



Oral Collage: A Study of the Storyteller-Migrant in Ali Smith's Seasonal Quartet

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In this article, I will explore how Ali Smith's *Seasonal Quartet* takes the form of an oral collage, a malleable, shape-shifting structure, to narrate the multi-layered affiliations of migratory experience. I will analyse Smith's creation of oral collage using an interdisciplinary network spanning the disciplines of the visual arts, literary criticism, and migration studies. My examination of the relationship between Smith's oral collage and the role of the storyteller-migrant will be informed by Yuval Etgar's concept of collage as a mobile form which shifts attention to the margins or edges, creating 'sites of disruption' where 'the unexpected, unscripted, or that was not meant to be included appear'. I will discuss how Smith's representation of the migrant's 'simultaneity of connection,' a criss-crossing of bloodline, geography, time, and memory, forms the foundation of her oral collage. (Levitt and Glick Schiller) Further, I will examine how Smith's oral collage contributes to the creation of a 'dissident counterpublic' sphere through its foregrounding of the figure of the storyteller-migrant. (Schrag) Finally, I will discuss the significance of Smith's quartet for writing about migration, identity and belonging in the 21st century.



Introduction

‘Don’t be calling it a migrant crisis, Paddy said. I’ve told you a million times. It’s people. It’s an individual person crossing the world against the odds.’ (Smith, *Spring*: 68)

Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet* features an eclectic cast. Some characters such as Daniel Gluck recur throughout the quartet, others like the Irish-born documentary film maker Paddy Hartman play a cameo role within one novel. Paddy’s appearance in *Spring* is connected to the larger ensemble through a shared belief in the value of the outsider, the migrant, the wanderer. Smith’s deployment of this narrative device ensures the reader does not invest in a single protagonist’s story but is instead drawn into an intricate collage of connections set up between several dozens of stories reflecting the enmeshed lives of migrants and those who they encounter. It is a collage generated through a gradual gathering of stories, objects, literary citations, and descriptions of artworks, shared across and between generations largely through the spoken word.

In this article I will focus on the novels’ engagements with the figure of the storyteller-migrant and the challenge they present to the legitimising of linear state narratives of belonging. Throughout the quartet, Smith underlines the complexities of peoples’ circumstances when living both in and outside a nation’s borders.

Movement and attachment are shown to be non-linear processes, ‘capable of rotating back and forth’, achieving a ‘simultaneity of connection’, a definition forged by migration scholars Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller who foreground empirical assessment of cross-border ties. (Levitt and Glick Schiller, 2004:1011) They argue generational experience is not always territorially bound but might be based on ‘actual and imagined experiences that are shared across borders regardless of where someone was born or now lives.’ (1017). I will discuss how this concept of ‘simultaneity of connection’ permeates Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet*, given artistic and political traction through the form of oral collage.

The fundamental principle of collage is to juxtapose different source materials to create new meaning as Marjorie Perloff argues, citing from Group Mu’s 1978 Manifesto: ‘the trick of collage consists of never entirely suppressing the alterity of these elements reunited in a temporary composition.’ (Perloff, 1984:34) In the *Seasonal Quartet*, a discordant cascade of voices speaks of lives lived at the cusp of catastrophe – personal, political, and environmental. I will explore how the shifting perspective of the speakers draws attention to the edges of things, just like the collaged image. An edge is a shifting space, a threshold for establishing new or unexpected connections and meaning, a quality rich in potential for creating new concepts of belonging in the 21st century.

Collage is not simply a technical procedure used by visual artists; it is also about attitude and possibilities. Yuval Etgar draws attention to the medium's 'inherent tendency towards mobility, change and, above all, dislocation.' (Etgar, 2022:37) Collage, Etgar states, 'is an entry point to the way in which we can perceive as well as produce artefacts in every realm of life.' (44) I will demonstrate how Etgar's concept of collage as a disruptive and creative procedure informs Smith's representation of the storyteller-migrant as a participant in the public sphere in the *Seasonal Quartet*. In the oral collage, the narrative focus is constantly disrupted; threads of ideas dissolve and re-form driven by the creative vision of the migrant characters. It becomes a key means by which Smith tests what Nicole Schrag describes as 'the relationship between art and politics in a dissident, politically engaged counterpublic sphere.' (Schrag, 2022: 2) Throughout the quartet, Smith's migrant characters engage in acts of 'creative dissidence' – primarily acts of storytelling – which support their belief in 'a world rich with the joy of discovering new ways of seeing and living.' (Schrag: 17)

Further, I will consider how Smith's representation of the role of the storyteller-migrant in the counterpublic sphere is informed by her long-term involvement with the Refugee Tales Project. Since 2015, the project has been organising walks in solidarity with refugees, asylum seekers and detainees, in which the sharing of stories plays a key role. Smith, currently patron of Refugee Tales Project, defines storytelling as 'an act of profound hospitality', one which underpins 'the importance of creating a public space' in which 'the language of welcome is the prevailing discourse.' (Refugee Tales)

