

Brexit-regények a kortárs brit prózában
Brexit novels in contemporary British prose

Jelige: TGD369

Lezárás dátuma: 2022.11.27.

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Abstract

A Brexit mint politikai, gazdasági, társadalmi és kulturális jelenség ma már széles körben kutatott téma. Jelen dolgozat a Brexit okainak, lefolyásának és politikai-gazdasági következményeinek kutatása helyett arra keresi a választ, hogyan jelenik meg a Brexit a kortárs prózában, új műfajt teremtve, úgynevezett BrexLit irodalomként. Ezen belül elsősorban azon valós és képzeletbeli határokat, törésvonalakat tárja fel, amelyek mind a társadalomtudományos diskurzusban, mind a dolgozatban elemzett három regényben felmerülnek a Brexit mögött húzódó okként. A dolgozatban elemzett művek kiválasztása során vezérfonalként szolgált, hogy mind a három regény különleges, szokatlan emberi kapcsolatokon keresztül járja körbe a világnézet, az identitás és a hovatartozás kérdését, miközben a Brexitet is a kontextus részévé teszi. Ezen tartalmi elemek, illetve a BrexLit mint műfaj potenciális társadalmi, kollektív emlékezetre gyakorolt hatásai elsősorban a médiatudomány eszközeivel kerülnek vizsgálatra.

Brexit as a political, economic, social and cultural phenomenon is now a widely researched topic. Instead of exploring the causes, course and political-economic consequences of Brexit, this paper seeks to answer the question of how Brexit is represented in contemporary prose, creating a new genre, the so-called BrexLit literature. It explores the real and imaginary boundaries and fault lines that emerge as the reasons behind Brexit in both the academic discourse in social sciences and the three novels analysed in this paper. A guiding principle in the selection of the works chosen for analysis is that all three novels explore the issues of worldview, identity and belonging through particular and unusual human relationships, while also making Brexit part of the context. The content of these novels, as well as the potential impact of BrexLit on collective memory is examined primarily through the lens of media studies.

But beyond and above all this, in the end what survives of us are the stories of people's lives, how we live through the history we call the present, through the cycles of another year and another, renewing themselves and us again and again, bringing around the darker days, and the light. Always look to story for the real plot. Look to dialogue, always, for the life.

Ali Smith, in an interview with *The Guardian*

Introduction

Even though I lived in the UK after the referendum and before Britain's formal exit from the EU and encountered the uncertainty and occasional rejection towards foreigners while seeking for employment, I was an outsider to what goes on in British workplaces, schools, homes, and minds. This analysis is a project I believe to carry significant value, primarily for those who, similarly to me, have no first-hand experience of the personal troubles faced by the British and of the general mood shortly before and after the referendum.

Objectives

The objective of this paper is to explore how contemporary British literature thematise the crossing of geographical and internalized boundaries to frame the background and consequences of the 2016 Brexit referendum. Within this, I focus on questions of boundaries, othering and belonging in three novels: *Autumn* by Ali Smith (2016), *The Man Who Saw Everything* by Deborah Levy (2019), and *Just Like You* by Nick Hornby (2019), as well the questions of reliability and recurrence conveyed by their narratological characteristics. These novels have been categorized as part of Brexit Literature, or “BrexLit” – meaning that although their main topic is not necessarily the referendum, it serves to set the context and the structure of the plot.

The characters portrayed in these novels are not reliable sociological profiles per se, and this paper does not aim to explain the real reasons and conflicts that have led to Brexit through them. Literature is certainly not for matter-of-factly analyses of politics, economics, sociology, and culture all in one. What it can do, however, is to leave an imprint in time and tell us what socio-demographic statistics cannot always show: how personal emotions, as well as intra- and interpersonal dialogues have challenged the definition of home, belonging and identity.

As I will later argue in the chapter on the potential impact of BrexLit on collective memory, a link exists between the fiction we consume and our sense of reality. Although this is not discussed in this paper due to character constraints, this link provides another reason to explore the literary perpetuation of images and themes of the social, political, and cultural phenomenon that Brexit represents.

Methodology

The above-mentioned questions and issues will be examined through the thematic and narratological analysis of the three novels.

In order to provide the context and the foundation for this analysis, this paper begins with a theoretical framework in which key aspects of the Brexit referendum - such as its political background, socio-demographic statistics and its language - will be discussed, followed by an overview of the definition and role of BrexLit in contemporary British prose, as well as its relationship with politics and its potential impact on collective memory, which illustrate the importance of this emerging genre.

I chose the above-mentioned three novels as the subject of my analysis since they all explore questions of worldview, identity, and belonging - all of which arise in the context of Brexit - through the lens of a unique and unusual relationship: the friendship of a little girl and an 85-year-old man (*Autumn*), the love affair of a white teacher in her 40s and a black guy in his 20s (*Just Like You*), and the homosexual affair of a British historian and a German translator in the 1980s (*The Man Who Saw Everything*). These novels also address the diversity of stories as well as the unreliability of our perception of reality, which will be discussed in the narratological analysis.

But why novels? Firstly, this is the genre in which the amount of Brexit literature is the most abundant as of now, allowing me to compare and analyse a diverse selection of novels and place them in a broader context of current research on BrexLit. Secondly, novels enable us to analyse not only stories, but narrative structures as well, which are excellent tools for exploring subtle, secondary meanings and sentiments. As we will see at Levy and Smith, the use of non-linear, dream-like narrative structure and lyric elements further enhance our feelings of disorientation, confusion, and fear from unexpected danger, which, as I will argue, adds yet another layer to the plot itself, emphasizing how Brexit reinforced pre-existing preoccupation with personal security, borders, and rules. It also enables us to narrate a story in our own head while reading along the lines – whereas in films, we are distinct from the screen, clearly set in the role of a spectator. Films leave little room for imagination: faces, gestures, places are all shown to us. Literature offers much more freedom in this sense: sometimes, we do not even know what a character looks like, because it is never truly described – just like Ali Smith's main character in *Autumn*, Elisabeth Demand, or Jennifer Moreau in Deborah Levy's *The Man Who Saw*

Everything, where Jennifer forbids Saul, his boyfriend, to ever describe her beauty with “old words”, so he relies on sensations (her smell), gestures and other qualities instead. Ali Smith plays with this freedom too in the last line of *Autumn*, as I will later discuss in detail: we believe to see the colour of a rose, while in reality the narrator never describes it, the reader just projects her idea of a rose instead. This characteristic is well researched in literature theory, reinforcing the idea that the final meaning of a text is co-created by the author and the reader – discussed in more detail in the theoretical framework.

Due to these differences, in literature, and especially narrative fiction like novels, the barrier between reader and character becomes much thinner, allowing us to step into the shoes of the characters, whether stories are told in the first or the third person. In his analysis of Ali Smith's *Autumn*, Anthony Mullen emphasizes this characteristic, the acknowledgement of the plurality of perspectives, as he discusses the role of novels invoking Adam Smith's thoughts:

In many respects, *Autumn* fulfils the role that the Scottish moral philosopher, Adam Smith, believed the novel had. Research by Maureen Harkin suggests that he considered the novel to be a means by which we can see the world from other peoples' perspectives. By reading novels, we are better positioned to empathise with others' experiences of the society in which we live. Harkin also writes that Adam Smith saw the process of writing history as a literary project, rather than a scientific one. To construct history is to tell a subjective story – and that inevitably leads to the exclusion of some perspectives. (Mullen, 2017)

Theoretical framework

Below I give a summary of the academic discourse on the various possible explanations for Brexit, followed by an introduction to what borders we can take into consideration when talking about Brexit, and how these borders get thematized in contemporary British prose, creating a new genre, the so-called “BrexLit” literature. Through the potential impact of BrexLit on collective memory, I also discuss the interconnectedness of memory, identity, culture and reception studies.

Brexit: a political phenomenon and its socio-demographic background

In 2022, it is hardly news anymore that the UK is not part of the European Union. However, just a few years ago, people all around the world were shocked to find out that 51.9 percent of

British people and 54 percent of English people voted for leaving the EU on the referendum of 23 June in 2016, with a turnout of 72.2 percent – an unusually high number in the history of referendums in the UK. (Castells, 2019, p. 57)

Naturally, people started wondering: what made the European Union seem so repulsive to so many voters, after more than four decades of being a member state of the EU and its predecessor, the European Economic Community? What did citizens vote against? The increasing immigration with the rise of globalization? Foreign workforce, like eastern European blue-collar workers “taking away jobs”? Money being paid to the EU instead of being invested in the English economy and infrastructure, in the most important institutions such as the National Health Service?

How and why the UK left the EU – statistics and theories

When it comes to possible explanations for Brexit, the number of opinions is abundant. Sociology, political science, economics and other disciplines have all had their own answers to the outcome of the referendum.

As for the political point of view, there are also many angles of research to consider. As Sarah Alessio (2020) summarizes in the introduction of her essay, “Reading Brexit through BrexLit: fictional responses to political crisis”:

[...] the Brexit vote should be analysed starting from the conjunction of three phenomena, respectively of global, European and British reach: disillusionment with and alienation from mainstream political parties, leaders, and institutions; disillusionment with and alienation from the structures, practices and actors of the European Union and EU membership having never been considered a positive condition. (Alessio, 2020, p. 23)

What Alessio describes is the prevalent topic in sociologist Manuel Castells’s (2019) work, *Rupture – the crisis of liberal democracies*, where he investigates examples of this rupture in modern-day democracies and the rise of populist parties all around the world, including the United States, France, and the United Kingdom. He places Brexit in a broader, global context, considering it yet another event showcasing the crisis of liberal democracies, where people feel general mistrust towards the democratic system, its institutions and politicians, which results in alienation and – often – anti-globalist radicalization, encouraged by non-mainstream populist propaganda.

Castells dissects the 2016 referendum discussing many aspects and socio-demographic statistics. One of these is immigration: he argues that voters' views on immigration could have correlated to a certain degree with how they voted at the referendum, pointing out that "in 2015, support for leaving the European Union was 40 percentage points higher amongst those who felt that immigration was too high than it was amongst people who had no objection to immigrants" (Castells, 2019, p. 61). These figures show that immigration and how it is perceived was indeed key to the outcome of the referendum - and an excellent rhetorical tool for many EU-sceptic politicians. The extent to which voters' views on immigration may be linked to how they voted is further illustrated by other statistics: according to the London Datastore (Colombeau, 2016), "areas with a higher international inflow over the past 3 years were more likely to vote remain. Furthermore, the more diverse the area, the more likely the area was to vote remain."

