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**WRITERS AND INTELLECTUALS ON BRITAIN AND EUROPE,  
1918–2018**

## **Nationed Silences, Interventions and (Dis)Engagements: Brexit and the Politics of Contextualism in Post-Indyref Scottish Literature**

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The debate that overtook Scottish society in the run-up to the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence featured the participation of Scottish artists, writers and literary critics in ways that stand in stark contrast to the utter cultural silence with which Brexit has been met in the Scottish literary scene. This article will seek to answer a two-fold question: what can contemporary trends in Scottish literary studies tell us about the political constitution of our discipline(s), and what can they tell us about our contemporary political conjuncture? In order to explore these issues, my investigation will map out the silences, interventions and (dis)engagements that have characterised the response to Brexit and the Indyref by Scottish literary studies and by Scottish writing. I will examine these in relation both to the politics of contextualism and the nationed disciplinary framework that define Scottish literature as a field of study, and to the post-postnational, sovereigntist conjuncture of which both the Indyref and Brexit are manifestations. Gauging the differential interest that the Indyref and Brexit have generated in Scottish literature on the one hand, and its relationship to the political moment we are traversing on the other, provides fundamental insights into the political constitution of the discipline.

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## 1. Introduction

Kristian Shaw has developed the concept of BrexLit to describe ‘fictions that either directly respond or imaginatively allude to Britain’s exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain’s withdrawal’ (Shaw, 2017: 18). As we will see, Brexit has drawn no explicit dramatisation as an event relevant to Scotland in Scottish writing. Such silence stands in stark contrast to the considerable extent to which the debate that overtook Scottish society in the run-up to the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence featured the participation of Scottish artists, writers and literary critics. This article will both explore how this response is manifest in Scottish literary studies and Scottish writing and track down the cultural and political dynamics that have underpinned it. It will seek to answer a two-fold question: what can contemporary trends in Scottish literary studies and in the thematic concern that informs literary works tell us about the political constitution of our discipline(s), and what can they tell us about our contemporary conjuncture?

In exploring these issues, my investigation will be framed by both a contextualist and a post-Indyref perspective. A contextualist orientation, namely one which in theorizing the relationship between theory and politics posits a mutual influence between cultural and political spaces, in a Scottish context is inseparable from a post-Indyref perspective. The latter offers an optic that acknowledges the Indyref both as having revolutionised the boundaries of what could be imagined in Scottish culture, literature and politics and as still functioning as a point of reference in cultural and political spaces. It utilises the prefix ‘post’ in Wendy Brown’s sense of the term to signify 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). A contextualist, post-Indyref perspective, in turn, forces attention to the political conjuncture we are traversing as being located after, again in Brown’s sense of the term, a post-national moment in which the attempts to ‘transfer marks of sovereignty, belonging, and subscription to common “values”’ to a European (Balibar, 2004: 65) or other supernational level were hegemonic, if not unchallenged or successful. The post-postnational aspect of our times and the post-postnational turn

Scottish literary studies is experiencing are respectively foregrounded by the Indyref and Brexit on the one hand, and by the response these have received in Scottish literature on the other.

The first section of this article will consider the response the Indyref drew from Scottish critics and writers alike in terms of what it tells us about the contextualism of Scottish literature. It will suggest that the ways in which Scottish critics and writers during the Indyref were prompted into public engagement and dramatisation of the unfolding debate, vindicated the contextualism of Scottish literature, and confirmed its exclusive ties to Scotland's developing constitutional status. The second section will situate these cultural dynamics in relation to our contemporary political conjuncture, suggesting that they can be read as indexing the development of a post-postnational, sovereignist conjuncture of which both the Indyref and Brexit are manifestations. The third section will be devoted to unpacking the pattern of responses that Brexit has drawn from critics working in Scottish literature and English literature through a comparative post-Indyref perspective. The fourth and final section will address the response Scottish writing has provided to Brexit, focusing on Andrew O'Hagan's lecture 'Scotland Your Scotland' (2017) and the first three books of Ali Smith's Brexit quartet, *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017) and *Spring* (2019). I will also discuss how John Burnside's *Havergey* (2017) and A.L. Kennedy's *The Little Snake* (2018) are concerned with issues of peoplehood and sovereignty which speak not to Brexit but to the political conjuncture from which Brexit has arisen. My conclusion will further reflect on the relationship between nationed disciplinary frameworks and political contexts from a post-Indyref perspective which is uniquely apt to read cultural silences around Brexit as structurally 'nationed' (Featherstone and Karaliotas, 2017). In positing a structurally nationed silence around Brexit in Scottish literary criticism I will consider theoretical reflections which explicitly address the disciplinary framework of the field or its relationship with context and nationalist politics. In doing so, my intention will not be to reduce the scope of the field to engagement with contemporary writing or contexts, but to explore the critical possibilities of contextualism from a situated point in time and space.

## 2. Nationed Interventions: The 2014 Referendum Debate and Scottish Literature

Since the 1980s in both Scottish literary studies and the wider Scottish society, Scottish writing has been perceived as endowed with the potential to exert an active influence on the development of Scotland's constitutional status. In Scottish literature cultural nationalism has traditionally presupposed a link of efficacy between writing and Scottish nationalist politics. For Alex Thomson this is confirmed by how aesthetics has been expected to revitalise the national context, while being in turn energised by this dynamic relationship. He notes 'a link between devolution and the "revival" of contemporary Scottish literature has become a critical commonplace' (Thomson, 2013: 3). Scott Hames confirms that after 1979 there originated the feeling that cultural autonomy could become a 'crucial substratum' for political autonomy 'on terms shaped by artists rather than politicians' (Hames, 2012: 5). A manifestation of the 'complex and pervasive intermingling of Scottish literature and politics over the past few decades', this feeling has had consequences 'for how we read (and over-read) the politics of Scottish writing, and for how we conceive the place of cultural and literary "identity" within the project of Scottish nationalism' (Hames, 2020: ix). There has been a 'narrative of antecedence' in Scottish literary studies whereby cultural emancipation preceded its political part in a way that leaves 'unclear whether the primacy of culture is a matter of causation, displacement or surrogacy' (Hames, 2017: 3). As Robert Crawford contends, 'Devolution and a reassertion of Scottish nationhood were imagined by poets and writers long before being enacted by politicians' (Crawford, 2000: 307). Caroline McCracken-Flesher and Cairns Craigs concur that it has been culture that has driven Scotland's constitutional development, most notably the 1997 devolution vote which led to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament (McCracken-Flesher, 2007; Craig, 2001). These claims are substantiated by the explicit dramatisation of Scotland's constitutional journey in works such as Alasdair Gray's pamphlets on *Why Scots Should Rule Scotland* (1997, 2014), the devolutionary poetry collection *Dream State* (1994) and James Robertson's *And the Land Lay Still* (2010), which narrates the run-up to devolution by bringing together different social identities and stories to compose the history of the nation.