Drawing on the four interconnected migratory narratives of the characters Gluck, Lux, Hero, and Florence, I will discuss how Smith views the migrant's creative vision as being crucial to the task 'to find and organise new descriptions of experience,' which will encapsulate complex legacies of belonging. (Williams, 2011:45). In the *Seasonal Quartet*, Smith puts emphasis on the idea of a cross-generational building of cultural legacy through reference to experiment with genre across generations – from the experiments with collage by modernist visual artists to the development of the pastoral by playwrights in the early 17th century. I will examine how Smith interweaves the pastoral genre into her quartet through prioritising the figure of the narrator, most specifically the storyteller-migrant Daniel Gluck, and the figure of an omniscient narrator whose role is influenced by the character 'Time' in Shakespeare's late play *The Winter's Tale*.

Key to Smith's representation of the storyteller-migrant is her use of recurring patterns of images drawn from actual and imagined artworks to establish connectivity between characters and events across time and place. My analysis of the methodology Smith deploys to translate the visual into the literary will be shaped by John Berger and Jean Mohr's concept of the image as a 'nexus of relative infinities, contrasts and

comparisons,' a structural device rich in potential for narrating the migrant's complex myriad of relationships. (Berger and Mohr, 2016: 282)

Oral collage

In the *Seasonal Quartet*, multiple literary genres are juxtaposed in collage style from news headlines to literary quotations, from drama criticism to the act of letter writing, linked by an underlying regulating system built around the theme of voice. The four novels, each named after one of the four seasons, are written as oral collage, full of storytellers, speakers, and protestors adept with both the spoken and written word – they debate, they write letters and postcards; they describe from memory inspirational works of art.

Recent scholarship on Smith's writing has focused on her use of ekphrasis and collage as modes of critical enquiry which bring together exploration of the state of the nation and the state of the novel in the present historical moment. Laura Schmitz-Justen argues this is achieved by setting up a series of 'ekphrastic encounters with self-reflexive artworks.' (Schmitz-Justen, 2022:318) In her study of the use of collage in the novel *Autumn*, Schmitz-Justen focuses on a real-life collage which is described by the character Daniel Gluck. The collage was created by British pop artist Pauline Boty in the 1960s and references the Profumo scandal. This reference-within-a-reference is, argues Schmitz-Justen, a means for the author to inject into her novel other works of art which also question the politics of representation. The Profumo Affair saw a young woman, Christine Keeler, imprisoned for her actions unlike the men who exploited her, including a member of government. Boty and Smith recreate this infamous political narrative by offering 'a shift in perspective'; it is a revised perspective which is subject to the reader's 'questioning yet benign ekphrastic gaze' centred on considering the 'political moment.' (Schmitz-Jensen:327) In a narrative layered with ekphrastic encounters such as that with Boty's collage, the reading experience becomes more akin to the act of translating a collaged image.

In her analysis of the application of the technique of montage to the novel in the early 20th century, Patricia McBride argues that Dadaist and Surrealist exponents of the practice expanded opportunities to 'incorporate diverse linguistic material and objects from everyday life into non-memetic narratives.' (McBride, 2016:51) Smith expands on the Dadaist and Surrealist model through harnessing her genre of oral collage to a wider ambition: the creation of a malleable narrative framework which harnesses 'new descriptions of experience' to express the complexity of a cultural legacy shared across and between different generations. (Williams, 2011:45) Each generation has its own 'structure of feeling,' Raymond Williams states, even if it simultaneously has absorbed

the social characteristics and ‘general cultural pattern’ of previous generations. (Williams: 69)

The new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting, taking up many continuities, that can be traced...yet feeling its whole life in certain ways different and shaping its creative response in a new structure of feeling. (Ibid)

Smith’s representation of this ‘new structure of feeling’ in the *Seasonal Quartet* is, Nicole Schrag argues, shaped by a metamodernist aesthetic. Smith is engaged in ‘politically re-energising aesthetic practices with a mix of hope and irony.’ (Schrag, 2022:1) The quartet is made up of shifting perspectives which operate rather like the edges introduced by the collagist; they represent disruption and resistance and are a means by which alternative lives enter the narrative. Smith allows her readers to identify with her characters, but she also subverts that relationship through irony (Schrag: 6) How and when a subject becomes a participant in the counterpublic sphere is partly determined by their engagement in conversations about artworks, what Schrag describes as ‘ekphrastic conversation.’ (Schrag: 11) These conversations are a ‘propulsion towards ethical, political, and creative action’, which in turn ‘make’ culture. (Schrag: 5)

