Brexit-Tales from a Divided Country: Fragmented Nationalism in Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut,* Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land*, and Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*

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Master thesis: Literary Studies, Literature in Society: Europe and Beyond

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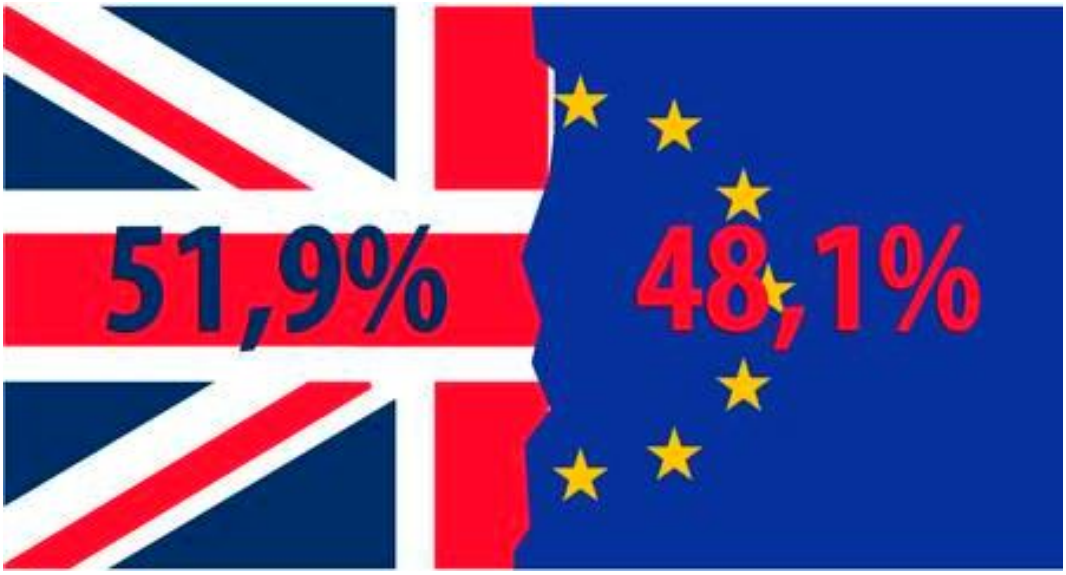
Date: 01-02-2020



(Zaichenko)

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INTRODUCTION

As part of a campaign promise made by then British Prime Minister David Cameron, a referendum on whether or not the United Kingdom should remain part of the European Union was held on 23 June 2016. It was called the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum but is more commonly known as the Brexit referendum. Ultimately, 51.9% of the voters voted that they wished to leave the European Union (Goodwin and Heath). The responses from some of the major British newspaper were as far apart as the voters, ranging from jubilant (Daily Mail Comment) to shocked (Elliott). Some saw this gap not as a result, but as a symptom. Kristian Shaw, who studied the relationship between Brexit and literature observes: “Brexit did not divide the nation, it merely revealed the inherent divisions within society.” (Shaw 16) By its very nature, a referendum will always leave a group of people dissatisfied with the outcome (Runciman 4). During the campaign leading up to the referendum, there were many arguments for and against leaving. Determining what the referendum was really about already caused different interpretations, so much so that Hobolt and Wratil stated in an analysis that was published before the referendum, that “[t]he public is clearly sharply divided in what it considers to be the main issue of the referendum.” This analysis led them to conclude that "the choice between continued membership or Brexit touches upon a number of complex political, economic and identity issues." (Hobolt and Wratil) The importance of identity in the referendum was also highlighted in Hobolt's analysis of the voting behaviour in the referendum. She states that “[t]hose who felt that the EU had undermined the distinct identity of Britain were much more likely to vote to leave, whereas the view that the EU had made Britain more prosperous had a similarly sizeable effect.” (Hobolt 1270) This distinct identity, the fragmented way in which it is constructed, and how this is reflected in literature, will be the focus in this thesis.

Building on the seminal work *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson; Eaglestone argues why the study of culture and literature is so important concerning questions surrounding national and cultural identity. He states that:

> [a] nation is too huge to be a real community in which everyone actually knows each other. Instead, nations are produced in the imagination by concepts, narratives, memories and traditions: that is, through the work of culture. One aspect of culture especially closely linked to national identity, is literature: this is evident in the name of the subject that studies it, 'English'. English specializes in profounder understanding and thought about ideas, stories, feelings, language and so, in this context, supplements and deepens the social sciences. And so literature is an especially useful and appropriate way to address the political arguments about national identity which lie at the heart of Brexit. (Eaglestone, *Introduction* 1)

This connection between literature and national identity makes the novel a relevant place to look for answers to explain some of the unresolved issues surrounding the Brexit referendum, and as a place to start for making sense of a debate that is still ongoing. Beller and Leerssen argue that the study of literature provides an opportunity to study the 'essence' of a nation: "[l]iterary history is thus a form of studying the nation's true character as expressed in its cultural history. Needless to say, notions concerning the nation's essence or character are wholly determined by ingrained and widely-current stereotypes and ethnic images." (Beller and Leerssen 19)

Because of the process of producing a novel, including writing and publishing, the first novels directly addressing Brexit started appearing some time after the referendum (Kelly 77). Shaw has dubbed these novels BrexLit, and defines these as "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 cosmopolitical consequences of Britain's withdrawal." (Shaw 18) Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* and Cartwright's *The Cut* were both published in June 2017, one year after the referendum. Both novels focus on a disconnect between the city and the country, and on opposing views on the state of the nation. *The Lie of the Land* was seven years in the making and very much inspired by the financial crisis (O'Keeffe). However, because of its subjects and its analyses, it is seen as one of the first Brexit novels (Day). *The Cut* was commissioned by Peirene Press to be a Brexit

novel, and its aim is “to build a fictional bridge between the two Britains that have opposed each other since the referendum day.” (Cartwright, *Cut 3*) Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England* was published in November 2018 and can be seen as a state-of-the-nation novel that is a product of the Brexit referendum (Preston). The characters in the novel try to make sense of their country and their fellow citizens.

The Brexit referendum affects the United Kingdom as a whole. The kingdom consists of several national territories, namely England, Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. These territories all have their questions of identity and nationalism. According to Henderson and others: “with almost 85 per cent of the UK electorate, England is politically predominant among the state’s constituent national territories.” (Henderson et al. 188) Their research concluded, “that there is a distinctively English dimension to the debate over the UK’s membership of the European Union (EU).” (Henderson et al. 187) Furthermore, the question of national identity is complicated by the fact that England and Scotland had differing views on EU membership (Henderson et al. 188). The three novels mentioned above all take place in England, where especially Coe’s title *Middle England* shows its geographic focus. This thesis will focus on questions surrounding English nationalism, and for this thesis, British and national identity in practice will refer to English identity.

In *The Cut*, *The Lie of the Land*, and *Middle England*, characters from a wide variety of backgrounds are given a voice. This is important because it mirrors the division within the country itself. In her analysis of the voting results, Hobolt concludes that

> [t]he results of the Brexit referendum portray a deeply divided country, not only along class, education and generational lines, but also in terms of geography. Generally the Remain side did better in the larger multicultural cities (especially in London) and where there were more graduates, whereas the Leave side was strongest in the English countryside and in the post-industrial north-eastern towns with larger working class populations. (Hobolt 1273)

In analysing the results, Runciman also looks at what divided the voters and concludes that class, age, metropolitan/traditionalist divide, urban/rural divide, London vs the regions, and education were fundamental causes to account for differences between Remainers and Leavers (Runciman 4). Still, individuals within these groups will, for the most part, feel they are part of one country; they all call themselves English and have an idea of what it means to be English. This can be seen in the fact that they all take part in the same democratic process, namely voting in the same referendum, that is a distinct part of their nation.

