Article:
McLeod, J (2020) Warning signs: Postcolonial writing and the apprehension of Brexit. Journal of Postcolonial Writing, 56 (5). pp. 607-620. ISSN 1744-9855

https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2020.1816688

Warning signs: Postcolonial writing and the apprehension of Brexit

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Abstract: This article considers how postcolonial fiction anticipated, apprehended, and critically explored the political and cultural milieu which facilitated the outcome of the 2016 EU referendum. In suggesting that "Brexit Literature" existed before Brexit was formally pursued, it understands Brexit as driving a distinctive form of English nationalism that unnervingly appropriates the history of the British empire and World War II. It uncovers the representation of these manoeuvres in a number of key texts, focusing first upon Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore* (2003), which both logs and challenges the malevolent imagining of newcomers that has deep roots in notions of war and empire. It turns next to Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) and reads its representation of post-crash austerity as proleptically exposing the complex politics of race and class which fuelled the pro-Brexit populism that lies latent in the novel. Ultimately, the article calls for a post-Brexit postcolonialism that harnesses the power and salience of critical thought to continue the longstanding contestation of the prevailing political orthodoxy.

Keywords: Brexit; Anglosphere; war; empire; austerity; postcolonial

It is the spring of 2008, and on an innocuous London street, at around 11.00 a.m., a Zimbabwean traffic warden, "Kwama Lyons", decides not to issue a parking ticket to the owner of a Land Rover. The driver has parked temporarily by an electronics shop and appears to be unloading boxes from the boot with his daughter. Parking for the purposes of unloading is fortunately permitted, and, after all, "Kwama" thinks that the man has an honest face. But one passer-by takes a different view of the scene. An unnamed woman in a tracksuit, with "flushed indoor skin and crinkly, angry hair" (Lanchester 2012, 212), blocks

the traffic warden's path and complains about the discrimination she is witnessing. "Let those snobs park anywhere they like", she complains:

> Ordinary people, you stick a ticket on them without looking twice, don't care if they're in the bay they belong in or not […], only got your job in the first place because of positive discrimination, ordinary working people pay the price. (212).

When "Kwama" politely reminds her that parking for the purposes of loading is permitted, the woman's disdain is brutal and ugly: "Why don't you just fuck off back to nig-nog land, go eat your fucking bananas in a tree and die of Aids […]? What the fuck are you doing here anyway?" (213).

Although the scene is set a full eight years before the United Kingdom [UK] European Union [EU] membership referendum of June 23, 2016, it seems, when read in retrospect, a distinctly Brexit tableau: the posh waxed-jacketed Land Rover driver; the racially abusive "ordinary" passer-by speaking up for white disenfranchised Londoners; the maligned and racialised migrant trying to make an honest living by taking on humdrum work, her presence in the postcolonial metropolis still a mystery to those who consider themselves rightfully native. And there is an additional twist: "Kwama Lyons" is a pseudonym for Quentina Mkfesi, a graduate of the University of Zimbabwe, who is seeking asylum due to the brutal Mugabe regime and working illegally. Such subdivisions of race and class, austerity and wealth, and legitimate citizen and migrant trespasser have come to define and defile "Brexit Britain" today. They underwrite the social inequalities and cultural imaginaries that have increasingly structured and corrupted Britain's political fortunes in this century. As such, "Brexit" names not so much a "democratic" decision or bureaucratic process – leaving

the European Union– but the grim, glum political and cultural milieu epitomised by the referendum result, one which has long historical antecedents.

The novel in which this scene appears – John Lanchester's *Capital* (2012) – consciously positions itself as a reflection on the global financial crash of 2008 and its local consequences, and, for one critic at least, constitutes an example of "Crunch Lit" (Shaw 2015, 7): an emergent literary engagement with high finance, austerity, and the neoliberal world order. Along with the other works that I shall discuss in this article, I want additionally to situate *Capital* as a Brexit novel, and for at least two reasons. First, it points explicitly to one of the most important contributing factors to the enthusiasm for Brexit – namely, the financial crash of 2008 – and implicitly to another: the perception and fortunes of migrants and their descendants in the UK which have deep roots in post-war decolonisation and, as we are witnessing more and more, the refurbished legacy of World War II. The recent and ongoing "Windrush Betrayal", to borrow Amelia Gentleman's (2019) uncompromising term, is ample evidence of the tryst between colonial past and present, while a recent opinion poll has revealed that 30 percent of Britons believe the colonies were better off as part of the British empire (Booth 2020). Second, the novel takes its place amidst other works that we should collectively consider as Brexit fiction – one genuinely hesitates to say "BrexLit" – that appeared not after the referendum but *before* it. (In this regard, very recent novels of Brexit, such as Jonathan Coe's marvellous *Middle England* (2018) and Ian McEwan's acidic *The Cockroach* (2019) mark the beginnings of a *post*-Brexit fiction). There has been gathering for quite some time in literary fiction the signposting and critique of the political, social, and cultural entanglements that have directly contributed to the Brexit imbroglio. Postcolonial writers have contributed significantly to this activity, and over many years, not least by exposing and exploring the calcification of prejudice, the intensification of malevolence, and the growing disparities of wealth and impoverishment that have

characterised Britain's hostile environment since at least the turn of the century – to the extent that the result of the referendum should not have come as a great surprise to readers who had been paying proper attention. To be blunt: we were warned.