Moreover, as Carla Sassi points out, equally important are literary texts in Scottish writing that have 'progressed a radical rethinking of both the concept of nationalism and the idea of the nation' while defying 'conventionally nationalist readings (British or Scottish)' (Sassi 2018: 182, 193).

A post-Indyref perspective in Scottish literature demands a re-positioning of the culturalist account of Scotland's constitutional development in relation to the politicisation of Scottish culture that occurred in the run-up to the 2014 vote on Scottish independence, as the latter vindicated the presuppositions of the former. Acting both as witnesses of the momentous transformation of Scottish society that the referendum debate had triggered and as participants in the independence movement, writers and critics brought about a 'naturalization of culture as a symbolic horizon for political discussion' (Thomson, 2016: 86). Where writers are concerned, the referendum debate featured prominently in their works. James Robertson recorded the feelings and issues that characterised the run-up to the 2014 vote in his collection of short stories *365 Stories* (2014), each written on a different day of 2014, while Craig Smith's *The Mile* (2014) unfolds the night before the vote, following three friends as they go on a pub crawl in company with Jock, an old man. Each friend represents a different voting position – yes, no and undecided – and is given the opportunity to make the case in support of it, while Jock stands metaphorically for Scotland's history, traditions and constitutional development as a journey of emancipation. In a similar vein, Alan Bissett's play *The Pure, the Dead and the Brilliant* (2015), which featured in the programme of the 2014 Fringe festival, is organised around the ideological battles of the referendum debate, waged by the bogles, banshees, selkies and demons of Scottish folklore. The play concludes with Bogle's hymn for all those involved in the independence movement: 'It was time. You were awake. The lights were going on. How could you unlearn what you had learned? ... we stood up as a people and said YES!' (*The Pure* 2015: 144). The imbrication between the parallel developments of national and individual journeys in Indyref times is also rendered in Bob Cant's *Something Chronic* (2013) and Jenni Daiches' *Borrowed Time* (2016). *Something Chronic* tells the story of Euan Saddler, who contracts a sleeping sickness after casting his vote in the 1979 devolution

referendum and wakes up twenty years later in 1999. The novel thus provides a metaphorical rendition of Scotland's interrupted constitutional development as a result of the failed 1979 referendum and its resumption of life post-devolution. *Borrowed Time* creates a dialogue with Cant's novel, following Sonia, a year after the sudden death of her husband, as she leaves her Yorkshire home to live in a railway carriage in the Scottish Highlands. In Scotland she finds independence, ensuring her story provides an allegory for the prospect of Scottish independence made possible by the 2014 referendum.

A post-Indyref perspective on Scottish literature foregrounds the ways in which the cultural dynamics that radiated from the Indyref debate not only validated the culturalist narrative of Scotland's constitutional development, but also reconfigured the status of critics as 'unacknowledged legislators' that invent the nation through their interpretive framing of literary texts (Thomson, 2007: 10). First of all, literary critics had the opportunity to shine a cultural light on the political debate by offering talks at events and online commentary. In this way they materialised the relation of efficacy between cultural contribution and Scotland's constitutional development that they would have otherwise only been able to theorise in relation to Scottish writing. A prime example of this was a collection of essays by writers and cultural theorists, *Unstated*, edited by Scott Hames, which proposed 'to document the true relationship between the official discourse of Scottish nationalism, and the ethical concerns of some of the writers presented as its guiding lights and cultural guarantors' (Hames, 2012: 10). Against the backdrop of a referendum debate that witnessed the involvement of a wide cultural cohort epitomised by the activity of National Collective, which championed the potential of art 'to imagine a better, and new, Scotland, in ways that politics cannot do' (National Collective, 2013), it is telling that Bissett credited *Unstated* with the merit of starting this process of cultural re-imagination (Bissett, 2013: 20). Secondly, the Indyref reconfigured critical practice in Scottish literary studies as the nation-centric contextualism of Scottish literature became more acceptable and treasured for theorisation. Hames contends that 'Methodological debate within Scottish literary studies seems likely to intensify' under the pressure of a 'charged "external" political climate' (Hames,

2017: 20) created by the 2014 No vote, which turned devolution into 'Scotland's indefinite future' (Hames, 2017: 22). This, for Hames, creates an 'opportunity to revisit the political self-constitution of "Scottish literature" as a subject' that 'should be welcomed' (Hames, 2017: 20).

In parallel to the inevitable visibility that contextualism has accrued in Scottish studies during and after the Indyref, there has developed a critical climate more favourable to discussion of the nationed framework of the field, where narratives tend to be 'articulated around the signifier of the nation' (Featherstone and Karaliotas, 2018: note 1). In Scottish literary criticism all narratives are nationed because of the circularity that bedevils the definition of Scottish literature as a discipline concerned to define and examine a national literary history. For Thomson, 'framed in national terms, the study of literature in Scotland will always tend to become the analysis of Scottish literature, and ultimately, of what is "Scottish" about that literature' (Thomson, 2007: 6). Thus, despite the post-national turn that traversed Scottish studies in the 2000s (Bell, 2004; Schoene, 2007), post-Indyref the primacy of the national focus of analysis has returned to be central to and owned by Scottish literary criticism, emboldened by the awareness that during 'the referendum campaign, the arts in Scotland were ranged decidedly, if just short of unanimously, on the side of an independent future' (Kidd, 2018: 2). Indeed, after 2014 there came out three Scottish literary studies monographs comfortably organised by a nation-centric focus (Gardiner, 2015; Craig, 2018; Kidd, 2018). However, it is important to point out that post-Indyref the presence of a nationed framework in Scottish literature may have become more palpable but was not originated by the Indyref. As Étienne Balibar explains in reference to the national paradigm, while the fortunes of national individualities can wax and wane, we cannot escape the determination of the nation-form as a mode of social organisation (Balibar, 2004: 12). The *form* of national literary history, like nation-form, cannot be overcome as a model of organization. The possibility to appreciate this post-Indyref suggests that the 'central tension' in 'the academic as well as in the public debate over the disciplinary definition of Scottish literature between the "national" and the "post-national" paradigms' (Sassi, 2014: 1) has morphed into a post-postnational articulation, in correlation with the conjuncture it stems from, which I will now discuss.