Benedict Anderson published *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* in 1983. This has become one of the most influential works in the field of nationalism studies and has affected many other fields as well. This is clear from "the number of citations that Google Scholar registers for this book, [namely] around 80,000, a figure that far exceeds the total for any work in the field of nationalism studies, as well as most other scholarly books." (Bergholz 518) In his book, Anderson defines the nation as follows: "it is an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (Anderson 5) Bergholz credits Anderson's emphasis on the role of the imagination on the building of nation:

> Anderson provided historians of nationalism with a fresh sense of processual verbs for examining ways of thinking that he believed were central to a sense of "nation-ness" – imagining, restoring, remembering, dreaming. In so doing, he provided those seeking to tell histories of nationalism with a new conceptual vocabulary to excavate and explain human agency, and specifically the role of the imagination, in the making of nationalism into a real political force. It is this contribution – more than any of the specific parts of his historical explanation for nationalism – that gave, and continues to give, his short book such tremendous and long-lasting influence. (Bergholz 519)

Other writers have also analysed the role of human imagination in the existence of nations. John Agnew looks at borders, which are an important part of the nation. He shows their complicated nature and concludes that they are something that humans have made up:

> [f]rom one viewpoint, borders are simple 'facts on the ground' (or, more radically, lines on the map). Borders exist for a variety of practical reasons and can be classified according to the purposes they serve and how they serve them. They enable a host of important political, social, and economic activities. From a very different perspective, borders are artefacts of dominant discursive processes that have led to the fencing off of chunks of territory and people from one another. Such processes can change as they do, borders live on as residual phenomena that may still capture our imagination but no longer serve any essential purpose. (…) They are complex human creations that are perpetually open to question. (Agnew 175)

Wellings explores the importance of loyalty in combination with culture, and concludes that nations are human inventions:

> [t]hus if the possession of a particular culture was necessary for inclusion within a particular economic and political system, then loyalties were rationally expressed as a reflection and veneration of that specific culture. It was this understanding of nationalism that led Gellner to argue that 'nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness; it invents nations where they do not exist'. (Wellings 23)

Edward Said has written extensively about identity and ways in which people, cultures, regions and nations are represented. In his seminal work *Orientalism*, he describes an imagined region, namely the Orient, and analyses the Western gaze on this region (Said, *Orientalism*). Treacher highlights the importance of the imagination for Said: "Said was perpetually concerned with thinking about how we are all inflected by others, and in turn we shape other human beings through fantasies, imaginings and problematic representations." (Treacher 385)

Leerssen and Manfred connect these mechanisms of creating nations to literature. They state that: “[i]f nations are defined as Imagined Communities, as has been proposed by Benedict Anderson (1983), it seems all the more justified to consider the images (mirages) that people of various nations create about each other, as “no more than a product of the imagination, that is, a fiction.” (Beller and Leerssen 11) They also highlight the link between literature and national stereotypes: “[t]o begin with, Imagology, working as it does primarily on literary representations, furnishes continuous proof that it is in the field of imaginary and poetical literature that national stereotypes are first and most effectively formulated, perpetuated and disseminated.” (Beller and Leerssen 26)

Both in the discourse surrounding the referendum, and in *The Cut, The Lie of the Land,* and *Middle England*, the way individuals look at their country is important. Arguably, the most famous slogan to come out of the referendum, namely "Take Back Control", was part of the Leave campaign (Gamble). This slogan implies that there is a common past that people want to return to, and it also implies that this is something that people agree on. However, there are fundamentally different ways in which the English look at the history, the present and desired future of their common nation. This phenomenon is not unique to this referendum, or these novels. In moments such as during the Brexit referendum, people are confronted with the different ways in which people imagine their nation. After the result of the Brexit referendum, people were shocked to discover that the country could be so divided on what course their nation should be taking. (Asthana, et al.) The discourse surrounding the referendum showed the different futures people envision for their country, the different ways in which they experience the now, and the different ways in which they interpret their nation’s past. Each chapter in this thesis will focus on one of the chosen novels and analyse in what way national and cultural identities are constructed and represented. These constructions will be analysed through the theoretical framework of Benedict Anderson, Edward Said, and other writers on nationalism and national identity. In Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England*, Amanda Craig’s *The Lie of the Land*, and Anthony Cartwright’s *The Cut*, characters from a wide

variety of backgrounds are given a voice. The point I am going to argue is that the chosen novels show that a decisive moment such as the Brexit referendum confronts people with the fact that they have been imaging their nation in very different ways.

CHAPTER 1 – Strangers in a Familiar Land: National divisions in Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut*

"'We've had enough,' and he went on, and sometimes on television they put subtitles under his words, translated into his own language and sometimes they did not." (Cartwright, *Cut* 21)

Outsider Perspective

Anthony Cartwright, who was already known for works such as *Iron Towns* and *Heartland*, wrote *The Cut* as a Brexit referendum novel. The publisher, Meike Ziervogel from Peirene Press, commissioned it because she wanted a novel that explored the two sides of the referendum (Cartwright, *Cut* 3). Cartwright stated in an interview that he thought it was essential to add more nuance to the debate, and that his story had to be "a kind of antidote to the massive generalisations all sorts of people were making after the referendum – that we had seventeen and a half million racists on one side and sixteen million people who were happy with a kind of social apartheid based on class on the other." (qtd. in Kelly 79) In *The Cut* Cartwright has two opposing protagonists that explore each other's point of view. This means that the author will have to write from at least one outsider's perspective.

Prior to *The Cut* Cartwright wrote an article in which he analysed so-called slum novels, and he commented on the outsider perspective by quoting Diniejko who states: "slum novels were not written by slum dwellers. However authentic and convincing they might seem, they necessarily conveyed an outside view." (qtd. in Cartwright, *Young Men* 331) In the article, Cartwright explored how the working class has been portrayed either as caricatures or as a homogenous mass. He underscores the importance of portraying characters as well-rounded by examining Alexander Baron's fiction and his portrayal of the working class. "His [Baron's] work follows a tradition of the London novel but it is also something distinct, a genuine attempt to portray working class lives, from the inside, with close observations of all their complications and contradictions." (Cartwright, *Cut* 338) This nuance is especially important when reflecting on something as divisive as the Brexit referendum. Treacher explains the importance Said places on the ability to give a voice to, and

listening to, those who can easily be marginalized. Treacher states: “Said emphasizes the importance of the writings of the marginalized and champions those who are ‘not quite made of the right stuff’, continually bringing awareness what can be learnt from the voice speaking from outside the boundary.” (Treacher 383) In *The Cut* Cartwright tries to give a balanced view on the discussion surrounding the interpretation of the Brexit referendum, by having two protagonists, namely Cairo Jukes and Grace Trevithick, who embody different groups in the country and who embody different demographics as seen in the Brexit referendum (Hobolt).

Personification

In her analysis of the novel Shaw describes these characters in the context of the divide seen in the Brexit referendum: “Cairo Jukes, a labourer on a zero-hours contract in Dudley, and Grace Trevithick, a documentary filmmaker (and personification of an elite British media) from Hampstead in London, represent the two sides of the disconnected post-Brexit nation.” (Shaw 23) Having characters represent different aspects of a nation is not new, and the way in which Cartwright does it falls into a long tradition. Manfred and Leerssen explain: “[n]ational stereotypes often take the form of personifications. In literature two well-known personifications of Englishness are ‘the gentleman’ and his uncultivated counterpart ‘John Bull’.” (Beller and Leerssen 145) Further on they elaborate by stating: “both stereotypes act out an image of English national identity which began to emerge after the English reformation of the 1530s.” (Ibid. 147) Not taking gender into account in *The Cut,* the gentleman is most closely embodied by Grace and John Bull by Cairo.

Demographic Divides

As part of her analysis of the Brexit referendum, Hobolt looked at, amongst other things, the demographic differences in the voter population. She states that: “[t]he analyses presented in this article show that British Leave Voters were motivated by anti-immigration and anti-establishment feelings. They also reveal stark demographic divides, as the less well-educated and the less well-off voted in large majorities to leave the EU, while the young graduates in the urban centres voted to stay.” (Hobolt 1260) In *The Cut* Cairo represents the lesser educated and less well-off part of the

nation. Throughout the novel, there are references to how he is struggling to make ends meet. This can be seen in this exchange where the financial tight rope he is walking is shown: "'[d]id he say anything about more work?' Alan says nothing. 'Fucking hell,' Cairo says, and he hears the panic in his own voice, and he wishes he'd shut up, wishes he did not always give himself away. He'd be no poker player, that much is certain." (Cartwright, *Cut* 59) About his position in a socio-economic group, we read: "[h]ow white-collar boxing differs from that of his own people Cairo is not sure. He is blue collar. He is possibly no collar." (Cartwright, *Cut* 10) Grace, on the other hand, is doing well and does not share Cairo's financial troubles. This is also a source of a divide between them, as can be seen in a scene where they are in the pub, and a new drink has to be ordered. Cairo worries about being able to afford a new drink, but Grace has enough disposable income. Cairo's internal monologue shows his emotions: "and it angered him suddenly, the ease of all this, the ease with which she sat here and then offered to buy him drinks and looked at him like she did, from her world that was not his." (Cartwright, *Cut* 69) This divide and the ways in which their worlds are different can be seen throughout the novel.