Zadie Smith admitted to feeling surprised the morning after the result was known in an essay which first appeared in the *New York Review of Books* in August 2016. "Throughout the day I phoned home", she recalls in "Fences: A Brexit Diary", "and emailed and tried to process, along with much of London – or at least the London I knew – our enormous sense of shock. 'What have they done?' we said to each other" (2018, 25). Her article both attends to and exorcises a degree of self-confessed liberal middle-class guilt, and sounds a distinct note of mea culpa in its cognition of a cellular, cloistered vision of London's diverse and divided *demos*, one at odds with the blithe and naïve cliché of Britain as "Happy Multicultural Land" (Smith 2000, 398), softly satirised in Smith's well-known debut, *White Teeth* (2000). Amidst its self-critical headshaking and hand-wringing, her essay makes two especially sharp observations. The first concerns Smith's awareness of Britain's socially striated terrain, the geographical distinctiveness of the nation's disunity amidst which the dynamics of class, race, and culture observe different chronologies. Away from London's societal dissonance, in other parts of the country, multicultural transformation has yet to be clocked or have its time, or has been timed out. Within the capital too, "Londoncentric solipsism" (Smith 2018, 26) is itself increasingly fenced in by the subdivisions, at once imaginative and very real, of economic privilege and racialised perception that make a mockery of the cheerful and utopian cosmopolitanism presumed to be at large in the postcolonial metropolis. "For many people in London right now", she writes, "the supposedly multicultural and cross-class aspects of their lives are actually represented by their staff – nannies, cleaners – by the people who pour their coffees and drive their cabs, or else the handful of Nigerian princes you meet in private schools" (27). Brexit is both the product and the evidence of these inequities. It has granted

legitimacy to prejudicial responses to inequality not least by attempting to normalise the rancid racism that Lanchester's "Kwama" experiences while going about her business on an ordinary London street.

Secondly, and significantly, Smith's essay reminds us that while the referendum result (and, as we have seen since, the battle over attempts to implement it) is era-defining news, Brexit per se is nothing new at all. "One useful consequence of Brexit", she hazards, "is to finally and openly reveal a deep fracture in British society that has been thirty years in the making" (Smith 2018, 27). One responsible way for horrified middle-class readers to respond to it, she suggests, is to realise its tentacular and tuberous roots:

> we might also take a look at the last thirty years and ask ourselves what kinds of attitudes have allowed a different class of people to discreetly manoeuvre, behind the scenes, to ensure that "them" and "us" never actually meet anywhere but in symbol. […] We may walk past "them" very often in the street and get into their cabs and eat their food in their ethnic restaurants, but the truth is that more often than not they are not in our schools, or in our social circles, and they very rarely enter houses – unless they've come to work on our endlessly remodelled kitchens. (31)

Brexit fiction, too, is nothing new. Postcolonial writing has long been taking a look at the unwholesome attitudes, the imaginative and economic austerities that culminated in the confected demand for Brexit, even if that demand was not fully considered by some of those who voted for it. Smith makes mention of the fact that large numbers of Britons "were googling 'What is the EU?' in the hours after the vote" (30) and reports an anecdote heard from a friend concerning one Leave supporter whose vote was motivated primarily by her desire to see the then Health Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, sacked.

As Ben Wellings (2019) has demonstrated in his superb forensic dissection of the political landscape of Brexit, obfuscation and occlusion are crucial to its ideological mechanics. Wellings shows how Brexit is the product and passion of a distinctively English nationalism that secretes its aims through a strategically British register. The masochistic isolation risked by its secessionist ambitions to leave the EU is offset by its integrationist tactics, first and foremost its supposed support of the Union of the four British nations, but also its wider commitment to "the Anglosphere" (5), those English-speaking nations created as a consequence of imperial expansion and still considered as intimately related, often (but not exclusively) through ideas such as the Commonwealth. In these terms, Brexit is not at all a parochial affair but decidedly global in its aims in seeking to reorient its international trading ambitions beyond the existing trading bloc of the EU towards a new "old" raft of predominantly English-speaking international partners, such as Canada, New Zealand, Australia, India, and the United States. In Wellings's view, "resistance to European integration revitalised English nationalism as a defence of British sovereignty whilst the Englishness of this worldview inclined Britain away from the EU and towards the Anglosphere" (14). The protection of British sovereignty was the guise behind which an elite right-wing English nationalism both built and occluded its decidedly England-centric ideology – a fact borne out by the markedly divergent voting preferences of the four British nations. With matters regarding British sovereignty and border controls pushed to the centre of a primarily English perception of the EU, Brexiteers played upon the fears of many who, rightly or wrongly, felt disenfranchised by the consequences of globalisation, especially the perceived negative impact of migrant labour on domestic jobs and wages. Such nationalism has depended upon "an awkward but decisive alliance between sections of the electorate disaffected by the effects of globalisation and elites attempting to expose Britain to more of the same" (7).

