LIVING ENTANGLEMENTS AND THE ECOLOGICAL THOUGHT IN THE WORKS OF

PAUL KINGSNORTH, TOM MCCARTHY, AND ALI SMITH

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ABSTRACT

In my thesis, I use the work of Donna Haraway, Timothy Morton, Karen Barad, and Anna Tsing to explore how three contemporary British novelists—Paul Kingsnorth, Tom McCarthy, and Ali Smith—deal with the representational and ethical challenges of writing about nature and climate change within the Anthropocene. The question of how to live and write now is a prominent thread in all their works, which show, in both form and content, the entanglements of ecology, materiality, locality, nationality, and personal identity. In doing so, their stories enable readers to engage with what Morton calls the "ecological thought," i.e. "a practice and process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings," and provoke us, as Haraway puts it, "to be truly present . . . as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings."

DEDICATION

For my parents, Robin and James.

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"World gettin' warmer, we goin' the other way."
— billy woods

"So I'm going to write about the swifts."
— Ali Smith, *Summer*

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> "It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds. It matters what stories tell stories."
> — Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*

The disaster, despite what we wish to think, is already happening. Every day, it seems, there's a new story—a new study, a new article—and with it, an added layer of anxiety about climate change and its attendant catastrophes, both present and future. Adding to that anxiety is our knowledge of the role we've played—the role we are *currently playing*—in causing it all. This is what ecological philosopher Timothy Morton describes as "the darkness of ecological awareness," akin to "the darkness of noir" in which "the narrator is implicated in the story" (*Dark Ecology* 9). That is to say, in noir "the narrator begins investigating a supposedly external situation, from a supposedly neutral point of view, only to discover that he or she is implicated in it" (*Ecological Thought* 16-17). "Just like in noir fiction," Morton writes, each one of us living in the Anthropocene is both detective and criminal: "I'm a person," but "I'm also part of an entity that is now a *geophysical force on a planetary scale*" (*Dark Ecology* 9, emphasis in original). The individual act of turning the ignition of your car may be "statistically meaningless" all on its own but "scale up these actions to include billions of key turnings," scale them up to what Douglas Kahn calls "Earth magnitude" (*Dark Ecology* 22), and one sees more clearly how each individual is "responsible as a member of this [human] species for the Anthropocene" (*Dark*

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Ecology 8). Simply put, to live now is to be already and unavoidably involved in the "crime" of climate change. Worse yet, "becoming a geophysical force on a planetary scale" means living in a paradox: "no matter what you think about it, no matter whether you are aware of it or not, there you are, *being* that" (*Dark Ecology* 21, emphasis in original). Ecological awareness is a loop. We can't escape.

Indeed, the loop is a fitting figure not just for ecological awareness but for living in the Anthropocene—or, more specifically, what Andreas Malm calls "the warming condition"—in general. Like Morton's notion of ecological awareness, Malm's warming condition is "a *realisation*, in the dual sense of the term, of a more fundamental illness or wrongness in the world" (14) while also being the very illness it drives people to recognize, i.e. "history and nature falling down on society . . . cloud[ing] the horizon" (15). For Malm, this condition—an encapsulation of both the figurative and literal violence wrought by climate change and global warming—is the antithesis of postmodernity as defined by Fredric Jameson. If existing within postmodernity means that space is predominant over time, that "time has ceased flowing," and that "we continue to live on a stage where there is nothing but the present" (Malm 1), then the warming condition threatens our eternal present by forcing us back "into the hole of time, the present dissolving into the past and future alike" (Malm 11). As Malm points out, "global warming is a result of actions in the past" (5). Consequently, "we can never be in the heat of the moment, only in the heat of this *ongoing past*" (Malm 5, emphasis mine). To move forward, then, is to always hearken back, "for every impact of climate change is, by physical definition, a communication with a human past" (Malm 6). The warming condition reveals that our past, present, and future are always already entangled, looping back in on themselves like a Möbius Strip, leaving us unable to differentiate where one begins and the other ends.

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How to deal with this looping? With the anxiety and fear that comes with ecological awareness—with *living*—within the warming condition? Morton argues that art can help: "it's a place in our culture that deals with intensity, shame, abjection, and loss," as well as with "reality and unreality, being and seeming"—all aspects that define living within the warming condition (*Ecological Thought* 10). Some argue, however, that art, at least in the form of the modern novel, may be fundamentally unable to engage with the climate change crisis. This is one of the main arguments made by novelist Amitav Ghosh in his book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. "Let us make no mistake," he writes, "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination" (*Great Derangement* 9). In this book and elsewhere, Ghosh asserts that "climate change has a much smaller presence in contemporary literary fiction than it does even in public discussion" ("Where is the Fiction…?"). Furthermore, fiction that *does* deal with climate change "is almost by definition not of the kind that is taken seriously: the mere mention of the subject is often enough to relegate a novel or a short story to the genre of science fiction" ("Where is the Fiction…?").

Science fiction is, in fact, where so much early climate change fiction sprang from. As Adam Trexler notes in his survey of the "the novel in a time of climate change," *Anthropocene Fictions*, there is actually "a considerable archive of climate change fiction" whose origin can be found in the works of writers like Arthur C. Clarke and Frank Herbert (8). "Early climate change novels," according to Trexler, "tended to focus on the theoretical malleability of global climate, in terms of terraforming, nuclear winter, or geological processes" (9). As concerns about global warming grew through the latter half of the 20th century, though, the focus shifted. Now, Trexler writes, "nearly all Anthropocene fiction addresses the historical tension between the existence of catastrophic global warming and the failed obligation to act" (9). Still, like Ghosh, Trexler sees

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limits as to what realist literary fiction can do when it comes to imagining climate change. Most notably, the form's "focus on a narrow locale and set of characters compresses distributed, global events" (Trexler 233). As such, it generally "struggles to understand the devastating potential of climatic disaster" (Trexler 233).

All this to say, there *is* a history of fiction dealing with climate change, but there may be something to Ghosh's charge that the novel is unable to adequately represent or engage with it. Indeed, most of the climate change novels written about by Trexler "reveal a tendency to employ highly conventional literary strategies of world-building and character development" (Johns-Putra 28). Timothy Clark echoes this critique in his book *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*, writing that "linguistic narrative . . . fits least well into the demands of the Anthropocene, seemingly more allied with forms of anthropocentric thinking to be overcome" (187, qtd. by Johns-Putra 28). If, as Clark suggests, the Anthropocene "may name a kind of threshold at which modes of thinking and practices that were once self-evidently adequate, progressive or merely innocuous become . . . latently destructive," then it is worth considering other modes of thinking, other modes of practice, that do not fit the realist, contemporary literary fiction model (21). In her work on climate change and the contemporary novel, Adeline Johns-Putra points readers toward the possibilities opened up by postmodernist fiction, specifically discussing the postmodern modes of metafiction and magical realism. Johns-Putra sees these modes, and postmodernism in general, as opening up "the opportunity to critique . . . the norms and expectations around realism, and, moreover, to align this with an exposé and de-centering of what, after [Val] Plumwood, one might view as the hegemonic centrism of human exceptionalism" (32). Johns-Putra cites Clark in her argument that modern writers' representations of climate change (and literary critics' discussion of those representations)

"ultimately depend on conventional and anthropocentric expectations of narrative stability and reliability" (29). That is to say, "the climate change novel has not appeared to have utilized, in any systematic way, the strategies of postmodernism," and *these* strategies, she argues, "provide the most obvious means of de-centering or eliding human agency from fictional narrative" (29). Put more simply, "to understand climate change one needs to go beyond"—needs to *write* beyond—"normal human experience" (Mertens and Craps 136).

In their critiques of the conventional novel and its ability to engage with climate change, literary critics echo, in their own way, various ecological philosophers who have been challenging our conventional notions of the world and our place in it for years now. One such thinker is Donna Haraway, whose writings on concepts like "staying with the trouble," "making kin," and "becoming-with" challenge the stories we have told ourselves about our "bounded individualism" and, with it, the distinction between humans and nonhumans. We like to think such distinctions are solid and fixed, but Haraway and others point out the ways in which this is really just a story we tell ourselves, the story of civilization. This story produces a "civilizing process" through which all humans pass, and it is this "civilizing process" that "produces *seemingly* stable, autonomous, bound, and single identities" (Lockwood 173, emphasis mine). Haraway argues, though, that "human exceptionalism and bounded individualism, those old saws of Western philosophy and political economics," have become "unthinkable in the best sciences, whether natural or social" (*Staying* 30). Our knowledge now requires us to recognize the instability of our bodies, our identities, and the permeability between, even the nonexistence of, the border between human and nonhuman. For this civilizing process "is also traumatizing: we are no such things as stable, autonomous, and bound individuals," and "seeing and believing ourselves to be so, we suffer all sorts of atomization and pathology as we move away from the

things we most need: touch, somatic and physical regulation, organicity and symbiosis with our environments and others" (Lockwood 173). Haraway argues that our task in the Anthropocene is "to become capable, with each other in all our bumptious kinds, of response . . . to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present" (*Staying* 1). Living in the Anthropocene "requires us to think also on the level of species" and to seek connection between our own and others (Wallace 566).

Haraway writes that "if we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism then we know that becoming is always becoming *with*" (*When Species Meet* 244). In other words, we are more open than we think we are, yet "humans' fixation on subjectivity, consciousness, and rationality, which separates anthropos from the rest of the living world, is a narcissism that blinds us to a multiplicity of becoming-withs in which we are immersed, and which can sustain or destroy us" (Wright 279). Becoming-with, then, "offers a metaphysics grounded in connection, challenging delusions of separation—the erroneous belief that it is somehow possible to exempt ourselves from Earth's ecological community" (Wright 278). It is this idea of connection that undergirds Haraway's ecological thinking and her idea of "staying with the trouble" of living within the Anthropocene and the warming condition.[1] Learning to live in this

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[1] Haraway notably proposes some alternatives to the term "Anthropocene," as "the Anthropos did not do this fracking thing and he should not name this double-death-loving epoch" (*Staying* 47). Haraway argues that "the story of Species Man as the agent of the Anthropocene is an almost laughable rerun of the great phallic humanizing and modernizing Adventure, where man, made in the image of a vanished god, takes on superpowers in his secular-sacred ascent, only to end in tragic detumescence, once again" (*Staying* 47). Instead, she writes, "if we could only have one word for these . . . times, surely it must be the Capitalocene" (*Staying* 47). This term reorients our focus away from the hubristic positioning of Species Man in the narrative of the Anthropocene and focuses it towards "the networks of sugar, precious metals, plantations, indigenous genocides, and slavery, with their labor innovations and relocations and recompositions of critters and things sweeping up both human and nonhuman workers of all kinds" (*Staying* 48). Yet Haraway points out that "both the Anthropocene and the Capitalocene lend themselves too readily to cynicism, defeatism, and self-certain and self-fulfilling predictions, like the 'game over, too late' discourse I hear all around me these days" (56). Given this, she proposes a third term, the Chthulucene, inspired by the spider *Pimoa cthuluhu*. This name, she writes, is "a compound of two Greek roots (*kthôn* and *kainos*) that together name a kind of timeplace for learning to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth" (*Staying* 2).The Chthulucene isn't here yet, not in the way the Capitalocene is; instead, it's an age we need to strive for (and

way "requires learning to be truly present . . . as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings" (*Staying* 1). In order to stay with the trouble, we must dismantle our systems of thought that separate us from the nonhuman world, we must recognize that "we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations," and we must "[make] oddkin" with the critters around us (*Staying* 4). But, as Ursula K. Le Guin points out, "changing our minds is going to be a big change" (M15). In order "to use the world well, to be able to stop wasting it and our time in it," we have to "relearn our being in it," as "skill in living, awareness of belonging to the world, delight in being part of the world, always tends to involve knowing our kinship as animals with animals" (Le Guin M15). One of the ways in which we can "relearn our being" in the world, Haraway and other ecological thinkers suggest, is through the stories we tell about ourselves and the world.

The arguments made by Ghosh, Haraway, and Le Guin above constitute a new iteration of the longstanding question of how humans write about and, consequently, frame nature within our collective imagination, a topic that has real-world implications for helping us understand the origins of climate change, as well as the myriad possible responses available to us. In the following pages, I use the work of Haraway, Morton, Karen Barad, and Anna Tsing to explore how three contemporary British novelists—Paul Kingsnorth, Tom McCarthy, and Ali Smith— deal with the representational and ethical challenges of writing about nature and climate change within the Anthropocene. While these writers drastically differ in the way they approach these

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one, she suggests, that we will inevitably reach). Living within the Chthulucene would/does impel us to look to "chthonic ones," which are "beings of the earth, both ancient and up-to-the-minute" that "demonstrate and perform the material meaningfulness of earth processes and critters" (*Staying* 2). These beings could show us a thing or two about "living-with and dying-with each other potently in the Chthulucene," which "can be a fierce reply to the dictates of both Anthropos and Capital" (*Staying* 2).

issues, the question of how to live and write within the Anthropocene is a prominent thread in all their works, which show, in both form and content, the entanglements of ecology, materiality, locality, nationality, and personal identity. In doing so, their stories enable readers to engage with what Morton calls the "ecological thought," i.e. "the thinking of interconnectedness . . . a practice and process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings—animal, vegetable, or mineral," and provide us with a model for "staying with the trouble" of living within the warming condition. The fictional works of "recovering environmentalist" and writer Paul Kingsnorth in particular allow us to see the folly of our foundational, human-centered stories and in the process show us what it might look like to let go and find new, more open ones. More specifically, Kingsnorth's work with the Dark Mountain Project, discussed below, and his trilogy of novels including *The Wake*, *Beast*, and *Alexandria* critique "normal human experience" in the face of societal and mental collapse and attempt, in both form and content, to write beyond that experience in order to "tug our attention away from ourselves and turn it outwards; to uncentre our minds" (Kingsnorth and Hine 21).

CHAPTER 2

"THE CRUMBLING OF THE EMPIRES OF THE MIND": DARK ECOLOGY, STAYING

WITH THE TROUBLE, AND THE FICTION OF PAUL KINGSNORTH

"We do not believe that everything will be fine."
— Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine, *Uncivilisation: The Dark Mountain Manifesto*

In her "coda" to the book *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*—edited by anthropologist

Anna Tsing, among others, and collecting essays from a variety of ecological thinkers and

writers like Donna Haraway and Ursula K. Le Guin—Mary Louise Pratt writes that "for most of

the writers here, the question of how to live the Anthropocene is inseparable from the question of

how to write it. Indeed, writing becomes the way of posing the question of how to live" (G170).

Pratt goes on to discuss the Anthropocene as a "chronotope," a term derived from the work of

Mikhail Bakhtin that means "a particular configuration of time and space that generates stories

through which a society can examine itself" (G170). Like Pratt, Paul Kingsnorth understands that

the stories a society tells can show us how that society views itself. Additionally, Kingsnorth

sees a link between "writing" the Anthropocene and living in it. Similar to Amitav Ghosh,

Kingsnorth also questions the ability of the stories we have now to shepherd us through the

climate change crisis. Kingsnorth's doubt in our civilization's stories—in the story of civilization

itself—and his faith in the possibility of new ones led him to establish, along with Dougald Hine,

the Dark Mountain Project, an artistic collective devoted to "look[ing] for new paths and new

stories, ones that can lead us through the end of the world as we know it and out the other side"

(Kingsnorth and Hine 26). Dark Mountain was founded in 2009 with the writing of a manifesto, *Uncivilisation*, in which Kingsnorth and Hine call for "Uncivilised Writing" that shifts the emphasis "from man to notman" (23). "Inspired by the Modernist manifestos that had appeared a century before, at another time of global upheaval," Kingsnorth and Hine's manifesto declared "that we were not facing a crisis of economics or politics or technology, but a crisis of *stories*— that the tales we were telling ourselves about our place in the world were dangerously wrong" (*Confessions* 4).

The foundational (and fictional) story of civilization, Kingsnorth and Hine argue, is the story of "human centrality, of a species destined to be lord of all it surveys, unconfined by the limits that apply to other, lesser creatures" (16). What makes this story most dangerous is that "we have forgotten that it is a story," one repeated so often for so long by rationalists and scientists that it has come to be seen as reality (Kingsnorth and Hine 17). All stories that arise out of this germinal one are ultimately "only variants of the larger story of human centrality, of our ever-expanding control over 'nature,' our right to perpetual economic growth, [and] our ability to transcend all limits" (Kingsnorth and Hine 18). The story of "civilization" separates human from nonhuman by lumping the latter into the concept of "Nature." Another consequence of this story is the development of capitalism and its emphasis on infinite progress, another myth itself "founded on the myth of nature" (Kingsnorth and Hine 10).

As mentioned above, Kingsnorth is known as an environmental activist of sorts, and this critique of the story of civilization is the starting point for much of his environmental writing, most of which is found in his essay collection *Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist*. In the pieces that make up *Confessions*, one finds a thorough critique of capitalism and its emphasis on both progress and "sustainability," which Kingsnorth says the modern environmentalist

movement, "as much a victim of the contemporary cult of utility as every other aspect of our

lives," has become obsessed with (*Confessions* 68). Kingsnorth argues that promoting

sustainability really means promoting the idea of "sustaining human civilisation at the comfort

level that the world's rich people—us—feel is their right, without destroying the 'natural capital'

or the 'resource base' that is needed to do so" (*Confessions* 68). The concept of sustainability is,

ultimately, "an entirely *human-centred* piece of politicking, disguised as concern for 'the

planet'" (*Confessions* 68, emphasis mine). There are two problems with "sustainability,"

according to Kingsnorth: it gives people a false hope that the climate change crisis can be

averted, and, being an offshoot of the capitalist ideology that has caused the climate change crisis

in the first place, it misrepresents human beings' place in the world—that is to say, it maintains

the separation of human and nonhuman under the guises of "civilization" and "nature." For

Kingsnorth, there is very little to be done about climate change and the apocalypse it will bring.

Climate change is not merely "an engineering challenge, which will be overcome with

technological solutions" (*Confessions* 44). Instead, it is an unavoidable calamity: as Kingsnorth

and Hine write in *Uncivilisation*, "there is a fall coming" (5). The Dark Mountain Project, along

with so much of Kingsnorth's writing, is founded on the simple idea, quoted above, that

everything will *not* be fine. Going even further, Kingsnorth and Hine state, "We are not even

sure, based on current definitions of progress and improvement, that we *want* it to be," as

continuing down the same path would fail to fix the fundamental problems that have led us to

this moment (12, emphasis mine). The Dark Mountain Project sees humanity as "up to its neck in

denial about what it has built, what it has become—and what it is in for" (Kingsnorth and Hine

15). Dark Mountain and Kingsnorth believe that there is now "a feeling that there is no way

through the mess in which we find ourselves that doesn't involve facing the darkness, and being

honest about the scale of the unravelling that is under way, and the uncertainty as to where it will

end" (Kingsnorth and Hine x).

