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Fragmentation and Relationality in Brexit Narratives: Linda Grant's *a Stranger City*

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Abstract
The main purpose of this article is to explore the ways in which Linda Grant's *A Stranger City* can be defined as illustrative of BrexLit. Many literary critics have argued that the majority of works within the genre of BrexLit primarily address this phenomenon from the British perspective, thus portraying its consequences only for the UK (mostly England) and British characters. I contend that *A Stranger City* is quite different from these works as it is concerned with the manifold experiences of various European citizens set in London against a background of xenophobia, nationalism and political tensions. Drawing on the tools provided by close reading, I will show how *A Stranger City* shows some narrative devices that characterise those newest fictions defined as fragmented narratives and networked novels in an attempt to identify the tensions between fragmentation and relationality that have been visible at a political and social level in the wake of Brexit. Using recent research in the fields of diaspora and vulnerability studies, I also aim to demonstrate that Brexit acts as the vertebral axis (dis)connecting Grant's diasporic characters. In the end, I will attempt to show that this aspect seems to evoke a hopeful future in which the fragmented identities of post-Brexit Europeans have the possibility to flow in a more connected way than ever before.

Keywords Fragmentation · Relationality · Vulnerability · Brexit · Network · Eastern European

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Introduction

Since the term was first coined in 2012 'Brexit' has been one of the most written, debated and talked about topics in recent years. In both pre- and post-Brexit times, the legal and political fields have been flooded by discussions about the technicalities and implications this process would bring to the international relations landscape at the European and global levels. The consequences that Britain's exit from the EU could have and has had on migration flows to and from the UK have also occupied the fields of sociology and migration studies. In fact, according to Christine Berberich, 'immigration became the most prominent and widely-discussed issue prior to the referendum, with language that was meant to divide and to incite'.[1] In the field of humanities, Robert Eaglestone has asserted that 'Brexit is not only political, economic and administrative: perhaps most significantly it is an event in culture too'. Consequently, 'literature is an especially useful and appropriate way to address the political arguments about national identity which lie at the heart of Brexit'.[2] Following this line of thought, and mainly believing in 'literature's capacity to interrogate how we relate to one another across national and cultural boundaries, offering an imaginative space for the envisioning of political futures',[3] Kristian Shaw has made a valuable contribution by coining the term 'BrexLit' in order to refer to those novels

reflecting the divided nature of the UK and the ramifications of the referendum. The term BrexLit concerns fictions that either directly respond or imaginatively allude to Britain's exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitan consequences of Britain's withdrawal.[4]

The number of studies on this type of literature has increased in the last few years, demonstrating that literature plays a vital role in challenging the national identities at stake during the post-Brexit era. Even though, in the literary world, the English struggle for identity is far from new, as Dulcie Everitt claims,[5] the exceptional turmoil caused by Brexit has led to the production of a literary genre that deserves to be studied in detail to observe its multifarious implications in the UK, the EU and beyond.

Brexit is, of course, also connected with the issue of migratory movements. Acknowledging that migration has always been intrinsic to human nature, Mirjam Gebauer and Pia Schwarz Lausten have stated that 'today it [migration] is widely considered one of the most important and urgent issues and major socio-political challenges which are registered at a global level and, more specifically, in a European context'.[6] Although they argue that 'only recently has migration become the object of study within the humanities',[7] so-called 'migration literature' has evolved from being placed at the margins to occupying a central position in the literary arena. This

[1] Berberich (2023). 34.

[2] Eaglestone (2018), 1.

[3] Shaw (2018), 27.

[4] Shaw (2018), 18.

[5] Everitt (2020), 46.

[6] Gebauer and Schwarz Lausten (2010), (1)

[7] Gebauer and Schwarz Lausten (2010), (2)

happens because literature offers a unique space to negotiate and deconstruct identities resulting from migration and the diaspora. The interdependency of form and content is thus assumed in migration and diasporic literature since the examination of the themes exposed in these narratives is usually enhanced by reflections on the aesthetics, modes and genres they display. Something similar can be said of BrexLit since the aesthetic techniques used in these novels often determine the novels' socio-political and ideological implications.[8]

In this article, I examine Linda Grant's latest novel to date, *A Stranger City* (2019). Linda Grant, born in Liverpool in 1951 as a child of Russian and Polish Jewish immigrants and a grandchild of Holocaust survivors, acquired a significant position on the British literary scene in the 1990s. Writing in a realist style, her novels usually address the generational transmission of memory, the role of place in the construction of diasporic identities, the journey of rebellious female characters in search of personhood, and the burden of Holocaust memories in subsequent Jewish generations. Yet *A Stranger City* addresses more transnational and contemporary issues than her previous works. As the writer herself has said:

This free-floating anxiety, the expectation that if there could be a bad outcome, there will be a bad outcome, is fed by uncertainty. … My anxiety about Brexit forms a central core of worry that flows out to encompass everything it touches. Even a balm can be an irritant, and cliff edges are now everywhere you look.[9]

Focusing on Grant's Jewish background and the constant presence of Jewish characters and themes in her *oeuvre*, Sue Vice has previously explored this novel in order to obtain an insight into the ways in which British-Jewish literature has responded to events in the UK since 2016. She has considered this work as demonstrative of that hybrid literature produced during the post-2016 era and which seems to mark a 'departure from pre-2016 modes of writing Jewish'.[10]

A Stranger City takes place during the months immediately before and after Brexit. Grant turns London into a microcosm of the UK, where troubles linked to migration, nationalism, racism, violence, terrorism, and individualism make a group of dissimilar characters' lives intersect around the death of a mysterious migrant woman. As she explains in the novel's afterword, Grant was inspired by the real-life event of a nameless woman who drowned herself in the Thames in 1992 and became the subject of a TV documentary similar to Alan McBride's own in the novel.

Bearing these ideas in mind, the main purpose of this article is to explore the ways in which *A Stranger City* can be defined as illustrative of BrexLit. Grant's novel has been briefly discussed as an exemplar of this genre by different critics,[11] but I would like to move this discussion a step further by analysing in detail the themes and narrative devices that make this novel a singular literary representation of immediate pre- and post-Brexit times. Many literary critics have argued that the majority of works within the genre of BrexLit primarily address this phenomenon from the Brit-

[8] Wally (2018), 68.