Culturally, this alliance depended upon additional sleights of hand, particularly as regards the conjoined remembering of two key elements of British history: the British empire and World War II. If England, embedded in the UK, "lay trapped between the receding memory of empire and the waking reality of deepening integration" (Wellings 2019, 96), then revitalising the former was essential to rescuing England from the latter. Brexit's advocates promoted the EU as the most tangible evidence of the nation's post-imperial humiliation and post-war demise, suggesting that Europe's perceived wartime saviour had unforgivably become the slavish subordinate of the Eurocrats' crackpot whims.

As a number of critics have explored, the entangled appropriation of each of these historical phenomena – empire and war – has long serviced a reactionary response to Britain's post-war domestic and global transformation. Writing in the year when the UK Independence Party (UKIP) secured 2.6 million votes and won twelve seats at the 2004 European Parliament Elections, Paul Gilroy (2004) commented upon the "neurotic […] citation of the anti-Nazi war" as a "privileged point of entry into national identity and self-understanding" that seeks to "get back to the place or moment before the country lost its moral and cultural bearings" (97). This sense of loss has firm connections to the slow erasure of Britain as an imperial power on the world's stage, the melancholic disavowal of which impacts upon attitudes to migrants and presumed foreigners who come "not only to represent the vanished empire but also refer consciousness to the unacknowledged pain of its loss and the unsettling shame of its bloody management" (110). In a similar multidirectional mood, Bill Schwarz (2011) has wondered if the popular cultural indulgence of the "mythic properties of the war" in the post-war years strategically shielded a more painful sense of English diminution and served to "screen other historical realities, not least the end of empire" (7). That said, empire and war have also been previously articulated in a different, dissident manner. As Matthew Whittle (2016) has fascinatingly shown, a distinct confluence

of literary activity in the immediate post-war years, one not often remembered today, mobilised "a critique of the ideological assumptions of the Empire […] as a means of interpreting the atrocities of the Second World War and the realities of decolonization" (29). Such post-war endeavours were part of an important critical re-imagining of Britishness firmly in the light of decolonisation in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, with writers often "reject[ing] past conceptions of an imperial identity in favour of a unified post-imperial conception of Britishness" (12). It is precisely this critical trajectory, one that also helped open a space for subsequent postcolonial literary explorations of the metropolis towards the end of the last century, that Brexit has hoped to stymie by determinedly remodulating conceptions of both British imperial identity and the legacy of World War II to serve reactionary not radical ends. For the Brexiteer, post-war postcolonial melancholia is triumphantly medicated by the miraculous return to life of the lost empire in the guise of Brexit's promise of national liberation from the EU. Whittle's "post-imperial" is gazumped by Brexit's post-imperium: Britain is ascendant once more amidst the Anglosphere and unshackled from Europe, with migrants and refugees, old and new, freshly perceived (yet again) as a threat to British sovereignty and ample evidence of the lapse of border "control" created by the EU's commitment to free movement.

Fintan O'Toole's (2019) witty and excoriating dissection of Brexit in *Heroic Failure* conveys this compounding of colonial and EU migrants as central to the refurbishment of the foreigner as the tangible evidence of the nation's subordinated sovereignty, when noting the "large overlap between pro-Brexit and anti-immigrant sentiment. […] The black and brown Other fused with the European Other" (20). Like Wellings, he recognises the centrality of the memory of empire to the malevolent machinations of Brexiteering and its politics of pain: indulging in strangely masochistic memories of imperial glory that often eulogised fortitude in defeat (the Charge of the Light Brigade, General Gordon at Khartoum, et al.), presenting

the UK's membership or dealings with the EU in terms of a Powellite fantasy of post-war British vassalage and subordination, the proud coloniser now abjectly colonised by a German-dominated Brussels. This ideological reconstitution of Brexit as a route back to the finest hours of imperial grandeur and British self-determination, reborn at the centre of a grateful, global Anglosphere, points to the very real and thoroughly sinister consequences of recolonising the narrative of empire. As Stuart Hall (2017) remarked when prompted by his memories of wartime and mid-century Britain, '[w]henever the British began to imagine themselves as lovers of liberty they also conceived of themselves, at one and the same time, as the imperial lords of humankind' (180). For these reasons, Wellings regards Brexit as a "back-to-the-future reorientation" where a combination of the neurotic celebration of Britain's unconquered, stand-alone persistence in the face of the Nazi threat has been fused with the resculpting of empire as "one of history's 'good things' to allow Britons *to imagine themselves distanced* from, or completely outside of, the EU" (2019, 106; emphasis added). The empire was in ruins; but after Brexit, the empire remains.

