BrexLit and the marginalized migrant

BrexLit and the Marginalized Migrant

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This essay assesses the role that EU migrants play in current British BrexLit literature. While the growth in this particular new genre that tries to engage with the ramifications of the 2016 EU referendum in Britain is laudable, the essay contends that most BrexLit actively appears to *ex*clude the voices of EU migrants. They might have cameo roles – generally as East European cleaners or Romanian plumbers – but they do not have vital roles to play in these works of fiction. Paying particularly close attention to Cynan Jones's *Everything I Found on the Beach* (2011), Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018), and Linda Grant's *A Stranger City* (2019), the essay contends that this appears to reflect contemporary British society where the voices of over three million EU migrants, many of whom have been resident in the UK for most of their lives, have been entirely silenced. BrexLit either attempts to mirror this situation or, more worryingly, to actually perpetuate it.

Keywords: BrexLit, migrant voices, Euroscepticism, Cynan Jones, Jonathan Coe, Linda Grant

Since the Brexit referendum in June 2016, a new genre has begun to emerge: the BrexLit novel. These novels, written in a predominantly realist mode, deal with the impact of the referendum on contemporary British society, the toll it has taken on individual families and local businesses. They include Ali Smith's Seasons novels *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017), and *Spring* (2019); Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2017); and Sam Byers's *Perfidious Albion* (2018), among others. Some, such as John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019), have adopted a dystopian tone, offering a futuristic tale of a country affected by both climate and

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political change, entirely surrounded by a high wall built specifically to keep incoming Others out. The focal point of this essay will be on Cynan Jones's novel *Everything I Found on the Beach* (2011), which preceded the Brexit referendum by five years; Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018), to date one of the most obviously Brexit-themed novels; and Linda Grant's *A Stranger City* (2019), a multivocal novel celebrating London's multiculturalism. Specifically, it will focus on the depiction of EU migrants living and working in the UK in these novels, rather than looking at the depiction of Brexit in general. In addition to critically assessing their representations, the essay will argue that there is currently a dearth of literary representation of EU migrants in BrexLit novels. Although the over three million EU migrants living in the UK form a sizeable part of the population, they have not been granted a voice or a say in either the initial EU referendum nor the ensuing official Brexit negotiations. Accordingly, EU citizens living and working in the UK are also largely marginalized, if not silenced altogether, in the cultural works produced to date. Much has been said in the press and on social media about the situation of EU nationals in the UK after the referendum. The organization "The 3 Million," campaigning for EU citizens to retain all their existing rights post Brexit, is the main group that tries to give a voice to EU migrants who feel that the referendum and the ensuing political debate have left them disenfranchised and silenced, merely treated as convenient bargaining chips. This essay argues that much cultural production on Brexit follows a similar – and worrying – trend of silencing the voices of those who have come to live in the UK from the EU, be they newly arrived highly educated professionals, or fully integrated and low-skilled yet vital labourers. Most Brexit literature has shied away from offering voices to them. While this could, potentially, be read as a critique of the existing real-life silencing of these voices, the essay argues that, instead, it reinforces the migrants' position as marginalized and disenfranchised outsiders in British society.

The road to Brexit should not have come as a surprise. Euroscepticism has a long history in the UK, particularly in England, and is simply too deeply entrenched in everyday life. Many critics, among them Fintan O'Toole, have convincingly argued that the roots of Brexit lie in English post-war disillusionment. O'Toole outlines English disappointment in the wake of the Second World War:

> It was by no means ridiculous to feel that Britain [...] had deserved much [after the war] but received little. It had lost its empire, become virtually bankrupt, suffered economic stagnation and, in the Suez Crisis of 1956 [...] had its pretensions as a world power brutally exposed. To make matters

> much worse, the former Axis powers of Japan, Germany and Italy were booming, as were France and the Benelux countries, all of whom had been rescued from the Nazis in part by the British. Who could avoid a sense of disappointed expectations? (4)

