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WRITERS AND INTELLECTUALS ON BRITAIN AND EUROPE, 1918–2018

'It aye like London, you know': The Brexit Novel and the Cultural Politics of Devolution

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This paper takes Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2017) as its central focus, a novel commissioned by European publisher Peirene Press as a fictional response to the UK's 2016 Brexit vote. I provide a discussion of what I term the 'cultural politics of devolution' in Cartwright's text, suggesting that it offers a critique of the British centralised state form and makes demands for the decentralisation of political power. Focussed on a small deindustrialised town, *The Cut* is an English regional polemic exploring how uneven development played a decisive role in the outcome of the European Union referendum. Building on Doreen Massey's insight that places are not simply physical locations but 'articulations of social relations' (Massey, 1994: 22), my discussion of Cartwright's novel is concerned with the way a discursive, cultural *version* of 'the North' was mobilised ideologically as a fulcrum of the Leave vote within Brexit media and political discourse. I trace the ways in which *The Cut* responds to this manoeuvre in an ambivalent deployment of nostalgia as both a vehicle for regional devolution and a literary mode associated with a parochial version of 'the North' that continues to exist in the national imagination. As this paper demonstrates, the text equivocates between a radical nostalgia that highlights the need for constitutional reform and a reactionary turn to the industrial past. Ultimately, I propose that *The Cut* forecloses its own devolutionary potential in an aesthetic and thematic reliance on cultural stereotypes of Northernness, suggesting the limitations of nostalgia as a resource for constructing alternatives to the present.

1. Introduction

During one of her first public appearances as Prime Minister, Theresa May drew attention to the threat of nationalism to what she perceived as the important relationship between the constituents of the United Kingdom. On October 2016 at the Conservative Party Conference, May attempted to assure the Party of her commitment to constitutional stability in light of the vote to terminate membership of the European Union:

[b]ecause we voted in the referendum as one United Kingdom, we will negotiate as one United Kingdom, and we will leave the European Union as one United Kingdom. There is no opt-out from Brexit. I will never allow divisive nationalists to undermine the precious union between the four nations of the United Kingdom. (May, 2016)

The Prime Minister's public allegiance to the Union here is significant in several ways. First, May's 'one United Kingdom' unionist rhetoric demonstrates that constitutional tensions within the UK played a decisive role in the EU Referendum – the so-called 'Brexit Referendum'. Second, the speech exemplifies the extent to which a Westminster-located Britishness dominated political practice both before and after the referendum. It is significant that May's concern with the threat of nationalism appears to pertain solely to the integrity of the British Union, given that the remainder of her speech was directed at the Party's vision for achieving a 'global Britain' after Brexit (May, 2016)¹ The idea that the multiple and contrasting nations of the UK voted 'as one' is, in this account, little more than a last-ditch attempt at maintaining Britain's sovereignty as the integrity of the British 'state-nation' (Gardiner, 2013:4) comes under increasing scrutiny.² A Union based on notions of 'stability' and

¹ The project of 'global Britain' as the lifeblood of the Conservative Party's post-Brexit vision has since been replaced by Boris Johnson's promise to 'unleash Britain's potential' (Johnson, 2019) ahead of the general election on 12 December 2019.

² Energies for Scottish Independence following the victory of the Leave campaign were bolstered following the election of Boris Johnson as Prime Minister. See: Harriet Sherwood, 2019, 'Is Scotland finally set to bid farewell to the union?' 11 August. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/aug/11/snp-scotland-independence-referendum-brexit> [Accessed 19th November 2019].

'continuity' has been crucial in the postcolonial imagination of Britain as it attempts to reassert itself in a post-Empire, post-devolution, and now, post-Brexit-vote, context.³ The notion of 'global Britain' is all the while competing against the reality that, without an Empire, a Union between England, Scotland, and Wales bears little contemporary relevance. As May herself identifies, the emergence of nationalisms presents a further challenge to a unified and 'global' Britain. During and after the referendum, politicised forms of local or national identity were portrayed by certain strands of the media as nostalgic localisms at best, and at worst, straightforward xenophobia.⁴

Notably, both of these accolades relied on an imaginary version of Northern England, and were readily attributed to its mythological working class *demos*.⁵ Anthony Barnett's analysis of the vote identifies this manoeuvre, noting that 'the London media rushed to the North of England, to see if Brexit could be blamed on the lumpen working class missing out on the benefits of economic growth' therefore placing 'all the weight of reporting onto a mythological real country with authentically poor health'(Barnett, 2017: 103). Writing for *The New York Review of Books* shortly after the referendum result, Zadie Smith's assertion that London is an 'outward-looking city [...] so different from these narrow xenophobic places up north' (Smith, 2016) is suggestive of a broader homogenising tendency and the contribution of London exceptionalism towards the development of a regressive narrative of the North as both insular and inherently 'local'.

Anthony Cartwright's 2017 novel, *The Cut*, explores how 'the local' became associated with a reactionary form of working-class nostalgia in the context of Brexit.

³ This rhetoric was likewise mobilised during May's general election speech in which she urged the public to 'remove the risk of uncertainty and instability' and give Britain 'the strong and stable leadership it demands' (May, 2017).

⁴ Ken Dewar describes Brexit as having descended into 'English provincialism' (Dewar, 2019), while Channel Four's documentary *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (2019) reveals how the Leave campaign utilized this viewpoint to bolster their own campaign. See also: Zoe Williams, 2016, 'Think the north and the poor caused Brexit? Think again.' 7 August. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentsfree/2016/aug/07/north-poor-brexit-myths> [Accessed 17th September 2019].

⁵ The Socialist Resistance refers to the outcome of the vote as 'a victory for right-wing xenophobes', a 'victory for racism' and 'a mandate to strengthen the borders of Britain against immigration' (Socialist Resistance, 2016).