### 3. Clashing Sovereignisms: On our Contemporary Post-Postnational Moment

The Indyref was called in the early stages of the wave of populist movements that rocked Europe and the world after the 2007 crisis, constituting what Chantal Mouffe has called 'the populist moment'. The populist moment for Mouffe is 'the expression of a set of heterogeneous demands' put forward by 'a variety of anti-establishment movements' that have challenged the neoliberal hegemonic formation whose contradictions had been deepened by the crisis 'through the construction of a "people"' (Mouffe, 2018: 6). For Paolo Gerbaudo the movements Mouffe refers to delineate a phenomenon he calls 'Citizenism', driven by 'the ideology of the "indignant citizen", a citizen outraged at being deprived of citizenship, chiefly understood as the possibility of individuals to be active members of their political community with an equal say on all important decisions' (Gerbaudo, 2017: 7). Because these movements, from the Indyref to the Greek Oxi movement to Brexit, have been grounded in the re-assertion of national sovereignty, whether in economic-monetary terms or at the level of border control, they are more usefully defined as sovereignist, as Beppe Caccia and Sandro Mezzadra suggest (Caccia and Mezzadra, 2016). Mouffe's populist moment is thus better conceived of as a sovereignist moment that indexes the unfolding of a post-postnational conjuncture.

A post-national condition was most notably identified by Jürgen Habermas in his *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays* (2001) which explored how processes of globalization resulted in the diminishing relevance of the nation-state and by Étienne Balibar in his *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (2004), which interrogated the extent to which the uncoupling of the concepts of citizenship and nationhood has been fulfilled in a post-national world. In the same spirit, David McCrone argued that for a long time Scotland could not be the object of sociology due to its stateless status; yet he suggests that in a globalized world one no longer needs to prove that Scotland exists as a unit of analysis: 'We now recognize that there are very few genuine nation-states in which political and cultural boundaries intersect, and that the world is a much messier – and more interesting – place because of that' (McCrone, 2001: 2). Our current sovereignist

moment is defined by tensions between two contrasting positions. On the one hand are those animated by a profound desire to bring about political arrangements which would align political and cultural boundaries, assuming the latter as grounding the mandate for decision-making to be exercised at the level of the nation-state. These have driven constitutional crises on the scale of Brexit and the Indyref in ways that spell the end of the post-national era. On the other hand is the legacy of the values of transnational solidarity and cosmopolitanism that have defined culture, politics and literary criticism in the past two decades. This renders the post-postnational moment inevitably different from both its national and its post-national predecessors in ways reminiscent of Wendy Brown's idea of 'afterness' (Brown, 2010), which I will discuss further in relation to the post-Indyref turn in Scottish studies and politics.

While both Brexit and the (post-)Indyref phenomenon are manifestations of a post-postnational, sovereigntist moment, their different constitutional politics invest them with fundamental differences. Being informed by a progressive politics positioned in opposition to forms of re-scaling of democratic spaces and negation of civil, social and political rights peculiar to right-wing sovereigntist movements (Caccia and Mezzadra, 2016), the Scottish pro-independence project occupies a specular if interlocked position with respect to the sovereigntism associated with Brexit. If the latter is driven by a commitment to recover national sovereignty through a redefinition of the UK financial platform and its place in the EU market at the expense of freedom of movement and social rights (Caccia and Mezzadra, 2016), the former was fed by rejection of UK austerity during the 2014 referendum debate and is now defined by a primary concern to call out the national grievance caused by the imposition of Brexit. For pro-independence supporters the latter grievance has unfolded on the mould of election and referendum results that in Scotland have been so 'out of step with the rest of the UK as to make the continuation of a political union antidemocratic in practice' (Logan, 2018). The extent to which Brexit reinforces the case for independence is epitomised by how on 26<sup>th</sup> March 2019 First Minister Nicola Sturgeon declared her intention to have Scottish Parliament legislation ready by the end of 2019 to be able to hold a second referendum on Scottish independence by 2021, should Scotland be taken out of the EU despite having voted Remain in

the 2016 EU referendum. While the Indyref played out as the Scottish version of the sovereignist movements that characterise our post-postnational moment, in a Scottish context popular and institutional responses to Brexit have unfolded within the pre-existent sovereignist space of the Indyref. This maps onto the different ways in which the Indyref and Brexit have been registered in Scottish literature, as I will discuss in the third and fourth sections of this article.

As Siniša Malešević suggests, populist and sovereignist movements such as the Scottish independence movement are structurally nationalist: because the existence of nation states 'is justified in terms of popular (i.e.) national sovereignty... all modern states and social movements that aspire towards political or cultural sovereignty inevitably appropriate nation-centric discourses and practices' (Malešević, 2019: 7). Gerbaudo's comments support this position, suggesting that citizenism 'combines appeals to the people with a mostly benevolent patriotism', generating a version of populism typically 'accompanied by an appeal to national identity as a source of meaning, and to the nation as a space to exercise the power of the People' (Gerbaudo, 2017: 5, 7). As already anticipated in relation to the fluctuating visibility of the nationed framework of Scottish literary studies, however, our contemporary sovereignist moment does not create nationalism, but simply makes more apparent the ways in which sovereignisms and the nationalist ideology by which they are accompanied frame the organisation of our societies. As Balibar notes, 'Nationalities, whether they have continued to exist over long time spans or had only had an ephemeral existence (something that is hardly ever known after the fact), have necessarily traversed critical circumstances in which their reproduction was by no means assured' (Balibar, 2004: 22); however, the nation-form is 'a type of "social formation"' or 'model for the articulation of the administrative and symbolic functions of the state' (Balibar, 2004: 17) which is not affected by historical contingencies. Malešević makes a similar point: if 'the intensity of national attachments is contextual and dynamic and as such is bound to wax and wane as social, economic and political conditions change' (Malešević, 2019: 4), then 'There is simply no way to avoid nationalism in a world whose legitimacy resides in the principle that the nation state is the only legitimate form of territorial organization'

(Malešević, 2019: 5). From a post-Indyref perspective, the question becomes to interrogate the extent to which different sovereignist discourses, movements and developments register in Scottish literary criticism and Scottish writing. This also involves theorizing the difference between the ways in which Scottish literature refracted and called attention to the post-postnational sovereignism of the indyref, which I discussed in the first section, and the extent to which Brexit has filtered into critical and literary imaginaries in Scottish literature which will constitute the focus of the next section.