The deployment of a collage aesthetics to frame a metamodernist vision of a ‘new structure of feeling’ in the counterpublic sphere challenges the idea Smith is writing ‘a fiction of immediacy.’ (Purvis, 2021:445) The *Seasonal Quartet* is not just a cross-generational novel in terms of character and plot; it also experiments with genre across time. The cumulative effect of being both in and out of a particular historical time is, arguably, the essence of the *Seasonal Quartet*, shaped partly by Smith adopting Perloff’s concept that collaged forms retain their alterity, and so refuse to be pinned to one interpretation. But Smith also enlarges her oral collage through drawing on the Renaissance concept of the pastoral. The late plays of Shakespeare are a creative touchstone: the novels in the *Seasonal Quartet* share the plays’ themes of time, memory, and magic, but as importantly, they echo Shakespeare’s experiment with the pastoral, a genre in which ‘tragedy and comedy became inseparable.’ (Orgel,1996: 37) The pastoral drama is not linear, but cyclical and it incorporates different dramatic genres to present a world which does not adhere to a given reality but ‘continually adjusts its reality according to the demands of its developing argument.’ (Orgel:36)

For example, in *The Winter’s Tale* the drama moves from action to narration with the introduction of a narrator ‘Time’ who acts as a Chorus in Act 4, breaking up the immediacy of the earlier scenes. Smith’s slippage between set scenes and ekphrastic encounters is further interrupted by interludes from a chorus-like narrator, self-reflective in

style and redolent of Shakespeare's personification of 'Time' in *The Winter's Tale*. The interludes provide a sense of immediacy, for example in *Spring*, a seemingly omniscient narrator argues:

Here's an old story so new that it's still in the middle of happening, writing itself right now with no knowledge of where or how it'll end. (181)

How people narrate and tell their story is key, as it is within Shakespeare's late plays where narration is presented as 'a crucial form of knowledge.' (Orgel: 57) In Smith's novels, the narrator takes precedence through the collaging of voices – an amalgam of discussion, dialogue, dispute, and word play. The text must be read across image and text, unearthing the gaps in history both personal and historical. Markers of place and time appear but quickly dissolve in a web of entangled narratives, many of them set into train by the character of Daniel Gluck, the storyteller-migrant who appears in all four novels.

Gluck's English German heritage reflects the complexity – and changing contours – of identity over an extended period. Born in 1915, Gluck's story stretches across two centuries and several geographies. 'I'm only a summer German,' he tells two residents in an internment camp on the Isle of Douglas where he has been sent following the outbreak of the Second World War in the novel *Summer*. (155) Raised in England by his German-English father, Gluck spends his summer holidays with his mother and sister Hannah in Germany. Throughout the quartet, the definition of his identity remains in flux; transition and transformation occur through extended conversations and the sharing of knowledge about art, lived experience, and historical facts. Gluck's evocation of Hannah is also conjured through a series of tangential inner dialogues, triggered by memories of specific works of art, including silent films made by Charlie Chaplin which feature the actor's persona The Tramp. The films spill over the interior and exterior walls of Gluck's temporary homes, a visual motif which brings past and present together. For example, when Hannah is ill, he transforms her bedroom into a cinema, projecting a Chaplin film against the wall. In *Autumn*, he is seen to repeat this performance in later life when he projects Chaplin's movies in his garden to entertain his neighbour's daughter Elisabeth.

In other words, Gluck is not a character in the conventional sense of the word. He is the hub around which multiple characters knowingly, or not, become part of a wider set of connections, set into motion by a series of quests, staged against the backdrop of the cycle of the changing seasons, which echo the magical backdrop of the late plays of Shakespeare. Gluck is evoked through a collage of recurring images and encounters which occur across three generations in multiple sites. His story is a convoluted quest which takes place in and out of time, hinged by speech acts, primarily monologues and

dialogues about works of art and the creative imagination. Arguably, this presentation of Gluck as a storyteller-migrant can be seen to be shaped by the process Raymond Williams identifies as the means for forging a new 'structure of feeling' in each generation and its translation across time, place, and national borders. 'Theoretically, a period is recorded; in practice, this record is absorbed in a selective tradition; and both are different from the culture as lived.' (Williams, 2011: 71)

Autumn the first novel in the quartet opens with Gluck on the cusp of dying, his memories and what is occurring around him a strange melange of image and the written word – his one-time neighbour Elisabeth reads to him when she visits him in his care home. Gluck's lived experience is expressed through his stream of consciousness; in *Summer*, the reader discovers only Gluck will remember the letters he wrote to his sister in Occupied France, and that he burnt them as a matter of course, to protect her from discovery by the Gestapo. On his deathbed, Gluck selects and reinterprets his memories. How they transfer to others is more complicated than say through a recorded entry in a diary, or email. His role is like that of the narrator 'Time' in *The Winter's Tale*: he is both present and omnipresent, largely because of the key images and motifs which he introduces and which the reader then sees reappear in the lives of other characters across the novels – some of whom Gluck will never encounter. These recurring images and motifs are freighted with meaning – like the Boty collage which simultaneously represents a particular 60s political scandal and indicates a revised perspective of that event for the reader to question.