In his review of the novel, Cook also conjures up this image of different worlds. He writes: "[*The Cut*] is England as two distinct nations, both trying, but failing, to understand the other." (Cook) This is in line with Anderson's notion in *Imaged Communities* about the nation as a construct: "[the nation] is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (Anderson 6) In *The Cut* Cartwright's protagonists do meet, only to discover how far apart they are. They attempt to understand each other, but they are continually confronted with their differences. They are described as being from very different worlds, and the unlikeliness of them meeting and interacting is highlighted several times in the novel. A clear example is the scene where Cairo and a friend are discussing Grace: "'[w]hat yer talking to her for?' (…) He wanted to say to Alan it was so that he could speak to the woman with the long hair and the microphone and the soft skin, because when would someone like that ever speak to someone like them, smile at blokes

like them?" (Cartwright, *Cut* 63) For Cairo interacting with Grace is also a source of discomfort, as can be seen when reading Cairo's feelings: "it had felt good, to be somebody. Now he could see his reflection in the window where they sat, Grace next to him, and he didn't want to see anyone who knew him. There's Cairo Jukes, that old boxer, people might say, if they said anything at all, making a fool of himself with that woman, look. Must think he's summat pretty special." (Cartwright, *Cut* 68) Grace is in Dudley for a film project and also has a hard time connecting with the people around her. This is shown by the reluctance people have in talking to her: "[e]arlier in the morning she had tried to film interviews near the bottom of the High Street, and no one wanted to talk to her, but instead veered away if she approached, as if she might be asking a question to which they did not know the answer." (Cartwright, *Cut* 18) She also experiences discomfort, just by being there, as can be seen in the following description: "[s]he felt exposed here, even in a sheltered spot in the sun." (Cartwright, *Cut* 18) She earlier filmed a project in the Balkans, and she takes the same approach to filming in Dudley. Both areas are equally foreign to her: "[b]ut first Grace has to finish her current project, one way or the other, will go back today, last images, not to the middle of Europe but to the middle of England." (Cartwright, *Cut* 14) Even though Dudley is in her native country, it does not feel like home.

Foreign Home Nation

There is a literary tradition that involves English people going out to explore foreign locations. Beller and Leerssen explain: "[i]n English literary discourse the idea of the gentleman can be traced from Chaucer's discussions of 'gentilnesse' in the fourteenth century, to the cult of the courtier in Elizabethan times, eighteenth-century stories of country squires, and nineteenth-century novels about gentleman explorers serving the Empire." (Beller and Leerssen 145) In *The Cut,* it is Grace who represents the modern explorer, and who tries to make sense of the world that exists outside of London, whether it is in the countryside or a different country altogether. Franco, who is part of her crew, views Dudley as a place that does not live up to his standards. This can be seen in the following exchange:

> ’[t]his place is a hole,’ Franco says to her, and sits down. ‘I’ve never heard you say that anywhere. Hungary, the border camps, Serbia, when you came back from Syria. Never. But Dudley is the end of the road for you. Look out of the windows. It’s a sunny afternoon in the English Midlands.’ (…) ‘Those places have got an excuse, a reason for being how they are, but these people,’ Franco says. ‘Ah, these people,’ she says, ‘these people. There is them and us. These fucking people.’ (Cartwright, *Cut* 111)

Franco here places all the people living there in the same category and turns them into the others. As a result of this, he takes away their individuality and thereby their humanity. Said also describes this mechanism of homogenization and dehumanization in *Orientalism*: “[i]n a sense the limitations of Orientalism are, as I said earlier, the limitations that follow upon disregarding, essentializing, denuding the humanity of another culture, people, or geographical region.” (Said, *Orientalism* 108) Cartwright is certainly aware of these mechanisms and Said’s insights in this field. In “The Young Men of the Nation” he connected the way in which the working classes were described with Said’s *Orientalism*. Cartwright states: “[i]ndeed Said’s description of the language used by nineteenth-century Western sources to *create* the Orient could be applied to *creations* of nineteenth-century industrial working class life.” (Cartwright, *Cut* 331) He furthers this point by commenting on the distance that exists between the groups: “[t]he opening to *King Dido* exemplifies what Williams also terms the “sour distancing” between West and East, between middle class aesthetics and working class reality.” (Cartwright, *Cut* 331) An exploration of the divide between the protagonists based on socio-economic position in society can also be found in *The Cut*.

Class Society

The mechanisms that separate Grace and Cairo are often connected with elements associated with a class society. They are very aware of the ways in which they are different from one and other, something that is also often associated with discomfort. An example can be seen in the way in which Grace interviews people in Dudley: “trying to get the voices of ordinary people, conscious of saying ordinary people and all that might mean, on the way they might vote, and why.”

(Cartwright, *Cut* 22) Cairo is also aware of this divide, when commenting on social interaction: "[w]hen did any of them ever speak to women called Grace? Although not even that is true, because he remembers his mom has a cousin called Gracie, who owned an Alsatian and had a caravan at Bromyard. Still, Gracie, not Grace. He knows that makes the difference." (Cartwright, *Cut* 64) Wellings shows that an emphasis on class is a common element in English society. He also explains that whereas Said emphasizes race, Cannadine, Professor of Modern History, emphasizes class and status. Wellings states that "Said's emphasis on race as a key element in conditioning cultural understandings of the Western self was challenged in the British case by David Cannadine who called for a shift of emphasis from 'Orientalism' to what he called 'ornamentalism'. This term referred to the status-oriented trappings of empire which revealed the importance placed on class and status by members of the British empire." (Wellings 28) This can be seen when Cairo explains his experiences in London: "'[i]t ay like London, you know,' he said, wasn't really sure what he meant by this and was glad she didn't press him on it. When he'd had those fights in London, the people had been much the same as at home. This woman was none of those things, in her patterned dress and cardigan and masses of hair and ideas that things might be fun." (Cartwright, *Cut* 72) In this case, it is socio-economic background that is more important than location in determining what group you belong to.

Cairo connects London with the elite, as can be seen in the exchange between Cairo and Grace where they are discussing the Brexit referendum vote:

> I bet the people writing these papers don't vote to leave, I bet they live in fancy houses in London and they'll vote to stay. They'm all doing fine, thank you very much. It's like a double bluff. (…) 'I'm not sure I do. You mean that people here will vote against whatever they think the perceived elite will vote?' 'Here you go again. It ay perceived. There is an elite.'
>
> (Cartwright, *Cut* 43)

Grace had not considered herself to be a part of the elite, but she, and people like her, are in the eyes of Cairo. Cairo experiences an elite that thinks of him and people like him as inferior. This can be seen in a scene where Cairo muses about what he sees in the world around him and what this does to people:

> [p]eople are tired. (…) Tired of change, tired of the world passing by, tired of other people getting things that you and people like you had made for them, tired of being told you were no good, tired of being told that what you believed to be true was wrong, tired of being told to stop complaining, tired of being told what to eat, what to throw away, what to do and what not to do, what was right and wrong when you were always in the wrong. Tired of supermarket jobs and warehouse jobs and jobs guarding shopping centres. Work had always worn people out, the heat of furnaces, the clang of iron, but this is tiredness of a different order, tiredness that a rest will not cure, like a plague, eating away at them all. (Cartwright, *Cut* 101)

This division goes beyond economic differences between groups of people since Cairo feels that they are being dictated in the way they have to behave and even think. In *The Cut,* this division and the unbalanced power relations are often associated with a division between London and the rest of England.

Geography

Geography played an important role in the Brexit referendum (Hobolt), and it too plays a role in the novel. Shaw even highlights it as the defining factor in the division: "[*The Cut*] encapsulates how geography emerged as a crucial factor in the referendum result, echoing John Lancester's insightful remark in his article 'Brexit Blues' that 'the primary reality of modern Britain is not so much class as geography. Geography is destiny. And for much of the country, not a happy destiny.'" (Shaw 23) This geographical element is connected with a focus that is either more local or more global. Cairo has a local focus and is very connected to his community. This focus can be seen

in the way in which Cairo's daughter describes his historical focus: "[h]e knows a lot about history, her grandad too, but more like little stories, like the Tipton Slasher and his pet monkey." (Cartwright, *Cut* 48) Grace has a more global focus and is used to travelling. Cairo comments on this, and again connects it with division: "[e]asy come, easy go. She'd been to places, making films, talking to people, Serbia and Kosovo and Greece, places from the news, and it surprised him how much someone might know and not know. She spoke some Russian, had said things to him in it, and how would someone go about learning Russian? Maybe clever people were always naïve." (Cartwright, *Cut* 72)

Language

Language both plays a vital role in nation-building and someone's position in society. According to Anderson, language plays an essential role in the way in which nations are constructed, and communities are imagined. He states:

> [t]hese print-languages laid the bases for national consciousness in three distinct ways. First and foremost, they created unified fields of exchange and communication below Latin and above the spoken vernaculars. Speakers of the huge variety of Frenches, Englishes, or Spanishes, who might find it difficult or even impossible to understand one another in conversation, became capable of comprehending one another via print and paper. In the process, they gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at the same time that *only* hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged. These fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community. (Anderson 44)