#### **4. Nationed Silences: Brexit and Scottish Literary Studies**

From the perspective of English literature Brexit is 'not only political, economic and administrative: perhaps most significantly it is an event... grown from cultural beliefs, real or imaginary, about Europe and the UK' (Eaglestone, 2018: 1). In this framework literature has a role to play because it 'broadens and reflects on our ability to think, feel and argue' (Eaglestone, 2018: 2). Different dynamics operate in Scottish cultural and literary studies, as well as in a Scottish political context, where critics have largely remained silent about Brexit. The silence is especially deafening when compared to the fusion of cultural and political energy in the run-up to the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence which validated the nationed (and in some cases nationalist) contextualism of Scottish literature. The reason for this can be gleaned from Robert Eaglestone's reflections on the importance of the contribution literature can make in a Brexit context. As Eaglestone explains, if

Culture is the heart of national identity... One aspect of culture especially closely linked to national identity is literature: this is evident in the name of the subject that studies it, "English"; it is on this basis that 'literature is an especially useful and appropriate way to address the political arguments about national identity which lie at the heart of Brexit' (Eaglestone, 2018: 1).

In Eaglestone's definition, the national identity about which English literature as a critical field of studies and as a corpus of literary texts can help us think about is profoundly place-bound, and does not extend to Scotland.

There is another related reason behind the ways in which Brexit has been passed over in silence by Scottish literary critics. In Scotland, the institutional and popular response to Brexit has been mediated by the debate around the possibility of a second referendum on Scottish independence. This shows the post-Indyref conjuncture as a 'condition of afterness in which what is past is not left behind, but, on the contrary, relentlessly conditions, even dominates a present that nevertheless also breaks in some way with this past' (Brown, 2010: 21). The Indyref takes priority over Brexit in defining people's allegiances, whether in favour or against independence or the British state, in Scotland. Michel Keating has unpacked the clash of sovereignties and attendant 'radically different conceptions of the UK's largely unwritten constitution' (Keating, 2018: 40) by which the approaches to Brexit taken by Westminster and Holyrood are underwritten. While for the former there is nothing final in the devolution of power to the EU or Scotland, for the latter it is the *telos* of the United Kingdom as a unitary formation that is open to negotiation. The tension between competing sovereignties identified by Keating provides fertile ground for the development of conflict between competing sovereigntisms. As Nicola McEwen notes, 'The convincing Scottish majority vote for Remain alongside the UK vote to leave the EU has exposed the difficulties in reconciling rival self-determination claims' (McEwen, 2018: 65). The independence movement has also had to contend with another attempt at re-conciliation between the radical, Eurosceptic left wanting to leave both the EU and the UK, and those rejecting Brexit as undemocratically imposed on a Scottish electorate which repeatedly and consistently did not vote for it. The fact that these dynamics are not refracted at the level of Scottish literary criticism is indicative of the nationed contextualism of the field. Indeed, the political constitutions of English literature and Scottish literature can be evinced by the very different responses the two disciplines have provided to Brexit. If English literature's response to the EU referendum debate encapsulates a 'struggle between the forces of cosmopolitanism and nationalism' (Shaw, 2017: 16), in a Scottish context this layer is overlaid with a further, primary struggle between competing nationalisms (in which the Scottish one occupies the cosmopolitan side) and competing constitutional questions. Thus, Kristian Shaw's idea that in a UK context 'Brexit did not divide the nation, it merely

revealed the inherent divisions within society' (Shaw, 2017: 16) can be read to refer not only to the struggle between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, but also to the cracks in the territorial constitution of the UK that had been deepened by the Indyref and Brexit itself.

The fact that English literary studies can comfortably respond to Brexit, and Scottish literary studies cannot, confirms the nationalist contextualism of Scottish literature. Most importantly, by foregrounding the extent to which English literature shares a similar vulnerability to a national(ist) contextualism, it also forces us both to interrogate critical arguments that posit the exceptionalism of Scottish literature's contextualist impulse. Liam Connell introduces the concept of 'structural nationalism' to describe the attitude that underpins the conception of 'the relationship between Scottish and English culture in antagonistic terms' (Connell, 2003: 42). Eleanor Bell and Scott Hames have connected Connell's argument to Scottish literature's exceptionalism in terms of its approach to context and theory. The 'structural nationalism' of Scottish literature makes 'a certain evasion of theory inevitable' (Bell and Hames, 2007: 2) and engenders a critical practice 'of forcing the text to be handmaiden to something provably 'Scottish' outside itself' that 'has inhibited the critical reception of Scottish writers *as writers*' (Bell and Hames, 2007: 3). A comparative post-Indyref perspective on the responses provided by Scottish literature and English literature to Brexit on the one hand suggests that a form of structural nationalism attends all national literary histories, confirming Thomson's reflection that 'The writing of historiography in the national style does not describe the reaffirmation of national identity: it hopes to enact it' (Thomson, 2007: 5). Indeed, Brexit has driven critics in English literature to ask the very same questions that their Scottish counterparts have been grappling with over the past few decades: 'What role, if any, does literary studies have to play in responding to such cosmopolitical events? What is the purpose of "national" literature in a divided cultural landscape?' (Shaw, 2017: 18). On the other hand, this perspective reveals constitutional developments such as the Indyref and Brexit as crucial prisms through which the nationed framework and contextualism of literary fields of study can be appreciated. Ultimately, it demonstrates that Scottish literature is not anomalous

because it responds to constitutional developments in ways that evince a structural nationalism or nationalist contextualism; rather, it is uniquely well-versed in making visible for theorisation the underlying structures and vulnerabilities to national political contexts experienced by literary studies in general.

