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ABSTRACT

Ali Smith's allusive relationship to the literary and cultural canon is a prominent feature of her writing life. Smith's works offer a rich and diverse perspective on the magpie-like appreciation of cultural mo(ve)ments as accretive and cumulative sites of creative re/construction. But they also provide a sense of the writer as reader, thinker and re-visioner of personalised literary and cultural canons including not only books but paintings, films and music. In this essay, I explore Smith's work through what I term the "autobiocritical" – that is literary texts which serve to play with notions of identity, authorial positioning and critical approaches *via* an allusive, metafictional and theoretically informed exploration of fiction, form and self-representation. The essay focuses on Smith's *Artful* (2012) in which I suggest she engages in a complex process of homage and adaptation that is invested in the queering of the acts of reading, re-reading and critical perspective. Smith's subversive approach to the nature of critical analysis when divested of personality, character and readerly interaction presents a degree of cynicism and scepticism about the role of the aesthetic when anaesthetised from the quirks and individualities of character and of reading – that are central to Smith's aesthetic.

KEYWORDS

Ali Smith; *Artful* (2012); autobiocriticism; aesthetics; queer reading

If you want to write a memoir without writing a memoir, go ahead and call it something else. Let other people argue about it. Arguing with yourself or the dead will get you nowhere.

– Elizabeth McCracken, *The Hero of this Book* (2023)

Introduction

Ali Smith has long played with new conceptualisations of (fictional) forms, ranging from the Modernist-inflected visual experimentations on the page in a text like *Hotel World* (2001) through to the ambiguities of readerly alternatives offered by *How to Be Both* (2014). One of the areas in which Smith has shown most playfulness is in the interrelationship between literary and literary critical modes of writing. In this essay, I explore how

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Smith's text *Artful* (2012) deliberates on questions of form, auto/biography, and creative-critical intertextual engagements. In doing so, I seek to advance the case that Smith is one of the prime exponents of what I term a contemporary "autobiocritical aesthetics". Drawing yet a further distinction between the myriad terminologies on offer in critical studies of autobiographical forms may seem perverse. From autobiografiction to autotheory and autofiction, the publishing landscape of the last decade or so has seen "new" forms of writing identified by as diverse a range of authors as Karl Ove Knausgård, Rachel Cusk and Ben Lerner. So, what makes Smith distinctive, or at least part of a more precise and discernible approach in this growing and crowded area? In this article, I first set out the concept I am newly coining as *autobiocriticism*, before moving on to explore how Smith's work *Artful* specifically utilises this approach. Finally, I suggest ways in which Smith's particular employment of this technique offers a queer dimension to the autobiocritical aesthetic focused on the specific acts of reading and re-reading alongside acts of mourning and remembrance that align the work with recent interventions in the field of Queer Death Studies as well as lesbian feminist theory.

What is the autobiocritical?

Writing in her recent study *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021), Lauren Fournier outlines the ways in which "[m]ost simply, autotheory is the integration of the auto or 'self' with philosophy or theory, often in ways that are direct, performative, or self-aware—especially so in those practices that emerge with postmodernism" (Fournier, 2021, p.5). Fournier's approach offers an interesting feminist take on the development of a tradition that extends back to the early twentieth century and the work of Stephen Reynolds who identified the genre of "autobiografiction" in 1906 (Saunders, 2010). But it also seems determined to locate the focus of attention on the role of theory itself, rather than the play with biographical forms or functions in the act of writing as a creative process. In my own reading of the texts explored by Fournier and the works of other contemporary writers, I think there are more widespread and deeper articulations of what I term the *autobiocritical*, which is to say an approach to the concept of the literary text as pseudo-fictional critical encounter with the work and practice of doing literature and/or literary thinking, including both writing and reading. The autobiocritical text is one which channels knowledge of the concepts and theories of writing and reading and, at times, critical theory, but does so in a way that acknowledges its own contingency as a text located between factual and fictional spaces and uses this to generate a new place for conceptual understanding. Further, in contradistinction to other forms of "auto-" writing, the autobiocritical specifically uses the

author's academic experience to think through the place of the literary in the critical. The autobiocritical therefore has important things to say about the relationship between literature, criticism, reading and literary history, locating itself in the irresolvable inter-relational and interpenetrative dynamics of writing-reading, reading-critiquing. This offers a potential alignment to a definition of lesbian aesthetics *pace* Terry Castle that is "a practice of reading and writing saturated with fantasies at once libidinal and political" and which has "ceased exclusively to signify an ontology" and instead "names a methodology, an erotically inflected practice of aesthetic judgement, selection and assessment" (Tongson, 2005, p.283). Importantly, it also allows for a consideration of the queering of autobiocritical perspectives, which are especially pertinent to Smith's work in *Artful*, specifically in relation to notions of mourning and melancholia as constitutive queer experiences.

