

CHRISTINE BERBERICH: *Brexit and the Migrant Voice: EU Citizens in Post-Brexit Literature and Culture*

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The UK referendum on Brexit in June 2016, as well as the events before it and its aftermath, have been widely discussed in global media and have generated numerous reactions within English-language literary production. However, the majority of critical responses to Brexit have emerged from within Britain itself, remaining predominantly monolingual and relatively homogeneous. Just as in the Brexit vote itself, EU migrants residing in the UK have remained silenced, devoid of a chance to contribute to this critical debate. That changed in 2022 with the publication of *Brexit and the Migrant Voice: EU Citizens in Post-Brexit Literature and Culture* (from Routledge's *Popular Culture and World Politics* series), edited by Christine Berberich. This volume brings together authors to share their analyses of cultural responses to Brexit and gives them a voice to share their views about migrants in the UK, their critical responses to Brexit, and their post-Brexit experiences. The collection presents a "literary journey" (7) across the EU from West to East, briefly engaging with Russia, and concluding with an epilogue in the unique geopolitical space of Gibraltar. *Brexit and the Migrant Voice* provides a platform for a variety of disciplines and perspectives, even though the analyses are limited to the available material on Brexit suitable for the purpose of such collection.

While some contributors engage directly with the effects of Brexit, others address it only peripherally, focusing instead on broader issues related to migration and border studies. The book combines analyses of a va-

riety of cultural productions: literary works, media, journalistic commentaries, and social networks; that represent the perspectives of European citizens and "their attitudes, their fears, and their concerns about Brexit" (i). It should be noted that the main focus of this review is the chapters dealing with literary analyses.

Christine Berberich's previous work on British national identity naturally pointed her in the direction of "BrexLit", as coined by Kristian Shaw in his *Brexit: British Literature and the European Project* (2018). Due to her personal experience with migration from Germany to the UK, she chose to emphasize her Europeanness, directing her focus specifically on European migrants in this edited collection. *Brexit and the Migrant Voice* aims to bring together "the topics of Brexit with the situation of EU migrants of various origins living and working in the UK" (6). In the introduction, Berberich describes the chaos in the UK in early October 2021 which resulted from Brexit, affecting the lives of both British nationals and migrants who were denied the opportunity to cast their vote on the decision to Leave or Remain in the Referendum. She advocates for EU migrants who have contributed not only to the UK's economy, but also its national culture, yet have remained silenced, excluded from the "national" discourse.

The volume attempts to change "the dominant Anglocentric Brexit discourse" (9) by offering a multicultural and polyvocal discussion of Brexit that alters the predominantly mono-lingual approach to its

representation. Berberich unites together researchers from various countries, regardless of their language, origin, (in)direct experience with migration, the Referendum, or the pre- and post-Brexit politics in the UK. This gives the reader a look at Britain both from within and from outside. Only a limited number of these studied works exist in translation, which points to Britain's limited interest in the discussion of cultural representations of the difficulties of EU migrant workers. The voices and languages of the analyzed material are allowed to flow freely without mediation, accompanied by contributors' translations into English to ensure clarity and accessibility. Several contributors apply Roxana Patras's term *migrature* in their analyses. This hybrid of "migration" and "literature" refers to literary works centred on migrant characters' efforts to establish themselves in Britain, highlighting their economic insecurity, cultural adaptation, and pursuit of social acceptance as both workers and community members.

In the first contribution, Eugene McNulty looks at the reactions of contemporary Irish writers to Brexit haunted by the history of the island. Although the chapter does not deal with specific migrant troubles, some of the analyzed novels touch upon uneasy encounters of the "natives" with the European others. The chosen literary responses explore the possible negative outcomes of Brexit, such as the conflation of political power, the possibility of a "hard border", or the restriction of the free movement. He emphasizes that there exists a cognitive dissonance or disconnect between the discourse of Brexit and the island of Ireland that often shadows the responses of Irish authors. McNulty adds that the understanding of the Brexit narrative as well as of the whole Anglo-Irish history depends on the position from which it is viewed. A specific discussion of these varied perspectives is present in the short analysis of the novel *Backstop Land* (2019) by Glenn Patterson, David Wheatley's poem "Flags and Emblems" and Naoise Dolan's novel *Exciting Times* (2020). McNulty also deals with

the bordering and potential re-bordering of the island as it has recently concerned authors from both sides. He exemplifies these concerns with the 2015 play *Lally the Scut* by Abbie Spallen. The Irish border is the main concern of two other novels in McNulty's analysis – *The Butchers* (2020) by Ruth Gilligan and *Country* (2018) by Michael Hughes. The chapter views the potential re-bordering through a transnational lens, placing the works within a broader European context.

