible futures.

In the case of the *Seasonal Quartet*, change is concretely thematized in the changing of the seasons, which has long characterised the British climate. Yet the novels' settings and explicit thematization of contemporary life destabilizes this regularity of change. If *Autumn* already registers anthropocenic anxieties, it is in *Winter* that the dam fully bursts. If seasonal change was for centuries and millennia a given in Great Britain—in line with the Smithian conviction that change is not an aberration, but a condition of life—, now the characters mourn the irregularity of the seasons. For some, the problem is a general dreariness: summers that extend for too long, a winter disappearing. For others, it is the fear the weather all year long becomes quite similar. As the narrator of *Winter* puts it, 'it's the dead of winter when it happens, a bright sunny post-millennial global-warming Christmas Eve morning (Christmas, too, dead)' (3). All throughout *Winter*, actual cold winter is absent—except in characters' imaginations. In other words, the *Seasonal Quartet* entertains the possibility that the change that is climate change heralds the end of the kind of regular, cyclical change that people in the United Kingdom know as the seasons. As such, as we will see later, climate change suggests an adjustment to the foundations of Smith's writing project.

Not all characters in the *Quartet* are either like the voices on the Brighton radio, nor like Sacha, who refuses to get into a not-electric car, will not have children, and thinks of Greta Thunberg as her hero. Some are like Art in *Winter*, who describes the contents of his blog Art in Nature as such: 'Nature itself. The wilds, and weather, things like the, yeah, what's happening to the environment, the planet, I'm really quite political in that writing, at least I'm getting more so, I mean I will be when I get back to it' (161). What he thinks is political about his blog, however, does not go far enough for his girlfriend Charlotte. Earlier on, she asked him:

> When have you ever even mentioned the world's threatened resources? Water wars? The shelf the size of Wales that's about to break off the side of Antarctica? … The

> plastic in the sea? she said. The plastic in the seabirds? The plastic in the innards of nearly every single fish or aquatic creature? Is there even such a thing left in the world as unruined water? (59)

Art's answer to this was that he's 'just not a politico … What I do is by its nature not political. Politics is transitory. What I do is the opposite of transitory' (59). This response hinges on a particular understanding of nature and the political in which the two never overlap—which is refuted not only by Charlotte, but also by the *Quartet* as a whole. Characters in the *Seasonal Quartet*, then, are not only either alarmed or in active denial; there's a broad spectrum in between those two poles. But even if Art is not actively denying climate change, we could still call him in denial, drawing on Song's work—and following Stanley Cohen.

In *States of Denial* (2001), Cohen distinguishes between three types of denialism when it comes to engaging with suffering: literal, interpretative, and implicatory. The voices on the Brighton radio overheard by Sacha Greenlaw are an example of literal denial, where the facts of the matter are denied. Among the *Quartet*'s main characters, this attitude is hard to find. More prominent, however, are the second and third types of denial, which range from facts being given 'a different meaning from what seems apparent to others' to facts being kept away from daily life, in order to avoid 'the psychological, political or moral implications that conventionally follow' (Cohen 2001: 5; 9). Art's throw-away reference to 'what's happening to the environment, the planet' is an example of these forms of denial, most strongly the implicatory variant: while he is aware of things happening, his phrasing—and his improvised timeline for 'get[ting] back to it'—betrays he keeps the implications from this acknowledgement at bay. What the novels show, as well, is Song's (2021) point that this denial is socially organized and continuously upheld: it is not enough to deny climate change once, it has to happen continuously or cease to be.

At the same time, the novels contextualise certain types of denialism, showing gradations in what it means to deny climate change. *Spring* is in part a novel about Richard Lease's long-time friendship with Paddy, short for Patricia Heal, who is dying of cancer. In one of their conversations, as she is just a couple of months away from her death at age 85, the two quarrel over the weather. 'What everybody knows today,' the narrator remarks (65), 'is that it's the hottest April day there's been since the year Richard was born,' which is presumably 1949. Richard characterizes the weather as '[c]razy': 'One of the worst springs I can remember. Snow up to here just two weeks ago. Minus seven. And now this. Twenty nine degrees.' Paddy answers: 'You're wrong … One of the loveliest springs I've known. Plants couldn't wait to get going. All that cold.

All this green' (72). This multi-layered conversation is tricky to decipher: although it is tempting to agree with Richard's interpretation, and connect the unusual weather pattern to climate change (although this is in itself tricky, too), at other points in the novel Paddy seems to be all too aware of the things going wrong in the world. Mostly, Paddy seems to be changing the subject of their conversation, away from Richard's comments on climate change—and it is his perspective we are nudged towards by the narrator.[2] Their brief conversation also outlines the frictions between the present and the past: the difference between what people experience today and their memories of past weather patterns. Lastly, it also lays bare the difference between what climate change means for humanity at large, and what it might mean for an individual—in this case, we can read Paddy's observations in metaphorical contradistinction with her own dying, that is, moving along in the cyclical process of life and death. From this perspective, Paddy is not denying the warmer weather and the large increase in temperatures over a short period of time, she is measuring the flowering of life against her own immanent death.