Such fatalistic talk has, of course, drawn ire from various thinkers and critics, with

Kingsnorth being called a collapsitarian and a nihilist.[2] A popular profile of Kingsnorth, written

for *The New York Times*, discusses the attention Dark Mountain and Kingsnorth have received,

as writers and activists like George Monbiot and Naomi Klein (who has written for Dark

Mountain) note a "troubling abdication" in his work (Smith 46). In that same profile, Kingsnorth

states that "the only hope he has abandoned is false hope" and that "instead of trying to 'save the

earth' . . . people should start talking about what is actually possible," a topic explored at much

greater length in *Confessions* (D. Smith 31). There, Kingsnorth notes that this "abdication" of his

is "not about defeat, or surrender. It's about pulling back to a place where you can find the

breathing space to be free and human again" (*Confessions* 118).[3] Kingsnorth and Dark Mountain

see the process of grieving as "the starting point for being able to move on and through, and to

begin to rebuild yourself again" (*Confessions* 98). We need, he argues, "to stop pretending that

the loss isn't real, or that it will all go back to how it was" (*Confessions* 98). This leads into the

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[2] Kingsnorth has also, it must be noted, been called a fascist for his views on locality, place, and identity, particularly after a controversial piece published in The Guardian in 2017. The piece begins with Kingsnorth's admission that "last June, I voted to leave the European Union" ("Lie"). He goes on to acknowledge "the power of the new populists," such as Stephen Bannon and Marine Le Pen, and argues that they "understand what the left refuses to see: that the heart of the West's current wound is cultural rather than economic" ("Lie")." For Kingsnorth, "what is driving the current turmoil is threats to identity, culture and meaning" ("Lie"). Kingsnorth thus frames the referendum as "a throwing off of shackles," a populist break from "the EU's domineering culture of progress" ("Brexit"). "A potential crack has opened in the culture of progress," he writes, "and it has been opened not by intellectuals, ideologues or political philosophers, but by 17.4 million ordinary people" ("Brexit").

[3] Indeed, this is literally what Kingsnorth did, as "he and his wife made a long-planned move to rural Ireland" in 2014 "where they [have been] growing much of their own food and home schooling their children" (D. Smith). In an essay written two years before the move, Kingsnorth seems to prefigure it, describing "a strategic retreat . . . to ensure personal sanity and to keep the flame of a particular, pre-machine vision of humanity alive" (*Confessions* 118). Years later, writing about voting Leave in the Brexit referendum, Kingsnorth catalogues the various reactions he's received from those he tells of the decision, sarcastically noting that he needs "to go away and check my privilege" ("Lie"). Yet it is telling that Kingsnorth rarely, if ever, genuinely acknowledges the privilege inherent in even being able to entertain the *idea* of withdrawing from "technological civilization" in such a way (D. Smith).

second problem with sustainability: it grows out of the idea that humans and nonhumans are inherently separate. While we are certain to feel grief for the impact climate change will have on our lives and on the lives of those around us, we must also feel grief for what we have done to the world and to those nonhuman critters (to use Donna Haraway's phraseology) with which we are connected. Kingsnorth sees no real difference between humans and nonhumans: at various points throughout *Confessions*, he describes humans as "undomesticated animals" and says we are as much a part of "nature" as everything else in the world. Indeed, "we *are* nature," Kingsnorth writes, "and the environmentalist project was always supposed to be about how we are to be a part of it, to live well as part of it, to understand and respect it, to understand our place within it and to feel it as part of ourselves" (*Confessions* 78, emphasis mine).

The "Uncivilised Writing" called for by Dark Mountain, then, is one way to continue this "environmentalist project." Uncivilised writing "attempts to stand outside the human bubble and see us as we are" (Kingsnorth and Hine 20). That is not to say that Uncivilised Writing offers a "non-human perspective—we remain human and, even now, are not quite ashamed—but a perspective which sees us as one strand of a web" (Kingsnorth and Hine 20-21). This writing, as said above, "sets out to tug our attention away from ourselves and turn it outwards; to *uncentre* our minds" (Kingsnorth and Hine 21, emphasis mine). In a key passage, Kingsnorth and Hine define the "Uncivilised writer" as someone who "knows the world is, rather, something we are *enmeshed* in—a patchwork and a framework of places, experiences, sights, smells, sounds" (26, emphasis mine). The *Uncivilisation* manifesto states that the "myth of civilisation" is the "last taboo"; it is this myth that has "led the human race to achieve what it has achieved; and has led the planet into the age of ecocide" (19). These two effects—human achievement and the damaging effect it has had on the environment—"must be decoupled if anything is to remain,"

and it is "only artists" that can do this (Kingsnorth and Hine 19). In its discussion of stories, the manifesto "establishes narrative as socially and psychologically foundational" for humanity and charges those who create narratives, the artists of our age, to start creating new ones in order to change and break those that have led us to where we are (Adams 59). In a line of thinking similar to that expressed by Adam Trexler, Amitav Ghosh, and Adeline Jones-Putra, Kingsnorth and Hine state that the "literary tools inherited from the recent past [seem] ill-adapted to the times into which we're heading" (xi). In his own nonfiction writing, Kingsnorth states that "green poets" might begin the decoupling process by "observing that worlds are not 'saved' by the same stories that are killing them . . . or they might try to explore what it is about how we see ourselves that reduces us to this, time and time again" (*Confessions* 49).

Kingsnorth is, notably, an actual poet, as well as an acclaimed novelist. And while much attention, both critical and popular, has been paid to his nonfiction work, his fiction, which consists of a loosely linked trilogy including 2014's *The Wake*, 2016's *Beast*, and 2020's *Alexandria* has gone largely unexamined in critical appraisals of modern climate change fiction. This may be because Kingsnorth's fiction, curiously enough, rarely engaged directly with climate change until *Alexandria*, something Ghosh specifically remarks upon in *The Great Derangement*: "Although Kingsnorth has written a powerful nonfiction account of global resistance movements, as of the time of writing he has yet to publish a novel in which climate change plays a major part" (8). This charge is both true and not. While climate change is not *specifically* addressed in *The Wake*—a book about Edward Buccmaster, an Englishman and leader of "grene men," and his fight against the invading Normans in 1066—the natural world is consistently foregrounded in the novel, and attention is drawn throughout to the ways in which humans were destroying it even then, as when Buccmaster describes the sight of a Norman castle

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being built as a "great wound" in the Earth (255). *The Wake* is also a period novel written in

some ways as a post-apocalyptic one, with the Norman invasion of England portrayed as the end

of a certain kind of world.[4] This is one of Kingsnorth's self-professed "themes, or tics, or

obsessions": the idea that "worlds are always ending" (*Confessions* 1). *Beast* too is concerned

with the end of the world, although whether the book depicts the end of the world or merely the

end of one man's mind remains ambiguous throughout the novel.[5]

   Still, as critic Laura Miller notes in her joint review of *Beast* and *Confessions*, neither *The*

Wake nor *Beast* is "the least bit polemical or obviously pertinent to the ideas Kingsnorth has

expressed in his nonfiction writings." The absence of climate change in these novels, given

Kingsnorth's prolonged and thorough engagement with the issue in his nonfiction, "does prompt

the question of how these books . . . represent a maverick effort to grapple with the truth of our

times" (Miller). While not explicitly about climate change, both novels nonetheless operate

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[4] Given its depiction of invading foreigners through the perspective of a man obsessed with his ancestral ties to the land on which he lives, *The Wake*, though written before Brexit, fits in well alongside "the first wave of post-Brexit fiction," which "largely seems to be detailing the specific frailties and parochial trivialities of an insular and diminished small island" (Shaw 27-28). However, while those stories "espouse an outward-looking cosmopolitan engagement as a form of resistance to an increasingly nationalistic and inward-looking cultural landscape," *The Wake* presents the opposite (Shaw 28). One of the strangest aspects of *The Wake*, when read within the context of Kingsnorth's bibliography, is that Buccmaster espouses many of the same ideas found in Kingsnorth's nonfiction while at the same time being incredibly violent, misogynistic, and borderline psychopathic.

[5] *Alexandria*, set 1,000 years in the future, *does* depict the end of the world—or the end of humanity, at least. In *Alexandria*, the Buccmaster/Buckmaster figure seems to be "K," a cyborg-like entity "running a mop-up operation" for an Artificial Intelligence named Wayland, an allusion to the legendary figure Weland the Smith, who plays a prominent role in *The Wake*, discussed below (*Alexandria* 202). K is tasked with persuading those human beings left on Earth to "ascend" to "Alexandria," a seemingly digital "republic of souls" (219) that Wayland "was tasked with building . . . so that humans," facing the collapse of civilization due to global warming and climate change, "could continue to live a conscious life after the physical deaths of their bodies" (201). Much of the novel consists of dialogues between K and a few humans, the last of a small pantheistic tribe who value physical touch and the body above all else. The tension between the conservative, land-based tribe and the technological, progressive culture represented by K that is seen throughout these dialogues is in many ways the fullest expression of the issues being worked through in both *The Wake* and *Beast*. It is no surprise, then, to read Kingsnorth admitting that "*Alexandria*, in some ways, was designed to have this argument out at length, perhaps at least partly so that I could make up my own mind about it" (Dreher). Kingsnorth himself has stated that the "the common theme of [the trilogy] is the relationship between people and the land — and the notion that the land is a lot more sentient and aware than we might give it credit for" (Dreher). The many ways in which this theme is built upon and culminates in *Alexandria* is worthy of thorough critical attention but is beyond the scope of this paper.

under its influence and offer depictions of the varying ways one deals with the collapse of one's world. If, as Kingsnorth says, "life is a series of collapses, staggered and staggering" (*Confessions* 24), then the language and plot of both *The Wake* and *Beast* place us in the moment and immediate aftermath of collapse, illustrating what the *Uncivilisation* manifesto called for in these times of trouble: "an artistic response to the crumbling of the empires of the mind" (20).

"i is beowulf": Language and Anthropocentric Narratives in *The Wake*

Each book in Kingsnorth's trilogy takes place about 1,000 years after the other: *The Wake* is set in 1066, and *Alexandria* is set 1,000 years in the future, placing *Beast* at some point in the early twenty-first century. The trilogy's span of time not only illustrates Kingsnorth's claim that "worlds are always ending" (*Confessions* 1) but can also help readers to imagine the "timescale of climate change," a problem raised by both Timothy Morton in his work and Rob Nixon in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. While we normally think of violence as "an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space," Nixon argues that climate change and other effects of the Anthropocene constitute a "slow violence," a violence that "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (2). This type of violence poses "representational, narrative, and strategic challenges," with its "calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (2). Nixon asks, "How can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world" (3)? He suggests that "to confront slow violence requires . . . that we plot and give *figurative*

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shape to formless threats whose fatal repercussions are dispersed across space and time" (10,

emphasis mine). Morton sees a similar problem in climate change, which he calls a

"hyperobject." Morton defines "hyperobjects" as "things that are massively distributed in time

and space relative to humans"—think climate change but also the internet or the human species

as a whole (*Hyperobjects* 1). Hyperobjects pose representational challenges because they are,

simply, too large to comprehend. Morton describes them as "so massively distributed we can't

directly grasp them empirically"; they can only be "vaguely sense[d] . . . out of the corner of our

eye" (*Dark Ecology* 11).

     The Wake and *Beast* are in many ways about what we humans cannot grasp empirically

and even more about how our language shapes our ability to do so. This is part of Kingsnorth's

reasoning for writing *The Wake* in what he calls "a shadow tongue—a pseudo-language intended

to convey the feeling of [Old English] by combining some of its vocabulary and syntax with the

English we speak today" (*Wake* 353). As Kingsnorth notes at the end of *The Wake*, "the way we

speak is specific to our time and place," and language reflects a society's "values,

understanding[s], [and] mythopoesis" (355-356). The language of *The Wake* allows the reader to

experience "the sheer alienness of Old England" (*Wake* 356) but also places them in the mind of

Edward Buccmaster, "someone whose land, culture and sense of being in control is taken away

by a force outside their known boundaries" (Du Cann). While there is certainly a linear plot in

The Wake, much of the book is concerned with Buccmaster's mental landscape, filled with

visions of the "eald [old] gods," delusions of grandeur, and repressed memories.

     A chief characteristic of Buccmaster is his outdated belief systems. For instance, his

fervent belief in the "eald gods," the Anglo-Saxon equivalent of Norse gods like Odin and Thor,

is obsolescent in an England ruled by the "crist" (Christ) and imposes on him a sort of pariah

status in the village closest to his home. Buccmaster continually has visions of these gods and other legendary figures like Weland the Smith, who supposedly engraved the sword passed down to Buccmaster from his grandfather. Buccmaster believes that he has been "chosen" by Weland to lead the fight against the "ingengas," the invading foreigners, and to return England to its roots. We see this dynamic play out in internal dialogue laid out on the page, with Buccmaster's thoughts represented on the left side of the page and the "voice" of Weland represented on the right. Whether or not Weland is actually talking to Buccmaster remains ambiguous throughout the novel, but what other perspectives we get of Buccmaster, such as a fireside story about how he murdered his father and sister, suggest that his "visions" are only another manifestation of his mental instability. By the end of the novel, when Buccmaster appears to his band of "grene men" (who have all but abandoned him) in "the eald war helm of my grandfather," with "welands great sword in my hand and my grene cape on my baec an eald sigil on my sculdor [shoulder]," it is clear that Buccmaster has clung to the old stories so much that it has cost him whatever credibility he once had with the small number of men who followed him (333-334).[6]

Equally damning is Buccmaster's sturdy belief in the class structure that has been blown apart by the Norman invasion, something he continually fails to see. When asked by a peasant to help him dig a grave, Buccmaster replies, "if thu [you] moste dig then dig i is a socman [a free land owner] i does not dig graefs" (117). Later in the novel, when Buccmaster encounters the "gebur" or servant of his murdered wife, he orders her around until the woman angrily declares, "i is no gebur now . . . i is a free wif now," prompting for Buccmaster a brief moment of reflection that is promptly interrupted by the sounds of approaching men (311). All of this adds

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[6] This is not to mention the comically small number of French invaders killed by Buccmaster and his steady avoidance of situations that would require action of him and put his heroic delusions to the test.

up to a portrait of a man who is fundamentally weak, a coward who eventually leaves all his men

to die by French sword but who believes, desperately, that he is the hero of the story, a belief

reinforced by his religion and the class structure of his day. It is not for nothing that, at the very

end of the novel, Buccmaster flees the French soldiers and runs, in his words, "*to the eald ways* i

will not stay with this" (342, emphasis mine).[7]

In these actions and in the character of Buccmaster overall, we see a critique of the

stories humanity has told itself about itself. If "liveability in the Anthropocene is threatened by

just those heroic story lines and practices that are thought to have made Man great," one sees that

threat represented clearly in Buccmaster (Swanson M10). Buccmaster himself establishes a clear

link between himself and those heroic story lines near the end of the novel when he is

threatening to kill a prominent bishop that he and his men (accidentally) captured. Boasting to

the bishop before attempting to kill him, Buccmaster says, "i is cum from the mere i specs

[speaks] for the wilde for the eald gods under the blaec waters in the drencced treows [trees]. i is

the lands law ofer mens i is eorth not heofen leaf of treow not leaf of boc [book]" (334). The

bishop remains silent, provoking Buccmaster to exclaim, "i is beowulf" (334). Buccmaster's

invocation of Beowulf is ironic in more than one way. For one, Buccmaster is nothing like that

paragon of masculinity, known for his strength and courage. But there is also the irony of saying

that he "specs for the wilde," for the nonhuman, while equating himself with a figure known

precisely for conquering the wild in the form of Grendel and his mother. Buccmaster is a

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[7] Though Buccmaster's decision at the end of the novel is presented as morally damning, it is curious that Buccmaster in this scene is in effect acting out the very retreat that Kingsnorth so passionately advocates for in his nonfiction: a withdrawal from the world and a return to the "old ways" or, rather, given the equivalence drawn between the Normans and the technological advancement of, e.g., castles, a return to "a particular, pre-machine vision of humanity" (*Confessions* 118). Buccmaster's expressed desire here to hold onto a "traditional" way of life, leading to his decision to Leave rather than stay, or Remain, also takes on a political dimension when read post-Brexit.

character defined by irony; it is hard to imagine any reader coming away from *The Wake* not recognizing the disparity between his image of himself and his actions. By building the novel around that irony, in conjunction with its unique language, Kingsnorth places the reader both inside and outside of Buccmaster's consciousness, reflecting the call in *Uncivilisation* for writing that "attempts to stand outside the human bubble and see us as we are" (20). As discussed above, climate change may not be an explicit issue in *The Wake*, but what utility the book has resides in its horrifying and, ultimately, tragic depiction of what happens when we hold on to our old stories, "the same stories that are killing us," at the very point that change demands we let them go (*Confessions* 49).

"Still, It is Just a Cat": Making Kin with the *Beast*

      If *The Wake* shows us the perils of holding onto our beliefs too strongly, then *Beast* shows us what it's like to let go of all of them, and it is exactly this effect that makes it more important in the discussion surrounding climate change fiction. *Beast* is the story of a modern-day Edward Buckmaster, a man who is both similar to and different from his presumed ancestor in *The Wake* and who, at the start of the book, has been living on his own near the moors for "five seasons" (3). He has traveled there—and left his wife and daughter behind in the process—in order "to be broken, to be torn apart, beaten, cut into pieces . . . to measure [him]self against the great emptiness" and "touch the void," which, he says, "will clean me of the smallness that I swam in" (2). Laying out the reasons for his self-imposed exile, Buckmaster's thinking sounds distinctly similar to the Romantic language of Thoreau, Wordsworth, and the like. He believes he will, in essence, find himself in Nature by being subsumed by it. What he finds there, though,

goes further than he seems to imagine possible, prompting a reorientation of his being in the world.

The first section of *Beast* ends with a literal collapse: a raging storm causes the roof of Buckmaster's barn to collapse on him.[8] What follows is the gradual disintegration of Buckmaster's mind and, with it, his conception of himself as a "bounded individual." Like the Buccmaster of *The Wake*, this Buckmaster tries to cling to existing systems of thought, but he fails to hold on to much of anything in his search for the titular beast, a "big and long and dark" creature that Buckmaster sees "from the corner of [his] eye" and that promptly becomes an obsession (50). In the aftermath of the collapse and throughout his search for the beast, Buckmaster may lose his mind but also comes to some realizations about his (and humanity's) place in the world. His ultimate fate at the end of the novel, contrasted with Buccmaster's in *The Wake*, suggests a possible vision of learning to "stay with the trouble."