[9] Grant (2019b).

[10] Vice (2020), 10.

[11] Vice (2020); Adam (2022); Berberich (2023).

ish perspective,[12] thus portraying its consequences only for the UK (mostly England) and British characters. I contend here that *A Stranger City* is quite different from these works as it is concerned with the manifold experiences of various European citizens set in London against a background of xenophobia, nationalism and political tensions. Drawing on the tools provided by a close reading, I will show how *A Stranger City* shows some narrative devices that characterise those newest fictions defined as fragmented narratives[13] and networked novels[14] in an attempt to identify the tensions between fragmentation and relationality that have been visible at a political and social level in the wake of Brexit. Using recent research in the fields of diaspora and vulnerability studies, I also aim to demonstrate that Brexit acts as the vertebral axis (dis)connecting Grant's diasporic characters. In the end, I will attempt to show that this aspect seems to evoke a hopeful future in which the fragmented identities of post-Brexit Europeans have the possibility to flow in a more connected way than ever before.[15]

Defining BrexLit: The Case of *a Stranger City*

Contemporary writers have reacted and are still reacting in different ways to Brexit, producing what different critics have categorised as 'post-referendum novels', 'Brexit fictions', or just BrexLit. As mentioned above, Shaw's definition has been instrumental when it comes to understanding the nature of this literary phenomenon. According to this critic's ideas, it is 'literature's capacity to interrogate how we relate to one another across national and cultural boundaries, offering an imaginative space for the envisioning of political futures'[16] that explains the significant number of recent literary works portraying Brexit. In fact, it has even argued that 'a flood of Brexit literature hit the market at the end of 2017',[17] reversing the traditional tendency of English literature not to reflect on European themes in its pages.[18] Those works understood as BrexLit illuminate notions related to Englishness and Britishness as experienced in the very present moment, to the extent that Everitt has considered them as 'not just works of fiction [but as] documents of history'.[19]

Even though it is difficult to narrow down a list of pieces of writing defined as BrexLit, most critics in the field have included the following works in their analyses: such speculative dystopias as Andrew Marr's *Head of State* (2015), Stanley Johnson's *Kompromat* (2017), and Heinz Helle's *Euphoria* (2017); Mark Billingham's crime novel *Love Like Blood* (2017); the post-truth novel *Time of Lies* by Douglas Board (2017); A. L. Kennedy's *Serious Sweet* (2016); Jonathan Coe's *Number 11* (2015) and *Middle England* (2018); Jon McGregor's *Reservoir 13* (2017); Amanda

[12] Pittel (2018); Veličković (2019); Everitt (2020); Adam (2022); Berberich (2023).

[13] Gioia (2013).

[14] Edwards (2019).

[15] Everitt (2020), 180.

[16] Shaw (2018), 27.

[17] Spencer (2017).

[18] Wally (2018), 75.

[19] Everitt (2020), 47.

Craig's *The Lie of the Land* (2017); Ian McEwan's *The Cockroach* (2019); and Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), read as 'the first significant post-Brexit novel'.[20] In spite of their singularities, what these works have in common is that 'they zealously scrutinize an identity [Englishness] that often goes un-examined. […] Where pre-Brexit referendum texts sought to problematize the form of Englishness that has emerged in the past two decades, BrexLit texts, in many cases, attempt to resolve it'.[21] Furthermore, scholars like Sybil Adam have claimed that 'one of the main concerns for literature about Brexit is mood: particularly the production of social, collective feelings, and emotions'.[22] What this literary mood attempts to capture is the atmosphere hovering over Britain in the last three decades, which has been characterised by Euroscepticism, hostility to immigrants from the Middle East and Eastern Europe, and a generalised tendency to blame the Eurozone for Britain's economic decline.

Another common feature among these novels is the fact that the term 'Brexit' is not frequently used. Sometimes, it is not even mentioned in the narrative, only alluded to through figurative language. In addition, as pointed out earlier, critics like Berberich[23] and Veličković[24] have criticised how many of these creations marginalise the European 'Others' suffering the consequences of Brexit since they are often denied a voice of their own, or, when they have it, they tend to be represented as minor characters conforming to stereotypes and clichés. BrexLit is thus not usually concerned with Europe and their inhabitants, either geographically or politically, nor does it address the other nationalities of the British Isles or its colonial past. For Everitt, what all these works have in common is their rejection of the prevailing nationalism dividing the UK in general and England in particular.[25]

Consequently, Linda Grant's text may be classified as BrexLit since Brexit acts as the nodal point displaying multiple consequences, like a network, before, during and after its proclamation. This novel exemplifies the atmosphere of tension and division prevailing in London during the times of the referendum. *A Stranger City* starts in *Part One*, set in February 2016, with the burial of an unidentified woman, eventually revealed to be the 43-year-old Moldovan illegal immigrant Valentina Popov, and finishes in *Part Six*, when her body is unearthed for DNA identification and then buried again, four years later. *Part Two* returns to the night of and days following Valentina's permanent disappearance and Chrissie's temporary disappearing act seven months earlier – Chrissie being a 24-year-old Irish nurse who moved to London just before the referendum. *Part Three* continues narrating the months before Brexit, focusing on Gunnersbury as a small microcosm of London. In this part, some of the characters – journalist Alan McBride and his half-Jewish wife Francesca; Francesca's parents and grandparents, who are Jewish immigrants from Persia; the young German couple who have recently moved to London with their small daughter; the Jewish lady Mrs. Shapiro and her Indian friend Simi, etc. – digress to their past and that of their fami-

[20] Shaw (2018), 21.

[21] Everitt (2020) 177.

[22] Adam (2022), 61.

[23] Berberich (2023).

[24] Veličković (2019).

[25] Everitt (2020), 180.

lies, mainly to the times when they migrated to the UK. *Part Four* recounts a terrorist attack in London shortly after Brexit, mainly from the perspective of one of the victims, the US-born Professor Rob, and his nurse, who is none other than Chrissie. Finally, *Part Five* revolves around the months following the UK's vote to leave the EU, describing the terrible consequences of the racism prevailing in England at the time, such as the acid attack suffered by Marco because of his Lebanese origins or the massive exodus of immigrants from the UK to their home countries.

