‘Eastern Europeans’ and BrexLit

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Abstract

This article examines the representations of ‘Eastern European’ migration in contemporary BrexLit, focusing on Adam Thorpe’s Missing Fay (2017), Amanda Craig’s The Lie of the Land (2017), Carla Grauls’ Occupied (2012), Andrew Muir’s The Session (2015) and Agnieszka Dale’s short stories. Drawing on Paul Gilroy’s work on postcolonial melancholia, it addresses the journal’s second theme of (post)colonial paranoia and looks at how the representations of Eastern European migrants oscillate between familiar stereotypes and an unsettling of them. It shows how the arrival of Eastern Europeans and the rising Brexodus of their ‘cheap labour’ enable us to reflect on the health of the nation – something is, indeed, rotten in post-Brexit Britain – as well as to address a number of unresolved legacies of empire that underpin the Brexit crisis.

Keywords: ‘Eastern Europeans’; migration; Brexit; BrexLit; Britain; stereotypes.

We closed the borders, folks, we nailed it.

No trees, no plants, no immigrants.

No foreign nurses, no Doctors; we smashed it.

We took control of our affairs. No fresh air.

No birds, no bees, no HIV, no Poles, no pollen.

From Jackie Kay, “Extinction” (2019)

Introduction

In 2017, Guardian journalist John Harris asked a timely question: “if eastern Europeans leave Britain after Brexit, what happens?” (2017, n.p.). Harris visits Peterborough and Wisbech in East Anglia and interviews business owners and workers in the UK’s agricultural and food processing sector that heavily depends on flexible eastern European labour. He juxtaposes the realities of food rotting in the fields with an almost utopian post-Brexit vision of British workers returning to these jobs, despite his conversations with the leave-voting locals who acknowledge that “most UK-born people wouldn’t be interested in the kind of jobs that might
This vision, or better, an illusion, was recently espoused by Home Secretary Priti Patel and the government’s new immigration policy. Patel suggested that “businesses ought to enlist the 8 million ‘economically inactive’” British people to fill in labour shortages after Brexit (qtd. in Mason and O’Carroll 2020, n.p.). Proposed changes to the immigration system also reportedly stipulate that “UK borders will be closed to non-skilled workers and all migrants will have to speak English”. It will be more difficult for self-employed and low-skilled workers, such as Polish plumbers or Romanian builders, to come into the UK without a job (Mason and O’Carroll 2020, n.p.). These “newly” arrived Europeans have been predominantly represented in recent British literature and culture as the unskilled manual labour from the expanded EU: With a poor command of English and audibly Other with their strong accents, they are willing to do the low-paid jobs that British people won’t do, and they are willing to work for lower wages – in short, they are portrayed as an economically useful but disturbing presence on UK shores.

As I have shown in Eastern Europeans in Contemporary Literature and Culture (2019), such literary examples are numerous and depressingly similar – ‘Eastern Europeans’ are builders, plumbers, agricultural workers, nannies, au pairs, care workers, trafficked and exploited women in need of rescuing and educating, unruly and sexist men (Veličković 2019). They frequently appear as token characters or a minor “exotic” addition to the narrative. I was recently mistaken for a Polish gardener as I was tidying my own front garden by a white British passer-by who was attempting a conversation and wanted to know where my accent was really from. Indeed, it is increasingly difficult not to reflect on the peculiarities of this lived experience and (un)belonging as an ‘Eastern European,’ even when one writes about literary representations, because those are the parameters according to which ‘Eastern Europeans’ are knowable in the cultural imaginary. The category ‘Eastern European’ is a construction and the long history of stereotypical representations and Othering of Eastern Europe and the Balkans has been the object of numerous academic studies (Wolff 1994; Todorova 1997; Goldsworthy 1998; Kovačević 2008). As a result of the EU’s enlargement in the 21st century, many of those ‘Eastern Europeans,’ young and old, educated and less educated, privileged and less privileged, made their way to Britain, making the most of their freedom of movement as EU citizens given the British government’s decision not to impose transitional work restrictions.

