

Border Anxieties and The Politics of BrexLit

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This article discusses a recent genre of BrexLit – literary works that have anticipated or directly responded to the Brexit referendum in 2016 – and its contribution to the cartography of political writing in Europe. The events preceding and following the Brexit vote witnessed a flourishing cultural and literary activity. What is now discussed under the category of ‘BrexLit’ encompasses a growing thematic and generic richness – state-of-the-nation novels, crime and thrillers, dystopian narratives, poetry, drama and essays. Focusing on a selection of Brexit poetry that have so far not received much critical attention, and novels and non-fiction that have tended to identify with the Remain position, I explore how these texts capture the zeitgeist of Brexit. I look at the ways in which they contest the politics of borders and expose the desire to take back control of national sovereignty as being deeply rooted in Britain’s unresolved post-imperial fantasies. I analyse the anxieties surrounding post-2004 EU migration and the tensions between the discourses of Euroscepticism and Europhilia, placing these works in the context of wider and unresolved debates about the nation’s imperial legacy. I conclude by offering my own contribution to the genre with a poem entitled ‘Communist Balcony’ that unsettles the politics of borders through an oppositional discourse centring the ‘Eastern European’ migrant experience.



Introduction

Literary responses to the events preceding and following the referendum have recently been discussed under the catchy coinage of ‘BrexLit’. In his 2018 essay for the edited collection *Brexit and Literature*, Kristian Shaw uses the term to describe literary works that directly respond ‘to Britain’s exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitan consequences of Britain’s withdrawal’. He also notes the limitations of the term BrexLit to refer only to a new body of texts and develops it into a more flexible category that encapsulates a longer tradition in post-war British writing – works that anticipate Brexit through ‘the thematic concerns such as anxieties surrounding cultural infiltration, and a mourning for the imperial past’ (Shaw, 2018: 18). For Shaw, Brexit is just one culmination of the long-standing crises that Britain was unable to resolve since the loss of its Empire – its diminishing status on the global stage, its deep-seated regional, class and racial divisions, deindustrialisation and impoverishment, and long-standing hostility towards immigrants, refugees and racialised citizens.¹ In a similar vein, Sobolewska and Ford note that Brexit is a product of several decades of social and political changes, including the ‘legacies of Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher [...] and the long-term consequences of liberal immigration policies introduced by the first two New Labour governments’ (2020: 1). Among recent scholarship on BrexLit, there is a critical consensus that political and literary Euroscepticism has a much longer history worth tracing to explain the ostensibly seismic rupture of 2016. Some earlier literary responses to the fall of the Berlin Wall, post-communist transition, the Yugoslav civil wars, and EU expansion (Ian McEwan’s *Black Dogs*, Mike Phillips’ *A Shadow of Myself*, Julian Barnes’ *The Porcupine*, Will Self’s short story ‘Europe’) already sowed the seeds of concern about what the political shifts on the continent might mean culturally for Britain and its sense of exceptionalism. Arguably, some writers who now passionately argue for Britain’s deeply embedded cultural ties with Europe have formerly been quite concerned about those very ties. In May 2019, for instance, Julian Barnes criticised Britain’s ‘deluded, masochistic departure from the European Union’ and the English ‘prid[ing] themselves too smugly on being insular, on being incurious about “the other”, preferring the easy joke and the idle slander’ (2019: 258). Indeed, it would be interesting to read his 1998 novel *England, England* in which ‘Britain [is] thrown out of the EU, having been so troublesome, negotiating with such obstinate irrationality, that it is eventually paid to leave’ (*The Guardian*: 2019) in dialogue with his critique of Euroscepticism in *The Man in the Red Coat* (2019).

¹ See Shaw, K. (2021) *BrexLit: British Literature and the European Project*. London: Bloomsbury Academic and Koegler, C, Malreddy, P.K and Tronicke, M (eds.) 2021 *Writing Brexit: Colonial Remains*. London: Routledge.

Iterations of ‘Euroscepticism’ and ‘Europhilia’ in Britain have had a long history and have almost always co-existed. Noting this complex legacy out of which BrexLit emerges even before the referendum, this article concentrates on the literary responses which frame and unpack Brexit as a symptom of post-imperialist nostalgia, racism and a fundamental ignorance of the legacy of empire and its afterlives in the present. Danny Dorling’s work on the political geography and demography of Brexit has highlighted that the Leave vote was won in in the south of England, including London, and was largely a middle-class, white vote (2020). Sara Hobolt’s work on the effects of age and education also paints a more complex picture of the voting patterns not only in terms of geography and class but also along education and generational lines, noting how ‘the “winners” of globalization – the young, well-educated professionals in urban centres – favour more open borders, immigration and international cooperation whereas the “left behind” – the working class, less educated, and the older – oppose such openness’ (2016: 10). I explore how BrexLit effectively contests and unsettles the politics of borders which remains a constant topic of political conflict, public debate and media attention in Britain even years after the referendum and with the new Labour government.² As Leah Cowan notes, the development of Britain as a border nation relies on positioning migrants as ‘outsiders’ and ‘much campaigning and commentary around Brexit has played on the concepts of sovereignty’ (2021: 15, 23) and the need to take back control of our borders, in this case from the EU. In his analysis of Britain’s ‘postimperial melancholia’ that Cowan builds upon, Paul Gilroy notes the ahistorical and amnesiac nature of such conceptions of sovereignty by pointing out that ‘even if today’s unwanted incomers – from Brazil or Eastern Europe – are not actually postcolonials, they may still carry all the ambivalence of the vanished empire with them’ (2004). While the racialisation of ‘immigrant’ was expanded in (pre-)Brexit debates around Eastern European migration, we should also not forget that non-white immigrants were often still presented as the ultimate threat, as Shilliam remind us citing Nigel Farage’s remark that ‘behind every Pole was a Muslim and/or African waiting to invade the heartlands’ (2018: 163). The examples of BrexLit analysed here illustrate the spirit of the times during the nation’s crisis as a reflection of predominantly leftist voices and perhaps offer only one half of the story. At the same time, they tentatively attempt to re-imagine the nation otherwise through their exploration of the socio-political divisions that the referendum surfaced and by exposing the history of the toxic discourse on migration.