## **5. Nationed (Dis)Engagements: Brexit and Scottish Writing**

The differential interest displayed by Scottish literary criticism to the Indyref and Brexit positions Brexit as an event that culturally and politically cannot be unproblematically rooted not in a Scottish context but only negatively related to it. Politically, it has developed as a UK-wide issue which neglects Scottish considerations; culturally, the complexities of its relevance to Scottish politics have not been unpacked in Scottish cultural or literary criticism. Similar patterns of (dis) engagement can be tracked down in Scottish writing. Brexit is largely not dramatised in Scottish writing and when it appears it is not represented as belonging within the Scottish political sphere. I will delineate how this is the case considering two writers associated with Scottish literature, Andrew O'Hagan and Ali Smith, who have broken the wider literary silence about Brexit in Scottish writing. Significantly, both O'Hagan and Smith have spent their lives both in Scotland and England, and are currently based in the latter. On the one hand, this has underpinned their comfortable belonging within the canons of Scottish literature and British literature alike. On the other hand, it has allowed them to inhabit the interface between the cultural mediation of Brexit that has developed in the two areas and this section will seek to unpack how they differently navigate the possibilities this position opens up. First, I will discuss Andrew O'Hagan's 2017 keynote lecture 'Scotland Your Scotland', delivered at the Edinburgh International Book Festival and concerned with Brexit as imposed on Scotland. Secondly, I will address Ali Smith's seasonal quartet. The first three books of the quartet depict the Brexit conjuncture against the backdrop of the wall-building frenzy and anti-migrant sentiment that is integral to the post-Westphalian order that has nurtured Brexit. As Brown explains, 'sovereign nation-states no longer exclusively define the field of global political relations' but 'remain significant actors in that field, as well as symbols of national identification' (Brown,

2010: 24). As we will see, the first two books of Smith's quartet, *Autumn* (2016) and *Winter* (2017), represent the social and political dimension of Brexit in an English context, while the third novel, *Spring* (2019), features Scotland centrally but not in relation to Brexit. I will conclude this section by examining how other Scottish writing produced after the Brexit vote does not engage with Brexit but speaks to our contemporary sovereignist conjuncture by critically engaging the concepts of people and sovereignty.

The only explicit discussion of Brexit in relation to Scotland comes from O'Hagan and is couched in the form of political commentary rather than literary text. In his lecture 'Scotland Your Scotland' O'Hagan focuses on how Brexit affects and makes visible the constitutional relationship that binds Scotland and the UK. For O'Hagan, Brexit highlights the anti-democratic nature of current political arrangements whereby Scotland must accept political developments for which it has not voted (from Tory rule to Brexit). In delivering his contribution, O'Hagan effectively positions himself as a writer reflecting on the destiny of the nation in ways reminiscent of the assumptions underpinning the culturalist account of Scotland's constitutional development. He declares, 'That's what writers are for – to replenish the imagination... into an open space of fresh possibility that we will soon constitute the nation'. Prefacing discussion of Brexit with reflections on the legacy of the independence referendum, O'Hagan contends: 'It hardly matters whether or not I wanted the Nationalists to win, it was more than it felt they already had'. Brexit has deepened this feeling by generating 'an image of a belated Little England posing an existential threat to a Scotland that has seen itself for years as European' on the one hand and, on the other, by providing an example of how the sovereignty of the Scottish parliament is not taken seriously by Westminster. O'Hagan's focus is clearly placed on constitutional matters and the specific case of the Scottish Continuity Bill, passed in March 2016 by the Scottish parliament with the purpose of making provisions for Scotland's exit from the EU different from those laid out in the UK's EU Withdrawal Bill. On 25<sup>th</sup> July 2016 the Supreme Court decided that the bill approved by the Scottish parliament was not within its legislative competence and, as O'Hagan comments, 'For those of us who had always supported the idea of the



United Kingdom, it was a shattering moment, to see how willing [Theresa] May was to ride rough-shod over Scotland's discreet authority'.

In the first two novels of Smith's seasonal quartet, *Autumn* and *Winter*, Smith's focus lies on the divisive impact Brexit has had on British society. Significantly, the nation Smith represents in *Autumn* and *Winter* is a version of Britain from which Scotland is unimagined, unlike the complex geographical imaginary that connects the two in *Spring*. The two novels are set in England and beg to be situated in relation to a history of radical politics unfolding in English locales. They therefore do for Britain what Robertson's *And the Land Lay Still* did for Scotland, following Scottish society as it developed from the post-war era through de-industrialisation to the 1997 devolution referendum through the prisms of how characters experienced different eras and events. While in *Autumn* the EU referendum has just occurred and the focus is on the divided country this has left behind, in *Winter* the shadow of the referendum compounds the clashes between characters the novel is about. In *Autumn* the divide created by Brexit is made visible through the microcosm of a village where the mother of Elisabeth, one of the protagonists, lives: 'half the village isn't speaking to the other half of the village' (*Autumn*: 54). This reflects the situation that the whole country is grappling with, and we learn that: 'All across the country, there was misery and rejoicing... All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won... All across the country, the country split in pieces' (*Autumn*: 60).

In this divided UK, refugees and European migrants are portrayed as present but unbelonging within the society and communities represented in ways that (over)determine their experiences. It is in this sense that Smith presents borders as performing 'a "world-forming function"' (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013: 6). We are introduced to Daniel Gluck, dreaming of himself as an old man who 'washes up on a shore' (*Autumn*: 3) on the same beach where dead bodies are washed up, creating a sharp contrast to nearby tourists (*Autumn*: 12). As for EU migrants, we encounter them in the form of care assistants at the care home where Daniel is sleeping: 'Elisabeth wonders what's going to happen to all the care assistants. She realizes she hasn't so far encountered a single care assistant here who isn't from

somewhere else in the world' (*Autumn*: 112). The destiny of the care assistants is situated in the context of the Brexit debate by the featuring of a radio debate in which one spokesperson responds to their Remainer opponent 'Get over it. Grow up. Your time's over. Democracy. You lost' (*Autumn*: 112 – emphasis in original). The UK is also portrayed as a divided kingdom in the subsequent instalment, *Winter*. In this third instalment, refugees and migrants appear as othered in a post-Brexit society, as expressed by the fight between Charlotte and Art. For Art, 'the people from the EU being made to wait to see if they can stay in the country or not [had run] that risk. It's not our responsibility'; Charlotte disagrees, and responds, 'Is this like when we were talking about the people who drowned trying to cross the sea running away from war, and you said we didn't need to feel responsible because it had been *their choice* to run away from their houses being burned down and bombed' (*Winter*: 55).