Gluck is a gifted and charismatic storyteller. In *Autumn*, the reader time travels between 2016 and the 1940s. The novel opens with Elisabeth visiting Gluck in the care home. She is a precariously employed lecturer in art history, but the reader also learns more about the friendship she struck up with Gluck, growing up in a village where they were neighbours, a village deep in the heart of the 'post Brexit English countryside.' (53) Elisabeth and Gluck's friendship is cemented through a shared love of words and storytelling. When young Elisabeth expresses an interest in going to college, Gluck plays on its close resemblance to the word collage to make a point about the true value of education:

Collage is an institute of education where all the rules can be thrown into the air, and size and space and time and foreground and background all become relative, and because of these skills *everything you think you know gets made into something new and strange.* (70–71; my italics)

He then describes a collage he has seen, a real work of art made by an artist friend of his who is later identified as Pauline Boty, a forgotten figure in the British Pop Art movement. The slippage between time, word, and image within these encounters is suggestive

of the collage-making process Gluck references – the opportunity to see beyond the familiar, and to embrace what is new. It is also a process which underlines the idea of a simultaneous present in which memory and imagination set up chains of connection between past and present. The simultaneous present is evoked in Smith's oral collage through ekphrastic conversation and through the interplay between memories across time. Gluck's memories from different decades are framed like a collage, drawing on a web of references which unfold across the novels so enabling connections to be made without lengthy exposition or prompts concerning previous events. For example, in *Autumn*, Gluck appears first as an old man who no one seems to know much about. But slowly, details emerge. Later in the novel, we learn Gluck had a sister Hannah when the narrative switches from the countryside to a film set in Nice, France, in 2015. A wartime scene is being recreated and there is uproar over the sight of a banner with a swastika being displayed. And then the scene segues into Nice, 1943, to the interior of a truck which carries Hannah a prisoner of the Gestapo. She manages to escape. In *Autumn*, in his residential care home, Gluck remembers his sister. And it's at this point the reader learns her freedom was short-lived. All he has left of Hannah are some pages from letters she wrote to Gluck whilst she nursed their mother. 'There are no pictures left of her. The photos at their mother's house? long burnt, lost, gone, street litter.' (189)

The Storyteller-Migrant

In the *Seasonal Quartet*, the migrant is given agency through their ability to shape their own narrative through a lens unmediated by the prejudice and hatred extolled in the mainstream press and on social media platforms. They are marginal voices – Gluck is a songwriter from wartime Europe, Lux is a Croatian student living in the UK under the radar, Hero is a blogger from Vietnam escaping death threats from his government, and Florence is a semi-mythical child who seems to infiltrate by magic a heavily surveilled detention centre. Their agency lies in their storytelling powers, which far from being a whimsical enterprise is invested with authority through Smith's rich understanding of the power of story and its potential to fully reflect on an individual's multi-faceted identity. Smith achieves this in the *Seasonal Quartet* by enabling the term 'migrant' to accrue new meaning as it expands to describe events which mark out an era shaped by complicated, interwoven crises. She writes about a country embedded within a globalized neo-liberal capitalist order, in which individual suffering is entangled within larger scale global risks, including mass migration and climate change. It is a perspective enriched by the inclusion of voices of those absent from the iconic narratives constructed around migrant journeys, such as that surrounding the arrival of the Empire Windrush in 1948.

In his critical study of transmigration in British history, Tony Kushner examines a cluster of migratory stories which stand outside collective memory, including the experience of stowaways from the West Indies and the African continent who arrived in British port cities and towns during the 20th century. In *Winter*, it is Smith's character Lux who is representative of the underrepresented transmigrant experience; she possesses a history with many starting points and seemingly no end point in sight, rather like the stowaways found in Kushner's study. She is the daughter of exiles who fled the civil war which tore apart the countries of the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Her new identity is Croatian, but she lives as an illegal migrant in the UK. In a post-Brexit discussion about economic migrants, Lux – her real name is never disclosed – shrewdly states: 'the only room I'm used to hearing people talk about is the *no* room, the *no more* room.' (Smith *Winter*: 205)

Smith challenges the legitimising of linear state narratives around belonging by putting emphasis instead on her migrant characters' multi-layered affiliations. Exploring what he describes as the 'complex genealogies' of the mass displacements which have occurred throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, historian Peter Gatrell identifies that such crises are not 'temporary or unique [...] but recurring phenomena.' (Gatrell, 2013:11). The appropriation and interpretation of history on the part of refugees, is he states, 'a key resource' which enables the foregrounding of the migratory experience as one 'located in an extensive and intricate web of meaning,' spanning time and space (Gatrell: 287) A person moves into exile is 'already enmeshed' in a myriad of relationships; they possess historic ties, family connections, memories of shared journeys. (Gatrell: 288)