Drawing on my previous work and the critics such as Ronald Cummings who approach Brexit ‘as one kind of afterlife of empire’ (2020), I explore how BrexLit

² See for example Keir Starmer’s speech at Immigration White Paper press conference, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-remarks-at-immigration-white-paper-press-conference-12-may-2025>.

contests these political discourses and exposes Brexit as an acute crisis (one of many) of Englishness.³ As Henderson et al. show in their analysis of the relationship between Englishness and Britishness in the Brexit referendum, ‘those with a strongly or exclusively English sense of their own national identity were the most (overwhelmingly) hostile’ towards the EU (2016: 194). Brexit was also an attempt to alter the UK’s place in the regional and global orders. I have noted elsewhere the irony in the former colonial power using the language of oppression and liberation during the Brexit campaign. Right wing Politicians such as Boris Johnson and the populist press would repeatedly describe Brexit as a ‘victory for democracy’ calling other European nations to ‘follow the United Kingdom and ‘free [them]selves from the shackles of the dying European Union’’.⁴ Similarly, the Conservative government’s plan for ‘Global Britain’ as a framework for post-Brexit foreign policy was deeply rooted in ‘imperial nostalgia or dreams of “Empire 2.0”’ (Turner, 2019: 727). For John McLeod, Brexit is ‘a triumph (for Brexiteers) in successfully securing a hegemonic position for empire as laudable legacy not shameful heritage, a (re)usable past which rewrites the history of British colonialism as a document of civilization rather than barbarism’ (2020). In her 1988 speech to the College of Europe (the Bruges speech), Margaret Thatcher admired ‘how Europeans explored and colonised and – yes, *without apology* – civilised much of the world [was] an extraordinary tale of talent, skill and courage’ (1988: my emphasis). Her opposition to the centralisation of power in the European Community would continue to fuel anti-EU sentiments and later culminated in the ‘take back control’ rhetoric, propagated by Boris Johnson and Michael Gove during the referendum campaign, that cast the EU as a coloniser. Of course, this is not to say that the EU is innocent here. As Nataša Kovačević writes, ‘the legacies of European colonialism continue under the auspices of *the* European Union, as reflected in contemporary discriminatory policies towards migrants and refugees from Europe’s former colonies and its postcommunist fringes’ (2012). Many of the literary responses I discuss here resolutely ‘write into, away from, and against the colonial underpinnings of the Brexit discourse’ (Koegler et al., 2020). My own BrexLit poem that completes this article directly responds to the politics of borders and racist violence following the referendum by playfully contesting the othering of ‘Eastern European’ migrants and regulated mobility of people through a celebration of movement and personal and cultural memory.

³ See also Introna’s article on how different dynamics operate in Scottish literary studies ‘where critics have largely remained silent about Brexit’ (2020: 12).

⁴ See Veličković, V (2020) “‘Eastern Europeans’ and BrexLit’. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. doi: [10.1080/17449855.2020.1816692](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2020.1816692), p. 3–4.

BrexLit Now/Writing About BrexLit Now

Before going into further close analysis, it might be worth making a couple of points here on the article's positionality and on writing about and revisiting BrexLit now, in 2025, just under a decade from the referendum. When I began researching this article back in Autumn of 2021, I wrote the following (now historical) snapshot:

In the autumn of 2021 the shortages of labour, gas, petrol, and supermarket food made daily headlines in Britain. Cancer treatments were delayed further, test sample bottles for GPs to offer routine blood tests were running short. People queued and panic-bought fuel at petrol stations and several British associations were demanding that NHS staff and key workers be given priority. A retail website stated that due to Brexit, deliveries to Northern Ireland would not be possible until further notice. The government was debating whether to offer short-term visas to European lorry drivers so that turkeys, toys and trees arrived in time for Christmas. After that, the immigrant drivers would be told to go back where they came from to reflect the spirit of Brexit. Earlier in the year, John le Carré described Brexit as 'the greatest catastrophe and the greatest idiocy that Britain has perpetrated since the invasion of Suez' (Harrison, 2021).

Revisiting this note only a year later, in 2022, and in the context of the financial assaults on the population, the endless stream of gaslighting from the Conservative politicians, and the disastrous and deadly decision to remove all Covid measures, already seemed like the halcyon days, and it feels even more so in the present. With the new Labour government in power and by glancing through some recent news headlines, it is clear that we are now at the stage where the UK is busy moving on from the political fights about Brexit and agreeing 'a major reset of relations' with the EU (BBC News, 2025). I was acutely aware of the risk when writing this historical snapshot that in our vertiginous present decline it will always be swiftly outdated. But it is a useful way to start thinking about BrexLit as writing that has captured the Brexit zeitgeist and about Brexit as a 'formation that is *temporally after but not over* that to which it is affixed' and 'a present whose past continues to capture and structure it' (Brown, 2010: 21). In other words, while we have moved away from some of Brexit's political crises (e.g. a historic defeat for the Conservative Party), its divisions rooted in xenophobia, racism and post-imperial melancholia continue to structure our contemporary political conjuncture (such as the continuation of the hostile immigration policies, repeated attacks on trans rights, disability cuts and the deepening of brutal lines of inequality in Britain, etc).