One of the earliest examples of what Kristian Shaw has termed 'BrexLit' (Shaw, 2018: 16), *The Cut* was commissioned as a response to the referendum by European publisher Peirene Press and given the task of 'building a fictional bridge between the two Britains that opposed each other on referendum day' (Cartwright, 2017). The novel's form echoes Brexit's overarching narrative of division. Arranged in alternating chapters titled 'before' and 'after', *The Cut* tells the gradually merging stories of filmmaker Grace Trevithick – a signifier of London-based cognitive labor – and Cairo Jukes, a precariously employed manual labourer who represents the so-called 'left behind' deindustrial working class. Grace has travelled North from London to 'get the voices of ordinary people' (Cartwright, 2017: 22) and speak to them about their voting choices, a project which leads to her meeting Cairo. Told through their contrasting perspectives, the narrative reflects how the English 'local' and the British 'global' became competing, incompatible discourses of class and geography. As the novel suggests, this dichotomy led to the desire for political representation in England's non-metropolitan regions being replayed as a kind of grumbling nativism alongside a supposedly progressive, outward-looking global Britishness.⁶

It is the peculiar tension between the English 'local' and the British 'global' that forms the focus of this article. As *The Cut* makes clear, this binaristic discourse overlooks the reality that the referendum provided a vehicle for subnational political representation; for many, the vote presented a challenge to the biases of the centralised state and spoke to a need for the redistribution of political power.⁷ Cartwright's distinct focus on England's socio-economic hinterlands demonstrates how, concurrent with May harnessing unionist rhetoric and claims of the 'precious' union between the four nations of the UK, England's own fractures demand closer attention. As Jason Cowley and Katy Shaw rightfully point out:

⁶ See, for example: Tim Oliver, 2017, 'An English Foreign Policy: Little England or Little Britain?' *The London School of Economics and Political Science*. 23 April 2017. Available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/an-english-foreign-policy-little-england-or-little-britain/> [Accessed 5th February 2019].

⁷ Scotland overwhelmingly voted to remain with a twenty-four percent majority, overtaking London's twenty percent majority in favour of remaining, whereas Wales only narrowly voted to leave and England-without-London voted to leave by a decisive majority of near eleven percent (Clarke, Goodwin and Whitley, 2017: 3).

across the country – but especially beyond the boundaries of the M25 – the sense has grown that the English lack agency and true democratic power. The absence of an English parliament or a proper forum to debate England-only matters has led to feelings of disempowerment. The discontinuities and imbalances between the four home nations (really three nations and a troubled province) have created a democratic deficit in England, especially in the north, the south-west and the eastern coastal towns. For many, the modern UK is less a union of partners than an unhappy family grappling with long-nurtured resentments. (Cowley and Shaw, 2019)

Likewise, the referendum's voting demographics reveal that uneven development was a significant factor in voting choices. Data from the Country Land and Business Association shows that people in small towns or rural areas voted to leave in greater numbers than the national average, with 55% in places classified as 'rural' voting to leave (Country Land and Business Association, n.d.). These figures illustrate how the Brexit vote spoke to existing schisms between voters residing in economically prosperous cities such as London, Edinburgh and Manchester (all of which voted to remain in the EU) and those living in small towns (particularly those who had experienced deindustrialisation) and rural areas.⁸ Focused on a small deindustrial town and its working-class community, *The Cut* engages with the tensions Cowley and Shaw describe here, illustrating how discourses surrounding place and class were mobilised in a way that reinforced the socio-economic and political marginality of deindustrial regions of England. It is possible, then, to identify what I term the 'cultural politics of devolution' at work in Cartwright's novel.⁹

Before I turn to the novel in more detail, however, I want to briefly explore the changing critical usages of nostalgia which help illustrate its ambiguous function

⁸ See, for example: Harry Bromley-Davenport, Julie MacLeavy and David Manley, 2019, 'Brexit in Sunderland: The production of difference and division in the UK referendum on European Union Membership.' *EPC: Politics and Space* 37 (5): 795–812.

⁹ The 'cultural politics of devolution' refers to a cultural form that is overtly didactic. Such a text's aesthetic and/or thematic concerns draw attention to the spatial biases and inequalities of the British centralised state form in order to make demands – implicitly or explicitly – for the decentralisation of power.

in *The Cut*. While the original coinage – combining the Greek for home (*nostos*) and pain (*algos*) – relates to a profound longing for the home that produced physical and psychological effects, nostalgia has since become displaced from its medical origins. Especially in a literary context, the term has longstanding links with regionalism.¹⁰ As Tammy Clewell finds, by the eighteenth century, 'nostalgia ceased to be regarded in pathological terms, it assumed a temporal form [and...] came to name [...] an emotional longing for a lost time' (Clewell, 2013: 5). There is a tradition in the English regional novel to tie nostalgia to a specific form of parochial working-class culture. Dominic Head points out that since its emergence in the 1920s and 1930s, 'the more overtly political element of this regional consciousness, rooted in the recognition of economic hardship, is that it has the plight of the working classes at its heart' (Head, 2017: 129). However, Head goes on to explain that the regional novel's political conscious is often limited by 'the problem of the backward look', which avoids 'the inevitable onward march of progress' (Head, 2017: 129), thereby resulting in a regressive, apolitical nostalgia that fails to confront the challenges of the present. As Stuart Tannock suggests, 'hostility towards nostalgia is fuelled in particular by the recurrent co-option of nostalgia by conservative, reactionary politics' (Tannock, 1995: 455), but such critiques risk conflating nostalgia with 'the desire for a stable, traditional, and hierarchised society' (Tannock, 1995: 455). Akin to Tannock, Alistair Bonnet suggests that the past holds the potential to make a radical intervention in debates about the present, arguing that 'the difficulty of dealing with sudden and massive social change' is precisely the condition of nostalgia 'in its distinctly modern form' (Bonnett, 2010: 19). For Bonnett, 'nostalgia exists within and against modernity and is integral to the radical imagination' (Bonnett, 2010: 11) rather than acting as a barrier to it.