The key narrative device Smith uses to represent this myriad of relationships is a series of recurring images which prompt and remind the reader of the 'simultaneity of connection' which underpin migratory lives. In *Another Way of Telling*, John Berger and Jean Mohr state: 'the sight of any single thing or event entrains the sight of other things and events.' (Berger and Mohr, 2016:115) In other words, 'one image interpenetrates another.' (Ibid). Viewing a photograph, different ideas coalesce in the mind's eye prompted by details which inspire insights into what has happened – and what will happen. The photograph represents a 'nexus of relative infinities, contrasts and comparisons.' (Berger and Mohr: 282) Smith's novel operates along a similar principle, allowing the reader to navigate their way through recurring images propelling the narrative, including descriptions of a sculpture of *Mother and Child* by Barbara Hepworth. The sculpture is made up of two parts, 'two round stones...strikingly beautiful stones.' (*Winter*, 251). The sculpture was once in the possession of Gluck, but in *Winter* it is revealed one of the stones was stolen by his former lover, Sophia. The two stones are reunited at the end of *Summer*, but the fact of their separation becomes a means for

Smith to explore fissures experienced in personal relationships mapped throughout the novels. In *Winter*, Sophia recalls the time she first sees the sculpture in Gluck's house, an encounter which anticipates the failure of their short-lived relationship. 'The sculpture was in two pieces...They were meant to fit together. But we didn't fit, he and I.' (251)

Smith translates the visual into the textual, creating a written version of the nexus of relative infinities described by Berger and Mohr. This nexus of infinities is embodied in a series of encircling narratives about artworks which fuse character, storyteller, and the listener/reader. The experience is, as Berger and Mohr suggest in a discussion of the extended reading of a photograph, akin to that of listening to a story as a child. 'You were no longer your single self; you were, thanks to the story, *everyone it concerned*.' (Berger and Mohr: 288) In the *Seasonal Quartet*, Smith explores this concept through her presentation of family relationships. They expand beyond ties of blood, history, and citizenship; what connects are acts of recognition, which reveal the close interrelationships which exist between those who are seemingly from very different worlds, separated by geography and time. Smith deploys the four interconnecting narratives of migrant characters Lux, Gluck, Hero, and Florence to achieve this objective.

What comes to the surface in these four interconnected narratives is dependent on an intensive process of gathering of image, word, and sound, the creation of an echoing chamber inhabited by the four storyteller-migrants, whose destination is not marked out by a map's coordinates but by the breadth and scope of their imaginations. For example, in the novel *Winter*, the character Lux finds anchor in her complex transmigratory world by identifying with key themes found in the plays of Shakespeare, chiefly the late play *Cymbeline*.

Lux is a student from Croatia whose money has run out, forcing her to live illegally in the UK. In *Winter*, she agrees to act as girlfriend to Art whom she meets at a bus stop, a role she takes on for a fee of £1000. Art is going to stay at his mother's house in Cornwall for Christmas but has just split up with his girlfriend. Far from simply serving as a *deus ex machina*, Lux is pivotal to the narrative that unfolds. She is a storyteller-migrant, like Gluck, one whose shifting concept of home is transfigured through acts of the imagination. In an extended discussion over Christmas lunch, the topic of conversation turns to Shakespeare's play *Cymbeline*.

Fault lines in the family are breaking through, and it is Lux who teases out the resemblances with Shakespeare's drama. 'You can't see for the life of you how any of it will resolve in the end because it's such a tangled-up messed-up farce.' (Smith, *Spring*, 200). According to Lux, everyone is too invested in their own world view to really listen and see what is being said and done by others, and this is preventing them understanding that 'they're all part of the same story.' (201). Lux expands on her theme

by identifying how Shakespeare's play is redolent of something much wider than one dysfunctional family at war with each other.

I read it and I thought, if this writer from this place can make this mad and bitter mess into this graceful thing at the end, where the balance comes back and all the lies are revealed and all the losses are compensated, and that's [...] the place that made him, then that's the place I'm going, I'll go there, I'll live there. (200)

Lux is emblematic of Peter Gatrell's point discussed earlier that the migrant is enmeshed in intricate webs of meaning. She compares her Croatian nationality to a wound; her creative act of resistance is to overcome the limitations of living between arbitrarily imposed borders – whether national, political, or cultural. Although she was born after the civil war which tore apart the countries of the former Yugoslavia, its legacy still complicates her life and that of her family. Their being physically distanced from the conflict has not spared them:

[...] We were wounded, I was wounded, all the same. And I love my family, I love them but when I'm with them, my wounds reopen. So I can't live with them. I can't be with them. (*Spring*, 246).