This shows the importance of language in unification and in the self-identification of being part of the same group. In *The Cut*, language plays an important role in the way in which people are shown to be from different worlds. An example comes from a segment where Cairo's commentary is

subtitled. His spoken English language gets the same treatment as a foreign language: “when her dad’s interview came on telly, they placed subtitles for everyone to read, like he wasn’t speaking English at all, and she saw it grieved him when he watched it, but he just shrugged his shoulders when she asked him about it. ‘What do you expect?’ he said.” (Cartwright, *Cut* 47) Again there is a dimension of power associated with the type of national language somebody speaks. Anderson explains the historical development of one vernacular that dominates another. He states:

> print-capitalism created languages-of-power of a kind different from the older administrative vernaculars. Certain dialects inevitably were ‘closer’ to each print-language and dominated their final forms. Their disadvantaged cousins, still assimilable to the emerging print-language, lost caste, above all because they were unsuccessful (or only relatively successful) in insisting on their own print-form. (Anderson 45)

He also looks at the influence of a version of the English language: “High German, the King’s English, and, later, Central Thai, were correspondingly elevated to a new politico-cultural eminence.” (Anderson 45) Those that speak the King’s English are associated with political and cultural benefits. Cairo certainly adjusts his speech in order to become more socially acceptable for Grace. An example of this can be found in the following scene: “’[y]er day force the drink down me neck, he said, was aware of his accent as he said it, became aware that he had been softening it, of course he had, for her, not even fully conscious of this until now.” (Cartwright, *Cut* 81) Grace also struggles with talking to people while doing interviews, because of a language divide: “asked a couple of the older people she spoke to and they looked back at her blankly, as with so many of the questions she asked (…) And she scolded herself that she did not have the right questions, that what she was doing was all in her own voice, not theirs.” (Cartwright, *Cut* 17) They all speak English, yet the different ways in which they do is another source of division within a nation.

A Sense of History

The importance of history and forgetting and remembering is an integral part of national identity and nation-building that is discussed in *Imagined Communities.* Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Professor of Social Anthropology who studied Anderson, writes that: “Anderson quotes Renan's perceptive 1882 essay ´Qu´est-ce que une nation?’(…) to the effect that having a nation entails remembering the same things, but also agreeing on what to forget." (Eriksen 631) Eaglestone is another author who analyses the connection between groups and remembering and connects this with narratives. He writes:

> [i]ndeed, the relationship between community and memory is deep and reciprocal: part of the point of shared memory is to create that sense of community through shared narratives, frames of reference and ‘forms of life’; part of the point of community is to preserve memory (Eaglestone, *Cruel* 96)

For Grace, the past does not play the same role as it does for Cairo. Cairo places much importance on the past: “[h]e could back up his theories, from afternoons spent with his old man at the local history groups, he was interested in all that stuff. Where we came from, where we were going.” (Cartwright, *Cut* 32) One of the few scenes where Grace references the past, is also one of the few instances where the colonial past of the United Kingdom is referenced. “as a young woman she had swum in the Thames, of course, called it the Isis, as Grace had, and her mother had too. And as a young girl her grandmother swam in the Shannon, daughter of Empire. They have a tea set in the attic at home, come all the way from India in a trunk, the tiniest spidery cracks in the china.” (Cartwright, *Cut* 14) This empire connection conjures up images of success and power. There was success and power in Grace’s past and family’s history. This is a stark contrast with Cairo’s lineage: “(t)here is a whole story of men who got beaten up, knocked senseless, in order to pay the rent, put food on the table, one of the many histories buried in the hill. He tells himself he is part of a proud Dudley tradition.” (Cartwright, *Cut* 12) Cairo’s past is one of hardship and struggle, and he comes from a long line of people who have shared this struggle.

Throughout the novel, there are references to the way things used to be, such as descriptions of how the landscape and life for people has changed. Especially Cairo seems to struggle with this. The world around him is changing, and for him, life gets worse instead of better. His world generally is portrayed as being partly stuck in the past. This is shown in the passage where Cairo receives his weekly wages and reflects upon the way that things used to be:

> even though he pays them all in dog-eared notes in cash bags from the post office like they are men from some bygone era. Like they are men who would go walking up the lane here from this factory back when it was still standing, men with an early Friday finish, going to tend their allotments and stand up at bars and walk their dogs and go home to their families and fill in the football coupon and dream of a week at the seaside. As if there is any of that any more. (Cartwright, *Cut* 37)

Whether things have actually gotten worse, or whether it is a matter of experiencing it as such is also part of discussions that take place between Cairo and Grace, where Cairo states:

> [y]ou make out like it's our problem, it's only about how we feel, but we have lost, it doh really matter what we feel about it. It's a fact. You can prove it.' 'What can you prove?' 'The loss, actual loss. Jobs, houses, security, all them things.' He paused. 'But maybe yome right that there's the feelings as well, of loss, of having lost.' (Cartwright 40)

Cairo is angry because his world is being marginalized and threatened. The world that he and his family know is changing, and they are not profiting from it. He feels they were good enough to build the nation as it is, but now are no longer good enough to live in it the way they are. This can be seen in the following scene, where he describes the dangers of the destruction of his present:

> [a] lot of it is gone, erased. The industrial past. And a lot of it is hidden away. The point is the people here built the country as it was to become. Now you act – we act – like there's some sort of shame to it all. The rest of the country is ashamed of us. You want us gone in one way

> or the other. It'll end in camps, it'll end in walls, you watch, and it won't be my people who build them, Grace, it'll be yours. It's already happening, in your well-meaning ways. (Cartwright, *Cut* 111)

Grace and Cairo do not agree on what should be remembered and treasured. In Anderson's theory, this is a crucial part of the construction of national identity: "[a]s with modern persons, so it is with nations. Awareness of being embedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of 'forgetting' the experience of this continuity – product of the ruptures of the late eighteenth century – engenders the need for a narrative of 'identity'." (Anderson 205) The mechanisms discussed in this chapter show that it does not require a lot to become separated from one another. As Grace experiences it: "She felt like there was some kind of invisible veil between her and these people. *These people.* And this is how it began, she supposed, prejudice on the scale of a whole country." (Cartwright, *Cut* 19) In *The Cut* Cartwright explores how people who inhabit the same nation where they could have so much in common, are still so far apart. The characters are trying, but failing to understand each other. This is not the only Brexit referendum novel where this dynamic is explored, as can be seen in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 2 - The City and the Countryside: Opposing Realities in Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land*

"When are we going back to England? (…) This is England, too." (Craig 53)

Premise

As seen in the previous chapter, an essential division in *The Cut* is between London and the countryside. Out of the three novels that are the focus of this thesis it is Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* that features this theme the most. Central to the narrative is the story of a family from London that moves to the country out of economic necessity. They try to adjust to their new life and in doing so, explore what it means to be English. Cairo's story in *The Cut* is very much about a yearning about the way things used to be. In *The Lie of the Land,* two of the protagonists, Lottie and Quentin, are also confronted with a world where they experience fewer opportunities than they used to have. In this novel, the turning point is the global financial crisis that took place in 2008. The narrator explains how their lives have changed:

> [b]efore the crunch became a downturn, before the downturn became a recession, it was taken for granted that their children would be privately educated, their health insured, their holidays exotic and their minds stimulated by all the intellectual entertainments the capital has to offer. (Craig 4)

These privileges came with a certain sense of arrogance, as is acknowledged in the novel: "if they have been smug, as members of the luckiest generation in British history, then so have many others." (Craig 5) Two of the main sources of division in the novel are the one in the marriage of Lottie and Quentin, and the division between life in the countryside and life in London.

This latter division is important in the context of the Brexit referendum, as can be seen in the analysis by Teney, and others. They analysed the effects of globalization on unity within Europe and stated that this geographical division is a crucial one: "[w]e use detailed survey items on issues of immigration and European integration that measure not only citizen positions towards the EU but

also the ideologies underpinning the positions towards the EU. This enables us to provide a fine-grained analysis of the cosmopolitan and communitarian ideological poles of the new conflict line." (Teney et al. 576) This conflict between cosmopolitan and communitarian ideologies can be seen throughout *The Lie of the Land*. At times there are similarities with the dynamic between the empire and its former colonies. The point here is not to argue that the English countryside is the same as a colony; the point is to show that there are similarities in power relations, descriptions and attitude. Said shows how "the Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks." (Said, *Orientalism 74*) The way in which this dynamic is explored in the novel will be further discussed in this chapter.

The novel starts with the divide between the main characters. They once had a happy marriage, but are now stuck in a position with little love, yet they are still dependent on each other. The state of their marriage is summarized as follows: "[s]he accuses him of being shallow, promiscuous, irresponsible and a liar. He accuses her of being a sociopath, frigid and the most controlling person on earth." (Craig 11) They must move to the countryside since it is the only place they can afford to live. Quentin is very much against the idea. They have differing views on many things, and one of them is their view on the countryside. This can be seen in the following observation by Quentin about the country and the people who live there:

> [p]eople here are so rooted in one place, through generations, that they might as well be trees. They hate London, the EU, politicians, newspapers – effectively, everything he's interested in. Lottie, however, has taken to this dreary place with ghastly enthusiasm. (Craig 283)

In his mind, there is a clear 'us vs them' dynamic, and for him moving to the country is like moving to a different country. The word country is the same, but its meaning and implications are very different.