This disappointment, as O'Toole continues to discuss, led to self-pity, but also to an inflated sense of self. Despite having lost its empire, Britain could not shake off a sense of imperial grandeur and superiority – and with it a sense of entitlement. Post-war Britain felt *entitled* to special treatment – and bitter about the fact that it did not receive it. And rather than self-critically reflect on this, there was a national quest for a scapegoat. In the late 1940s, the 1950s, and the 1960s, scapegoats were those who were visibly different: immigrants from the former colonies in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean. The first post-war decades in Britain were full of xenophobia and not even thinly veiled racism, and this has found representation in literature and culture: in Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* of 1956, for instance, or, more recently, in Andrea Levy's prize-winning novel *Small Island* (2004). "England in the 1960s and 1970s," as O'Toole explains, "was flagrantly racist. There was a ready and visible target for those looking for someone to blame for the country's economic and social ills – black people, who had themselves replaced Jews in the role" (16). However, openly and blatantly racist politicians such as Enoch Powell soon – and mercifully – lost public support. But rather than this putting an end to racism, racism changed track and went into hiding. Instead of being out in the open it became more subtle – and looked for a different target. This target became the EU, as Richard Weight has outlined in his study *Patriots*, which precedes the Brexit vote by a good fourteen years. He explains that "when scapegoating black Britons for the UK's problem became less morally acceptable, the EEC made a useful substitute. In short, Brussels replaced Brixton as the whipping boy of British nationalists" (514).

From the day Britain joined the EEC in 1973, Eurosceptics from across the political spectrum have helped stoke a fire of anti-European sentiment within Britain. This was, to a large extent, aided and abetted by parts of the mainstream press, in particular the tabloids, which have revelled, over decades, in perpetuating anti-EU myths and scapegoating Europe or certain groups of EU migrants. In response, and as early as the 1990s, the European Commission set up a website with the sole aim of "debunk[ing] the myths they saw as being propagated by the British press" (Levy et al. 10): the notorious "straight EU bananas," for instance. Wikipedia, not normally a website renowned for its academic rigour, should be mentioned here anyway as it has an entertaining page

dedicated to the most outrageous "Euromyths" that includes stories about EU rules allegedly banning British barmaids from showing a cleavage, demands that British fish and chips be sold using Latin terminology, and plans to ban mince pies ("Euromyth"). The European Parliament's more sober "Liaison Office in the United Kingdom" has its own page engaging with those myths, highlighting – and debunking – particularly misleading tabloid headlines ("Euromyths"). These stories could be seen as harmless and entertaining, brushed aside as funny, and not to be taken seriously. However, Dominic Wring has shown that "one of those journalists most associated with propagating [...] baseless 'Euro-myths' designed to undermine [the EU's] credibility" was, in fact, Boris Johnson (12) – and this immediately gives the "Euromyths" a far more sinister and overtly political context. Johnson actively supported and even campaigned with the help of another "Euromyth": the claim, prominently splashed across the Leave campaign's now infamous red bus, that Britain had to pay the EU £350 million a week, money that ought to be better spent supporting the NHS. And while Brexit-sceptic newspapers tried to debunk this myth, alongside others, at the time – see, for instance, Jon Henley's measured article in the *Guardian* in the run-up to the referendum in May 2016 – its claim stuck, addressing deep-seated anxieties about the pressure of migration on, for instance, the National Health Service.

This also illustrates that it was a small step from blaming the EU for restricting British traditions (the barmaids! The fish and chips!) to demonizing those people who had come to live in Britain via another EU law: Freedom of Movement. The European Parliament's website explains that "[f]reedom of movement and residence for persons in the EU is the cornerstone of Union citizenship, established by the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992" (Marzocchi). It is something that the UK of course subscribed to and seemed to support – after all, hundreds of thousands of Brits of all ages have similarly made other EU countries their home. Yet, anti-EU-immigrant headlines became a fundamental part of pro-Brexit propaganda. As Levy et al.'s study *UK Press Coverage of the EU Referendum* shows, and as I have discussed further elsewhere (Berberich), there was a clear shift towards the issue of immigration at the end of the Brexit campaign that even mainstream politicians and Remain campaigners such as David Cameron were prone to slip into. EU migrants, in particular those from Eastern Europe, were scapegoated and blamed for the country's ills: the shortage in housing, the pressure on schools and the NHS. A recent study by researchers at Oxford University's Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS), the Budapest Business