So, then, we might say that nostalgia is often stuck in a dichotomy in which it is seen as either necessarily conservative or as a politicised response to profound social upheaval. In Svetlana Boym's influential study *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), she distinguishes between 'restorative' and 'reflexive' nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia

¹⁰ See Phyllis Bentley, 1941, *The English Regional Novel*. New South Wales: G. Allen & Unwin.

is regressive in that it signals a return to 'the original stasis' (Boym, 2001: 49), whereas reflexive nostalgia is more forward-looking, suggesting 'new flexibility' and emphasising 'social memory' (Boym, 2011: xviii; 49). Boym explains that while restorative nostalgia prioritises *nostos*, and proposes to rebuild the lost home, reflexive nostalgia dwells in 'algia' (*algos*) (Boym, 2001: 45). Restorative nostalgia often manifests itself in complete reconstructions of monuments of the past, while reflexive nostalgia lingers on ruins, cherishing 'shattered fragments of memory'; the former is limited by its idealising tendencies, viewing the past as 'a perfect snapshot' (Boym, 2001: 49). Boym's distinction between restorative and reflexive nostalgia offers a critical framework to think through the literary implications of how a provincial, restorative kind of nostalgia became yoked to a particular Northern iconography. *The Cut* resists a neat distinction between reflexive and restorative nostalgia. While the novel utilises nostalgic images of industry and labour to prioritise the voices of socio-politically marginalised communities, it invariably remains caught within the narrative of reactionary provincialism and thus partially operates within the stereotypes it ostensibly aims to deconstruct.

Joe Kennedy's concept of 'pseudo-ethnography' neatly captures this paradox. According to Kennedy, cultural and literary provincialism of recent years 'has taken the form of [...] a kind of pseudo-ethnography central to political authentocracy that pretends to be getting away from "metropolitan elites" to tell it like it is but, in fact, has already decided what it wants to find when it gets there' (Kennedy, 2018: 81). Indeed, *The Cut* – and Brexit fiction more broadly – typically made the authentocratic move of using the British provinces as a code for realism.¹¹ This association between 'provincial England' and 'realism', as I demonstrate in the analysis that follows, revealed itself to be built out of a set of tropes that rely on a reified, nostalgic and inherently working-class version of the North that continues to function ideologically in the wider cultural and political imagination. What role, then, does the English regional novel have to play in a post-Brexit-vote national context? How might we read fiction set in England's socio-economic peripheries as a challenge to the British

¹¹ See also Adam Thorpe's *Missing Fay* (2017) and Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018).

centralised state form? Is there potential for regional literature to offer productive ways of reconceptualising the relationship between region and nation in a manner that transcends the limits of parochial insularity and underlines the urgency for adequate political representation within England? Exploring these questions, I propose that the novel's ambivalent engagement with the nostalgic mode is a telling contemplation on the place of the North within the wider national imagination that was explicitly played out during Brexit. As this essay argues, the text equivocates between a reactionary – or 'restorative' – engagement with the past that reinforces stereotypes surrounding deindustrial space and the North while at the same time evoking a radical – or reflexive – nostalgia that mobilises place-bound history to highlight the need for radical constitutional reform.

Cartwright's oeuvre represents a literary attempt to confront socio-economic and geopolitical peripherality; all of his work to date has been set in the Black Country, in areas which have undergone severe economic decline, and during the post-war period and after, been positioned as provincial backwaters associated with redundancy and decay. Marked by a defiant sense of place and working-class identity, Cartwright's novels are concerned with the cultural, financial and political implications of deindustrialisation. The dismantling of place-bound industry, the impact of increasingly globalised production, and a growing disillusionment with the political system, are concerns to which his work consistently returns. *The Afterglow* (2004) centres on a working-class community in the wake of the destruction of the Midlands' steelworks, exploring the subsequent mourning for 'belonging to something, of being part of something bigger than yourself' (Cartwright, 2004: 4) that industrial work offered. The marginalisation of an (often masculine) working-class culture is also central to *How I Killed Margaret Thatcher* (2012), a fictional response to Thatcher's 1979 election victory. Uneven development and regional inequality are also at the core of *Heartland* (2009) and *Iron Towns* (2016), both of which capture the socio-economic and political dispossession experienced within deindustrial towns. In many ways, then, Cartwright's earlier fiction foreshadows the role of place and class in the Brexit referendum, identifying the tensions between England's formerly industrial regions and its political heartland that reach a climax in *The Cut*.

2. Class, London Media and 'the North'

Brexit, however, is not merely a question of place. Central to the referendum was the notion of class as a socio-economic relation, with commentators regarding the vote as a 'modern day Peasants' Revolt' (Kingsnorth, 2016) or symptomatic of a wider 'working-class identity crisis' in low-wage Britain (Bloodworth, 2018: n.p.).¹² Within literary culture, the emerging body of work we might describe as 'BrexLit' (Shaw, 2018: 16) readily identifies social class as an urgent concern.¹³ Joe Kennedy goes as far as to suggest that the Brexit novel 'appears to denote a contemporary declension of the condition of England novel, a mode which has always concerned itself with the social schisms underlying a given English polity and the tenability of those polities in the face of such fractures' (Kennedy, 2017). Indeed, *The Cut's* critique of the British centralised state form lends itself to the definition Kennedy sets out here, emphasising the bricolage of social cleavages spearheaded in the Brexit vote.

Yet, it is important to note that Brexit was far from an exclusively *working-class* 'revolt' as some commentators have suggested, and what is too often missing from accounts that seek to explain result is the fact that the wealthy, land-owning rich were a largely Leave-voting demographic. As Phil O'Brien rightly points out, 'the clammer to point the finger at an imagined working class' in the wake of the referendum result elides the reality that 'the Leave campaign was not only orchestrated by those wedded to the ideology of neoliberalism but was also able to mobilise a broad-based coalition of voters which is much more wide-ranging than the "left behind"' (O'Brien, 2020: 15). For example, Brendan O'Neill's analysis of voting demographics appears to rely on an overly simplistic reading of class defined solely in economic terms:

The Brexiteer/Remainer divide splits almost perfectly, and beautifully, along class lines. Of local authorities that have a high number of manufacturing

¹² A report by the Joseph Roundtree Foundation highlights the relationship between socioeconomic inequality and voting choices. See Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath, 2016, 'Brexit vote explained: poverty, low skills and lack of opportunities.' *Joseph Roundtree Foundation*. Available at <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/brexit-vote-explained-poverty-low-skills-and-lack-opportunities> [Accessed 20th November 2019].

¹³ See: Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* (London: Little, Brown, 2017); Adam Thorpe's *Missing Fay* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2017), and Sarah Moss' *Ghost Wall* (London: Granta, 2018).

jobs, a whopping 86 per cent voted Leave. Of those bits of Britain with low manufacturing, only 42 per cent did so. Of local authorities with average house prices of less than £282,000, 79 per cent voted Leave; where house prices are above that figure, just 28 per cent did so. (O'Neill, 2016)

However, while it is important to note O'Neill's elision of the social and cultural nuances of class, this data does pinpoint an important relationship between uneven development and the Leave vote. In any event, voting demographics alone swiftly dispel the Blairite myth of a post-class society, indicating how socio-economic configurations of class are spatialised and operate within broader regional power dynamics within the country.