*Spring* differs from *Autumn* and *Winter* in terms of location as it is set in Scotland, and from the very beginning it engages with the marginal position the country occupies in a stereotypical Anglo-centric consciousness. We encounter Richard, a TV director, as 'he is walking along the Euston Road and as he passes the British Library' in London (*Spring*: 23), and follow him as he leaves for Scotland almost by mistake: he 'puts his card into one of the ticket machines. He inserts the name of the place that's the furthest a train from here can go' and decides to get off the train at a random place on the way: Kingussie. Kingussie is dematerialised as Richard perceives it as 'King Gussie... like the robot announcer pronounces it over the speakers in London King's Cross above his head before he boards the train' (*Spring*: 25). Richard's unintentional journey to Kingussie is paralleled by that of Brittany, a custodial office working in an immigration removal centre, and Florence, a seemingly magical child that has worked miracles in the centre. The girl is drawn to Kingussie by a postcard which bears its name. When she asks Brittany where Kingussie is, the custody officer replies 'Well, it's in Scotland... 99.99% sure; at first she'd thought it might be Devon from the strangeness of the name, or if not maybe Yorkshire' (*Spring*: 173). The difficulty in grasping Kingussie as an individualised location is reinforced when Richard shows ignorance of Scotland's history in his exchanges with Alda Lyons, a local out-of-work librarian who sleeps in a disused coffee van. However,

Scotland's marginal position in UK or Anglo-centric imaginaries is not further unpacked in relation to how this plays out in the Brexit debate. Debates around the extent to which the 'territorially divided result' of the 2016 Brexit referendum 'ought to be regarded as constitutionally significant' (McHarg and Mitchell, 2017: 513) draws attention to the importance of issues of 'constitutional voice for the devolved institutions in Scotland and elsewhere' (McHarg and Mitchell, 2017: 518) in terms of the insufficient consideration given to the latter by the UK government. If, as Philip Rycroft amongst others has noted, 'Brexit has further soured the relationship between the Scottish and the UK governments' (2019), it has done so as a result of the marginalisation of the devolved administrations from the negotiations with Europe after the vote, which has been perceived in pro-independence quarters as compounding the democratic deficit created by the imposition of Brexit on Scotland.

Indeed, in *Spring* Brexit is not directly dramatised and is only mentioned when Richard remembers how his Irish scriptwriter and friend Paddy, who has recently died, had raged about 'the British government and Ireland... messing with the ancient hatreds' (*Spring*: 66). The reality of Brexit and its overwhelming presence are rendered through the prisms of the cacophony of voices that make up public opinion, to which the opening chapters of the three sections into which *Spring* is divided are devoted. All three sections express 'The popular desire for walling harbors a wish for the powers of protection, containment, and integration promised by sovereignty' (Brown, 2010: 26) that informs the sovereigntism of Brexit. The start of the first section reports:

We want the people we call foreign to feel foreign we need to make it clear they can't have rights unless we say so... We need to suggest the enemy within. We need enemies of the people we want their judges called enemies of the people we want their journalists called enemies of the people we want the people we decide to call enemies of the people called enemies of the people... We need a good old slogan Britain no England/America/Italy/France/Germany/Hungary/Poland/Brazil/[insert name of country] First' (*Spring*: 3–5).

In the opening chapter of the third section, anti-migrant sentiment is portrayed within the wider framework of hate crime on social media. We read: 'You are destroying the Western World so full of shit jimmy Savile should have raped you in Hospital you are disabled because God Hates You nex time you are out on a dark night we will get you good and your children you should be scared you immigrant shit' (*Spring*: 225). The power of social media and algorithms is another recurrent topic in ways reminiscent of Benjamin Moffitt's contention that contemporary populism must be rethought as it 'still based around the classic divide between "the people" and "the elite"' (Moffitt, 2016: 3) but defined by a 'a political style' (Moffitt, 2016: 4) and a novel 'reliance on new media technologies' (Moffitt, 2016: 3). The first cacophony of voices ends with the remark 'We need the dark web money algorithms social media' (*Spring*: 5) while the second is entirely devoted to conveying the algorithmic power that influences people's opinions: we are told, 'Now don't go getting us wrong. We want the best for you. We want to make the world more connected. We want you to feel the world is yours. We want you to see the world through us' (*Spring*: 119).

If the people in sovereignist movements are defined in relation to the Hobbesian sovereign authority to which it gives the mandate to enforce order, Smith renders the Leviathan as the Home Office, rather than as the UK government engaged in constitutional wrangles with Scotland and the EU. Smith's decision to engage with issues of sovereignty through the prisms of anti-migrant policing is apt as borders are central to the exercise of sovereignty and create 'spaces in which the transformations of sovereign power and the ambivalent nexus of politics and violence are never far from view' (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013: 4). In *Spring* we are offered a powerful snapshot of this border violence. Smith contrasts for us the battle of Culloden, after which 'all the local men and women and children out counting the corpses between Culloden and Inverness', with our contemporary anti-migrant policing. On Smith's contemporary battlefield 'a child runs across the grass over the bones of the dead and leaps into the arms of a young woman... Then what looks like a small mob of people in uniform is running towards them' (*Spring*: 332); the mob takes away, separately, the woman and the child (*Spring*: 333). The reaction of a few tourists to the Home Office raid is to 'follow the woman, the child and the officials to the car park, keeping

their distance', while some actors 'dressed up as people from the past, a bit like ghosts, ghosts from both sides of the battle, watch them being loaded into the vans' (*Spring*: 333). Smith offers a clear indictment of the collective failure to take action in solidarity with the migrant woman and child. While this connects with Smith's wider criticism of the ways in which refugees are not made to feel welcome, by attributing indifference to tourists and actors Smith crucially locates it on a plane disconnected from the performativity of solidarity action that is a feature of present-day Culloden.