Although there have been recent critical interventions that have explored the critical aspects of this dynamic in Smith's work, most specifically Elizabeth Anker's attentive and persuasive reading of the complexities of the post-critical dynamic in *How to be Both*, I think insufficient attention has been paid to Smith's earlier text *Artful* as the most overt challenge to understandings of the acts of critical interpretation and the acts of creative expression as separate modes. Instead, *Artful* offers in a single multi-formed text Smith's most sustained take on the interleaving of creative-critical dynamics as forms of meaning-making. In *Artful*, we are pushed to think harder about the connection between audience, readership and writing as a triumvirate of divergent creative and critical perspectives, with which Smith does more than play, and instead see how she positions creative-critical thinking as a key mode of understanding the role, place, and functions of literature and criticism in the present moment.

***Artful* as autobiocritical aesthetics**

Artful offers no neat conceptualisation of its form or genre. As Cara L. Lewis summarises "[p]art memoir, part fiction, part literary criticism, *Artful* is built around an unnamed protagonist reading a dead partner's lecture series." (Lewis, 2019, p.130). Highlighting that "the book is very much structured around the mourning process of a fictional character, thereby deconstructing the firm boundary between scholarly, academic work and the world of fiction", Lewis goes on to suggest that "[i]nterestingly and importantly, the reader is left in the dark about the degree of fictionality of the book" (Lewis, 2019, p.139). But why should the generic status of the text matter so much? Why is it both "interesting" and "important" that the "degree of fictionality" is unresolved? Why should a reader care about such play, or is it that a specific type of *the* reader (i.e., a critical one) is positioned as of prime concern in studies of the book?

Artful is a series of lectures; an almost diaristic structured account of acts of mourning; a ghost story; a mystery; a piece of literary criticism; and a satire of academic life and academic work as a form of constructive identity. Fundamentally, Smith's challenge to the reader is to argue that *Artful* is all these things and none of them at the same time; it is a text made up, composite in its nature, and alert to its own uses and subversions of form itself. This is where autobiocritical aesthetics comes into play. Smith's book is a readerly and critical work: it is an account of first person meaning-making at a time of personal crisis delivered partly *via* the form of a series of lectures that must be consciously reconstructed by both the narrator-protagonist and the reader. As a demonstration of the kinds of intertextuality, allusion, mimicry, and literary joking that Smith has made her hallmark it is unsurpassed. Importantly, though, *Artful* it is also grounded in a discourse about (re)reading as a form of identity-making which prioritises language, image, and the cultural encounter to mark out shared and contentious reading spaces. These reading spaces become the foundation point for the creation of a new form of identity, the "third" space in which reader-writer meet and forge a new sense of interpretative, creative and critical possibility.

From the title's pun on *Oliver Twist*'s thieving friend through to the recounting of the act of queerly reading Dickens's novel throughout the text, Smith provides multiple encounters for the unnamed narrator with both familiar and new readings. The lectures which inform the narrator's awareness of the thoughts of the dead academic lover are themselves reconstituted readings by that cultural critical voice. The critical not only serves as a form of the experimental genres at play but also as a means of opening up identity to its plural possibilities, while the assimilation of the academic reader—as lover of but also other to the narrator's viewpoint—within the text offers a destabilisation of the reading experience. The text is therefore framed by the narrator's account of the process of mourning as one in which one needs to relearn and re-read what it means for the lover to be absent and lost as a physical presence but to remain intellectually and spectrally present. The delightful twist (pun intended) to the last phase of the text as it transpires that the dead academic has been aware of and writing for the still living reader-narrator throughout, offers a further sense in which the critical is life-affirming rather than deadening, and (re)productive rather than parasitical on the artworks under consideration. When the academic lecture becomes personalised at that point - "Hello my darling, how are you? I hope you are very well, are you?" (p.172) - the conversation between living and the dead achieves a "working artifice" (p.169) grounded in coincidence and generosity, as well as offering a subversion of how "academic" rather than personal the previous lecture notes have actually been.