However, Castells also notes that we need to make a distinction when discussing immigration. According to him, those who came from the European Union generated more discontent and a sense of an uncontrolled influx of immigrants, as they moved relatively freely, while those from outside the EU had to obtain work permits, go through rigorous border controls, visa checks, and other processes, all strictly controlled by the British authorities (Castells, 2019, p. 61). What many anti-immigration voters probably were not aware of is that non-EU immigrants outnumbered EU immigrants by around 18,000 people a year, according to a 2017 Guardian article (Travis, 2017). EU-sceptic politicians such as Iain Duncan Smith, former leader of the Conservative Party, readily claimed that "workers' wages are 10% lower thanks to the open door immigration that is the price of EU membership" (Woodhouse, 2016). It is no coincidence that "take back control" was one of the slogans of the leave voters: as Castells summarizes, "it wasn't a reference to imperial nationalism, anchored in nostalgia for Britain's glorious past, but rather a defensive reflex, aiming to protect their right to live in their country, undisturbed" (2019, p. 60). To sum up, Polish, Hungarian and other Eastern European workers coming in as cheap labour and further decreasing the capacities of schools, hospitals and other services (especially after the 2008 crisis) were indeed seen as a problem by many voters in the UK. Nevertheless, a 2016 research conducted by researchers of the Centre of Economic Performance of the London School of Economics and Political Science proved that claims about Europeans taking away jobs or negatively influencing living standards and the UK's economy were indeed false: they note that "any adverse experiences of UK-born workers with regard to jobs and

wages are more closely associated with the biggest economic crash for more than 80 years”, and that, ironically, lower immigration will further decrease UK living standards, since EU immigrants “are more likely to work and pay tax and less likely to use public services as they are younger and better educated than the UK-born” (Wadsworth, Dhingra, Ottaviano, & Van Reenen, Brexit and the impact of immigration on the UK, 2016, p. 16).

To gain a deeper understanding of the referendum results, it is, of course, important to consider socio-demographic factors alongside views on immigration - needless to say, these are, more often than not, key determinants of an individual's political views. Research in this field has also been carried out after the referendum. The resulting data unveiled that the age group with the highest share of remain votes were age 18-24, while the one with the highest share of leave votes was age 65 and over. Both in the lower and upper working class, 64% voted to leave, while in the lower middle class it was a close call of 49% voting to leave and 51% to remain. In the upper middle class, however, 57% voted to remain (The Brexit referendum - Statistics & Facts, 2022).

Research has also unveiled that vote share correlates – to some degree - with education and certain industries as well. The strongest correlation was seen between areas with a majority of remain voters and areas where a high proportion have a degree level qualification (Colombeau, 2016). Correlations in vote share have also been discovered based on the most significant industries of certain areas. Areas where residents work in manufacturing, construction and wholesale and retail were more likely to vote to leave, whereas other areas where the main industries were Information and communication or Professional, scientific, and technical activities had a majority of remain voters (Colombeau, 2016). Since certain occupations and industries are considered more masculine (such as construction), while others are viewed more feminine, it is interesting to look at the gender segmentation of the referendum data as well. According to the statistics of the The Commons Library, “for men, the most common sectors included the wholesale and retail trade (14% of all jobs held by men), followed by manufacturing and construction (both 10%)”, while “70% of jobs in education are held by women” (Irvine, Clark, Ward, & Francis-Devine, Women and the UK economy, 2022, p. 9). Men indeed voted to leave in higher proportions (55%) than women (49%) did (The Brexit referendum - Statistics & Facts, 2022).

Analysing the data based on regions and areas also showed that London was the only one that had a majority (60%) of remain voters. London is the melting pot of many socio-demographic aspects that show correlation with the Brexit vote: age, social class, occupation, and the number of immigrants. (It is no coincidence that anti-Brexit street art also flourished here, painted not only by British (English, Irish) but also by foreign (e.g. Lebanese) artists (Khozema, 2019); Schmidle, 2019).

According to Castells (2019), leave votes were based less on careful consideration, and more on pre-existing convictions based on personal experience and a sort of defence mechanism against globalization and its socio-cultural and economic effects.

Brexit and borders - the interplay of geographical and internalized boundaries

Brexit is a question of borders. It is an artificial border that stems from a natural border - the British Isles separated from the European continent - and hence the British 'otherness' has always existed.

Withdrawal from the European Union and the associated narrative ('us' vs 'them' – further discussed later in this chapter) has raised a series of questions. First and foremost, who remained, who could remain on the 'inside' of the border, in the UK, and who could not? Who am I on the inside of the border? Who are on the other side of the border? Who am I on the other side of the border? Who am I when I cross the border?

What was really being expressed through opposition to immigration and the EU was in fact the profound class and cultural divide that defines British society, and Western societies more generally. The local objected to the global using the only tool at hand: the border. Markets and capital are allowed to cross it by all means, provided that they don't bring people and cultures with them. (Castells, 2019, p. 61)

These anxieties are reflected in works like *Autumn* by Ali Smith, *The Man Who Saw Everything* by Deborah Levy, and *Just Like You* by Nick Hornby, which will be discussed in future chapters.

Again, anti-immigration seems to play a crucial role. Gilmartin & al. (2018) make the same argument as Castells; however, they note an important difference: anti-immigration arguments come mainly from the right, while the anti-globalisation left also objects to mobility, notably the mobility of capital, criticising transnational corporations that exploit natural borders and disrupt local economies to increase their profits. They emphasize nonetheless that this latter

concern of borders and the mobility of capital receives less attention, whereas the mobility of people has been heavily politicized both by Brexit and Trump's 2016 election campaign. Similarly to Castells, they draw parallels between the 2016 US and UK political events, explaining them as culminations of the very same global trend. They argue that Trump's 2017 travel ban and the problematization of migration during the Brexit campaign "operate in similar ways by creating hierarchies of acceptability based on nationality, race, religion or other social characteristics" (p. 6). The main idea seems to be the same in both Castells and Gilmartin & al.: that the free, "borderless" world, promised by globalization is one built on discrimination. It advantages a few who have the right, as well as the cultural, economic, and social capital to cross borders (of their own free will – not as refugees) and become part of the new, cosmopolitan elite. All the others – well, they have to face the feeling of being left behind as local workers, "devalued by industrial off-shoring and relocation, displaced by technological change and left vulnerable through labour deregulation" (Castells, 2019, p. 13). Therefore, their primary defence mechanism is to protect their borders, in order to prevent immigrants from taking away even what they – the "true British" - have left.

Brexit has led not only to questions of geo-economic borders (such as the future of the Irish border and Scottish independence), but also to questions of identity and belonging, both in social and spatial terms. Do citizens have more right to live in a country than others? At what point, after how many generations does an immigrant family become British? Or will they never be seen as fully British just because of their apparent features - darker skin, narrower eyes, bigger nose, different hair? Hungarian migrant workers, no matter how much they felt they belonged, had to pack up and return 'home' if they had not lived long enough in the UK and obtained a settled or pre-settled status.

When discussing these questions of identity and belonging, a key notion to focus on is culture. When we move to another nation's country as foreigners, even if the artificial border allows, the cultural boundaries of that nation make it difficult to integrate and separate us from members of that nation. Culture can be discussed at various levels, such as the nation, local community, the organisational culture of our workplace, and so on. Several definitions and models of this elusive concept have emerged over the years; Hofstede's apt comparison is that our cultural background is like our nose, we cannot see it properly, but everyone else notices it and finds it strange if it's different from everyone else's. Besides, we go where it leads, but it's always in the way.

Looking at all the models and approaches, one idea seems certain: culture is hard to define. However, certain elements, that altogether form culture, are generally agreed on by scholars. Malota and Mitev (2013) compile a thorough – although, as they underline, non-exhaustive - list of these elements of culture which include religion, history, values, social organisations and institutions and, of course, language as the most important components of culture, but they also mention norms, knowledge, customs, traditions, rituals, routines and skills.

However, apart from defining the most important elements of culture, it is also important to ask ourselves what we define culture *against*. Culture, a type of shared knowledge, is something that ties people together – and excludes those who do not have it. If we do not belong to a certain culture – or a community, be it local, national or else - we are seen as strangers. The concept of the stranger has been described in various disciplines and in various ways. In his book *The Stranger*, Shaun Best (2019) approaches the concept from the perspective of sociology, drawing on George Simmel's famous essay “The Stranger” to discuss the work of several prominent scholars, such as Erving Goffman, Pierre Bourdieu, Norbert Elias and Zygmunt Bauman, in an attempt to capture the concept of the stranger. He also discusses related concepts such as the Other, estrangement and the community of practice. He focuses on the notion of practice as the basis of differentiation between “us” and the Other or the Stranger, defining it as “a resource that we draw upon effectively to demonstrate to people around us that this is me and I belong” (Best, 2019, p. 167). He discusses various definitions of the stranger that scholars have formed throughout the decades, boiling it down to the following description of the interplay of practices, community, identity, and estrangement:

[...] estrangement is a product of social practice through which not only understandings of what it means to be ‘strange’ are propagated and maintained but people’s subjectivities in relation to the stranger are shaped and constructed. Practice is never owned by a single individual but rather is present in various sets of connections or sets of contacts and can be exercised only so far as the individuals are free to choose actions from within a field of possibilities. (Best, 2019, pp. 15-16)

Best notes, however, that “we have the capacity for critical consciousness and can be agents of change over our own lives and influence the practices used to define the stranger” (Best, 2019, p. 16).

Best's definition of community of practice clearly shows an overlap with the elements of culture I discussed above: the significance of a shared knowledge, a shared language, shared daily routines and – above all – norms. We can see here how the concepts of identity, culture, community, borders and belonging all interplay:

Estrangement is the perception of difference as a potential or real threat and the stranger is seen as the carrier of the threat to the individual self and the wider society. The stranger is 'not one of us', and although human agents are generally inclusive, they often find difference unnerving. A central aspect of inclusion is the need to keep difference to a minimum and to do this people feel secure when they engage in effective border creating and border maintaining. The process of estrangement in contemporary society is then a creation of changeable configuration of practices. [...] The practices also constitute the boundaries we create and are understood as part of us; we live with them and through them. The boundary allows 'us' to identify between categories of people who behave in an acceptable or unacceptable way. In other words, between those who belong (us, the insiders) and those who do not (them), the strangers. Strangers are assumed to have a greater propensity to behave in an unacceptable way. Borders encourage us to think of difference as danger. (Best, 2019, p. 167)

The fear and hostility towards foreigners really showed after the referendum result showed that the UK voted to leave the EU. In an article published just a few days after the results came out, the BBC compiled a series of - rather disheartening - tweets from people who had been subjected to racist insults in the wake of the referendum, claiming they no longer belonged ('Go back home' - Bitter backlash post EU referendum, 2016).

Best (2019) mentions language as one of the main shared types of knowledge within a community. The significance of language and the process of "othering" in the case of Brexit specifically is well described by sociologist Dr Sarah Burton in her feature article, *The Case of Brexit, Expertise and Linguaphobia: Cosmopolitanism, Language and the Politics of Value*:

Significantly, a number of racist attacks on people for not speaking English have been claimed to result from perpetrators feeling 'paranoid' about what might be being said that they cannot understand. As such, shared languages function as interpretive avenues, but a lack of common linguistic horizon equally works as a barrier not just to communication but also to conviviality of citizenship and belonging. This is, of course, not to reduce the

culpability of racist actions, but to begin to draw a relationship between fear of ‘the other’ and processes of othering themselves. (Burton, 2018)

The main theme that emerges related to the differentiation between “us” and “the Other” is threat. Borders are thus seen as a means to physically separate and protect “us” from the perceived danger embodied by the Stranger, who falls outside of the non-physical borders of our community.