If history has taught us that the production of culture increases in moments of political struggle and crisis, the events preceding and following the Brexit vote have

certainly witnessed a flourishing literary activity. BrexLit now encompasses a growing thematic and generic richness – from state-of-the-nation novels by Ali Smith (*Seasonal Quartet*), Jonathan Coe (*Middle England*) and Bernardine Evaristo (*Girl, Woman, Other*) to genre fiction such as BrexLit crime and thrillers (John McGregor’s *Reservoir 13*, Mark Billingham’s *Love Like Blood*, John le Carré’ *Agent Running in the Field*), dystopian narratives (Stanley Johnson’s *Komproamat*, Ian McEwan’s satirical homage to Kafka *The Cockroach*, Tracey Mathias’ *Night of the Party*, Sibylle Berg’s *GRM: Brainfuck*, Tom Hillenbrand’s *Drone State*), drama (The Guardian’s *Brexit Shorts*, Mike Bartlett’s *Albion*, Tim Walker’s *Bloody Difficult Women*, Jez Butterworth’s *The Ferryman*), and poetry. This chapter will particularly pay attention to Brexit poems by Anthony Anaxagorou, Jackie Kay, Luke Wright, Sea Sharp, and Vidyan Ravinthiran. Authors well known beyond the UK have taken their stance, mostly for ‘Remain’, notably Carol Ann Duffy in her drama *My Country: A Work in Progress*, as well as Zadie Smith, John Lanchester and Julian Barnes and in their *LRB* essays. There is no shortage of TV drama, film, programmes, radio plays and music on the subject. Anil Karia’s short film *The Long Goodbye* (2020) directed for Riz Ahmed’s album of the same name is probably one of the most powerful indictment of post-Brexit racism in its rendering of a dystopian far-right nightmare of Britain in which male members of an ordinary British-Asian family are rounded-up and brutally executed.

Clearly, this selection is limited as it engages primarily with left-leaning writers critical of Brexit and works that often do little to articulate understanding or sympathy with Leave voters, which itself reflects the literary marketplace and Britain’s intelligentsia. My decision not to focus on Leave political voices and representations that are perhaps more visible in different mediums than in literature (e.g. *Twitter*, *Facebook*, *The Daily Mail*) is also a political one. When one has witnessed and experienced different forms of cultural racism and is writing about Brexit as an ‘Eastern European’ migrant, this ‘biased’ selection and a refusal of objectivity is a deliberate strategy against the phobic discourses of Brexit. Writing from lived experience also allows me to scrutinise the representations of ‘Eastern Europeans’ in contemporary British writing, to render visible the forms of Othering so often reproduced in the liberal Middle-England literary and other responses, and to reimagine different solidarities, as I have done in my previous work.⁵ ‘Communist Balcony’ is a poetic extension of this work and my response to stereotyping and to the racist and xenophobic violence that has accumulated and erupted after the Brexit vote (and again in the summer of 2024 during the far right anti-immigration riots in the UK).

⁵ See Veličković, V. (2019) *Eastern Europeans in Contemporary Literature and Culture: Imagining New Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. and Veličković, V. (2020) “‘Eastern Europeans’ and BrexLit’”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*. doi: [10.1080/17449855.2020.1816692](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2020.1816692).

Brexit Poetics and Border Anxieties

It may seem like an unusual choice to open a discussion of BrexLit with Johny Pitts' 2019 travelogue *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe*, but it is a useful text for rethinking both Europe and Britain as being defined through borders – 'Fortress Europe' and Brexit serving as a 'looking glass' to Europe's intense policing of its own national borders and restraining mobility for some in order to enable freedom for others. It is also useful for rethinking Britain and Europe not as single entities but as multiple and heterogenous referents, political, cultural, and discursive formations (or fictions) as well as an attempt to imagine Europe otherwise, as evident in the book's title. As Manuela Boatcă reminds us in her analysis of 'multiple Europes', Western European superiority often remains unquestioned/unmarked in the popular perceptions of Europe, while the 'questionable Europeanness' and backwardness always remains reserved for its Eastern/post-communist/Balkan counterparts (Boatcă, 2010). While Pitts doesn't quite make it there, with an exception of Moscow, he traverses some of the main Western European cities such as Paris, Brussels, Marseille, Lisbon, Berlin and Stockholm in an attempt to uncover another key dimension that is often absent from the imaginings of Europe – its 'ongoing colonial entanglements' that mark both Europe's historical legacies and its present borders' (Boatcă, 2020). *Afropean* explores the plurality of Europe alongside its colonial histories in different countries, border anxieties and the perceived migrant threat from the continent that were to culminate in the Brexit vote.⁶ Following in the footsteps of earlier black travellers, Caryl Phillips (*The European Tribe*, 1987), Mike Phillips (*A Shadow of Myself*, 2000) and Langston Hughes (*I Wonder as I Wander*, 1934), Pitts sets off in search of the utopian and progressive self-identifier 'Afropean' as he explores his belonging to Europe through his encounters with and reclamation of the contemporary and historical black presence in Western European metropolises (Pitts, 2019). In Amsterdam, for example, Pitts showcases the black activism past and present of the city's Afro-Surinamese community (the city's Black Archives and the New Urban Collective) and the work of black Dutch scholars such as Gloria Wekker who has critically examined Dutch self-image built on 'white innocence' (Wekker) and the amnesia around its colonial past (132–160). In Berlin, Pitts rediscovers notable Afro-Germans such as the poet, educator, and activist May Ayim, and notes the dissonance between 'a cultural aphasia about [Germany's] history beyond its own national borders' and the 'international socialist ties of East Germany' (196). As a particular kind of traveler – who was 'born black, working class and northern in Margaret Thatcher's Britain', Pitts travels in Europe during a time when a "multicultural backlash" [was] sweeping across the continent [and] the likes

⁶ I put 'migrants' in quotation marks to signal how refugees are often subsumed under this category.

of [him] represented some sort of failed temporary experiment' (5). Written at a time when populism and anti-immigration rhetoric were on the rise, particularly among far-right parties in Europe, and when UKIP took the right wing from Labour and the Conservatives, Pitts' travelogue is a staunch defense of ordinary multi-culturalism on the continent and in Britain. However, a visit to the 'Jungle' in Calais in 2016 makes him reconsider the privilege of owning a British passport: on the journey out, it still provides 'a free ticket into mainland Europe' (10); on the way back, he is followed and then stopped-and-searched by French military police as his 'skin had disguised [his] Europeanness' (4). These contradictions and experiences of liminality follow Pitts on his journey, yet he remains unwavering in his search for a 'whole and unhyphenated' Afropean identity. Pitts moves between borders and categories to find 'where he, a working-class, mixed-race man from the north of England, might fit most comfortably within Europe's complex past and its possibly chaotic future' (Okongwa, 2019).