In the variety of perspectives and viewpoints represented in these four novels, the *Seasonal Quartet* shows itself to be an active, thinking object that, moreover, in its polyphonic voices represents both society as a whole and individuals themselves. As such, it speaks to the last element Song discerns in his discussion of climate denialism, namely its social organization. Kari Norgaard has earlier written of denial's social aspect as being about a 'sense of knowing and not knowing, of having information but not thinking about it in [our] everyday lives' (Norgaard 2011: 4). Denial does not just stand on itself or exist in a vacuum: it comes into being and is supported by a social context, which, as Song points out (2021: 28–9), means that denial has to be performed again and again, every day. Denial, in this sense, never stops, and is in continuous dialogue with a subterranean or repressed awareness of other perspectives. As the *Seasonal Quartet* makes clear, signs of climate change—that life is somehow not what it used to be, that something is 'off'—filter into our daily lives time and again. Yet in that filter the novels make visible the process of continuous denial, as well as conflicting appreciations that underlie this denialism, as shown in e.g. Paddy's rejection of a long-term thinking that has no logical place in her own situation.

In other words, even if some of the *Quartet*'s characters refuse to act on their subconscious knowledge that the world around them is changing, the novels themselves do draw attention to this changing world. They do so in two ways: firstly, through characters who are concerned and actively trying to change their own habits

[2] I thank Agnes Andeweg for this suggestion.

and behaviour (a point I will turn to in the next section), and, secondly, through the narrator's remarks on the changing of the seasons and the transformations in the natural world. In *Autumn*, for example, the narrator draws attention to a frost that 'has snapped millions of trees all across the country into brightness' (177), to the 'eggs for the coming year's butterflies [that] are tucked on the undersides of the grassblades' (178), and to the 'fly-fetid, heavy-clouded, cool and autumnal' summer of 2016 (195). The seasons, and the changes they promise to bring, are present all throughout the series—in defiance, perhaps, of the anthropogenic climate change that threatens to destroy this cycle.

In *Winter*, Art, too, comes to be more activist and more political. As the year draws to a close, he becomes more aware of the fact that the change that should be happening is not happening. In one of the novel's more lyrical passages, the narrator describes his state of mind as such:

> What he longs for instead, as he sits at the food-strewn table, is winter, winter itself. He wants the essentiality of winter, not this half-season grey selfsameness. He wants real winter where woods are sheathed in snow, trees emphatic with its white, their bareness shining and enhanced because of it, the ground underfoot snow-covered as if with frozen feathers or shredded cloud but streaked with gold through the trees from low winter sun, and at the end of the barely discernible track, along the dip in the snow that indicates a muffled path between the trees, the view and the woods opening to a light that's itself untrodden, never been blemished, wide like an expanse of slow-sea, above it more snow promised, waiting its time in the blank of the sky. (214–5).

In Art's nostalgia lies his awareness: this winter is a thing of the past now—or, put more sharply, of an imagined past. This passage stands out as one of the *Seasonal Quartet*'s fairy-talelike, almost mythologizing moments. Art longs for a past he has never known himself but has more likely encountered via pastoral imaginations of winter. Perhaps in these imaginations there is a risk to Art's nostalgic feelings: a potential source of change in the future, away from the imagined lyrical to the real and practical.

Brexit Climates

An honest and full consideration of the facts around climate change requires more than a societal transition to green energy, widespread insulation of houses and offices, and so on, Song writes: 'It requires a rebellion against a system that relies on the poisoning of the air, ground, and water to produce profit' (Song 2021: 24). Some of the *Quartet*'s

characters call for such radical change, although most do not. *Summer*'s Sacha Greenlaw embodies this rebellious type most strongly: by refusing to get into fossil-fuel-driven cars, she has concretely altered her lifestyle and brought it in line with her principles. Her mother Grace mockingly calls Sacha 'her revolutionary daughter' (67)—although she does seem to admire her daughter, too.

Sacha is not in denial about climate change—rather to the contrary, even. She even perceives that 'the wind isn't free … It's driven by climate shift and now by climate damage' (85), which connects seemingly innocent weather futures such as wind with large-scale climate patterns, showing their enmeshments. This distinguishes her from many of the other aware, alarmed, or even activist characters in the *Quartet*, who generally exist as one of two types: those who are aware of and point out how everything they and others do, is now impacted by or in turn impacts climate change, and those who bring a youthful esprit but no practical guidance. (Indeed, these two types to a large degree overlap.) There is, in other words, a pervasive sense of powerlessness and disempowerment in many of the characters: they are unable to change their own behaviour or that of people around them, let alone climate politics in Britain.

In *Winter*, Art's mother Sophia laments 'the knowledge that everything I eat is poisonous to me' (190), hinting at the *Quartet*'s preoccupation with living with toxicity as another human/more-than-human entanglement (De Vos 2022), yet her only solution is to eat as little as possible and thus risking her very existence in this world. In *Spring*, Florence, the young migrant girl who attempts to stay off SA4 A's radar, talks about how 'an eternal nuclear autumn will set in and there'll be no more seasons' (184). She seems to accept this future, or in any case accept its arrival as unavoidable. And in *Summer*, Sacha characterizes her mother's worrying about whether or not Hannah Arendt has written a quote she intends to use for a school project a 'displacement activity from worrying about the real things happening in the world' (11). None of these characters is able to translate their awareness into something more concrete or activist—the rebellion Song speaks about. Disempowered by the imagined vastness of climate change (Morton 2013), they sit and wait.