The otherness of the stranger, however, sometimes carries a certain exoticism as well, along with the threat it represents. What can possibly connect the two? In both cases, the stranger is not really seen as a fellow human being. They get dehumanized, objectified, even fetishized - much like the famous black dancer Josephine Baker and her *danse sauvage* was perceived by (non-Black) audiences as an exotic, fascinating Other from a distant continent, representing something shockingly different from “the norm”, but also the object of lust:

Descriptions of Baker’s dancing by critics and biographers remind us of the pull toward the primitive, the exotic, the racialized and colonized Other that inevitably shaped how audiences viewed her. Even testaments to Baker’s universalism are often tinged with a romanticization of so-called primitive peoples as closer to some kind of primal oneness. (Das, 2020, p. 4)

Another, similar example is the concept of “nesting orientalisms”, according to which regions “orientalize” other regions to the East and South from them, meaning that they tend to view their culture and religion more primitive, more conservative. In this hierarchy, the Balkans represent the most “Eastern” area of Eastern Europe, but Asia is even “more oriental” or “other.” (Bakic-Hayden, 1995)

The objectification of the “exotic stranger” is a phenomenon also seen in Brexit literature. In her essay on the representation of Eastern Europeans in contemporary British literature, Vedrana Veličković (2020) cites Adam Thorne’s novel *Missing Fay* as an example, where a Romanian-Hungarian character, Cosmina, although a university graduate, has to start working blue-collar jobs because of her poor command of English. She is treated with disrespect or ignorance by most people, and one character even labels her a “stupid whore of a Romabitch” (quite ironically, since Cosmina’s character is also depicted as quite racist and dismissive of the Roma people). Veličković notes how the only character (Mike) who does try to get close to her does so primarily for the simple reason that he objectifies her as an exotic stranger:

Cosmina is the first Romanian Mike has ever met; he sees her as “unbelievably foreign and glamorous” (220) and finds her name incredibly attractive (209). He becomes obsessed with her and reduces her to sexual allure. [...] There is a sense that Europe is “out there” and Eastern Europe is an even greater unknown, generalized as a poor place without prospects through brief snapshots of Cosmina’s parents back in Romania (Thorpe 2017, 206) and Mike’s assertions that Cosmina’s “country is very poor” (223) and having to deal with “endless struggles” (226). This is a familiar stereotype of post-communist transition as an eternal predicament (Horvat and Štiks 2015, 16) and of poor but sexy Eastern Europe, to use Agata Pyzik’s (2014) excellent phrase. (Veličković, 2020, p. 6)

Does Brexit have a language?

Besides socio-demographic statistics and the main boundaries of Brexit, it is also curious to investigate whether there exists a specific set of words, expressions or even dichotomies in the English language brought forth due to Brexit – especially when we examine literature, which might very well reflect if this new “language of Brexit” has found its way into literary texts as well.

The term "Brexit" itself was coined after the word "Grexit" (used to reference Greece's exit from the EU) in a 2012 article by Peter Wilding, a solicitor working for David Cameron's Conservative Party in EU politics and media. However, it was not until the early days of the 2015 general elections campaign that the word found its way into everyday, popular discourse as well, and then quickly became the word of the year both in Collins Dictionary and the Oxford English Dictionary in 2016. This one single word, “Brexit” led to a movement and mobilized an incredible number of people. Wilding later said he regrets creating this new term, “being the leading remainer before the referendum and gifting the leavers their catchy trigger to unleash the demons that followed” (Wilding, 2018). The interesting idea here is that the appearance of one single word in public discourse can indeed have such a profound and far-reaching socio-political impact.

A number of other terms followed in the path of Brexit: Bremain, Bregret, Brexhausted - the list goes on. Artist Simon Roberts even created a Brexit lexicon, compiling nearly 5,000 words and phrases from the press and social media. Interestingly, Bremain, the remain-side equivalent of Brexit, did not gain such popularity. Journalist Christine Ro cites linguist Lise Fontaine to offer two possible explanations as to why:

For one thing, it's not as flexible: "You can't talk about 'the remain'. It doesn't have a noun counterpart." And it's less compelling as a word because, according to Fontaine, "There's nothing exciting. There's no risk, there's no threat. It's not newsworthy." (Ro, 2019)

In terms of language and linguistics - as the quote above implies - Brexit has not only created its own vocabulary but has also revealed certain linguistic tools used by leave and remain campaigners. Linguist Steve Buckledee (2018) conducted a fascinating research to see what linguistic structures and strategies both sides employed during the campaign, and how this use of the English language helped or hindered their cause. He collected data between January and June 2016, primarily looking at "the official and unofficial websites devoted to the remain and leave campaigns, speeches and interviews involving mostly politicians but also economists and bankers, and editorials and articles from online newspapers". As he concludes,

[...] no individual could have swayed the result one way or the other, while remain supporters of the right, left and centre have a certain collective responsibility for not employing language more convincingly. (Buckledee, 2018, p. 8)

What is it that the remain side did not get right? And what made Brexiters side so successful?

First and foremost, Buckledee argues that remainers used language that suggested that even they themselves were not entirely adamant about remaining in the EU. As an example, he mentions the use of coordinative constructions used in headlines and articles, as well as in speeches and interviews such as the following by Monbiot, Cooper and Cameron:

I'm starting to hate the EU. *But* I will vote to stay in (Monbiot, 2016)

The EU is not perfect and improvement is always worth making, *but* the benefits far outweigh the costs (Cooper, 2016)

Like many, I have had my doubts about the European Union as an organisation. I still do. But just because an organisation is frustrating it does not mean that you should necessarily walk out of it, and certainly not without thinking very carefully through the consequences. (Cameron, 2016)

Buckledee claims that the use of subordinate clauses such as "*Although* I hate the EU, I will vote to stay in", or even better, of factive verbs such as *know* or *realize* (The EU is not perfect and improvement is always worth making, but *we have realized that* the benefits far outweigh

the costs') would have significantly improved the credibility and impact of remain campaigners' arguments. As he argues,

“By repeated use of coordinative constructions, anti-Brexit politicians and journalists showed that they had sufficient confidence in their pro-EU arguments to allow them to be ‘susceptible to questioning’ [...] in a main clause, but the question remains as to why they decided to give equal prominence to the Brexiteers’ views, not even relegating them to the lower syntactic level of a subordinate clause.” (Buckledee, 2018, p. 16)

He underlines that this use of language was probably explained by remainers more thorough approach to the complexity of the issue. They wanted to emphasize that they do indeed understand the perspective of the leave side and agree with a few of their claims, however they still consider leaving the EU a bad idea. In contrast, leavers tended to simplify the matter and boil it down to simple arguments – like the ones about the “uncontrolled” influx of immigrants and their negative influence on salaries and living standards, and other arguments discussed in previous chapters.

In conclusion, Buckledee states that remainers used “linguistic features that give the impression that they were not wholly convinced by their own arguments”, whereas leavers “opted for bold claims and seemed untroubled by doubts or the need to exercise caution”, which enhanced the power of their rhetoric (Buckledee, 2018, p. 17).

The use of slogans has also made a significant difference, in particular the famous - or rather infamous - phrase: "Take back control", which has become the catchphrase of Brexiteers, similar to the "Make America Great Again" slogan used by Trump during the 2016 US presidential election. Here, the objective of this phrase is vague, not referring to any specific measures to be taken. What it captures is rather a sentiment – which was strong enough to mobilize many people. The remain side, however, never came up with a similar slogan - partly because they wished to discuss the possible consequences of Brexit with the complexity that it entailed, instead of boiling their campaign down to one single catchphrase. Although not a slogan, the sentence “go home” was also used in various forms, directed at people who were not considered to belong, as I discussed in the previous chapter on Brexit and borders.

Fiction and Politics – how and why did BrexLit emerge

BrexLit – a new genre

The term *BrexLit* (also spelled *Brexlit*) was first used by Financial Times journalist John Day in his article titled “BrexLit: the new landscape of British fiction” (2017). Day distinguishes between two different types of literary texts within BrexLit: the first, coming under the genre of speculative fiction, consists of literature that envisages dystopian or utopian scenarios for Britain after it leaves the European Union. The second type of BrexLit, by contrast, explores the complexity of the social, cultural, economic and political divisions that prompted the referendum. To summarise, the first type of BrexLit, as categorised by Day, deals with the consequences, while the second is concerned with the causes.

This new literary genre – as well as the term itself - quickly gained popularity, similarly to its previously discussed term of origin, Brexit. In 2018, Routledge published a collection of essays entitled *Brexit and Literature - Critical and Cultural Responses* (Eaglestone (ed.), 2018), which, among other fascinating papers, includes an essay dedicated to this quickly emerging genre in contemporary British literature (Shaw, BrexLit, 2018). The significance of BrexLit is also reflected in the fact that the author of this essay, Kristian Shaw, Associate Professor in English Literature at the University of Lincoln, later published an entire book entitled *BrexLit: British Literature and the European Project* (Shaw, 2021). BrexLit, as defined by him, is fiction that represents “the divided nature of the United Kingdom as well as both the motivations for, and ramifications of, the referendum” (p. 4). This, of course, is a rather broad definition, which he narrows down with three additional characteristics of content: according to Shaw, a literary text can be considered a work of BrexLit if it either directly responds to Brexit, “imaginatively allude” to it, or “engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial, or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain's withdrawal.” (Shaw, 2021, p. 4)

Based on this, Alessio (2020), drawing on Shaw’s and Day’s categorization, divides all BrexLit literature, regardless of genre, into two categories: intimate or psychological and political fiction. Political fiction, according to her, primarily depicts “dystopian post-Brexit scenarios” and places political concepts, such as “post- truth, the danger of nostalgia, political mendaciousness, awareness and responsibility” in the centre in order to explore the underlying social-political aspects of Brexit. Intimate novels, on the other hand “attempt to represent,

instead, the people across the divide and to better understand the reasons underneath the attitude towards the leave vote” (p. 146).

As the above definitions and categorizations of Day, Shaw and Alessio suggest, BrexLit includes a wide variety of literary genres, ranging from speculative novels, political thrillers, magical realism and theatre plays to poems, dealing either with “the underlying factors of which Brexit is a symptom – social division, city vs country, intolerance” (Self, 2020) or the ramifications - or utopistic visions - of the referendum.

In addition to genre and subject, another aspect of identifying BrexLit is the date of publication. There is no unanimous consensus on whether both pre- and post-referendum literature can be considered BrexLit. Some analyses narrow BrexLit down to “texts published in the period between 2016–2020, between the vote and the UK’s official departure from the EU on January 31, 2020” (Everitt, 2020), excluding, for instance, texts dealing with the social divisions that preceded the Brexit referendum, which do not mention the political event itself. With regard to the latter category, the scope of BrexLit is particularly ambiguous: as I will argue later in the chapter on the impact of BrexLit on collective memory, the reception of a text is strongly rooted in and influenced by the social and political context of the moment, leading to new and updated interpretations. Therefore, I argue that contemporary pre-referendum texts that were not written with the intention of representing the underlying events of Brexit might now also be seen as BrexLit, fitting as puzzle pieces into the overall literary representation of Brexit.

To further define the scope of the genre, the nationality of authors should also be taken into account. Although BrexLit is usually referred to as a sub-genre of 'contemporary British literature', we must be careful not to treat it as synonymous with texts written by British authors. Within British nationality already, we should differentiate between Scottish, Northern Irish and Welsh authors, as well as British citizens with non-British origins (people from Asia, Africa, or other European countries for example). In addition, adhering to the definition based on subject and genre, BrexLit includes fiction written by non-British authors as well - Eastern Europeans for instance. Vedrana Veličković (2019) follows this categorization in her book *Eastern Europeans in Contemporary Literature and Culture: Imagining New Europe*, exploring the representation of Eastern Europeans in fiction written by British, Black British and Eastern European authors. Authors from different nationalities allow us to see the causes and

consequences of Brexit from more than one perspective – thus it is crucial to include them in the BrexLit discourse as well. In this study, I have chosen not to include this aspect in my analysis and will only discuss novels by British (English, Scottish, and South African-raised) authors; nevertheless, it is an exciting area to investigate what commonalities and differences can be found in Brexit literature if we take the author's nationality as the basis of segmentation.

