

## Thresholds and Borders: Reflections on the Art of Brexit

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Figure 1. Anish Kapoor, 'A Brexit, A Broxit, We All Fall Down', 2019. © Anish Kapoor. All rights reserved.

In the spring of 2019, weeks before Theresa May's ignominious exit led to the appointment of Boris Johnson as the UK's Prime Minister, two exhibitions were focal points on the London art calendar. In the gathering gloom of Brexit, at the National Portrait Gallery, Martin Parr's *Only Human* ran from March till May and brought together a selection of images from the photographer's long career that spoke eloquently to the political moment Britain was passing through. In another part of the city, artist Anish Kapoor had a solo show at Pitzhanger Manor, from April till August, with his star work that summer, cheekily titled 'A Brexit, A Broxit, We All Fall Down', not part of the show proper but created on commission for *The Guardian* around the same time. A testimony to the psycho-social darkness into which Britain is still plunged, it was in the best tradition of Kapoor's practice:

acerbic, violent, sinister. The most plausible response to the train wreck that is Brexit, Kapoor seemed to be saying, is an outburst of dark laughter. When collective good sense lies in a pitiful mess and the only response to the Brexit disaster appears to be incoherent rage, why not borrow a line from the topsy-turvy world of nursery rhymes? It was art made for Internet virality, and viral it became — admired and lampooned in equal measure across social media platforms.

The British-born Parr and the Indian-born, naturalised British citizen Kapoor both dealt with questions of identity, diversity, multiculturalism, borders and migration in their work, though their registers were starkly different. Parr's *Only Human* interrogated the meaning of 'Britishness' in a vividly naturalistic mode. Although the show drew on his studies from



Figure 2. Martin Parr, images from *Only Human*. © Magnum Photos, courtesy National Portrait Gallery, London and Rocket Gallery, London.



Figure 3. Martin Parr, images from *Only Human*. © Magnum Photos, courtesy National Portrait Gallery, London and Rocket Gallery, London.

the last twenty years, its unifying idea was best encapsulated by a subset of images that Parr had made for BBC One to capture the eclectic diversity that informs contemporary British identity. His engagement with debates over belonging and unbelonging, many of which were stoked by the Brexit referendum in 2016, took the form of documenting the sheer range of communities that live in contemporary Britain. From *bhangra* dancers in Edinburgh, to vacationers on the beach in Cornwall, to a Sikh man standing forlorn in Willenhall Market, no one escaped Parr's ironic but empathetic gaze. An Asian student is photographed at the end of the Magdalene ball at Cambridge, one of the historic bastions of white 'Britishness', passed out after a night of presumably wild revelry. Contrast this vignette with the image of a group of (mostly) white people standing on the beach in Cornwall, with their backs to the camera. A red flag flutters, signalling a warning against a choppy sea, though it also portends a symbolic danger. Only a solitary child turns away from the scene to look out of the frame, while the rest seem to be lost, staring into an uncertain future.

Through the years, Parr has photographed other vacationers on beaches, sprawled on the sand or posing in swimwear (a striking example of the latter being the close-up of an elderly woman holding up her lapdog to

the camera). His intent – to document the varieties of British identity – may not have changed over time, but those were the less elegiac days, or at least that's what the earlier photographs seem to say. In the later work, we notice a ubiquity of signs of national identity – flags, graffiti, placards – and a tension that is palpable in bodies and faces. And yet, although Parr voted for Britain to remain in the European Union, he never turned his faith in the multicultural fabric of his society into a partisan agenda to push forward in his work. Deeply invested in understanding the building blocks of British identity and the roots of discontent, he went on to make, as part of this evolving series, several striking portraits of those who voted to leave the EU, many of whom are living in Lincolnshire, the area that recorded the highest proportion of pro-Brexit votes in the referendum.

As opposed to Parr's documentary impulse, marked by his close-ups of human faces and bodies, Kapoor casts a more panoramic eye over the map of the British Isles. He depicts Brexit as a bloody schism within Britain, dividing races, ethnicities and communities more sharply than ever. In his imagination, the execution of Brexit results in a physical rupture. A garish scar opens, as Britain's inner geography is mutilated by violently redrawn borders. Once the nation is torn asunder, its broken populace cannot be unified into a wholeness again.

What hope, Kapoor seems to be saying, does humanity have in the face of such a self-annihilating chasm created by the politically blind?