In her own chapter, Christine Berberich talks about the representation of EU migrants in contemporary British BrexLit originally written in English. She names only a few examples as a complete list of currently available Brexit-related fiction would be too long. The examples include Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016), which was the first direct reaction to the EU Referendum. It was followed in 2017 by Amanda Graig's *The Lie of the Land*, Mark Billingham's *Love like Blood*, David Boyle's *The Remains of the Way*, Douglas Board's *Time of Lies*, and Antony Cartwright's *The Cut*, and later by bestselling authors such as Jonathan Coe, Ian McEwan or Linda Grant. Berberich names the Leave-supporting media as the cause of the "Othering" of EU migrants living and working in Britain. According to the author, the migration to the UK was misused by the Leave campaign to demonize EU citizens and blame them for the housing shortage, the almost dysfunctional National Health Service, the increased crime rates etc. These marginalizing and "othering" tendencies are, thus, present in many Brexit novels written in English. Smith's *Autumn* evokes the ugly mood in post-Referendum Britain full of anti-immigrant sentiments. Other novels use European characters to reaffirm stereotypes and clichés. Berberich shows that EU migrants in contemporary BrexLit are underrepresented, function primarily as static minor characters, and are often marginalized in the binary dichotomy of us versus them. To represent this mentality, Berberich analyses John Lancaster's novel *The Wall* (2019), which can be read as both "a response to, and a logical development of,

contemporary Brexit politics” (41) and opens the question of who should actually be considered a migrant and the “Other”. According to Berberich, this novel has a profound contribution to the understanding of Brexit, as it can put the reader into the position of the emigrant. The chapter calls for a wider representation of Brexit and its effects not only on Britain, but on millions of people of other backgrounds affected by it within a wider European context.

Helena Carrapico examines the everyday lives of European minority groups in post-Brexit Britain, with a special focus on the Portuguese community. She deals with the legal, political, and emotional impact Brexit has had on Portuguese migrants in the UK. However, due to the limitations of Portuguese literary production on this topic, Carrapico assesses the legal status of Portuguese migrants using academic literature and media, specifically the expat Facebook group in which the author carried out a study.

Another analysis of non-fictional material is presented by Rosario Arias, who “considers Brexit from the perspective of the Spanish living in the UK” (65). Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s term “contact writing” (2015), Arias studies blog entries, newspaper articles, and opinion pieces that carry the personal experiences of Spanish migrants who go through the process of disorientation. In the final section, she turns to the issues associated with translation of BrexLit into Spanish and other European languages and criticizes its unidirectionality.

In the next chapter, Sara Alessio writes about Italian migrature and the effect Brexit has had on the rising Euroscepticism in other countries. Alessio attempts to set some defining characteristics of two macro-categories of works engaging with Brexit and its aftermath. These two categories are political fiction and more intimate, psychological fiction. However, the characteristics are rather vague and include general features such as recurring themes, embracing the immigrant’s point of view, Brexit in a wider framework of global phenomena, the London setting, etc. Based

on these attributes, Alessio selects three recently published and still untranslated works for her case studies: Cristina Marconi’s *Città Irreale* (Unreal cities, 2019) as intimate, Alberto Prunetti’s *108 metri: The New Working Class Hero* (108 meters: The new working class hero, 2018) as political, and Marco Varvello’s *Brexit Blues* (2019) as hybrid. Although not all these texts relate directly to Brexit, the in-depth analyses and careful selection of appropriate quotations uncover the commonalities between Italian migrature and British BrexLit. The author recognizes Brexit as just another event in a series of phenomena on a global scale.

Christoph Ehland’s chapter scrutinizes the political commentaries of Jochen Buchsteiner, a London correspondent for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. These articles map the changing attitudes in British politics towards EU and immigration from a distinct German perspective.

The key issue in the contribution by Jopi Nyman is the Finnish responses to Brexit. Although most of this chapter deals with journalism and social media, two brief creative cultural responses to Brexit are analyzed in the end, a fairy tale for adults and a humorous blog post. Like some of the previous contributors, Nyman draws on the ideas of Sara Ahmed together with concepts like bordering, rebordering, or culture of conviviality. He concludes that the Finns see the future affected by Brexit rather pessimistically.