Whether we read about causes or consequences, and from whichever perspective, there is one theme – or rather issue – that seems to recur: the question of identity. Dulcie Everitt, author of *BrexLit: The Problem of Englishness in Pre- and Post-Brexit Referendum Literature* (2020) explores how “BrexLit seeks to re-examine the nature of Englishness and offers readers the opportunity to step outside of the chaos, to reflect, and in many cases, to heal from the dismal anxiety of the present” (p. 3) and aims to demonstrate “the power of BrexLit to both expose the rifts in English society and detoxify Englishness in the wake of one of the most toxic events in its recent history” (p. 180). She concludes that

Englishness is an enigma, not because no identity exists at all, but because the impulse of Englishness is itself a paradox. Englishness attempts to be both an identity of exceptionalism and superiority, yet it is simultaneously rooted in post-imperial grievance and the fear of being dominated by Europe. (p. 3)

At the heart of my analysis of the three novels will be precisely this issue of identity, which prevails not only in Brexit literature but also, as this introduction shows, in academic discussions about nations, borders, culture, and related terms.

Below I provide a brief overview of the most widely discussed BrexLit fictions published after the referendum, all of which fall into the category of prose, notably novels or short stories. The earliest novels, published just a few months after the referendum, are Ali Smith’s *Autumn* (2016) – one of the novels I analyse in this thesis -, referenced as “the first serious Brexit novel” (Preston, *Autumn by Ali Smith — ‘the first serious Brexit novel’, 2016*) and Anthony Cartwright’s *The Cut* (2016). While the first one started off as a literary experiment to capture the present without the intention to directly address the referendum (I will discuss it in more detail in a subsequent chapter), the second was commissioned by independent publisher Peirene Press “specifically to explore Brexit” (Cook, 2017). Cartwright's novel shows a similar approach as Nick Hornby's later novel entitled *Just Like You* – that I will analyse in this thesis

-, in that it illustrates the divisions and dichotomies of Brexit through a relationship. As summarized by Jude Cook (2017) in her review for *The Guardian*:

Cartwright's diamond-sharp novella digs deep into the political quagmire, dramatising the referendum's opposing ideological standpoints via a man and a woman from very different class backgrounds. This is England as two distinct nations, both trying, but failing, to understand the other.

The Lie of the Land, Amanda Craig's 2017 comic but dystopian novel, focuses on the dichotomy of city and country to depict social and political divisions. Her book follows the story of a couple from post-Brexit north London – an area which is often associated with the metropolitan liberal elite - who, as a result of the financial recession, have to cut costs and thus relocate to Devon, where they find themselves surrounded by leave voters.

Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* (2018) and Jonathan Coe's satirical state-of-the-nation novel, *Middle England* (2018) directly address political divisions in the UK as well. Byers' novel, just like Craig's, is set in post-Brexit Britain, envisioning a rather dystopian future which, at the time of the publication, was not at all certain to ever come true. Coe's novel, on the other hand, portrays not so much the future, but rather the past and present of Brexit at the time, framing it as part of a larger, overarching narrative, as the author "moves gallopingly from the election of the coalition government in 2010, through the riots of 2011, the brief upswelling of multicultural national pride that was the 2012 Olympics, to the 2016 referendum and its subsequent fallout, ending in 2018" (Preston, 2018). Coe is not the only one to place Brexit in a larger narrative: published in the same year, Melissa Harrison's *All Among the Barley* follows a 1930s political movement taking place in the countryside town of Suffolk, aiming to "preserve the health and purity of our English soil". As she builds an analogy between the 2016 referendum and past events, her novel represents Brexit as "a product of toxic nostalgia that looks dangerously close to the far-right movements of the 1930s" (Self, 2020).

Published one year later, Linda Grant's novel *A Stranger City* (2019) focuses on questions of identity, home and belonging, portraying the life of European immigrants in post-referendum London. As they get subjected to anti-immigrant insults, they start to wonder, after several years spent in Britain, whether they still belong, and whether they can still call London their home.

In the same year, acclaimed author Ian McEwan published a satirical BrexLit novel as well. His book, *The Cockroach* draws inspiration from Kafka's famous *Metamorphosis* as it follows the

story of a cockroach who takes human form in the body of the UK Prime Minister - but, it turns out, everyone in the cabinet at 10 Downing Street, except the Foreign Secretary, is also a cockroach in human form. In McEwan's novel, the world is turned upside down: the flow of money is reversed, employees pay their employers and receive money in return for their purchases; countries who export their goods and services to the UK have to pay for their exports as well, in return, they get money for importing from Britain.

How does BrexLit interact with politics?

The interplay between BrexLit and politics requires a discussion of both the authors' intentions and the reception of the works - since, as I will argue in the chapter on the potential impact of BrexLit on cultural memory, the author and the reader together create the meaning of literary works.

As for the authors' intentions, all three of the authors whose novels I analyse in this paper have, in one way or another, made a statement about politics in relation to their work. I discuss their intentions and the social and political context in which their novels were published in a subsequent chapter, as part of the analysis.

Another aspect is that all three novels mention the Brexit referendum explicitly, which already makes it impossible for readers with even the most basic knowledge of Brexit to detach them from the political scene of our days. As Anthony Mullen (2017) writes of Ali Smith, considered to be the first author to represent Brexit in literature in her novel *Autumn*, “political tropes and events like the Home Office’s ‘Go Home’ immigration vans, the murder of Jo Cox and the referendum outcome also ground the novel in our current political moment”. Deborah Levy’s work draws an eerie, although very subtle parallel between events of 1989, communist East Germany, the fall of the Berlin wall and the 2016 referendum. Nick Hornby’s novel *Just Like You* follows the unfolding love story of a young black working-class man, Joseph, and a divorced teacher in her forties, Lucy, and uses the Brexit referendum as a powerful conflict point to thematise their differences of age, class, education, and even political engagement - or disinterest. As a consequence, all three novels have been interpreted in a way that implies they carry a strong political message – I will discuss this in more detail in the chapter on critical reception.

Lastly, when it comes to reception, another important question is whether fiction has the power to shape our perception of reality and, consequently, our choices. People tend to formulate their

decisions, even political ones, based on pre-existing prejudices, stereotypes, impressions – as it happened during the 2016 referendum as well, as Castells argues: “People categorize the information they receive based on their pre-existing convictions, rooted in the emotions that they feel: electoral deliberation is secondary” (2019, p. 59). However, as I will argue, the individual’s perception of the world can be influenced by experiences lived both in real-life and through fiction.

The extent to which fictional stories can influence the real-life actions of their consumers has long been a point of contention in communication and media studies, particularly since the rise of mass media. Several scholars have argued that they indeed can. George Gerbner and Larry Gross (1976) showed that heavy-viewers of television who are regularly exposed to fictional stories containing acts of violence have a higher sense of risk and danger in the real world than light-viewers – therefore, according to their interpretation of the data, fictional stories do have the power to cultivate and distort our perception of social reality. Another example – although not supported by research – is Goethe’s 1774 epistolary novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*), which led to a wave of “copycat suicide” among young gentlemen, who were all found dead dressed like Werther, often with the book itself found at the scene of the suicide. We can also mention Orson Welles’s radio adaptation of H.G. Wells’s *The War of the Worlds*, which led to one of the first mass hysterias sparked by fake news. According to writer and historian A. Brad Schwartz (2015), author of the 2015 book *Broadcast Hysteria: Orson Welles's War of the Worlds and the Art of Fake News*, Welles’s collaborators did not expect such a response “because they all found the story too silly and improbable to ever be taken seriously”. The important distinction here is that, despite the improbability of the story, the audience was not aware of the fact that they were consuming fiction – whereas it is hard to imagine readers not being able to differentiate between real-life events and those that they experience through reading novels. Nevertheless, these instances clearly show that we cannot neglect the link between fiction and our sense of reality. Among these examples, Gerbner and Larry’s research is the one which shows the most relevant link between the consumption of fictional stories and how we perceive the society we live in – which, naturally, influences our views and preferences of politics and politicians as well.

In her paper “Eastern Europeans” and *BrexLit*, Vedrana Veličković (2020) examines numerous representations of Eastern Europeans in Brexit literature. She argues that how they are portrayed in contemporary literature can indeed influence their perception and further reinforce pre-

existing stereotypes, even if the author's aim is to deconstruct them. She discusses several novels which "emphasize lack of understanding and divisions between Eastern Europeans and the British, and fall into reinforcing stereotypes about the new migrants as scapegoats for Britain's unresolved social and historical ills, as well as its 'left behind' people as narrow and racist" (p. 10). Drawing on Larry and Gerbner's research, we can theorise – although not with certainty - that those who are regularly exposed to negative stereotypes about Eastern Europeans, potentially heightened by personal experience and certain media outlets, will have a more negative, distorted and generalized picture of them.

The impact of BrexLit on collective memory

In his analysis of Ali Smith's *Autumn*, Anthony Mullen, PhD in Thatcherism, argued that "like the British novelists of the 1980s, Ali Smith has used fiction to attempt to intervene in the current formation of a narrative of Brexit Britain" (Mullen, 2017). This statement, as well as recent discourse related to role of literature like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's viral speech, the "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009), imply that authors have the power to influence mainstream political narratives and, ultimately, how political events are recorded in collective memory. But does literature really have a role in how we perceive and remember Brexit?

Before discussing how BrexLit can potentially influence collective memory, it is crucial to define "collective memory", further than only referencing to it as "how society remembers" things, events or people. The definition of collective memory has been explored and defined by scholars from various disciplines, including sociology, psychology, anthropology and, since it has become a field of research in its own right, memory studies. I do not aim to provide an exhaustive summary of all the approaches present in academic discourse, my objective is rather to explore how literature relates to collective and cultural memory and to briefly summarize the findings and objectives of contemporary memory studies, as well as its intersection with media reception studies.

Collective and cultural memory are terms that are often used interchangeably. The term "collective memory" was first coined by French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1992) in his 1925 paper, *On Collective Memory*. He claims that there exists no such thing as individual memory, since an individual's memories are already embedded in various social patterns and elements, therefore the society in which one is socialised determines how and what they remember. The fact that people living in the UK probably remember where

they were and what they were doing when they first learned of the 2016 referendum result is a good example of what Halbwachs means by this definition. Likewise, a British person walking past a Hungarian shop in London might not have remembered doing so before the referendum results came out, but after Brexit and its potential consequences became a reality, this simple event could have become significant to the individual and made its way into their long-term memory. We tend to notice and remember only what we deem important or relevant, and forget – moreover, not even consciously process – everything that falls outside the scope of our interest. This selective brain mechanism has been observed again and again by researchers in psychology and cognitive neuroscience (Wixted, 2004), as well as memory studies (Connerton, 2008), (Conway & Singer, 2008).