To the detractors of this work (of which there are several, if we go by a cursory survey of social media responses),<sup>1</sup> Kapoor's imagery seems bluntly obvious, even simplistic. But the fissure that he depicts has a terrifying resonance in many parts of the world we currently live in. In the United States, for instance, Donald Trump's administration is desperate to erect a physical wall to demarcate the country from Mexico. Over the last decade, Myanmar has imploded to tackle its so-called Rohingya problem, resulting in the eviction of hundreds of thousands of stateless Muslims from the Rakhine region. In India, from where I write this essay, a draconian attempt by the ruling government to integrate the disputed Kashmir valley into the polity has pushed the nation to the brink of civil strife. Across vast swathes of the globe, especially in the postcolonial nations of Asia and Africa, a version of the abyss that Kapoor depicts has been opening up beneath the feet of populations, hurling them into a chasm of despair. As entire countries are left perched on these precipices, what does the way ahead look like? After such divisions, can there be ever any possibility of real reconciliation?

The responses by Kapoor and Parr are among the many creative modes of grappling with these questions, which have also inspired newer forms of fiction writing. Between the earthy realism of Parr's photographs and the poetry of Kapoor's nightmare, artists like Susan Stockwell, Michael Landy and John Springs have harnessed their responses into styles that range from blatant caricature to arch symbolism. Stockwell, for instance, also plays with the cartographic trope: her map of Great Britain, 'Jerusalem — Brexit', is made up of green wool and looks critically misshapen. Springs has painted grotesque portraits of political leaders in a contemporary upgrade of Toulouse-Lautrec, while Landy's work, with its profusion of British flags and slogans, is provocative and direct. In the literary sphere, Ali Smith has crafted a series of novels specifically designed to respond to the shifting sands of Brexit. In her projected seasonal quartet – of which *Autumn*, *Winter* and *Spring* are published at the time of writing this essay – Smith has put the notion of novelty back into the novel. As she explained in an interview in *The Guardian*, in 2016, Smith had gone to her publisher Simon Prosser with a radical proposal.

Can we do a series of books which we publish really close to the time of their writing – a kind of keeping the novel novel project – returning it to the notion of 'the new'? (Armitstead np)

Prosser and his team were up for the challenge. Written in real time over the last three years, on the heels of the unfolding political crisis, and published swiftly, the novels in the seasonal quartet graze against the tide of the vanishing present.



Figure 4. Susan Stockwell, 'Jerusalem — Brexit', 2010. Knitted map of Great Britain. © Susan Stockwell. Photo © Seb Camilleri.



Figure 5. Michael Landy, 'Queen Backs Brexit', 2016. Oil stick on paper, 30 × 22 cm. 11 3/4 × 8 5/8 in. © Michael Landy. Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery. Photo: Richard Ivey.

In Smith's delicately engineered plots, fiction dissolves into fact, art trespasses on life, and the chatter of social media mingles with everyday speech. While so-called 'foreigners' appear comfortingly familiar, nativists come across as awkward misfits. Smith's gift for subverting the premise of staid novelistic convention and writing against the grain of the readers' expectations are also discernible in Olivia Laing's *Crudo* (2018), and – maybe to a lesser extent – in Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy (*Outline*, 2014; *Transit*, 2016; and *Kudos*, 2018), which is made up of novels that also unfold close to real time. Taking off on breaking news or social media outrage, these works exist in the nebulous zone between fact and fiction. They deal in 'ficto-facts', to borrow a term coined by J M Coetzee in his novel, *Diary of a Bad Year* (53). Tweets, Facebook posts, clickbait headlines: every bit of trivia and ephemera, every earth-shaking announcement becomes grist for the mill of this mode of writing.

On the other end of the literary spectrum is a work like Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, which, while centred around the anxieties and afflictions caused by borders, does not indulge in stylistic pyrotechnics. Called 'the first post-Brexit novel' by John Freeman (np), Hamid's story is a testament to the resilience of people whose lives are violently uprooted and their stubborn refusal to be crushed by the vicissitudes of inter-continental migration. His narrative opens *in medias res*, in 'a city swollen by refugees but still mostly at peace, or at least not yet openly

at war' (1). A young man, Saeed, meets a young woman, Nadia, in this limbo, they fall in love, and their story takes off when the world around them begins to fall apart. As the veneer of stability that held their lives together snaps, Saeed and Nadia decide to flee. This decision sets them off on a journey halfway across the globe in search of a refuge from the horrors that chased them away from home. And as they begin to cross border after border, at the risk of their lives, they are at each stop threatened with denied entry, the fable-like aura of Hamid's narrative morphing into a fact of twenty-first-century life: the need to keep moving, triggered by confusion and calamity, in order to stay alive.