Grant's text also adheres to what we understand as BrexLit by depicting a mood of change and crisis, which Francesca's grandfather perceives at different moments of the novel: 'he could smell that life here in England was going through a process of transmutation into something different. The order changes. What can you do but prepare?'[26] This feeling of anxiety is also wisely illustrated by Marco's parents, second-generation Lebanese immigrants, when they wonder: 'What is this country coming to? What is going on? It's all changed, you've no idea what the neighbours will come out with next'.[27] These examples illustrate how this mood of transition is especially perceived by those who have already undergone a migration process in the past.

Moreover, as happens in many BrexLit texts, the language used to name Brexit in *A Stranger City* is frequently figurative. The characters refer to it as the change of order,[28] 'the big thing',[29] 'the atmosphere',[30] being 'cut off from the Continent',[31] 'this nonsense',[32] and 'these strange times',[33] as if this event were something so immediate and painful that it cannot be put into words explicitly. In addition, *A Stranger City* shows a clear critical attitude towards English nationalism and the xenophobic attitudes related to it. Not only do most of the characters agree on the relapse that leaving the EU implies for the UK – as can be observed when Rob defines Brexit as 'a time machine, taking us back to the past';[34] when Marco's father argues that 'this country has been taken over by the *dregs*. I'm telling you, the scum of the earth are in charge now';[35] or when Chrissie concludes that 'the English are withdrawing back into themselves like a mollusc to its shell … they're turning their backs on the world'[36] – but they also establish parallelisms with some of the darkest episodes of contemporary history, such as the Holocaust, the partition of Cyprus and the war in Lebanon.

[26] Grant (2019a), 105.

[27] Grant (2019a), 201.

[28] Grant (2019a), 105.

[29] Grant (2019a), 110.

[30] Grant (2019a), 120, 241.

[31] Grant (2019a), 154.

[32] Grant (2019a), 195.

[33] Grant (2019a), 280.

[34] Grant (2019a), 154.

[35] Grant (2019a), 203, original emphasis.

[36] Grant (2019a), 319.

Fragmentation and Brex(L)it

Formally speaking, Ted Gioia has described a new literary genre growing at the turn of the century: 'the new fragmented novel'.[37] In fact, the adjective 'new' implies that narrative fragmentation is not original; rather, this phenomenon has gone through different phases since Modernism. Gioia sees the present moment as the third, and probably final, stage of this process, which 'seeks an exemplary wholeness, a fitting together of the fragments into brilliant patterns. It does not court randomness or glorify schizophrenia. The fragments here are not shrapnel. More like pieces of a glorious jigsaw puzzle'. This is what happens in Grant's novel: it aims for unity by highlighting fragmentation, which is achieved by means of different narrative mechanisms.

Firstly, the narrative recreates different sub-plots in a shared Brexit landscape, and it does so through polyphony and multi-focalisation. These include the tragic disappearance of Valentina Popov, Chrissie's adaptation to living in London, the dissolution of Detective Pete Dutton's marriage and his obsession with identifying the dead woman, Alan McBride's production of his TV documentary, Francesca's entry into motherhood, Younis' migration anxiety, Marco's refusal to see the racism behind the referendum in opposition to his parents' fears, the German girl marginalised at school because of her foreign origins, and Rob's process of acting out trauma after living through a terrorist attack. There is a constant presence of a third-person narrator, but focalisation varies throughout the chapters. Alan, Chrissie, Pete, Francesca, Younis, Marco, and Rob provide different points of view on the main events portrayed in the narrative. This amalgamation of voices illustrates that an understanding of such a complex event as Brexit is impossible to attain by listening only to British voices, but there is also an urge to include the numerous agents configuring the post-Brexit scenario. In keeping with this, Gioia has claimed that polyphony may be studied as an essential feature of the new fragmented novels, and Vanessa Guignery and Wojciech Drąg argue that 'the polyphonic novel … is another possible category of fragmentary writing [since it] relies on a juxtaposition of multiple voices,'[38] just as Grant does in this text.

Secondly, *A Stranger City* interlinks various narrative layers and spatial-temporal dimensions. This aspect can be examined using Guignery and Drąg's ideas about 'the poetics of fragmentation' that can be found in today's fictional works 'that deny completeness, linearity and coherence in favor of incompletion, disruption and gaps'.[39] *A Stranger City* illustrates this lack of completion, disjointedness and heterogeneity by constructing a non-linear and discontinuous narrative. Grant's novel performs its fragmentariness through the intersection of 'elements and stories in a non-linear manner'.[40] As described above, the novel begins with Valentina Popov's burial and finishes with her body being exhumed for DNA identification and then buried again. This aspect could indicate the circular structure of the narrative. Yet this circularity is

[37] Gioia (2013).

[38] Guignery and Drag (2020), xix.

[39] Guignery and Drag (2020), xi.

[40] Guignery and Drag (2020), xx.

disjointed, going back and forth as the diverse sub-plots advance and the characters digress to different moments of their past.

Furthermore, Grant promotes a multidirectional and fragmented view of time and space in this novel by taking recourse to the technique of juxtaposition. This is often achieved through the main characters' streams of thought, as they often connect the present to their family history within the context of migration. For example, when Alan eavesdrops on Chrissie and Marco's conversation on the tube, he digresses to her grandparents' traumas after the war back in Ireland.[41] On another occasion, when Francesca loses her job, she is connected to the history of her family as exiles having to earn a living in a foreign country.[42] This aspect aligns the narrative with a multidirectional view of memory[43] as it connects dissimilar events from different periods that are nonetheless linked to the destruction they brought about to diverse peoples worldwide.