To understand the role literature plays in shaping collective memory, it is helpful to look at the works of German anthropologist Jan Assmann (2013), who juxtaposed the concepts of “communicative memory” and “cultural memory” within collective memory. The term “communicative” refers to memory that is maintained by members of a narrower or wider group in their everyday communication and practices evoking the past. Communicative memory, according to Assmann, can only be preserved over the course of approximately three to four generations, after which knowledge can be transferred from the arena of interpersonal communication and practices to external media, and thus become cultural memory. This latter concept refers to a long-term memory that preserves collective guidelines and images of group identity and ensures their perpetuation through a variety of means: memorials, symbols, songs, celebrations - and even literary works. In this framework, novels which discuss real-life past events can be considered as items of collective memory – although it is crucial to emphasize that novels are fictional, and that the work of fiction authors should not be confused with that of historians.

However, history and historical records might not be fully reliable representations of the past either. Wulf Kansteiner (2002) in his paper *Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies* raises the problem of the interconnectedness of identity, memory – both individual and collective – and history, concluding that “memory is valorized where identity is problematized” (p. 184). Kansteiner draws on this concept to question the objectivity of history:

Even historians have been forced to rethink their scholarly identities as a result of the rise of memory studies. While most academics still maintain that ‘in its demand for proof,

history stands in sharp opposition to memory,’ there are good reasons to question such a clear epistemological divide between academic and non-academic representations of the past.²³ Perhaps history should be more appropriately defined as a particular type of cultural memory because, as Peter Burke already remarked in 1989, ‘neither memories nor histories seem objective any longer. In both cases we are learning to take account of conscious or unconscious selection, interpretation and distortion. In both cases this selection, interpretation and distortion is socially conditioned.’²⁴ (p. 184)

Kansteiner raises several critiques against traditional definitions of collective memory, based on Halbwachs’s original concept. He points out that collective memory should not be seen as a set of individual memories, and should not be analysed in terms of the psychological and emotional functioning of individual memory, as this approach “misrepresents the social dynamics of collective memory as an effect and extension of individual, autobiographical memory” (p. 179). He differentiates memory makers (those who produce collective memory) and memory consumers. This implies that memories can be tracked back to a specific source, an active producer – and since institutions can become memory makers as well, politics, political parties or institutions also have a significant influence on the production of collective memory, be it either censorship or ensuring the perpetuation of certain events in society. According to Kansteiner, collective memory emerges from shared communication about the past and is based on social patterns, symbol systems, models – existing not in the mind but in material reality, in the form of buildings, social practices or, in our case, even a novel. In relation to collective memory, he also highlights the role of memory communities: we cannot assume, for example, that the same memories will persist within the United Kingdom among members of different ethnicities, religious communities or social classes. In the case of Brexit novels, this raises the question of who produces and who consumes the novels, to what extent the author - the memory producer - can break out of his or her own social bubble, and who the memory consumers will be.

Kansteiner also points out that memory studies tend to “focus on the representation of specific events within particular chronological, geographical, and media settings without reflecting on the audiences of the representations” and argues that “collective memory studies should adopt the methods of communication and media studies, especially with regard to media reception” (p. 179). One of the key notions that connects Kansteiner's arguments with literary studies is the idea of plurality, which is a well-researched concept in the field of media reception. The

plurality of meanings implies that there exists no single correct interpretation. In the context of the idea of correct interpretation, it is also important to note how the plurality of meanings, or indeed the enforced idea of a single correct meaning, relates to politics, in terms of cultural and memory politics as well. What do political institutions allow to be recorded in representations of the past, be they literary or historical? How can politics help or distort their interpretation? Politics can be not only a maker of collective memory, but also an agent that influences the interpretation of the various “containers” (books, national celebrations, statues...) of collective memory. A good example of this power over representation, meaning and remembrance is the Hungarian Revolution of October 1956, which the socialist leadership referred to as a “counter-revolution” until the fall of communism, and therefore it was referred to as such in history textbooks as well, ingraining this point of view in pupils from a young age, and leaving little to no room for contestation.

The plurality of meanings raises a number of further questions. If a text has several possible meanings, how do these meanings coexist? Are some of them more legitimate than others? What elements of the text guide interpretation, and to what extent? What are the limits of individual interpretation? These questions are at the heart of the theory of text. The researchers of the Anglo-Saxon tradition of research formulate a similar theory to Halbwachs's definition of collective memory: they assume that media reception is always an activity embedded in a social and cultural context, and that the interpretation of the recipient is not free from the influence of these contexts, nor is it completely autonomous. Another recurring idea in textual theories is that the meaning of a work is not final, since author and recipient form the final meaning together – here, we can evoke Umberto Eco's concepts of the open work (Eco, 1979), model reader and model author (Eco, 2014), or Roland Barthes's (1970) concept of the five narrative codes. They all agree that the meaning of a text changes dynamically depending on the reader's own interpretation. Eco's and Barthes's work tend to focus more on the individual and less on the context of the reception. German academic Hans Robert Jauss was one of the first academics to take macrostructures into consideration as well. One of the key notions coined by him is the “horizon of expectations” (Jauss & Benzinger, 1970). For Jauss, reception is a process of appropriation (by the reader, the audience) that will change the value and meaning of a work over generations. He argues that this is a two-way process: certain works will modify the horizon of expectations, such as the norms of a certain genre, as did the first postmodern artworks. However, the change in the horizon of expectations and consequently in the norms of

a genre or medium also alters what works are produced afterwards and how they are received, and it also has an impact on the reception of past works. A good example for this process would be the perpetuation and re-interpretation of Greek myths in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories.

This recurrence and re-interpretation of texts is also listed by Erll & Rigney (2006) as one way literary texts contribute to the production of cultural memory. They list three roles of literature in the production of cultural memory:

- 1) literature as a medium of remembrance – Literary works that recollect the past in the form of narratives, be it a historical novel, autobiography, historical drama or any other genre.
- 2) literature as an object of remembrance – Texts can also be commemorated in themselves: they serve as tools for practices of collective memory and cultural remembrance, and as a basis for reflection on the collective memories they record. A good example for this, besides Greek myths in Freud's work, would be the Bible, which does not only record events of the past, but its passages also serve as a foundational text for religious practices and literary works which build on its system of symbols and metaphors.
- 3) literature as a medium for observing the production of cultural memory, or a "mimesis" of memory – literary works that represent acts of recollection invite readers to reflect on the process of memory production, both individual and collective. Erll & Rigney mention Marcel Proust's famous novel, *A la recherche du temps perdu* as an example for literature serving as a "mimesis of individual memory". They differentiate the "mimesis of cultural memory", which, according to them "reflects upon the epistemology, ethics, and workings of collective memory and, as such, it engages in a dialogue with historians and sociologists regarding the interpretation of the past and the forms appropriate to it" (p. 113).

We can find examples for all three of these roles of literature in the novels I discuss in this paper. Nick Hornby's novel falls mainly in the first category: it presents the events and opinions surrounding Brexit that we have read about in the news, complemented and made more relatable by the personal experiences and lives of its protagonists. Levy's and Smith's novel can also be considered as such, however they are also both centred around questions of memory and its accuracy; thus they make us reflect on and question our process of creating both individual and

collective memories. Thirdly, intertextuality is also used as a tool, mainly by Smith, to further reinforce her idea that history, just like the seasons, is cyclical and has recurring themes and patterns, which get recorded by literature again and again.

Erll (2006) further develops this categorization in her essay on how the Indian Mutiny has been represented (mainly following the British myth and neglecting the Indian point of view) throughout the decades, and how this narrative has only recently been challenged by new narratives, emphasizing the Indian point of view and questioning the stereotypes about the Indians being the “villains” committing violent acts during the Mutiny. Erll also invokes Assmann’s concepts: she states that novels which got published some forty years after the Mutiny are of special significance, since they have the power to either reinforce or destabilize the pre-existing narrative at a point in history where communicative memory slowly fades away, as it is maintained by less and less eyewitnesses. This statement also implies the interesting transformation and use of communicative memory in literature: as authors recreate conversations through which the characters produce communicative memory, it becomes cultural memory, recorded in text as part of the novel. In the case of Brexit, it is interesting to think about what novels, if any, will be published in three to four generations that represent Brexit, and how these texts will reinforce or deconstruct the narratives established by contemporary authors.

To summarise what has been discussed in this chapter, it can be said that literature as part of our collective and cultural memory, and authors as memory makers clearly play a significant role in shaping what and how we recall in relation to historical events and figures. Novels, just like historical writings, are subject however to the author’s own subjective word choices and editorial decisions, as well as each reader’s individual interpretation, which together create the final meaning of the text. Therefore, we can never accurately assume the potential impact of a certain text on individual memory, nor on collective memory, since it is always influenced by the social, cultural, political, and individual context of its reception.

Analysis

Context

To better understand the role of the three novels in contemporary British prose, in this chapter I discuss the most significant details of their publication, as well as their critical reception and reviews from readers.

The authors' intentions and the publication process

Of the three novels, Ali Smith's *Autumn* has a peculiar background when it comes to publication and goals. Her project to write a quartet based on the four seasons arose from a missed deadline with her publisher, after which her novel *How to be both* was published in just 6 weeks instead of the usual 9-18 months. After this experience, Smith came up with the idea of “a sort of time-sensitive experiment”: she agreed with her publisher to realise a quartet in the same way, making the publishing time as short as possible so that “they would be about not just their own times, but the place where time and the novel meet.” (Smith, ‘I thought it would be about the seasons’: Ali Smith on writing *Autumn*, 2019) Smith started writing *Autumn*, the first part of this quartet in 2015, before the Brexit referendum. However, after the results came out, the author had to reconsider the contents of her novel: she could not leave out such an important event from her time-sensitive experience. In her interview with *The Guardian* (Smith, 2019), the author claims that she did not have to start from scratch, however: the piece she had written was already dealing with “social division, gentrification and austerity”. In her view, all these social and political divisions and conflicts have always existed and have been portrayed several times throughout the centuries and cites a speech from Sir Thomas More “about the foulness and dangers of anti-foreigner sentiment”. Along with this, she states that the divisions that brought about Brexit “aren’t new” and the results of the referendum “just made them properly visible to us all.”

Hornby’s novel, *Just Like You* is set in 2016, but was published only in 2019. It is almost like a fable about social divisions that lead to Brexit: in an interview with *Penguin.co.uk*, the author said he “wanted to write about a couple separated by as many things that could possibly separate a couple, within reason” and that he found that it was “an interesting time to be writing about value clashes between older and younger people”, clearly referencing the differences in remain and leave vote share, discussed in the theoretical framework. He mainly focuses on differences of class, race and generation as he portrays the blooming love story of an unlikely couple:

Joseph is broke and a bit aimless. He lives with his God-fearing old mum, coaches football in his spare time and works in a north London butcher's shop while nursing dreams of making it big as a DJ. One of his regular customers is Lucy, head of English at a local school, mother of two boys and separated from Paul. (Leith, 2020)

Deborah Levy's novel, *The Man Who Saw Everything* was also published in 2019. The author addresses many themes and issue in her novel – Brexit being one of them, as she jumps back and forth in time, structuring her narrative around notable events in history – such as the fall of the Berlin wall and the referendum – through the eyes of a peculiar, narcissistic man, Saul Adler. As Levy herself says in an interview with *Hazlitt.net*, she aimed to “draw parallels between the micro and the macro. It's another way of saying the personal and the political have to find new language for everything” (Fitzpatrick, 2019).