In seeking to embellish post-EU futurity through a myopic requisitioning of the past, Brexit is both the triumph and the failure of the imagination. It is a triumph (for Brexiteers) in successfully securing a hegemonic position for empire as laudable legacy not shameful heritage, a (re)usable past which rewrites the history of British colonialism as a document of civilisation rather than barbarism. Brexit cheerfully obscures the darkness of colonial exploitation, resource extraction, genocide, environmental catastrophe, impoverishment, underdevelopment, and social and psychic immiseration by illuminating instead the exalted model of democratic sovereignty selflessly gifted by Britain to the (Anglospheric) world through the "mission" of imperial expansion. It is a failure of the imagination, of course, for precisely these reasons too, and for keeping at a remove or under wraps contrary ways of imagining England, Britain, the United Kingdom, the European Union, and the globe – past

and present – as well as the multitude that traverses these spaces. Following Wellings's lead in presenting Brexit as a means of both imaginative and political distancing, we should think further about the politics of proximity it installs – both spatial and historical, regarding that which is considered near or far – not least because such thinking returns us to those Brexit fictions that critically narrate a worried prequel to Brexit's electoral success. What warnings do these texts sound of the nation to come? What distances and proximities do they discern, and how did they get forged?

As its title suggests, matters of proximity preoccupy Caryl Phillips's (2003) novel, *A Distant Shore*. Its well-known opening line, "England has changed" (3), routes us into the unsettling *zeitgeist* of the early 21st century at least for those whom stasis is always preferable. O'Toole has noted that Brexit's voting pattern entrenched England "as a divided thing, bitterly split, not just between Leavers and Remainers but between the England of the big multi-cultural cities on the one side and the England of the villages and towns on the other" (2019, 178). As a contemporary "condition of England" novel, *A Distant Shore* deliberately eschews an engagement with Britain for a sharper English focus, while the predominant setting – the English North – is alert to the uncommon chronologies that render English transformation uneven and distinctive in the provinces, sticks and suburbs. In this book, selective memories of World War II and the ruinous presence of colonial remains haunt the horizon of the everyday, as Phillips shows how each is dangerously immanent within the undemonstrative, quiet streets and cul-de-sacs of England's turn-of-the-century peace and quiet.

Europe is nearer than one might think. To the newcomer Dorothy, the elderly white former teacher who lives in a new development called "Stoneleigh" just up the hill from the village of Weston, the area seems unexceptional and historically void. But a road-sign by its entrance

> announces the fact that we are twinned with some town in Germany and a village in the south of France. In the estate agent's bumf about "Stoneleigh" it says that during the Second World War the German town was bombed flat by the RAF, and the French village used to be full of Jews who were all rounded up and sent to the camps. I can't help feeling that it makes Weston seem a bit tame by comparison. Apparently, the biggest thing that ever happened in Weston was Mrs Thatcher closing the pits, and that was over twenty years ago. (Phillips 2003, 4)

Weston's proximity to war-time Germany and France is subtly rendered. The conflict is evoked through a patriotic memory of the triumphant Royal Air Force (RAF) that brings to the fore the nation's military achievements in Europe, while also keeping Europe at a distance from English shores –"I can't help feeling that it makes Weston seem a bit tame by comparison" – not least due to the fact that the two mainland European villages are not named. Europe is embraced at a comfortable remove with reference to the war, conjured cosmetically through vague advertising copy or diminutively named on a road-sign that postures equanimity through the quaint confection of civic "twinning".

This contradictory signposting of Europe in relation to England – beckoned in terms of the victories of the 1939-1945 war, but remote from post-war England – is strengthened by Dorothy's account of her late father, whose antipathy to Europe is well-remembered. Having lost his own father during the conflict in Belgium in World War I, he rarely ventured outside of England and remained hostile to the other European nations: "whenever he swore", Dorothy remembers, "which he seldom did, he was always quick to say 'pardon my French', which, of course, made no sense unless one viewed it through the prism of contempt" (11).

His post-war parochialism is manifest in his geriatric grumbling on his allotment, where Dorothy often found him

> bemoaning the fact that we were giving up our English birthright and getting lost in a United States of Europe, or the fact that one never sees men in collars and ties on Sundays, or expressing his continued astonishment that ordinary folk could have any respect for the memory of Churchill, a man who during the 1926 General Strike had, as Dad had been telling me since I was a small child, referred to the workers as "the enemy". (27)