This is not to suggest, however, that the text's "autobio-" elements have to be firmly located in reality or serve as an indicator of a self-confessional understanding of the memoir as form. Indeed, although there are readings that suggest the narrative and the textual reference points are meant to be associated directly with Smith's own (reading) life story, I think this overlooks the nature of the "artful" suggestiveness of the title and its prime literary reference point. While the book is autobiocritical, then, it is so in the sense that it is the supposed first-person account of a series of acts of mourning by someone reconstructing their dead academic lover through criticism as an expression of the self. Several critics, for example, have come to focus on Smith's use of epigraphs in her works as a form of signifier—placing the emphasis on the idea that these are somehow personalised features of Smith's reading life that offer clues to the interpretation of the fictions, with Lewis arguing that "Smith's oeuvre... evinces *her own reading practice and preferences*—in the multiple epigraphs that begin each novel or story collection" (Lewis, 2019, p.129; emphasis added). Evidently, they are texts that Smith has read given they are epigraphs to her works, but this is to position the fictional and biographical narrative framework as a fused identity. It both denies Smith a creative, shaping authority for how the text should be read and suggests that the literary citations themselves serve to sever the relationship between fact and fiction: if a creative writer uses literary voices within or as paratexts to a fictional work, why do we default to seeing this as the authentic or "real" author speaking?

In *Artful*—which is noticeably without epigraphs—the text, as befits the hybrid lecture-novel format, is infused with literary allusion through word-play, direct quotation of full or unaltered texts, and also the montage effect demonstrated in the poems which are composite forms created by lines from various sources. Importantly, these texts are not used as assertions of direction to decode the fictional narrative itself; indeed, so interwoven are the textual allusions within the book that they offer contradictory stances to the reader in the same way as they provide a site of interpretative tension for the protagonist. Smith defies the proposition that these source texts—quotations scattered but also woven into the story—are there to serve any solidifying purpose or provide directionality to the characters or their interpretation by the reader. And the reader here can be perceived at different levels—the reader who does and does not have a "clue" to the specificities and intentions of the form itself. This is a repeated stance in Smith's work, which seeks to question the validity of singular acts of meaning-making in favour of a more open awareness of diversity, divergence and multiplex potentialities.

Exploring Smith's *How to be Both*, Elizabeth Anker suggests that "an instinct for autocriticism", specifically "the stakes of "how we read"" (Anker,

2017, p.17) has been a focus of recent fiction and theory. Reading Smith's 2014 novel as "a rejoinder to academic debates", Anker views the book as staging "a type of unlearning; a forgetting of the habits of reading academic criticism inculcates" (Anker, 2017, p.20). Smith's novel, Anker argues, offers a sustained commentary through "circuitous reflections" and "meta-theorization (rather than metafiction)" on "the function of criticism... ponder[ing] the repercussions of one method of analysis versus another" (Anker, 2017, p.26). We see this in the positioning of the critical as having some form of precedence in the reading process; as Anker puts it, "[h]aving assimilated the teachings of theory, the contemporary novel can itself function as a tutorial in those goals" (Anker, 2017, p.27). Yet who is seen as the participant in such a tutorial? Smith's autobiocritical texts are involved in an aesthetic exploration of form, of boundary and genre pushing as a means of artistic development, and this gets rather reduced in a formulation which sees the primary audience for the work as being those in the critical business. (Calder makes a similar point in stating "*Artful* self-consciously engages with debates about literary theory" (Calder, 2022, p.4) placing literary theory at the centre of the meaning.)

While I do not disagree with Anker's viewpoint on *How to be Both*, *Artful* had already pre-empted many of these issues and employs some of the same devices; acts such as providing "something of an auto-commentary on the novel's own structure" (Anker, 2017, p.21), are present in *Artful* to dislocate genre conventions and offer a more playful dynamic on the situation of the text's status. Lewis, like Anker, sees *How to be Both* as "afford[ing] an invigorating vision of the contemporary novel's lessons for contemporary literary criticism." (Lewis, 2019, p.134) and working as a "a postcritical gesture that deflates the rhetoric of academic interpretation" (Lewis, 2019, p.138). However, I would suggest that we view Smith's intentions less in the nature of critique and more in terms of constructive commentary, or even an attempt to redeem the creative modes of criticism that are possible and available to us. In *Artful*, far from suggesting that the "performance" of critical work is "accompanied by palpable fatigue" (Anker, 2017, p.27), Smith offers a framework through which to read the critical act as itself a creative one, invested in concepts, allusive and elusive acts of meaning-making, and subject to a form of personalisation that works at the level of understanding the individual reader rather than all-encompassing theory. It is accurate, then, as Anker states, to see Smith's perspective as one that is critical of the overarching or dominant theory of much critical work, but as a counter to that there is an embracing of the potentialities of the creative within that critical space. Thus, rather than view Smith's text as a comment on the internalisation of critical theory through the generation of creative writing programmes (Anker, 2017, pp.26-27), one might feel more empathy with

Fiona Doloughan's comment that there are positives to "Smith's ability to borrow from other texts" (Doloughan, 2010, p.244) as part of a concern with creative writing practice offering "models of creativity and a focus on the possible relationship between (re)-reading and (re)-writing." (Doloughan, 2010, p.242).