In the aftermath of the barn collapse, Buckmaster seems to have lost all notion of where he is and a not insignificant portion of his memories. He lives now in what seems to be a "posthuman landscape," and as he traverses that landscape, walking from the house he sleeps in to a nearby church and, eventually, over the moors, he begins to attribute "an antagonistic, colonizing spirit" to the land and vegetation around him (Carpenter 175). As in so many other modern climate change novels, "the nonhuman environment" is depicted "not as inert victim but as transforming force, which humans can no longer make the mistake of pretending to control" (Carpenter 171). Yet Buckmaster continually tries to. After sighting the beast, he decides to

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[8] *Beast* is made up of four distinct sections, each separated by several blank pages, with cut-off words at the beginning and end. In the second and third sections, Buckmaster's narration becomes more and more frantic, fragmented, and elliptical, his sentences running into one another and progressively dropping punctuation, even switching, with the start of the third section, from a conventional uppercase "I" to a lowercase "i."

"make a plan . . . to find the creature"; he says, notably, that he is "going to be *systematic* about it" and so creates a map to hunt for the creature (73). In a passage that sums up much of Buckmaster's thinking in this novel, he says, "I needed to create a system" (73). "A system," he says, "would lock out the fear and the silence and the despair," all of which describe his feelings in his post-collapse world. (73).

The problem, though, is that both the beast and the world *overwhelm* his systems, just as Timothy Morton's "hyperobjects" overwhelm our own capacities for comprehension. Indeed, the descriptions of the beast in this novel are strikingly reminiscent of Morton's own descriptions of hyperobjects. Looking at the initial prints left behind by the beast, Buckmaster describes both the prints and "the thing itself" as "too big to fit with anything we had managed to name and number and draw a picture of" (54). Buckmaster runs through the possibilities of what it could be—dog, deer, badger, fox—but immediately rejects those ideas. No, the beast "was something that was not in any of the books," and thinking about it triggers in Buckmaster "a fear much older than reason" (54-55). From Buckmaster's initial point of view, the beast is massive, seen only in glimpses, and is beyond categorization, possibly even comprehension—all qualities of Morton's "hyperobjects." Buckmaster may try to pin the beast down through the use of his map, but his attempts are always fruitless (and, to the reader, more than a little foolish).

Furthermore, Buckmaster's sighting of the beast and his search for it is ultimately what leads to the breakdown described throughout the second half of the novel, with the beast's continual intrusion upon Buckmaster's thoughts and space disrupting his attempts to make sense of his situation. The beast is similar in this regard to Isabelle Stengers' concept of "Gaia," discussed by Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble.* For Stengers, Gaia is "a fearful and devastating power that intrudes on our categories of thought, that intrudes on thinking itself"; it

is "maker and destroyer . . . . not a person but complex systemic phenomena that compose a living planet" (*Staying* 43).[9] Buckmaster's hunt for the beast, then, can be read as both an attempt to engage with (and, hubristically, to conquer) the hyperobject of climate change and as a reckoning between man and the "complex systemic phenomena" that Buckmaster was blind to pre-collapse. Buckmaster's reflections throughout the second half of the book show an increasing ecological awareness on his part, as he comes to learn that "we are [the Earth]; we are in it and of it, we make it and live it, we are fruit and soil and tree, and the things done to the roots and the leaves come back to us" (*Confessions* 80).

Buckmaster's dawning ecological awareness finds symbolic form early on when he attempts to walk to town. Walking to town, he passes a church and continues down the lane . . . only to find himself inexplicably "outside the church again," more specifically "coming down the lane from the moor to the exact same point where I had been perhaps twenty minutes before" (47). Confused, Buckmaster "set[s] off again down the lane towards the town paying attention this time to where I was" (47). Again, though, "after another twenty minutes or so," he finds himself "coming down the lane towards the church" (47). He tries over and over again—four times total—and every time he ends up back at the church. He becomes "furious" with himself, "with the place . . . with the fucking church and the fucking moor," before deciding to go into the church, where he bows his head and states that "you have to bow your head to something" (48-

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[9] Relatedly, near the end of *Alexandria* it is revealed that Wayland is not simply an artificial intelligence but is instead the product of "a basic framework . . . sewed into the fabric of the Earth itself" (354). Having been built "upon an ecological matrix" (354), Wayland inhabits the Earth just as a mind inhabits a body—or, as K puts it, "Wayland is the soul and the voice of Earth" (356). The novel ends with a dialogue between the remaining humans, including K, and Wayland, and it is suggestive of what we might imagine a dialogue between humanity and Gaia, as Stengers describes it, to be like. Wayland's statement that "all we know is a great mind, a giant thought / when any conscious creature dies / its mind shifts to another part of the whole" gestures towards the systemic phenomena embodied in Gaia (385). And when Wayland tells the small group of survivors that "this planet is moving beyond you," followed by the end of the novel depicting a flood of light suggesting humanity's subsumption, Gaia's destructive potential becomes clear.

49). The loop in which Buckmaster finds himself is similar to a loop in Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, where Alice "tries to leave the Looking Glass House," setting off "through the front garden" but "returning to the front door via that very movement" (*Dark Ecology* 7). Morton terms this sort of loop a "strange loop," the "dark-ecological loop," in which "a turn of events . . . has an uncanny appearance" (*Dark Ecology* 7). It is this kind of loop, Morton says, that "defines emerging ecological awareness occurring to 'civilized' people at this moment" (*Dark Ecology* 7).

Buckmaster's ecological awareness becomes clearer throughout the novel. In his hunt for the beast, Buckmaster cycles between various systems of thought and a growing awareness of how useless they are in his new world. At one point, he goes from solipsism—"What if we are not all sharing this one world but instead every one of us creates their own world and that is true of everything that is?" (82)—to a Christian-like ethos—"Or what if it is all about kindness?" (83)—in the span of two pages, ultimately ending up at something like nihilism: "and here you are and there is the void and it is everything and it is coming for you and it is fine" (84). Such moments illustrate how Buckmaster is "trying to hold onto things," something he dreams about at one point: "there was one more thing to hold onto and I knew that I had to hold onto this because if I couldn't I would fall and then it was over" (66). At other times, though, Buckmaster lets go of his beliefs and seems to see himself from outside himself, to see himself as he really is, as just another animal. At one point he says, "I felt like the nature of things was laid quietly out before me like the wares on a market stall. For a moment the world cracked open and I saw myself as the wild creature I was as one caged wild creature among billions as atoms as meat as animal as prey" (69).

These moments are compounded by the times when Buckmaster seems to glimpse, and even experience, what Morton calls the "mesh," which is "Morton's term for the principle of interconnectivity" (Macqueen 3). The mesh "consists of infinite connections and infinitesimal differences," and, similar to Haraway's conception of "becoming-with," "each being in the mesh interacts with others" (*Ecological Thought* 30). The boundaries between human and nonhuman become permeable again and again throughout this novel, and it is in these moments that Buckmaster experiences the mesh. Take, for instance, the passage where Buckmaster says, "Now I was my body but I was also what my body walked upon. I was the grasses all of the different grasses and I was the peat of the moor and I was the heather and the skylark I had heard and I was the thing in the lane . . . I was *everything*" (92, emphasis mine). Embedded in Morton's conception of the mesh is the idea that it erases any distinction between the anthropocentric foreground and the nonhuman background established through humanity's conception of Nature (something Morton consistently argues against). As Morton points out, "we orient ourselves according to backgrounds against which we stand out," so what happens when there is "no background and therefore no foreground" is, simply, "madness" (*Ecological Thought* 30).

Madness, of course, is what seems to be happening to Buckmaster, particularly in the climactic third section of the novel, where the first-person "I" becomes "i," and almost all punctuation falls away to create a torrent of run-on sentence after run-on sentence. While in the second section of the novel, Buckmaster was searching for meaning—at one point, he exclaims that "there has to be a secret" to knowing how to live (98)—he eventually realizes that this meaning doesn't exist as he thinks it does. Indeed, Edward's chief "predicament is his insistence of discovery as a model for meaning-making" (Carpenter 176). Thinking about his hunt for the beast, Buckmaster says, "It was becoming clear to me that when I looked for this thing I never

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found it . . . *My system didn't work"* (104, emphasis mine). In the aftermath of this realization, in the third section, Buckmaster's narration becomes frenzied, and the action becomes ambiguous, blending what seem to be memories with dream-like visions. Buckmaster's systems of thought come apart here, as seen when he notes that "all of the thinking was meaningless" (135). He continues, stating that "none of it meant anything you can think for three decades and your thoughts will be worse than useless because you have not *touched* this thing not really" (135, emphasis mine). As his systems fall apart, so too does his conception of himself as a "bounded individual," as represented by the shift from an upper-case "I" to a lower-case one. As Haraway states in *Staying with the Trouble*, "Gaia puts into question our very existence," and the hunt for the beast seems to be having the same effect here on Buckmaster (44).

Buckmaster's end, though, suggests some possible hope. Unlike *The Wake*'s Buccmaster, this Buckmaster, having passed through the madness of the third section, ends the novel with some newfound knowledge about himself. "I once thought that my challenge was to understand everything, to build a structure in my mind that would support all that I experienced in the world," he says (162). Ultimately, though, "there is no structure that will not fall in the end and crush you under it" (162). The upper-case "I" returns in this section, suggesting that, as with facing the darkness and grief of ecological awareness, the disintegration of the self (or of the stories one has told oneself) is ultimately *necessary* in order to "rebuild yourself again" (*Confessions* 98). If "*Beast* is partly about the difficulty of extricating yourself from one story and inserting yourself into another," the brief glimpse we get of that other story suggests a way forward (Richardson). Again, unlike Buccmaster, Buckmaster does not retreat but rather faces his fears at the end of this book—walking with the beast, which he can now see is a cat, up onto the moor. Despite "not want[ing] to see it again" and "not want[ing] to go any further with it"

(162), Buckmaster follows the cat and, along the way, hears "a single skylark [singing], its notes rising and falling with the cloud and the wind" (163). Reaching the destination, observing the cat "sitting again on its haunches a few feet away from me," Buckmaster walks over to it, "slowly lay[ing] the palm of my right hand on its head" and staring into its "beautiful, magnetic yellow eyes" (163-164). In the final lines of the novel, the beast, imbued with so much mythological and symbolic significance throughout the narrative, becomes, pointedly, "just a cat" (164). Climate change fiction can try to, as Nixon says above, "give figurative shape to formless threats," but sometimes the only way to deal with the loop and fear and anxiety of ecological awareness, the only way to really stay with the trouble, is to simply be present, to pay attention, as Buckmaster does, to the birdsong and the wind, and to reach out to the critters around you (10).

CHAPTER 3

"TO LET MATTER MATTER": THE INDETERMINACY OF NATURE, TECHNOLOGY

AND BEING IN TOM MCCARTHY'S *C* AND *SATIN ISLAND*

"Listen: between cities, countries, and continents, we are going to crash."
— Tom McCarthy, Simon Critchley, et al., *The Mattering of Matter: Documents from the Archive of the International Necronautical Society*

"Thus spoke the grid."
— Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*

In Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island*, the grid—that vast network of electricity, wireless signals, screens, and capital that props up modern life—is indeed saying something, though what that something is remains unclear to "U," the protagonist striving to parse the code in order to write "the Great Report," a singular work described as the "First and Last Word on our age" (*Satin Island* 61). The opening scene of the novel, set in the indeterminate non-place that is a hub-airport, illustrates well U's position as an everyman in modernity. Surrounded by screens—television, computer, phone—he receives news that his company has won a contract. Staring at the screens and the disparate scenes of a football game, of the aftermath of a terrorist attack, and of an oil spill, U imposes his own narrative, merging them into a singular scene by turning a football player and a victim, running "screaming towards the camera," into avatars of celebration for his own Company's success (8). U repeats this action throughout *Satin Island* or at least tries to: the imposition of a singular narrative onto a vast network of independent events and places is, after all, what the Great Report requires, what it is. U's predicament, McCarthy's novel suggests,

is in many ways everyone's predicament living in the 21st century, beset by the eerie forces of technology and capital.[10] Humanity's entanglements with these forces is a core concern not just in *Satin Island* but across McCarthy's oeuvre, hailed by some as "the future of avant-garde fiction" (Kirsch). This desire to fully grasp the vast grid that constitutes the modern world ultimately reflects U's desire for transcendence, just as Serge Carrefax's desire to merge with the grid in *C* reflects the same. McCarthy revels, however, in his characters' failure to transcend: rather than offer revelation, technology only exacerbates his characters' inability to transcend the physical world. This failure is for McCarthy an inevitability of living in the material world, one that's at the heart of his understanding of art and of the human experience.

Similar to Paul Kingsnorth and his involvement with the Dark Mountain Project, McCarthy helped found an artistic organization/collective called the International Necronautical Society (INS) with the writing of a "pastiche-manifesto" in 1999, one that laid out an artistic ethos through a recycling of Modernist and poststructuralist thought (Armesto). The manifesto begins by declaring that "death is a type of space, which we intend to map, enter, colonize, and, eventually, inhabit" (McCarthy, Critchley, et al., 53). "We are all necronauts, always already," it says, because "our very bodies are no more than vehicles carrying us ineluctably toward death" (McCarthy, Critchley, et al., 53). Noting the increasing speed of our world's "universal passage to oblivion," the INS manifesto asserts that "mankind's sole chance of survival lies in its ability, as yet unsynthesized, to die in new, imaginative ways," a perverse predecessor of Dark Mountain's call for "new stories" to guide us through the end of the world (McCarthy, Critchley,

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[10] This predicament can be seen as a symptom of what Anna Tsing calls "the modern human conceit," which she describes as a "bundle of aspirations" that arises from the progression of capitalism and our consequent entanglements "with ideas of progress and with the spread of techniques of alienation that turn both humans and other beings into resources" (19). Technology gives us a more totalizing view of the world and inspires aspirations of progress while at the same time alienating us from the materiality of the world around us.

et al., 53). That end, though, is (always) already here: in a "Declaration on the Notion of 'The Future,'" McCarthy, who has served as the INS's "General Secretary" since its inception, notes that "it is this organization's strong contention that our current age . . . has to be understood through the lens of catastrophe" (McCarthy, Critchley, et al., 269). Following Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*, McCarthy argues that attempting to understand this catastrophe "is both necessary and impossible," in that we cannot "stand *outside* or *beyond* the catastrophe" nor "penetrate its core, experience it fully, *merge* with it" (McCarthy, Critchley, et al. 269, last emphasis mine). Simply put, "the time of the catastrophe is not easily graspable," as Timothy Morton and Rob Nixon have shown us already with their discussion of hyperobjects and slow violence, respectively (McCarthy, Critchley, et al. 269). Living within catastrophe consists of an ontological indeterminacy. Indeed, the INS posits this indeterminacy as the foundation of existence in general.

Our "ability to die . . . in new, imaginative ways" is, for the INS and for McCarthy, wrapped up in the question of how we "let matter matter," both in life and in art (McCarthy, Critchley, et al., 224). For necronauts, it is not "form, or God" that points the way forward, "but matter, the brute materiality of the external world" (McCarthy, Critchley, et al., 224). Blanchot, whose work is continually invoked throughout INS "reports" and in McCarthy's interviews and essays, identifies "two tendencies, two temptations, two sloping *pistes* of possibility" in art for how to deal with this materiality: "One temptation is to try and ingest all of reality into a system of thought, to eat it all up, to penetrate and possess it . . . [and] the other option is to let things thing, to let matter matter, to let the orange orange and the flower flower" (McCarthy, Critchley, et al., 224). Zadie Smith, like Blanchot, proposes two potential "paths for the novel" in her now infamous review of McCarthy's *Remainder*, paired with Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* by Smith

to contrast the authors' different approaches to realism in contemporary fiction.[11] *Netherland*, per Smith's description, seems to fall into the first temptation proposed by Blanchot, operating under the belief that "only one's subjectivity is really authentic, and only the personal offers [the] possibility of transcendence" (Z. Smith). That is to say, the "lyrical Realism" of *Netherland* is centered in the subjectivity of the character/author and is ultimately an attempt to give an order to reality that is impossible. *Remainder*, though, as well as McCarthy's other novels, "empties out interiority entirely: the narrator finds all his gestures to be completely inauthentic and everyone else's too" (Z. Smith).

While the INS manifesto and subsequent reports are meant to be read somewhat tongue-in-cheek, McCarthy's fiction nonetheless shows a fidelity to the artistic principles expressed throughout the INS materials, and this is perhaps best seen in how he depicts subjectivity in his fiction. While the "dominant modern response" to the form/matter dilemma of existence "is to believe that one can form oneself as a unified, autarkic, autonomous subject," the INS posit that such a belief is a delusion (McCarthy, Critchley, et al., 226). Instead, the INS proposes that "inauthenticity is core to the self, to what it means to be human, which means that the self has no core, but is an experience of division, of splitting" (McCarthy, Critchley, et al., 226). This is because, per Heidegger, "human existence is formed in relation to a brute material facticity that cannot be mastered," and "any attempt at authenticity slips back into an inauthenticity from which it cannot escape, but which it would like to evade" (McCarthy, Critchley, et al., 227). McCarthy's fiction leans into this inauthenticity, emphasizing the indeterminacy of identity in its encounter with materiality because, as Blanchot points out, it is just as impossible for artists to

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[11] Smith's declaration that *Remainder* is "one of the great English novels of the past ten years" is invariably quoted in most assessments, academic and popular, of McCarthy's work.

"let things thing" as it is for them to ingest and "penetrate" reality (McCarthy, Critchley, et al., 66). Subjectivity in McCarthy's novels, as in the novels of his artistic predecessor J.G. Ballard, "works 'as a kind of trajectory through space, networks, and legal systems'" (Seltzer 154). While his characters continually strive for transcendence, such transcendence is impossible in a world "underpinned by the dark irony of matter" (Lea 116). For these characters, "there is no prospect of slipping the chains of the physical world because the metaphysical is always beyond both grasp and comprehension. McCarthy's is therefore a universe of things, geometries, patterns, inscriptions, and networks, but it is never a place of transcendence" (Lea 116). This results in a "pervading horizontality" in his novels, evidenced by the motifs of "temporal endlessness, loops, and entropic systems" (Nieland 573). Simply put, McCarthy's novels "[give] us pure facticity, material bodies circling each other in carefully delineated spaces" (Quarrie 148).

