

'I am the child who's been buried in leaves': Social Ghosting, Child Spectres and the Possibilities of Play in Ali Smith's *Spring* (2019) and *Companion Piece* (2021)

[SLIDE] Hook and Thesis Statement [292 words]

I want to start this paper with an intertextual interruption, with Matthew Hawthorne's description of the child Pearl in his novel *The Scarlet Letter*, whose mother understands her as a:

'child of the border between town and forest, child of allegory and enigma, rogue piece of signification.'

Considering the delight Smith's work takes in intertextual play, and the ways in which her intertexts haunt her prose, flickering between recognition and misrecognition, it felt appropriate to open with this fragment, which speaks luminously to present concerns, when beginning this paper on two of Ali Smith's spectral child protagonists, children who slip between states of being, whose implications and significance are enigmatic and manifold and who constitute, I will argue, exactly such rogue pieces of signification.

Hawthorne's Pearl is the product of an adulterous union, relegated to the margins of society, where she nonetheless continues to exert pressure on the ways in which her community defines itself, its membership and its borders. In this paper I want to argue that the character of Florence in *Spring* and the figure of the nameless child blacksmith who populates the final movement of *Companion pieces* share significant commonalities. Indeed, there is a strong argument to be made that Florence and the Smith are doubles of each other, with Florence stating towards the end of *Spring*: 'I am from now on going to be known as Florence the Smith'.

Furthermore, I hope to demonstrate that both of these characters constitute spectral children with a distinctive approach to and ability to 'play' a term which, as I will illustrate in a moment, is put to work by Smith in knowingly multivalent ways.

Having established the ways in which these characters are rendered spectral, I move to demonstrate the powerfully disruptive 'ghost games' these children are able to partake in, reading Smith's scenes of phantom 'play' (broadly understood) as illuminating, and at points rendering ineffective the violence and exclusion frequently enacted upon national and communal borders.

Context [290]

Before we meet these spectral children though, *Spring's* Florence and *Companion Piece's* nameless blacksmith, it is helpful to map the contextual ground against which these texts were written and initially received, and the theoretical ideas which help us understand the cause and implications of their phantom status. A key context which informs both of these novels is the contemporary treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, particularly in Western Europe.

Ali Smith's literary and political interest in concepts of asylum and refugee, and the figure of the asylum seeker is long standing. One of the protagonists of her 2011 novel *There but for the* works transcribing the testimony of asylum seekers and is complimented for her ability to remove all emotion from these documents. Outside of her own writing, she is the patron of the Refugee Tales project which provides support and advocacy to those detained within the UK asylum system.

Spring's engagement with these issues is overt, featuring both a detention centre which is implied to be the much criticised Yarl's Wood and references to the UK's 'hostile environment' policy. Likewise though *Companion Piece* is overtly a lockdown novel, concerned with the domestic threshold, who can safely cross it and when, it shares *Spring's* concern with national border crossings, something which is

signalled in Martina Ingless' experience early in the text, of being punished for constituting a nationally ambiguous subject when she tries to return to England after a work trip and is revealed to be a dual national:

Is one country not enough for you? the man behind the screen said.

I'm sorry? she said.

I said, is one country not enough for ? the man said again.

She looked at his eyes above the mask. They weren't smiling.'

[SLIDE] Theory [250 words]

Three interrelated theoretical concepts help frame my discussion today. In what follows I will be using them lightly, however, they are important for understanding how Smith's spectral children articulate and attempt to subvert certain operations of state power.

The first is Foucault's concept of biopolitics, the notion that it is not merely subjects who actively threaten the stability and continuance of the state who must be disciplined, but the population itself, and that the medium through which that disciplinary system takes place is the body itself rather than through the visual and spectacular display of the state or sovereign's power to take or not to take the life of an individual.

Agamben moves this on with his concept of 'bare life'. Here he points out that the figures of power who are able to allocate themselves outside of the population, and render themselves immune to the operations of state power are mirrored in those subjects who are allocated outside of the population and therefore not protected by their status as full citizens. They are alive biologically, but do not register as politically and socially 'live'. To quote Alex Murray, this state of exception:

'it becomes possible to exclude a citizen from the city, taking away their political rights so it is no longer illegal for him to be killed. [. . .] suggesting that the modern figure of the refugee, as well as the prisoner in the concentration camp, represent the limit point of politics.' (p. 61)

Finally, Achille Mbembe's groundbreaking essay 'Necropolitics' proposes that the distribution of this status of 'bare life', is in no way arbitrary but profoundly undertaken along racial and ethnic lines: 'In the economy of biopower, the function of racism is to regulate the distribution of death and to make possible the murderous functions of the state.'