Phillips's depiction of Dorothy's father is slight but sharp, and acutely alive to the contradictions he epitomises. His disdain for a post-war "United States of Europe" as threatening his "English birthright" anticipates the hardened 21st-century perception of the EU as a betrayal not a guarantor of democracy and peace. In Wellings's words, if World War II was an apogee of British greatness, then "membership of the European Union came to be seen as an eclipse of great power status and an institutionalisation of British decline" (2019, 112). Dad's contempt for Churchill is instructive here, as it was Churchill who first used the phrase "United States of Europe" in 1946 with a relatively positive inflection as a way of re-imagining the continent beyond the carnage of destruction. It is also voiced squarely in the terms of class conflict, as the reference to the General Strike suggests: as a Conservative politician, Churchill was no special friend to working-class interests and was ousted at the 1945 General Election to make way for Clement Atlee's Labour administration. Dad's socialism would seem to put him at odds with Churchill's Conservative Party; yet socially and culturally Dad is conservative, as his liking of proper male attire attests. His socialist politics are scrupulously national not internationalist, turning on a vaguely biogenetic myth of

"English birthright". Victory *in* Europe has come to mean the victory *of* Europe over the English, a pyrrhic triumph which associates war with a sense of loss felt in national terms (another reason, too, for Dad's lack of post-war Churchillianism) ultimately symbolised by the death of Dad's father in wartime Belgium. With European locations framed in terms of a threat to English identity, sovereignty, and survival – significantly, Dorothy's Mum suffered a minor stroke on the family's only foreign holiday in Majorca – there is no room in this closed circuit to accommodate England's newcomers. Dorothy's regular visits to her parents' graves reminds us that these attitudes remain spectrally extant in the novel's present.

If Brexit successfully realised the refurnishing and fusing together of memories of war and empire, with the recall of empire profoundly rehabilitated as a benign affair, Phillips's novel grimly exposes the resultant consequences. Their confluence structures the ordinary world of Weston's suburban milieu, which is deeply suspicious of any kind of newness and keen to adhere to chauvinist and racist attitudes when policing the borders of the "foreign". As a newly arrived elderly single woman living in the posh development up the hill from the "small village" (Phillips 2003, 23), Dorothy is already a figure of suspicion amongst Westoners, as she learns from the mother of one of her new piano students: "these people, they talk, you know" (23). Into the parochial, prejudicial milieu of "these people" arrives Solomon from mainland Europe. A refugee from an unnamed African nation previously known by the name Gabriel, he works as a handyman and occasional driver for Dorothy. Gabriel/Solomon's presence brings to the surface the latent racism of village England: not before long he begins to receive hate mail which includes razor blades, and his life is ended in the canal by the Waterman's Arms, killed by racist youths. It also exposes the installation of those spacings and distancings crucial to Brexit's rewriting of history by effectively collapsing them. His story originates in a brutal civil conflict presumably in sub-Saharan Africa, where as a soldier he witness the killing of his family and is forced to flee; it

follows him to a refugee centre near the French coast that recalls the Sangatte refugee camp (that existed between 1999 and 2002), and on his journey to England clinging to the side of a ship; it captures his rough living and eventual incarceration in London, before he heads north in the company of a kindly truck driver; and it portrays his eventual arrival, employment and murder in Weston. This spatial trajectory pulls into proximity the local English village with the global "small wars" of the contemporary that are themselves indebted to the advent of colonialism across Africa and to the continent's neo-colonial fortunes amidst globalisation's ascendancy. It also exposes the coming "refugee crisis" as neither a mainland European nor British metropolitan affair safely remote in the cities or on the South Coast, but just at large in northern English village life.

In revealing the uncomfortable proximity of these unvarnished historical phenomena to the daily business of Weston by his very presence, Gabriel/Solomon is an embodied reminder to "these people" of all they would like to forget and keep at bay, such as the malign consequences of the nation's colonial conduct on the world's stage and the "free" movement and dwelling of the migrant stranger whose very visibility is perceived as a threat to an "English birthright". Gabriel/Solomon's characterisation, too, acts as a meta-textual link to the long history of murderous anti-migrant prejudice that is no stranger to the English North. His arrival from Africa by sea, short incarceration, and death by water recall the hounding of David Oluwale, a Nigerian migrant to Leeds who died in 1969 in the River Aire while fleeing racist officers from the Leeds City Police, and who is the subject of Phillips's moving chapter "Northern Lights" in *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2007). In recent years, Oluwale's murder has concerned historians as well as local activists keen to protect his memory from civic and popular elision, and as part of their wider contestation of the "hostile environment" doggedly pursued by recent Conservative governments.[1] To borrow his character's words, Gabriel/Solomon is a figure "burdened with a hidden history" (Phillips

2003, 300) at once real and imagined. His killing is the product of the entangled tryst between the anti-migrant sentiment rooted in empire's end and the conservative-nationalist Englandism which murderously seeks to uphold the fragile distancing of Europe's perceived threat to English "birthright". No wonder, then, that Brexit so successfully secured populist support in feeding (on) English fears of the EU's post-war ascendancy, symbolised by the figure of the migrant from once-colonised space whose ability to access England from the European mainland came to be perceived as epitomising the EU's failings.