School, and the European Journalism Centre at Maastricht has investigated different approaches to media reporting across Europe and has found that, in particular on the subject of "migration," there is vastly different reporting across the Continent. The UK media, in particular, are singled out by the study for their particularly negative approach towards migration; while a Swedish journalist has stressed that, for him and his colleagues, "[g]lobalisation is a positive force. We rarely write something negative. Labour force migration is positive," his British counterpart has admitted that his focus will always be "more likely to be [on] people who are a burden to society than those who are a benefit to [it]" (qtd. in McNeil). McNeil points out that "the culture within UK media – particularly within newspapers – is focused on winning political victories," and this has, of course, become especially apparent in the run-up to the Brexit referendum. The Leave campaign, in fact, was entirely founded on negative images, on 'Othering' – on setting Britons apart, and in more prominent and entitled position. As O'Toole highlights,

> [o]n the one hand, Brexit [was] fuelled by fantasies of "Empire 2.0" [...]. On the other, it is an insurgency and therefore needs to imagine that it is a revolt against intolerable oppression [in this case by the EU and non-British bureaucrats]. It therefore requires both a sense of superiority and a sense of grievance (3).

With all this political, social, and media focus on immigration, it is surprising – to put it mildly – to see that migration does not play a wider role in the most prominent form of cultural production on Brexit to date: literature. BrexLit does engage with the current situation in Britain – but does so by predominantly foregrounding the British perspective. While it could, of course, be argued that Brexit is an issue that affects the British more than anybody else, it seems short-sighted to silence those many EU citizens who have made their lives in the UK and who are such an important factor in British life, commerce, and industry. As Kristian Shaw has outlined, BrexLit "concerns 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 from the EU" (18). But how is this possible without hearing the actual voices of Europe? After all, and as many cultural commentators have written about, literature has traditionally always played – and still does play – an important role in forming and shaping public opinion; silencing so many voices might then give credence to those polemicists who say that migration is not im-

portant, and that migrants, regardless of their background, should not be given voices. As Baroness Young of Hornsey has said so astutely, "[t]here's a role for literature, so adept at humanising big questions and creating emotional and cultural landscapes, in metaphorically poking us all in the ribs and urging us to start thinking critically and becoming politically active again" (xviii). Brexit itself has mobilized tens, if not hundreds of thousands, both in support but, predominantly, in protest and opposition. It is therefore important that its literary representation similarly engages in the political activism and shows the very real struggles and arguments of day-to-day life in Brexit Britain. BrexLit, more so than other kinds of literature, ought to humanize an often purely political and in many cases lamentably vague debate, in particular when it comes to showcasing the *personal* cost it has on the lives of both the British and migrants alike.

A look at the recent history of the British novel shows that this absence of migrant voices is all the more astonishing because, as Bryan Cheyette has convincingly argued, "a migrant's perspective is at the heart of English literature, [...] of English cinema, [...] of English theatre, [...] of English art," citing Joseph Conrad, Karel Reisz, Arnold Wesker, and Lucian Freud as just a few examples. Yet, as he also shows, most of these immigrants' "stories are little known as our national story still dominates" (70). Maybe it is a lack of interest on the part of the reading public or the publishing industry. Maybe an effort on the part of the immigrants to show how much they have become 'anglicized' or assimilated. Whatever the reason, the effort to showcase and emphasize a sense of 'unified' national identity, a white Anglo-Saxon Englishness, seems to have outweighed efforts to highlight the stories of minorities. And now, this is becoming a real problem. As Cheyette has argued, "Brexit means that our national straightjacket – Englishness, not even Britishness – becomes much tighter and the value of a migrant's perspective becomes increasingly discounted and devalued" (69). This is where BrexLit *should* play a more active role – by highlighting more stories of migrants – but where, so far, it has fallen short. The following section will look, in more detail, at the three very different novels highlighted in the introduction and assess how they represent EU migrants – and what the potential effects of this representation could be.