Critical reception

Autumn, with its speedy publication, was the first highly celebrated Brexit novel – it was named as one of the ten books of the year by the *New York Times* and got shortlisted for the 2017 Man Booker Prize. It has been praised by the press for its subtle portrayal of divisions, stereotypes and prejudices, its beautiful, lyric prose, its use of references to images such as the works of pop-art artist Pauline Boty, as well as its rich intertextuality:

It riffs on Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* as a way of discussing the split personality in our society that Brexit brought out of the shadows into the light: ‘All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. (Self, 2020)

Deborah Levy's novel also got nominated for the Man Booker Prize. Her disorienting fiction deals with identity, power dynamics and oppression in both the political and personal realm. As *The Guardian* writes, the main character Saul's story is “a kind of psychoanalytic mirror of Europe, with events in the material world finding their emotional counterparts in his disordered memories” (Byers, 2019).

In contrast, Hornby's book leans more toward romantic comedy than lyric prose. The press, although celebrated *Just Like You*, also emphasized its lightness:

It is frequently funny, consistently engaging and it's not primarily a sociological treatise or a satire: it's a love story. It may not have fire in its belly, but it has great warmth in its heart. (Leith, 2020)

Another Guardian review claims that it does not really stand its ground as a love story either, pointing out that “what is less effectively conveyed is just how this relationship works, neither the glue nor the chemistry truly apparent”, while also failing to properly capture Brexit as a phenomenon:

[...] the arguments from both sides rehashed, but this is territory already so well covered by Jonathan Coe and others, and so well known by the rest of us, that it feels redundant. Just Like You could stand alone as the ladlit-meets-mumlit social satire that it is, its vicious wit paradoxically interwoven with tenderness and empathy. (Briscoe, 2020)

Reader's response – issues of complexity, accessibility, and timing

As of November 2022, readers on Goodreads.com, the world's largest site for readers and book recommendations, have left the most reviews (66,111) on *Autumn*, followed by *Just Like You* (17,474) and Levy's novel as the least read of the three (8,155 ratings). The best rated was, again, *Autumn* (3.69 out of 5), followed by *The Man Who Saw Everything* (3.67) and *Just Like You* (3.4).

Reading through reviews on *Autumn*, one recurring element seems to be its complexity and loose ties in the plot: for some, it represented an exceptional artistic achievement – for others, it made the novel hard to read, all over the place and incoherent.

Levy's book – also having a non-linear and rather complex narrative - got similar reviews. Some readers considered the writing incredibly clever, saying how this book would have deserved to win Levy a Booker Prize. Others were less enthusiastic: they found it confusing, lacking real plot, stuffed with “genuinely bad dialogue” and “lots of rambling” (Goodreads, 2019).

As for Hornby's book, it was more accessible and easier to digest for the public. Nevertheless, many readers expressed their discontent with Brexit having such a main role in this romance story, saying that they were already fed up with it:

I feel like Hornby really wanted to write a Brexit novel but was also aware that most people are fed up with hearing about Brexit so he got around it by conceiving Just Like

You [...] Except Brexit and the near-constant banging on about class and race turns a fine romance story into dreary muck. It's like he aimed for both and fell short twice so he fails at a romance story and he fails at a Brexit novel (even though the latter I'm pretty sure shouldn't exist). (Goodreads, 2020a)

Another reader formulated a very similar opinion:

[...] by the end I was just ready to be done with the 2016 referendum. The first time around was hard enough, do I hate myself so much that I want to experience it again? Not really. (Goodreads, 2020b)

But might it just be the case for readers in the UK who cannot seem to be able to escape the topic of Brexit? Another review from an American reader suggests that the novel, besides fulfilling its roles of entertainment, can give valuable insight into British politics:

As an American (and political nerd), I enjoyed the background on Brexit, but I imagine my friends across the pond have had enough (similar to how I'm avoiding Trump books right now). (Goodreads, 2020c)

In this sense, Ali Smith might have had an advantage, because her novel was the first one to tackle such topics, and got published at just the right time, when readers were not tired of Brexit, moreover they seemed eager to see how fiction represents it.:

Ali Smith manages to cover all of the current topics that the people in Britain are talking about, and disguise them in a story about a young woman and an old man over the years. But the topics are visible, they are everywhere and that's Smith's intention in the first place I believe. We have pre brexit conversations, political issues, media issues, racism and homophobia as well as visibility, we have anger and misunderstanding, and above all we have the common citizen standing in the middle not knowing what's going on around them anymore. [...] When all the world seems to fall apart, these two characters manage to meet again. And I will never be thankful enough for that hope. (Goodreads, 2016)

BrexLit boundaries – the interplay of physical borders, sense of identity and belonging

In all three novels, physical borders – fences, district lines, country borders, zebra crossings, the Berlin Wall and so on – play a central role and structure the plot in such a way that characters find themselves opposed to each other. In this chapter, I discuss how these artificial boundaries

affect the characters' sense of identity in each story and eventually result in the questioning of such borders.

Defining identity, however, is an interdisciplinary challenge: scholars of philosophy, psychology, religion, spirituality, social science and neuroscience have all established their own approach and set of tools to grasp its complexity. Due to character constraints, I will not discuss all of these approaches. In the following subchapters, I will analyse BrexLit characters' identity through physical and non-physical boundaries drawing on ideas of social identity theory, which explores the interplay between personal and social identity (Tajfel, Turner, Austin, & Worchel, 1979).

Autumn – defying physical and societal borders through pop-art and an unlikely friendship

Smith's novel tells the story of a friendship between Elisabeth Demand, a junior lecturer in art history and his childhood neighbour Daniel Gluck, an elderly man of English and German origin, who used to be a songwriter. The third important figure is the young-deceased 1960s pop artist Pauline Boty, once a friend of Daniel's and the subject of Elisabeth's doctoral research. We are jumping back and forth from decade to decade, seeing flashbacks of both Elisabeth's and Daniel's childhoods, as the plot advances in a loose, collage-like structure.

It is of no coincidence that the last lines of one of the most frequently cited chapters, often serving as the blurb of the novel are the following:

All across the country, the country was divided, a fence here, a wall there, a line drawn
here, a line crossed there,
a line you don't cross here,
a line you better not cross there,
a line of beauty here,
a line dance there,
a line you don't even know exists here,
a line you can't afford there,
a whole new line of fire,
line of battle,
end of the line,
here/there. (pp. 60-61)

Smith's writing shows beautifully how outside borders get internalized, how these lines separate the once unified into opposing sides. However, her main character is one who questions and challenges all these lines. In *Autumn*, 8-year-old Elisabeth Demand, who lives with her mother, receives a homework assignment to conduct an interview with a neighbour. Her mother is unsupportive; she does everything, even offers to buy Elisabeth a new VHS as a present, just to keep her away from the old man, Daniel Gluck, whom they don't know and who she assumes cannot even speak English. It is only a narrow fence separating their homes from each other – but at the end, she convinces her daughter to make something up about Daniel, only to show him the girl's writing through the fence afterwards. A few days later Daniel is waiting for Elisabeth (who is now afraid of him being angry at her) out in the street, where there are no physical boundaries separating them – and although the little girl first crosses the street to avoid him and claims she is not Elisabeth, but her sister, they finally form a bond, shaking hands to introduce themselves. With that gesture, they cross the first artificial line separating them, together with age and nationality differences. The following discussion they have about their own names sheds light on how even different cultures and origins in the UK have something to share (such as Biblical references):

It's that I think your surname is originally French, Mr Gluck said. I think it comes from the French words de and monde, put together, which means, when you translate it, of the world."

„What does your name mean? she said.

It means I'm lucky and happy, he said. The Gluck part. And that if I'm ever thrown into a pit that's full of hungry lions I'll survive. That's the first name.

Years pass, but Elisabeth's mother, still views the then 85-year-old Daniel as a suspicious "other", and thus deems their friendship abnormal, asking her daughter why she cannot "have normal friends like normal thirteen-year-olds" (p. 78). The mother tries to put Daniel in a box based on stereotypes and create a narrative which fits her preconceptions:

And anyway, why else are you always hanging round an old gay man?

(That was her mother.)

I don't have a father fixation, Elisabeth said. And Daniel's not gay. He's European.

Call him Mr Gluck, her mother said. And how do you know he's not gay? And if that's true, and he's not gay, then what does he want with you?

Or if he is, Elisabeth said, then he's not just gay. He's not just one thing or another. Nobody is. Not even you. (Smith, Autumn, 2016, p. 77)

This last claim of Elisabeth raises another important issue: as soon as we are labelled this or that, society wants us to act like it, to pick sides and adhere to them. This, in the case of Daniel turns out to be life-defining, as a nurse who takes care of him later tells Elisabeth about his past:

We were all amazed, the care assistant says, when he told us about in the war, when they interned them. Him being English really but going in there with his old father the German, even though he could have stayed outside if he'd chosen. (p. 170)

Years later, Elisabeth, now a lecturer in history of art in London, visits her hometown, where her – very upset – mother shows her the new electrical fence that has been built in a previously common land. In a later chapter, Elisabeth goes to see the fence again and decides to ignore all the signs alerting her to keep out, and enters the area, only to get followed and sent out by a man:

This is your third warning, he says. You are now being warned for the last time that action will be taken against you unless you vacate the area immediately. You are unlawfully trespassing.

As opposed to lawfully trespassing? she says.

– still anywhere near the perimeter the next time I pass here –

Perimeter of what? she says.

She looks through at the fenced-off landscape and all she can see is landscape. There are no people. There are no buildings. There is just fence, then landscape. (Smith, Autumn, 2016, p. 142)

The electric fence is not the only artificial line that gets questioned by Elisabeth. Throughout the novel, she tries to renew her passport again and again, but her photo gets rejected repeatedly, because it does not adhere to the rules – once it's her hair, then her eyes and the size of her head. The seemingly comic, recurring scene shows, once again, how society draws the arbitrary lines we are obliged to follow. As Harald Pittel (2018), lecturer of English literature at the University of Leipzig points out, Smith does a beautiful job of drawing our attention to “the drawing of lines and borders for its own sake”, and how the resulting “commodified culture of meaningless delimiting and measuring exerts a severely alienating effect on individuals”. In Smith's novel, characters start questioning what is “normal” and all the arbitrary barriers

imposed on them. Even the last name of the main character (Demand) comes from the same origin as the French word *demande*, to ask. However, just like in the passage quoted above, she does not get replies. The only one who really listens to her and helps her understand other perspectives is their neighbour Daniel Gluck, the man from the other side of the fence, who introduces Elisabeth to the world of art, namely paintings and pop-art collages, where all the rules and “norms” are deconstructed, inspiring Elisabeth to deconstruct and re-interpret her own environment in a similar way.

The world around Elisabeth is less open-minded towards strangers: one day she notices a house in her hometown, on which someone has written “GO HOME”. A few weeks later, she passes the house again, and sees that someone added “WE ARE ALREADY HOME THANK YOU” (p. 138), challenging the idea of “belonging” and claiming that the UK is *home* not only to the UK-born, but also to first-generation immigrants who have decided to set up a new life in this country. Another instance when Elisabeth experiences a similar sentiment towards foreigners is when she’s queuing in the taxi station and a Spanish family gets insulted by locals:

They’d clearly just arrived here on holiday, their luggage round their feet. The people behind them in the queue shouted at them. What they shouted at them was to go home.

This isn’t Europe, they shouted. Go back to Europe. (p. 130)

As we will later see in Hornby’s book as well, people are quick to defend their own community and step up against strangers who are deemed dangerous - solely because of their “otherness”. This is what Tajfel & al. (1979) call social categorization based on prejudice attitudes: we see people as members of either in-groups (our own) or out-groups.