Importantly, *A Distant Shore* does more than merely log the emerging political domain that would stimulate Brexit. As I have suggested elsewhere (McLeod 2018), Phillips pursues a poetics of proximation in his intercalating of Dorothy's and Gabriel/Solomon's narratives and the complex chronologies that unfold in each. In seeking to entangle the narratives of a retired English white teacher and a black refugee by suggesting proximity where others install distance due to the particulars of race, culture or gender, Phillips challenges received assumptions of human incongruity – the other has nothing to do with me – as an excuse for ethical inaction. In putting these lives narratively in touch, Phillips hopes for the possibility of forging resistance and ethical steadfastness through quotidian human contact. "This is a woman to whom I might tell my story", thinks Gabriel/Solomon: "If I do not share my story, then I have only this one year [since arriving in Weston] to my life" (2003, 300). And although he does not last long in racist England, his brief relationship with Dorothy is instrumental in her helping bring his killers to the notice of the police and also offers her a refuge from her own crippling loneliness. In shaping things in this way, we might retrospectively read *A Distant Shore* as an anti-Brexit novel, one that does more than simply register an unpalatable habitus but mediates it distinctively, strategically, and critically, as well as keeping a degree of faith in the survival of meaningful human relations across divisions and fencings.

To my mind, such glints of hopefulness in such a dark tale also index the novel's moment of appearance at the turn of the century rather than amidst the turmoil compounded by the global financial crash of 2008 that entrenched and widened the kinds of suspicions displayed by Phillips's Westoners. The financial crash and its subsequent austerity measures pursued by successive British governments arguably played into the hands of Brexit's advocates, who could point to the presence of migrants old and new as ultimately responsible for the increasing precarity of work and welfare, rather than caused by the global financial system and its unimaginably wealthy proponents. Written in the shadow of the 2008 crash, as was Lanchester's *Capital*, Zadie Smith's (2012) *NW* contends with the precarity wrought by globalisation and capitalism in the 21st century.[2] In James Arnett's words, "[t]here is no question that *NW* marks out the complex sociopolitical environment of Britain on the brink of Brexit" (1). Smith's novel depicts a contemporary postcolonial London neighbourhood characterised by the degree zero of its polycultural populus that pulls the lineages and lingo of other times and places into an entangled present. "[T]he streets turn European", the narrator tells, when an uncomfortably hot sun shines: "there is a mania for eating outside" (3). Its vernacular cosmopolitanism, to use Homi K. Bhabha's (1996) well-known term, is conjured through the complicated family lineages and friendships indebted to migrations from Ireland, Jamaica, Algeria, Trinidad, and more besides, yet sharp divergences in class and wealth cross-cut such cultured convivialities and bring fences and frictions into play. Childhood chums Leah Hanwell and Natalie (once Keisha) Blake meet up regularly as adults, but not equitably: Irish-descended Leah knows that her visits to the dinner parties held by Jamaican-descended Natalie and her Italian-Trinidadian husband, Frank, serve their hosts' illusion of metropolitan liberality: "she and [her migrant husband] Michel are invited to provide something like local colour. Neither of them knows what to say to barristers and bankers, to the occasional judge" (Smith 2012, 75). Older possibilities of class or race-based

solidarities seem long gone in this liquid postmodernity wrought from neoliberal aspirations. These aspirations are epitomised by Natalie Blake's determination to rise from her modest social beginnings through education and middle-class careerism (she trains and works as a lawyer) and by Michel's amateurish nocturnal participation in the stock market online. The normalisation of neoliberalism's approval of bourgeois individualism and self-centredness is eerily captured on the novel's opening page as Leah reclines in her council-house garden, fenced in, and hears on the radio "a good line": "I am the sole author of the dictionary that defines me" (3). But the heteronormative designs of others prove ultimately more definitive. Natalie's quest to leave Keisha behind by being "crazy busy with self-invention" (183) flounders as her legal career is beset by the constraints of sexism and racialisation that prohibit her transformation and position her as a diversity hire, forever subject to the entrenched gaze of white male authority, to the judges who regard her performances in court as "aggressive hysteria" (210). Leah's determination not to have a child contends endlessly with the views of her husband and her mother, Pauline, who fail to understand her abortive attitude towards heteronormative aspirational maternity. This vexed, striated urban enclave is thrown into particularly sharp relief by the appearance of two disruptive characters – Nathan Bogle and Shar – whose treatment at the hands of the others seems all the more instructive when viewed from the vantage of Brexit.