Smith's work can be critically viewed as overly invested in the issue of binaries or dualities: there is the creative vs the critical, there are "double meanings", there are divergences between fictional and factual, there is the voice of Smith as reader/author which has to be de-fictionalised from the characters and their capacities as readers/writers within the work. As Anker phrases it

How to Be Both... answers the problems of dualism raised in its title by cultivating an experientially charged materiality that also shapes the act of reading. This rejuvenation of the reading experience naturally contains a diagnosis of where things went wrong: namely, Smith depicts academic and theory-based interpretation as beholden to a paranoid logic of double meanings that stifles and discounts crucial vectors of lived engagement (Anker, 2017, p.33).

But rather than view such "dualisms" as fragmenting or disabusing the critical as a perspective, Smith's earlier text *Artful* offers a more aesthetic reasoning around the movement between creative and critical, not oppositional in presentation or intent, but more fluently connecting the modes. More so than *How to be Both*, *Artful* offers a positive presentation of the challenge Anker and others see in Smith's work, particularly in the *how*—and not just the *why*—it "“challenges the ways regimes of interpretation quarantine literary genres to sterilize our methods of explaining artistic engagement” (Anker, 2017, p.35). In distinction to Anker's perception that Smith's stance towards the critical is that it is part of “an academic sanitization of the literary” (Anker, 2017, p.35), *Artful*, we should remember, is about a mourning and loss of the figure of the academic-critic within the text. The resurrection of that dead figure is a process of exorcism that can only be achieved through reading their ideas through their critical framework. In this respect, Smith's *Artful* is aligned to what has more recently been identified as a distinctive element of Queer Death Studies (QDS). As the editors of a special issue of *Australian Feminist Studies* argue, “QDS constitutes a transdisciplinary field of research that critically, (self-)reflexively and affirmatively investigates and challenges the conventional normativities, assumptions, expectations and regimes of truths that are brought to life and made evident by death, dying and mourning” (Radomska et al., 2020, p.88). For those working in QDS and specifically for those creative interactions concerned with lesbian and queered others within mainstream discourse, the deliberate troubling of chronological models of time, grief and mourning represents a challenge to dominant understandings of the function of time passing. This is what Izzie Atkinson

reflects on as the “complex and individualised experience[s] of queerness [that] makes chrononormativity and queer time core concepts with complicated definitions” (Atkinson, 2024, p.79). in literary terms, such as Smith’s text, the utilisation of non-standard forms—the lecture which is delivered by someone discovering a series of incomplete lectures by a dead lover on literary texts—as the framework for a quasi-fictional, quasi-autobiocritical text, serves to disrupt notions of not only form but also chronology and narrative construction.

That the academic form is a sceptical place to be in contemporary writers’ works is also part of the dynamic here. Writing about contemporary responses to moments of cultural fragmentation, Richard T. Kelly makes an aside that “(A college lecturer is a mask that novelists find simple to put on, simpler than that of a brain surgeon, say, or a rodeo rider; it’s a voice they can easily ventriloquise.)” (Kelly, 2018, p.78) Kelly’s parenthetical comment points to how knowing contemporary writers are about how this will be read by the lit-crit sphere. Smith, like many other writers, comes from a background which includes degree-level study in the humanities, and in Smith’s case includes a stint as a lecturer in literary studies at the University of Strathclyde. This means to read, critically, against a lens of theory is bound to offer results given Smith not only studied English but also taught it. Therefore, the telling teasing out of potential critical perspectives and themes in her writing does not really wash in the same way as it might. The hermeneutics of suspicion has already been pre-empted in the work itself and in *Artful* this is especially the case.

It is almost too easy to take Smith’s approach as a critique of critique. It seems more suggestive to me that Smith’s positioning of the act of re-reading is a snub to academic lit-crit rather than overly concerned with its failing status to account for the complexities of contemporary cultural, social, and political experience. In *Artful*, the act of mourning is located in the death of the critic, but this does not result in the death of nuanced and personalised critical interpretation, in fact quite the reverse given the lectures turn into a kind of love letter to the mourning narrator. While the academic in the text may claim that they are not good at argument but only the gathering and curating of texts, the primacy of that role of (re)discovery, (re)reading, and (re)curating is undoubtedly valued both by the narrator and the form itself. This is where the lecture format, serving as a distillation and filtering system for the full range of allusions, signifiers and connections not made as well as those that are surfaced most explicitly, holds a particular purpose in navigating the potential reference points available.