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Calamities are often the starting point of creativity. The world, as we know it, breaks down and it falls on artists to pick up the pieces, make sense of them and then put everything back together into a semblance of wholeness. Like any moment of upheaval, the Brexit vote brought in its wake the threat of disintegration — of the broader social fabric, a shared sense of community and moral values. Yet, for this very same reason, it also created a promise of new stories.

It is at the borders, at the precise moment when a foreigner wishes to cross over the threshold to enter a new country, that one of the most ancient transactions between human beings is enacted. On the intersection of Thebes and Delphi, Oedipus is stopped by the Sphinx. He has to answer the riddle posed by the creature before he can proceed. Thousands of years later, the same ritual is repeated ad infinitum at immigration offices and arrival lounges. *Who are you? Where are you from? Why have you come here?* Every newly landed guest, whether they have arrived illegally by boats on perilous seas or by a flight with legitimate identification and entry permits, is asked these questions by border officers. Under the crisp legitimacy of investigation, these queries really amount to invitations to strangers to tell their stories — and to make those stories credible enough for them to be granted entry into the foreign country.

'Story is an ancient form of generosity, an ancient form that will tell us everything we need to know about the contemporary world', Ali Smith wrote memorably in her introduction to *Refugee Tales* (Herd and Pincus), a project of which she is a patron. '[The] story has always been a welcoming-in, is always one way or another a porous art form where sympathy and empathy are only at the beginning of things' (qtd. in Armitstead np). *Refugee Tales* aims at telling stories of people who have been detained indefinitely under the United Kingdom's immigration policy. While its scope may be much different from that of a work of art or literature, its goal is the same: to document and amplify the plight of immigrants, put a human face to statistical data and to interrogate the

principles of hospitality that determine whether these people should be welcomed into the UK or turned away.

The art of Brexit, if we can call it that, seems fixated on borders and boundaries, as has been the Brexit process itself. Alongside reflections on division, there have been implicit and explicit deliberations on transgression and acceptance — the means by which one can solve the Sphinx riddle that enables entry, or fail and be expelled. In the novels and art objects, we discern a drive to work through these dilemmas, to understand and complicate the moment of being welcomed in or turned away. In Smith's quartet, particularly in *Winter*, as well as in Hamid's *Exit West*, the idea of hospitality runs like an unspoken but abiding theme. It manifests itself in their plots both subtly and overtly, manipulating our sympathies, making us alert to nuances that may otherwise fail to make a dent in our consciousness through the foggy rhetoric of international law and policy. The visual analogy of reading these texts would be looking at Parr's photographs. Sometimes hard truths leap out of the frame, in the form of people proudly waving flags of England, for instance. Then there are symbolic gestures and subtle insinuations: embodied in the child breaking away from the group on the beach or in the turbaned Sikh man standing in Willenhall Market, holding a tote bag on which the British flag is printed.

Set in the run-up to the Christmas of 2016, *Winter* tells the story of a family coming together to celebrate, marking the convivial spirit of the season. At Christmas, the Christian virtues of love and charity are encouraged to be called forth to thaw the glacial landscape of interpersonal relationships; it is a time when the limits of hospitality are tested, well and truly. At the heart of the novel is Sophia Cleves, with whom the story begins, who is expecting her son Arthur to come home from London with his girlfriend, Charlotte. Widowed for years and estranged from her only sibling Iris, Sophia lives alone in a fifteen-bedroom house in the heart of the country. In the days leading up to her guests' arrival, her only company is a torso-less head of a child — not scary, just a little bit uncanny — which hovers over her like a helium balloon. Although there are odd clues about the identity of the apparition (could it be Newlina, the local saint who is known to roam around headless?), nothing certain is known about it, except that it is a benign visitation. It follows Sophia around — too real to be dismissed as a figment of her imagination and too fantastic to be anything else — as she struggles to run her solitary life of retirement.