Robbie Shilliam reminds us that in 'the lead up to the EU referendum, the category of "immigrant" took on an expansiveness that exceeded its prior racialization as predominantly Black and Asian' (2018: 159). Indeed, in the aftermath of the referendum, both EU and ethnic minority British-born citizens were being told to go back to where they came from.⁷ Meera Syal's monologue *Just a T-Shirt*, written and performed by herself for the *Guardian* Brexit shorts series *Dramas from a divided nation*, explores the racial fault lines after Brexit and the return of racist and nationalist narratives. Syal plays Priti, a middle-aged British-Indian woman from the de-industrialised West Midlands. She voted Leave, 'like everyone else', protesting against the decimation of public services, lack of opportunities and widespread depravation deepened further by the government's austerity policies. Her Polish neighbour Pavel is the only person from her immediate surroundings who she knows has voted to remain. Priti has nothing against Pavel and she sees him as one of the 'good', hardworking migrants, like her father Balwinder, but she has less sympathy for the 'Romanian gangs who keep mugging Asian women for their gold' (Syal, 2017). Priti's views will be soon put in check when a man in a t-shirt with the slogan 'YES WE WON! NOW SEND THEM ALL BACK' approaches her and Pavel outside their house on the day of the referendum. He directs his abuse at Priti, not Pavel, as he spits at her and racially abuses her, bringing back painful memories of the neo-Nazi National Front parading through the streets and of the racism she experienced as a child in the 1970s. Pavel intervenes and is then violently beaten up. We realise that Priti's monologue is, in fact, delivered as a statement to the police following the attack that sent Pavel to intensive care. We never

⁷ See, for instance, Veličković, V. (2019) *Eastern Europeans in Contemporary Literature and Culture: Imagining New Europe*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

find out if Pavel recovers and the monologue ends with distressed Priti asking the officers to tell Pavel's family that she was sorry. In the aftermath of the Brexit vote, she becomes painfully aware again of how precarious her Britishness is; how she is still perceived as 'them', not 'us'. The play is a powerful call for solidarity between old and new 'migrants' and racially minoritised citizens as it invites a critical and honest re-examination of the nation's attitude towards the Empire and migration.

Much of Brexit poetry can be read as a protest against Britain's border anxieties and the legitimisation of racial discrimination, violence and hostility towards migrants and refugees. It directly responds to the tabloid headlines and right-wing politicians' vitriolic targeting of the people coming to the UK from and via Europe. Nigel Farage's 2016 'Breaking Point' poster, showing a line of refugees and migrants crossing the Croatian border with a subtitle 'The EU has failed us all', is probably the most extreme and dangerous example of the dehumanisation of 'immigrants' during the Brexit campaign, although recent research has shown that the official Vote Leave campaign to 'Take Back Control' was equally responsibly for advancing anti-immigration politics of the former British MP Enoch Powell by using similar dehumanising images.⁸

In 'A Poem for Your Immigrants' (2019), re-published as part of the *Guardian's* 11 odes to Europe, queer poet Sea Sharp directly confronts such toxic discourses that have been particularly instrumental in UKIP's campaigning. The poem's title and structure work to destabilise collective and generalising representations of 'immigrants' through a series of repetitions, distance and proximity. 'Your immigrants' are 'just here' to 'TAKE YOUR jobs', 'to CLAIM YOUR benefits' or 'to HARVEST YOUR food'. Through simple but effective language the poem deliberately obscures the complex historical, cultural and economic reasons for the immigrants' arrival 'here'. In a similar vein, Ronald Cummings provides an understanding of 'Brexit and its unfolding as part of a longer state doctrine and practice of border control' and sees 'Brexit and the Windrush scandal as twin manifestations of border anxieties that structure debates about citizenship and belonging in contemporary Britain' (2020: 593). Sharp's poem exposes the nationalist narratives of 'rightful' belonging and ownership by blurring the collective voice of the 'immigrants' and the racist and xenophobic voices of all those who do not welcome them. The capitalisation of the verbs and the pronoun 'your' in the poem resembles the sheer volume of anti-immigration newspaper headlines that contributed to unleashing racist sentiments. Through its evocation of the nation's symbols (jobs, benefits, the NHS, language, neighbourhoods, women, children), Sharp's poem invites a reflection on the constructed and contested nature

⁸ See Melhuish, F. (2024) 'Powellite nostalgia and racialised nationalist narratives: connecting Global Britain and Little England', *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 26(2);, pp. 466–486.

of ownership and rights. The final lines of the poem present the immigrants tolerating ‘YOUR hatred’ before it ends with a (Enoch) Powellian image of them bleeding on ‘YOUR streets’ to convey a more universal message that stresses the dangers of anti-immigration discourse.⁹ In the same issue of *The Guardian*, Andrew McMillan wrote two poems that engage with similar political manipulations and threats – ‘£350 million a week’ in response to Boris Johnson’s controversial Brexit bus and ‘open the gates’, a reference to President Erdogan’s threat to Europe that Turkey will open its borders for millions of Syrian refugees to enter Europe unless they get more international support.