All that to say, McCarthy's world is one Paul Kingsnorth would abhor, a world defined by its metastasizing systems, where "local" is a meaningless descriptor, where our lives are shaped, with no input of our own, by capital and technology, and where nature has no place but on a screen. That said, while much critical attention has been given to McCarthy's engagement with materiality and his relationship to post/modernism, very little has been written on how nature plays a role in his fiction. On first glance, this is understandable, as McCarthy, with his focus on technology and his general examination of living in a postmodern world of non-places, does not seem like an ecological writer in the way that Kingsnorth is. However, a similar dissolution of boundaries—between human and machine, between machine and nature—can be found in McCarthy's work as well. Indeed, McCarthy's depiction of humanity's entanglement with technology, a mainstay of critical discussion for McCarthy scholars, cannot be fully understood without attention to the entanglements of nature and technology throughout his

novels *C* and *Satin Island*. That is to say, these two supposedly different entanglements are actually one and the same: you cannot have one without the other. *C* does not just address "the convergence of technology and death in the early twentieth century" but also shows us the convergence of nature and technology and how the modern world of *Satin Island*, our modern world, came to be (Lea 136). *Satin Island*, meanwhile, presents us with a narrator on the cusp of ecological thought—enabled, to some degree, by technology—who nonetheless persistently shies away from its implications, content to meditate on the world while remaining estranged from "the materiality of natural phenomena" (Grewe-Volpp 142). As Karen Barad's work shows us, matter, as the INS says, points us towards death, but matter's ontological indeterminacy, embodied in the character of U at the end of *Satin Island*, can also help us think about life and our continued survival, even potential flourishing, within the warming condition.

"A Mechanical Aspect": Nature and Technology in *C*

If *Satin Island* is about living in a world where the grid is already in place, then *C* is a novel, to some extent, about how it got there. I start with the grid because it is a "key McCarthian figure . . . at once topographic and temporal" (Nieland 584). The grid in McCarthy's novels acts as a symbol of "a series of relationships—between form and matter, the systematizable and the contingent, the aesthetic and the historical—that, for McCarthy, define our being in media and shape the time in which events take place" (Nieland 584). The figure of the grid also, in some ways, embodies McCarthy's artistic approach: as Rosalind Krauss says, the grid is "what art looks like when it turns its back on nature . . . the grid is the means of crowding out the dimensions of the real and replacing them with the lateral spread of a single surface" (qtd. in Nieland 584). McCarthy's work dwells in this tension between the "real" and the "surface" of the

grid imposed on the world by modernity and its technology, depicting characters, Necronauts, who "[do] not navigate depth or volume but [plunge] through a series of different layers" (Hart, et al. 671). McCarthy's comments at times suggest that the grid is a figure for our existence in general, saying that "to be human is not to be some kind of abstract, free, spiritual 'essence' that then gets 'expressed'; on the contrary, it is to be *enmeshed within* language and history and to be bound up in a set of relationships with the Law and desire and all the rest" (Hart, et al. 676-677, emphasis mine). This enmeshment is reflected in the prose and form of McCarthy's novels. His description of the allure of Jean-Philippe Toussaint's books, for instance, could work doubly as a mission statement for his own work: "We don't want plot, depth or content," he writes. "We want angles, arcs and intervals; we want *pattern*. Structure *is* content; geometry is everything" (*Typewriters* 186, emphasis mine). In other words, as U tells us in *Satin Island*, "*events!* If you want those, best stop reading now" (14, emphasis in original).

    C is not short on events, spanning as it does from 1898 to 1922 and skipping from rural England to the skies of WWI to London to Egypt.[12] The book lacks the propulsion of plot though, instead shuffling the reader from set-piece to set-piece as motifs (like radio signals and insects) proliferate, their overall meaning left to the reader's analysis. McCarthy consciously uses the form of "a cradle to grave, nineteenth-century *bildungsroman*" to create, "in one sense, a very conventional narrative arc" (Armesto), but Serge Carrefax, the main character, "is never portrayed as the typical protagonist" of such a novel (Lea 137). Instead, Serge is remarkably passive: he "is an active protagonist only inasmuch as his presence enables a historically specific experience to be described; the impact on him of that experience is always minimal" (Lea 137).

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[12] The final year of the book, 1922, is purposeful, an allusion to the "great year of modernism": not only was it the year the BBC was founded and the year King Tutankamen was exhumed (a significant detail, given the final setting of the book), it was also the year both *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land* were published (Purdon).

More specifically, McCarthy's portrayal of Serge "is not a portrayal of moral or psychological nuance but rather of the human as a wireless shell primed for technological conduction" (Lea 137).

This characterization of Serge alludes to a common topic in the small amount of critical literature surrounding *C*, namely its posthumanist depiction of human beings merged/ing with machines. This can be seen throughout the first section of the novel, which takes place at "at a pedagogically radical school for the deaf and dumb run by [Serge's] father, whose physically interventionist methods for dealing with muteness render his pupils little more than machines" (Lea 138). At a presentation for parents of prospective students, the pupils mechanistically recite poetry they've been forced to memorize, living proof that, as Simeon Carrefax says, "speech, like song, is but the mechanical result of adjustments of the vocal organs" (21). The presentation ends with a description of one child's recitation: "His words . . . seem to issue not from him but rather to divert *through* him—as though his mouth . . . received a sound spirited in from another spot" (24, emphasis in original). In this description, as in many more throughout the rest of the novel, we see the "metaphor of the body as receiver-transmitter": the children's bodies becoming "fleshy radios, transmitting signals without in any way being their originators or editors" (Lea 138). A similar metaphoric merging of man and machine can be seen later, when Serge visits a jazz club in post-war London. Serge watches the band play, and "they look like machine parts too, extensions of their instruments, the stoppers, valves and tubes. Their bodies twitch and quiver with electric agitation. So do the bodies of the dancers" (265). In another scene, a woman makes a sound "of the same character and pitch as low-frequency radio waves" (143). This is all in keeping with the book's recurring conflation of human behavior, even human thought, with mechanical action: earlier in the novel, Serge, spending his evenings sweeping for wireless radio

signals, likens the radio static to "the sound of thinking . . . the sound of thought itself, its hum and rush" (79).

As Daniel Lea points out, "these hybridisations suggest . . . the beginning of a conceptual shift towards a technological posthumanism in which the metaphors for human praxis merge the mechanical and corporeal, creating modernity's body-machine subject" (139). Rather than fear this hybridity, though, *C* actually acts as "a celebration of the anti-humanism that can be brought about by technology," the human-as-machine "contain[ing] the potential to transcend death through the logic of a self-perpetuating mechanism" (Lea 143).[13] As Donna Haraway points out in her *Cyborg Manifesto*, "by the late twentieth century . . . we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism—in short, cyborgs" (*Manifestly Haraway* 7). *C* uses its historical form, then, to place us at the beginning of the twentieth century to show how this new ontology comes to being, an outgrowth of wireless signals, trains, global trade, all themselves wrapped up in and used in aid of imperial conquest.[14] However, *C* does not just explore the dissolution of the body/machine binary but also the dissolution between technology and nature. Lea notes that "any essentialist dichotomy between the natural and man-made is troubled" by such fusions identified here "because [they] suggest that the natural is always a product of *techne* and vice versa; the two states become manifestations of a singular state of being which is neither wholly organic/inorganic nor alive/dead" (140). Aside from one example, though, Lea barely discusses the ways in which McCarthy's prose consistently and explicitly

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[13] In keeping with the celebratory attitude the book has towards these hybridisations, at one point in the novel we're told that "the idea that [Serge's] flesh could melt and fuse with the machine parts [of his airplane] pleases him" (206).

[14] In the final section of the book, Serge, similar to U above, is tasked with "compiling a report, or reports, that . . . assessed, abetted or advanced, or at least paved the way for the advancement of, the . . . Empire Wireless Chain" in Egypt, a project given to him by the British Ministry of Communications (*C* 303).

suggests a merging of nature and technology, often making it difficult to discern which produced the other.

This difficulty is foregrounded at the very beginning of the novel, as a visiting Dr. Learmont hears "an intermittent, mechanical buzz" (5) that is later compared by the doctor to the "less agitated, less electrical" but nonetheless persistent buzzing of bee hives (13). This scene also introduces the recurring motif of insects. As Joakim Wrethed points out, "throughout the narrative, there is a chiastic pattern: insect activity is human activity and human activity is insect activity. Insects pervade the text and humans are frequently compared to insects or animals" (16). However, insect activity—and the activity of other nonhuman critters in general—is also often described as *mechanical* activity in this book, and vice versa. Canaries "perched in hanging cages . . . chirp and tweet shrilly and decisively in overlapping relay, as though issuing instructions to the loom, machine-code" (39). Similarly, the "calls of wild ducks, coots and herons" are likened to radio signals, "sounding and responding critically across the water, as though issuing and forwarding their own sets of instructions" (163). Fireflies "glow and fade, like faultily wired bulbs" (314), then are later seen "pulsing phonetically, in [the] dots and dashes" of morse code (318). Gnats "travel in straight lines towards each other, then separate, each gliding to the spot another occupied seconds ago, before repeating the same procedure, again and again," creating and sustaining a mechanical circuit of sorts (187). At one point, the sun's "transit through the air seems laboured, as though the whirring mechanism that dragged it along its tracks were damaged and worn out" (201).[15] Conversely, at times machines are described as insect-like, as with a "small electric box [that] clings to one of the rails, short legs

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[15] Even appearance is indeterminate, as what seems natural at first glance turns out to be man-made: walking towards what he thinks are vines, Dr. Learmont discovers they are actually "strands of copper wire" (14).

clamped around it like the femurs of a tick while a longer, more tentacular protuberance drops

from its underbelly to send currents through the earth" (107). The quasi-Edenic Carrefax estate,

with its apple orchard and garden, comes to seem "like a small, inconsequential circuit: a

transceiver loop" (241). The inflation of German kite balloons brings to mind "the image of ticks

swelling as they gorge themselves on blood" (199), and watching Germans attempt to jump out

of a burning balloon reminds Serge "of flies caught in spider's webs" (200).

All this imagery culminates in Serge's trip upriver, a la *Heart of Darkness*, to scout a

possible location for the Chain, accompanying a team of archaeologists, a trip that results in

Serge's death by unidentified insect bite in a crypt. A vision Serge has on this trip, as well as his

final vision before dying, brings together these imagistic strands, suggesting the take-over of

nature by technology.[16] Looking out from the boat at the Egyptian landscape, Serge "has the

impression of being not in nature but in some giant mechanism, like a clock, sextant or

theodolite" (354). Everything "look[s] mechanical," including "the stalks and herons that strut

and peck their way through marshes," as well as "the marshes themselves, the fields, settlements

and stretches of desert beyond them . . . alternating and repeating like a flat panorama that's

wound round and round by a dull, clockwork motor" (354). "Even the movements of humans,"

we're told, "take on a mechanical aspect" (354). Time, too, is distorted, as "passages of desert

suggest epochs—present, Napoleonic, ancient—which loom into focus like so many

photographic slides" (354). These epochs even, at times, "appear simultaneously, as though two

or three slides had been overlaid" (354), evoking the "present dissolving into the past and future

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[16] Notably, in two different interviews McCarthy describes Serge's final vision as a "sonic explosion that kind of surges through him, that *blows his circuitry*" (Huber 186, emphasis mine) while describing Serge in the moments before death as "this fetal, quivering insect" (Hart, et al. 671).

alike" that is a signature of postmodernity and, more specifically, the warming condition (Malm

11). Paradoxically, this trip into the past, a seeming regression from the modern world of the

previous sections, actually becomes a vision of the future. This impression is further emphasized

in one of Serge's dying visions, in which he sees himself as an insect whose feelers

mechanistically "plug into" plates, sockets, and holes, connecting him "to everywhere, to all

imaginable places"—an image seemingly describing, as Simeon Carrefax does earlier in the

novel, our present condition, all of us "plugged in" to an Internet (or an international trade

system) that connects everyone across the globe (376).[17]

Despite all this, though, there are moments in *C* that suggest the primacy of the natural,

nonhuman world, glimpses of what was there before modernity. At one point in the novel, Serge

considers a phonograph playing music, "mov[ing] his head round and look[ing] down into the

reproducing horn" (54). While looking into the tube, listening to the music, "Serge thinks of

entrances to caves and wells, of worm- and foxholes, rabbits' burrows, and all things that lead

into the earth" (55). Lea notes that in this passage there is "an explicit linkage of

words/sounds/noise with something primal, unconscious, and subterranean," linking Serge's

thoughts to "the claustrophobia of interment" and, implicitly, to the death drive that Serge

exhibits throughout the novel (140). A similar argument can be made for another passage when

Serge contemplates "airfields, tennis courts and cityscapes" while "sit[ting] among the scrub" on

parole during his time as a POW (233). As he looks out, the materiality of the natural world

seems to reach out to him—"gorse curls around his forearms; lichen stains his clothes"—and

"the landscape seems to penetrate his skin and grow inside him, replacing viscera and brain with

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[17] In a letter to Serge, Simeon describes a project he's working on as "not only the projection by means electronic of images across a screen . . . but their transmission across long distances, by wires or, indeed, wirelessly . . . such that life in all its full, vibrant immediacy may be relayed without any delay"—a clear predecessor of the Internet (139).

heather, lavender and fern" (233). The suggestion of interment—the dead body becoming one

with the earth—is undeniable here, yet both these passages also suggest that the natural, material

world cannot be denied, even if technology and, more broadly, modernity has transformed it into

something *un*natural. It also depicts, as in Kingsnorth's *Beast*, a dissolution, literally, of the

boundaries between human and the natural world. Though Serge's condition throughout the book

is to favor the technological over the natural—to perpetually, as in one scene, find "the sound of

the celluloid strip . . . more *real and present* than the trickle of the stream or chirping

grasshoppers"—the natural ultimately cannot be denied, as death will ultimately force all of us to

confront our shared state with the material world (57, emphasis mine). Though *C* depicts a world

of technological advances, with both man and nature becoming machine, when the catastrophe

comes, there will still be "a small insect, some kind of wood louse . . . crawling out of it, crossing

the wires of the receiver's circuit-board as it heads towards the opening" (293).

"Suspended Between Two Types of Meaninglessness": Ontological Indeterminacy and the Ecological Thought in *Satin Island*

  Satin Island jumps to an indeterminate time in the 21st century, past the point when the

grid of technology and trade has, per Rosalind Krauss above, "crowd[ed] out the dimensions of

the real and replac[ed] them with the lateral spread of a single surface" (qtd. in Nieland 584).

Our contemporary condition now is that, as U says in the opening of the book, "we see things

shrouded, as through a veil, an over-pixelated screen" (3).[18] Or, as Timothy Morton puts it, "we

have gained Google Earth but lost the world" (*Ecological Thought* 30). Morton points out the

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[18] U, McCarthy himself says in one interview, is "like all of us all the time" now: "He's moving sideways through the data sphere . . . looking at a bunch of screens, trying to constellate it all into something coherent" ("*Countertext*" 143).

paradox of this condition though, namely that "only in an age of this 'power-knowledge' can global awareness become available" to us and, with it, the ecological thought (*Ecological Thought* 25). That is to say, "the ecological thought is modern," but "the modern era . . . [has] impeded its own access to the ecological thought" (*Ecological Thought* 5). This paradox defines U's character, as his search for a master pattern in his attempt to write the Great Report often exhibits characteristics of the ecological thought, yet at every turn, "instead of confronting the real material effects of environmental destruction . . . [U] prefers to hide behind a discursive lens of observation where he can pursue his disconnected musings about nature and its meaning" (Grewe-Volpp 147). In this way, "*Satin Island* foregrounds the question of how form can prevail over matter" (Reinfandt 563), acting as a meditation on our inherent inability, as discussed above, "to try and ingest all of reality into a system of thought" (McCarthy, Critchley, et al., 224). That said, U's attempt to do so can be read productively as a depiction of both a failed ecological thought and the difficulty of grasping not just the hyperobjects of global trade and the Internet but also the hyperobject of climate change, attempting to suss out its nature, its pervasive effects, and when exactly it began.

As discussed previously, Morton defines the ecological thought as "the thinking of interconnectedness . . . a practice and process of becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings—animal, vegetable, or mineral" (*Ecological Thought* 7). Morton uses the image of the "mesh" to depict this network of (inter)connection, noting that "since everything is interconnected, there is no definite background and therefore no definite foreground" (*Ecoological Thought* 28). Morton compares our modern awareness of interconnection to the schizophrenic "unable to distinguish between information (foreground) and noise (background) . . . Everything seems threateningly meaningful, but she can't pin down

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what the meaning is" (*Ecological Thought* 30). This is, of course, a description of U's

predicament in *Satin Island*, tasked with writing the Great Report for the Koob-Sassen Project

and forever finding new "structures of kinship, the networks of exchange within whose web

we're held, cradled, created" (*Satin Island* 133). U subscribes to his hero Claude Lévi-Strauss's

notion that "if we had some kind of grid that we could lay across it all . . . we could establish a

grand pattern of equivalences" (31). So, in an attempt to construct such a grid, U gathers

"dossiers" on topics ranging from "Japanese game-avatars" to "newspaper obituaries" to "the

rhetoric and diction of scam emails" (35-36). "Who's to say," after all, "what is, or might turn

out to be, related to what else?" (*Satin Island* 36). One of the key problems U faces, though, is

that this Project dissolves the boundaries between the observer and the observed or, as he puts it,

"when the object of your study is completely interwoven with your own life and its rhythms, this

distinction vanishes: Where (I asked, repeatedly) does home end and field begin?" (25). U

describes the Project in much the same way Morton describes hyperobjects, i.e. as pervasive and

inescapable but difficult to actually grasp: "It will have had direct effects on you; in fact, there's

probably not a single area of your daily life that it hasn't, in some way or other, touched on,

penetrated, changed; although you probably don't know this" (*Satin Island* 13). U's recurring

meditations on oil spills and trash, discussed at further length below, combined with the concept

of the Project, show an underlying interest in depicting the difficulty of both understanding and

representing climate change.[19]

One of the chief difficulties U faces in working on the Project is not just that it is "well-

nigh impossible . . . to discern its 'content,' bulk or outline" but also that it is impossible "to say

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[19] When asked about his progress with the Report, U almost always responds that it is "finding its form," once again
suggesting the difficulty of depicting climate change and, more broadly, the warming condition (29).

where [the Project] began and ended" (14). U's fixation on origins and endings, with pinning down when exactly something began and ended, mirrors scientific and scholarly debates over the origin(s) of climate change and, more specifically, the beginning point of the Anthropocene and human's impact on the earth. This fixation can be seen most clearly in U's obsessive ruminations on the death of a parachutist, about which U happens to read one day in the newspaper (right after reading of an oil spill, actually). The parachutist "died jumping from a plane" because "his parachute had detached from him" (19). Later, "an examination of the dead man's gear had unearthed evidence of tampering," causing the police to treat the death as a homicide (30). U, looking at a photograph of the crime scene, notes that the location in the photograph "didn't accurately represent the one at which the crime had actually taken place: just where its consequences had played out, left its imprint" (40). "I realized that the crime scene, properly speaking, was the sky," he tells us, or, rather, "the sky was a crime scene" (41). Indeed, the sky in the Anthropocene *is* a crime scene of sorts, bearing invisible traces of human violence against the nonhuman world.