The character of Francesca is essential in this sense, as she establishes interesting comparisons between today's Britain and Nazism when some neighbours take her to a secret area in the neighbourhood: 'the Island, […] a geographical anomaly'.[44] Like the protagonist of *Alice in Wonderland*,[45] Francesca enters a timeless place where generations of 'Island' families have lived since Victorian times. The people who used to live in this place mainly worked as bin men and are said to have been very narrow-minded people who did not welcome foreigners.[46] Francesca connects this surrealist place to her visit to Auschwitz with her grandfather as a teenager, as both places are 'transnational territories.'[47] Likewise, in the midst of her hallucinatory state, Francesca portrays this area as 'a wooden city of sheds housing people no more solid than wraiths dressed in modern clothes, wheeling luggage, holding children, talking on phones, checking screens. … [T]hey were deportees, hemmed in on all sides awaiting future arrangements for their permanent departure'.[48] Whether or not these deportees are real is unclear, but the narrative establishes a parallelism between the Holocaust victims in the concentration camps and the asylum seekers enclosed in European camps today. It is said that Francesca's neighbours took her there so she could learn a lesson by having access 'through the looking glass into another England, one that was half in this time, half in an older age'.[49] Considering some of the characters' comments saying that Brexit means going back in time, the depiction of this other dimension, this 'Island' that has never been invaded, according to Mrs Shapiro,[50] as opposed to the 'real' London, acts as a metaphor for what England will become if Brexit succeeds.

[41] Grant (2019a), 25.

[42] Grant (2019a), 90–94.

[43] Rothberg (2009).

[44] Grant (2019a), 221.

[45] Grant (2019a), 220.

[46] Grant (2019a), 220, 225.

[47] Grant (2019a), 225.

[48] Grant (2019a), 227.

[49] Grant (2019a), 224.

[50] Grant (2019a), 232.

For such critics as Jean-Michel Ganteau, fragmentation is also connected to 'loss, lack and vulnerability', giving way to fictional works that revolve around traumatic and vulnerable experiences and display 'modes of fragmentation and dislocation'.[51] These notions may be applied to *A Stranger City*, with its emphasis on human vulnerability and its representation of vital traumatic episodes for contemporary history through the singular experiences of the people living through them. Subsequent to the so-called 'trauma paradigm', scholars such as Martha Nussbaum,[52] Judith Butler,[53] Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman,[54] Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau[55] have established the contemporary 'vulnerability paradigm', according to which there is an increasing demand for accepting one's exposure and/or vulnerability to the wound as an essential element when constructing the self. According to the OED, being vulnerable means being open to both physical and/or psychological attacks; an individual 'may be wounded; susceptible of receiving wounds or physical injury' and may be 'open to attack or injury of a non-physical nature; esp., offering an opening to the attacks of raillery, criticism, calumny, etc'.[56]

Traumatic and vulnerable situations have both individual and collective implications in this novel. At the individual level, all the characters in Grant's work are depicted as suffering an inner process of fragmentation due to some traumatic experience and/or vulnerable situation to which they have been exposed. Described from the very beginning of the novel as a 'poor lady with no one, not a soul in all the world except for God who must have known her',[57] Valentina is the best example of a vulnerable victim of external historical forces that became triggering factors for personal trauma and destruction. She was born on the wrong side of the border to be a legal European 'in a town called Ungheni, a border post between Moldova and Romania. Until independence it had been part of the Soviet Union. The EU was on the other side of the bridge across the river. Geographically it was *in* Europe…. And if you looked in the other direction, then you had Mother Russia'.[58] She had been working illegally as a cleaner for a family of rich Russians and attending Romanian parties without establishing any deep ties. Then, she was extorted by her boyfriend, and she was even hated by her daughter. All these reasons made Valentina want to 'be erased from life'.[59]

The character who acts as Valentina's counterpoint is Chrissie. Even though this Irish nurse is often portrayed as quite a carefree and worldly young girl, she is also somehow wounded throughout the narrative as she gets involved in different troubles, from going viral on YouTube while dancing at a concert and her brief disappearance after her argument with Marco, which was reported by the news, to her witnessing of

[51] Ganteau (2015) xii.

[52] Nussbaum (2001).

[53] Butler (2006).

[54] Fassin and Rechtman (2009).

[55] Ganteau and Onega (2017).

[56] Oxford English Dictionary (2015).

[57] Grant (2019a), 4.

[58] Grant (2019a), 307.

[59] Grant (2019a), 311.

the traumas caused by a terrorist attack in London, as she reflects: 'the injuries they'd seen, just horrendous, they didn't mention that on the news, people would completely freak out if they knew that surviving was such a terrible ordeal and you would probably never get your old life back'.[60]

Moreover, Rob and Marco also end up being wounded by terror and hate attacks, although in different ways and for different reasons. After the attack on London Bridge, Rob is depicted as suffering from traumatic symptoms,[61] such as paralysis, muteness, fear and a desperate need to find sympathy in the people around him. For Marco's part, it is revealed that he had already suffered a childhood trauma because of the death of his younger brother. Now, in adulthood, he becomes a victim of terror again, which makes him desire to be an entirely different person: 'He wanted an axe to split him transversely and a new fledgling Marco to arise from the abandoned carcass'.[62]

The German family, who moved to London because of its reputation as a 'supra-state, beyond nationality',[63] also become more vulnerable in the background as the narrative advances. This is illustrated when, for example, they decide to talk less German in their house and none outside due to their fear of being attacked, mainly their daughter.[64] Francesca increases her exposure to vulnerability as the pages go by too. When she first loses her job, owing to her immigrant family origins, she is aware 'that life was a perpetual game of snakes and ladders',[65] and this awareness expands when she knows she is going to be the mother of a baby girl in these uncertain times.[66] Furthermore, the previous generations of immigrants represented in the novel through Francesca's grandparents and Marco's parents make clear statements about the vulnerability implied in their permanent status as exiles. Likewise, Alan is personally affected by Valentina's story since this incident, and all the events leading up to Brexit around him, seem to tell him that 'there was a solidity which was vanishing before his own eyes',[67] pointing out the uncertainty of their future. Finally, the only English character given a voice in this novel, Detective Pete Dutton, who acknowledges being obsessed with Valentina's case, sees his marital life collapse due to irreconcilable differences with his wife, who shows very racist attitudes towards foreigners and even voted for UKIP.[68]

Yet it is impossible not to see these individual experiences of vulnerability as part of a whole, of a collective that is wounded and undergoing a profound social, political and values crisis. This social and political fragmentation is perceived, for instance, by the German couple who moved to London because Caspar regarded the city as a supra-state where they could teach their daughter 'to be a citizen of the world, fluent

[60] Grant (2019a), 153.