But while the Culloden raid happened in October, the novel *Spring* ends in April, 'the anarchic, the final month, of Spring the great connective' (*Spring*: 336), with a portrayal of how Scotland provides space for different ways of connecting all people against the UK Leviathan embodied in the Home Office. As a striking departure from the indifference he had displayed in October towards local history and realities, in March 'Richard knows the road between Inverness and Culloden quite well, having gone back and fore, as people say up here, so many times interviewing for his new project, the film he's planning to call A Thousand Thousand People' (*Spring*: 269). As part of this project he is interviewing the people involved in the Auld Alliance, a network that helps detainees escape detention centres. We learn from a migrant turned activist that 'a system of Auld Alliance network members all over this country from Thurso to Truro who are working for, not against, the people that other people have designated invisible' (*Spring*: 273). We also discover that the Auld Alliance activists adopt a tactic whereby 'Everyone in the Auld Alliance network calls herself or himself by the name Alda or Aldo Lyons' (*Spring*: 270) and, aptly, Richard is 'filming people in silhouette, for anonymity' (*Spring*: 269).

The political subjects represented as forming the Auld Alliance are reminiscent of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's multitude. Unlike the 'people' that constitutes itself to give the Leviathan the mandate to rule, they are 'singularities that act in common' (Negri and Hardt, 2004: 100). The Auld Alliance fits the mould of those 'movements [that] have the potential to redefine fundamental social relations so that they strive not to take power as it is but to take power differently, to achieve a fundamentally new, democratic society' (Hardt and Negri, 2017: iii). Its focus on helping refugees and migrants escape detention proves Sandro Mezzadra and Brett

Neilson's point that borders expand possibilities for action and create a space within which new kinds of political subjects, which abide neither the logics of citizenship nor established methods of radical political organization and action, can trace their movements and multiply their powers' (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013: 14). Smith's decision to represent the Brexit conjuncture through the prism of anti-migrant policing rules out the possibility for the Leviathan to be embodied in the Scottish government as immigration does not lie within the powers devolved to the Scottish parliament. On a surface level, the novel speaks to the contemporary misconception that Scottish society is 'seen as welcoming and friendly towards incomers', while in fact it is not 'free from prejudice and is not generally supportive of maintaining or increasing current levels of immigration to Scotland' (Trevena, 2018: 3). However, it may also be read as supportive of Michael Gardiner's claim that 'a vital difference between Scottish and British is one of official state nationality: a person cannot be "officially" Scottish, since immigration and citizenship are administered by the British state' (Gardiner, 2005: 16). The Home Office of the novel operates as an intrusion from the British state in ways that might point to the impossibility for the Scottish state to take on the power and responsibility of managing immigration autonomously. However, the border struggles Smith represents imagine the space for a different society to be created outside the logics of the competing sovereigntisms that define UK and Scottish political contexts alike.

Similarly to *Spring*, John Burnside's *Havergey* and A.L. Kennedy's *The Little Snake* engage in an outright denunciation of forms of state sovereignty, although without mentioning Brexit or our contemporary political conjuncture explicitly. *Havergey* portrays the damage inflicted on nature and society by capitalism alongside attempts at creating an ideal community on the Scottish island of Havergey, after an environmental collapse strikes. This community is not organised along national lines but on the basis of non-hierarchical community relations. A local nomad, Ben The Watcher, explains 'I'm not so much interested in ideas like national character, but I do believe that place, if it's looked at closely enough, can say a great deal about how people behave' (*Havergey*: 14). He reflects 'Havergey is a wonderful place, and we have a wonderful community here. It's not like the old days, when community

was just a political word' (*Havergey*: 41). On the other hand, the sovereign power of the nation-state is represented as implicated in the environmental destruction caused by capitalist processes of accumulation and extraction. We learn that under 'the last Scottish government... any landowner could erect any number of wind turbines' despite protests by 'the people of Shetland – the real people that is, not the "business community"' (*Havergey*: 158), and that the Scottish government had thrown its legal weight behind a billionaire who sought to obliterate 'people's houses and gardens and at least one site of special scientific interest to build a luxury golf course' (*Havergey*: 157).

If *Havergey* interrogates and condemns the terms of reference of the sovereignist paradigm, so does Kennedy's *The Little Snake*. The novel tells the story of the friendship between Mary, a little girl who lives with her parents in a big city in an unnamed country, and Lamno, a little snake whose task is to travel the world biting people. We witness the destruction war wreaks on Mary's city and life, as Mary and her parent must flee after the city is destroyed in ways that speak to our contemporary displacement of populations from zones of war and civil war such as Syria and Libya. The territory represented is neither a decision *space* defined by 'the spatial reach of legislation and collective decisions' nor 'an *identity space* or a space of belonging' (Maier, 2016: 3). On the contrary, it is a place vulnerable to the whims of unnamed local people of power and foreign sovereigns that Lamno meets and bites. Among these is The Great Man Who Loved the People. We encounter him as he receives communication that the war that he has been 'conducting on behalf of the people had killed eighty per cent of the enemies of the people' and the one enemy city left standing, 'filled with women and children and the elderly', had surrendered (*Snake*: 3). The Great Man Who Loved the People orders the General to kill elderly, children and women alike because all would be able to constitute a new generation of enemies, as well as that the remainder of his own people should commit suicide because had not participated in the war. *The Little Snake* thus interrogates and critiques the sovereignist assumption that states 'operate according to general laws or norms' on the basis of which they merit 'loyalty from citizens and recognition from foreigners on grounds that go beyond the mere exercise of coercive power' (Maier, 2012: 34).