The Man Who Saw Everything – ambiguous identities and exotic otherness

The first main border we see in this novel is the zebra crossing on Abbey Road in Liverpool – where Saul (according to his unreliable memories) gets hit by a car first as a 23-year-old historian in 1988, then as a 50-year old in 2016. Crossing Abbey Road is a central theme, serving as the starting and end point of the novel – as I will further discuss in the narratological analysis. In 1988, when Saul is first run over, he is on his way to see his girlfriend, Jennifer Moreau, a young art student, who breaks up with him shortly afterwards, partly because she leaves to study in the US, and Saul leaves to continue his research on tyrants in the communist German Democratic Republic. In the GDR, Saul falls in love with his translator and host Walter

Müller, but also makes love to Walter's sister, Luna. The trope of the "exotic stranger" resurfaces several times in this novel. First, it is Saul who views his girlfriend in this light:

I had been proud to have glamorous Jennifer Moreau on my arm, what with her exotic French surname, vintage powder-blue trouser suit and matching suede platform boots. (p. 30)

Saul sees Jennifer's French origin as yet another accessory, a peculiar jewel adding to her charm. But Saul is also seen as an exciting stranger by Walter and Luna in the GDR. Before he travels to the GDR, Walter asks him to bring a can of pineapples as a present for Luna's birthday (a symbol of economic and commercial differences too), and later Luna asks for Saul's jeans, which are of much better quality than what she can buy in the GDR. Saul also gives Luna a copy of the photo that Jennifer took of her on Abbey Road, as the girl is also yearning to quit her country and see the famous city of one of her favourite bands, the Beatles.

Saul's character is also interesting in the sense that he has a mixed, ambiguous identity – wherever he goes, he never fully belongs. His (already deceased) mother was German, his father is Brit, and – as one of his neighbours in the UK point out - he has a Jewish-sounding first and last name. His character is also androgenous: he wears a pearl necklace that once belonged to his mother, clothes that make him look rather feminine and experiments with make-up as well - to the dislike of his very masculine father and brother. This constant sense of non-belonging results from Saul's unsuccessful attempt to categorize himself. Tajfel & al. (1979) mention this categorization as an important step of social identification: we learn about ourselves by knowing which categories we fall into, and we determine what constitutes suitable conduct based on the social groups to which we belong.

Just Like You – Brexit dichotomies illustrated through an unusual relationship

In *Just Like You*, Lucy, the middle-aged, liberal teacher and mother of two also views Joseph, a young black as an exciting stranger – which, when the narrator shares Joseph's point of view, seems like childish infatuation fuelled by false stereotypes. As they are getting ready to go to the black community's church to attend the wedding of Joseph's sister, they have the following discussion:

It's not one of those churches, you know,' he told her when she was asking for wardrobe advice. 'Nobody speaks in tongues, or starts rolling around on the floor.'

'Please,' she said. 'Give me some credit.'

‘Nobody dances. They can’t even sing, most of them. They’re too old. They warble and croak. There might be a bit of swaying, if you’re lucky. And it’s usually half-empty. Anyway, Scott’s sister is going to sing “Perfect” by Ed Sheeran, and her mum is playing the piano for that bit.’

‘Great,’ said Lucy, but Joseph could see she was a bit disappointed. (pp. 173-174)

The main physical borders are found within London, between districts and certain areas of the city – as well as between city and country. Lucy lives in North London, an area known for its liberal elite population. When she first encounters Joseph, he is working in the neighborhood butcher shop, serving customers coming from a very different social class than himself:

The people who lived in the neighbourhood weren’t posh, in the sense that they wore jeans and didn’t sound like Prince Charles, but they obviously had money, and sometimes that seemed to create some kind of embarrassment. Joseph didn’t give a shit, really. He wanted what they had, and one day he would get it. Just because he earned a hundred and ten quid for a day’s work in the shop didn’t mean he hated people who spent a hundred and twelve on meat. (p. 12).

The borders between the two slowly fade away: first they only talk over the counter (another physical boundary strictly setting their roles of seller and customer in the given social situation), then Joseph becomes Lucy’s babysitter and thus enters her living space, then all physical boundaries dissolve as they become lovers.

These borders are just as physical and official as they are internalized – social classes intuitively differentiate between “their place” and “other places” and are quick to define who does not belong – as it happens to Joseph as well. One night, he is waiting for Lucy in front of her house and gets questioned by two white policemen who – just because of his skin colour – deem him suspicious and ill-intentioned, assuming he is plotting a robbery. As it turns out, a neighbour called the police on him, and it is only after Lucy comes out to question the two policemen that they let Joseph go – but even then, they assume Lucy is lying in order to protect him. Lucy, who is not used to this prejudice-fuelled side of the police, is taken aback. The conversation ends after the police asks how they know each other and Lucy refuses to answer, threatening to report this incident, to which the policeman replies “You’re welcome to”, clearly suggesting that he still sees Joseph as an illegal trespasser in the neighbourhood.

Hornby links Brexit to this socio-demographic segmentation based on location, age and profession. One day, Joseph and his colleague Cassie (a student at the University of North London) find a poster saying “VOTE LEAVE ON JUNE 23rd” in the window of the butcher shop. While the girl is taken aback, Joseph does not think much about the referendum at that point:

‘Well,’ said Joseph. ‘He probably thinks we should vote leave on June the twenty-third.’

‘People won’t like it.’

‘People won’t give a shit.’

‘Round here? You’re joking.’

‘Really? The bloody E.U.?’

Joseph hadn’t really thought about it until that moment. It was April, so the referendum was still weeks away. He was probably going to vote to leave, like his dad, but he couldn’t see that it would make much difference to his life one way or the other. There’d still be meat, leisure centres, kids, football.

‘My parents wouldn’t shop here if they saw that,’ said Cassie. ‘They hate Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson.’

‘Your parents don’t live round here, do they?’

‘No. They live in Bath. But same sort of thing.’

‘Bath is the same as London?’

‘This bit of London is the same as their bit of Bath. Dad teaches theatre, Mum teaches creative writing. I mean, they wouldn’t be able to afford it round here, but a lot of the people we serve remind me of them.’ (p. 33)

When their boss arrives, they learn that he put on the poster without any serious contemplation, and when Cassie confronts him, he offers to change it to another one saying “Stronger in Europe”. While the young university student sees Brexit as an important political decision, the butcher sees the whole campaign as a business opportunity:

‘Hold on,’ said Cassie. ‘You’d switch from one poster to the other, just like that?’

‘I don’t give a shit, do I?’

‘Don’t you know how you’re going to vote?’

‘I’m voting to leave. Too much red tape. Too many Albanians.’

‘Albania isn’t in the E.U.’

‘Who is then?’

‘Spain, France, Poland, Ireland, Germany, Italy ... You want me to name them all?’

‘Poles, then.’

‘So why put a poster saying the opposite in the window?’

‘If you’re telling me it’s good for business, why wouldn’t I?’

‘Because it’s not what you believe.’

‘Listen. I can’t stand liver, but I sell it, and I want everyone to buy it. What’s the difference?’” (pp. 33-34)

As the above example also illustrates, Hornby uses professions as a way to shed light on the motivation of Brexiters. Joseph’s father, a construction worker, thinks immigrants are taking away jobs and negatively influencing wages. His mother, working for the NHS, although fears a future without Polish, Hungarian and other European healthcare workers, still votes to leave, because she believes the false promise that once the UK leaves the EU, more money will be spent on UK healthcare, including salaries. These characters support the idea that, as Buckledee (2018) writes, the Brexit vote “was a genuine protest by those who perceived themselves as economic losers ignored by the decision makers” (p. 2). On the contrary, Lucy’s social circle – all remain voters – includes teachers, writers, and other white-collar employees. Joseph himself is juggling several jobs: he works in the butcher shop, at a sports centre, as a football coach, and tries to build a career as a DJ. He is initially not interested in the referendum, but as he gets closer to Lucy and her world, he starts questioning his own social circle’s “evident” choice to vote leave. In the end, he cannot make up his mind and puts a mark in both boxes, not choosing one or the other, since he is not fully convinced by either side. The others get taken aback by this decision – which shows just how much we as humans are inclined to pick sides to reinforce our identity and belong to a group, no matter our own uncertainty.

Destroying borders – freedom versus security (or conformity)

One theme that ties all these novels together is that the main characters go against the physical and social boundaries (between in-groups and out-groups) imposed on them, and all refine their own identity, beliefs and worldview as a result.

In *Autumn*, it is not only the main characters (Elisabeth, Daniel and the pop-art artist Pauline Boty) who go against the rules and artificial boundaries again and again – at the end, Elisabeth’s mother also finds her own voice and social impact as she starts bombarding the new electrical fence with antique objects she has been collecting as a hobby. This means she has finally found agency – before, she wanted Elisabeth to do something, because she was “young”, and,

according to her, that meant she was the only one who could do something against the fence. She also starts a lesbian relationship with an actress from one of her favourite childhood TV shows – breaking with another social norm and reformulating her own sense of identity.

In *The Man Who Saw Everything*, Saul and his girlfriend Jennifer both start a new journey as they quit the United Kingdom. For Jennifer, this is the way to get the education and form the connections to become the celebrated artist she has always dreamed of being. For Saul, it is a time to experiments with language, his look, his sexuality, research the GDR– and go against all the rules, norms and views formed by his father, and shared by his brother Matt:

In his view, freedom of speech and movement were not as important as eliminating inequalities and working for the collective good, but then he could catch the ferry to France any time he liked and no one was going to shoot him from a watchtower in Dover. He turned a blind eye to the Soviet tanks rolling through Prague in 1968 because he obviously thought we were related to Stalin.

‘The Soviet Union is the GDR’s godfather. Family must look after each other and protect their kin from reactionary adversaries.’

Yeah yeah yeah.

Like Matt looked after his brother when the boys tried to hang me with my tie from the upper deck of the bus. (p. 32)

In *Just Like You*, Lucy and Joseph cross a main internalized border by starting a relationship despite their many differences. They have to face the shock or outright discontent of their social circles, as well as all the struggles caused by both hostile and benevolent racism. However, they benefit a lot from their relationship too: they both challenge each other’s views on politics, discrimination, work and many other domains of living in a society, coming from different classes. As a result, they both have to rethink their self-image, and they start to categorize themselves as part of more than one set of closely tied or overlapping communities (like habitants of a district, members of a social class, employees of a workplace...), as they become a part of each other’s very different families.

The Real and The Imagined – A Narratological Analysis

This narratological analysis provides a deeper understanding of how the three novels create a sense of disorientation and uncertainty, and how their linearity and timeline place the

boundaries they thematise in a broader, universal context - whether through the repetition of events or the generality of a romantic relationship.

The narrator

In *Autumn*, the narrator is omniscient, knows Elisabeth's thoughts and feelings, as well as Daniel's dreams as he is lying in hospital. The narrator has their own voice too, making small remarks or even jokes: "Back then at school a boy was hellbent on making Elisabeth, who was sixteen at this point, laugh. (He was hellbent on just making her, too, ha ha.)" (p. 145).