In *The Cut*, Grace's documentary is an extended allegorisation of the intranational relations between an – ambiguously defined – deindustrial 'North' and the South of England. Although Cartwright explicitly locates the novel in Dudley, a small town in the Midlands, the fact that Grace is described as travelling 'North' to speak to Leave voters – and very much views Dudley as part of the North – is emblematic of the ways in which the region operates in the national imagination as more of a socio-economic category whose cultural representation is constructed within certain characteristics and aesthetics, rather than a precisely defined geographical territory.¹⁴ As Tom Hazledine suggests:

what most binds the North together is industrial tradition plus political discontent—but it shows up across the whole gamut of socio-economic indicators: output, jobs, incomes, house prices, education, life expectancy. The aggregated statistics point to a fissure running east to west between the Humber and Severn estuaries, stranding the northern regions, the West Midlands except Warwickshire and the East Midland counties of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire in the zone of relative economic disadvantage. (Hazledine, 2017: 54)

¹⁴ See Dave Russell, 2004, *Looking North: Northern England and the National Imagination*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. For a discussion of how 'Northernness' has effectively operated as a socio-economic class category since industrialisation, see Dodd (1990).

Casting Dudley as a kind of 'second-rate Lowry' (Dodd, 1990: 17), Grace's documentary is premised on this discursive, cultural version of the North in which 'class and region have become [...] elided', leading to 'the north's imagined place in the national consciousness as the land of the working class' (Russell and Wagg, 2010: x). Doreen Massey likewise proposes that we think relationally about the spatialisation of capitalist production, maintaining that 'questions of geography in the United Kingdom reflect, not just the formal relations of production, but wider questions of politics, power and social class' (Massey, 1984: 295). Building on Massey's insight that places are not simply physical locations but 'articulations of social relations' (Massey, 1994: 22), this article is less concerned with defining precise territorial boundaries than with the way in which a particular *version* of the North as a socio-economic and cultural category was mobilised as a fulcrum of the Leave vote within Brexit media and political discourse.

It is important to be clear here that in discussing the relations between the 'North' and 'South' of England I am not advocating a simplistic binary opposition between the two, but rather, a complex web of changing socio-economic and geopolitical relations that transcend geographical boundaries; successive rounds of uneven development and the emergence of technologised mass culture have led to murkier socio-spatial divisions than can be adequately discussed in binaristic nomenclature.¹⁵ Mapped onto this geographical displacement between metropole and deindustrial periphery is a clear socio-economic class division. Throughout the novel, Grace and Cairo's relationship – both professional and otherwise – is defined by cultural assumptions that reflect a media bias towards homogenising stereotypes of working-class identities at the time of Brexit. During one of their first meetings, Cairo expresses his frustration at this tendency, explaining how: 'on the telly and that, papers, just been told we'm all stupid, held up for ridicule' (Cartwright, 2017: 43).

¹⁵ The North-South divide is inadequate for representing the spatial division of labour in the twenty-first century, eliding new metropolitan and non-metropolitan and urban-rural divides. This is complicated by attempts to replicate London's financial and cultural prosperity in Manchester via the Northern Powerhouse initiative and the decentralisation of the BBC to Salford's Media City UK. These projects essentially employ Manchester as a metonym for the North and reflect depoliticised attempts at regional devolution.

Cairo's lament refers to the media coverage of the Dudley Ferris Wheel being erected in the town centre and the locals' despair that the much-needed public funding had been spent on a tourist attraction.¹⁶ Consequently, the area and its inhabitants were mocked by the press in a political manoeuvre that held up the town and its residents as embodiments of regional backwardness and a nostalgic opposition to modern urban development. This contextual reference speaks to a complex social geography in which 'the subjective notions of class are bound up with place and location' (Savage, 2015: 295), emphasising the role of the media in perpetuating a reifying cultural imaginary of deindustrial places and their communities. Indeed, there is as Kennedy observes, a dominant narrative in the UK in which "real people" need to be listened to and "respected", but in practice this tends to amount to the circulation of a one-dimensional portrait of "provincials" grounded in a simplistic, badly modelled circulation between the "elites of Islington", or wherever' (Kennedy, 2018: 11). The reference to the Ferris Wheel engages with the tensions Kennedy describes here, paralleling a Brexit discourse that was invariably simplifying and always came down to a non-sense binary opposition between an uneducated working-class North and a socially progressive, liberal Southern elite. In this way, we can read Grace as a bastion of metropolitan authority and class privilege, while Cairo serves as a regional metaphor for dispossession and poverty.

The Cut's use of regional dialect establishes how socio-economic configurations of class operate within broader regional power dynamics. Cairo's regional vernacular – of 'we'm' 'yer' 'doh' and 'yow' – is juxtaposed with Grace's Standard English, demonstrating a kind of quasi-postcolonial power relation between the two. Indeed, the 'invisible veil' (Cartwright, 2017: 19) between them is initially articulated linguistically. When Cairo's interview with Grace is broadcast on the television, 'they put subtitles over his words, translated into his own language, and sometimes they did not. But there he was, playing on some endless loop, making sense and not

¹⁶ *The Telegraph* captured the public outrage caused by the wheel. See "'Britain's worst tourist attraction': Ferris wheel gives panoramic views... of Dudley.' (No named author, 2016). *The Telegraph*. 15 March. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/howaboutthat/12194700/Britains-worst-tourist-attraction-Dudley-West-Midlands-ferris-wheel.html> [Accessed 20th November 2019].

making sense at all' (Cartwright, 2017: 21). This image of Cairo watching himself on television in which his regional dialect has been translated demonstrates a class manoeuvre in which the working-class subject is unable to speak for themselves. Here, Cairo's words are appropriated and effectively given back to him by a middle-class narrator in order that they may be broadcast to the nation, evoking how '[t]he othering of the North operates within a specific set of power relations, in which the North is subordinated to a London and South-East centric locus of national economic, governmental, media and cultural power' (Phillips, 2017: 150–151). This translation process explicitly enacts how places within England are, as Mike Savage puts it, 'moralised through the lens of the dominant London worldview' (Savage, 2015: 263). The way in which Cairo's words are mediated by the authority of London-based media is analogous to Westminster's political stranglehold in the British centralised state form. Cairo's inability to represent himself is continued throughout the novel, as voice becomes an allegory for political autonomy and representation.