Cynan Jones's novel *Everything I Found on the Beach* predates the referendum by five years. But its early focus on the experiences of Polish migrant worker Grzegorz is quite remarkable and, to date, virtually unique. The novel consists of two parallel narrative strands. On the one hand, it tells the story of Grzegorz, his wife Ana, and their two children,

in a house shared by many migrant workers and provided – at high rent – by the very agency that brought them to Britain in the first place. The second narrative strand focuses on the British character Hold, his battle against poverty and his desperate efforts to provide for his dead friend's wife and child. Grzegorz's and Hold's stories interlink when, one early morning on the beach, Hold finds the dead Grzegorz and several kilos of cocaine in an inflatable. He tries to get rid of the body by pushing the boat back into the sea, and keeps the cocaine to try and sell it and create a better life for himself. Given that the dead Pole is found early on in the novel, as readers we do not get to hear much of Grzegorz's actual voice. But the novel does provide ample context for how he came to be where he was found.

Everything I Found on the Beach starts with Grzegorz and several of his Polish co-workers waiting for a special job that will see him alleviate the financial dependence from the migrant agency that he has to endure. It becomes clear very quickly that he has signed up for a special task that is going to be illegal. The novel makes no excuses for this; but it also does not condemn this illegal activity. Instead, it shows that his regular job, at a slaughterhouse, is one where he works extra-long hours for a minimum wage that does not allow him to move his family out of the shared accommodation they have been in for a year. Grzegorz describes the house he and his family share with many other Polish migrant workers as a "no-man's-land between Poland and what they had held as an ideal new world" (10). The reality of England – the poor living conditions in the house, the "Polish out" graffiti on the outside wall, the "dullness of the buildings, the latent fatigue of the place, colourless shops with broken signage" (9, 11) do not fit the image of England he had held. He – and all his fellow migrant workers – had come to England full of hope to be able to work hard and forge a better future for themselves. Instead, they find that they are all reliant on the migrant agency. He explains:

> Because of the break when they'd laid them off for three weeks, he hadn't quite clocked up the twelve months' unbroken work that would make him eligible for benefits, so he couldn't move out of the house yet, not on the money he had. There was talk that the agency had organised this break deliberately so they didn't have a choice but to accept the work and the stoppages in their pay cheques – the deductions for rent, for the transport to work that was laid on, for house cleaning, though none of them had ever seen a cleaner. (11)

This passage shows clearly how limited the freedoms of the migrant workers and how prescribed their lives really are. It defeats the *Daily Mail* headlines shouting about migrants coming to the UK for instant benefits. Grzegorz realizes that "I didn't come here for this" but is also adamant that, despite the disappointment, Britain is "the land of choice" (9, 11). He wants a different future for his two sons and begins to resent the Polish sounds, traditions, superstitions, and influences around them in the house. Although he is aware that "with all the Polish around him, nothing had really changed" (13), his memories of Poland begin to fade – before he has had a chance to create new and positive ones of his new life in the UK. The result is that Grzegorz feels uprooted and fragmented, trying to leave life in Poland behind him, yet unable to make sense of what he experiences in his new life. He desperately tries to shed his 'Polishness' and become more assimilated to an Englishness he cannot grasp yet: "We can't move on while there is all of this [meaning the house full of fellow Poles speaking Polish and cooking Polish foods], we can't become anything new" (19). This highlights the migrants' dilemma: the belief that, in order to fit into their new world, they need to give up their sense of who they were in the past. The result is that their sense of self, their identity becomes confused and shadowy – no longer one thing, not yet another. Grzegorz concludes: "This is where we are now. [...] And we have to move on. Here. Poland has nothing for us" (20). Grzegorz convinces himself to willingly suppress and attempt to forget his Polish roots, his traditions, and his memories in order to "become" English as soon and as smoothly as possible – and this is an experience shared by so many migrants these days: the pressure to, potentially, suppress personal identity and traditions in order to fit in better and more quickly. In contemporary Britain, both in pre- but particularly in post-Brexit years, assimilation is considered more important than bringing different cultural outlooks. Cheyette contrasts this contemporary trend unfavourably to the 1980s, when "[a]ssimilationism was being challenged by compelling voices such as Salman Rushdie and his generation of writers" (68). He concludes that "this was a time [...] when the history and place of migrants in Britain was being understood from a positive perspective and other options, rather than mere assimilation or disappearance, were being voiced" (68). For Grzegorz, a mythical Englishness becomes the be-all, end-all: "We want more now. [...] We're not so simple. We can't be happy living the old way any more. It is better to be here. Poland can rot" (50).