Lux discovers a home in literature and the imagination. Like Gluck, she offers up stories which interlock through a process of osmosis – an accumulation of detail and seeming coincidences which gradually amass around key works of literature and art. When Art asks her to describe the most beautiful thing she has ever seen, Lux describes a flower she once saw, pressed between the pages of a copy of Shakespeare's complete works:

It's the bud of a rose.
Well. It's the mark left on the page by what was *once* the bud of a rose.
(*Winter*, 212)

After their Christmas adventure, Art tries tracing Lux but fails. He locates the image she has described in a library's online archive, but it is 'the ghost of a flower.' (*Winter*, 319) Whilst the flower is long gone, what remains is: 'the mark of the life of it reaching across the words on the page for all the world like a footpath.' (*Ibid*). It is an example of how Smith demonstrates the storyteller-migrant's use of ellipsis to re-shape the wounds of biography; contextual clues are placed inside a story built around a key image such as the rose, transforming a written narrative into a form of oral collage.

There are many journeys recorded throughout the quartet, the majority on foot, including the journeys Hannah Gluck makes, guiding wartime refugees who are fleeing into exile across the Pyrenees. When characters walk in the landscape they are shown as being intrinsically part of a wider story which they tell of themselves, a story shot through with debates about national and global politics. They walk in landscapes scarred by political division, but they are also places where the stranger, the outsider, can discover a different way of belonging, even if not recognised by officialdom. Ideas are exchanged on these journeys, and transformations occur – some as fantastical as those found in a fairy tale, others more subtle and open-ended, like the story of two men wandering in a bomb-blasted landscape in London.

The two men are characters in *Together*, a short film made by the Italian exile Lorenza Mazzetti whose story is told in the novel *Summer* through reference to what Smith describes as her ‘short film interludes.’ (Smith, *Summer*, 262) Descriptions of Mazzetti’s short films recur at key moments in *Summer*, drawing together multiple narratives by image. *Together* is a film about trauma; it is a film about two mutes who must find their own way to communicate. The men walk through the bombed-out city, oblivious to the children who run behind them mocking the way they walk, and what they see as their strangeness.

The film is discussed by members of the Greenlaw family when they travel to Suffolk, to seek respite from problems centred on son Robert’s experiences of being bullied. Robert seeks to walk in the footsteps of his idol Einstein by locating a pub where the scientist was believed to have drunk whilst in exile in England; his mother Grace re-traces a walk she made to a local church whilst touring as an actress in a production of *The Winter’s Tale*. The relationship between standing witness and walking is rooted in Smith’s activism with the Refugee Tales Project discussed earlier in which participants embark on walks in solidarity with refugees, asylum seekers and detainees. Storytelling plays an important role in the project, as Smith states in her welcome statement on the Refugee Tales website:

Story has always been a welcoming-in...and a porous artform where sympathy and empathy are only the beginning of things. The individual selves we all are meet and transform in the telling into something open and communal.’ (*Refugee Tales*)

This approach to storytelling is reflected throughout the quartet. Smith, like her character Gluck, creates multiple (hi) stories through playing the game of Bagatelle within her novels, the game Gluck introduces to young Elisabeth in *Autumn*: ‘The whole point of Bagatelle is that you trifle with the stories that people think are set in stone.’ (117) And, as Gluck states, telling a story is a way of building a home for others:

[...] Always try to welcome people into the home of your story [...] And always give them a choice – even those characters [...] who seem to have no choice at all. Always give them a home. (*Autumn*, 119–20)

What Smith achieves with her account of the journeys in the *Seasonal Quartet* is a sense of ideas evolving through human movement, ideas that span established and emerging global crises including mass migration. They are quests which demand to be told in more creative ways than the redacted narratives of sovereign power which seek to impose linear temporality on events which cannot be folded into neat historical episodes. Smith's oral collage is a heuristic tool which offers the reader an opportunity to trace complex codes of meaning through sets of recurring images which bring together events and people separated by time and geography. In the *Seasonal Quartet*, the storyteller-migrant's affect-world determines the trajectory of their story; acts of oral storytelling and images of the somatic memory fold in and out of each as the characters travel across diverse sites of trauma – from sites in 20th century wartime Europe to an historic battleground in the Highlands.

In Renate Brosch's analysis of ekphrasis in Smith's novels, the emphasis is put on the author's creation of a process of affective seeing, a means to 'stall the flow of mental images by providing a halting place for a more attentive imagination'. (Brosch, 2018:408). In the *Seasonal Quartet*, the reader must navigate a series of cumulative narratives, told by choruses of recorded and imagined voices from the margins, enmeshed in complex histories of mobility. In excavating these layers of stories, the reader's guide is the storyteller-migrant whose world comes into being through their acts of 'attentive imagination.' The storyteller-migrant demonstrates the potential of the imagination to overcome the limitations imposed on their social and political identity as defined by the world of nation states and increasingly redundant in a century where the apparent enemy – or threatening entity – is capable of overrunning borders be it a virus or a tornado. It is the resources of the imagination which return agency to the lost and unheard migratory voices in the *Seasonal Quartet*.