The devolutionary potential of regional dialect has already been identified as a recurring aesthetic in Cartwright's work. Phil O'Brien pinpoints a 'Dudley demotic' at work in Cartwright's fiction, suggesting that his novels:

merge a form of Standard English with an explicit urban and industrial working-class Dudley accent and dialect. Quotation marks, separating the language of the characters from the authorial third-person narrator, are never used. This collapses the distance between the two and positions the narrative voice closer to the subjective experiences of the novel's working-class characters, presenting them as equivalents. (O'Brien, 2018: 113)

While O'Brien's suggestion that Cartwright's deployment of regional dialect resists dominant class structures certainly holds true, I want to suggest here that the radical potential of *The Cut's* regional dialect can also be problematised. On the one hand, the dialect in the novel operates as a counterpoint to Grace's documentary in which Cairo takes authorial ownership of his experience; this authorial refocussing is devolutionary in that it offers a decentred narrative perspective focussed on the voice of those who are ordinarily marginalised. In this respect, regional dialect

provides a voice for a voiceless constituency, providing a polemical challenge to the authorities and conventions (both literary and political) whose vested interests in British unionism have been maintained by neglecting the voices of deindustrial communities but also through persistent insular images of provincial locales.

On the other hand, however, this devolutionary potential is undercut by the dialect's association with regional otherness and an inherently nostalgic version of 'the local'. *The Cut's* deployment of regional dialect to prioritise deindustrial working-class voices can therefore be complicated by what Raymond Williams terms 'the orthography of the uneducated' (Williams, 2001: 245). In the novel, the narrative voice and Grace's speech are written entirely in Standard English, while only the speech of Dudley's residents is represented in dialogue with an unconventional spelling. Crucially, according to Williams, the 'error' here is in 'supposing that the ordinary spelling indicates how proper people speak' (Williams, 2001: 245). Cartwright's use of 'you' for the narrator, and 'yer' (Cartwright, 2017: 63) for Dudley's residents therefore reinstates the otherness of the community against their difference from a standardised national linguistic form. This tension is reinforced by the novel's socially realist narrative perspective, a style 'heavily associated with the depiction of (especially) northern life' (Head, 2002: 5) and 'authentic', gritty working-class cultural representation.¹⁷ In this sense, regional dialect is a stumbling block for the novel, signalling an impasse in its devolutionary politics; it is both politically enabling and a self-exoticising lens that perpetuates uneven power relations between the North and South of England.

¹⁷ These dominant images of bleak, industrial towns emerging at the time of the industrial revolution took on a new significance during the North's moment of cultural vogue during the post-war period in the mid-to-late twentieth century. During the 1950s and 1960s, the emergence of Mersey Beat, the films associated with the British New Wave, early Northern Soul, and the Angry Young Man movement contributed to a sub-genre of specifically Northern cultural and literary production often described as 'Northern grit'. This category was characterised by a formal reliance on social realism and centred on racialised stereotypes of white working-class masculinity, a 'keep calm and carry on' attitude, authenticity, nostalgia, and a strong sense of community identity associated with manual labour, all of which were said to represent the everyday lives and voices of England's 'ordinary people'. Significantly, these representations frequently employed deindustrial *leitmotifs* situated in the decaying urban environments of Northern England and the Midlands. This not only served to function as a response to Thatcherism's dismantling of manufacturing industries but simultaneously contributed to a vision of the North as an urban-industrial monolith marked by dispossession and alienation.

3. Nostalgia and Deindustrial Space

The Cut's deindustrial aesthetics emerge from within existing narratives of place, mobilising regional representation as a mechanism for re-establishing class within the national conversation. Through the persistence of the material landscape as a signifier of the region's manufacturing history, the novel establishes a place-bound identity that stands in opposition to Westminster's centralised national consciousness. Emphasising a history of uneven development, *The Cut* draws attention to the socio-economic processes that continue to shape the region's cultural iconography and in turn, its place in the wider national imagination. As Williams writes of the Welsh deindustrial novel, 'industrial work and its characteristic places and communities are not just a new background: a new "setting" for a story. In the true industrial novel they are seen as formative' (Williams, 2005: 221). In a similar manner, industrial ruins and dilapidated buildings feature prominently in Cartwright's description of Dudley. Deindustrial urban space thus becomes a representational strategy through which to reflect the social hierarchies of power that designate the region and its inhabitants to a position of inferiority and otherness. Descriptive passages of the landscape are punctuated by buildings and factories that once signified economic progress and growth in the town, but are now 'totally disintegrated' (Cartwright, 2017: 22) and left as out-of-place anachronisms and architectural embodiments of persistent uneven development.

Cartwright frequently presents us with a contemporary condition marked by waste in order to articulate nostalgia for the years of industrial prosperity. Cairo works on an area referred to as 'the wasteland' (Cartwright, 2017: 37), a microcosm of an entire regional image centred on deindustrialisation signifying what Katherine Cockin terms a 'Northern Wasteland' (Cockin, 2012: 1). This iconography takes on a hauntological presence to represent the geographic effects of distance from Westminster, articulating England's regional democratic deficit through the landscape. Katy Shaw has recently identified the resurgence of English fiction that explores aspects of hauntological praxis by raising concepts of nostalgia and memory, mobilising sample-like intertextuality and representing the agency of the return (Shaw, 2017: 16). Indeed, the spectral presence of industry in *The Cut* signifies a form of reflexive nostalgia that responds to the socio-economic and political disconnection between

region and nation through a hauntological temporal disruption. The persistence of the past as a characteristic of Dudley's townscape renders acutely visible the way in which the spatial divisions of labour are constructed and reconstructed over time, solidifying the processes of uneven development and the aspatial concentration of capital. This devolutionary imperative can likewise be observed in the narrative's local specificity, which serves as an attempt to pull away from dominant centralised modes of power:

Cairo would bolt down the hill, racing the water that ran off and ended up in the Severn, down and over the Rowley Road and through Warren's Hall and past the ponds and the gravel where they used to sometimes torch the cars and down the black paths, past the ruin of the engine house where the engine had pumped water from the mine, and the coal had fired the engines and the furnaces, and forged the country as it became. And here were the ruins, and here were the ghosts of people among them. (Cartwright, 2017: 100)

These frequent references to the closure and subsequent privatisation of steelworks during the 1990s textually replicate the community's inability to escape the spectral presence of deindustrialisation and its aftermath, despite their labour 'forg[ing] the country'. The novel's shift from placed spatial markers ('Rowley Road' and 'Warren's Hall') to nameless abstractions ('ruins' and 'ghosts') frames the local community as isolated against a prevailing image of stasis, presenting the material environment and its populace as trapped within a regional iconography 'dominated by nostalgia and a spectral history of oppression' (Phillips, 2017: 146).