In his poem ‘After the Formalities’ (2018), British-born Cypriot Anthony Anaxagorou traces Brexit’s colonial roots. The poem’s structure presents two competing discourses – italicised factual information about the European invention of race alternative with a personal story of the speaker’s family’s arrival and settlement in Britain. It opens with the statement that in 1481 Jacques de Brézé, the **Grand Seneschal** of **Normandy** uses the word ‘race’ for the first time, in a poem, ‘*to distinguish between different groups of dogs*’. The following stanza then provides a scene of the speaker’s grandparents fleeing war and arriving in Britain with a set of ‘dog leads’ and not much else. There are sparse references to Anaxagorou’s/the speaker’s Cypriot heritage – the grandparents’ ‘Byzantine icons placed on paraffin heaters’ and questions about his origins during a job interview – to foreground that this particular family story is to capture collective struggles of the first and second generation ‘immigrants’ and their British-born children. The next stanza reminds us that

*[i]n 1606 French diplomat Jean Nicot added the word ‘race’
to the dictionary drawing distinctions between different
groups of people. Nicotine is named after him.*

Yet, the memories of the grandfather’s smoking cut through the futility and artificiality of race. The connotations we now attach to nicotine as pernicious and addictive can be extended to the equally pernicious construction of race. Nicot’s harmful legacy is consigned to the dust pile of history and our gaze directed instead to ‘[t]he way it’s impossible/to discern the brand of cigarette a single pile of ash derives from’ (Anaxagorou, 2018). This pattern of free association continues throughout the poem interrupting European and British racial pseudo-science. The italicised sections refer

⁹ See also earlier poems such as ‘Home’ by Warsan Shire, <https://www.facinghistory.org/standing-up-hatred-intolerance/warsan-shire-home>, and ‘Think About It’ by Maria Jastrzebska, <https://www.poetryinternational.org/pi/poem/9764/auto/0/0/Maria-Jastrz281bska/Think-About-It/en/tile>.

to the work of J.F. Blumenbach, Charles Darwin and the eugenicist Charles Davenport, and include more recent quotations from Winston Churchill illustrating his views on race and colonial policies (such as the Bengal famine of 1943) and Enoch Powell's 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech. At the receiving end of these discourses is the speaker's family who suffer racial abuse across several generations, including its British-born speaker who is attacked by racists wielding a crowbar outside a KFC. The poem's final italicised fact takes us to the year of the Brexit referendum and quotes Nigel Farage's remark, '*It's amazing how ideas start out, isn't it?*' Thus, the poem's trajectory reminds us about the origins of the construction of race and presents Brexit as one of its political consequences. While the speaker's grandmother is dying in hospital and another elderly lady dying next to her is complaining of foreigners and compares them to dogs, the attending nurse has to 'apologise for the whole of history'. However, the poem's deliberate blurring of the categories and words associated with dogs so that the reader never fully knows if they refers to animals (the dogs left behind by the grandfather at the beginning of the poem), people (in moments when the poem evokes racial classifications and violence), or something else ('the dogs of England'), is to move us away from border anxieties and the vicious cycle of hatred and hostility towards the migrant/the foreigner. The poem ends with a symbol of peace and friendship as the last line evokes a 'prayer reaching for the pride of an olive'. This is not to suggest some kind of easy resolution, but to imagine a common ground where difference (ethnic, species, cultural) is not attacked or demonised for the society's ills.

Jackie Kay's anticipatory 'Extinction' (2015), commissioned for Carol Ann Duffy's series of poems on the topic of climate change, imagines a dystopian version of Great Britain after the triumph of anti-immigration and anti-climate discourse. Playing on the Leave campaign's slogan of 'taking back control', it opens with an exuberant exclamation: 'We closed the borders, folks, we nailed it'. Kay uses a deliberately jingoistic tone to challenge the idea of borders and little mindedness. The remainder of the poem then goes on to provide a long list of undesirable liberal phenomena that no longer exist or have been banished from Britain ('no lesbians', 'no immigrants', 'no EUs') alongside aspects of the natural world ('no pollen', 'no polar bears', 'no rainforests') to emphasize the ludicrousness of detaching ourselves from the natural world and our EU neighbours. Such satirical and dystopian responses raise important questions for understanding the emergence of Brexit poetry, and BrexLit, more generally. Indeed, revisiting these poems in 2025, and some of the novels I discuss in the next section, makes them hardly dystopian as our present is as bad if not worse. Nevertheless, they are important literary records of the Brexit zeitgeist, presenting us with alternative political potential, even if they reflect a particular political viewpoint less or more explicitly.

Working-class poet Luke Wright, who has been on ‘a mission to write poems to unite a nation divided by austerity and Brexit’ (Prior, 2019), adopts a similar satirical tone in ‘It’s Great to Have My Country Back’ (2016). Most stanzas finish with an exclamation of the poem’s title, the inevitable echo of the Leave campaign’s demand to ‘take back control’, which despite its vagueness (control of what?) has been so powerful in mobilising and reawakening Eurosceptic and xenophobic dreams. The poem starts by announcing that ‘the dream of ’45 is dead’ and then proceeds to ‘celebrate’ the achievements of Brexit with great irony (Wright, 2016). The country bids farewell to Angela Merkel and to united Europe. Britain has decided to carve its own destiny even if it may lead to internal disintegration as ‘Sturgeon whips her scalpel out/ and Belfast calls the priest’. What follows is a dizzying and disturbing spiral into Britain’s post-Brexit reality as the poem charts an increasing erosion of democracy, UK currency and expert assessments. Imperial nostalgia redolent of Thatcher’s Bruges speech is reduced to clichés: ‘it’s pluck that won the commonwealth’. As Kehinde Andrews writes in his astute critique of Brexit and nostalgia for empire, the days when Britannia ruled the waves are long gone and behind the empty rhetoric to take back control hides ‘a small island desperately reaching out to countries it formerly ruled in order to try to maintain its relevance’ (Andrews, 2017). The poem reframes the absurd ‘benefits’ of Brexit by giving us examples of freedom from the EU that actually reveal the triumph of populism and voter manipulation through spreading myths about the EU and its bureaucracy. Bent bananas are no longer subject to EU’s ‘crazy’ rules, ‘the racists’ are ‘popping fizz’ and ‘Farridge’ is strutting ‘about like Kanye West’, a clear reference to both men’s friendship with Donald Trump.¹⁰ Indeed, there is very little to be proud of about Britain’s post-Brexit future.