The next chapter looks at Lithuanian Brexit-related migrature which Irena Ragaišienė examines to see how Eastern European migrants have been othered and racialized. Ragaišienė analyzes literary works written in Lithuanian by three immigrant women writers, Julija Miliūtė, Giedrė Biliotavičiūtė and Kristina Baubinaitė, that deal with a variety of themes ranging from fruit picking and work in the hospitality sector to prejudice, stereotyping, organized crime and modern slavery. Miliūtė’s first autobiographical novel *Emigrantai: Ar braškės virsta ferariais?* (2015; Eng. trans. *Do Strawberries Turn into Ferraris?*, 2020), which deals with general

issues of Lithuanian immigrants in Britain, has been translated into English. According to Ragašienė, the selected texts make a valuable contribution to the expanding international canon of BrexLit. However, their interpretation and analysis could benefit from a narrower perspective and more elaborate conclusion.

Joanna Kosmalka's chapter briefly outlines the history of Polish migration to the UK and then examines a variety of responses dealing with expat life before the Referendum and also after Brexit. In her analysis, Kosmalka looks at literary and non-literary works and focuses on the questions of "migration, isolationism, Euroscepticism, nostalgia for the imperial past and a division of society into globalist and nationalist in Britain" (160). The selected Polish authors, such as Agnieszka Dale and A. M. Bakalar, place Brexit in a wider historical and international context viewing it as a crisis rather than "an awful tragedy" (173). These authors explore how Polish migrants fight their invisibility and constant prejudices and navigate the dynamics of binary identities in British society, being in a position of both insiders and outsiders themselves. Kosmalka ends the chapter by positively emphasizing that some Polish migrant authors have caught the attention of international media, which gives them an opportunity to publicly expose their views and be heard globally.

Roxana Patras completes the trio of female Eastern European voices in the volume. Her chapter deals with Romanian migrature, characterized by nostalgia for the homeland and hard labor done for little money in a foreign country. She discusses key themes and recent developments and advocates for the term BrexLit to encompass not only texts written in English, but also those in other languages that have the potential to depict Brexit from a certain distance. Patras analyzes two novels and one collection of short stories: Ioana Baetica Morpugo's *Imigranții* (Immigrants, 2011), Mihai Buzea's *Gastarbeiter* (2017) and Ioana Scoruș's *Freud Museum* (2019). As the years of publication

suggest, the works represent three different moods in the society which corresponds to the structure of Patras's chapter: pre-Brexit, during Brexit (Brexit diaries), and post-Brexit. The authors present an array of migrant characters with their own deep emotions and psyche which is often missed in British BrexLit. Similarly as the previous two contributors, Patras examines how the selected Romanian authors confront and challenge the stereotypes often associated with Eastern European migrant workers.

The last chapter takes the reader to Russia; in this short contribution, the Moldavian literary scholar, poet, and translator Ivan Pilchin briefly analyzes four different voices of Russian political commentators reacting to Brexit.

The concluding remarks of the collection belong to M. G. Sanchez, a renowned Gibraltar writer who has resided in the UK for a long time. His gloomy but poetic epilogue touches upon the stability and continuity of one's identity and existence, a topic remarkably important against the backdrop of Brexit and the growing hostility associated with it. Sanchez contemplates the notion of contested territories and transfers it to the English context to represent how the non-English inhabitants in his hometown are being marginalized and pushed aside.

Some of the analyses address texts that depict more general issues of the lives of expatriates in Britain, while others focus on specific reactions to Brexit. The volume also incorporates contributions that engage with cultural productions predating the Referendum, depicting the events that eventually led to it. The collection consists of diverse interdisciplinary chapters with insightful research objectives related to the life of European migrants in the UK, but some contributions appear superficial and lack deeper critical engagement with the broader sociocultural context, especially for a reader unfamiliar with the issues of European migration to the UK and the effects of Brexit. Some chapters would benefit from more detailed analysis or larger corpora of studied works. However, rather than criticism, this should be seen as

encouragement for further research in this area, which is greatly needed.

A significant number of BrexLit works have overlooked the millions of individuals profoundly affected by Brexit, assessing the event solely through a British lens, representing the British and their problems, concerns, and reactions. However, post-Brexit Britain should seek answers beyond its own borders within a broader European context that encompasses diverse voices and experiences. That is emphasized in *Brexit and the Migrant Voice* which stresses that Brexit has severely impacted not only Britain and its citizens, but also individuals of a wide range of nationalities, including migrants from EU

countries, all of whom should be represented in the critical discourse surrounding this event. Christine Berberich repeatedly mentions that the collection is not intended to disrupt, challenge, or undermine the existing Brexit discourse, but rather to contribute to it, enrich it, and offer alternative perspectives that may provoke a rethinking of certain preconceived notions.

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