Instead, then, I want to suggest that Smith’s concern is less with the oppositionality of these interpretative framings than their potential organic proliferation. Smith’s *Artful* seems to assert that one of the dodges is to

be multiple things at once in order to channel that capacity to create something new, as represented by the “third”, which is neither “both” nor one thing or the other. Indeed, the third, for Smith, offers a liminality of space at the same time as a quantum of possibilities for how it might be occupied. It is a reading space, or rather it is a space of multiple readings and forms of knowingness that are grounded in a plurality of autobiocritical positions, and therefore aligned to a lesbian aesthetics that eroticises the act of reading and judgement. The (critical) writing life in *Artful* is also a creative reading life in which the practice of deeper understanding comes from familiarity with the texts born of re-reading. Smith’s manifesto on this point is contained within the plea for re-engagement and potentially re-enchantment with the complexities of texts:

We do treat books surprisingly lightly in contemporary culture. We’d never expect to understand a piece of music on one listen, but we tend to believe we’ve read a book after reading it just once. Books need time to dawn on us, it takes time to understand what makes them, structurally, in thematic resonance, in afterthought, and always in correspondence with the books which came before them, because books are produced by books more than by writers; they’re a result of all the books which went before them. Great books are adaptable; they alter with us as we alter in life, they renew themselves as we change and re-read them at different times in our lives. You can’t step into the same story twice – or maybe it’s that stories, books, art can’t step into the same person twice (Smith, 2013, p. 31)

Artful serves as a kind of mournful Eliotian Waste Land between prose and poetry, fiction and narrative essay, in ways that are firmly located in the “adaptable” and changing nature of the literary text. It is this malleability and mutability which might provide the locus of Smith’s scepticism towards hard critical perspectives versus more agile contingent readings.

Queering the autobiocritical

In what ways, then, does Smith “queer” this account of the autobiocritical in *Artful*? The reading practices outlined in *Artful* are frequently moments of re-reading not only for the protagonist but also for us as readers. as noted earlier, one of the ways in which such readerly acts are identified is through the use of quotation and the epigraph. Dougal McNeill suggests Smith’s use of literary allusion through the extensive inclusion of epigraphs in her works is a means to slow down the act of reading itself as part of an “ethical and imaginative” demand (McNeill, 2019, p.358), which raises a series of questions: “What might it mean to give a book the time it demands from its readers? How might a reader know when they are ready to give over the time demanded by the book? What sort of critical possibilities present themselves to the lingerer, the dawdler, the perambulator through the house of fiction?” (McNeill, 2019, p.357)

Re-reading is what the contemporary novelist and academic Patricia Duncker terms “the richest and strangest form of reading” (Duncker 2013), partly because it offers both a refamiliarization and a defamiliarization process. The re-reader is engaged in an act of present-moment re-enactment with the text and their earlier self as reader and assimilator of that text. The confrontation, then, is about how that earlier knowledge becomes filtered through an accumulation of experience, new meanings, and incorrect memorialisations of what that text previously “meant” and what it means now; but it also about reclaiming canonical texts for alternative uses. This is articulated in Smith’s text as the “third”. The third space has its own established theoretical framework including as part of feminist and queer studies approaches to culture and literature. But in *Artful* the textual creation of a third, or alternative, space serves as the fertile ground of literary knowledge and re-formation. The use of Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* as the central and locational text for acts of re-reading is particularly suggestive here. As Holly Furneaux notes, the kinds of elective familial relationships the Victorian novelist proposed in fictions like *Oliver Twist* were frequently seen as part of Dickens’s marginalisation of “opposite-sex romance in his delineations of family formulation” (Furneaux, 2009, p.45). The sex of the narrator is unknown in *Artful*, and the gender dynamics of the relationship between narrator and academic in the text is therefore elided. This makes the textual interactions more intriguing to create alternative emotive identities, sharing spaces and texts as a part of the relational exchange,

The third space also offers a queering of the dynamic between academic knowledge and the knowledge of the physicality of books. Smith’s perspective on the organic nature of the literary environment is worth emphasising here, especially in relation to the layering of different narrative strands, the interrelation of texts and the presentation in *Artful* of a narrative that draws strength and sustenance from the ecosystem of literature. In an interview on the short story as a form, Smith commented that “Books and trees are the same thing...I think books are all interrelated. Stories are all interrelated to other stories, to other books. Books produce books, trees produce trees. Books and trees in some way produce each other and are related in their very form, in the way they are made.” (Smith & Brody, 2010, p.71). In this context, it is important to note that the narrator of *Artful* declares “My own job was trees” (Smith, 2013, p.41). The concern with the book as organic object—part of a natural fabric as well as a collective transmission of forms of identity, understanding and experience—is relevant to Smith’s textual approach of appropriation and re-reading. This is where Calder’s assertion of a “deliberate artifice...[with] an ethical dimension” (Calder, 2022, p.6) and the slowing down of the reading process (McNeill, 2019, pp.357-58) come together. Here, too, we might reflect on the sense in which Smith’s text engages with notions of Queer