Grzegorz's story ends pretty much as soon as Hold finds his body on the little boat. As readers we find out that he had agreed to pick up

some smuggled drugs from a ship in the Irish Sea, that his compass had given out on him and that he had lost his bearings at night. Hold does not know who Grzegorz is; all he can do is judge him by his facial features, the "high cheekbones and wide face of a Slav" (82). But the faceless victim becomes much more personal to him once he listens to the meaningless Polish voice messages on Grzegorz's mobile phone, the increasingly desperate and sad messages left by a woman he cannot understand but who nevertheless touches his heart. "He listened as with each message the woman broke up into smaller and smaller pieces into the useless, unanswered phone. When he sat down, he felt he had killed the man" (107). As such, a nameless body becomes much more personal to Hold, his left-behind family almost an additional responsibility for him. For Hold, finding Grzegorz's body means establishing a personal connection to the plight of just one immigrant – and this is, maybe, what literature can help us all do.

By comparison, though, this is exactly where Jonathan Coe's much lauded *Middle England* (2018) fails. The novel focuses too much on stereotypes – admittedly maybe in an attempt to showcase the stereotypes and clichés that had been tapped into by the referendum Leave campaign. In *Middle England*, to date the heftiest and most obviously Brexit-themed of all BrexLit novels, there are, virtually, *no* EU migrants. The focus is very much on white, middle-class English characters – which also silences out the voices from the British margins: the Scottish, the (Northern) Irish, the Welsh. The one exception is a young Lithuanian woman, Grete, who works, predictably, as a cleaner for one of the novel's several elderly characters. Grete becomes the victim of racist abuse in the village store, when a drunk man turns on her and starts shouting abuse for her speaking Lithuanian in public:

> He shouted, "Get off your effing phone," and then just as we were both outside the door he grabbed me by the arm and said, "Who are you speaking to?" and "What language were you speaking?" I shouted, "Let go of me," but he just repeated, "What effing language were you speaking?", and then "We speak English in this country," and then he called me a Polish bitch. I didn't say anything, I wasn't going to correct him, I'm used to people thinking that I'm Polish anyway, I just wanted to ignore him, but he didn't stop there, now he grabbed my phone and took it off me and threw it on the ground and started stamping on it. [...] He kept saying Polish this and Polish that – I can't repeat the actual words he used – and told me "We don't have to put up with you ... people any more" [...] and then he spat at me. Actually spat. (381)

This scene does not only stand out for its violence that is perpetrated towards an entirely innocent woman, out to do her weekend shopping in a small village, but also for the denial of identity that immigrants so often have to suffer: the Lithuanian becomes a Pole just because it is easier; because the abuser cannot differentiate between Polish and Lithuanian; because it is easier to conflate an entire region, that of Eastern Europe. This dialogue between the novel's protagonist, Sophie, and Grete, which stretches over a mere six pages, is the longest appearance of the Lithuanian in a novel that is 421 pages long. Coe uses her to compress all the negative experiences of EU migrants in post-referendum England. So much more could have been done with her character – but she remains on the sidelines, marginalized due to her background and her socio-economic standing as a cleaner. Both she and her husband reappear at the very end of the novel – they have left the UK as a direct result of Brexit and have settled in France as live-in housekeeper and handyman to the novel's other British protagonists Benjamin and Lois Trotter in their new French B&B. While Grete and her husband seem to end the novel in a seemingly safer and friendlier environment, they are still banished to the margins, not quite of the same standing as their British employers Benjamin and Lois, and this despite the fact that the Trotters themselves have now also acquired migrant status. Some migrants are more equal than others: the British migrant Trotters in France assume a higher place in the hierarchy than the Lithuanians Grete and Lukas.