Simeon Carrefax and Karen Barad are in agreement on this. At one point in *C*, Simeon tells Serge that "wireless waves don't die away after the ether disturbance is produced: they linger, clogging up the air and causing interference. Half the static we've just waded through is formed by residues of old transmissions. They build up, and up, and up, the more we pump them out" (245). Elsewhere, Barad argues that "the world 'holds' the memory of all traces; or rather, the world *is* its memory" ("Quantum" 261). As U says, "nothing ever goes away" (133). Passages in both *C* and *Satin Island* suggest a fear that catastrophe will come out of this continual build-up, set in motion by humans but no longer in our control. At one point in *C*, Serge contemplates an imaginary train collision, ultimately realizing that "the catastrophe was

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hatched within the network . . . it was hatched *by* the network, at some distant point *no longer capable of being pinned down but nonetheless decisive*, so much so that ever since this point was passed—hours, days or even years ago—the collision's been inevitable, just a matter of time" (149, first emphasis in original, second mine). At another point in *Satin Island*, U's girlfriend Madison mocks his (and our) heroic fantasies of an easy—and egotistical, i.e. anthropocentric—solution to our problems: "You all want to be the hero in the film," she tells him, "who runs away in slo-mo from the villain's factory that he's just mined, throwing himself to the ground as it explodes. But the explosion's taking place already—it's *always been taking place*. You just didn't notice" (140, emphasis mine).

The warming condition, in other words, is not coming but is already here, originating at some indefinite time in our past. By this point it is self-perpetuating. U's useless attempts to pinpoint when exactly the murder of the parachutist took place only reveals his ability to turn the brute materiality of a man's death into a thought experiment. Did the murder happen the first time the parachutist attempted to open his parachute or the second or the third? It ultimately doesn't matter, but U continues to obsess over determining "at what precise *point* in time" the man was murdered (59, emphasis in original).[20] Dwelling on the fact that the man's death was inevitably awaiting him in "the last hours—days, perhaps—of his life," U comes to the conclusion that "although [the parachutist] hadn't actually been killed until the moment of his impact, to all intents and purposes, he had," that the man had "*been* murdered without *realizing* it" (60, emphasis in original). U's description of the man living through those last days "already

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[20] At one point in the novel, a "major revelation" comes to him: the parachutist's death was caused by a "Russian Roulette pact . . . a cult, dispersed . . . around the globe" (129). This attempt to identify one singular cause can also be read as reflective of our attempts to find a singular cause, even a conspiratorial one, for climate change. Of course, it remains only an attempt, and a failed one at that: as U discovers later, his theory "was bogus; full of shit" (132).

effectively dead" casts the man as a Necronaut, stuck in an indeterminate space between both life and death—or not between, exactly, but both alive and dead *at the same time* (60).

The work of Karen Barad shows us that this indeterminate state of both life and death is not just a conceptual paradox but is in fact the basis of all existence, including our own. "The play of non/existence" is what, to take a cue from the INS, makes matter matter ("What is the Measure…" 13).[21] Barad uses quantum physics to show us that matter, contrary to our normal conceptions of it, "is always already open, heterogeneous, noncontemporaneous with itself" ("Quantum" 268). It is "always shifting, reconfiguring, re-differentiating itself," continually opening itself ("Quantum" 268). In quantum physics, "particles are born out of the void, go through transformations, die, return to the void, and are reborn, all the while being inseparable from the wild material imaginings of the void. At the core is the *indeterminacy of time-being*" ("No Small Matter" G112, emphasis mine). That is to say, "matter is not some givenness that preexists its interactions. Matter is always already caught up with nothingness" ("No Small Matter" G110). "At the heart of quantum physics is an inherent ontological indeterminacy," an indeterminacy that "is only ever partially resolved in the materialization of specific phenomena" ("What is the Measure…" 7). Existence, for the INS and McCarthy, comes from a continual play between life and death: "Death, the horizon," they say, "gives us matter" (McCarthy, Critchley, et al., 139). Barad affirms this, asserting that "every finite being is always already threaded through with an infinite alterity diffracted through being and time" ("TransMaterialities" 401). McCarthy is correct when he notes that "a thing's real would be touched in its own materiality: a sticky, messy and above all *base* materiality that overflows all boundaries damming in the

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[21] This "play" is part of what Barad calls "intra-action." As she says, while "'interaction' . . . assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action" (*Meeting* 33).

thing's—and everything's—identity, and thus threatens ontology itself" (*Typewriters* 71). He is correct because, as Barad points out, quantum physics has proven that "at the core of mattering," what gives matter its own materiality, is indeed an "ontological indeterminacy, a radical openness" that threatens our classical notions of identity, existence, and ontology ("TransMaterialities" 401).

U's failure throughout *Satin Island* is that he continually turns away from this very materiality, "away from the material residues of modernity and towards a conceptualism he associates with the nebulous shape of the contemporary" (Lea 147). This is seen in his discussion of the parachutist's death above but is seen most explicitly in his ruminations on oil spills. As Christa Grewe-Volpp points out in her analysis of oil's function in *Satin Island*, U "constantly comes back to the *images* of an oil spill when he tries to assess its significance" (146). As we see in the very first scene of the novel, in which U watches a news report about an oil spill, U always "approaches the topic of oil via the media, believing that it will answer his questions about nature and culture and about concepts of time" (Grewe-Volpp 147). U's engagement with oil and, by extension, all of nature, including the critters very much materially affected by oil spills, is always *mediated*, an engagement not with materiality but with images. U's fixation on oil spills culminates in a presentation U "gives" on the topic of oil spills, an imaginary attempt at the presentation he "*should* have given back in Frankfurt" at an anthropology conference the week before (*Satin Island* 110). In this presentation, U argues that oil spills "improve" the ocean into which they spill: "Oil has more consistency than water," he says. "It is denser, more substantial—and thus brings the latter into its own more fully, expressing the sea's splendour in a manner . . . more lyrical than that in which the original ever did" (113). Animals affected by the spill "become instant martyrs . . . infused with all the pathos and nobility of tragic heroes" (114).

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They too are "improved" by being "transformed into monumental versions of themselves" (114). Responding to an audience member who criticizes his "aestheticizing" of oil spills, U responds in a way that clearly shows his alienation from both materiality and from other people, arguing that environmentalists' "entire mindset is a product of aesthetics" and that "they dislike the oil spill for the way it makes the coastline look 'not right,' prevents it from illustrating the vision of nature that's been handed down from theologians to romantic poets to explorers, tourists, television viewers" (116).[22] U seems unable to conceive that a person "dislikes" oil spills because of its harmful effects on the ocean and the animals it touches, instead projecting his own aestheticization of the oil spill onto his critics. U's evasion of materiality here is indicative of his attitude towards materiality throughout the novel. However, as McCarthy says in one of his reports for the INS, it is in this very evasion, in the moment of "the self's turning away from itself," which is itself "formed in relation to a brute material facticity that cannot be mastered," that "our fatal embeddedness in materiality is revealed" (McCarthy, Critchley, et al., 227).

So, despite U's attempts to avoid this fact, enabled in large part by living in a technological age of inescapable simulacrum, there remains a tension between the conceptual and the material throughout the book, with U's dream of the titular island, a key scene in the novel, suggesting a lingering, underlying awareness of the materiality he can't face. In what U describes as a "splendid dream," U dreams of what is, essentially, junk (141). The island itself "was an excrescence, a protuberance, a lump," while the buildings on it are "huge, derelict factories," including a "trash-incinerating plant" (141-142). "Giant mountains" of "rubbish . . .

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[22] Given the novel's critique of global capitalism, left undiscussed here but very much present in the novel, an argument could be made that U's alienation is not just a consequence of technology but of capitalism itself. Anna Tsing argues that "the history of the human concentration of wealth through making both humans and nonhumans into resources for investment . . . has inspired investors to imbue both people and things with *alienation*, that is, the ability to stand alone, as if the entanglements of living did not matter" (5). U, as shown throughout this chapter, consistently tries to disown "the entanglements of living."

were piled up in its great, empty halls" (142). This island, U says, is "the *other* place, the feeder,

filterer, overflow-manager, the dirty, secreted-away appendix without which the body-proper

couldn't function," despite (or perhaps because of) "its very degradation" (142). That U dreams

of an island of trash is fitting because "a garbage dump is a place where matter matters and

reasserts its agency" (Grewe-Volpp 149). As Grewe-Volpp discusses in her article, the garbage

dump reveals what Jane Bennett calls the "vital materiality" of things, which "can never really be

thrown 'away,' for it continues its activities even as a discarded or unwanted commodity"

(Bennett 6). Garbage, especially large masses of it, are a potent example for Bennett of "Thing-

Power: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and

subtle" (6). Soon after this dream, U notes that though he'd "been able to parlay [his] parachute

wallpaper-fragments into a coherent and insightful contribution to the Company's overall work

on Koob-Sassen," it is images of "*piles of rubbish*, barges, [and] seagulls" that "seemed to resist

all incorporation into any useful or productive screed" (146, emphasis mine). Perhaps it is the

vital materiality of these things, even in image form, that refuses transformation into yet another

concept used only for discursive means.

U eventually discovers that pictures of Staten Island, "the fifth, forgotten borough, *the

great dump*," is what prompted the dream, and the novel ends with him being drawn there while

in New York City (144, emphasis mine). By this point in the novel, U has given up on finding

the master pattern and writing the Great Report. "Nothing meant anything to me," he says (178).

Yet he holds on his "island-dream," which is still "radiating with a prospect, with an

overwhelming promise, of significance" (178). If he goes to Staten Island, then "something

would make sense—if not the whole caboodle, at least *something*" (178, emphasis in original).

The novel ends with U at the Staten Island Ferry, about to board but ultimately choosing not to,

instead standing in place as people around him both disembark and board the ferry. Grewe-Volpp characterizes U's refusal to board as evidence that "he is a man not ready to confront his deep involvement with matter" (149). I partially agree with this assessment but think there's more going on in this scene than just that. Notably, U watches a film on a screen in the moments before the ferry arrives, observing a "bright-orange vessel . . . cruising (so it seemed) right out of time, past all statutes and limits, to some other place where everything, even our crimes, had been composted down, mulched over, transformed into moss, pasture and wetland for the duck and coot to build their nest in. Maybe I could somehow nest there too" (182). U's reverie suggests a yearning for materiality—a desire he shares with Serge above to merge with the natural world, which, as Haraway has shown us, we are always already merged with. Nonetheless, U is still just looking at a screen, which both enables and impedes the ecological thought at work in this scene. The scene climaxes, appropriately enough, with an image of indeterminacy, U occupying "a space meeting its inverse, negative and positive coming together, merging into one," as people flow around him (183). U realizes in this moment that "to go to Staten Island—*actually* go there—would have been profoundly meaningless" and that "not to go there was, of course, profoundly meaningless as well" (185-186). "And so," he says, "I found myself, as I waded back through the relentless stream of people, struggling just to stay in the same place, *suspended between two types of meaninglessness* (185-186, emphasis mine).

Ironically, U in this scene becomes an image of the indeterminacy that underlies all matter, that makes matter matter. His longing for materiality is consummated here, perversely, by being left unconsummated. He also, in a way, embodies the ecological thought, which Morton says is, "at its limits . . . a radical openness to everything" (*Ecological Thought* 15). This "radical openness" is characterized by McCarthy himself as a "form of resistance" and a "restlessness"

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that U takes "back into the heart of the machine" at the very end of the novel, what he calls a "political and aesthetic gesture," perhaps the only one available to use in the modern age ("*Countertext*" 140). Yet the final lines of the novel depict something more ambivalent than that. Right before leaving the terminal, U watches a "homeless guy" who is "going slowly down the row of payphones, searching for forgotten change caught in their mechanism" (188). In the final line of the novel, U tells us how he "stared at him; our eyes met for a while; then I, uncomfortable, broke off the contact and started walking, past the growing stream of people, out of the terminal and back into the city" (189). When read through the work of Barad, this moment, I argue, is actually *more* indicative of U's final turn away from materiality than his refusal to board the ferry.

As Barad points out, "reality is composed not of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but of things-in-phenomena . . . It is through specific intra-actions that phenomena come to matter—in both senses of the word" (*Meeting* 140). To matter, then, is to be entangled with the world around you and all its human and nonhuman parts; one must be entangled to matter. Barad supplements Haraway's work on entanglements by showing that entanglement is not simply "a name for the interconnectedness of all being as one" but is in fact fundamental for matter to exist ("Quantum" 265). Not only that but "entanglements," Barad says, "are relations of obligation—being bound to the other," because the "Other" is "irreducibly and materially bound to, threaded through, the 'self'" ("Quantum" 265). We cannot escape this obligation because "the very nature of matter entails an exposure to the Other" ("Quantum" 265). Furthermore, our responsibility to the Other is "not an obligation that the subject chooses but rather an incarnate relation that precedes the intentionality of consciousness . . . It is a relation

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always already integral to the world's ongoing, intra-active becoming and not-becoming. It is an iterative (re)opening up to, an enabling of responsiveness" ("Quantum" 265).

What we see in the final lines of *Satin Island* is U coming face-to-face with an Other, the homeless man, to whom he is—fundamentally, ontologically—indebted.[23] The discomfort U feels when looking into his eyes is perhaps a recognition, albeit a subconscious one, of this obligation, one that U has continually disregarded throughout the novel.[24] Despite experiencing a moment of radical openness and dwelling within an experience of indeterminacy, U's turn away from the man, more than his turn away from the ferry, suggests a permanent inability to recognize materiality and its obligations. Contrasted with Buckmaster's encounter with the cat at the end of *Beast*, in which Buckmaster not only locks eyes with an Other but *touches* it, U's encounter with the homeless man, ending in uncomfortable dismissal, represents a recognition of the ecological thought and our interconnection but, ultimately, a failure to follow through with what that requires of us.

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[23] Another way of thinking about this encounter is to say that U encounters what Morton calls the "strange stranger," a concept he developed "from Derrida's *arrivant*, the ultimate arrival to whom one must extend hospitality" (*Ecological Thought* 140). Morton's concept of the "strange stranger" is also indebted, as he acknowledges, to Levinas's "idea of the 'face,' his term for the *thisness* and presence of the actual other person" (*Ecological Thought* 42). The self is obligated to recognize the Other in their Otherness because the self is fundamentally threaded with their alterity.

[24] U's relationship with Madison, whom U always regards with a cold, utilitarian perspective, is perhaps the most prominent example of his callousness towards others.

CHAPTER 4

"WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A NEIGHBOUR": STRANGE STRANGERS AND

COLLECTIVITY IN ALI SMITH'S SEASONAL QUARTET

"Each living thing remakes the world through seasonal pulses of growth, lifetime reproductive patterns, and geographies of expansion. Within a given species, too, there are multiple time-making projects, as organisms enlist each other and coordinate in making landscapes . . . The curiosity I advocate follows such multiple temporalities, revitalizing description and imagination."
— Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*

"So is this a counsel of despair? Not at all. There are new means for producing counter-consensual collectivity. Like this."
— Mark Fisher

In a key scene from Ali Smith's *Autumn*, the first novel in her Seasonal Quartet, Daniel Gluck, arguably the primary recurring character of the Quartet and certainly its guiding light, outlines a storytelling philosophy that underlies all four seasonal novels and Ali Smith's work as a whole.[25] The scene is set by the omniscient narrator, whose presence is often made known throughout the Quartet: "it was a Tuesday in March in 1998" (115). On this day, Daniel is telling a thirteen-year-old Elisabeth Demand—a neighbor with whom the much older man has struck up a platonic relationship that stretches throughout her adolescence—about a game, "Bagatelle," which begins with Daniel telling her the first line of a story and requires Elisabeth to reply with

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[25] Daniel's last name, Gluck, as pointed out by several critics, "is meant to echo the German word for happiness (i.e. *Glück*)," alluding to both his symbolic significance within the Quartet and his German heritage, which becomes a central part of his story in the fourth novel, *Summer* (Wally 80).

"the story that comes into your head when you hear that first line" (117).[26] Their discussion

evolves into a meditation on the use and power of story. "There is no point in making up a

world," Elisabeth says, "when there's already a real world," to which Daniel responds that

"whoever makes up the story makes up the world" (119). "So," Daniel advises her, "always try

to welcome people into the home of your story" (119). Even further, "if you're telling a story,"

he tells her, "always give your characters the same benefit of the doubt you'd welcome when it

comes to yourself . . . and always give them a choice—even those characters . . . who seem to

have no choice at all. Always give them a *home*" (120, emphasis mine). In this scene, Daniel

echoes Smith's own views on storytelling as articulated in numerous interviews and speeches, in

which she characterizes the storyteller as a generous host, welcoming character and reader alike

into the home of her stories. In this, Smith herself echoes John Berger, whom she discusses

briefly in her 2017 Goldsmiths Prize lecture. Remembering the only time she saw Berger speak,

Smith talks of how Scottish journalist Andrew Marr asked Berger "for his advice and thoughts

about the huge mass movement of people across the world now," a movement, she notes, that "is

even bigger and under even more catastrophic pressure today." Berger's answer: "I have been

thinking about the storyteller's responsibility to be hospitable" (qtd. in "Goldsmiths Prize").[27]

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[26] Elisabeth's last name, like Daniel's, is also significant: it "comes from the French—de and monde—alluding to the notion of being a cosmopolitan citizen 'of the world'" (Shaw 21). Fittingly, Elisabeth's experiences and thoughts throughout the novel as a "thirty two years old, no-fixed-hours casual contract junior lecturer at a university in London" reflect the millennial experience of navigating a world marked by increasing globalization and decreasing interest in anything that doesn't serve the interests of globalized capital (*Autumn* 15).

[27] The concept of "hospitality" has been discussed at length by many famous philosophers, including Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. Their work, specifically Levinas's notion of the face of the Other, lays a foundation for the ecological thought outlined by Timothy Morton, as discussed below. In her article on "seeking asylum in Ali Smith's fiction," Alice Bennett notes that "conventionally, the analogy between the nation and the space of the house is always present in the question of hospitality" (330). Bennett uses Smith's novel *There but for the* to analyze this "problematic analogy," noting that Smith "seems to disavow . . . an interpretation of border crossings and border security that echoes the model of the conventional, *transactional* model of hospitality" identified by Derrida in *Of Hospitality* (330, emphasis mine). Bennett concludes that "while it is reasonable [as a country] to extend a welcome to people seeking asylum, the same [absolute, unconditional] welcome does not have to follow in the home" (334).