Thus it is unsurprising that the operation of biopower, the distribution of 'bare life' comes to be profoundly licit upon and around national and communal borders.

[SLIDE] Protagonists as Children [200 words]

While one could be forgiven for assuming that the status of 'child' is either one you possess or you don't, Smith's texts encourage us to recognise that occupying the place of 'child' within socio-legal contexts is by no means given or straightforward.

In *Spring* we see this precarity of a child status play out not only through the character of Florence (the 'child on the wing', whose flight from conventional childhood ways of being allows her to disrupt established systems of power and authority, but through Smith's invocation of the figure of the child with reference to the asylum system. On a number of occasions the ongoing controversy around establishing the ages of unaccompanied child asylum seekers is referenced, with detention centre worker Brittany populating the centre with children in imagination, as a comparison point for the weight of possessions each detainee was permitted within the prison estate: '25kg, same as the weight of a small child, three or four years old' (p. 131).

With reference to *Companion Piece* the extent of the smith's child status is in flux. When the reader is first introduced to her, the protagonist guesses she's perhaps sixteen years old. When she reappears in the narrative 'she is thirteen years'. This discrepancy can be read a number of ways. The first concerns the slippery chronology of Smith's novel – the character she has grown older between this moment in her life's narrative and her appearance in Sandy's (though of course, in terms of historical time over six centuries have passed). The second reading we might offer of course is that the extent to which one is understood to be a child is not a matter of fact but a matter of interpretation.

[SLIDE] Protagonists as Spectral [400 words – running at 570]

Another less than straightforward question follows, which is in what ways are we encouraged to understand these children as spectral within the logic of these novels?

To begin with *Companion Piece's* smith (whose identification by her job title alone invites an alignment with the figure of the author herself, a diminutive 'Smith')? This is a character who profoundly occupies a precarious place between social and biological death (a space sketched out in theoretical writing by Giorgio Agamben and Georges Mbembe as discussed above). Her twice orphaned status makes her vulnerable to exclusion from her community, and this violent exclusion at the hands of those who steal her inheritance from her renders her socially dead, not recognised as a subject or a member of the community to whom the usual laws and protections might apply.

This social death is underscored by Smith's depiction of the girl at various points in the narrative as on the brink of death, willed or involuntary. She comes close to death when her parents die of the plague, and after her beating and sexual assault the narrator describes the girl's mental state as follows: 'She is thinking to die.' (p. 175) She could lie here till she's what the weather will make of her one way or another one day soon enough whether she dies now or later.' (p. 176) Smith's prose represents the character as in the process of dying, her willed death certain but yet to arrive, positioned in the future tense. Likewise, the categorising of the girl by her community as a vagrant or vagabond, and her branding with a V formalises her status as socially dead, as deprived of the right to remain or even linger, to be present in a place, confined to what the character describes as 'this afterlife she did not actually need to die to find.' (p. 199)

This liminal status is compounded by the character's appearance in twenty-first century England, centuries after she should have (did?) die, a more literal ghost of a historical period ostensibly long passed but whose tensions and prejudices we see reanimated in the hyper contemporary moment of Smith's text, putting the lie to Sandy's protestation that 'this isn't history, I said. It's now.'

For *Spring's* Florence, her spectrality emerges in a way which is perhaps less overtly engaged with ideas of post-mortem existence. Instead it is generated through her doubly marginal identity as black, and a child. As she puts it: 'Sometimes I am invisible, the girl says. In certain shops or restaurants or ticket queues or supermarkets, or even places when I'm actually speaking out loud, like asking for information in a station or something. People can look right through me. Certain white people in particular can look right through young people, and also black and mixed race people like we aren't here.' (p. 192)

Establishing both of the child protagonists of these novels as involved in 'play'. [600 words]

[SLIDE] Defining Play

Strikingly though, Florence as a character reclaims a conventionally erasing experience of racial marginalisation, her flickering between visibility and invisibility reproducing a sense of play present in the notion of the play of light on water, described by the OED as indicating movement which is 'quickly

changing or intermittent; elusive change or transition.’ If this is the case, what other meanings of the word ‘play’ might be ‘at play’ in these texts?

Returning to the OED we see play defined with reference to brisk, free or unimpeded movement, free action, freedom, opportunity or room for action, ‘the proper motion of a mechanism, or part of a living body’ – to play is to be in motion, and to play is to evidence systems working as they should.

Play can also reference ‘a device of magic, a trick of conjuring.’ Play then is transformative. Finally, play is understood in its opposition to the notion of work: ‘the condition of being idle ‘as of workmen on strike, or out of employment.’