In this article, I consider the ways in which the abovementioned stereotypical representations of ‘Eastern Europeans’ have made their way into recent “BrexLit” (Shaw
As Kristian Shaw argues, BrexLit encompasses works that “anticipate the thematic concerns such as anxieties surrounding cultural infiltration, and a mourning for the imperial past” as well as those that “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” (2018, 18). I extend Shaw’s definition by placing these representations at the forefront of BrexLit and show how the figure of an Eastern European migrant, when represented in this particular way, exposes unresolved anxieties around a presumed British cultural superiority, race and empire. I also include here a few, but promising, responses from Polish British writers who interrogate the problematic staleness of these representations and take them into a new and much needed direction.

**Invading ‘Eastern Europeans’**

Dubravka Ugrešić observes astutely that the Polish plumber is the new “colonial bogeyman” or “the new European phantom […] who wends his way around Europe in overalls, with a wrench, terrifying the local working class” (2011, 232). Alongside numerous scaremongering tabloid press titles about ‘Eastern Europeans’ taking over jobs, benefits, school and NHS spaces, eating swans and soiling public spaces, another example that I often cite further highlights anxieties around their presence on British shores, even several years before the UK’s referendum on EU membership. It is the question that the Rochdale’s pensioner Gillian Duffy asked then prime minister Gordon Brown in 2010: “all these Eastern Europeans what are coming in, where are they flocking from?” (Veličković 2019, 35-69). Replace ‘Eastern Europeans’ with German or French and it would be clear where they are coming from, or replace ‘Eastern Europeans’ with Muslim or refugees and the liberal alarm bells would certainly not fail to ring as they did in the case of ‘Eastern Europeans.’ As Larry Wolff (1994) has shown, ‘Eastern Europe’s’ indeterminate and shifting geographical borders are a legacy of the cultural mapping of Europe since the Enlightenment and the resulting imaginary and real divisions are so embedded even in the contemporary perceptions. Put aside Labour’s failure to re-connect with its traditional working-class voters, exemplified by both Duffy’s concern about immigration and Gordon Brown’s description of her as “bigoted” (2010, n.p.), and the dangers of homogenising the white working-class revolt in opposition to multiculturalism and immigration, these racist sentiments should not remain unchallenged. While Eastern Europe has always been seen as an exoticized or threatening unknown before
and after the Cold War, despite Britain’s much longer history of migration from different parts of Europe, such as the Jewish exodus from ‘Eastern Europe’ 1881–1914, to name only one example, Duffy’s anti-European sentiments were mobilised again in 2016 in the service of English nationalism. Just before the British referendum on EU membership, Duffy appeared on *BBC Newsnight*, lamenting how “we’ll never get England back to how it was” and expressing her concerns about “losing our English identity.” “I love being English and I don’t want to be a European”, she concluded (Duffy 2016, n.p.). This deeply melancholic response and attachment to an assumed, past English greatness with its parochial sense of identity (why cannot one be both English and European?) carries all the elements of Paul Gilroy’s analysis of Britain’s “postimperial melancholia” (2004, 98) and its inability to work through the loss of empire. These melancholic attachments to past imperial greatness continue to shape contemporary attitudes to migration and strangers across the class spectrum. As Gilroy notes, “even if today’s unwanted incomers – from Brazil or Eastern Europe – are not actually postcolonials, they may still carry all the ambivalence of the vanished empire with them” (2006, n.p.). I will return to this ambivalence in my below analysis of the perceptions of Eastern Europeans in recent British BrexLit.