Shar's irruption into Leah's home at the novel's beginning appears a confidence trick, one which turns on her distressed and histrionic request for money to visit her allegedly sick mother. Leah's decision to call a taxi and give Shar £30 is received with incredulity by Pauline and Michel. Yet Leah's gullibility has significance in terms of Brexit. Consider her literacy (and, behind it, Smith's) in metropolitan austerity. From Leah's slightly more socially elevated point of view, Shar bears all the hallmarks of social depravity which are read off in terms of pitiable vulgarity. She smokes and smells; her "familiar" face wears a

crooked smile; her skin is “papery and dry”; she wears “rolled-down jogging pants, the little downy dip in her back, pronounced, sweaty in the heat” (Smith 2012, 6). Shar speaks unguardedly about personal upset and difficulties – her abusive husband, her single motherhood – and conveys “a dark look” as she “grins satanically” (10). From the point of view of Leah, Shar is a known unknown, a figure “seen many times in these streets. A peculiarity of London villages: faces without names” (6). This queasy rendition of a proximate Londoner, witnessed regularly but rarely encountered, marks the predicament with which Smith is concerned: the attempt to engage sympathetically with those perceived unsympathetically at large. Leah’s migrant mother, Pauline, is unmoved by Shar’s seeming desperation and argues that the £30 will be used for drugs, while Michel declares Leah “an idiot” (15) – there is little attempt by either to think even briefly how austerity may have propelled Shar into her mendacious performance. The novel’s neoliberal milieu and cognition of austerity’s underclass is presented through Leah’s distinctly liberal quandary: how should I deal with the seemingly vulgar lives of others? With solidarity voided in the neighbourhood’s brittle commons of snobbish suspicion and self-regard, populated by passers-by not participants in a confluent multiculture, Brexit’s pernicious rhetoric of blame can quickly take root. Neoliberalism’s stimulation of an unseemly precariat despised for its crudity, condemned for its deceitfulness, and held liable for its own immiseration acts as the perfect preparation for Brexit’s populist disdain for the most vulnerable as a threat to the neoliberal dream of successful self-determination and “sole authorship” – of the entrepreneurial (migrant) subject, of the sovereign self, of the affluent nation – and not as evidence of its political and ethical atrophy, of the cellular social milieu fractured by proliferating imaginative and actual fences. But crucially, as Smith’s novel exposes, such populism is *not* the primary product or possession of a disenfranchised and maligned underclass, but of those – amateur stockbroker Michel, pious Pauline, even liberal Leah – who appear a little better

off and seem not unhappy to participate in rather than question capitalism's entrepreneurial values of hard work and money-making.

Nathan Bogle's presence in *NW* is especially penetrating and revealing in these terms. Leah's shocked recognition of him in Kilburn Underground Station – "familiar […] unknown" (Smith 2012, 40) – recalls Shar's inscrutable proximity, as does his downtrodden demeanour as he stands near the ticket machines illegally selling travelcards at knock-down prices: "The Afro of the man is uneven and has a tiny grey feather in it. The clothes are ragged. One big toe thrusts through the crumby rubber of an ancient Nike Air. The face is far older than it should be" (40). The decrepit sportswear seems all the more unkind, given Nathan's youthful ambitions to be a successful footballer. But for every Freddy Kamo, the migrant Senegalese Premier League footballer in Lanchester's *Capital* whose brief career gains him more money than Nathan will ever know, there are a hundred Nathan Bogles. Just as Nathan receives no chapter of his own in *NW* but squats amidst the tales of others, so too does his neighbourhood open little accommodation for his precarious and itinerant presence. While Phillips's Gabriel/Solomon is the migrant figure freighted with antipathies wrought from the contexts of empire and World War II, Smith's Nathan Bogle is the contemporary black British subject whose racialised disenfranchisement is weighted further with the populist disdain for the wasted lives created by the Brexiteers' beloved globalisation. Late in the novel Natalie attempts to respond to witnessing such pain in proximity, but the gulf is too large, as Nathan vituperatively tells:

> What do you know about my life? When you been walking in my shoes? What do you know about living the way I live, coming up the way I came up? Sit on your bench judging me? […] Talking out your neck about me. "How does it feel to be a

> problem?" What do you know about it? What do you know about me? Nothing. Who are you to chat to me? Nobody. No one. (276)

What is to be done? If Leah's awkwardly charitable response to Shar, offering her money to salve an upset caused by an encounter with impoverishment, suggests the prohibitive distancings which Brexit will deepen and exaggerate as it reorganises domestic politics in terms of populist antipathy not popular solidarity, Natalie's response is distinctly sinister. Both one-time pupils at Brayton High School, Nathan represents all that Natalie has worked hard to leave behind – not least the constraints of race and class – in her quest for upward mobility and suburban security. Yet their proximity as she wanders the neighbourhood in his uncomfortable company in the novel's dramatic finale suggests the circularity of her journey and the failure of her quest for sole authorship through neoliberal self-determination – it is not for nothing that her new initials, NB, are the same as Nathan's. Nathan's presence is so unbearable because it threatens to reveal the illusion, from which Natalie worryingly cannot let go, of identitarian sovereignty, of taking (back) control of who you want to be.