Death Studies, particularly the challenges of linearity and coherence, assembly and “assemblages”: as Radomska, Mehrabi and Lykke frame it, in a

material-discursive relational approach to death...death [is not] a fixed moment that marks the end of life, bounded to a human subject (a white, able-bodied, heterosexual man) whose life is imagined within a linear temporality marked and defined by birth, reproduction and death. Rather, death becomes meaningful in terms of assemblages and interactions. Death is materialised and becomes meaningful at a particular time, in a particular place and in relation to other processes (Radomska et al., 2020, p.90)

The meaningfulness referenced here speaks to the *Artfulness* of Smith's text, which is constructed in a way that emphasises the specificity of discovery and assembly as it draws on a series of different forms, narratives and modes of interpretation and analysis. To pick up all the quotations and allusions in line with the narrative would be to pause frequently and rekindle an engagement with those other texts. The narrative demonstrates this at various points both through the quasi-crypticism of fused quotations (which academic reader reading the academic here could resist trying to trace or annotate those fragmented lines?) and the pace of reading itself. At the start of the novel, Smith's narrator re-encounters the opening pages of *Oliver Twist* by underlining the nature of ownership and possession of the tangible text and the location of interpretation and critical knowledge:

I went and stood in our study and looked at your desk, where the unfinished stuff, what you'd been working on last, was still neatly piled. I looked at your books, I took one of your books off the shelf at random – *my* study, *my* desk, *my* books, now.

The book I took down today happened actually to have been one of mine originally. It was a Dickens novel, *Oliver Twist*, the old Penguin edition I'd had at university (emphasis in original; Smith, p.3)

“I”, “our”, “your”, “my”, “mine”: the passage configures a movement around identity which is located *via* the text and also the critical apparatus for its interpretation. The use of possessives underlines a sense of the narrative's moderation of ownership and, indeed, the slipperiness or artfulness of authorship and authenticity around the texts included as reference points throughout *Artful*. The “unfinished stuff” both signifies the “unfinished” nature of the relationship, which is in effect what the process of mourning enacts, and the “unfinished” nature of the critical act itself; here, the narrator references back to having read *Oliver Twist* thirty years previously in the same edition but when it was a different book. Re-reading the opening section of Dickens's novel from an alternative perspective indebted to a form of lesbian aesthetics assumes a different kind of perspective, not of ownership but a questioning curiosity, even mystery about the act of interpretation: “First, why wouldn't Dickens name the town this was happening in?” (p.7) This then spins out to an act of re-reading as a particular

form of close critical reading: “Then this phrase”, “Then: this world of sorrow” (p.8). The empathetic element of this process, however, removes it from the critical domain into something more felt, more emotive and the more human: “When I read those words I felt again the weight of my own sorrow, the world I carried on my own back; and at exactly the same time the fact that someone somewhere sometime else had thought of the world as a world of sorrow too made the weight on my own back feel a bit better.” (p.8) The shared community of writer-reader here is about both the distinctiveness of the individual human experience (grief/mourning) which is personalised and unique working within a common language for that experience which emphasise the unsolitariness of the reader. This is also where the narrative’s perspectives on time come to the fore as Smith merges and fuses present and past into a usefulness or purposefulness grounded in time. This is a lesbian aesthetics which destabilises heteronormative notions of the lived, the spectral and the temporal. The narrator confuses the dead lover’s spoken presence as a question about the time until ““I realised that I’d misheard you and what you’d actually said was: *what is it, again, time?*” (p.11). The spectral is divorced from the temporal but this permits a focus in on what constitutes narrative and lived time for the reader and the narrator as something useable/limited: “As long as I’ve got you here, we’re going to use and appreciate this present moment. Because I wish, and I’ve wished a thousand times since you went, that we’d known it was the present, and that we were living in it.” (p.13) As noted above, such an insistence on present/presence and the moment as an act of memorialisation, ties Smith’s text into a discourse of lesbian aesthetics and queer realignment of temporality.