Echoing Gilroy’s argument, a number of critics and commentators have emphasized the links between Brexit, migration and empire nostalgia, dispensing these neo-colonial fantasies with factual information. David Olusoga and Kehinde Andrews have criticised the historical amnesia and arrogant hubris that have been a predominant feature of the government’s proposals for potential, post-Brexit free trade deals with African and other Commonwealth nations under the offensive and delusional banner “Empire 2.0”. As Andrews reminds us, while “the leave campaign was based on a yearning for the days when Britannia ruled the waves”, Brexit also provides an opportunity for Britain “to understand its place in the world; a small island desperately reaching out to countries it formerly ruled in order to try to maintain its relevance” (2017, n.p.). Olusoga puts it even more forcefully – former colonies “don’t want to be part of Empire 2.0, any more than most of them wanted to be part of Empire 1.0” (2017, n.p.). It is even more ironic that the former colonial power has been using the language of oppression and liberation in the context of Brexit. Right wing politicians and the populist press, even Boris Johnson, have repeatedly described Brexit as a “victory for democracy” and other European nations were called to “follow the United Kingdom and ‘free [them]selves from the shackles of the dying European Union’” (Bell 2017, 52; my emphasis).
Other critics focused on exploring how experiences of ‘Eastern Europeans’ fit within a wider history of race and migration in Britain. Gary Younge made an important investigation into how prejudice and stereotypes have affected Eastern European migrants after Brexit in his *Eastern Europeans in Brexitland* (BBC, 2016) (Veličković 2019, 154-157). Anshuman Mondal is one of a handful of scholars to note that “certain continuities in discourse and rhetoric between arguments against EU migration and post-war immigration from formerly colonised countries” (2018, 85). He argues that “anti-EU immigration sentiment […] principally directed at obtrusively white migrants from Eastern Europe” was “a displaced proxy for still embedded antipathies towards non-white migration from outside the EU” (86). Mondal is right to point out that their whiteness has provided an outlet for the many unresolved tensions of the past couched in the assumption that one cannot be racist towards ‘Eastern Europeans’ as they are white. In the same edited collection as Mondal, George Szirtes also writes about the dormant “demons” of empire that had been “successfully suppressed after Notting Hill in 1958” but were now resurfacing through a new outlet in the referendum campaign (2018, 204). Indeed, in the aftermath of the referendum, both EU and Black and ethnic minority British citizens were being told to go back where they came from (Veličković 2019, 140). However, Mondal fails to note that not all ‘Eastern Europeans’ are “obtrusively” white (think about the Eastern European Roma and other ethnic minorities) and ‘Eastern Europeans’ whiteness does not occupy the same position. They are constructed as not-quite white or not-quite European as their Western counterparts. Using Etienne Balibar’s notion of “racism without race” (1997, 23) or cultural racism and building on the existing work on the shifting racial designations of ‘Eastern Europeans’ (Wolff, 1994; Goldsworthy 1998, Kovačević 2008), I have discussed elsewhere how Western representations of ‘Eastern Europeans’ range from an exaggerated whiteness (recalling a distant Dracula imagery) to dirty whiteness (an emphasis on poverty and outdated clothes, for example; see Veličković 2010, 2019). I have also looked at the complexity of ‘Eastern European’ self-identifications with whiteness via the claims to racial/cultural closeness to Europe and the unresolved legacy of racism in Eastern Europe, as exemplified in the conflation of Romanians with the Roma in recent British journalistic and media accounts of migration from the expanded EU (Veličković 2019). In homogenising narratives of ‘Eastern Europeans’ these intersections and differences are often ignored so it is important to highlight them.
“Now let’s see if you can work like a Pole” (Craig 2017, 69): ‘Eastern Europeans’ in BrexLit

In what follows, I concentrate on works that either anticipate or directly engage with the anxieties surrounding recent EU migration. Recent literary representations often tend to reinforce stereotypes about ‘Eastern Europeans’, even when they try to deconstruct them. Adam Thorpe’s novel *Missing Fay* (2017) is set in pre-Brexit Lincoln, which would later record the UK’s highest Brexit vote with other parts of Lincolnshire (*BBC News* 2006, n.p.). The characters are loosely connected by the disappearance of the local young girl Fay and a sense of claustrophobia, alienation and small town mentality permeates the novel. As documented by Tim Samuels in his two BBC documentaries, *The Poles are Coming!* (2008) and *The Great Big Romanian Invasion* (2014), East Anglia and Lincolnshire saw a particular increase in ‘Eastern European’ migration due to their relative proximity to Stansted and Luton airports (with new, cheap flights from the expanded EU) and the availability of picking, packing and factory work. The arrival of ‘Eastern Europeans’ in the novel is registered both as a generic threat with racist graffiti “Paedos go bak to Poland” (Thorpe 2017, 28) appearing in town, and through its Romanian character Cosmina, who is a care worker. Howard, a retired steel worker who plays pub-crawl Monopoly, often has to listen to the anti-immigrant sentiment from his friends Ian, Don and Gary who complain about too many “Polacks or Lithanians” and “whatnot” (71, 72). Howard, who is a survivor of the Kindertransport, seems to possess the knowledge that not all ‘Eastern Europeans’ are the same, but does not challenge the racism of his friends out loud. He quietly observes the changing demographics of the town, but is far from nostalgic for the old days. We learn that he “quite likes smoked sausage and pickled Herring out of the Baltic” (reference), rather than object to ‘Eastern European’ grocery shops springing up across the town. As a Jewish child refugee, he recognizes that the current calls to save “the nation from intruders” and “floods of immigrants” (56) are part of a much older discourse, but the novel does not explore further potential affinities between the new migrants and those who were once fleeing persecution.