Foreign Home Nation

Quentin is not the only one who sees a different country when observing the countryside. The children feel so far removed from the country that they grew up in that they ask their parents when they will be moving back to their own country. This can be seen in the following exchange: "'[w]hen are we going back to England?' Stella demands. 'London isn't England,' Lottie says. 'This is England, too.' They don't believe her. How can it be true, when there are no streets, shops and lights?" (Craig 53) Their initial experience of moving to a different part of their own country mirrors immigrating to a different country. The local customs, the language, the rhythm of life are all different from what they know and what they associate with their nation as a whole. When Lottie returns to London after spending months in the countryside, the disconnect is apparent:

> Lottie laughed, but when the train glides into Paddington she is overwhelmed. The graceful white wrought ironwork above the station platform looks like the outlines of gigantic flowers, leaves, hearts. It's all so familiar, yet oddly alien. The busyness, the lights, the colour, the shops, the traffic, the sirens and the crowds almost stun her with their profligate revelry. This is life, this is youth, this is energy and success, she thinks: but is it still home? (Craig 182)

This view that the countryside is a different country can also be seen in the way in which other people approach it, as can be seen when Lottie tries to persuade friends to come and visit: "'[y]ou should come down for a weekend,' she urges Justin and Hemani, but they say, 'When are you back again?' or, 'Perhaps in summer.' It would be easier if I did live in another country, Lottie thinks." (Craig 63) At several points in the novel travelling to Devon is compared to going on a foreign holiday to a not so desirable country. An example can be found in an exchange between Xan, Lottie's son, and his friends where they discuss their view on Devon:

> 'It can't be that bad, can it?' said Bron, and Dylan asked, 'Don't millions of people go there on holiday?' 'There is absolutely nothing to do there except watch TV and get pissed. It's

> basically all tiny villages one bungalow deep in village idiots, and old people waiting to die.' Neither Bron nor Dylan had ever been into the countryside: why bother? For £30, you could catch a flight to somewhere abroad. Xan has looked at where they're going to live on Google Earth, and the Devon and Cornwall peninsula sticking out into the Atlantic like the deformed trotter of a pig. Nobody in their right mind would want to go there. (Craig 26)

Xan's friends feel so far removed from this part of their nation that they do not feel any connection to it. Even though they have never been there, they attribute several negative habits and characteristics to it.

Perceived Backwardness

Krishan Kumar, a sociologist and historian who studied English identity, explores the relationship between the countryside, nationalism and a perception of different levels of intelligence and modernity: "[n]ationalism, to most English thinkers, always seemed to have something of the provincial about it, something more reminiscent of tribalism than of the outward-looking ideologies that seemed more necessary in the contemporary world." (Kumar 482) The reference to tribalism conjures the image of a more backward part of the nation. In *The Lie of the Land,* there are continuous remarks about how the countryside is not as advanced as the city. Stella, one of the children, certainly sees her country peers as backwards when she says: "'[c]ountry children don't know anything about anything!' is her angry cry. 'They're all stupid, and I'll become stupid too unless you take me home!'" (Craig 54) Stonebridge, who studied the relationship between Brexit and literature, even sees the way in which people were portrayed as backwards as a cause of Brexit: "Brexit was a protest against some people assuming that other people were stupid. Eye rolling is not only the vice of the pantomime villains of neo-liberalism." (Stonebridge 10)

Craig Calhoun, Professor of Social Sciences, expands on the topic of nationalism in combination with geography and perceived backwardness. He states: "nationalism is often 'denigrated by proponents of transnational society who see the national and any other local

solidarities as backward or outmoded, impositions of the past on the present'." (qtd. in Shaw 23) In *The Lie of the Land* Quentin feels that the countryside is the same as the past when he muses about connectivity: "[t]he single most maddening thing about country life is its lack of connectivity – the mobile signals that waver and shrink, the Internet that has everyone on a laptop watching pages and images that freeze or shatter into fragments. The twenty-first century, just out of reach." (Craig 374) In terms of technology, the city and the countryside offer different opportunities to those that live there. As stated earlier, the relationship between London as the place where the elite and the power resides, and the countryside, has parallels with the power relations between the empire and its colonies. Said argues how elitism impacted the way in which the European culture formed when he states "indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures." (Said, *Orientalism* 7) The idea of London being superior can be found throughout the novel, but first, it is important to take a closer look at what life is like in the countryside.

Rejecting the Status Quo

The character of Maddy is used to explore hardships in daily life that none of the main characters from London are familiar with. This can be seen in the different definitions of poverty that Xan and Maddy have: "Xan thinks how his own family has felt in the past year. Poverty for them has meant no luxuries, not the terror of being actually homeless and actually hungry. The gulf between his life and Maddy's has always been there." (Craig 371) Their different socioeconomic situations are a source of division. This quote also shows that for Maddy, who has a fulltime job and works hard, society does not offer enough for her to live a comfortable life. The political consequences of this division for Maddy, and those like her, can be seen in this statement in the novel:

> [d]eprived of the immigrant shift workers, Humbles are actually paying overtime to their remaining workers – which is to say, an extra 50p an hour. No wonder Maddy and the other Devonians say that next election, they'll vote UKIP, because nobody else cares. Xan has

> always despised anti-immigrant feelings, but out here he can, reluctantly, see that it might be different. (Craig 160)

Besides its views on immigration, UKIP is also one of the political parties in the United Kingdom that campaigned in favour of Brexit (Carver). Steve Buckledee, who analysed the language used in the Brexit referendum, notes that the Leave camp emphasized promoting changes, whereas the Remain camp was mainly focused on a message of keeping the status quo (Buckledee 1). Maddy shows how unappealing the status quo can be, and it also shows a divide between those in power and certain segments of society. Those powerful enough to represent the Remain camp did not consider that the status quo would be something that people like Maddy would reject.

The influx of immigrant shift workers in a community that is not used to it is part of a larger trend where the effects of globalization have an impact on local communities and individuals. Globalization affects people in different ways. There are those that benefit from it, and those whose lives suffer because of it. Teney and others explain the difference and also show how this impacts the way in which affected individuals look at their nation:

> [i]n a nutshell, losers of globalization are citizens who see their life chances reduced by the effects of globalization while winners are those who consider themselves to have benefitted from globalization. Coherent ideological and attitudinal positions underlie the poles of this new conflict: each of these groups tends to support antagonistic positions regarding 'denationalization' (…) which refers to the opening-up of national borders for a range of international exchange and interaction. (Teney et al. 575)

The story of Maddy shows the potential impact that globalization has on local communities. Michael Skey, who studies the importance of nations, shows what happens when the state does not offer enough to an individual to make a living by stating that: "collectivities must offer something to individual members otherwise what would be the point in investing time and effort in them." (Skey 86) For somebody like Maddy, any chance would be welcome when looking at her working

conditions: “[it’s cripplingly hard to keep up the pace, even though some, like Maddy, are desperate enough to do back-to-back shifts. Every week, she seems to have aged another decade.” (Craig 119)

Imaging the Countryside

Manfred and Leerssen explored the divide between the city and the country in the context of how the English view themselves. They analyse the way in which the countryside has been imagined, and how the image is not always negative, by stating that:

> the twentieth century also continued a strong tradition of English countryside idyll, focusing on a peaceful homeland -> region with picturesque villages and cottages and marked by harmonious human relations and ancient traditions (…) This ambivalence between a societal and communitarian image of England is often articulated in terms of a ->North/South divide, contrasting a rugged, industrialized North with a most genteel, rural South. (Beller and Leerssen 149)

Besides identifying England’s dual nature, they also point out where these worlds meet when they state that: “[b]oth sides of the English self-image converge (…) in glorifying a sense of level-headed pragmatism and individualism against all forms of systematic or theory-driven rigidity.” (Beller and Leerssen 149) In *The Lie of the Land,* the way in which the countryside is often imagined is addressed. However, instead of convergence, there is division. This can be seen when Xan reflects on the price that must be paid for the daily upkeep of London:

> [w]hen he looks around the streets of London he understands, dimly, that he is living in some kind of pinnacle of existence, a great pyramid of labour, ingenuity, law and effort whose base is so remote as to be almost out of sight. (…) Who here knows or cares about the places from which its prizes are drawn? If the countryside exists in popular imagination, it’s as a place of recreation, in which food is produced in Elysian fields of buttercups from happy hens and immortal herds. Xan has been to the so-called farmers’ markets in which the middle class sell artisan meats and hand-made goats’ cheese to each other from within state

> school playgrounds, in the belief that this is a more authentic shopping experience. It had been mildly entertaining then, but now he thinks that if people could see the inside of Humbles, or a slaughterhouse, or a field in freezing weather, they might not be so complacent. (Craig 298)

The city and the countryside are dependent on each other, especially in terms of providing for livelihood. People in London need the produce that the countryside creates, while the people in the countryside need the work that this industry creates to make ends meet. However, the novel makes clear that it are the people in the countryside that are in the most vulnerable position.