Smith's Seasonal Quartet feels very much like a work written by an author concerned, as she always has been, with the idea of hospitality and, more specifically, with hospitality as a moral and ethical responsibility required of the writer working in the era of late capitalism, climate change, the refugee crisis, Brexit, Trump, and an increasingly dangerous white nationalist fervor.[28] The Seasonal Quartet examines all of these issues, weaving them together throughout the four novels in a way no other contemporary work has done, aided in large part by a unique writing and publication process. Each novel of the Seasonal Quartet blends fiction with reality, offering four independent-yet-linked narratives that incorporate real-life events that occurred mere months, if not weeks, before publication. As Smith's publisher Simon Prosser puts it, "there was the idea of whether it would be possible to write these books on a relatively short time, so they were right up to the minute, as contemporaneous as could possibly be, and whether we could publish them as fast as was humanly possible" (Vincent).[29] Smith began writing *Autumn* in the months leading up to the 2016 Brexit referendum, an event that reverberates throughout the book but is never explicitly named, only alluded to as "the vote" (53). Brexit's effects are frequently noted by the characters in *Autumn*, such as when Elisabeth sees a house in her village that "has been painted over with black paint and the words GO and HOME" (53), and by the narrator, who describes the aftermath of the referendum in a brief

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Daniel's remarks above provide further nuance to this conclusion, as Smith seems to suggest that the "home" of a story can offer a space for unconditional acceptance, even if the literal home cannot. Regardless, as Bennett notes in her article, the demands made by those "asking for asylum . . . have the weight of suffering behind them," a weight, as shown throughout Smith's *Spring*, that is perversely quantified, if not outright dismissed, by the bureaucracy of the state (Bennett 334). Smith's response to this dismissal, as well as the trickle-down effect it can have on individuals caught within the system, is discussed at great length below.

[28] As John Masterson notes, "there is a palpable and portentous entanglement between climate change denial, nationalist political bluster, and very material effects and affects when it comes to imagining human displacement in the future" (358).

[29] "As fast as . . . humanly possible" equates to about six weeks, by the way (Vincent).

interpolation that begins with the declaration that "all across the country, there was misery and rejoicing" (59). Published in October 2016, just under four months after the referendum, *Autumn* was understandably hailed for its treatment of such a historic and polarizing event. Reviewers at the time called it "the first serious Brexit novel" (Preston), "the first great Brexit novel" (Lyall), and "a post-Brexit masterpiece" (Gilbert). That said, there is more to *Autumn* than its portrayal of a post-Brexit Britain, and other issues introduced in *Autumn*, particularly the refugee crisis and climate change, become more prominent with each of the succeeding novels, each published one year after the other.[30] The last novel, *Summer*, published in the summer of 2020, weaves the global COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests in America into a story that not only brings together many of the characters from throughout the Quartet but more specifically uses the Gluck family's experiences in WWII Germany and Britain to reflect on the cyclical nature of history, itself reflected in the steadfast cyclical movement of the seasons. Indeed, the Quartet begins with this idea. *Autumn* opens, as do all four novels, with a modified version of an opening line from a Dickens novel, in this case (fittingly enough) *A Tale of Two Cities*. The opening declares that "it was the worst of times, it was the worst of times. *Again*" (3, emphasis mine). "That's the thing about things," we're told. "They fall apart, always have, always will, it's in their nature" (*Autumn* 3). Just as we experience the return of the seasons every year, we've been here before, facing many of these same issues, or, as Paul Kingsnorth writes, "worlds are always ending; empires are always falling; the climate has changed before; change is the only constant" (*Confessions* 2).

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[30] It is worth noting here that "generic labels such as 'BrexLit' or 'post-Brexit fiction' purport a certain degree of finitude or closure, when in fact they are symptomatic of a continuing sense of crisis" (Heidemann 679). Relatedly, Birte Heidemann argues in her article on *Autumn* that the book is "not necessarily bound to a *specific* contemporary event" but rather "diagnose[s] an innate yet imminent sense of emergency that, among others, may *also* be read as the underlying cause for all things Brexit" (679, emphasis in original).

Except there's more to Kingsnorth's statements than the above. Kingsnorth

acknowledges that "worlds are always ending, it's true; *but not like this*" (*Confessions* 3,

emphasis mine). What we face now "is new . . . [and] is bigger than anything there has ever been

for as long as humans have existed, and we have done it, and now we are going to have to live

through it, if we can" (*Confessions* 3). Smith knows this too. Underlying her ruminations on the

cyclicality of history is an anxiety over both the familiarity of the challenges facing us now and

their unprecedented nature. The second epigraph of *Autumn*, for instance, is the shocking

assertion, published in *The Guardian* in July of 2016, that "at current rates of soil erosion,

Britain has just 100 harvests left." The catastrophic harm humanity has dealt to the environment,

as well to other people, becomes a more and more insistent concern with each of the books in the

cycle. The books' anxiety over the effects of climate change is seen most conspicuously in

repeated allusions throughout the Quartet to how unusual the weather has become. In *Autumn*,

the narrator tells us that the days in October "are unexpectedly mild" (177) then, a month later,

that "it's more winter than autumn" (259). The main present-day events of *Winter* revolve

around what the narrator calls "a bright sunny post-millennial global-warming Christmas Eve

morning" (5). Yet even in a scene set in 1961, primary character Sophia Cleves mentally notes

that "it's meant to be winter still, February, but it's so warm, today it's shockingly warm, not just

like in spring, more like in summer" (25). More than fifty years later, the problem persists, if not

worsens. We're told that Sophia's blogger son, Arthur (or "Art," as he's commonly called), has

been waiting to write about snow for his nature blog "because of the warm winter last year" (52).

The unusual warmth is mentioned at least twice more in the book, as the narrator says, "It's

winter, still," but "there's no snow. There's been almost none all winter. It'll be one of the

warmest winters on record, again" (91). Much later, a "sunny day" in April is described as the

"hottest day of the year so far and a near-record high for the month" (302), an almost record-breaking day that is perhaps the same day noted in *Spring* as "the hottest April day there's been since the year Richard was born" (65). Characters like the fantastical child Florence in *Spring* worry over the erasure of seasons that has already effectively begun, noting that "if the force of just five more nuclear bombs going off anywhere in the world happens . . . an eternal nuclear autumn will set in and there'll be no more seasons" (184).[31] In *Summer*, another child, Sacha Greenlaw, thinks to herself, "We're all antediluvian *right now*" and wonders about those who can't admit this fact "even when they see the photo of Australian people with no summer daylight standing breathing red dust air on a beach under a red sky . . . while the ball of fire spread on the horizon behind them like a melting butter sun" (25, emphasis in original). This motif reaches its apotheosis in one of the opening sections of *Spring*—narrated, it seems, by Earth itself. In this section, the speaker directly addresses the reader, telling them, "Mess up my climate, I'll fuck with your lives" (8). "Your lives are a nothing to me" (7), they tell us, perhaps because "the light shifts across your divides, round the people with passports, the people with money, the people with nothing . . . the light shifts *regardless*" (8, emphasis mine). Earth will persist though we may not. In turning our attention to it, these books suggest, as well as to history and art, to stories both fictional and true, we can find ways to stay with the trouble threatening to overwhelm us, if it hasn't already. After all, it is the nonhuman world, of which we humans are a part, that persists "under [our] house's foundations . . . warping [our] doors . . . giving [our] world the fresh colours . . . sending the thinnest of green shoots through that rock so

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[31] Florence's worry here is set up earlier in the Quartet, as Smith threads throughout *Winter* several descriptions of the protests at the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp, begun in 1981 out of anger at the British government's investment in nuclear weapons. Sophia's sister, Iris, protested at Greenham, and in *Summer* Art mentions that "she was on the first-ever anti-nuclear peace march to Aldermaston," as well as "ran a commune near Porton Down, protested against and did research and drew public attention to biological warfare, nerve gas and tear gas manufacture, hidden poisons people weren't being told about" (95).

the rock starts to split," saying something to us about living amongst and through great

disturbance (*Spring* 9).

Written from 2016 to 2020, the Seasonal Quartet certainly documents a time of great

disturbance or, rather, a time of what Anna Tsing calls "precarity." Tsing defines "precarity" as

being "the condition of being vulnerable to others" and argues that "precarity *is* the condition of

our time" (20, emphasis in original). As explored in Tom McCarthy's novels, we are now beset

by global forces of capital and climate change, meaning that "we are not in control, even of

ourselves" (Tsing 20). Yet Tsing finds optimism in the fact that "unpredictable encounters

transform us" (20). She argues that now we are "unable to rely on a stable structure of

community" and so "we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our

others" (20). The condition of precarity, in short, is a condition of indeterminacy, and Tsing, like

Karen Barad, believes that indeterminacy "makes life possible" (20). That said, Tsing also notes

that "to live with precarity requires more than railing at those who put us here (although that

seems useful too, and I'm not against it)" (3). Instead, "we might look around to notice this

strange new world, and we might stretch our imaginations to grasp its contours" (3). Yet, as the

character Charlotte says in *Summer*, "we *can* imagine anything . . . but every human act,

including the act of the imagination, bears a moral context" (85, emphasis in original). And

"what you *can* imagine," she continues, "does tend to depend on the Zeitgeist of the time, and

who and what are influencing a mass imagination" (86, emphasis in original). Smith's Seasonal

Quartet is both a direct engagement with the zeitgeist of the late 2010s and an attempt to imagine

new ways of working outside of it. Smith has said that "when we are in foul times, art will tell us

we are. It will show us where we are, and at the same time it will pass us on through those times

to whoever is going to be beyond them" (Wooding 149). In the Quartet's persistent attention to

many different entanglements—including those of its many characters across time and space, of humans with the nonhuman world, and of the four novels both with each other and with other artworks of all kinds—these four books exemplify the ecological thought, showing us where we are but also forcing us to consider new ways of becoming-with, above all illustrating in both content and form how "disturbance realigns possibilities for transformative encounter" (Tsing 152).

"It's About History, and Being Neighbours": Listening to the Stories of the "Strange Stranger"

In the introduction to his novel *Crash*, J.G. Ballard writes that "we now 'live inside an enormous novel . . . 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" (qtd. in *Artful* 37). Smith includes this quote in her book *Artful*, a hybrid text that blends a fictional story of a grieving widow sorting through her husband's lecture notes with Smith's real-life lectures on time, form, and more, given at St. Anne's College. Smith's inclusion of the quote in *Artful*, as well as her comments elsewhere, suggests her agreement with Ballard and points towards another purpose of story-telling related to those explicated above: its ability to "[remind] you to read the world as a construct" (Laing). If you can read the world this way, Smith says, then "you can ask questions of the construct and you can suggest ways to change the construct. You understand that things aren't fixed" (Laing). Like Paul Kingsnorth, Donna Haraway, Timothy Morton, and the other ecological thinkers discussed in these pages, Smith believes that stories frame our reality and that the stories we should pay attention to are those that, in the words of Tsing above, "stretch our imaginations" and help us better see the contours of our world. The ability of Smith's stories in particular to do

this is rooted in her belief that "every story is many-sided" (Young 141), and her respect for all

stories, no matter whose, results in works built around—works that build a space for—

"multivoicedness, which she terms a 'multilogue'" (Kostkowska 147). Smith credits this aspect

of her work to coming up in and being "formed by" a Scottish literature tradition "that

demonstrably celebrated multiplicity of voice, celebrated the margins . . . celebrated multiplicity

of and openness of form" (Begley 189). These multiplicities, found throughout Smith's oeuvre,

show her engagement with modernist and postmodernist forebears like Virginia Woolf and

Jeanette Winterson, as Justyna Kostkowska points out.[32] "Like Woolf and Winterson before

her," Kostkowska writes, "Smith seems to be saying through her 'democracy of voice' that we

must be aware of others and their perspectives; what is more, we need other voices to understand

ourselves and the world" (Kostkowska 152). Listening to the stories of others, Smith's work

suggests, is essential to the project of questioning the structures we live within and changing

them for the better.

    Smith emphasizes the act of listening to (or, in this case, reading) these stories with both

her works' content and form, as seen in the many profound encounters with strangers that recur

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[32] Smith, similar to Tom McCarthy, has been called "the principle creative advocate or brand ambassador for literary modernism in the present day," and it is worth noting that the year 1922, which features prominently in McCarthy's *C*, also bears significance in Smith's *Spring* (Horgan 166). In *C*, as previously discussed, the year marks the end of Serge Carrefax's life, suggesting the death of an era while at the same time aligning McCarthy's work with a modernist tradition. In *Spring*, 1922 is the setting of a novel-inside-the-novel about Katherine Mansfield and Rainer Maria Rilke's overlapping stays in "the same small Swiss town" (33). In telling his longtime friend Paddy about this novel, Richard Lease, a director hired for the film adaptation, notes that the blurb on the paperback calls it "an escape from an era of Brexit," yet the characters' discussion of 1922 illuminates just how similar to the present day it is. Paddy tells Richard that 1922 was also a time of unrest, specifically "brand new ancient Irish civil unrest," with "Ireland in uproar," a "brand new union," a "brand new border," all this taking place during a time in which "something like one in five of all the millions alive in the world . . . belong to . . . [the] British Empire" (*Spring* 41). Like McCarthy, Smith's character also emphasizes the year's significance in literary history, describing it as the "year when everything that was anything in literature fractured. Fell to pieces. On Margate Sands" (42). The film adaptation Paddy begins to imagine in *Spring* sounds in effect much like the book we're reading, bringing together and looking to the historical events and artworks of the past for guidance. As Paddy tells Richard when recounting the events of 1922, "don't tell me this isn't relevant all over again in its brand new same old way" (42).

throughout her work.[33] In *Autumn*, for instance, Elisabeth and Daniel's friendship begins with a

school assignment that asks students "to talk to a neighbor about what it means to be a

neighbour, then make a portrait in words of a neighbour" (43). Eight-year-old Elisabeth

pointedly tells her mother, resistant to the idea of her daughter talking to the "old queen" next

door (43), that the assignment is "about history, and being neighbours" (45). Elisabeth's

description here also serves as an eloquent summation of *Autumn* and the Quartet as a whole,

with each novel using a specific decade in British history to reflect on the historical events

happening in the lead-up to publication—and what exactly it means to be a "good neighbour" in

times such as these. Tsing provides a useful framework for reading the Quartet in this way,

drawing on the work of scientist Lu-Min Vaario, whose research in the science of matsutake

mushrooms (the subject of Tsing's book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*) "investigates

how neighborliness—that is, social relations across differences of both vitality and species—is

essential to good living" (279). For Tsing and Dr. Vaario, neighborliness is defined as "mutuality

across difference" (279), and Tsing argues that "the study of neighborliness turns difference into

a resource for collaboration" (280). Tsing's discussion of neighborliness fits in well with

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[33] Another way she does this is through the "technique of narrative cross-talking," which "sh[ies] away from dominating single-person narrators in favour of multiple viewpoints, set, not directly in competition, but alongside each other" (Lau 41). One way this is seen throughout the Seasonal Quartet is when one character's memory of an event is pitted against another character's (usually described in a separate book) or as we begin a scene inhabiting one character's consciousness only to skip to another scene and circle back much later to the original, told this time from an entirely different character's perspective. For instance, a trip to Paris Daniel took forty years ago with an unnamed woman, described briefly in the opening of *Autumn*, is returned to near the end of *Winter*, with the woman from Daniel's memory revealed to be Sophia Cleves, who describes Daniel as "the love of my life"—and reveals to Lux, a woman pretending to be Art's girlfriend, that he is in fact Art's real father (248). Daniel's memory of "when he visited the city of love with yet another woman he wanted to love him" is accompanied with the acknowledgement that "she didn't, course she didn't, a woman in her forties, a man in his late sixties, well, be honest, nearer seventy, and anyway he didn't love her either. Not truly. Matter of profound mismatch nothing to do with age" (*Autumn* 10). This thought is picked up, responded to, by Sophia in *Winter*, as she tells another character that "he thought it was because he was too old . . . and in truth, it wasn't him, it was me who was too old for him. I couldn't see a life with him. Too little in common. Not even remotely possible" (251). "It wasn't right," Sophia says, "not for me. I knew for sure there in Paris" (251). In moments like these, we see "Smith's commitment to the imaginative fecundity of acknowledging the perspective of the other" (Lea 41).

Haraway's notion of "becoming-with," Barad's ontologically indeterminate encounters on the quantum level, and especially Morton's "strange stranger," all concepts that view the gap between self and other—whether that other be human or nonhuman—not as a fixed border but as the very foundation of being. Haraway writes that "becoming is always becoming *with*" (*When Species Meet* 244), and Morton locates the origin of the ecological thought in the recognition of this fact, writing that it is specifically "through the being of the strange stranger" that our entanglement with the "mesh," the web of life with which we are always already involved, becomes known (*Ecological Thought* 57). Notably, Morton tells us that "the ecological thought thinks the strange stranger as the other mind, the other person, the *neighbor*" (*Ecological Thought* 91, emphasis mine) and that "how to care for the neighbor, the strange stranger" is one of "the long-term problems posed by the ecological thought" (*Ecological Thought* 135).

Smith's work is filled with (strange) strangers and intruders who probe the limits of hospitality and unsettle notions of personal identity, such as Miles in *There but for the*, who locks himself in the spare bedroom of a family's home, and Amber in *The Accidental*, "who comes to stay for a time at the holiday cottage of the Smart family, and who sets about transforming (or destroying, depending on one's perspective) each of their lives" (O'Donnell 96). In Smith's work, the stranger is "the allegorical embodiment of cultural and historical contingency" and "the visible reminder that 'we,' in time, are always composed otherwise" (O'Donnell 100). As such, there are "long-held preoccupations in Smith's work about the kinds of welcome that can be afforded to strangers" (Bennett 323). Alice Bennett notes that "previous critical work on Smith's novels has seen the figures of the intruder and the stranger as crucially significant, but has tended to read these figures apolitically" (324). However, "Smith's work from around 2010 onward has demonstrated a concrete concern with passports, border controls,

and refugee rights . . . [a] concern that can be considered both a continuation and an overt politicization of her long-standing interest in the dynamics of guest and host" (Bennett 324). After all, "the seeker of asylum—without papers, textless, impossible to name (yet) as refugee or immigrant—is the ultimate manifestation of the stranger or foreigner, the representative of radical alterity" (Bennett 323). As discussed by Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, both of whom have famously written on the relationship between the stranger and hospitality, "the unknowability of the stranger is central to the relationship of difference between the other and the self," and "a stranger is a stranger to the extent that their story is, as yet, untold" (Bennett 323). While Bennett's article examines these issues in *There but for the*, the Quartet, particularly the third novel *Spring*, foregrounds the issue of immigration in a way Smith's previous novels haven't, placing philosophical questions of hospitality not just into an explicitly political context but into a *real-world* context with which we the reader are (or can become) intimately familiar.