This process also emerges during one of Grace's train journeys in which she passes 'an expanse of rubble as the train came out of Birmingham' (Cartwright, 2017: 22). These remnants of industry serve as reflections of the region's longstanding neglect in favour of a metropolitan ideology of 'Global' Britishness, a project presented as far removed from the everyday concern of Dudley's local community. O'Brien likewise identifies a dialectic relationship between haunted landscapes and twenty-first-century modernity, suggesting that the function of material space is a central

characteristic of the contemporary deindustrial novel as a means to 'understand the processes of neoliberalism and deindustrialisation through an engagement with landscape' (O'Brien, 2016: 235). In this sense, we can think of the disintegrated factory and ruins of industry as nostalgic symbols emblematic of a disaffection with the flexible production methods of the global contemporary, evoking a desire to return to a Fordist past that at least offered some form of stability and continuity.

These architectural anachronisms also embody the cultural inertia and political powerlessness felt within deindustrial communities and help establish what Williams describes as a 'residual structure of feeling' (Williams, 1977: 134). Williams emphasises that the residual structure of feeling is formed in the past but remains very much alive in the present. As he explains:

Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue – cultural as well as social – of some previous social and cultural institution or formation. (Williams, 1977: 122)

Williams goes on to suggest that this residual structure of feeling may have an alternative or even oppositional relationship to dominant culture. Likewise, in *The Cut*, the affective experience of widespread political inefficacy stands in opposition to a national politics that neglects deindustrial communities:

'We've had enough,' is what [Cairo] said [to Grace], with the sun on the footballer, and the church and the castle behind him and the soft shadow of the buildings and his face dusted with some unknown material, which he would no doubt breathe in and whatever it was would be there in his lungs, *burning through the years*. (Cartwright, 2017: 21 [emphasis original])

This alignment of Cairo's body with the inevitability of the side-effects of industrial work and its health implications not only symbolises his lack of agency and voice, but corporeally register years of industrial decline that continue to shape perceptions of the region and its inhabitants. Fundamentally, the spectral image of Cairo standing

in the town inhaling debris from disintegrating buildings aptly depicts the dangers of industrial work, but also how it was nonetheless central to the formation of the self.

4. Nostalgia, Labour and the Self

The novel's deployment of nostalgia extends to the loss of labour as a mode of place-bound self-identification. In Dudley, as in many other industrial towns, identity – particularly working-class masculinities – was at one time something forged through work.¹⁸ Now, in the late capitalist era of globalisation and flexible accumulation, employment is scarce and, in *The Cut*, usually takes the form of insecure manual labour. It is important to note that the novel's nostalgia does not primarily concern the financial implications of industrial decline, but the displacement of a specifically gendered iteration of working-class culture and identity. During an interview with Grace, Cairo's father reflects that 'there used to be work for all the men. Man's work, not like now [...]. There used to be a culture that went alongside the work' (Cartwright, 2017: 55). Cairo's father experiences the contemporary through loss, now that the material security of industrial labour has given way to precarity. Here, nostalgia pertains to a particular form of working-class subjectivity tied to productive industrial labour.¹⁹ Notably, this is an historical identity to which Cairo's father has a deep personal affiliation – his ancestors were 'nailers', 'puddlers', 'coal pickers' and 'navies' (Cartwright, 2017: 46) – but which he is unable to translate to the contemporary employment landscape centred on cognitive or alienated labour. As Sherry-Lee Linkon reminds us, although the work itself was often unpleasant and dangerous, 'the mythology surrounding productive labour, with the associated benefits of the family wage, labour, solidarity, and physical prowess has long played a key role in defining working-class masculine identities' (Linkon, 2014: 148). Acknowledging this 'mythology of productive labour', *The Cut* responds to how the modern condition of proletarianisation and flexible, post-Fordist production methods prevent the forging of shared communal histories, instead resulting in a form of cultural alienation in which the relations of gender and class are compounded by the spatial divisions of labour.

¹⁸ See, for example, Massimiliano Molona, 2009, *Made in Sheffield: An Ethnography of Industrial Work*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.

¹⁹ For an account of Brexit as a symptom of Britain's working-class identity crisis, see Bloodworth (2018).

Moreover, in opposition to the identity-bearing capacity of community-based labour, the 'gig-economy' of zero-hours contracts mean that, for Cairo's father and others like him, work is now 'like a plague, eating away at them all' (Cartwright, 2017: 101) as they come to occupy a liminal hauntological presence in the contemporary. Far from becoming active political participants in the present, these men are 'from some bygone era' (Cartwright, 2017: 37), experiencing the contemporary as 'a global epidemic of nostalgia with an effective yearning for a community with a collective memory, a longing for continuity in a fragmented world' (Bauman, 2017: 3). This loss of localised physical labour highlights the socio-economic and cultural resources for constructing masculinity that industrial work made available for most of the twentieth century throughout the UK; the novel registers a form of contemporary lack through nostalgia for a time when the region played an active role in the national project of industrial modernity. Yet, it is important to note that this form of nostalgia is ultimately restorative and works to mask the hardships associated with industrial labour. Cairo's father's longing for the stability of Fordism elides the deeply entrenched class stratification that occurred alongside such forms of production; it succumbs to a limitation of nostalgia Tannock identifies insofar as it 'gloss[es] over contradictory or negative components that compromise the sense of possibility found in such spaces and in such sources' (Tannock, 1995: 457) and does little to imagine alternative political avenues for the present.