To add insult to injuries, Grete's erstwhile elderly British employer Helena Coleman, a Brexiteer and ardent quoter of Enoch Powell slogans, is given considerably more space in the novel, especially more space to speak and distribute her questionable views. Helena considers herself as living "under a tyranny," specifically the tyranny of "an idea," in this case the "idea of political correctness" (212-13). She believes that political correctness prevents her from expressing her views or ideas and thinks that the country has become divided into "our people" and "others" who, for her, are all those people with different options, backgrounds, or skin colours. Helena, very problematically, does not speak up for or support Grete after she has been subjected to verbal and physical abuse in the village, despite having witnessed it first-hand. Instead she suggests that "on the whole, it would be better if you and your husband went home" (383). Coe certainly does not take sides in his novel; he does not give his readers the feeling that he is more in support of one group of characters than another. He merely shows a country that is deeply divided between unquestioning supporters of the left and liberal

ideas of multiculturalism, and a right that feels aggrieved and abandoned, betrayed by its own politicians and left alone to fight for their mythical ideas of a once-great England. As Ian, Helena's son, deftly summarizes, "this was basically how she'd been living her whole life. In a state of undeclared war" (385). Helena's "undeclared war" goes back full circle to O'Toole's statement of "disappointed expectations" (4) that I quoted at the beginning of this essay. For Helena, life in post-war Britain had been one disappointment after another, a country seemingly selling out on its own ideals – no matter how misguided they might have been – to accommodate the changing times. It is this seething, underlying anger and vitriol that Coe masterfully draws out in his novel. But it is a shame that this has to come at the expense of more migrant voices.

By contrast – and finally! – these migrant voices abound in Linda Grant's *A Stranger City* of 2019. In fact, hers is a multivocal novel with a large number of different protagonists from various backgrounds: the native and passionate Londoner, policeman Pete, and his wife Marie who, in turn, starts to support UKIP and dreams of a less complicated and more 'English' life in the Lake District, far away from multicultural London; the documentary filmmaker Alan and his wife Francesca, of Persian-Jewish background; Francesca's family, with special focus on her immigrant grandparents Younis and Amira; the highly educated German family, Caspar, Elfriede, and their little girl Gaby; Mrs Simarjit Kaur Khalistan and her best friend, the Jewish widow Audrey Shapiro; the Irish nurse Chrissie and her pretentious flatmate Marco who has traded in his suburban family background, Lebanese heritage, and birth name "Neil" for the allegedly more interesting and potentially safer Italian-sounding "Marco" to accelerate his career in PR; the Greeks from the local deli; Alan's Hungarian business partner Johanna; and Alexandru Radu, the Romanian plumber. The novel consequently cannot be accused of a lack of 'migrant' voices; in fact, it offers a perfect blend of migrant and 'native' voices. What it does investigate, through a narrative as diverse as its voices, is the uncertainty that has been created in the country through the Brexit referendum. Characters no longer feel at home, are uncertain about their future, feel frightened about the continuation of the very existence they have laboriously built for themselves over years or even decades, and are worried about showing their 'difference' outside the safety of their own houses. Grant expertly showcases instances where migrant characters forcibly deny or hide their difference by no longer speaking their own language outside the confines of their own homes. Francesca's Persian grandparents, for instance, not EU migrants but caught up in the maelstrom that is post-Brexit xenophobia,

hardly leave the house anymore. "Only when Younis was dressed in his pyjamas and Amira in her nightgown lying under pink sheets and rabbit-coloured waffle blankets, a fringed lampshade casting a rose-coloured flush to their old faces, did they whisper to each other in Farsi" (105). This homely scene – the old couple in their cosy bedroom, clearly at ease with each other after a long life together – stands in stark contrast to Younis's life after Amira's death, when "the widower [...] had no one left apart from his son to whom he could speak his native language with fluency and intimacy" (261). With the loss of native language comes a loss of self, a loss of identity; a big part of Younis's life, his simple enjoyment of his mother tongue, is literally being silenced. Similarly, the German family make a conscious decision to "talk a little less German in the house and [...] no longer chat in German outside" after daughter Gaby, post referendum, is asked in school, "why are you still here, aren't you going home now?" (216-17). For Younis and Amira, as well as Caspar, Elfriede, and Gaby, the referendum impacts on their sense of belonging; it is not only their ability to speak freely in their own languages that is being affected, but also their physical well-being. Already before Amira's death, Younis is told that they should not

> leave their building, except for the few steps from the front door to his Audi. [Their son] did not want them loose on the streets, pleading in painful English, without a phone in their pockets. Groceries were delivered now by van. Walks were restricted to the rear garden. Amira missed her visits to the hairdresser, her son said it was safer to try to manage herself. (257)

This well-meant advice by a concerned son effectively turns his parents into prisoners in their own home, depriving them of the pleasure they had previously found in exploring the city and feeling part of their adopted country. This imposed house arrest leads to their physical and mental decline, especially for Amira: "It took only two months of house arrest for her to die" (257).