    Autumn introduces this issue at the very beginning of the Quartet, opening with what we come to learn is a dream of Daniel's.[34] In this dream, "an old old man," Daniel, "washes up on shore" (3) naked and dashes into the forest to avoid a girl and a "ring of dancers round her" (12). Making a coat out of the leaves he finds there, Daniel emerges back onto the shore, only to find "a washed-up body . . . a dead person" (12). Then he sees "another dead person" and "beyond it, another, and another," discovering a "dark line of the tide-dumped dead" including bodies of

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[34] In addition to the refugee crisis, this dream sets up many recurring motifs, establishing a system of allusions that each of the Quartet's novels will use. As discussed above, the first line of each novel is a rework of a first line from a different Dickens novel, but each of the Seasons books also alludes to, discusses, and reworks the plot of a Shakespeare play, such as, in the case of *Autumn* and its opening image of a man washed up on shore, *The Tempest*. Daniel's dream also includes a reference to John Keats, a recurring figure in the Quartet whom Daniel quotes to a young Sophia Cleves in *Winter*, which will lead her later in her life to "read everything John Keats ever wrote and . . . even [go] to Italy especially to see his grave" (317). Finally, Daniel remembers buying a postcard of a photo of a little girl who "looked like she was dressed in dead leaves" (*Autumn* 9). Though Daniel cannot remember the photographer's name, the image, captured by Edouard Boubet, is also mentioned several times throughout the Quartet, with the girl in leaves taking on layers of significance as she appears in each book.

"very small children," an image that evokes the real-life pictures from 2015 of the washed-up

bodies of Syrian refugees who had drowned in the Mediterranean (12). The scene continues with

Daniel seeing more people "further up the beach," but these people are alive and under parasols:

"they are holidaying up the shore from the dead" (12). The dead and the living—Smith's

repeated use of "person" rings throughout the passage, emphasizing the personhood of both—are

gathered in the same place, but those who are alive are seemingly oblivious to the tragedy

occurring nearby, an ignorance that is both the logical endpoint (and, perhaps in some way, the

cause?) of what one speaker in *Spring* calls the "Britain no

England/America/Italy/France/Germany/Hungary/Poland/Brazil/[insert name of country] First"

mentality, a mentality promoted by politicians like Trump and Nigel Farage and, indeed, by

writers like Paul Kingsnorth (5).

As the Seasonal Quartet progresses, the conservative mindset fueling Brexit becomes

increasingly central to the novels. Throughout *Autumn*, we see people told to "go back to

Europe" (130) or "GO HOME" (53), but these scenes are shown mostly through the perspective

of Elisabeth, who reacts with increasing dismay, thinking at one point, for instance, that "this is

what shame feels like" (130). In *Winter*, though, many chapters are told from the perspective of

the much older Sophia, a former businesswoman turned misanthropic recluse who blatantly says

that immigrants and refugees are "coming here because they want *our* lives" (206).[35] In the wake

of Brexit, Sophia ignores whatever ethical obligation she and her country have towards these so-

called "economic migrants" (*Winter* 205), and this ignorance is passed down to her son, Art,

who, when confronted with the prospect of "people from the EU being made to wait to see if

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[35] It is no coincidence that the primary Dickens novel referenced in *Winter* is *A Christmas Carol*, with Sophia being the Scrooge stand-in.

they can stay in the country or not," among many other precarious situations, says, "They chose to come and live here. They ran that risk. It's not our responsibility" (*Winter* 55). Even worse, Art's callousness extends even to those washed-up dead from Daniel's dream, as his girlfriend Charlotte accuses him of telling her at one point that "we didn't need to feel responsible because it had been *their choice* to run away from their houses being burned down and bombed and then *their choice again* to get into a boat that capsized" (55, emphasis in original). In *Summer*, Robert Greenlaw, the aforementioned Sacha's brother, flaunts his admiration of Prime Minister Boris Johnson and, in particular, his adviser Dominic Cummings, who, he thinks, "knows how to style politics so that it doesn't look like politics any more" (54). "Robert Greenlaw is in awe," we're told, "of their performance of callousness" (*Summer* 55), and this results in his own performance of the same, telling his teachers and peers that "people hate women for being girly swots and only useful for sex and having children, especially children that you don't admit to having, because being a man is all about spreading our seed" (*Summer* 34) and that "children who come from poverty or grow up in it aren't worth educating because they're just not up to it" (*Summer* 35). In saying the latter, Robert specifically notes that he is "only repeating what our own prime minister's chief adviser thinks" (*Summer* 35)—and the adviser to a prime minister who "was recently elected with a huge majority" at that (*Summer* 36). Robert embodies the idea that, as the narrator in the opening of *Summer* says, "it got fashionable around then to act like you didn't care" and that "it got fashionable, too, to insist the people who did care, or said they cared, were either hopeless losers or were just showing off" (3).

All that said, Smith's examination of people who hold such views is at its most thorough and prolonged in *Spring*, which features a lengthy mid-section centered on Brittany (or "Brit") Hall, a guard at an "Immigrant Removal Center" (IRC) run by the company SA4A who began

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working there because though "she'd wanted college . . . they couldn't afford it now . . . [or] ever" (133).[36] Brit's arc in the novel—consisting of a progressive desensitization to the plight of the immigrants at the IRC interrupted, though not permanently, by an encounter with Florence, the fantastical, transformative child mentioned above—is explicitly equated with the position of Britain post-Brexit. For example, one of her fellow guards, Torq, gives her the nickname "Britannia" (*Spring* 134) while Florence points out her inner divisions by telling her, "You're nearly two different places. Britain and Brittany" (*Spring* 189). Brit's encounter with Florence, which leads her to accompany her all the way to the town of Kingussie in Scotland, becomes an attempt on Florence's part to "humaniz[e] the machine": the institutional apathy and cruelty that Brit represents (*Spring* 309).[37] Smith details Brit's desensitization by showing the ways in which she distances herself from the ethical considerations of her job and from the immigrants she talks to every day at the ICO. One way Brit does this is through the language she uses and through policing the language others use—a fixation symptomatic of the constant control Brit feels she must exert over her interactions with the various immigrants. Indeed, Brit rarely uses the words "immigrant," "refugee," or even "detainee," instead calling them "deets," as her coworker Torq does, the first of several distancing language choices. The name comes from insect repellent, and Torq explains the term by drawing parallels between the "deets" under their care and the DEET that kills insects, telling Brit that "everything about this job is repellent. And you got to be

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[36] SA4A, the company in charge of the IRC, is present throughout all four novels: in *Winter*, Art works for "the entertainment division of SA4A" (70) while in *Autumn*, SA4A is responsible for a fence being put up that "encloses a piece of land that's got nothing in it but furze, sandy flats, tufts of long grass, scrappy trees, little clumps of wildflower" (55). Sacha Greenlaw's mother, Grace, encounters this same fence a few years later in *Summer*, now with a "newly tarmacked road" and, as one sign declares, "PROTECTED AND PATROLLED 24 HOURS A DAY BY SA4A" (309). A woman passing by tells Grace that behind the fence is "a government place for people who don't belong in this country" (*Summer* 310).

[37] Never one to miss an opportunity for a joke, Smith begins the encounter by having Brit ask, "If you're Florence, does that make me the machine?" (*Spring* 170).

careful with Deet. Your speech can get slurred, you can feel really sick, it's a neurotoxin, under your skin going right into you" (*Spring* 134). As Brit thinks to herself after considering a friendly interaction with "one of the Syrians," there "were lines you had to draw. There were correct responses" (*Spring* 131). This sentiment is reflected not just in the unnecessarily cruel rules of the ICO, e.g. that "sitting next to family is forbidden," but also in Brit's frequent correction of the immigrants' use of English (*Spring* 139). Faced with "a Kurdish deet" who tells her, "I crossed the world to come here to ask you for help . . . And you locked me in this cell. Now I sleep every night in a toilet with some person I don't know whose religion I don't share," Brit's response tends not to the complaint itself but to the words used (*Spring* 160). "It's a *room*, not a cell," she replies, "and you're lucky you've got anywhere to sleep at all" (*Spring* 160, emphasis mine). When another immigrant named Hero asks her, "Why can't we open window in this prison?", Brit corrects him by noting that "this isn't a prison, it's a purpose-built Immigration Removal Centre with a prison design" (*Spring* 160).[38] Committed so intensely to the letter of the law, Brit cannot—will not—face the human spirit of those in front of her.

Brief, haunting allusions to the stories of those imprisoned at ICOs across the UK litter this section of the novel. At one point, Brit dreams of The Wood, a women-only ICO where detainees are subjected to "body searches . . . assaults that never make it to report . . . rapes" (*Spring* 143).[39] Many of these women, too, had "been sex trafficked across the world," but "all

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[38]The character of Hero provides yet another connection between books. In *Summer*, we learn through Art and Charlotte, who have become involved in a program that helps refugees, that Hero came to Britain after he was "beaten up by government thugs in the country he ran away from because he wrote a blog about something governmental he disagreed with" (103). Sacha Greenlaw's letters to Hero in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic end each section of the novel, with Hero's letter back to her acting as the ending of both the novel and the Quartet as a whole.

[39] SA4A perversely co-opts places in nature for the names of their detention centers: e.g. "the Spring, the Field, the Worth, the Valley, the Oak, the Berry, the Garland, the Grove, the Meander, the Wood" (*Spring* 133).

swore [that] . . . detention there was worse than any of the rest of what had happened to them"
(*Spring* 143). Additionally, a male detainee's "casenotes said he'd claimed he'd been made not
just to watch his father and brother both decapitated but been forced to choose which head he'd
play football with, and to do it too" (*Spring* 142). In a section detailing "some of the things
Brittany Hall learned in her first two weeks as a DCO at a UK IRC," we're told of detainees
"who'd been brought up in the UK": these "were the most depressed and could be particularly
troublesome, partly because none of the others would make friends with them" (*Spring* 151). In
another section detailing things learned in her first two months at the ICO, we're told that "there
were 30,000 people detained in this country at any one time, and that was the level of interned
deets across detention estate that kept SA4A salaries stable" (*Spring* 165), the implications of
which become clearer when considering how often "people get arrested who aren't the right
people, sometimes aren't even the right gender" (*Spring* 320).[40] Just as the images of the dead
bodies on the shore of Daniel's dream evoke their real-life counterparts, the power of the
detainees' statements and stories comes in part from the fact that they are based on true stories.
At the end of *Spring*, Smith thanks "the refugees and detainees who've spoken to me or written
about what it's like to be detained indefinitely at a UK Immigration Removal Centre," as well as
"an anonymous friend who told me about everyday life in this country's IRCs" (339). These
sections of the novel also show the influence of Smith's work with *Refugee Tales*, a series of
books modeled after Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* that ask "poets and novelists [to] retell the
stories of individuals who have direct experience of Britain's policy of indefinite immigration
detention" ("Books"). Smith is "both a patron of and contributor to" these books, having written

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[40] Consider too that "the CIOs often sent people here they'd designated adult who were plainly still kids, thirteen,
fourteen" (*Spring* 129).

"The Detainee's Tale" for the first volume (Masterson 356).[41] When we are told, then, that Brit's

response to a detainee asking for a blanket is that "*we're not a hotel. If you don't like it here go*

home. How dare you ask for a blanket," it is clear that Brit has internalized the thought and

speech of those she works with—and that this heartless response is likely all too common in real

life (*Spring* 16, emphasis in original).

In *There but for the*, the character Genevieve, who owns the house whose spare room the

stranger Miles occupies, has "her understanding of herself . . . reshaped in the face of the

stranger in her house, and she is forced to answer for her identity, as she becomes 'strangely self-

aware'" (Bennett 333-334). A similar transformation begins to occur with Brit, as her worldview

and identification with "the machine" are upset by Florence, whom she describes as "like

someone or something out of a legend or a story, the kind of story that on the one hand isn't

really about real life but on the other is the only way you ever really understand anything about

real life" (*Spring* 314). More specifically, Florence "makes people behave like they should, or

like they live in a different better world" (*Spring* 314). Florence, then, might guide Brit (and us)

to a more appropriate response to the real-life tragedies described above. From the beginning of

their relationship, Florence is, like many of the children in Smith's works, playful, witty, and

insightful, prone to making moral pronouncements.[42] On the train to Kingussie, where Brit has

reluctantly joined her, Florence tells Brit, in a statement that captures Florence's general ethos,

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[41] In his article on "imagination, agitation, and raging against the machine in . . . *Spring*" (355), John Masterson describes this tale as "a laboratory for her 2019 novel" (367). Masterson's argument that Smith's "seasonal quartet . . . and her work with *Refugee Tales* aesthetically and ethically defend the principle that human dignity, both individual and collective, rests on the ability to tell stories" dovetails well with my own here (355).

[42] Tory Young links Smith's frequent use of children and teenagers in her fiction to a "humane concern for the expression of a range of emotions and marginalized voices," an "ethical desire" that underlies "her literary experimentation and concern with narrative style" (133).

that her mother "always says as a general rule it's a good thing to make the world bigger, not

smaller" (*Spring* 180). This attitude is seen in Florence's reaction to crossing the border between

England and Scotland, prompting a discussion about borders when she says to Brit, "I didn't see

any border . . . Did you see it? I don't see anything different" (*Spring* 195). Not only does

Florence's comment point out the contrast between man-made borders and the natural world on

which they are imposed, but she also proposes an alternative view of the border crossing: "What

if, the girl says. Instead of saying, this border divides these places. We said, this border *unites*

these places. This border holds together these two really interesting different places. What if we

declared border crossings places where, listen, when you crossed them, you yourself became

doubly possible" (*Spring* 196). In saying this, Florence is echoing Haraway, Barad, and Morton:

that is to say, she is advocating for the ecological thought. As these thinkers point out, we are

(always) already linked, the invisible borders between people and nonhumans being not

boundaries but lines of interconnection in the "mesh." Florence's proposal pushes against a

question "at the core of the Brexit debate," i.e. "the question of national borders: how should

they be controlled?" (Shaw 17). Out of this arise other, practical questions to consider—e.g. "in a

globalised world of transnational mobilities are porous borders an inevitability? Or is the

maintenance of existing borders a form of defence from acts of global terrorism and

undocumented immigration?"—but the ecological thought articulated by Haraway et al. points

out that such borders have always been porous and that to maintain them in the ways we humans

have is to deny the reality of our world (Shaw 17). As Morton tells us, "the ecological thought

cannot abide national boundaries," a sentiment embodied by Florence (*Ecological Thought* 51).

Viewing borders the way Florence does is to effectively remove them, to make the world bigger,

not smaller, to, in the words of Smith herself, "put our hand across a divide" by remaking the

divide into what it always has been: a bridge between two selves (Laing).

This belief is reflected in the form of the Quartet as well, which, like Smith's past work,

often "shifts narrative perspective from one character to another halfway through, reversing the

subject-object configuration" and maintaining the multiplicity of voice and perspective discussed

above (Kostkowska 149). In doing so, Smith's work shows us that life "isn't either/or. It's

and/and/and" (Laing).[43] This structuring technique can be seen throughout the last third of

Spring, after Brit and Florence's story intersects with the story of Richard Lease from the first

third of the book. Having talked Richard out of committing suicide on the train tracks, Florence

compels him to join her and Florence in a "Coffee Van That Isn't A Fucking Coffee Van" with a

driver that takes them the rest of the way to Kingussie (*Spring* 215). Switching back to Richard's

perspective, the book jumps in time from the van ride to Richard's memories from 1976 of

Paddy, whose recent death is contributing to his suicidal thoughts, to their arrival at a local

supermarket to five months later in the following March, when Richard is beginning a new

documentary about the "Auld Alliance," a "countrywide network" that has "helped [at least] 235

people escape or outwit detention estate" (*Spring* 270-271).[44] Elided in all of these temporal

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[43] As Paddy tells Richard, "there's a difference between narrative strategy and reality, but they're symbiotic" (*Spring* 63).

[44] The driver of the coffee van, we learn, is a member of this Alliance, waiting at the train station to take Florence to meet her mother, an escaped detainee, at a nearby battlefield. Richard's interviews with members of the Alliance give us a small look into their operations, with everyone in the Alliance "call[ing] herself or himself by the name Alda or Aldo Lyons" (*Spring* 270). In *Summer*, we discover that Daniel Gluck's sister, Hannah, is part of a similar organization in WWII Germany, whose members take on the names of dead people while helping members of the "family" cross the border (218), showing that, in the words of one Alda, "there are different ways to be a nobody" and "different kinds of invisibility" persist across the years (*Spring* 272). Other influences persist over time as well, as we are told that the Alliance's name was inspired by the fictional TV movie "Andy Hoffnung," directed by Richard and written by Paddy, the name of which came from Paddy's encounter with an unnamed "half German, half English" man at a Beethoven concert who'd "lost a lot at the hands of both" but who was "the most hopeful man [Paddy had] ever met" (*Spring* 59). Though never explicitly named, the man's heritage, as well as his bad luck, suggest that he is Daniel Gluck. Paddy bases the titular character on him, making "words that mean *dedicated to*

jumps is the actual climax of the novel, with Florence finally finding her mom, only to be separated from her once again by SA4A agents in a scene reminiscent of images of child separation in the United States from 2018 to 2019.

This climactic scene is left to the very end of the novel, and before we get to it, Richard's story is interrupted by Brit's, whose voice cuts in saying, "Yeah but enough about the filmmaker and what Russell would call the zzzzzzzzzz of his story" (*Spring* 291). Having covered in sixty pages forty-plus years from Richard's perspective, even flashing forward "five years from now, when he eventually tracks down the girl, Florence, now a young woman," we are now back in the van, with Brit filling in gaps from Richard's story with her own view of things. Brit, we learn, is who leads SA4A to the battlefield where Florence and her mother meet, a decision Brit makes after being deserted by Florence at the supermarket. Brit's reaction to being left behind is telling. Reflecting on their stay at a Holiday Inn the previous night, Brit thinks of how Florence is "good" (*Spring* 314), but having been left behind, Brit realizes "it isn't, wasn't, goodness. Or if it is, it's a good that's not and has never really been about Brit anyway. So fuck that" (*Spring* 315). Moments before, realizing Florence and the van driver have left, Brit searches for Florence, fixated on getting her schoolbag to her in hopes that she has not "been tricked" (*Spring* 317). Because if Brit has been, then it means "it was never about her . . . [and that] she was never a real part of the story. She was just an extra in it. She was the hired help" (*Spring* 317). Brit's reaction here is suggestive not only of her own narcissism, unable to bear her role as an attendant to the main story, but also, given her symbolic significance discussed above, of Britain's own inability

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hope into an actual person . . . giving the words a human shape," just as Smith does with Daniel—as well as others like Florence, Sacha, and Lux—throughout the Quartet (*Spring* 271).

to deal with its status in an increasingly globalized world.[45] As noted by Paddy earlier in the novel, "something like one in five of all the millions alive in the world in 1922 belong[ed] to . . . [the] British Empire" (*Spring* 41), and "nostalgia for the empire's back big-time" in the wake of (and, perhaps, preceding) Brexit (*Spring* 43). Brexit, then, like Brit's call to SA4A, can be seen as an attempt not just to ignore but to vindictively cut off connection to the myriad equally if not more important stories occurring across the world.