Unbalanced Power Relations

The economic relation between London and the countryside goes further than production. This can be seen in the way in which the countryside is dependent on tourism from the city. An example comes from Xan's contemplation on the merits of the landscape: "[i]n London, a sunny day is a bonus, but in the country it is critical. Without a decent summer, holidaymakers get an EasyJet flight to the Mediterranean, rather than staying at home." (Craig 256) This dependence leads to a power dynamic between the city and the country. Said explores the relationship between two regions in the context of power and how a region is viewed. McCarthy writes: "Said stresses that the relationship between the West and the Orient has been one of *power*. The Orient has been 'Orientalised' or described as 'Oriental' not merely because it has displayed the characteristics Westerners associate with 'the Oriental,' *but because it could be."* (McCarthy 70) There are several examples in *The Lie of the Land* where this dynamic is explored. Xan talks about how the countryside produces the food and comments on the unbalanced power relation when he states that: "[e]verything to do with food seems to be built on a pyramid of exploitation and unhappiness." (Craig 210) Anderson explains how unbalanced power relations within a community do not have to affect the cohesion of a nation when he states that:

> [the nation] is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (Anderson 7)

In the novel, those that fight and die for their country do often come from the countryside. The story of Joe, a veteran who is struggling, shows a disconnect between those in power and those who have to do their bidding, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

> [d]espite all the promises, despite all the fine speeches by generals and politicians, men like Joe are forgotten. Sally doesn't think it's a coincidence that, by and large, soldiers come from the countryside where, if something goes wrong, they can be pushed out of sight, and out of mind. (Craig 88)

This observation is especially poignant because soldiers are the ones that defend their nation, so their commitment to the nation is a matter of life and death.

Othering and Race

Paul Gilroy, who studied British identity after the empire, analyses how race plays a role in the formation, and re-evaluation of national identity post-empire. He identifies a sense of postcolonial nostalgia, that has implications for how race is viewed and how national identity is formed:

> [t]he consolidation of postcolonial melancholia suggests an even more disturbing possibility, namely that many people in Britain have actually come to need "race" and perhaps to welcome its certainties as one sure way to keep their bearings in a world they experience as increasingly confusing. For them, there can be no working through this problem because the melancholic pattern has become the mechanism that sustains the unstable edifice of increasingly brittle and empty national identity. (Gilroy 116)

In *The Lie of the Land* it is through Xan, Lottie's biracial son, that race and racism are most fully explored. He encounters both overt and covert racism at several points in the novel. An example can be found in the following excerpt: "[o]nce, a little girl came up to him and asked if he were made of chocolate. (…) The locals don't even know how racist they are." (Craig 65) Because of the way he looks, people even question whether or not he is English at all:

> [t]he foreman who shows him what to do is a huge fellow with checks and nose stained bright red from broken veins. He shouts, 'Do you speak English?' 'Yes.' 'What?' 'YES!' Xan shouts back, nettled. 'I *am* English!' The man looks doubtfully at him and says, at the same volume, 'Any ID?' Xan never thought he would be mistaken for an illegal immigrant, but Lottie has had the foresight to get him to photograph his passport. (Craig 68)

Xan here is made into an Other, who needs to prove his status as an Englishman. In *The Lie of the Land* this is not expected to happen in London, as can be seen in the worries of Lottie: "'[s]top worrying, Mum. I'll be fine.' Of course, she thinks: you don't feel under scrutiny here. In London, being black or mixed-race is completely normal, like voting Labour. It's the one thing she really dislikes about country life." (Craig 276) For her, this type of othering is something that is associated with the countryside.

Othering is a way to divide people, even within national borders that are traditionally associated with unity. For Agnew borders are a crucial part of the nation, that heighten the feeling of community, as can be seen in his description: "borders are absolutely central to the definition of the state. They function to decide who is inside and who is outside in an essential opposition between the 'friends' and 'enemies' (or Romans and barbarians) into whom the world is divided." (Agnew 180) This concept of othering has also been applied to the European Union. Manfred and Leerssen argue that:

> [a]fter the Second World War, with the advent of European integration, the role of the Other has increasingly been assigned to 'the Europeans'. In England various works of future

> fiction have been published describing the ever closer European Union as a threat to the English national identity. In these Eurosceptic tales the stereotypes of Englishness hardly deviate from the established patterns. (Beller and Leerssen 149)

The way in which the European Union and English national identity are connected will be further explored in the next chapter.

Besides othering between nations, it is also a common element between dominant and minority groups. For those that are a victim of it, there is a genuine dimension of danger. In *The Lie of the Land* this can be seen in the response Xan has to the news that his mother and stepfather are moving: "Mum, Devon's full of *white people*. They'll probably turn their dogs on me." (Craig 2) Even though he is an Englishman who has been living there for a while, it is clear that Xan is never fully seen as belonging, as can be seen in this observation: "[t]he regulars in the bar seem to like him, even if they do call him 'a nice young black chap', and don't quite believe he's English." (Craig 254) Those that do not feel like he is one of them experience a disconnect between race and nationality. Skey explains how this is a common phenomenon within society when he explains that: "some people within the nation are perceived to be and treated as if they are 'more (or less) national than others', because they possess particular characteristics (skin colour, accent) and or/competencies."(Skey 89) According to Gilroy, this type of thinking about race grew from colonial times:

> [t]he empires were not simply out there – distant terminal points for trading activity where race consciousness could grow – in the torrid zones of the world at the other end of the colonial chain. Imperial mentalities were brought back home long before the immigrants arrived and altered economic, social, and cultural relations in the core of Europe's colonial systems. (Gilroy 164)

When discussing Said, Shyama and others note that he "exposes the Eurocentric universalism which established Western superiority over the East, identified as the 'Other' and the processes by which

the 'Orient' was and continues to be constructed in European thinking." (Shyama and Salil Varma 49) As shown, there are numerous instances in the novel where one group considers itself superior. For Said, it is the dynamic of othering that is crucial for creating identity and national self:

> [a]ll cultures spin out a dialectic of self and other, the subject "I" who is native, authentic, at home, and the object 'it' or 'you', who is foreign, perhaps threatening, different out there. From this dialectic comes the series of heroes and monsters, founding fathers and barbarians, prized masterpieces and despised opponents that express a culture from its deepest sense of national self-identity to its refined patriotism, and finally to is coarse jingoism, xenophobia, and exclusivist bias. (Said, *Orientalism* 40)

This chapter has tried to show that the dynamic between the countryside and the city in *The Lie of the Land* is unbalanced and that there are parallels in the way in which the empire viewed its colonies. The next chapter will focus on the ways in which people try to understand each other in *Middle England*.

CHAPTER 3 – Diverging and Converging: Reflections on a Nation in Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*

> "Can you imagine what it was like, hundreds of people, working together like that, for the war effort? What a spirit, eh? What a country we were back then!" (Coe 262)

Premise

Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* is the most recent novel out of the three novels that are the focus of this thesis. It explores many of the discussions surrounding the Brexit referendum and addresses these topics by looking at several families and individuals who are somehow connected and who hold opposing views on their nation and the referendum. Arguably at the centre is a couple, Sophie and Ian, on whom the outcome of the Brexit referendum has such an impact that it leads to their temporary separation. This can be seen in the following description of Sophie, who muses on the personal consequences of the result of the Brexit referendum:

> it had not so much been a reason as a tipping point. Ian had reacted (to her mind) so bizarrely to the referendum result, with such gleeful, infantile triumphalism (he kept using the word 'freedom' as if he were the citizen of a tiny African country that had finally won independence from its colonial oppressor) that, for the first time, she genuinely realized that she no longer understood why her husband thought and felt the way he did. (Coe 326)

Throughout the novel, Coe explores what keeps people apart and where they differ. However, he ultimately seems most interested in exploring where people meet and agree. Exemplary is the way in which the story of Jo Cox, the Member of Parliament who was killed a week before the referendum, is incorporated into the story. Coe uses part of her maiden speech to the House of Commons as his dedication for the final part of the novel. It reads: "[w]hat surprises me time and time again as I travel around the constituency is that we are far more united and have far more in common with each other than things that divide us." (Coe 313) In the novel, this unity is made concrete by Sophie and Ian reuniting and deciding to invest in their future: "Sophie and Ian's

tentative gesture of faith in their equivocal, unknowable future: their beautiful Brexit baby." (Coe 421) Since this thesis focuses on differing views on the nation, in the context of the referendum, this chapter will focus more on the divisions found in the novel, than how people converge.