The capitalist re-working of public space also occurs alongside the erasure of identity-bearing productive labour in the novel. On his way to an interview with Grace, Cairo approaches the new Castle Gate leisure complex, a development which appears at odds with the local environment: Cairo describes how 'the name of the complex was new, the whole development, cinema, gym, diner and so on, like it was bloody California' (Cartwright, 2017: 39). The allusion to California here serves as a comparison between globalised 'world cities' (Massey, 2007: 1) and places in which globalisation manifests itself in vast uneven development and sectoral decline. Marked by profound loss, Cairo's nostalgia responds to the removal of places that enable personal connection through productive labour – crucially, the business park has been built on the old county ground that Cairo's great grandfather helped to construct – and the rise of non-places offering work only in the service

sector.²⁰ Cairo's relationship with the space evokes Marc Augé's assertion that supermodernity and globalisation have produced identity-less places marked only by the exchange of capital; these identity-less non-places have replaced former places which are strongly settled in space and time, leading to the loss of an area's tradition and history (Augé, 1995: 77–78). In the novel, this erasure is configured through spatial exclusion. Cairo experiences a kind of cultural disembedding from local space due to urban regeneration initiatives. The dialogue of their conversation is interspersed with Cairo's recollection of his experience of the grounds during his childhood, when he used to 'sneak on to the site as a kid with his mates, after it had been abandoned' (Cartwright, 2017: 40). Despite his personal and ancestral links, the material processes of capital have erased his historical connection with space, an attachment that has since been replaced by identity-less urban developments. The narrative voice describes how 'it used to be somewhere' (Cartwright, 2017: 44) but this rooted identity is now 'long gone' (Cartwright, 2017: 28), an assemblage of empty signs that are devoid of any local or historical meaning.

Importantly, then, the novel mobilises nostalgia as a response to how the processes of neoliberal modernity are felt as occurring only to the benefit of metropolitan centres. Cartwright associates the affective experience of simultaneous deindustrialisation and the creation of corporate non-spaces with a democratic system that ignores the implications of uneven development:

[People] are tired. Tired of clammed-up factory gates, but not even them anymore, because look where they are working now, digging trenches to tat out the last of whatever metal was left. Tired of change, tired of the world passing by, tired of other people getting things that you and people like you had made for them, tired of being told you were no good, tired of being told to stop complaining, tired of being told what to eat, what to throw away, what to do and what not to do, what was right and wrong when you were

²⁰ There is a further irony in that the Dudley Sports Centre was rendered unsafe by and eventually closed due to mining subsistence. See <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/nostalgia/day-hole-closed-football-sports-13694172> [Accessed 23rd April 2020].

always in the wrong. Tired of supermarket jobs and warehouse jobs and guarding shopping centres. (Cartwright, 2017: 101)

Illustrating the local community's political inertia, Cartwright's depiction of Dudley's deindustrial community evokes an ultimately inescapable regional iconography characterised by stasis and nostalgia. The novel points towards the narrative of division that dominated media and political discourse during the referendum, as deindustrial working-class identities are positioned as out-of-time, juxtaposed against the country's metropolitan areas and the rest of the world 'passing them by'. However, despite the scene's sentimental characteristics, I would venture that Cairo's nostalgia is not a restorative desire to return to the past, but rather, a reflexive nostalgia that conveys the need for the redistribution of political power. This reflexivity emerges in the passage's direction at Grace and the use of binaristic language, creating an 'us' and 'them' dichotomy from a *local* perspective, subverting the dominant authorial hierarchies of media and political discourse that render communities such as Cairo's voiceless.

The Cut's devolutionary potential thus resides in the way in which it addresses how the Leave vote was invariably caught up within a wider constitutional crisis and energies for regional devolution. Clearly embedded in both the novels' representation of regional-national relations and the Leave campaign's slogan of 'taking back control' was the desire to revolt against the injustices of a centralised nation-state. Ultimately, Cairo's contempt at being told 'what to do and what not to do' demands to be read in a regional context, referring to the reality that existing attempts at rebalancing the disparity between England's regions have always resulted in sovereignty remaining in the hands of Westminster, rather than resulting any meaningful redistribution of power.²¹ In this way, *The Cut's* mobilisation of reflexive nostalgia as a vehicle for regional devolution demonstrates a scepticism towards the novel's commissioned task of reconciling the 'two Britains' of Brexit and unifying the nation.

²¹ These inadequacies can be observed in the Northern Powerhouse initiative. Despite the project's initial appeal in attempting to redress a range of economic, cultural and infrastructural regional disparities, the Northern Powerhouse has never really been anything more than a top-down agenda controlled by central government in Westminster. The project has revealed itself as an exercise in regional containment intended to quash increasing grumblings of regional neglect in the North, doing little to bring about meaningful change to the region's most deprived areas.

5. The Limits of Nostalgia

I have thus far argued that Cartwright utilises nostalgia to confront the ways regional uneven development and discourses surrounding the North played a decisive role in the outcome of the Brexit Referendum. In mobilising a locally particularised working-class nostalgia for the industrial past, *The Cut* presents a regional form of devolutionary cultural politics; the persistent spectral presence of industrial decline sits uneasily alongside political discourses of a unified nation state and the international orientation of capital central to the ideology of 'global Britain'. The novel's thematic concerns thus reflect an urgency for radical constitutional reform. In terms of its potential as a commissioned Brexit novel, as I have already argued, much of *The Cut's* promise resides focussing on a form of local politics at odds with unitary state-national politics. In doing so, the novel offers an important account from the perspective of individual realities that attempts to 'break away from metropolitan stereotypes of small-town backwardness, and to explore what happened with a sense of *where* it happened' (Barnett, 2017: 103 [my emphasis]). Thus, we might read *The Cut* as engaging with a cultural form of devolutionary politics which asks important questions about structural uneven development and political representation throughout England.