The novel’s Romanian character is all too predictable. We are introduced to Cosmina after she has a bike accident near the possible place of Fay’s disappearance. She is treated by a doctor from New Delhi who is curious to find out about Romania and whether she is “ever confronted here in England by racist types” (82). Cosmina disagrees and is presented as another, typically racist Eastern European. She notices a photo of the doctor’s mixed-race
child who she describes as “a bit like a Roma kid but cleaner” (83), and her perception of Roma people from her home village as thieves with filthy children (80) are equally racist. Ironically, when she is wrongly accused of attempting to steal Nurse Bronwen’s bag in the care home where she works, Bronwen sees in her a thief and a Roma (102). Cosmina tries to explain that she is Hungarian Romanian, but this matters little even to the Spanish matron Esperanca, who, in the end, refuses to give Cosmina any more shifts (103) and calls her a “stupid whore of a Romabitch” (105). The only character who is trying to get close to Cosmina is a second-hand bookshop owner Mike, whose mother is in the care home suffering from dementia. However, this proximity is achieved through what Mita Banerjee describes as a fascination with ‘Eastern Europeanness’ as the “new exotic” and “the new erotic” (2007, 317). Cosmina is the first Romanian Mike has ever met; he sees her as “unbelievably foreign and glamorous” (Thorpe 2017, 220) and finds her name incredibly attractive (209). He becomes obsessed with her and reduces her to sexual allure. While Mike is more welcoming that others, he displays a patronising attitude to Cosmina and the Romanians:

We’re all as one in Europe: he’s looked it up, and in January 2014 – in less than two years – Romanians won’t even have to have a work permit. They’ll be a proper part of the family. (193)

There is a sense that Europe is ‘out there’ and Eastern Europe is an even greater unknown, generalised as a poor place without prospects through brief snapshots of Cosmina’s parents back in Romania (206) and Mike assertions that Cosmina and “her country is very poor“ (223) and having to deal with “endless struggles” (226). This is a familiar stereotype of post-communist transition as an eternal predicament (Horvat and Štiks 2015, 16) and of poor but sexy Eastern Europe, to use Agata Pyzik’s excellent phrase (2008). As expected, Mike also wants to help Cosmina to improve her English and suggests “some excellent books” from his bookshop (Thorpe 2017, 223). In the end, no one learns or benefits from these encounters and we can read this representation as a paralysis of the imperialist imagination.

Cosmina’s journey to the UK is told through familiar tropes of migrant hardship. Although she has a university degree, she has to start from the bottom “in the fields cutting cabbages and broccoli all day with the Poles and Latvians under Ted the gangmaster (who wasn’t bad, when he wasn’t eyeing her bottom)” (102) because of her poor command of English. She shares a flat in Lincoln with Anca from Timisoara and tries to save enough
money to “go to journalism classes, to make contacts, to push upwards”, but she remains stuck in low-paid jobs. In the care home, she is given “a lot of responsibilities, but she is treated as if she is slow and stupid” (81). Rather than moving upwards, her only option after she is sacked from the care home is to consider doing an even worse job with the 2 Sisters Food Group fish packing in Grimsby (106). Her future uncertain, she dreams of going home and exits the narrative.

A similarly tokenistic representation of ‘Eastern Europeans’ can be found in Amanda Craig’s *The Lie of the Land* (2017), described as a “novel that exposes the fault lines in post EU referendum Britain” (Alfree 2017, n.p.). The novel explores the divisions between the rich and the poor, urban and rural areas in contemporary Britain, as it follows a dysfunctional middle-class family who must relocate from London to a fictional village of Trelorn in Devon, having lost their jobs in the recession and no longer being able to afford a house in London. Quentin and Lottie Bredin’s marriage is in crisis and so is the country. Their son Xan manages to find a zero hours job at the Humbles pie factory, “the only big employer in Trelorn” (Craig 2017, 121), where he works among the dissatisfied locals and ‘Eastern European’ migrants. Some of the locals see them as hard working and useful, but also as a threat. Xan’s supervisor Maddy cannot decide whether to scapegoat them for their apparent readiness to work long hours and for lower wages or for coming to take what ‘rightfully’ belongs to the locals:

[A] little British baby is what they want, and benefits. […] I’m not saying they’re not good workers, but nobody does this job for long. Free health care, child benefit, who wouldn’t jump at it? Plenty of little Polish kids in local schools’. Xan doesn’t like this kind of talk, which sounds pretty much like racism, but he knows nothing. (74)

There is a strong sense of being ‘left behind,’ an easy byword for the north-south divide that, instead of attempting to account for the long-term inequalities, stagnating wages and deindustrialisation, is directed at scapegoating the migrants. Maddy complains about the lack of school and social places and tells him that at the next election they’ll vote to leave Europe and for “UKIP because nobody else cares” (160). Xan, who is mixed-race, is uneasy about the anti-immigrant rhetoric, “but out here he can, reluctantly, see that it might be different” (160). If he is then only beginning to understand the divisions of contemporary Britain, his relationship to migrant ‘Eastern European’ workers is rather problematic. As insert character name in *Missing Fay*, Xan is fascinated with ‘Eastern European’ women in the factory who
are “pretty, slim and he suspects Polish, for they have those smooth, wedge-shaped faces, heavily made up. Even in overalls, they are seriously fit” (72). He has a brief fling with a Polish girl Katya who lives in a cramped house with other fellow migrants. Xan romanticises the struggles of the Polish and their willingness to live “in what would be slum conditions if they weren’t so scrupulously clean” (122) in order to save money. He admires the Poles’ “almost military sense of how to behave”, clean, cook and make bread (123), and romanticises their way of creating a sense of home in the communal space of the tiny kitchen “painted with bright stencils and pots of herbs in the window”. He finds “the immigrants’ willingness to not only work for the minimum wage but save from it [as] both impressive and depressing” (211). If the precarious locals bemoan the loss of communal spaces, Xan’s attitude towards ‘Eastern Europeans’ only emphasises his middle-class privilege. There are other passages that read like a liberal Marxist manifesto as Xan learns about the vicious cycle of exploitation:

The Poles not only earn all their income from Humbles, but also rent their cramped and shoddy homes from them [...] They all know that farming work is the worst work of all [...] The work goes to the Romanians and Lithuanians [...] who dream of getting a job at Humbles. Everything to do with food seems to be built on a pyramid of exploitation and unhappiness (210–11).

The novel reveals deeper fractures between the characters as they often feel out of touch with each other, another useful metaphor for Craig to diagnose the nation’s current predicament. Katya feels that the British “don’t want to work hard like Polish people” (122) and is aware that she is also seen as a migrant who is taking “jobs and homes from English people” (210–211). She also fetishizes Xan as the only “black person” she has ever touched and he has to educate her to stop saying “that his skin is smooth like wood” (213). Growing differences between them are further emphasized by Katya’s objections to Xan’s lack of cooking skills and his wasting of money on ready meals, while Xan does not appreciate her complete lack of interest in literature and reading, and their relationship breaks down.

The last time we hear of Katya is when Maddy informs Xan that she has left the pie factory. She is on her upward journey opening a Polish bakery at Trelorn and outrunning the Brits. Katya is too one-dimensional (exoticised, uncultured, racist, only interested in making money) and ‘Eastern European’ men are also a generalised and threatening presence in the novel. They are clearly different to Xan: “larger, tougher, more pale and more male than he,
with their giant sausage-fed muscles, clipped heads” (214). The novel abounds in other stereotypical passages about them:

The men have pale, broad faces and small dark eyes; they can look like angry scones until suddenly they smile. They turn their hand to anything: building, joinery, plumbing, electrics, decorating, mechanics [...] most seem to be employed by an especially Big Pole called Arek, who is some kind of master-builder. (123)