In the context of the discussion about time and the need to be consciously aware of being within the present, the narrator’s return to older texts and the academic’s own writing about a blurred sense of chronology which can be trumped by emotionality and knowledge out of time, offers a much more organic and natural notion of influence, momentariness, contingency and knowledge. In the structure of the academic’s lectures for instance there is a cultural wordplay which fuses frames of understanding such as in the titles “You Must Remember This: why we have time and why time has us” (pp.18-22). In this first encounter with the academic’s voice, what we see is an erosion of the literary and cultural chronology into a single present as part of the sheer joy exhibited through the creative-critical act:

Michelangelo lived to be nearly three times as old as Mansfield, who shared his knowledge, like Damien Hirst does, like all artists do, that regardless of how precious the stones stuck all over it are, it’s a skull – and regardless of whether it’s the 1520s in the sun in Florence or the first decade of the twenty-first century in an aesthetically reproduced Scandinavian sunrise in a London art gallery, you must remember this, as time goes by, the fundamental things apply. (p.22)

Given the text encloses a series of interconnected lectures which provide the narrator's reading spine throughout the book, it is also "fundamental" that we see how the form and content function at an aesthetic level. Indeed, the lecture "Putting the For in Form" (pp.64-74) restates the purposefulness at the core of *Artful*: Form, from the Latin *forma*, meaning shape. Shape, a mould; something that holds or shapes; a species or kind; a pattern or type; a way of being; order, regularity, system. It once meant beauty but now that particular meaning's obsolete." (p.65) The comment that form "once meant beauty" connects the obsolete or older meaning to the present time of the novel, for this is about an aesthetics of the self in that more traditional sense of orderliness or shaping. This thought is continued later in the same lecture in terms of the interrelationships involved:

There'll always be a dialogue, an argument, between aesthetic form and reality, between form and its content, between seminality, art, fruitfulness and life. There'll always be a seminal argument between forms – that's how forms produce themselves, out of a meeting of opposites, of different things; out of form encouraging form. Put two poems together and they'll make a third (p.69)

"[T]hat's how forms produce themselves" suggests the means through which *Artful* also offers a history of the hidden and surreptitious sites of commonality, community and connection within a more queered reading of literary history. The use of a reproductive motif – "fruitfulness and life", "produce themselves", "out of" and the "make a third" – to describe the process of destabilising genre, writing within, against, across, under, below and over other texts, offers a further edge. From the outset, the intermingling of texts has been at the core of what constitutes an intimate relationship. The moment at which the Austen text for bodily inscription is identified offers the aside that these are the academic's "bookshelves (this is before we're living together, before we do the most faithful act of all, mix our separate books into one library)" (p.16). The "separate books", like the "two poems", are mixed to create a new, third "one library". This third identity, however, is also not fixed, which is another reason why some of the binaries and dualities identified by Acker and others in Smith's works do not really apply in *Artful*. Instead, the attraction to Dickens's character offers a signal towards the multiplicity of options and possibilities in how that third is constituted. As the narrator writes back into the unfinished lecture "On Form" about their own reading of Dickens's novel, specifically about the first meeting between Oliver the Artful Dodger (pp.89-92), they comment: "I liked how when he meets 'the Artful', the book really comes alive, almost because he begins to understand about colourful language, and I liked how Dickens called the Dodger all his names, the Artful, the Dodger, the Artful Dodger, Jack Dawkins, Mr John Dawkins, like he was a work of shifting possibility." (p.91) For the nameless

narrator, engaged in tracing the ideas and attempting to re-animate the thoughts of her nameless academic lover's identity, to focus here on the multiplicity of nomenclature offered by Dickens for his most "artful" trickster figure, is to recognise how Smith underlines the slipperiness of meaning itself and the futility of calling (out) the one thing as if it is always immutably the same thing. It is a plea for difference and unfixedness.

The sense of inconclusiveness forms an important part of the text, too. As the lecture materials begin to run down, and the narrator realises that they are both the audience and the recipient of the lecture-as-love-letter, a final fragmentation takes place at the level of an individual word: "Here's to the place where reality and the imagination meet, whose exchange, whose dialogue, allows us not just to imagine an unreal different world but also a real different world—to match reality with possibili-" (p.188). Smith's missing word-end here is "ties", punningly suggestive of the way that possibilities are, literally, endless but also the sense that through the working out of the lectures, through the resurrection of the critical voice and reader in the text in the form of the dead lover, there has also been a cutting away of the "ties" to the dead. The book began with an incantation that after twelve months and a day mourning comes to an end, but in the text the "end" of things is an unfinished, unresolved and therefore open-to-interpretation conclusion.