Creativity & complicity

In Smith's novel *Spring*, the reader is introduced to Hero and Florence two storyteller migrants who are linked to an Immigration Removal Centre. Smith demonstrates how both claim agency against the UK's punitive detention regime through creative acts of resistance, inspired by nature and the elements.

Hero is a detainee from Vietnam, but little is known about him, other than he arrived in the UK after being sealed in a haulage container for seven weeks. Details

of Hero's experiences in detention echo those of a detainee Smith interviewed for her story *The Detainee's Tale* published by Comma Press in 2015. He was also from Vietnam, and like Hero has a room with a window that does not open. (Smith, 2015) In her novel *Spring*, Smith introduces this fact into the short episode where we encounter Hero. Brit, one of the centre's officers, engages in a conversation with Hero when she finds him lying on the floor of his room, looking through the bars to the sky above. The windows don't open, and he wants to know why. Hero's circumstances are unendurable, but his imagination still takes wing. Brit responds by correcting his grammar and vocabulary.

'What is it like to breath real air?

Breathe, she said. *What is it like...*

I watch clods, he said.

He meant clouds.

I am watching, she said. *Clouds.'* (Smith, *Spring*: 160/61)

Hero is detained and denied his basic rights unlike Florence, a mercurial child who initially appears more of a figment of the imagination than a real presence. She infiltrates the centre and demands change; staff at the detention centre swap stories about her startling skill at dodging their strict security measures. On her way to work one day, Brit comes across a young schoolgirl who is intent on reaching a destination she knows only from a postcard. This chance meeting leads to an extended train journey where Brit comes to realise the schoolgirl might just be that other child who can seemingly walk-through walls. Her name is Florence and where she comes from has been the subject of much debate at the detention centre. Some claimed she went to a local Co-op academy; others that she survived crossing the seas on a dinghy, but her mother had drowned. Florence carries a school notebook which she lets Brit look at intermittently during the journey. Its title is *Your Hot Air Book*.

Like Hero, Florence's story is told partly through images which centre on transitory elements such as air, clouds, and the act of flight, elements which echo the subject matter found in a trio of exhibitions by the visual artist Tacita Dean held in London in 2018.¹ The chorus-like narrator in the *Seasonal Quartet* describes visiting the exhibitions; details of individual works of art, including a series of cloudscapes, prompt comparison with the outputs of Hero and Florence's creative imaginations. Artwork and fiction interpenetrate, and it is more than a rhetorical ekphrastic exercise. After

¹ In 2018, three interconnected exhibitions featuring the work of Tacita Dean were held across three London galleries. *Tactia Dean: Landscape*, Royal Academy of Arts (19 May–12 August); *Tacita Dean: Portrait*, National Portrait Gallery (15 March–28 May) and *Tacita Dean: STILL LIFE*, The National Gallery (15 March–28 May).

Florence is reunited with her mother, Brit keeps her schoolbag which contains the Hot Air notebook. It is both fictional artefact and a book-within-a-book which encapsulates the process of turning art making into a narrative capable of writing across generational and geographical boundaries:

‘[Brit] has worked out...that some of the pieces have been written to go together as if they are in sort of dialogues with each other, the right-wing stuff answered by a voice bigger than it, the earth speaking, or time or her favourite season...’ (Smith, *Spring*: 323)

The *Hot Air Book* has been given to Florence by her mother. An inscription reveals she wants her daughter to write down in it all the things others will dismiss as hot air. In other words, the transmission of the invaluable experience of Hero and Florence is not prevented by their limited circumstances; their shared purpose extends beyond their immediate constraints through juxtaposition with timeless artworks by the internationally acclaimed artist Tacita Dean.

Throughout the *Seasonal Quartet*, acts of writing and oral storytelling and the rituals around their making are evolved by characters whose voices are retrieved in postcards and letters which migrate between novels, forming layered visuals which collapse time and space. They do not appear at random but are structured by the principle of collage – built on the gradual accumulation of knowledge revealed through the hidden building blocks of the writer’s craft. In Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet*, postcards are a key concealed building block. There are repeated references to a vintage postcard showing a child in a park in Paris – Edouard Boubat’s ‘*petite fille aux feuilles mortes jardin du Luxembourg Paris 1946.*’ In *Winter*, Sophia remembers this postcard with clarity, but not that it was sent to her by her former lover Daniel Gluck. *Autumn* opens with Gluck as an old man, his memory wandering and it is the postcard he recalls, ‘bought off a rack in the middle of Paris in the 1980s of the little girl in one of the parks.’ (9) The postcard is a layered visual – it is a child playing with leaves, but the leaves also resemble rags which remind Gluck of the war, and a very different interpretation ensues – a photograph taken ‘in a time when a child just playing in leaves could look, for the first time to the casual eye, like a rounded-up and offed child (it hurts to think it).’ (Ibid)

The postcard reappears in *Spring* when a dying Paddy chides Richard about contemporary human rights abuses including children working in cobalt mines, dressed in ‘clothes as ragged as suits of dead leaves.’ (250). Using the recurring motif of the postcard, Smith draws together the landscapes of wartime Europe and mineral mines in today’s Democratic Republic of Congo which have been associated with exploitative

labour practices, including the use of child workers.² In other words, a repeated image, surfacing in different contexts, becomes a means to narrate the complexity of lives shaped by a ‘simultaneity of connection.’