[SLIDE] Play in *Spring*

With these playful definitions of play established then, in what senses do these ghostly children engage in play in these texts? In answering that I want to look at some specific examples.

Perhaps the most striking of these in *Spring* is Florence’s game entitled ‘Lucky 13’ which she describes as follows:

‘The game is, I ask thirteen questions, then we both have to answer them. Right? The girl said. ‘What’s your favourite colour, song, food, drink, thing to wear, place, season, day of the week. What animal would you be if you were an animal. What bird. What insect. What one thing are you really good at. How would you most like to die.’ (p. 185)

Brit baulks at this last question, deeming it ‘bloody depressing’ but Florence re-frames it, stating: ‘that last question’s precisely why the word lucky’s in the title of the game.’

‘What’s lucky about having a favourite way to die? Brit said.

If you don’t know how lucky you are even to be discussing the chance of a choice, the girl said, then all I can say is, you’re really, really lucky.’ (p. 186)

[SLIDE] The structure of ‘Lucky 13’ is recalled in a different questioning ‘game’ which Florence plays with the manager of the detention centre when she reaches his office. On the slide we have some of the examples of Florence’s questions and she explains the rules to him as follows:

‘Okay, so what I plan to do is, when you can’t or don’t answer a question I ask, I won’t bother you with it again, I’ll just go on to the next question.’ (p. 203)

Play in *Companion Piece*

At first glance though the smith’s association with and deployment of play as a survival strategy and ethical tool is less apparent than that of Florence. However, her alignment with travelling players, both literally in terms of her one-off performance with them and her being allocated to the same category as them through her branding as a vagrant, demonstrates her presence within the novel to be one aligned with the potentially subversive qualities of play. This is also underscored by the way the blacksmith’s tools are at numerous points described as being akin to musical instruments which can be ‘played’. As Ann Shaklock puts it ‘when my father played the anvil he was good enough to dance to.’ (p. 188)

Play as Ethically Invested/Players as Ethical Actors

What are the implications of these moments of play then? What might the legacies of these players be? To answer that question it is vital to recognise that one of the characteristics which these two

protagonists share is that they are ethically charged beings, invested with a capacity for moral judgement by the people who encounter them. When the smith returns to her village she is received by her former community as 'a kind of risen avenging-saint child.' Florence meanwhile is described as flying like an angel, capable of willed invisibility and hypnotism.

As such, it is possible to understand the play that these spectral children engage in - indeed are capable of engaging in precisely because of their slippery spectral status - is ethically invested. We see this in Florence's observation about the 'favourite way to die' question which underscores the political significance of her game in that it forces her co-player (a detention centre guard) to engage with the realities of a subject position other than her own, the optional quality of the game standing in opposition to the removal of agency and autonomy experienced by those subject to the asylum system in the UK. While 'Lucky 13' constitutes an explicit example of the word play that Ali Smith engages in it also, importantly, reproduces the kinds of pre-authorised questions through which asylum seekers are required to make their case for asylum while underscoring their arbitrariness and basis in 'word play' - I'm thinking here particularly of Florence's request for a broad definition of torture and a narrow definition of torture - and offering an alternative - this is a questioning process which is crucially reciprocal. The questioner has to answer their own questions too.

In *Companion Pieces* this ethical investment is perhaps more subtly drawn, rooted in the way Smith forges links between the figure of the blacksmith as a kind of musician, the status of a vagabond, their 'free play' of movement over regional and communal lines and the figure of the travelling player, whose performances transgress rigid social norms and, in this case at least, incite action towards a more equal society and illuminate the unequal distribution and marginalising exercise of state power.

[quote regarding the player's song and its lyrics]

Conclusion

I wish to conclude with two vignettes, one taken from *Spring*, one from *Companion Piece*. In the first, at an exhibition of Tacita Dean's 'Fatigues' - large scale chalk drawings of the mountains of the Hindu Kush - 'one day, a small child, two or three years old, threw herself at one of the pictures and smudged its chalk.'

In the second, a mother searching for her dead child finally finds him:

It nearly kills her to see him rise up dead out of the ground.

But the child doesn't stop rising, he rises and rises into the air and floats there like a sun above everything.'

In the first, we see an act of play in the process of which seemingly untouchable/unmovable structures are changed, an attestation that the play of children or child-like play, is capable of transforming apparently impassive structures. Can, in fact, move mountains. In the second, the spectral child, recognised, individualised, known as his mother's child, is positioned as the banner under which 'everything', all that can be imagined, can and must take place. Read together, the two images speak to an understanding of the paradoxical power of the play of these child spectres has the power to change how we see the world and those who move through it, to act, as Smith argues *spring* itself does, as 'the great connective.'