[61] LaCapra (2001), 21.

[62] Grant (2019a), 239.

[63] Grant (2019a), 205.

[64] Grant (2019a), 116–117.

[65] Grant (2019a), 87.

[66] Grant (2019a), 318.

[67] Grant (2019a), 57.

[68] Grant (2019a), 135.

in languages'.[69] And yet they are faced with a society where 'nobody talked to each other or made eye contact on the tube; like an elephant bitten by a mosquito, London was simply too big, too absorbed in its own individual business'.[70] This atmosphere of tension is not only characteristic of London; Pete also describes similar racial tensions in a café in rural England.[71] All in all, what Grant does is interrelate numerous characters representing individual trauma and vulnerability within a general context of tension, chaos and fragmentation.

Relationality and Brex(L)it

In parallel to the new fragmented fiction, there has also emerged a genre that Caroline Edwards describes as 'the networked novel'.[72] In fact, both genres show a tendency to represent fragmentation at a thematic and formal level, but this fragmentation aspires for unity and relation in the end. Edwards claims that the figure of our times is the digital network of global communication and that this is also hovering over the contemporary novel, which is being transformed 'into a networked aesthetic', leading to innovations in narrative voice, structure and temporality.[73] Thus, networked novels 'offer a broad range of temporal registers that complicate notions of historical time, narratives of progress, the old modernist distinction between public and private time, as well as reworking postmodernist tropes of simultaneity, chaos, contingency and chance'.[74] Aris Mousoutzanis has also referred to 'network fictions' as 'a group of narratives that have been proliferating during the last two decades …, which interweave multiple interlocking narratives set in different times and spaces around the globe and involve many characters, often in a state of mobility and travel, who get involved in or affected by incidents from another storyline'.[75] These ideas can be applied to *A Stranger City*, set in the present but digressing and connecting to other distant places and times.

Mousoutzanis explains that network fictions are usually presented as 'a continuum with past histories of invasion, destruction and corruption of local cultures enacted by colonialism',[76] evoking the multidirectional essence of memory.[77] In fact, this is a feature mentioned by some BrexLit critics.[78] This genre often portrays today's Britain's history in relation to some kind of nostalgic past that leads both the authors and their characters to recall the loss of the British Empire or the memory of the Second World War. Grant makes these connections visible as her characters establish parallelisms between past migrations and the migratory movements caused by Brexit

[69] Grant (2019a), 205.

[70] Grant (2019a), 205.

[71] Grant (2019a), 137.

[72] Edwards (2019).

[73] Edwards (2019), 15.

[74] Edwards (2019), 22.

[75] Mousoutzanis (2016), 2.

[76] Mousoutzanis (2016), 9.

[77] Rothberg (2009).

[78] O'Toole (2018); Berberich (2023).

and between violent episodes witnessed in London's past and present. There is a very telling example in the following passage, where Alan illustrates how the Thames acquires the role of a powerful force dominating the city as well as symbolising the fluidity of history, the succession of crises, and their interconnection:

> And he remembered his lovely Thames, her steady inexorable purpose, how she was a watery road through the city, how the Spanish Armada had tried to sail up her and been repelled, …, how the river brought the plague and how it had become so polluted by industry it nearly died. … Now memory was at a high flood, the memory of the dead woman who had arrived in his life at a time of crisis and borne him away with her. Were they both drowning?[79]

This episode depicts the convergence of collective and historical memories of periods of crisis for the city of London with the individual crises of Valentina and Pete. Grant often personifies London's capacity to act as a palimpsest, and Francesca even alludes to these theories when she visits 'the Island':

> From art history she knew of the *palimpsest*, derived from the Greek to be 'scraped again.' The palimpsest was … a surface such as a canvas bearing the traces of many layers of record, re-inscribed over time. Beneath the paint lay the trace of other paint, or a chalk mark, a fingerprint. The landscape had been scraped, it had been overlaid, it had reformed itself. Medieval peasants had trudged through this watery land, had got lost in the fog, had drowned…. The Blitz had brought the rubble and debris of the East End, peace had brought ruled football pitches and weekend playtime.[80]

Her words reverberate the theories of Sarah Dillon, who sees the palimpsest as an 'involuted phenomenon where unrelated texts [and memories] are involved and entangled, intricately interwoven, interrupting and inhabiting each other'.[81] In fact, in an interview about *A Stranger City*, Grant directly referred to London as a palimpsest: 'It can mean a manuscript whose words have been scratched out and overwritten, or a painter's canvas in which an earlier work is scraped and a new image superimposed. London is one vast palimpsest'.[82] This image is perpetuated throughout the novel, and Alan often refers to the multiple layers that configure this metropolis. For example, he says: 'It was impossible, Alan thought, to tell London's story; it was too large, too ancient, too many layers obscured it, its stories were too contradictory, … – the place simply defied narration'.[83] As such, London contains the memories and histories of different generations, which can be uncovered so as to reveal superimposed layers interacting with each other and integrating new meanings with the influx of new generations and immigrants. Regarding the latter, London is initially depicted

[79] Grant (2019a: 136–37).

[80] Grant (2019a), 227, my emphasis.

[81] Dillon (2007: 245).

[82] Grant (2019b).