The exploitative labour practices of one country have repercussions which travel beyond its geographical boundaries: cobalt is used in the making of electric cars in Western Europe, an enterprise widely regarded as important in helping to reduce carbon emissions through phasing out reliance on diesel vehicles. We all have the potential to become ‘implicated subjects,’ when an event stands outside a singular moment, as Michael Rothberg argues. (Rothberg, 2014: xv) Migratory knowledge – here embodied in a black and white postcard – bears witness to the intricate overlaps which exist across histories, cultures, and biographies.

Conclusion

The *Seasonal Quartet* is structured as oral collage, its multiple narrative strands made cohesive through the pivotal figure of the storyteller-migrant. The storyteller-migrant is given agency through acts of speech, but Smith moves away from the polemical to create rich and entangled dialogues to give expression to the multi-layered affiliations of migratory experience. Acts of speech centre on recurring patterns of images and works of art (real and imagined), a device which enables Smith to create a complex web of connections between all characters. It becomes a means to underline the author’s understanding that borders are carried within as much as without and might be shared regardless of where someone was born or where they chose to live.

In reading Smith’s quartet through the lens of collage, it is possible to gauge the significance of her writing experiment for writing about migration, identity and belonging in the 21st century. Yuval Etgar’s concept of collage as a mobile form which shifts attention to the margins or edges, to create ‘sites of disruption’ where the ‘unexpected, unscripted, or that was not meant to be included will appear,’ is rich in potential for narrating migratory experience as one of complex affiliations. (Etgar, 2022:48) It is arguable that in a new century, marked out by a rise in global migration, these new descriptions will be increasingly shaped by ‘the simultaneity of connection’ which underpins migratory experience.³

² Smith’s reference to cobalt mines in Congo puts a spotlight on the abuse of children’s rights uncovered by international campaigning organisations such as Humanium. <<https://www.humanium.org/en/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-child-labour-in-cobalt-mines-in-the-drc/>>

³ According to the United Nations Office of the High Commission Human Rights (OHCHR) an estimated 281 million people – or 3.6% of the population – currently live outside their country of origin, an ‘increasing number of whom are forced to leave their homes for a complex number of reasons.’ www.ohchr.org.

As Smith demonstrates in the *Seasonal Quartet*, the migratory experience must be perceived as something more than the reductive media stereotype, such as illegal migrants crossing oceans in small boats. An example is the author's portrayal of the complex identity of her transmigrant character Lux. The concept of home for Lux is not territorially bounded; hers is a migratory experience of multi-layered affiliations spanning countries and places real and imagined. Lux inhabits a 'simultaneous present,' a space created from ekphrastic conversation. Schrag argues this form of communication plays a key role in shaping acts of creative dissidence in a re-imagined counterpublic; Smith expands on this concept through emphasizing the contribution made by the storyteller-migrant who must creatively imagine their home or place in the world.

It is the creative imagination which determines the contours of a home for Lux, and it is a perspective shared by all four storyteller-migrants in the *Seasonal Quartet*. Gluck and Lux are gifted oral storytellers, Florence writes in her *Hot Air Book*, whilst Hero pushes against the confines of his existence by learning a new language to describe what little he sees beyond a detention centre window. Their creativity is one part of a greater whole: a commitment demonstrated by each of the storyteller-migrant characters to use their own multi-affiliated identity as a model for bringing together disparate elements – biographical, historical, cultural, and linguistic – in narratives where unity is forged from difference. It is an ambition which reflects Schrag's definition of a counterpublic sphere where artists and other creatives might operate successfully to discover 'new ways of seeing and living.' (Schrag, 2022:17) In the *Seasonal Quartet*, Smith experiments with the visual arts technique of collage and the literary genre of pastoral to create a shape-shifting narrative where the experience of alterity is not marginalised but intentionally foregrounded in the figure of the storyteller-migrant enabling their participation, however limited, in the counterpublic sphere.

The four key interconnected migratory narratives of Gluck, Lux, Hero, and Florence help create the sense of what a dissident counterpublic might look like if the marginalised are welcome, not silenced. Throughout the *Seasonal Quartet*, the storyteller-migrants seek to determine their place in the world through creative acts of resistance, given traction by expanding on whose story is told and by whom. For as Gluck states in *Autumn*, '[...] whoever makes up the story makes up the world.' (119)

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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