The men rarely speak, but are described here and being ‘spoken for’ by Xan. Of course, one is tempted to read these descriptions in the context of the novel’s broader concerns with various class, racial, geographical and other divisions in contemporary Britain. Craig was inspired to write the novel when a local councillor visited her at her doorstep in Devon. He was begging them “to give work to someone he knew” and told her that he was so desperate because “people don’t realise, but in this part of the country we are poorer than Romania” (Kean 2017, n.p.). However, after encountering similar representations of ‘Eastern Europeans’ over and over again, once can also argue that the divisions between the left behind Devonians and the new migrants are only perpetuated by these damaging stereotypes. In this context, I cannot help but think of Chimamanda Adichie’s powerful reflections on the “dangers of the single story” that creates stereotypes and make “one story become the only story” (2019, n.p.). If, let’s say, another ethnic group of people was represented and generalised through such recurring images, it would certainly be considered problematic. Such depictions of ‘Eastern Europeans’ then reveal the unresolved anxieties towards race, migration and belonging in post-imperial, post-Brexit Britain, rather than offering any kind of ‘truthful’ representation. Ugly racism and xenophobia from both sides is a barrier that prevents British and Eastern European workers in the novel from finding any common ground. Xan, the local Devonian poor and the newly arrived Eastern Europeans are all exploited and equally devoid of any political awareness of their own conditions of precarious flexibility and utility in the system. A perfect capitalist tactic that promotes atomisation of individuals rather than collective uniting and leaves very little room for resistance and solidarity. In other words, there is a need for more progressive BrexLit that moves away from the state of the nation novels that offer a diagnosis of the pre- and post-Brexit crisis, but fall short of imagining new solidarities. Whether this also reflects the current state of the Left in Britain and Europe is worth pursuing, but it would require another essay altogether.
Before I move on to recent works that are moving BrexLit and the representations of ‘Eastern Europeans’ in new directions, rather than using them as token characters, I would like to focus on two more examples that reflect this state of paralysis and thread a thin line between stereotyping and caricature – Carla Grauls’ play *Occupied* (2012) and Andrew Muir’s *The Season* (2015). Muir’s play is about the breakdown in communication between a married couple, Lena Bayle, who is Polish, and her English husband Robert, as they are struggling to cope with grief after their son Freddy, a lorry driver, was killed in a traffic accident. Spoken alternately by Lena and Robert, the play raises questions of identity and ownership as we learn that the relationship was uneven from the start. There is a language barrier between them in the beginning and Lena also struggles to come to terms with her newly found otherness in Britain. She feels like a “human alien” and imagines that Robert would have been welcomed and not seen as different if he had been in her land (Muir 2015, 10–11). Lena idealises England as “this tiny country that stood with its head high looking down on most of the world” without questioning its colonial history and thinks that she has found her “prince” (23) in Robert. He is, however, more anxious about their cultural inter-mixing and often patronises her (“she needed this country so that she could realise her potential”, 37). As Lena’s command of English improves, Robert refuses to learn Polish and feels that English was making Lena “more critical” (46). He also does not want her speaking to their son “in a language I don’t feel he needs to know” and marginalises his Polish heritage (“he’s English”, 46). Grief brings them together towards the end of the play, but their identity crises and uneven power relations are far from resolved, as Robert announces that he will look after Lena who is in need of rescuing.

The notion of an identity crisis is also at the heart of Carla Grauls’ Beckettian play *Occupied*. Set in a derelict Victorian public toilet, the play presents a conglomerate of stereotypes about ‘Eastern Europeans’ on almost every page and proves uncomfortable for readers and audiences alike. Tom, an Englishman, has been abducted by the 30-year-old Alex who appears on stage with a copy of the *Daily Mail* announcing the Romanian invasion and occupation of English gardens sheds, abandoned houses and toilets (Grauls 2014, 4). The play references similar tabloid headlines (23, 57), but often fails to challenge them. Alex has a broken-tooth smile and is wearing a dirty tracksuit, a leatherjacket, fur hat and a gold crucifix around his neck (3), conforming to the familiar stereotypes of unruly, Eastern European men with an outdated fashion sense. Alex has been raised on “potatoes and cabbage, beautiful women, drinking, corruption” (14) which creates a reductive image of his country. He was a taxi driver in Romania, but has now come to England to “become rich”
(32) and his other aspiration is to get an English girlfriend, an “English Rose like Kate” who knows that he is “the boss” (33). He wants Tom to teach him about the English life, but just like Alex’s own illusions about England as “the country that has always been a boss and a place where you are supposed to be nice to foreigners” (49), Tom explains that having all the “nice things” (43) that he has will not make Alex happy. The English way of life, he tells Alex, is an empty capitalist dream: “get yourself a flat, a mortgage, gadgets, live on credit, work in a job that profits from others, that’s the English life” (49). The play further enacts anxieties around masculinity, identity, gender and race through Alex’s altercations with Tom, who is bound, gagged, physically assaulted and powerless throughout the play, yet speaks with more knowledge and confidence, despite also feeling empty and suicidal. The play clearly tries to address a number of stereotypes about ‘Eastern European’ but does not quite manage to challenge them successfully. Alex is mistaken for a Roma (to which he strongly objects), a Pole (when he is abused and assaulted in a pub) and a vampire from Bulgaria (34). He is also racist and sexist throughout the play. His crisis of belonging as not capitalist enough and not English enough is never resolved and he remains a repulsive and pathetic caricature as the play ends with his own death and migration as a symbolic death rather than a positive experience – “we the immigrants pull the ropes around our necks because English life is still better here than what we have” (82). If the aim of the play is to foreground the post-communist existentialist crisis in a Beckettian manner, as we learn towards the end that Alex witnessed the Velvet revolution as a boy and saw his mother commit suicide, it does so by falling prey to another stereotype of post-communist transition as “the catching up revolution” (Buden 2010, n.p.).