## 6. Conclusion

As of December 2019, the results of the UK General Election have confirmed the Scottish difference as far as voting patterns are concerned and have re-invigorated the pursuit of a second independence referendum. In the cultural sphere, the irrelevance of Brexit and the hegemony the legacy of the Indyref exercises in a Scottish context have also persisted. They demand consideration as mutually defining and as inseparable from the politics of both the discipline of Scottish literature and the pro-independence movement. No public event or publication has explicitly considered the relationship between Brexit and Scottish literature, although there have been talks that have engaged with the European dimensions of Scottish literature and possibly point to the only way in which Brexit can be registered in Scottish culture – as disconnected from the political sphere. On the contrary, in September 2019 an event was organised to discuss the ‘Indyref: Culture and Politics Five Years On’. This offered an opportunity to reflect on the legacy of the Indyref and to critically examine the constraints that constitutional politics imposes on the contribution of artists and writers, as well as on grassroots movements committed to its same aims. It was suggested that fear of co-optation into institutional politics is what will prevent a re-run of the synergy of cultural and political energy that characterised the referendum debate between 2012 and 2014. While it may be suggested that a similar fear is what has discouraged writers’ engagement with Brexit in Scotland, we should beware of an Indyref exceptionalism which posits the grassroots character of the Indyref as unique and as uniquely responsible for inspiring cultural responses. The cultural irrelevance of Brexit in Scotland maps more onto the refusal of the grassroots independence movement to take a position on Brexit to avoid tension between Eurosceptic and Remain constituencies, as exemplified by the themes treated at the 2019 conference of the Radical Independence Campaign. In both culture and politics the constitutional debate within Scotland is that which revolves around its constitutional persistence as a member of the United Kingdom or its separation as an independent nation-state. The Indyref was an exceptional moment of politicization for Scottish culture and literature which demonstrated the structural purchase nationalist politics maintains on both spheres. The silence on Brexit is



equally significant because confirms the differential attraction that constitutional developments present for the literary, critical and cultural imagination in a Scottish context depending on the extent to which these are perceived to belong within the Scottish political context. In this article I have sought to engage with this differential attraction as a way of investigating the mechanisms that power the politics of contextualism in Scottish literature. I have argued that critics' utter silence around Brexit in Scottish literature is not surprising when it is considered in relation to the nationed framework of Scottish literature and to the specific post-Indyref conjuncture that this intersects with. Scottish literary critics have been exclusively responsive to Scotland's constitutional development and this may seem to be warranted by the difficulty in imagining Brexit as unproblematically relevant to, or belonging within, Scottish history, culture or society that has been shown by writers who are currently based in Scotland and thus more exposed to its political context. Through the optic afforded by a post-Indyref perspective, two more sets of reflections about literary criticism and its relationship to context and literary texts can be drawn from the analysis conducted so far.

As I have sought to map out from multiple angles, the extent to which Brexit has filtered into the cultural imaginaries of our disciplines – whether Scottish or English literary studies – illuminates their ultimately nationed frameworks and contextualisms. A long-term perspective on the development of Scottish cultural studies since the 1980s suggests that if cultural studies originated as a 'radically contextualist and conjuncturalist' field in response to particular geo-historical conjunctures and committed to contributing to 'a better understanding of "what's going on"' (Grossberg, 2006: 1), its Scottish variant is defined by a nationed form of contextualism. A closer focus on our contemporary conjuncture allows a comparative angle to be turned on these general dynamics. The political as much as critical mo(ve)ments we are participating in are traversing a post-postnational turn with a sovereigntist semblance; a post-Indyref perspective on the interest with which Brexit has been met in Scottish and English literature is useful in determining how these dynamics play out. On the one hand, a post-Indyref perspective in and on Scottish studies acknowledges how the field has entered a post-postnational turn, and draws

attention to the relationship that obtains between the disturbance the Indyref originated in the post-national comfort zone that Scottish studies had inhabited since after devolution and the disturbance Brexit is now causing everywhere but in Scottish studies. On the other hand, a post-Indyref perspective on the response Brexit has attracted, or not, in Scottish literature calls out for interrogation of the ways in which different branches of literary studies have responded to and refracted the clash of competing sovereigntisms that characterises our contemporary post-postnational moment. Ultimately, if the nationed framework of Scottish literature has always overdetermined its concern with the importance of contexts in the study of Scottish writing, in doing so it has created a space for debate and enhanced self-reflexivity as far as the relationship between external political events and literary culture is concerned. This self-reflexivity is what encourages engagement with the changing discourses on the relevance of the national question for Scottish literature in Scottish literary studies, and with the extent to which these may index either the unfolding of different 'disciplinary turns' in the field or the 'state of constitutional unsettlement' that most visibly invested the United Kingdom (Walker 2014) in the run-up to the 2014 referendum, animating the very disciplinary procedures by which Scottish literature is constituted.

As for the critical theorisation of literary texts which engage with Brexit or related issues of sovereignty, peoplehood and anti-migrant sentiments, operating within the critical framework of Scottish literature involves a heightened degree of self-reflexivity. Should we claim there is no BrexLit in Scottish literature, or should we consider texts associated with Scottish literature that dramatise not Brexit but the sovereignist post-postnational moment that has fed it as constituting a form of 'Scottish BrexLit'? To what extent does the political constitution of Scottish literary studies enable critics to read as BrexLit novels that do not directly portray Brexit in relation to a Scottish context? Whether Smith's literary rendition of the Brexit cultural and political moment can be read to capture or critique the place of Scotland in the British Brexit imaginary, or whether it is better read as a piece of 'Scottish BrexLit', very much depends on which critical lenses we adopt. So does the extent to which *Havergey* and *A Little Snake* are theorised as parts of a tradition

of BrexLit, Scottish BrexLit, Scottish, British or world literature. The value of a post-Indyref perspective lies in its heuristic potential: it encourages us to acknowledge the extent to which how we answer these questions depends on the critical framework we situate our analysis in, the specific nationed contextualism this is attached to, and the political conjuncture from which we are writing. Thomson suggests that in order to counter the risk of 'substituting cultural for political debate, and of politicizing culture in instrumental ways' (Thomson, 2016: 86), cultural historians should 'recognise rather than disavow their role in this political process' (Thomson, 2016: 87). Although Thomson's comments refer to the effects of writers' and critics' prominent involvement in the political debate during the Indyref, his observations also speak to the Brexit conjuncture. One of the merits of a post-Indyref contextualisation of Scottish literature is the possibility that it affords to subject to scrutiny both critics' interventions and their silences as structurally nationed.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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