The German family have a near-death experience when Gaby is attacked and nearly drowned by two girls on the towpath close to her home (296). Towards the end of *A Stranger City*, Grant's narrative turns positively dystopian when she depicts a London that is, literally, haemorrhaging people, predominantly migrants. Alan observes trains full of detained migrants passing along the tracks behind his house, with "deportees [...] pleading at the glass"; he also comments on "prison ships [that] had appeared in the Thames estuary confining illegal immigrants before they were floated back to mainland Europe" (254-55). But it is not only those anonymous strangers that preoccupy him. His own

friends, acquaintances, and neighbours leave: his business partner Johanna has returned to Hungary and sends him updates and advice via Skype (256); the Greeks from the local Delicatessen have left overnight, "slid away without farewells" (209). The German family are leaving "voluntarily, with smiles and dignity and farewell presents and exchanges of email addresses," explaining that "[w]e won't take the risk, our safety is too important" (314-15). Post-referendum Britain, Grant predicts, is no longer a welcoming and safe place for resident migrants.

What Grant's novel consequently does, and in a way so far unachieved by other BrexLit novels, is show a country that has, indeed, turned into the "hostile environment" advocated by former Prime Minister Theresa May in her previous incarnation as Home Secretary (see, for instance, Yeo). Her increasingly dystopian narrative thus shows how perilously close contemporary Britain is to a dystopian future. While ex-policeman Pete ponders that "[y]ou couldn't have London without foreigners, it wouldn't be the same place, would it?" (302), Grant conjures a country that is, indeed, prepared to go further to get rid of immigration: "The country was being emptied of its unwanted population. Paperwork must be in scrupulous order to avoid being picked up and forcibly removed" (257). In *A Stranger City*, Grant effectively gives her foreign migrants a voice – only to show that the right to speak is, slowly but steadily, eroded and taken away from them again: in short, she empowers her migrant characters to illustrate how they are being disempowered in post-Brexit Britain. This is neatly summarized after the departure of the Greek family: "Believing they were of this country they were not, or in not quite the right way. They had come too early or too late, it was all opaque, but their status was wrong, and could not be fixed easily" (209). In this respect, there are many parallels between the migrants' experiences in *A Stranger City* and Grzegorz's experience in *Everything I Found on the Beach*: like Grzegorz, Grant's migrants arrive full of hope and eager to blend in, and then go through the various stages of disillusion when they find that their hopes and expectations are not matched by reality in post-Brexit Britain, to finally arrive at utter dejection and loss of self. Jake Arnott, reviewing *A Stranger City* for the *Guardian*, notes that "[a]t a time when dangerous inert notions of national identity are on the rise once more, Grant reminds us that humanity is a migrant species: we are all strangers." *A Stranger City*, with its many vignettes of different migrants' experiences, thus succeeds in humanizing the very migrants marginalized or silenced by the tabloid press, populist politicians and, sadly, also many other BrexLit novels. It

allows its readers to connect with these characters, to share in their hopes and dreams but also in their experiences and frustrations.

In conclusion, it is clear that BrexLit has a responsibility: it has the responsibility to not only address British concerns with regards to England, but also to address the situation of the EU citizens living and working and making homes for themselves in England. Over three million voices should not be neglected or sidelined in such prominent cultural production. Instead, BrexLit could and should be used to speak up for these marginalized groups and make a stronger case for their integration. Every migrant has their own story to tell – and if we had more opportunity to listen to them, to read about them, to see them presented on stage or screen, then maybe there would be that little bit less ignorance, and that little bit less vitriol against them.

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