Vidyan Ravinthiran’s poems ‘Faraj’ and ‘Brexit’ (both 2019) explore the emotional and political impacts of Brexit on ordinary people. ‘Faraj’ begins with a meeting in Tunisia between a British poet, a translator and a Libyan poet, the titular Faraj, who had to flee his country because of militia rule. The poem deliberately displaces our associations with one of the key architects of Brexit, Nigel Farage. Although their names are homophones the two men have very little in common. Faraj writes love poetry, but towards the end of the poem he offers the British poet an Arabic translation of his ‘small poem about small people: repression and fear in the country of Nigel Farage’ (Ravinthiran, 2019). In this clever turning point, the Libyan poet, who indeed could be one of the men from Farage’s ‘breaking point’ poster, responds to the dehumanisation of refugees and migrants, and the meeting of different languages

¹⁰ A reference to Boris Johnson’s remarks during the campaign. See <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/may/11/boris-johnson-launches-the-vote-leave-battlebus-in-cornwall>.

and people is juxtaposed with the small mindedness of Brexit Britain and Farage's dangerous legacy.

In 'Brexit', Ravinthiran further interrogates the simplistic yet dominant explanations for the reasons people voted in the referendum, as popular opinion was that the better educated voted remain. The speaker is at Durham station observing other passengers the day after the result was announced. Durham voted to leave the EU. The atmosphere is tense as people are glancing at each other wondering how each voted and racial hostility hangs in the air – 'you see a white man square up to a brown'. Later the speaker reflects on the 'conventional snobberies' of his Facebook friends 'down south' who find 'themselves, all of a sudden, a minority in their own country' and also look down upon people who voted to leave. I have written elsewhere on the affective polarisation after Brexit, focusing specifically on expressions of shame coming from many left-leaning middle-class voters and commentators, who felt ashamed of being British.¹¹ These expressions helped to restore a sense of national pride and a vision of Britain as more open and inclusive as well as to heal the rift in Britain's complicated (un)belonging to Europe – think of the posters during anti-Brexit demonstrations with the slogans 'I Love EU' or 'Never Gonna Give EU Up'. However, as I have argued, the outbursts of shame on the one hand, and the resurfacing of imperial nostalgia and racism post-Brexit on the other, should be placed in the context of a particular understanding of the history of Empire that still dominates the national narrative. Brexit divisions are also best explained, as Robbie Shilliam reminds us, by looking at longstanding regional inequalities brought on by Thatcher's de-industrialisation, 'the rise and fall of the "white working class"', and 'the diminution of the benefits that whiteness once afforded' to those who now see themselves as 'left behind' (2018: 156). The sonnet's ending presents the North/South, Leave/Remain, class/race divisions in a toxic vacuum, emphasising political failures on both sides: 'All our talk now has this shape:/at lunch a colleague tells me of her mother/who always orders food she cannot bear'. As the editors of *Writing Brexit: Colonial Remains* similarly observe, 'the narcissistic forces of empire [...] might have been more constructively resolved while Britain was still an EU member', but 'Brexit has for now forestalled any such possibility' and has 'revived those remains of empire's narcissistic nationalism that now militate against the very idea of Europe' (Koeglar, Malreddy, & Tronicke, 2020: 558). Indeed, many pro-Remain poems discussed here, while appearing in the predominantly middle class forum such as *The Guardian* pages, offer a diagnosis of the current state of affairs leaving it to the reader to reflect on possible solutions out of this stagnant crisis.

¹¹ See Veličković (2019: 15–16) See also Sara Ahmed's work on how shame can form a collective ideal and work for nation-building in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, (2014).

Brexit Fictions/Fictions of Brexit

Many recent novels and short stories about Brexit have adopted an explicitly political stance. Ian McEwan's novella *The Cockroach* (2019) is a Brexit reworking of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915) as it centers on the Prime Minister Jim Sams' transformation into a gigantic creature in Westminster and his mission to deliver the 'Project' and clinch support from his deeply-divided Cabinet, particularly the hard 'Reversalists' tendencies in his party (McEwan, 19). Just as Brexit was predicated upon deeper anxieties about Britain's place in the world and a skewed sense of economic liberation from the EU's red tape and bureaucracy, Reversalism is about bringing Britain to a 'Clockwise world' (30) using the so-called 'reverse flow economics' (27). It involves an employee handing over money at the 'the end of a working week' [...] 'to the company for all the hours that she has toiled [and] when she goes to the shops she is generously compensated at retail rates for every item she carries away' (25). The PM's foreign secretary 'supposed to be in every capital in the world for Global Britain on a salary of £141,404 a year' complains how he would not be able to find time to do all the shopping to afford his job, and the PM tells him to get 'a Tesla from Amazon' instead (36–7). A sharp satire on Euroscepticism, Boris Johnson and his party, the novella abounds in deeply sarcastic passages and also does not spare the Left's ambivalent position on Brexit and their belief that soft Reversalism 'would empower the unemployed' (28). Despite the intellectuals', business leaders' and economists' warnings that Brexit will be catastrophic for the nation, the PM is bent on getting on with it. He delivers a speech to the EU in which lays out his vision of Reversalism ushering a new era that will re-energise 'our country and not only making it great again, but making it the greatest place on earth, by 2050' (45), presumably a reference to Jacob Rees-Mogg's statement in July 2018 that the potential benefits of Brexit would be realised in fifty years (Saner, 2018). The irony is further intensified by the German chancellor asking him "'Warum?' three times and why he is tearing his nation down' (McEwan, 86). The EU cannot comprehend the UK's self-inflicted wound that is Reversalism, but the PM simply responds 'because' after a 'long stuffy silence' and carries on with the same absurdist and empty rhetoric: 'we intend to become clean, green, prosperous, united, confident and ambitious' (87). The opening lines of this chapter demonstrate that this has not been the case and Brexit has only intensified 'everything that was [already] wrong with the country, including inequalities of wealth and opportunity, the north-south divide and stagnant wages' (29). The party nevertheless succeeds in getting Reversalism done and the novella ends with Christmas Eve celebrations. But there is little to celebrate about Britain's delusional narcissism as the country 'now stood alone!' (96) and as it starts its new future in a state of *akrasia* (83), the state of acting against one's better judgment.