In the wake of her encounter with Florence, Brit is unmoored, still working at the ICO but without the promotion she'd hoped for after making the call. Yet Florence has opened her up to a degree, made her world bigger, and Brit's last section in the book suggests an inner struggle that has only been exacerbated by her time with Florence. Near the end of the van ride, for instance, Brit thinks of how "she has been quite surprised by how unpleasant she is to other people without even thinking, and by how bad her being unpleasant to other people is currently making her feel" (*Spring* 305). Later, back at work, she listens to Torq recite a poem in Gaelic, and "just hearing it made her angry. It made her near tears. It felt like being bullied did" (*Spring* 326). Her throat starts "to hurt like it does when you try to stop yourself crying," and "it was the language that was making it hurt" (*Spring* 326). Her throat continues to pulse "like she was a string on a musical instrument that was being played against its will" (*Spring* 327). This language, unlike the broken English spoken by the detainees, is out of her control, which is why the scene ends with her thinking that "different languages shouldn't be allowed in England. Britain. She meant Britain" (*Spring* 327). Brit's transition from England to Britain here

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[45] For an analysis of how this inability affected British writers in the early half of the 20th century, as Britain's power on the global stage began to diminish, see Jed Esty's *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England*. Esty argues that "taken together," the works of Eliot, Woolf, and Forster from the thirties and forties "began to deemphasize the redemptive agency of *art*, which, because of its social autonomization, operates unmoored from any given national sphere, and to promote instead the redemptive agency of *culture*, which is restricted by national or ethnolinguistic borders" (2-3, emphasis in original).

contradicts her overall sentiment though, responding subtly to the speaker at the beginning of the book espousing a "Britain no England . . . First mentality" and suggesting an internal alignment within Brit with, per her name, Britain as a whole, including all its various parts. And she remains connected to Florence, persisting in a hope of finding her in order to give her back her schoolbag, as well as reading her notebook, which we deduce is the source of the various interpolations spread throughout *Spring*, including the "right wing stuff" above and the aforementioned section with "the earth speaking" (*Spring* 323).

There is one other notable section from Florence's notebook though, one that speaks to the predicament of immigrants and refugees, as well as to the moral failings of Brit and "the machine." It's about faces, and the speaker remains unidentified—indeed, their lack of identity is the very point being made. "Any time at all. Here, take it. Take my face," the speaker says to us. "I'm not surprised you want my face. It's the face of now" (*Spring* 125). This is the face on an "A4 photocopy," which serves as "proof I exist" and that "I'm not able to study here or work here or live here without permission" (*Spring* 125). This is the face "that resembles the drawings on the posters that tell you to report anything you think looks suspicious" (*Spring* 126). This is the face "like the faces on the poster-lorry the white man in the suit posed in front of, of a great queue of people, I mean *non-people*, at a border" (*Spring* 126, emphasis mine). This face "is a breaking point"; it is "all about you" (*Spring* 126). This is the face "trodden in mud . . . bloated by sea," like the faces of the dead people Daniel sees in his dream (*Spring* 127). "What my face means," the speaker says, "is not your face" (*Spring* 127). This is the face of the drowned refugee, the detainee, the Other, the strange stranger. The meaning of their face lies in the very fact that it is not ours—that it is the face of the Other. And when the speaker tells us to take their face "by all means," followed by a pithy "You're welcome," the enraged sarcasm of the

statement is clear. "You"—which is to say, all of us who "take" the face of the Other without recognizing the person underneath—are welcome: which the Other isn't, not in England, and which the Other makes possible for "the white man in the suit" standing in front of "faceless nobodies while his was the face of a somebody" (*Spring* 126).

The rest of *Spring*, and the Quartet as a whole, shows the consequences of this arrangement when made national policy and asks us to not just consider the face of the Other but to listen to their stories. After all, as Florence says to Brit, "looking is just the start of understanding, just its surface, the top layer of any understanding" (*Spring* 182-183). Of course, when considering the notion of the face of the Other, one must turn to Emmanuel Levinas, who wrote of how the face of the Other challenges our subjectivity and, consequently, our ideas of ourselves and our actions, opening the self to new possibilities and perspectives if we will only recognize the Other in their otherness. Levinas tells us that "subjectivity is being a hostage" to the Other (*Otherwise* 127) or, put another way, that "to be I signifies not being able to escape responsibility" for the Other ("Transcendence" 17). Timothy Morton picks up this idea, making it a cornerstone of the ecological thought and his description of our encounter with the strange stranger. As he points out, "other beings," i.e. strange strangers, "elicited the ecological thought: they summon it from us and force us to confront it (*Ecological Thought* 135). So "when I encounter the strange stranger, I gaze into the depths of space, far more vast and profound than physical space that can be measured with instruments . . . [and] everything is intimate with everything else" (*Ecological Thought* 78). The strange stranger, human or nonhuman, helps us realize our entanglements, to see the mesh, and, as Anna Tsing notes, "entanglement bursts categories and upends identities" (137). (The same can be said for Florence and the other intruding, beguiling strangers of Smith's fiction.) Barad, as discussed previously, shows us that

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entanglement is a fundamental fact of existence: in a description that echoes Levinas, she writes

that entanglements "are relations of obligation—being bound to the other," because the "Other"

is "irreducibly and materially bound to, threaded through, the 'self'" ("Quantum" 265). We

cannot escape this obligation because "the very nature of matter entails an exposure to the Other"

("Quantum" 265). Subjectivity is being a hostage. Given this, it is no wonder that "there is

something utterly outrageous and, at the same time, *universal and unavoidable* about" loving the

strange stranger (*Ecological Thought* 79, emphasis mine). Laying down on the train tracks in

Spring, Richard Lease thinks to himself, "Even the machine has to encounter nature, not even it

can escape the earth. There's something reassuring in that" (111). Loving and listening to the

strange stranger, no matter where they are from, is the task set before us, but it is also an

unavoidable challenge. After all, as Morton asks, "are we not all migrants?" (*Ecological Thought*

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"The Shape the Telling Takes": Imagining Collectivity within the Warming Condition

In a lecture given one week after Donald Trump's election in the United States, cultural

theorist Mark Fisher discussed what he called "care without community" (*Postcapitalist Desire*

107). "Isn't that what we want?" he asks. "Where you can give people the care regardless of

whether they belong to the community" (*Postcapitalist Desire* 107). He describes "the events of

last week" and, more generally, "this new form of right-wing reaction" as "the exact opposite of

that. It's restricting care only to a defined community. So, you're literally putting up walls . . .

It's a fantasy" (*Postcapitalist Desire* 107).[46] In contrast, Smith's Seasonal Quartet "animat[es]

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[46] Indeed, the need for an alternative solution is given voice by Lux in *Winter*, a stranger Art presents to Sophia as his girlfriend Charlotte, with whom he has had an argument. Discussing the refugee crisis, Lux asks Sophia, "But what will the world do . . . if we can't solve the problem of the millions and millions of people with no home to go

the belief in the richness and intensity of life that comes with removing rather than erecting borders" (Pittel 63). Caring outside the parochial limits of one's country—as urged throughout the Quartet by the characters of Daniel, his sister Hannah, Lux, Florence, and Sacha—can not only make life more rich: it is also the only way to stay with the trouble of living within the warming condition. Indeed, caring without community in this age, as Haraway shows us, is to care not only for other humans but also nonhumans, the critters with whom we can—and must—make kin. As Fisher points out, and as both Morton and Rob Nixon have shown us with their respective discussions of hyperobjects and slow violence, "the cause of eco-catastrophe is an impersonal structure which, even though it is capable of producing all manner of effects, is precisely not a subject capable of exercising responsibility" (*Capitalist Realism* 66). Unfortunately, "the required subject—a collective subject—does not exist, yet the crisis, like all the other global crises we're now facing, demands that it be constructed" (*Capitalist Realism* 66). Fortunately, the ecological thought "forces us to invent ways of being together that don't depend on self-interest," and other beings, strange strangers, "compel us to imagine *collectivity* rather than community—groups formed by choice rather than by necessity" (*Ecological Thought* 135, emphasis mine).

Collectivity, as opposed to community, is also an idea Anna Tsing returns to throughout her book *The Mushroom at the End of the World*. Tsing looks to what she calls "assemblages" as an alternative to community, particularly in times of precarity. As discussed above, to live in precarity means being "unable to rely on a stable structure of community," and so "we are

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to or whose homes aren't good enough, except by saying go away and building fences and walls? It isn't a good enough answer, that one group of people can be in charge of the destinies of another group of people and choose whether to exclude them or include them" (206). Instead, "human beings have to be more ingenious than this, and more generous. We've got to come up with a better answer" (*Winter* 206).

thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others" (Tsing 20).

Assemblages are "open-ended gatherings . . . [that] allow us to ask about communal effects

without assuming them" (Tsing 23). More importantly, they are also "scenes for considering

livability—the possibility of common life on a human-disturbed earth" (Tsing 163). Tsing's

exploration of assemblages is rooted in her belief that "staying alive—for every species—

requires livable collaborations," which means "working across difference" or, put another way,

being good neighbors (Tsing 28). For Tsing, "without collaborations, we all die" (28).[47] One

advantage of studying assemblages is that they allow us to see these collaborations at work; to

"see lifeways—and non-living ways of being as well—coming together" (Tsing 23). Notably,

though, "assemblages don't just gather lifeways; they *make* them," as "patterns of unintentional

coordination develop in assemblages" (Tsing 23). "To notice such patterns," Tsing writes,

"means watching the interplay of temporal rhythms and scales in the divergent lifeways that

gather" (23). As such, assemblages also "show us potential histories in the making . . . urg[ing]

us to ask: How do gatherings sometimes become 'happenings,' that is, greater than the sum of

their parts?" (Tsing 23). In short, assemblages are sites of indeterminate encounters between

overlapping, often interconnected "world-making projects" that change and develop over time,

creating a greater whole out of many smaller, shifting parts (Tsing 22).

  The same can be said for the Seasonal Quartet, dwelling as it does on history, on how we

become ourselves throughout time, on how we affect one another, as well as the world, and how

those effects reverberate, become history or "happenings," greater than the sum of their parts,

just like the Seasonal novels themselves. By gathering together real-life historical events,

disparate artworks, and many different perspectives on living throughout the late 2010s, the

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[47] Indeed, "transformation through collaboration, ugly and otherwise," Tsing tells us, "is the human condition" (31).

Quartet both depicts and creates through its form "an open-ended entanglement of ways of being" (Tsing 83). Tsing tells us that "to appreciate the assemblage, one must attend to its separate ways of being at the same time as watching how they come together in sporadic but consequential coordinations" (158). This is a good strategy for reading the Seasonal Quartet as well, as each novel is very much its own work while at the same time intersecting with the other three through the recurrence of characters, motifs, and thematic concerns, as noted often throughout the discussion above. Contrary to one critic's assertion that *Autumn* "does not . . . hint at any possible way forward," it is through both this vision and enactment of collectivity that *Autumn* and the other novels show the means for our continued survival, even potential flourishing, within the warming condition (Wally 81). As Paddy tells Richard in *Spring*—in a line that, like Florence's above, echoes Haraway and the like—"there's ways to survive these times, Doubledick, and I think one way is the shape the telling takes" (21).

Smith has spent her career experimenting with the shape of her stories, and her use of the independent-yet-interconnected form of the four seasonal novels can be seen as the end result of many of these experiments—and as exemplifying the ecological thought. Indeed, many of the qualities of Smith's early work, including her short stories and her debut novel, *Like*, can be seen throughout the Quartet. In *Like*, for instance, "Smith uses . . . recurrences to tie the two stories together while at the same time reflecting the difference between the two protagonists, and between individual points of view in general" (Kostkowska 132). In the same novel, the reader is forced to "move from one section to the other and back in the hope of finding more answers," causing the reader to "always [be] thinking about the other one as we are reading, trying to impose one chapter on the other to restructure the timeline and the events. We overcome the existing physical sequential order of the two parts as we weave them together into a shared

account" (Kostkowska 139). Justyna Kostkowska describes the "reading process" of *Like* as "spiral, always encouraging a next reading," thanks to "Smith's brilliant strategy of leaving information gaps to encourage a search for clues" (136). This search, Kostkowska argues, "propels us to intimacy, outlining a model of relationship to the unknown [strange] 'strangers'" (136).[48] The Seasonal Quartet is perhaps the fullest realization of this narrative strategy in Smith's work so far, as the reader is constantly urged to find links between the books, whether they be the frequent allusions to Shakespeare and Dickens, the different appearances of a younger, never-named Daniel in *Winter* and *Spring*, discussed above, the mentions of swifts sprinkled throughout the texts as representative of the changing seasons, and more.

Smith's past works have also "insist[ed] on becoming part of our own," frequently breaking the fourth wall to remind us "that the 'real' world still exists, that in our act of reading we are still surrounded by something larger to which we, as well as the text, belong" (Kostkowska 159). By "reach[ing] out beyond the text into its environment," Smith's stories extend the "transformative space" of the story into the "reader's life," thereby "promoting a more accepting view of otherness, both human and nonhuman" (Kostkowska 154). The Seasonal Quartet, again, exemplifies this trend in Smith's work by blending the fictional lives of her characters with the real-life events that have taken place in the very recent past for her readers, helping us to see our entanglements while foregrounding the political and ethical implications of

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[48] Another way the form of Quartet reflects the ecological thought is in its traversal of time and place, jumping within the space of a sentence to "years later . . . more than three decades later" (*Winter* 239). The Quartet, like the ecological thought, "hugely expands our ideas of space and time" (*Ecological Thought* 135). This is also in line with Barad's discussions of matter, which she describes at one point as "a condensation of dispersed and multiple beings-times, where the future and past are diffracted into now, into each moment" ("TransMaterialities" 411). The Quartet allows the reader to see these "dispersed and multiple beings-times" in the form of characters dispersed throughout time, interacting with and affecting one another in ways only the reader fully knows. Indeed, as Art says to a child "some time in the future," this is "one of the things stories and books can do, they can make more than one time possible at once" (*Winter* 224).

that vision. Another way Smith's stories push outwards into the real world is through her inclusion and extended discussion of other writers and artists, including famous writers like Shakespeare, Dickens, Keats, Mansfield, and Rilke alongside forgotten and contemporary female artists like Pauline Boty, Barbara Hepworth, Tacita Dean, and Lorenza Mazzetti, an Italian filmmaker.[49] In Smith's stories, "story-telling is not singular but an interweaving, an accumulation, a texture" (Baker 102). That is to say, in Smith's work stories are always entangled with other stories, and in this Smith's work can be seen as an example of Ursula K. Le Guin's "Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," discussed with adoration by both Haraway and Tsing. In this theory, Le Guin "proposes that storytelling might pick up diverse things of meaning and value and gather them together, like a forager rather than a hunter waiting for the big kill"—and like an assemblage gathering multiple lifeways (Tsing 287). Just as the world-making projects found in assemblages are perpetually shaping one another through endless indeterminate encounters, "in this kind of storytelling, stories should never end, but rather lead to further stories" (Tsing 287). In this storytelling, stories are "a few seeds to give away and to receive, suggest[ing] stories of becoming-with, of reciprocal induction, of companion species whose job in living and dying is not to end the storying, the worlding " (*Staying with the Trouble* 40).

Stories, in other words, lead to more stories. Smith, ever the hospitable host, gives us her stories and points us towards others, not just those written down or made into art but also, and more importantly, the stories of the world around us, which is really the story of us becoming-

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[49] Mary Horgan describes the inclusion of such writers and artists as a sign of Smith's "self-conscious engage[ment] with modernism, setting twentieth-century modernist texts, authors, styles, and concerns to work in the present moment" (166). Such engagement, which is furthered by her "experiments with voice, genre, narrative, and form[,] continue a modernist project, proposing something different from the stylistic and political conservatism of much contemporary British fiction" (Horgan 166). Regarding the specific female artists noted above, Smith has said she thinks of them as "forming a spine, a kind of spirit spine for each of the books" (Wooding 148).

with the world and of the kin, both human and nonhuman, with which we are always already entangled. The end of *Autumn* illustrates this well, culminating in a simple description of a landscape: "the trees are revealing their structures. There's the catch of fire in the air. All the souls are out marauding" (206). As Tsing tells us, landscapes are "sites for more-than-human dramas," more-than-human stories, and as such they are "radical tools for decentering human hubris. Landscapes are not backdrops for historical action: they are themselves active" (152). By dwelling on the landscape, as Smith often does here and elsewhere throughout the Quartet, "the reader is challenged to envision new paradigms of relationship: between humans, and between humans and nonhumans" (Kostkowska 154).[50] Notably, though, the description of the landscape ends with a confrontation, similar to those found at the end of Kingsnorth's *Beast* and McCarthy's *Satin Island*. Even amidst the dying trees and the turn of the season, we are told, "there are roses, there are still roses. In the damp and the cold, on a bush that looks done, there's a wide-open rose, still" (*Autumn* 207). And here the narrator, perhaps Smith herself, puts her hand out across the divide to *you*, the strange stranger, ending with a gentle suggestion: "Look at the colour of it" (*Autumn* 260). Here at the end, the reader is "seen (met in the act of looking)," a moment Smith describes as "the exchange that happens when art and human meet" (*Artful* 28).[51] And it's this moment of being seen that, crucially, "results in the pure urgency for transformation: 'you must change your life'" (*Artful* 28).

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[50] Her description also shows the influence of Virginia Woolf, another artist mentioned throughout the Quartet. Like the "Time Passes" chapter in *To the Lighthouse*, in which Woolf describes "the subtle physical shifts and play of light and darkness in and around a house deserted by the novel's characters," Smith's description "undermine[s] the idea" that the landscape "is a neutral stage set on which the characters act" (*Ecological Thought* 107). Instead, "the existentially vivid presence" of the landscape "emerges" (*Ecological Thought* 107).

[51] *Summer*, and the Quartet as a whole, ends similarly, with a letter from Hero responding to those written by Sacha and presented throughout the book—another instance of exchange, of acknowledgement, of being seen.

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VITA

Garrett Peace was born in Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Robin and James Peace. An only child, he attended Tiger Creek Elementary in Tunnel Hill, Georgia, where his mother worked as a second-grade teacher at the time. Garrett went on to attend several schools in Catoosa County, Georgia, including Ringgold Middle School, Heritage Middle School, Lakeview-Fort Oglethorpe High School, and Heritage High School. After graduating from Heritage, Garrett attended Berry College in Rome, Georgia, where he majored in English Literature and minored in Secondary Education. As an undergraduate, Garrett presented his paper "Flannery O'Connor and James Joyce: A Study of Subversion in Epiphany" at the Southern Writers, Southern Writing graduate student conference held at the University of Mississippi in July 2013. Garrett completed the Bachelor of Arts degree in May 2014 and was hired as a Special Education English teacher at his alma mater, Heritage High School, later that summer. In the following years, Garrett began teaching College Preparatory and Honors English classes, eventually also overseeing the Journalism program. In August 2018, Garrett began pursuing a Master of Arts degree in English Literature at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. Garrett graduated with the Master of Arts degree in May 2021. Garrett continues to work as an English teacher at Heritage High School and is open to pursuing a PhD degree in the future.