To paraphrase the novels' work like this is to focus on what they do not do, or what they fail to do. Yet it is perhaps exactly literature such as the *Seasonal Quartet*—which situates itself so clearly in *our* world—that makes this impasse (Berlant 2011) and the impossibility of individual action visible. The *Quartet* is not a practical guide: it offers no way out or way forward—no blueprint or utopian alternative to the world we inhabit currently—but instead shows how short-term politics blinds society to the changes that are altering how we live *at this very point*—and that ultimately threaten to end the change of seasons and thus destabilize Smith's own poetics. It is the misguided policies

of Brexit and xenophobic nationalism, targeted at immigrants and those who are seen to 'not belong'—policies which moreover deny the transgression of borders that is inherent in life—, that distract from the fundamental, increasingly lethal changes that threaten human and nonhuman habitats on planet Earth.[3] Short-term focus prevents us from seeing the slow, long-term violence (Nixon 2011) that climate change—damage, in Sacha's terms—entails.

Despite all of this, the *Quartet* does not end on this heavy note; it does, also, offer hope. Specifically, it imagines hope in individuals and individual moments of clarity. It invests, that is, in the power of art to make things happen.

Conclusion: Believing Art

Within the context of its own poetics, the *Quartet* can think no solution—poetic or otherwise—to the threat that is anthropogenic climate change. Its disruption cannot be transformed, exactly because it threatens to disrupt some of the most natural transformations that exist on planet Earth. The spectre of no more darkness in summer, no more light in winter, but instead one big monoseason is the horizon against which Smithian poetics images its own end. If that sounds highbrow, it is also practical: it means taking its subject matter seriously. The *Quartet* helps us see clearly how our lives in the Anthropocene are slowly coming unmoored—but it does one other thing, too, which I want to put forward by way of conclusion.

Throughout this article, I have been emphasizing the tension between the *Quartet*'s Bakthinian, dialogic polyphony on the one hand and its clearly stated, more monologic sympathies on the other. This is to say that the *Seasonal Quartet* is hospitable to characters aware of climate change, allowing their lives and the novels' narrative threads to be disrupted, and thus allows it to make itself heard and to impact—if not change—the story. As such, it nestles itself in the novels' aesthetic strategies and shows the importance of representation to create an image of the world we live. As Daniel Gluck says in conversation with Elisabeth in *Autumn*, 'whoever makes up the story makes up the world,' also advising her to give her characters 'the same benefit of the doubt you'd welcome when it comes to yourself. … Always give them a home' (119, 120).

Here, we see an early instance of the *Seasonal Quartet*'s metafictional awareness of itself. True to Smith's writerly roots in postmodernism (Germanà and Horton 2013, Germanà 2020; cf. Horgan 2016), sewn throughout these novels are references to the power of art in society. These references act as much on an intercharacter level, as they

[3] A reluctance to enact climate change legislation of course often goes hand in hand with nationalist politics. See Newell (2019).

are statements on what the *Quartet* itself attempts to do. If in the novels, and especially *Winter*, initially doubt is cast on Art the character, they positively position art with a small 'a' much more quickly.

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty. There is no such thing as fake beauty,' Lux tells Art's aunt Iris in *Winter* (211). In a later conversation, Lux remarks to Iris about her nephew that 'Art is seeing things', to which she replies, 'that's a great description of what art is' (286). Throughout Smith's work, we find references to the power of art to change the perspective and make people see things anew (Lewis 2019, 2022; cf. Smith 2018). The various artists who make their appearance in the pages of the *Quartet* are positioned as such: they make things visible, and in the beautiful objects they create—whether literature, film, sculpture, or paintings—they come closer to truths about human life. (A rather Romantic positioning indeed, perhaps too much so for Smith.) Yet the novels' faith in art is not directed only at the artists in their own pages; it also reflects back on the novels themselves: they, too, contain stories within their pages. Perhaps the *Seasonal Quartet* is not able to effect any concrete change in our world, but they are able to make visible that our lives are already thoroughly affected and increasingly disrupted by climate change. Art is seeing things: that what is already happening, and the small ways in which each one of us might do things differently.

In a final reflection, I want to suggest we read Smith's puns—such as Art/art—as moments where her aesthetic commitments enact the power of art to counteract denial: in art, it is impossible to *not* see things and follow that up by acting. Art, Song (2021) also suggests, is a space of attention and noticing. Art helps to see things anew, including those things we have known all along: it distributes what Jacques Rancière calls the 'sensible,' and thus discloses 'the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it' (2004, 12). In this distribution lies an acknowledgement: of the effects of anthropogenic climate change and the consequences of greenhouse gas emissions to our collective life. In the *Seasonal Quartet*, all forms of denial, including its interpretative and implicatory versions, become impossible: art prevents the continued repetition of not-knowing, which makes us see things.

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