Other novels continue this trend of representing Brexit through absurdist and dystopian lens. In Tracey Mathias' novel *Night of the Party* (2018) post-Brexit Britain is dystopian nightmare for anyone who was not born in the UK or 'has been a resident for fewer than twenty-five years' (20) (although hardly dystopian now with the continuous hostile immigration policies). The novel explores the consequences of the 'Immigration and Residency Bill' passed by an unnamed ruling Party who is busy deporting and hunting down some 2 million illegal Europeans that are still at large. The main protagonists are a group of college friends and a young couple, Ash, who is British-born, and Zara, whose Eastern European origins are later revealed. Everyday life has been totally transformed by the Party's anti-immigration policies and ordinary citizens are regularly stopped and required to show their ID cards. Ash's wealthy parents 'used to have an au pair Jagna', but we learn that 'she is going back to Poland', and the Bill also requires English people 'to report the overstayers or they will be fined' (48). There are rumours of Europeans being 'dumped in Calais' rather than being deported' (210) and Eastern European cafes are being burnt down (224). The tensions in Ash and Zara's group of friends become more pronounced as the novel progresses. At one of their pub outings, a waitress who serves them makes a grammatical error that gives away her Eastern European origins (220) so one of their right-wing friends decides to call the police and she gets arrested. Another friend, Priya, despite being British-born, is seen as suspicious and we learn that her father 'wants the family to move to India' (221). When Zara discovers that one of their friends murdered Ash's sister, she goes to the police to report the crime (216) but is instead put under intense questioning and the police arrest her as they discover her real name 'Zara Emily Jones Catalina Maria Zara Ionescu'. As an illegal, Zara is sent to 'Oake Leigh detention centre', where she witnesses horrendous treatment of European and 'Other' deportees held there (246). As I have noted earlier, this is hardly dystopian in the light of the Rwanda scheme and in the context of Trump's immigration raids. She somehow manages to escape and the remainder of the novel follows her and Ash trying to reach the safety of Scotland by car using old map and evading patrols and checkpoints. In a tense last scene, Ash manages to distract the border police so Zara can cross the border undetected and join her mother. Despite the bleakness of post-Brexit England, the novel ends on an optimistic note as it zooms on Ash going to 'catch the daily international service to Scotland' to meet Zara after their ordeal and their relationship will endure despite the absurd new borders (431).

Isabel Waidner's experimental novel *We are All Made of Diamond Stuff* (2019), set on the Isle of Wight that voted overwhelmingly 'in favour of leaving the European Union' (36), is marked by a similarly claustrophobic atmosphere and anti-immigration sentiment. The queer narrator is an EU national who has 'worked in all areas of the

British hospitality and retail sector' for 20 years (15), has excellent command of English, but their right to stay is still precarious. They have worked under the tax threshold and the immigration officer who checks on them tells them that their residence card is 'not authentic' and they can't apply for British citizenship (61). While they have support from their co-worker Shae, queer people of colour and queer Europeans are under threat from 'young white working-class gay twenty-somethings who vote UKIP' (38) and have formed the 'UKIP of English Deference League LGBTQI+ divisions' (37). The island is ironically divided and fragmented further across class and racial fault lines as minorities turn against minorities, but as the novel shows through its very explicit critique of nostalgia underpinning Brexit, this neo-colonial tactic of divide and rule worked because of the 'empire's stranglehold on the British psyche and reality' (80–81).

Finally, a more balanced approach in the literary representation of Leave voters in an attempt to understand both sides are offered by Jonathan Coe in his sprawling *Middle England* and in rare, but growing examples, of Eastern European writers settled in Britain and Western Europe taking on a monumental task of writing back to stereotypical representations of EU's new Eastern European citizens and their depictions as cheap, disposable and culturally lagging labour force, naïve and exploited trafficked women, often without agency and voice.¹² Short stories 'A Happy Nation' and 'What We Should Feel Now' by the British-Polish writer Agnieszka Dale are excellent examples of trying to re-imagine the nation otherwise after Brexit. Krystyna Kowalska, the narrator of the first story, refuses to leave Britain, even though all the immigrants have gone away. She is questioned by an immigration officer, but she unsettles the power dynamics between host and guest by asking the officer the questions about colonial history and what it means to be British. The story is a wider conversation about the state of the nation post-Brexit and the dangers of revived xenophobia and insistence on cultural and racial purity evident in the Leave calls to take back control. She is classified as a 'White Other', but she refuses it and carves instead her own sense of belonging within a new category that she describes as '*whitish*' (69; original emphasis). The story gouges a hole in the fortification of post-imperial whiteness after Brexit and, at the end, we find out that the officer's white Britishness actually hides a migrant heritage that they might have in common – he is called Adam Michalowski (73). In 'A Happy Nation', the unnamed narrator does not want the conversation to be dominated by the Leave–Remain divisions as she shares her experience of ordinary conviviality in Britain and feeling loved by her 'neighbours, colleagues, shopkeepers' (67). Dale turns away from the realities of food rotting in the fields after Brexit to try and envisage an almost

¹² For a detailed discussion, see Veličković (2019).

utopian vision of Britain in which the divisions might be repaired and a communal/national 'we' imagined otherwise: 'We'll grow new apples together [...] and then we'll eat together. Our apples. Apples that do not rot' (75). Such calls for community and solidarity are ever more needed in our oppressive present.