Once a successful businesswoman, Sophia is, like Shakespeare's Portia, 'a lady richly left' — left with riches but also richly *left*, in the sense of being abandoned, emotionally high and dry. Sophia may be the owner of a mansion, but there is a gaping void at the centre of her being. Her son isn't close to her; she

hasn't seen her sister, Iris, her only other surviving family, in decades. A supporter of Brexit and suspicious of foreigners, Sophia is the counterpoint to Iris, who, in her seventies, is feisty and politically left leaning. The Remain-supporting Iris has spent her youth rebelling against the status quo, participating in anti-nuclear power marches and fighting for the rights of the disenfranchised. As her younger sister stewes in her gloomy country house, Iris is still at large in the world.

In the Dickensian frame of *Winter*, Sophia is reminiscent of Ebenezer Scrooge, averse to welcoming her own kin into her home. Her close-mindedness has rubbed off on her son as well. An aspiring nature writer, Arthur (or Art, as he is known) makes a living by combing the Internet for copyright infringements. He is a stereotypical child of the neo-capitalist era, unable to look past his self-interest. A politically uncommitted millennial, Art is happy to assist with surveillance and invent stories on his nature blog to appear authentic, but Internet research is as far as he deigns to venture into the world, refusing to get his hands dirty with messy realities. Enraged by his unrelenting hypocrisy and pusillanimity, his girlfriend Charlotte walks out on him after a mighty row, but not before she destroys his laptop and hacks into his Twitter account to expose him as a fraud. More confused than heartbroken, Art decides to rent a decoy girlfriend in response and take her to his mother's for Christmas — partly to save face before family but also perhaps because he is lonely and in need of company.

It is with the entry of Lux, who agrees to impersonate Charlotte for a few days for a fee of £1,000, that the plot begins to thicken. With her multiple piercings and distinct accent, Lux is recognisably foreign — a Croatian student who came to England for higher education but who has since fallen off the academic map. Drawn to Britain because of her love for Shakespeare, especially for his play *Cymbeline*, Lux finds herself in a world not unlike the one described by the Bard. *Cymbeline*, as Sophia reminds Lux, is set in 'a kingdom subsumed in chaos, lies, powermongering, division and a great deal of poisoning and self-poisoning' (Smith, *Winter* 200). She seems to be describing the exact anarchy in which contemporary Britain is subsumed. Describing a situation that feels painfully real not only to people living in twenty-first-century Britain but also to the members of the family with whom she has agreed to spend Christmas, Lux adds it does feel

like the people in the play are living in the same world but separately from each other, like their worlds have somehow become disjointed or broken off each other's worlds. (Smith, *Winter* 201)

The toxic influence of Brexit, as evidenced in art and literature of the recent past, has resulted in individuals and communities floating about like small islands in an

island nation. Lux is one of these unmoored entities, part of the debris of social disruption caused by the referendum. She could be a character in one of Parr's photographs; we can almost imagine her as a young woman defiantly staring back at the camera, a foreign-looking face that stands out in the sea of Britishness. She is the conundrum Sophia must grapple with. Lux is the guest, who must be hosted, especially at a time when it's seen as the duty of every good family to be hospitable. But Lux also happens to be one of the faceless millions who Sophia considers a threat. The encounter between these two women exposes the precarious premise on which the very notion of hospitality is founded.

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In one of his final tracts, *Of Hospitality*, French philosopher Jacques Derrida confronts the radical dichotomies that underwrite the terms in which acts of hospitality are often enacted. 'Does hospitality consist in interrogating the new arrival? Does it begin with the question addressed to the newcomer ... what is your name?' he asks, before posing a counterpoint.

Or else does hospitality begin with the unquestioning welcome, in a double effacement, the effacement of the question and the name? Is it more just and more loving to question or not to question? to call by the name or without the name? (27–28)

Hospitality, as Derrida goes on to argue (using the specific example of Sophocles' play, *Oedipus at Colonus*, among other texts), is a ritual that is enacted at the borders, with the coming together of strangers and foreigners. Such a gesture is guided by a higher law — the humanitarian principle of unconditional welcome that must be extended to every guest. But it is also subject to the specific laws and customs of the land, contingent upon the social and political contracts that control the lives of a land's inhabitants. These opposing forces, inherent in the act of hospitality, turn it into an almost impossible gesture. Even when invoked with the best of intentions, it can never fulfil the revolutionary promise of unconditional welcome.