The City vs the Country

As argued previously, both *The Cut* and *The Lie of the Land* explore the relationship and the divide between the countryside and the city. This can also be seen in *Middle England* with a similar disconnect and a similar sentiment of people not feeling at home in their own country. An example can be found in the exchange between Sophie and Sohan, who just moved away from London:

> 'I'm going to be surrounded by all this [the countryside] from now on. Can't you see the horror of that?' 'But this is England. You're fascinated by England. It's what you're writing a book about.' 'So? Just because I'm writing a book about it doesn't mean I want to live in it, for Christ's sake. Do you think Orwell wanted to live in Airstrip One?' 'He was writing a dystopia. A nightmare.' 'Which is what my life's about to become!' (…) my soon-to-be-husband – is dragging me away from everything I love and forcing me to live among a strange, alien people. Miles from civilization.' (Coe 362)

Just like Franco in *The Cut* and Quentin in *The Lie of the Land*, Sohan feels like he has been exiled to an undesirable place that he does not feel like he belongs in. In *The Cut*, Grace experiences a feeling of unease when she has to talk with English people from the country. This mirrors Sophie's experience when she is in the countryside, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

> [i]n her fatigued, hungover state, a feeling of unreality began to steal over her. She suddenly had the powerful feeling that she did not understand this place, that she had no sense of the life it contained. Surely this was wrong: her childhood home was less than a hundred miles from here, and in any case, this was England after all – her country – but she felt wholly estranged from this corner of it. For the last ten years, despite the time she had spent in the Midlands, her heart had always been in London. She considered herself a Londoner, now,

> and from London she could not only travel by train to Paris or Brussels more quickly than she could come here, but she would probably feel far more at home on the Boulevard Saint-Michel or Grand-Place than she did sitting on this bench. (Coe 368)

Sophie feels more connected to other, more cosmopolitan environments that transcend her national borders. In his analysis of the importance of borders as a social fact, John Agnew shows how economic spheres of influence are no longer necessarily connected to the bordered world of the nation-state when he states that "economic organization is increasingly working at odds with a bordered world. In this construction, we are living in a world that is increasingly global and local and decreasingly national." (Agnew 182) Sophie feels a stronger connection with communities outside of her own national borders. During the Brexit referendum this was also a source of division within the electorate, as is described by Shaw who states that:

> [f]or many undecided voters it was difficult to perceive the benefits of a vague supranational identity when their national identity was much more tangible and intrinsically tied to their cultural memory and day-to-day lives. Such cosmopolitan citizenship seemed to be the purview of privileged elites alone. (Shaw 24)

The European Union

A large part of the discourse in the novels focuses on things that are not directly related to the European Union. However, there are examples where the EU is directly addressed, primarily as an entity that has too much power, that interferes with the nation and where there is a struggle for control. In *Middle England t*his can be seen in an exchange between a Member of Parliament and somebody from her constituency: "'[o]f course, the EU knew better than us,' said Dennis (…) But hopefully one of these days we can go back to being a sovereign nation again, and start making our own laws. Not that you seem to be in any hurry to get on with it." (Coe 353) The formation of English identity, or lack thereof, has been discussed several times in this thesis. Wellings explores the

relationship between English identity and Euroscepticism. He argues that opposition to the European Union is crucial to the formation of Englishness:

> this book attempts to re-direct our gaze more fully towards Europe when seeking to understand English nationalism and argues that *resistance to European integration* (…) laid the foundations of contemporary English nationalism. (Wellings 5)

Just like in the novels, the various debates about the Brexit referendum are often about anything other than the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union. This would imply that for many voters the Brexit referendum was not really about the question that was put on the ballot, namely; 'should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?' (Henderson et al. 189) In the novel, this is suggested in a discussion between two main characters, Doug and Nigel: "people don't really care about the European Union. Whenever the public are asked to list their main political concerns they say things like education or housing, and the EU doesn't even come in the top ten." (Coe 182) Kumar theorizes that the debate about English identity itself has always been about something else. He states that "the discourse on national character in England – and perhaps elsewhere – was as a vehicle for expressing political concerns of a more general kind, more particularly the propensity for liberty and the type of 'public spirit' developed by different political traditions." (Kumar 470) Kumar furthers his argument by stating that England has not had the same development of nationalism like other nations have had: "Englishness never evolved into a true nationalism, if by that we mean a well-defined sense of national identity similar to that of its continental neighbours." (Kumar 470) However, in *Middle England* individuals certainly experience a clear national identity and a clear idea about what group they feel they belong to.

Sport and Nationalism

Nationalism takes on many forms, and one of the organized outlets for it is sports. Wellings explains its importance for English nationalism:

> sport provided an outlet for expressions of Englishness, but it was one which reinforced the post-war notion of decline even as it touted victories over former foes. (…) Even the 2005 selection of London to host the 2012 Olympic Games was seen as a victory in itself and one presented in much of the press as all the more enjoyable as it was claimed as a victory over the French, celebrated in Trafalgar Square in the bicentennial year of Nelson's victory. Again what was noticeable in the reactions was a sense of disbelief, rather than a confirmation of national superiority. (Wellings 204)

The opening ceremony of the 2012 Olympic Games in London is an important moment in *Middle England.* It is an event that is described from the point of view of most of the lead characters. The Olympic Games, and especially the opening, is a moment when a nation gets to present itself to the world. It is something that binds those who inhabit the nation and a moment where they can share their national pride, even though they do not know this about each other. This mirrors Anderson's central point as explored in *Imagined Communities*. Anderson states that the nation "is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (Anderson 6) This notion that different people experience the idea of their nation in different ways can be seen in Coe's novel. In it, the characters all respond to different elements in the opening, such as the Queen jumping out of a helicopter, the invention of the Internet or literary references, that induces a sense of nationalism and patriotic pride. Doug, one of the central characters in the novel, suddenly experiences a surge of national pride that he has not felt before:

> what he felt while watching it were the stirrings of an emotion he hadn't experienced for years – had never really experienced at all, perhaps, having grown up in a household where

> all expressions of patriotism had been considered suspect: national pride. Yes, why not come straight out and admit it, at this moment he felt proud, proud to be British, proud to be part of a nation which had not only achieved such great things but could now celebrate them with such confidence and irony and lack of self-importance. (Coe 132)

For Gilroy, Englishness for a long time was driven by sport and war. He claims that "it is around sport that (…) modern formations of national identity have been powerfully articulated. (…) For about three decades, the brash motto of true-Brit sporting nationalism was supplied by a curious boast: "Two world wars and one World Cup, doo dah, doo dah." (Gilroy 117)

War and National Identity

Gilroy and others have further explored the impact of world wars on the formation of English national identity. Gilroy tries to understand the importance of especially the Second World War and the continuing influence of its War imagery:

> [w]hy are those martial images – the Battle of Britain, the Blitz, and the war against Hitler – still circulating and more importantly, still defining the nation's finest hour? How is it that their potency can be undiminished by the passage of time, and why do they alone provide the touchstone for the desirable forms of togetherness that are used continually to evaluate the chaotic, multicultural present and find it lacking? (Gilroy 95)

The relationship between London and the rest of England has been discussed several times in this thesis. For Wendy Webster, who studied Englishness in connection with the empire, the dominance of London was an effect of the Second World War. She states that: "[t]o demonstrate the spirit of the nation, collective effort was strongly emphasized, and London was constructed as a community that stood for nation." (Webster 21) Eaglestone furthers this by explaining how the War brought together the nation as a whole: "the War also stands for a *shared common purpose:* a sense of a national unity, deep comradeship across classes and, within the UK, national identities, when 'none was for a party' and 'all were for the state'" (Eaglestone, *Cruel* 97) In *Middle England,* this feeling of

unity can be seen when Colin, Benjamin's father, says: "[c]an you imagine! Can you imagine what it was like, hundreds of people, working together like that, for the war effort? What a spirit, eh? What a country we were back then! 'Whatever happened to all that?" (Coe 262) Besides unity, this national pride also has consequences for the group somebody is a part of, as is identified by Eaglestone:

> [t]he War also stands for *defiance* against the enemy, against the odds, alone, and with that, a kind of *certainty* and *pride*: that 'we' know who 'we' are. This means it has a kind of 'meta' meaning too: if you don't share this feeling, you are not 'one of us', not rooted in the same past. The War is a kind of signifier for a rooted Britishness or even Englishness: interwoven with Empire and race. (Eaglestone, *Cruel* 97)