This is what Coe's *Middle England* does on a grander scale as it follows a sprawling cast of characters eight years before and after the referendum to offer a re-evaluation of the state of the nation and the social divisions exacerbated by the 2008 credit crunch, Gordon Brown's unsuccessful campaign trail to try and swing 'Middle England' voters and David Cameron's eventual victory, the 2011 riots following the shooting of Mark Duggan and the killing of Jo Cox in 2016, to political and media manipulations leading to the Brexit vote. Coe explores the impact of these events dividing different generations of the Trotter family and their friends, the North and the South, the metropolitan and regional areas, 'the quiet rage of the middle class' (19) and the working classes being fortified in their rage by anti-immigration anxieties becoming a dominant feature of the campaign. The novel deserves a full chapter, but it is useful here as a concluding remark on the future of BrexLit, and indeed, post-Brexit Britain. One of the main characters are the newlyweds Sophie and Ian, a Remainer and a Leaver. She works on 'contemporary portraits of black European writers in the nineteenth century' (74), which interestingly echoes some of Pitts' engagements with multiple Europes that opened this chapter, and exemplifies a 'modern, layered, multiple identity' that she feels 'had been taken away from her' (326) after the vote and causes a major rupture in her relationship with Ian. The end of the novel finds her at a family gathering in France where some of their friends, such as Eastern European migrants Grete and Lukas (382), had been forced to relocate after they had 'fallen out of love with England' (385) due to post-Brexit abuse. We learn that Sophie is pregnant and perhaps she and Ian, in the spirit of Jo Cox's words from her speech to the house of Commons in 2015, have learned that they are 'far more united and have far more in common with each other than things that divide us' (314). Coe leaves the ending of the novel open and uncertain, but it is no coincidence that the last lines announce the birth of 'their beautiful Brexit baby' (421). As Bill Ashcroft notes in *Postcolonial Futures* (2001), a trope of the child that 'had helped resolve some of the immense contradictions of empire becomes a potent sign of post-colonial conceptions of imaginative and cultural possibility' (54) and this is just one way for Coe and other writers discussed in this chapter to work through the 'bizarre hysteria that had gripped the British people' (Coe, 356), although the choice of a deeply gendered and racialised term continually used to dismiss women and minorities as overly emotional and out of control reflects the limits of the white, middle-class imagination.¹³

¹³ See Pragya Agarwal, *Hysterical: Exploding the Myth of Gendered Emotions* (2022).

If ‘literature broadens and reflects our ability to think, feel and argue’, as Robert Eaglestone reminds us (2018: 1), the works discussed here effectively use narrative and poetics to contest and unsettle the politics of borders and explore Brexit as the expression of a much longer chronology of post-imperialism and Euroscepticism. At the same time, as a reflection of predominantly leftist voices, BrexLit shows how little has changed in the structure of feeling in Britain. It captures the political divisions in terms of the ongoing ‘struggle between the forces of cosmopolitanism and nationalism’ and the long-term effects of postwar national decline that led to an iconoclastic electoral expression of anger (Shaw, 2017). While BrexLit has helped to expose the many political and other fictions of Brexit, in these newly fascist times where some children are worthy of protection while others (of Gaza, Sudan) are subject to unimaginable horrors, Ashcroft’s postcolonial trope of the child has certainly lost its potency. One can only hope that when literary critics come to reassess BrexLit’s contribution to chronicling these political fictions in a few decades that the possibilities of dismantling racist borders will be realised in some parts of the world at least. In the meantime, writing remains a vehicle for resistance, reflection and for practicing anti-racist, anti-capitalist politics. By way of conclusion, it is my hope that this poem makes a small contribution to BrexLit through its playful conversation with post-Brexit Britain from the perspective of those of us with ‘unpronounceable’ names, different and othered in multiple ways, who keep on writing and keep on coming.

Communist Balcony

My communist balcony wakes me up at night.
 I can hear something fluttering
 as I sleep in my Victorian bedroom.
 it is the wings of my parrot shuffling in her summer bath.
 my grandparents never painted the grey rugged stone
 on my communist balcony.
 in the middle of the night I long to press my cheek
 against its rough edges.
 I need to know that it still exists.
 on that balcony my grandmother would grow
 petunias, geraniums, snapdragons – a colorful display!
 some say Maltese balconies are the most beautiful in the world.
 ours could only be ugly,
 could only be mocked –
 our brutal communist architecture.

if only you knew
 how much my grandmother enjoyed the balcony view,
 you would tell your First World self
 to be more considerate, or to spot the difference
 between your council estates and our brutalist skyscrapers.
 aren't they the same? aren't we the same?
 little tadpoles in the capitalist game.
 Nigel says, 'You're not my neighbour'¹⁴
 as windows and heads are smashed when you try to say my name.
 outside the *Polski Sklep* a woman is crying
 ugly writing on the door – 'Go home!'.
 something in you is dying,
 something is rotten,
 it stings the nostrils
 like a drop of vinegar on a hot stove –
 my grandmother's recipe for a blocked nose.
 the colonial debt is overdue.
 this island is not full.
 the borders are assumed.
 we know how they pull genocidal armies full of rage,
 but your rage is a cage eating you alive.
 how long can you go on like this?
 we are still here, and we keep on coming –
 with carnations, consonants and cunning.

14 'Nigel Farage Tells LBC Radio: I Don't Want Romanians as my Neighbours' (2014).

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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