In Sophia's meeting with Lux we observe the various stages of Derrida's articulation, beginning with the confusion over Lux's name, especially after her real identity is revealed. Should Lux still be addressed as 'Charlotte'? Should she be given back her rightful name? Does the truth about Lux — the fact that not only is she a dissembler but also a foreigner of uncertain legal standing — affect the terms of Sophia's hospitality towards her? (Even more troubling for Sophia is the other duty imposed on her — to be welcoming towards her sister Iris, who she has never been able to love unconditionally, and is now suddenly forced to spend Christmas with under the same roof, after not seeing her for many years.)

The erasure and recovery of identities after crossing a border — Lux turning into Charlotte, then turning back into Lux, in *Winter* — is a trope that Hamid also plays with. At the beginning of *Exit West*, we have two living, breathing, flesh-and-blood characters, Saeed and Nadia, whose love for each other is conveyed to the reader in intensely sensual terms. Saeed is gentle and docile, in awe of the mercurial Nadia, who, donning a burqa, drives a bike around the streets of the unnamed town they live in. She smokes on her terrace and smuggles Saeed into her lodgings, also disguised in a burqa. We hear the cacophony of the everyday life of the city, envision the sights Hamid describes and smell the odour of humanity that floats in the air. But as the repressive regime, under which the couple lives, tightens its grip on their lives, they become desperate to leave. A freak accident kills Saeed's mother, making their safety even more precarious. At long last, through the intervention of a network of touts, who have access to keys to mysterious doors that literally transport — or teleport — desperate millions to far-off cities like Los Angeles, London and Mykonos, Saeed and Nadia escape. And with this exodus, begins the gradual erasure of their identities. From individuals with distinct histories, they turn into faceless immigrants overnight. Lumped together with the wretched of the earth, they struggle to make ends meet on foreign shores. The terms of hospitality, established by the laws of the land they seek refuge in, leave them robbed of their individual identities, turning them instead into numbers in the ever-growing statistics of the refugee count. It is only with the possibility of being welcomed into a new country that they can hope to recover their dignity, their selves and perhaps find a new home.

And so, once again, we are returned to thresholds, to the question of borders that events like Brexit bring into focus. In *Exit West*, the physical act of border-crossing becomes the crux of the plot; in *Winter*, barriers of the mind, erected by long-held prejudices, are breached. In both instances, something is lost. Nadia and Saeed lose who they once were as they seek refuge in a new country; Sophia loses her icy edge, as she begins to warm up to Lux. These losses, therefore, also bring in their wake the promise of gain: a new home for Saeed and Nadia, a second chance at life for Sophia. If there is any silver lining to the gathering storm of Brexit, it manifests itself in this possibility of rediscovery and retrospection, to which these artists and writers draw our attention, especially in the context of contemporary Britain.

Be it in their artful evocations in Smith's novel or in the brutal predicament of Hamid's characters, be it in the appeal of Parr's title (*Only Human*) or in the gash that runs through the body of Britain in Kapoor's vision, we are repeatedly forced to confront borders that divide. Admittedly borders are the consequences of human will and volition, but it is also in the same figure of the

human that a glimmer of hope resides. Parr's photographs, for instance, are compulsively peopled, with supporters and detractors of Brexit. (In contrast, Kapoor's panoramic view of the British Isles is unremittingly bleak, zoomed so far out that no trace of the human remains visible.) Sometimes it is hard to tell the friends and the foes apart because of lack of any obvious markers of difference, which deepens the irony of their situation. Smith picks on this conundrum too in her delicate juxtaposition of Sophia and Lux. In spite of her staunch resistance to foreigners, Sophia feels a stab of connection with Lux when they meet. She is drawn to a total stranger more than anyone else in her family, a phenomenon that leaves Sophia baffled and vulnerable. Lux, in turn, is undaunted by Sophia's frosty welcome. She tries to coax the older woman to eat, speak, breathe a little.

In Sophia's predicament is, perhaps, the message of hope that the art of Brexit wants to offer. Global politics is broken and debased and we are losing even the vestiges of humanity every day. Yet, it is only through the promise of art – and of stories – that we can revive the dignity of being human and the vulnerability that stirs our empathy for others. 'THE HUMAN will always surface in art no matter its politics', as Iris puts it evocatively in a text message to Arthur at the end of *Winter*, 'THE HUMAN will have to be absent or repressed in most politics no matter its art'.

## NOTE

[1] An early negative response was from Elise Bell, who pointed out that Kapoor's work has an unfortunate

resemblance to female anatomy (np). Several Twitter handles also drew attention to the same problem.

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