[83] Grant (2019), 27.

by Chrissie as 'the capital of the world,' as that place 'where everyone comes and everyone is here, you meet all sorts, people from countries she'd never heard of…. And now the poor refugees from Syria'.[84] However, as the narration continues, the view promoted is that it is very difficult for the contemporary subject, in the midst of globalisation and the rise of the Internet, to put down roots in a place that contains so many complex layers of history and silenced legacies. Indeed, Alan identifies 'a lot of nomadic people in London who only have a permanent place on the Internet.[85]

Furthermore, the idea of causality is usually challenged in network fictions, and reflections on this issue are shown in Alan and Pete's discussion about the fact that both Valentina and Chrissie crossed their paths just minutes before the former committed suicide: 'Is it a coincidence? I don't know. How many people were on that bridge that evening, and how many were feeling low and looking down and thinking, *This is it for me?*'[86] Many networked novels begin with a traumatic event that 'shatters a Western protagonist's ordered world, connecting multifarious people and motivating their various journeys through the narrative action'.[87] In Grant's novel, this disruption originates in Valentina's death, which powerfully affects Alan's and Pete's lives. Focusing on a traumatic incident that distresses originally unrelated people might evoke feelings of chaos and paralysis. Nevertheless, what *A Stranger City* suggests is that these traumatic episodes are part of 'a continuum with past histories of invasion, destruction and corruption'.[88]

Thus, globality, understood as 'human interconnection, causality, temporality, social space',[89] also characterises this relational genre. Human interdependence is fostered in Grant's novel through all the characters' networking at different moments of the narration. As Alan mentions, in 'this atomised London – they were all chained together, part of its vast invincibility'.[90] This mainly revolves around the figures of Valentina and Chrissie: all the characters are impacted in one way or another by Valentina's disappearance and/or the viral phenomenon of Chrissie in the media; most of them meet Chrissie at some point in the novel; and all of them feel exiled in a country that is making it increasingly clear to them that the UK is not their home. In the end, the focus on vulnerability and/or exposure to the wound, which was examined in the previous section as a source of individual and collective fragmentation, suggests at the same time that one is always connected to others[91] and that vulnerability thus becomes inherent to our relational nature.

[84] Grant (2019a), 33.

[85] Grant (2019a), 60.

[86] Grant (2019a), 44.

[87] Mousoutzanis (2016), 11.

[88] Mousoutzanis (2016), 9.

[89] Barnard (2009), 208.

[90] Grant (2019a), 29.

[91] Butler and Athanasiou (2013).

Fragmented and Relational Figures: The Representation of Immigrants

A key mechanism displayed by Grant to bring together fragmentation and relationality in her text relates to the way in which she reflects the figure of the immigrant as an emblem of the contradictions between rupture and union reigning in the era of Brexit. As was mentioned in the introduction, many BrexLit novels have been said to leave behind the points of view and experiences of 'the millions of European migrants living and working in the UK',[92] thus implying 'a dominant Anglocentric focus despite the fact that Britain's departure from the EU has impacts far beyond the British isles and on millions of other lives'.[93] This aspect both echoes and promotes the marginalisation of these citizens living and working in the UK.[94] Berberich has even argued that when Brexit novels point out these marginalising and 'Othering' practices, they often do so through 'minor characters, confined to walk-on parts as Latvian cleaners or Romanian plumbers'. Moreover, 'they are often used by the writers to show that the discontent of more major – and British – characters in the novels is linked to migration'.[95] In this regard, Veličković claims in her explanation of the construction of the category of 'Eastern European' that there is a long 'history of stereotypical representations and Othering of Eastern Europe'.[96] In particular, she has revealed how the figure of the Eastern European migrant tends to be either silenced or relegated to the narrative margins, thus 'reinforcing stereotypes about both the new migrants as scapegoats for Britain's unresolved social and historical ills as well as its "left behind" people as narrow and racist'.[97] Applying these notions to *A Stranger City*, what makes it distinctive among other BrexLit works is Grant's interest in giving a voice to European citizens living through Brexit and her attempts to contextualise this episode within not only Britain's imperial past but also other historical events where racism and hate led to devastation.

It has already been highlighted that all the characters, with the exception of Detective Pete Dutton, are immigrants or subsequent generations of immigrants into Britain. In particular, the two interrelated female protagonists show the double face of the immigration phenomenon in the 21st century and resolve that there are different categories of immigrants. Valentina being an illegal Eastern European immigrant in opposition to Chrissie, a legal European immigrant, relates to their different fates. When this young nurse arrives in London amid the Brexit controversy, she meets a wide spectrum of immigrants, which makes her reflect on the materiality and purposes of passports: 'a European passport, … she had been born with one and could marry a million guys, take her pick, just because she had that maroon-coloured book so she could go anywhere instead of being stuck on this tight little island which is how everyone at home used to feel and now the shoe was on the other foot'.[98] At the

[92] Berberich (2023), 6.

[93] Berberich (2023), 8.

[94] Berberich (2023), 9.

[95] Berberich (2023), 35.

[96] Veličković (2019), 2.

[97] Veličković (2019), 13.

[98] Grant (2019a), 150.

beginning, she does not value her passport that much, as 'she had been born with one',[99] in contrast to other characters, like Marco[100] or Francesca's grandparents,[101] who are perfectly conscious that 'without the prop of a passport a person is a disembodied ghost'.[102] In fact, it is this passport, as well as her status as an Anglo-Saxon immigrant, that provides her with a privileged position. This advantaged status is recognised by Pete, who admits his good fortune at being born in a more privileged part of the world: 'He had a nationality, he could prove it, everything was in that. Just an accident that he was born on the Surrey side of the Thames and not in the middle of a war. He had no idea who he would be without a passport'.[103]

As the narration progresses, Chrissie becomes more aware of the hierarchies that society imposes on immigrants according to their legal position. For example, her Romanian boyfriend Yousef is deported because of his illegal status, while her Jamaican flatmates, who decide to go back home at the end of the narrative, try to look as European as possible in order to be socially accepted.[104] What Grant tries to unveil, through, for instance the attack suffered by Marco, is that the racist attitudes behind Brexit go beyond owning a passport or being born in the UK. It is Chrissie who tells Marco, 'That's what's happening to all of them. And look what happened to you, born here. What was it they called you? … Racially motivated'.[105] This episode shows that, in the end, she learns to identify the xenophobic mechanisms underlying some of the rationale for Brexit.