Smith's *Artful* explicitly inhabits the language of the queer aesthetic through the inclusion of the lecture-as-form, so that extracts alluding to "where aesthetic form meets the human mind" (p.73), or the fact that "[i]n the aesthetic act something comes to life" (p.83), offer alternative meaning-making moments. A similar reflectiveness ("[a]t one level reflection means we see ourselves. At another, it's another word for the thought process" (p.186)) is offered by the narrator's and academic's perspectives on forms of writing: "The difference between the short story form and the novel form is to do, not with length, but with time ... The novel ... is bound to and helplessly interested in society and social hierarchy, social worlds; and society is always attached to, in debt to, made by and revealed by the trappings of its time" (p.29). As a comment on whether *Artful* is a novel or something else, the phrasing here is ambiguous. Is *Artful* concerned with "society and social hierarchy, social worlds" or is it a short story interleaved with extracts from a series of lectures? If we take it to be novel—something new—then at some level it is also bound to that comment about the genre, that it is about "social worlds". This may be where the implicit social commentary on forms of relationship and identity including queerness come forward. It is in the space of the texts—pluralised, generically unstable—that the narrator reads their relationship with the academic: "Because when I think about what it was like to live with you, it was like all these things.

It was like living in a poem or a picture, a story, a piece of music, when I think of it now.” (p.50) Writing backwards into a queerer version of the canon offers new possibilities to the narrative frame.

There are absurdities to this process, too, specifically where the act of writing or handwriting comes into play as text gets distorted and queered as part of the third. While the narrator is reading a lecture text, an awkward to decipher phrase is seen: “The next page, which was the last page of *On Form*, had a scrawl on it, difficult to read. Did that say *Italic*? *Italian*? *Cumin*? *Italian Cumin* says near the end of his book *Six Memos*” (p.85) The subversion of misrepresentation here offers a playful example of the randomness and unattributableness of the sources of ideas as they circulate through readers’ minds; indeed, “*Italian Cumin*” becomes a kind of third space author within this handwritten confusion, neither valid nor invalid as a critical or readerly citation. Elsewhere, there is a direct instance of textual writing on the body, when the narrator offers to have a tattoo of a quotation selected by the academic. Seemingly randomly selected from Jane Austen’s work, the extract is as much about words as intermingling, of friendships that develop into other forms of relationship. In the act of inking, indelibly associating the skin with the tableau of the writing space, the narrative here also brings to the fore the association with a kind of authenticity in the words that touch and can be touched; felt text as symbolic of the association between meaning-making and the bodily site of interpretation. Handwriting matters for Smith and *Artful* comes complete with visual illustrations from Austen and Dickensian manuscript materials. For a writer so frequently referenced as engaged in a resurrection of modernist impulses in contemporary writing, Smith is also deeply alert to the fecundity of a return to the realist narrative forms of the nineteenth century which is placed as inescapably present as the tattoo itself. But it is also something to be written out in terms of moved away from, critically invoked and creatively displaced at the same time.

As noted earlier, however, in the added twist that the lectures as forms are far from separate to the relationship between the lover and academic, Smith subverts a Gothicised or supernatural space of haunting into one which serves as more fertile and evolving in its nature. This too is pre-empted by the critical text itself in its allusion to Shakespearean form-fusing, Dickensian form and the nature of artifice:

The resolving force of coincidence, the generosity in the workings of Dickens’s plots, comes straight down the line from Shakespeare’s comedies...[the] most powerful forms of magic and coincidence in his late plays.... [P]lays that fuse category to defy category, where tragedy and comedy coexist, fight it out, resolve in forms of uncanny rebirth, findings of those who were lost and restorings of the dead to life, usually via a display of working artifice (p.169)

The indebtedness of the content of *Artful* to other forms, other writers, other texts, is founded on the tricksterism and queering of expectations that come not only from the reading process but specifically a critically informed re-reading process that fuses creative-critical boundaries into an alternative, third space of exploration. The autobiocritical is a framing of this as life-through-books, identity-through-re-reading.

Conclusion

This essay's focus on Smith's *Artful* as a prime example of the autobiocritical at work in contemporary writing has suggested ways in which the text opens up forms of creative and critical reading as a means to explore fragmented identities that are bolstered but never completely reassured by the act of re-reading nor of criticism itself. Smith's hybrid text offers an intervention into both critical and creative acts of writing and reading and in so doing suggests the development of a different form of readerly reconciliation: textual meanings and the uses to which they can be put are fluid and imprecise, specifically at moments of crisis for the narrator. The structuring of the text around fragments of unfinished critical lectures offers a corrective to the idea that knowledge or expertise of the academic reader is somehow more compelling or convincing in the process. There is of course something ironic here that Smith's texts like *Artful* offer themselves as objects for precisely the kind of metacritical discussion that we interpret them as refuting. However, the critical as a category is destabilised partly through an enhancement to its subjectivity; a reflection, from Smith, on the need to offer reading and academic perspective the space to be individualised as the biographical and critical assert their unified claims to value.

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