Sometimes it is not even clear who is speaking and playing around with words: the narrator or the characters themselves. A good example of this is the first chapter with a very intimate, spontaneous train of thoughts as we see Daniel waking up on a shore:

He can make a bed here. He can stay here while he gets his bearings. Bare-ings. (Puns, the poor man's currency; poor old John Keats, well, poor all right, though you couldn't exactly call him old. Autumn poet, winter Italy, days away from dying he found himself punning like there was no tomorrow. Poor chap. There really was no tomorrow.) (p. 7)

In *The Man Who Saw Everything*, Saul narrates his own story in the first person, through his own perceptions and scattered memories, blurring the lines between reality, imagination and dreams. This imprisons the reader in his point of view and challenges us to question whether his interpretation and memory of events is reliable – only to find out at the end that they are probably not. For instance, he portrays his friend Jack as a minor, unimportant character, but at the end we learn that he is actually very important to Saul and is likely his long-term partner. As Deborah Levy says in an interview:

One of the themes in the book is how history is told. If you think about yourself, if you tell your own personal history, and I do, we are likely to tell it in our favour. We're going to leave out quite a lot of stuff we feel we come up bad in. (Fitzpatrick, 2019)

In *Just Like You*, the omniscient narrator follows Lucy and Joseph separately, shedding light on their thoughts and feelings, but always switching between them, never unveiling both of their inner worlds at once, even when they are together in a scene. This technique lets readers identify with both, seeing one from the perspective of the other, showing us how their gestures and utterances get (mis)interpreted.

In summary, the narration brings us to question its reliability and objectivity. The most “objective” seems to be Hornby’s narrator - showing us the most intimate thoughts and feelings of his two main characters. Both Smith’s and Levy’s narrators take us on a dream-like, loosely tied sequence of events - which brings us to the next point: the narrative structure.

Linearity

Every generation has had and will have its crises and divides: as Levy’s characters experience personal and political separation in 1989’s Berlin recall events of Brexit. Smith’s novel paints a beautiful picture of seasons that come in cycles, always being different in the details, but same in the core.

Smith’s narrator, although knows a lot, is a lousy one: the narration contains very vague, careless references to time, making the impression that the narrator’s choice of sequencing events is completely arbitrary, as well as what he includes or leaves out: “Here’s something else from another time, from when Elisabeth was thirteen, that she also only remembers shreds and fragments of” (Smith, *Autumn*, 2016, p. 77). The narrator keeps switching between present and past tense. The present is usually used when the chapter is set in 2016 – or in Daniel’s dreams - and all the flashbacks are in the past tense, which gives the reader some hint, but still creates a disorienting effect: “It was one of the days of a week in one of the seasons in one of the years, maybe 1949, maybe 1950, 1951, in any case sometime around then” (p. 163). Our sense of time is completely disoriented.

We don’t know who our narrator is – we sense their presence through their small remarks and jokes, and we have no choice but to follow their arbitrary, collage-like narrative, not knowing what they leave out, misinterpret, or distort. Perhaps what sums up Smith’s multi-perspective, non-linear narrative the best is the following opening line of a chapter, which could have been written about *Autumn* itself as a whole, referencing to Brexit’s very current, yet very uncertain flow of events: “Here’s an old story so new that it’s still in the middle of happening, writing itself right now with no knowledge of where or how it’ll end” (p. 181).

As Pittel (2018) writes:

In the days of post-truth, Smith’s imaginative realism seems to encourage, in a way, a return to facts – the deeper facts, that is, reflecting an intersubjective sense of truth that is not simply arbitrary but authentic and solidary. (p. 63)

The Man Who Saw Everything has a similar, dream-like and non-linear narrative: the only thing that binds them all together is the fact that they are all the main character's memories. However, these memories are shattered into millions of pieces which keep moving in all directions, reconnecting, gaining new meanings – which shows that our narrator cannot be trusted; what he senses is not reality, at least not an objective one. He lacks the self-awareness to realize his faults and oppressive, ignorant behaviour – his narcissism is rationalized by his own narrative, recalling Levy's and Kansteiner's views on the non-objectivity of history. Levy's inventive writing creates not by linearity, but with intricately layered, recurring elements – such as the smell of roses or a jaguar as an animal but also as a car make -, creating a dream-like effect, mixing the real and the imagined, the past and the present.

Nick Hornby's *Just Like you* has a linear narrative, very few flashbacks and a few flash forwards, covering a 3-year timeframe from spring 2016 to spring 2019, therefore the plot includes events from both before and after the referendum. Hornby uses dates very deliberately and explicitly, sectioning his novel into three parts, and uses these timeframes to structure the plot (as I will discuss in the following chapter).

The significance of the timeline and closing chapters

All the three novels explicitly mention the 2016 referendum – however, their timelines are all very different. In *Autumn*, the timeline is not easy to reconstruct: the non-linear narrative consists of flashbacks to Daniel's childhood in the 1930s, episodes from the 1960s, and scenes from 2016 ("the present"). The youngest we see Elisabeth is 8 years old in 1995, the oldest is 29 years old - Daniel being 101- in 2016. Levy's novel runs from 1988, when Saul first gets hit, when the GDR is still existing, up to 2016, the year of the referendum, when Saul is lying in hospital after the second accident on the zebra crossing. Hornby's novel covers a 3-year period – from the spring of 2016 to the spring of 2019.

Analysing the last chapter of these novels allow us to see where these timelines take us and what final message, moral or conclusion the authors leave us with. In *Just Like You*, Lucy and Joseph attend the wedding of Joseph's sister together in the last chapter. As they get there, they get into a short conflict with Joseph's father, Chris about who really counts as family (since Joseph calls Lucy as such, while his sister does not want their dad to attend her wedding at all due to their bad relationship). In the end, the photographer asks all couples to pose for a picture with the young couple. Lucy gets scared, fearing that Joseph and her might break up in the

future and it would be strange for her to be in the family photograph. Hornby illustrates the uncertainty but also the exhilaration that comes with crossing a (social and cultural) border through this scene:

So Lucy stood on the steps with Joseph, and his mother, and Chris, and the boys, and Grace, and tried to live in the moment, with these people, in this place. Joseph was right. There were no more hurdles. Now all they had to do was walk, and see how far they could get. (p. 175)

But Hornby draws another, more straightforward parallel between relationships and Brexit as Lucy watches the bride walk down the aisle with Joseph:

She thought about her own wedding, and her marriage, which had made her happy and then very unhappy, and it suddenly seemed absurd to her that she had spent so many years with someone who had brought her so low, all because of the vows that she had made at a different time, to a different person. And for some reason that took her on to Chris, and Joseph's mother, and then Chris's peculiar obsession with Brexit, and then on to her unhappy country. Everything seemed to be about marriages and divorces (...) (p. 175)

In the last chapter of *The Man Who Saw Everything*, we see Saul Adler finally crossing Abbey Road without getting hit, "walking across deep time, trying to put myself together again" (p. 292). Events, sounds and people from past years all come together in this final scene, as a flush of scattered and repressed memories finally coming to the surface. This scene feels real and dream-like at once. Luna from the GDR, still looking like a teenager, is waiting for 50-year-old Saul on the other side – while they are discussing how she could never make it to Liverpool because of the Berlin Wall. Even in this moment, we do not know for certain if Saul really crossed a road. He did cross one road – but was it just a dream? Was he dying? Was he indeed crossing the road while imagining Luna? Whatever is really happening, the importance of it remains the same: and that is the beauty of Levy's writing. Crossing an internal boundary is just as significant than crossing a physical one, maybe even more so.

The second to last chapter in *Autumn* show Daniel waking up from his sleep and finally talking to Elisabeth again. The last chapter is independent from their story: the narrator describes in fine detail and present tense how autumn slowly turns into winter. The very last sentence is particularly captivating:

But there are roses, there are still roses. In the damp and the cold, on a bush that looks done, there's a wide-open rose, still.

Look at the colour of it. (p. 260)

These lines recall earlier passages from the novel, where Daniel would describe existing collages to young Elisabeth without her ever seeing them, encouraging her to let her imagination run wild. The narrator tells us nothing about the colour of the rose in the above sentence – yet we all have the picture of a rose in our minds. By directing our attention to the colour of it, the narrator invites us to consider our own inner worldview and the ways in which we fill in the gaps in our knowledge and assumptions - without even realizing it.

Conclusion

This paper adds to a growing corpus of research showing that Brexit literature helps shift the readers' views on the notion of belonging – to a certain neighbourhood, social circle, country, sexuality or else – and consequently challenge stereotypes of the Other.

As we could see in the readers' reviews, the reception of the three novels is heavily dependent on the reader's pre-existing knowledge and experience of Brexit, as well as their acquired set of tools to decipher more complex, non-linear and multi-perspective narratives.

Nonetheless, the theme of borders discussed above resurfaces again and again in all three novels, and provide us with important questions to consider. Some borders are natural, some are arbitrary. Some are physical and very much visible, some are less tangible. The overarching theme in these three novels is that borders, especially those between “me” and “the Other”, should be questioned, crossed, and, when found more limiting than protective – although that is, no doubt, a point for deliberation -, should be demolished, rather than erected. Be it the Berlin wall, an electric fence, the internalized borders defining “normality”, the more malleable, intangible but hard-rock beliefs of our very own self which enclose us into an “identity”, they are all challenged in these novels, again and again. When Elisabeth befriends Daniel, a whole new world opens up for her. Lucy and Joseph question their belonging to a certain group and not to the other, along with their seemingly evident assumptions about their worldview. Saul explores new ways to express himself as he forms a relationship with Walter.

In all the above examples, certain steps of crossing - or defying - a border through a new relationship recur. First, there is fear – of the unknown, the strange, the “abnormal” and all of

its implications and effects on one's sense of identity. It goes together with or is followed by fascination – where the unknown, the strange is seen as new, exciting, challenging, invigorating (like Elisabeth's eye-opening conversations with Daniel, Lucy's and Joseph's infatuation with each other's very different lives and social circles, as well as Saul's first encounters with Walter and Luna). Then, when the two sides finally get in contact, conflict also follows, sooner or later: Elisabeth has debates with Daniel over reality and truth, Joseph and Lucy have opposing views on the Brexit vote, racism, cultural and generational differences, and Saul, the self-centred, narcissistic man gets in conflict with both Luna and Walter.

Another interesting topic is what these novels tell us with their narrative structure. While Levy and Smith show that people's experiences before, during and after Brexit - all the fault lines, stereotypes and mechanisms in society - are not truly new, Hornby focuses more on the "here and now" of the Brexit referendum. He does place however all these differences and conflict points in the context of a relationship, creating an almost fabula-like story, showing conflicts in society through individual characters. What he shows is that we exist in a society, where even our most private matters are infiltrated by politics. Joseph and Lucy cannot escape the fact that Joseph is black, and that they have a vastly different experience of society. Levy's and Smith's unreliable narrator, as well as Hornby's multi-perspective writing brings us to question what we believe to know for certain, and to question the narrative and who speaks, further reinforcing the idea that history is but a subjectively reconstructed series of events, never fully complete, and linked together in a rather arbitrary way.

These novels all call us to cross lines between generations, social classes, ethnicities, and language – in short, lines between ourselves and others. Otherwise, we get imprisoned in the narrow world of fixed personal and social identities, living with distrust and fear.

Further research

It is a question of future research to investigate how contemporary literature addressed Brexit finally becoming official in January 2020 and what other themes could be discovered in Brexit novels besides the question of borders, identity and belonging.

Future research should also consider the potential effects of the context of production and reception more carefully, for example how the social class of the author and the reader influence Brexit literature. Do authors typically belong to the upper middle class? What about their readers? Are remainers reading more fiction? Is BrexLit creating a social bubble, and thus

narrows down its potential effect on collective memory? These questions provide an excellent starting point for discussion and further studies.

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