Contraposed to Chrissie is Valentina. Other illegal immigrants in the novel are given the chance to leave the country, but she is not. And the same happens with her voice; even though her disappearance acts as the guiding thread in the novel, she is denied a voice of their own, becoming some kind of ghost, an absence/presence in Derridean terms,[106] whose identity is constructed and reconstructed in the narrative *via* a deconstruction process. Numerous comments throughout the novel allude to this missing woman's lack of uniqueness, such as, for example, the one Rob makes after watching Alan's documentary: 'People were specific, she wasn't'.[107] The fact that Alan and Pete constantly highlight the contradiction that she seemed 'to be a person he could very easily know, yet nobody knew her'[108] alerts us to the fact that the figure of Valentina has a strong collective meaning in the narrative. She is deprived of her individuality when she is buried in a coffin with the number DB27 on it, meaning that 'she was the twenty-seventh dead body we pulled from the river last year. … We're all a set of numbers one way or the other: National Insurance, credit cards,

[99] Grant (2019a), 150.

[100] Grant (2019a), 150.

[101] Grant (2019a), 210.

[102] Grant (2019a), 210.

[103] Grant (2019a), 304.

[104] Grant (2019a), 152.

[105] Grant (2019a), 250.

[106] Derrida (1978).

[107] Grant (2019a), 177).

[108] Grant (2019a), 47.

bank details, …, but at least we've got names. She had one, don't forget that, we just don't know what it was'.[109] Pete further emphasises that her case is not unique since 'there are unidentified bodies all over the place, washed up on the coast mainly, in a state of decomposition. There are probably hundreds of unclaimed bodies'.[110] Readers are shown the stark reality of the unknown mass of immigrants who live in extremely vulnerable conditions and how our societies do not grant them any individuality or value. Therefore, Grant echoes Butler's reflections on the criteria according to which some lives are liveable and grievable in our societies whereas others are not: 'Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, what *makes for a grievable life*?'[111] Butler contends that the social reinforcement to mourn some victims and to forget about mourning others has caused the appearance of a national sense of identity, like the one that prevailed in the months leading up to Brexit, based on the exclusion of others. The other is 'dehumanized' and 'This derealization of the "Other" means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral'.[112]

The spectrality that hovers over Valentina's case acquires complex meanings when it comes to analysing Grant's depiction of Eastern European immigrants. The fact that the leading figure is 'absent' within this polyphonic narration seems to be a strategy to make visible the lack of voice that this sector still has in Brexit narratives. This is made clear when, in the conversation quoted above, Alan reminds Pete that Valentina had a name, it is just that they do not know what it was. The whole novel revolves around the search for this woman's difference, her identity, her name and history, which suggests that Grant wants to contribute to the denunciations of critics such as Zygmunt Bauman, Judith Butler, Sarah Ahmed concerning the silencing, strangeness and demonisation assigned to the figure of the foreigner and the immigrant in our societies.[113] Ahmed has defined this 'stranger danger' as the tendency that 'produces the stranger as a figure … which comes then to embody that which must be expelled from the purified space of the community, [and] the purified life of the good citizen', turning the stranger into 'a figure of the unknowable'.[114] Similarly, following Ana Belén Martínez-García, who draws on Homi Bhabha's theories about colonial haunting,[115] 'haunting voices from the dead, of whom the migrants drowned or the left-behind of migration are examples, may impact characters and audiences alike.'[116] Grant achieves this in her narrative by depicting a set of characters whose lives intersect because of the haunting presence of this female immigrant.

Although Grant's attempts at giving visibility to Eastern European experiences of migration must be acknowledged, there are some textual contradictions that suggest that society needs to take more action to ensure that the post-referendum literature manages to give an individual voice to minorities. Pete, the detective in charge of

[109] Grant (2019a), 11.

[110] Grant (2019a),42.

[111] Butler (2004) 20, emphasis in the original.

[112] Butler (2004), 33–34.

[113] Ahmed (2004); Butler (2006); Bauman (2016).

[114] Ahmed (2000), 22.

[115] Bhabha (1994).

[116] Martínez-García (2022), 225.

Valentina's case, is possessed by her intriguing disappearance to the extent that he feels she is his property, as observed when he thinks: 'It was his river. Now she was its property and so she was also his. … She lodged herself inside him. She had become a part of his life. … And was it disloyalty to his wife? How could you two-time a living woman with a dead one?'[117] The fact that the only 'pure' English character in the novel appropriates Valentina's experience in these obsessive terms can imply, first, a patriarchal model of domination over the figure of the Eastern European woman and, second, that the Western model of dominating the Other is still the most prevalent pattern of establishing relationships between Britons and Eastern European immigrants.

It is positive to see that other Eastern Europeans acquire some relevant roles in the novel, but some stereotypes are still reflected in the narrative. For instance, they are depicted as avoiding dealing with the authorities, as happens when Yousef's flatmates identify Valentina on TV but do not trust the police;[118] Romanian workers are portrayed as 'squat, dark, unfanciable' and unable to speak English;[119] and when Rob looks for plumbers to renovate his bathroom, he is sure to hire Romanians, another common stereotype according to Berberich, without caring much for their legal situation, as he wonders: 'He had no real understanding of their situation, if they were illegal immigrants or if in fact they might be some type of modern slaves. He didn't like to ask. They disturbed him in several ways, their dirty clothes, their smell, their black inexpressive eyes'.[120] In fact, Rob's thoughts illustrate how these Eastern European immigrants disturb him as they represent the Other, the unknown. As has been widely studied in postcolonial and migration studies, Othering practices like those experienced by Rob involve the social, cultural and political exclusion of immigrants and refugees, often on the basis of their race, ethnicity, religion, or national origin, by Western citizens.[121]

In *A Stranger City*, when Western characters have the opportunity to get to know characters from elsewhere more deeply and vice versa, as occurs in the conversation between Alex, the manager of the plumbing group who used to be an engineer in his home country, and Rob, the Western character soon realises that not all immigrants are the same as each of them has a unique immigration story. However, when Grant tries to bring the worlds of these two migrants closer together, it becomes evident that this is not possible; Alex tells Rob that: 'You are nice Englishman, a professor. … You have nothing to fear except random things no one can avoid, just bad luck. … They [the police] start asking questions and … now it is me who is being investigated'.[122] This quotation portrays a world where illegal immigrants are not mixed up with their legal counterparts as, along with the Othering practices described, they possess a different status due to their passports and other social and legal restrictions.

[117] Grant (2019a), 12.