If Alex is unable to make sense of his alienation and dislocation, the two women in the play, Elena and Andreea, are also in a limbo. Elena is another surreal character reminiscent of Beckett’s Nell from *Endgame*, as she often emerges from the dump scavenging through rubbish for food. She is also an undead ghost of Elena Ceausescu haunting Alex. As expected, Andreea is a young Hungarian-Romanian woman, possibly underage and trafficked as we learn that Alex found her “in a flat on Holloway Road where they take the girls from Eastern Europe” (Grauls 2014, 67). She is begging and stealing in London and is controlled and often abused by Alex. Even though he is unable to escape himself, Tom often offers to become her saviour. If the purpose of Beckett’s plays is to create a profoundly unsettling effect, the characters in this play, who are ‘occupied’ by various sources and are unable to overcome mental and physical slavery, suggest an unsettling co-dependency of post-communist Eastern Europe on the capitalist West and are locked in
stereotypes. As Alex summarises crudely: “Every time Romania stands up, some other fucking country come in and make her his whore. But you see we are part of EU now, we Romanians we can go anywhere, we can have better life and better jobs and much more money” (49). Their experience in the UK in the play shows that this is far from the truth. While Alex imagines towards the end of the play how he will be a car mechanic and Andreea a teacher (80), that alternative future/representation is denied to them. Andreea is a more elusive character and there are hints in the play that she counters Tom’s objectification of her as broken and in need of saving. However, the fact that she is being sexually exploited in order to survive in London suggests that she is, indeed, that “one thing” (52) when it comes to the representations of Eastern European women.

**Conclusion: Where do we go from here?**

So far I have been discussing representations that emphasise lack of understanding and divisions between ‘Eastern Europeans’ and the British, and fall into 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. If we have recently witnessed the Brexodus of real ‘Eastern European’ migrants, although in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic we hear that Romanian fruit pickers are being flown to the UK to help (O’Carroll 2020), in this concluding section I show how recent works by ‘Eastern European’ British writers have halted their untimely exit in literature. Polish British writer Agnieszka Dale is one of them. In her dystopian short story “A Happy Nation”, the narrator literally refuses to leave, even though all the immigrants have gone away and the shops are closing down. She is another ‘Eastern European’ migrant ‘we’ think we know, a certain Krystyna Kowalska from Gdansk whose father resembles Lech Walesa (Dale 2017, 68). While she speaks to, or rather speaks back to, an immigration officer, the story is a wider conversation with her adopted nation. The post-Brexit vision of Britain is one in which holidays now mainly happen in Wales and she is asked to show her ID. She came to Britain during the EU enlargement not for the the benefits or the work possibilities, but “to mix [her] blood” with a Brit who is “one-fifth Spanish. And a little Irish” (70). It is clear that Dale speaks back to a number of stereotypes about ‘Eastern Europeans’ here (vampires, job stealers, trafficked women) as well as about their hosts as her narrator reveals that she still loves it here – “I feel loved, just loved by everyone: neighbors, colleagues, shopkeepers, and maybe that’s why I’m refusing to leave” (67). The story also tackles issues of racial and cultural purity and
historical hierarchy. She is aware of the changing conditions of cultural visibility in Britain and explains the anxieties around ‘Eastern Europeans’ as a visible and audible presence in the 21st-century Britain in the following way:

You don’t like our delikatesy. Not so much the sausages and the bread but more the design of the shop signs. The fonts we use...yes, you can tell we don’t study art and design in schools the way you do in Great Britain. And your signs are great. But how come you don’t mind the Indian corner shops any more, or the Jamaican fruit and vegetable market on a Monday morning? Or Chinatown? Why us? Why me?. (71)

By referencing previous histories of migration, the narrator echoes Gilroy’s argument about today’s unwanted incomers from Eastern Europe carrying all the ambivalence of the vanished empire with them. The narrator suggests that the presence of ‘Eastern European’ white others is disrupting the dominant whiteness and comments on her ability to pass by staying silent or being able to “speak English like a British person now” until they can no longer tell the difference (72). While Brexit is never named in the story, the narrator’s awareness of being perceived as a threat and the references to losing control are clearly a direct critique of nationalism and claims to cultural and racial purity evident in the Leave calls to take back control. Rather than explaining where she is from and who she is, she poses the questions to the officer, and the imaginary collective of the nation: “How would you define British? Do you know who you are? Did you learn about Great Britain in your history classes? The history of colonization? (70). She uses the UK’s White Other ethnic category to gouge a hole in the fortification of post-imperial whiteness after Brexit and carve her own sense of belonging within a new category that she describes as “whitish” (69). The suffix –ish in whitish reminded me of Afua Hirsch’s book Brit(ish), an identity under constant renegotiation and a reclaimed, powerful space. She may not be quite white, but neither is the immigration officer. The story ends with a turning point as it is revealed that the officer who questions her is called “Adam Michalowski, born in Lambeth, White British” (73). While the narrator decides to leave in the end, sensing a more hostile atmosphere from the immigration official, Dale’s story shows that what we are now witnessing in post-Brexit Britain (new racisms, the resurfacing of post-imperial nostalgia) can be better understood within a longer history of race and migration.

Polish British poet Maria Jastrzebska has recently written a blog reflecting on the racism and xenophobia after Brexit and her growing up in England in the late 1950s when she
would be told, alongside her Polish mother, to go back where she came from. She also writes how, as a young Pole, she was empowered by the terms like Black British that made her "feel Britain could be multi-racial, multi-cultural, inclusive, welcoming – where someone like me could be Polish British, somewhere that could be called home" (Jastrzebska 2020, n.p.). That there is a call for new alliances and anti-racist activism is, I hope, an emerging trend that would take BrexLit in new directions.³ In another story from Dale’s collection entitled “What we should feel now,” Brexit is again not mentioned, but the unnamed narrator clearly addresses its affective afterlife – how it felt to her and people around her. The narrator is trying to make sense of different feelings and acts of hostility without being resentful: “because why? Who did what to me? Thugs?” (74). Ethnic and racial markers on both sides are absent – people are just different people and those who were violent to her are denied a voice. Avoiding the “us” versus “them” mindset, she keeps asking people around her: “Do you not like me here?” I ask shopkeepers, doctors, policemen, politicians, and friends. ‘Of course, don’t be silly. We love you. You are like us, part of us, you know” (75). Faced with the realities of food rotting in the fields and an uncertain future, a small antidote to the Brexit crisis and the rise of populism and racism may be a kind of BrexLit that moves away from all kinds of stereotypes and pens up other ways of understanding and community.

Representations of ‘Eastern Europeans’ as economically useful but disposable token characters have limited a deeper engagement with a number of unresolved legacies of empire that underpin the Brexit crisis. The powerful final lines of Dale’s story suggest one way in which the divisions might be repaired and a communal/national ‘we’ imagined otherwise: “We’ll grow new apples together […] and then we’ll eat together. Our apples. Apples that do not rot” (75).

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Notes

1 See also Bayliss. 2017.

2 For an interesting discussion of framing white working class as racist and disconnected from politics see Beider, 2015.

3 For an emerging queer BrexLit see for example Isabel Waidner’s 2019 novel *We Are Made of Diamond Stuff*. Manchester: Dostoevsky Wannabe Originals.