So Nathan must be purged. When Leah asks Natalie why Nathan has lived the life of a "poor bastard" (Smith 2012, 292), Natalie's "instinct for self-defence, for self-preservation" keeps her locked inside a post-Thatcherite entrepreneurial standpoint as she admonishes the victim for his vagabondage, just like a good Brexiteer: "We were smarter and we knew we didn't want to end up on people's doorsteps. We wanted to get out. People like Bogle – they didn't want it enough. […] This is one of the things you learn in a courtroom: people generally get what they deserve" (293). Nathan's apparent complicity in the murder of Felix (the young black man whose story preoccupies the novel's second section) is one reason why Natalie, with voice disguised, shops him to the police as the novel closes. But there are other matters at work too, not least the demonization and pernicious erasure of those whose local

presence evidences the failures of neoliberalism's global schematics. Smith's novel of austerity models the machinations of Brexit with bleak, studied prescience.

As Natalie stands suicidal on Hornsey Lane Bridge, near the novel's end, she sees through the railings a "cross-hatched" vision of the city: "St Paul's in one box. The Gherkin in another. Half a tree. Half a car. Cupolas, spires. Squares, rectangles, half-moons, stars. It was impossible to get any sense of the whole" (Smith 2012, 281). As well serving as a reminder of Natalie as forever fenced off from her dreams of betterment symbolised by the city in the distance – a reminder which she fails to notice, it seems – the inhibited cross-hatched view, neither whole nor sensible, anticipates the infinitely receding subdivisions of Brexit Britain. This disintegrating vision of the whole proleptically metaphorises the uncoupling of those cultural and social connections required to sustain a pluralised popular politics of solidarity, as well as the prising open of those fractures in which the pious plaints of self-righteous grievance take root. Importantly, Smith exposes the complex class particulars at play here, in making the intemperate and impious partisan *not* the disenfranchised figure of Nathan but the entrepreneurial upwardly mobile Natalie, "crazy busy with self-invention", whose disdain for the downtrodden pushes her away from the popular towards a potentially populist politics. In so doing, Smith importantly gives the lie to Lanchester's brief and cliched characterisation of the tracksuited woman with "indoor skin" (whose demeanour recalls Shar's), who racially abuses "Kwama" on behalf of "ordinary" people. *These* will not be the primary harbingers of Brexit, perhaps, as much as those neoliberals who aspire, like Natalie, keenly to secure their status amongst the bay-windowed, safely gated middle class.

NW offers little sense of a way out of, or a way to contest, the coming crisis. If *A Distant Shore* retains a quiet faith in the progressively ethical possibilities of innocuous human contact and tale-telling, no matter how dark or hopeless things are, Smith's novel

seems unable to find even piecemeal solace. Its entangled narratives of the chief characters' fortunes do not enable anything like Phillips's progressive poetics of proximation. By its close, Natalie is still compliant with the (by no means impartial) rule of law and the precepts of neoliberal self-centredness in turning in Nathan; while Leah's several frustrations – familial, political, sexual, professional – are silenced rather than settled as she joins Natalie's vendetta against Nathan. What, if anything, has changed for the better? 'Let's talk about something else' (Smith 2012, 293), Leah says to Michel and Natalie, as she reaches for a welcome glass of wine as the book winds to its end.

Elite neoliberals found in austerity the perfect opportunity to deflect blame for its primary causes – globalisation, international finance, the reckless money marketeering of millionaires and their minions – towards the presence of those living most precariously. Austerity was fertile ground indeed for Brexit's reconstitution of empire's memory and World War II's legacy. But Brexit's fractures and fault lines are not new and run deeply, and, I would hazard, have been articulated in many more postcolonial texts than I have had occasion to mention. The warning signs have long been in evidence.

So what is to be done? Lanchester's *Capital* ends with the newly redundant banker Roger Yount promising that "I can change change change" (2012, 577). It is a hideously ironic conclusion, voiced by a one-time high-flying City financier who has himself become part of the expendable slurry and small change of the global money markets. In our current bleak moment, and in the modest domain of literary and cultural critique, we need all the more the critical imagination of postcolonial thought – writing *and* reading – to remind us of the origins and depth of a crisis brought by the long formation of Brexit's post-imperium, as well as its continued investment in the necessity and possibility of political transformation and meaningful change. Here, one hopes, postcolonial writing might play a fundamental role, in a number of ways: in its contribution to a "BrexLit" that sustains and advances the

longstanding ethical and political refusal of the newly nostalgic nation's hostile environment; in mounting a determined cultural challenge to the triumphant political orthodoxy now nakedly at large; and in imagining and protecting the enduring, equitable transpersonal relations that refuse every day the fencings fundamental to Brexit's malevolent politics of plunder.

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Notes

[1] For more on these local activities co-ordinated by the David Oluwale Memorial Association (DOMA), visit https://rememberoluwale.org/ . Caryl Phillips is a patron of DOMA.

[2] My discussion of *NW* is highly indebted to the critical imagination of my students at the University of Leeds, with whom I have studied the novel as part of my undergraduate module, "Postcolonial London". In particular, my comments about Natalie Blake's initials and Nathan Bogle's lack of a chapter to himself are inspired by the insights of my students, several of whom saw such things long before I did.

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