[118] Grant (2019a), 151.

[119] Grant (2019a), 272.

[120] Grant (2019a), 272.

[121] Said (1978); Gilroy (1993); Hall (1997); Ahmed (2004).

[122] Grant (2019a), 275.

Nevertheless, Valentina is not the last element in the social structure of the novel's cosmos, as she is finally given an identity. The deportees are represented as inferior to her, and Alan connects the deportation infrastructure implemented in England to the post-Brexit times they are going through: 'Inside the trains the deportees raised their palms, pleading at the glass. The deportation infrastructure formed a network of cross-hatching across the eternal landscape of England [...]. Across all these solid lines of track were moving towards temporary detention centres and on to airports and sea ferries'.[123] His thoughts compare the perpetuity represented by rural England with the temporary nature of these human beings, transported from one place to another without having any decision-making capacity. They are referred to as a non-concrete mass: 'The deportees were kept locked up now in the hold, the poor wretches. Barbaric [...]. The poor devils were to be transported, not to Australia but back to chemical weapons and nerve gas and aerial bombardment, hiding with your kids in a basement while hell was above your head'.[124] The way Grant depicts these deportees returns us to some of the ideas put forward by Bauman, according to whom today's political class, as exemplified in the post-Brexit period, is approving harsh asylum policies that impede any proximation between immigrants and receiving populations. The fictional recreation of these hundreds of illegal immigrants confined in 'prison ships',[125] attending to so-called 'b/ordering practices,'[126] before being deported to continental Europe is a stark reminder of either the real immigration episodes that have taken place in recent years in the Mediterranean, following the war in Syria, or the British government's policy to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda and their attempts to put people crossing the Channel onto ferries. In this way, the author connects the desire of a large part of the British population to be 'emptied of its unwanted population',[127] ignoring the 'floating concentration camps'[128] on the river, with recent immigration episodes, when individual citizens and the international community have preferred to look the other way to maintain a hierarchy of vulnerable human beings and the borders that separate 'us' from the 'Other.'

Conclusion

A Stranger City can be defined as illustrative of BrexLit attending both to form and meaning. Linda Grant has succeeded in bringing together fragmentation and relationality in her text through her specific treatment of time and her complex portrayal of the figure of the immigrant as well as through the different literary techniques analysed in this article. Also, it has been shown that the novel exemplifies numerous thematic and narratological features of both the aesthetics of the fragment and the relational novel, suggesting that these literary tendencies are not exclusive but go

[123] Grant (2019a), 254.

[124] Grant (2019a), 303.

[125] Grant (2019a), 255.

[126] Van Houtum et al. (2005).

[127] Grant (2019a), 257.

[128] Grant (2019a), 255.

hand in hand when it comes to representing complex periods of crisis such as those derived from Brexit and other recent migration episodes.

Furthermore, Grant moves beyond the BrexLit tendency to look inward and connects the lives of a wide range of EU citizens by means of polyphony and a palimpsestic view of time and space. Accordingly, it is the thematic and aesthetic array of fragmentation and relationality composing Grant's novel that allows her to unfold some commonly silenced perspectives on BrexLit, such as those of Eastern European immigrants. Even though the author's attempts to include the experiences of this group of immigrants still have certain nuances that could be improved in terms of stereotyping and othering practices, *A Stranger City* displays obvious alliances with the anti-racist activism associated with what Vedrana Veličković has identified as 'an emerging trend that would take BrexLit in new directions'.[129] Novels like *A Stranger City* can open the path for a refreshed type of BrexLit 'that moves away from all kinds of stereotypes and opens up other ways of understanding and community'.[130] Only by 'allowing polyvocal narratives to permeate the existing Brexit discourse, not to disrupt it but to add to it,' can the humanities contribute 'to a rethinking of preconceived ideas, and for other perspectives, in some cases deliberately ignored, in others unconsciously sidelined, to be seen'.[131] Therefore, Grant seems to suggest that polyphonic engagement with disasters on a global scale – whether Brexit or migration crises – is a useful tool to foster agency and bring about a sense of global responsibility.

Dulcie Everitt considers that there are two strands of BrexLit: one group of works emphasising the hopelessness of the British nation in the post-referendum era and another group that promotes hope in the construction of an English identity rooted in inclusion and openness to the 'Other'.[132] I would contend that *A Stranger City* belongs to the latter because the vulnerability, fragmentation and sense of rupture evoked leads to the urgent need for relationships and the breaking of hierarchies and borders between migrants and host populations as well as among different groups of migrants themselves. This interrelationship is made explicit in the final paragraph of the novel when the main characters are evoked together, although in different places, in an explicitly relational act:

The sky unites the exhumed body of Valentina Popov, *on her way back to the morgue* for tissue analysis, and Pete Dutton *on his last journey* to the river's mouth, and Alan McBride *driving home* to his wife and daughter, and Francesca in the garden with the baby, *looking up at the jet's white tail*, thinking for the first time that the small domestic gods should be able to save you, that carpets, for example, could actually fly.[133]

This final episode suggests that humans are always changing and in transit, as evinced in the use of verbs and expressions of movement and direction highlighted, yet also connected to each other. Human temporariness, in contrast to the immen-

[129] Veličković (2019), 15.

[130] Veličković (2019), 15.

[131] Berberich (2023), 8.

[132] Everitt (2020), 180.

[133] Grant (2019a), 322, my emphasis.

sity of the universe, is reinforced by the fact that the person travelling on the plane that Francesca is observing is Chrissie leaving London, who simultaneously supports the view of our intrinsic human vulnerability and malleability when she thinks: 'From the air the Thames is a wiggling serpent. It has not always had this shape, it will not in the future. … Like everything, London is a temporary place, a temporary condition'.[134] These words, along with the fact that the different elements of nature are linked together, imply that life will go on in its different forms, just as the Thames has always varied its form throughout history, adapting to the different crises around it. Francesca ends the novel by observing the traces left in the sky by the tail of the plane and, pregnant with her first daughter, she evokes a future in which the only way for life to continue its course is to recognise our unity, fragility and vulnerability, regardless of our origins.

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[134] (Grant 2019a, 321.

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