Migration

One of the subjects that divides people is migration; this subject is addressed several times in *Middle England*. It also played an important role in the Brexit referendum, and the different views on it can be seen in the way people voted. This is shown by Hobolt, who states that the

> British Leave Voters were motivated by anti-immigration and anti-establishment feelings. They also reveal stark demographic divided, as the less well-educated and the less well-off voted in large majorities to leave the EU, while the young graduates in the urban centres voted to stay. (Hobolt 1260)

In the novel discussions about migration are heated and keep people apart from each other: "everything seemed to hinge upon immigration and border control. The tone changed too. It became more bitter, more personal, more rancorous. One half of the country seemed to have become fiercely hostile towards the other." (Coe 299) Having a different view on the subject is even compared with living in different universes, as can be witnessed in a scene where Sophie hears what her mother-in-law's position on migration is:

> the unspeakable truth: that Sophie (and everyone like her) and Helena (and everyone like her) might be living cheek-by-jowl in the same country, but they also lived in different universes, and these universes were separated by a wall, infinitely high, impermeable, a wall built out of fear and suspicion and even – perhaps – a little bit of those most English of all qualities, shame and embarrassment. (Coe 90)

Helena is the mother of Ian, and she represents the well-off part of the nation. She mentions to Sophie that she agrees with Enoch Powell's speech on immigration. Gilroy has written about this speech, and he connects it with colonialism by stating that:

> Enoch Powell's notorious speeches on immigration played with (…) powerful feelings of aggression, guilt, and fear and articulated them as a violent racist politics. We should think back to his memorable imagery not of the "rivers of blood," which in 1968 he predicted would be the catastrophic outcome of all Britain's mistaken attempts to mix the races, but of the even more terrifying prospect of a wholesale reversal of the proper ordening of colonial power. (Gilroy 111)

The ideas of Enoch Powell played a further role in the Brexit referendum as explored by Andrew Gamble, who researched the political implications of the referendum, he stated that: "[t]he people reclaim the right to determine how the country should be governed, the character of its political arrangements, and its place in the world. This romantic notion of sovereignty is associated with Enoch Powell." (Gamble 1216)

Political Correctness / Freedom of Speech

Several characters in Middle England are very concerned with what they experience as a restriction of freedom of speech in the form of political correctness. There is much discontent among different groups in the novel. Helena is one of the most outspoken characters on the subject, evident from her lament that

> we do not have freedom, of speech or of anything else (…) Our views are not allowed to be expressed on television or in the newspapers. Our state broadcaster ignores us, or treats us with contempt. Voting becomes a waste of time when all the politicians subscribe to the same fashionable opinions. Of course I voted for Mr Cameron, but not with any enthusiasm. His values are not our values. He actually knows as little of our way of life as his political opponents do. They're all on the same side, really – and it's not our side. (Coe 213)

Helena feels that she is no longer represented in a medium that Anderson has identified as crucial to the birth of the nation: "the basic structure of two forms of imaging which first flowered in Europe in the eighteenth century [are] the novel and the newspaper. For these forms provided the technical means for 're-presenting' the kind of imagined community that is the nation." (Anderson 24) Even though Helena does not feel represented, she does still feel power: "if the time ever comes when we are given the opportunity to let him know what we really think of him [Cameron], then believe me – we will take it." Helena and others like her had the opportunity to show what they thought when Cameron called the Brexit referendum.

Privilege

Just like in the other novels that are the focus of this thesis, socio-economic status plays a vital role in the way in which the characters in *Middle England* experience their nation and how people interact. For somebody like Doug, his enjoyment of many privileges separate him from others and become an obstacle in the way in which he can do his job as a columnist. He is very much aware of this, as can be seen in the following exchange:

> '[y]es, but I'm … out of touch with all that, you see? That resentment, that sense of hardship. I don't *feel* it. I'm just a spectator. I live in this bloody … cocoon. I live in a house in Chelsea worth millions. My wife's family own half of the Home Counties. I don't know what I'm talking about. And it shows up in my writing. Of course it does.' (Coe 15)

His bubble means that he can no longer connect with a large part of the world around him. Sophie faces a similar problem, but she seems unaware of her privileges. Others certainly perceive her as being part of a privileged group, and comment on how she is not part of their world:

> 'I'm ordinary.' 'No you're not.' She bristled. 'Excuse me?' 'I'm talking about people who live in the real world.' 'I live in the real world. At least I think I do. Are you telling me I'm hallucinating it all?' 'Of course not. I'm just saying there's a difference between what you do and what people like me do.' 'What, and that makes your life more "real" than mine, somehow?' 'People need forklift trucks.' 'I'm not sure I do.' 'Of course you do. You just don't think about it.' 'Well, maybe you need paintings just as much. Only *you* don't think about *that.*' (Coe 155)

Throughout *Middle England,* people keep discovering that there are different worlds and views within their nation, and instead of this being a source of curiosity and a good base for a discussion, it often leads to confrontation and separation.

CONCLUSION

Scholars such as Anderson, Said and Leerssen have shown that national and cultural identities are constructions. A decisive moment such as the outcome of the Brexit referendum shows how people have different constructions with regard to their common nation. This thesis explored what is distinct about English identity and showed the fragmented way in which it is formed. The chosen novels explore how these constructions influence both individuals and relationships. Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut*, Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land*, and Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* show how people are confronted with the fact that they have been imagining their nation in fundamentally different ways than their fellow countrymen.

All three novels explore what it means to be English, and its authors are interested in analysing and describing the relationships between people. There are several recurring themes that are a source of division between people. One of them is the English class society that separates people in terms of opportunities they have and that hinders an open exchange of experiences and knowledge between groups. It leads to a fundamental gap between people, where they often feel uncomfortable around each other. In the novels people do try to understand each other, but are often ultimately too far apart to really do so. As such the novelists often employ imagery that portray people as being from different worlds. Another recurring variation on the theme of different worlds can be found in the different ways in which the city and the countryside are described. The world of the 'Other' is described as alien and uncomfortable, and there are many prejudices involved. People inhabit the same national borders, but their lives are fundamentally different, to the extent that the descriptions and interactions could also be applied to a different country. A theme related to this is the exploration of differences between cosmopolitan and communitarian ideologies. In the case of the first, identity transcends national borders, because people feel more comfortable with other cosmopolitan communities that exist in different nations. With communitarian ideologies people feel more at home with more local groups that also do not align with national borders. Anderson's theories about the nation as an imagined community can

therefore be applied to communities that exist within, as well as communities that transcend national borders. It was beyond the scope of this thesis to fully explore this, but it could be worthwhile to research how these identities are constructed on virtual platforms that transcend national borders, such as massive online communities, or social media.

The themes previously mentioned impact power dynamics between people and regions. One group has more privileges and opportunities, while the other group is more dependent and therefore vulnerable. Even though the context is very different, this power dynamic does mirror colonial dynamics. This shows how Said's theories also have relevance outside of a colonial context. It was beyond the scope of this thesis, but it would be interesting to further explore if and how this is tied in with the fall of the empire, with finding a new position in the world and forming a new identity. Often people in the novels do not feel at home in their own nation and find little comradery with their fellow countrymen. People keep interacting with each other, only to discover that there a different views on subject matters relevant to their nation. Instead of this being a source of curiosity and a way of getting to know each other better, it often leads to confrontation and separation. Subjects such as migration, class society, geography and politics create subcultures that are separated by fault lines. These fault lines were both made explicit by the outcome of the Brexit referendum and have deepened because of it.

This thesis has explored the novel as a logical place to search for answers for a topical discussion such as the Brexit referendum. Research has shown that there is a connection between literature and national identity. Studying literature is therefore a way to study the essence of a nation and to explore questions surrounding national identity. The novel offers an unique opportunity to get a greater understanding of what the referendum was about. It is a place where complex issues can be reflected on from a multitude of different possible angles, be it social, political, economic or philosophical. It thereby gives insight into the state of the nation. It is also a way in which characters can explore their differences and similarities in a safe environment, away

from political, economic or social repercussions. It is expected that in the next coming years Brexit will continue to play an important role in both British and European politics. A greater understanding of the reasons why people voted the way they did, and a greater insight into its underlying issues, could lead to a better position to make political decisions that will still need to be made. It gives space to take a step back and offers time for reflection, something that is easily missed in the pressure of having to find answers to questions that have arisen as a result of the outcome.

This thesis focused on the divisions in national identity that can be found in the chosen novels. It is worth also exploring the commonalities that can be found in literature. In a nation that is still strongly divided it is worth to explore what people have in common in order to move forward as a nation. The question put to the electorate in the Brexit referendum called for a binary answer. This thesis has shown that there are many aspects to the debate about the future of a nation, and it would seem that the answer to a binary question is too simple to really understand the underlying interests and needs.

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