Having set out *The Cut's* exploration of the interlocking geopolitical and socio-economic class dynamics of Brexit, I want to draw my argument to a close by turning to one of the ways in which Cartwright's reliance on nostalgia ultimately prevents the realisation of alternatives to the present, suggesting that the novel's recommendation for routes out of a Westminster-dominated democratic system remain conflicted and ambivalent. As I have already demonstrated, the novel's aesthetic and thematic mobilisation of nostalgia equivocates between its potential as a devolutionary mechanism and as a barrier to the possibility of a radical political praxis in the present. Nowhere is this ambiguity clearer than in Cairo's romantic, restorative nostalgia for his former boxing career, a pursuit that enables issues of political representation to be projected into the cultural sphere. Cairo's participation in boxing is equated with becoming active in the public sphere, providing an avenue for reclaiming a cultural identity linked to a working-class masculinity located in the

region's past. Cairo reflects that '[t]here is a whole history of men who got knocked senseless, in order to put food on the table, one of the many histories buried in the hill. He tells himself he is part of a proud Dudley tradition' (Cartwright, 2017: 12). Unlike his predecessors, Cairo's boxing does not serve as a source of financial income, but a cultural sphere in which his desire for a political voice is displaced. In the absence of an adequate democratic system, in *The Cut* – as in much of Cartwright's fiction – it is through sporting events that men construct an alternative 'imagined political community' (Anderson, 1983: 6). This reclamation of boxing, a sport deeply embedded within Dudley's local history, thus serves an attempt to retrieve a place-bound voice, conveying the desire for regional representation.

Cairo quickly becomes fixated with reclaiming his boxing career to gain control over his existence and interpellation as a working-class subject.²² Cartwright equates the spatial freedom of boxing with a form of self-actualising potential rooted in place-bound memory. For instance, the route on which Cairo runs in preparation for a boxing match is described in specifically localised terms:

Cairo turns left, along Watson's Green Road, into the gloom. He has the idea of running the opposite way up the hill, should meet the boy somewhere on Cawney bank, the other side of the watershed, where the water slips down the hill and on and on to the River Trent and then out to sea and then back again as rain on the hills. (Cartwright, 2017: 28)

Here, Cairo's training is characterised by a psychogeographic desire to move through the town and recover its history. He becomes fixated on another runner, 'the boy from Lupin road' (Cartwright, 2017: 27) and locating a sense of agency through his physical capabilities.²³ In the face of socio-political disempowerment, this alternative form of expression is aligned with both Cairo's individual identity – to 'prove to

²² See Imogen Tyler, 2015, *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*. London: Zed.

²³ The idea of running as liberating or emancipatory may also be an intertextual reference to Alan Sillitoe's short story *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1959), in which running is a form of resistance to institutionalisation and class domination.

himself that he's still got it in him' (Cartwright, 2017: 27) – and reclamation of the region's history.

Yet, despite his apparent mobility in this scene, Cairo's spatial pursuits eventually present themselves as failed attempts at agency that are evacuated of any political potential and leave him stuck in the past. Upon his realisation that he is unable to keep up with the boy with whom he has become increasingly preoccupied, Cairo 'feels a sense of betrayal at this and he winds down the run as if he's slowing a clock' (Cartwright, 2017: 29). Here, the emphasis on temporality and the continual haunting of the past prevents Cairo's success in the present; despite his best efforts, he is unable to access the boxing community to the same degree in which he has previously. The industry has moved on since Cairo's childhood and is now a kind of gentrified escapism from the demands of cognitive labour: there are 'white-collar bouts and unlicensed meetings on the first Friday of every month' (Cartwright, 2017: 10). Cairo's inability to reconstitute himself in the cultural sphere echoes the absence of self-government with which to liberate himself from the stasis that characterises his present. Cairo's failed mid-life experimentation with his former boxing career thus signifies the novel's ambivalent deployment of nostalgia. While Cairo's nostalgia for his sporting youth becomes a source for 'value and meaning' (Tannock, 1995: 455), this romantic, restorative turn to the past fails to offer a resource for altering the present.

The limits of the cultural sphere to overcome the everyday reality of political and social abjection neatly capture the paradox of nostalgia and its purchase against the ills of the present. As Boym puts it, nostalgia 'works as a double-edged sword: it seems to be an emotional antidote to politics, and thus remains the best political tool' (Boym, 2001: 58). Cartwright places limits on nostalgia's capabilities and critiques – somewhat self-reflexively – how civic participation is often projected onto the cultural sphere in the absence of political representation in the public sphere. The novel continually grapples with this impasse, between a romantic longing for a particular cultural-historical moment, and its potential as a vehicle for regional devolution. *The Cut*, then, does not offer a straightforwardly restorative nostalgia, but operates within multiple nostalgic forms that are competing and culturally cross-cutting. The novel gestures towards the productive potential of nostalgia, yet

it also suggests the limits of the past as a resource for constructing alternatives to the present.

The Cut's closing scenes offer a portrait of how the imperative for 'global Britain' relies on the oppression of non-metropolitan regions and their communities. Cairo sets himself on fire in the middle of the town centre in a desperate cry for a better political system. In stark opposition to Grace's documentary in which his voice has been mediated, Cairo's suicide is an ardently political, discursive act. Where we see the potential for change most forcefully then is in Cairo's suicide as the ultimate act of self-sacrifice. Before the flames catch alight, he ruminates that '[t]hey voted to relight the fire. He will be the furnace and the flames' (Cartwright, 2017: 127), aligning suicide with the communicative act of political self-expression and agency. The novel's striking denouement is also a reference to the Arab Spring, a revolution regarding similar questions of political power at a national level.²⁴ In closing on this act of violence, the novel makes a claim for the kind of radical constitutional restructuring campaigned for in the Arab Springs; his public suicide is an amplification of rebelling against one's voicelessness and functions as a sudden grasping of political power. Ending cyclically on the image of burning on which it opened, the absence of narrative closure intimates only a pessimistic idea of political discourse and the reconciliatory potential of the Brexit novel. Cartwright thus provides an ambivalent prognosis for the novel's role in altering the cultural and political imaginary of Britain after the Brexit vote. *The Cut* is a regional polemic, but, as I have sought to demonstrate, its nostalgic treatment of the deindustrial landscape as a central motif poeticises this didacticism and forecloses its devolutionary potential. A different narrative form is required to liberate the North from generalising tropes grounded in a historical version of the region, but I do not think it is in nostalgia or deindustrial aesthetics that this potential is to be found.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

²⁴ The politicisation of Cairo's suicide is further enforced through the symbolism of his name, a direct reference to the Egyptian Revolution of 2011, whose focal point has been the occupation of Tahir Square in Cairo.

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