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Carys Lewis

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« *We're Working Class. We're Easy Meat* ». *Le Brexit et la classe ouvrière dans The Cut d'Anthony Cartwright (2017) et Easy Meat de Rachel Trezise (2021)*

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“We’re Working Class. We’re Easy Meat.” Brexit and the Working Class in Anthony Cartwright’s *The Cut* (2017) and Rachel Trezise’s *Easy Meat* (2021)

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Introduction

- 1 Art is often perceived as a means of communicating a whole experience and within the arts, literature is valued for the possibilities it offers of representing the felt experience of the characters it depicts and the social context in which these characters exist. At certain historical moments, this social experience is felt in all its jarring, disruptive force: the emergent world views born of a lived experience bring pressure to bear on the institutions and the formations within a given society. These emergent forces are structured, even though they may not in moments of tension recognize the dissent that may lie at their heart. Artists and writers are perhaps most adept at pinpointing the social changes that lived experience will trigger; they can pick up on these changes and show them for what they are, in the words of the cultural theoretician Raymond Williams, writers are concerned with “*changes in structures of feeling*”.¹ Of all the terms associated with Williams, “structures of feeling” is perhaps one of his most idiosyncratic. Williams himself revisited his definition of the term over the years, but in this paper, it is the explanation given by Williams in his 1977 work on materialist criticism that interests us, namely his “*alternative definition*” which he calls “*structures of experience*”.² Stating that he is not particularly satisfied with the alternative since the

word 'experience' has notions of the past tense inherently tied up in it, he goes on to elucidate his understanding of the term:

We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a 'structure': as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension.³

- 2 The Brexit referendum held on 23 June 2016 uncovered voting patterns in working class, low-income, deprived areas of England and Wales that politicians and commentators alike failed to recognize inasmuch as they seemed to be in complete antithesis to the interests of these social categories. We propose in the present paper to analyse the motivations behind the working-class Brexit vote in the context of Raymond Williams's "structure of feeling". We posit that contextualizing the vote under the aegis of Williams's term might help understand how an emergent, dissenting force came to be and what rationale lies behind it. It is therefore pertinent to turn to the work of writers of fiction to uncover what mere statistics cannot reveal, by unearthing experience through emotions whilst confronting these experiences as they were felt by the working-class of England and Wales. The paper will concentrate on two novels: English writer Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut*⁴ and Welsh author Rachel Trezise's *Easy Meat*.⁵

Commonality and Community

- 3 Whilst Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* is set in his home town of Dudley in the Black Country and Rachel Trezise's *Easy Meat* takes place in the fictitious town of Rhosybol in what appears to be one of the post-industrial South Wales Valleys, both authors share common features in that they have been ploughing their own creative furrow by writing about their native left-behind areas of post-industrial Britain for some time. Cartwright has set many of his social realist novels in the Black Country, a community that he understands from within.⁶ Similarly, Rachel Trezise is no beginner when it comes to portraying the despairing population of her native Rhondda Valley: her first novel, *In and Out of the Goldfish Bowl* burst onto the Welsh literary scene in 2002 when Trezise was still a student, earning her the sobriquet of *enfant terrible* of Welsh writing in English.⁷
- 4 Both Cartwright and Trezise are especially gifted with a unique vantage point: the communities that they explore in their works are for them knowable communities; both writers have a distinct idea about who they are writing about and where that writing comes from. However, theirs is also the gaze of an outsider looking in, since both Cartwright and Trezise left their native communities to pursue their studies and, in the case of Cartwright, settled elsewhere for professional reasons.⁸ This affords them the capacity to extrapolate from their inside knowledge and represent their characters almost in the tradition of a Gramscian organic intellectual.
- 5 In the case of the two novels we have chosen to focus on, both can be said to have come about because of the Brexit result, even though this statement should be tempered by the fact noted previously that both Cartwright and Trezise have built their writing careers on giving voice to the people whom they believe have fallen through the cracks

of British society. However, both authors have clearly stated that the Brexit result spurred them into writing these particular novels. In the case of *The Cut*, the novel was a commission that Cartwright received from the publisher, Peirene Press. Indeed, Meike Ziervogel, the head of Peirene Press, stated this clearly at the beginning of the book:

The result of the EU referendum shocked me. I realized that I had been living in one part of a divided country. What fears – and what hopes – drove my fellow citizens to vote for Brexit? I commissioned Anthony Cartwright to build a fictional bridge between the two Britains that have opposed each other since the referendum day.⁹

- 6 It must have appeared as natural for the polyglot, German-born, former AFP journalist Ziervogel to use her publishing house to enable readers to understand what led to the result of the referendum. Her own shock and the realization that she “*had been living in one part of a divided country*” ironically mirrors the relationship of the protagonists of *The Cut*. Yet, Ziervogel states her motives most clearly when she confesses that the purpose of the commission was “*to build a fictional bridge between the two Britains that have opposed each other since the referendum day.*” This points to several things: that there was a clear realization on the part of pro-Remain supporters – one cannot rationally suspect Ziervogel of having supported Leave – that the UK was most certainly divided *after* the referendum result, but that this realization had not crossed their minds *before* the referendum. Secondly, Ziervogel invests the writer with a specific task – “*to build a fictional bridge*” – thus pre-determining the intentionality of the work of fiction. Whether that task has been accomplished will be up to the reader to decide. Cartwright himself has explained why he took on the commission:

I took it on for a few reasons. The first was that I thought I could do a good job – I’d written about some of the divisions and inequalities that seem to have underpinned much of the vote in my previous work. I also knew I would write about Dudley again. And it was a chance to work with Peirene, whose books I really admire, as part of a fascinating project.¹⁰

- 7 Trezise also explains that the inspiration for the novel came about from discussions with her publisher:

I had recently written two state-of-the-nation style plays for National Theatre Wales, one about the possible closure of the Port Talbot Steelworks and another about women’s rights. I realised that nobody had written a contemporary book of this nature in Wales for a long time. My publisher was interested in me addressing what had happened with the EU referendum and that seemed like the perfect opportunity to examine what had happened to our politics over the last decade or so.¹¹

- 8 Trezise goes on to say in the same interview that she considers that *Easy Meat* was in fact similar to her other works as it was set in the Rhondda Valley, albeit a fictional one. She also states that it bears the same theme as all of her work, “*the frustration of poverty*”, even though she admits to not having written anything as “*expressly about politics*” in her previous work.
- 9 Since the political event of the Brexit referendum seems to have been the spur to writing, it is tempting to see the novels as belonging to an altogether new category of British fiction, loosely termed as “BrexLit”. The term seems to have stemmed from a book review published in the *Financial Times* in 2017. Journalist Jon Daly sits back and takes stock of recent British fiction:

With the anniversary of the EU referendum this year came a crop of novels that have been identified by publishers and critics (at times, you suspect, against their

authors' wishes) as representative of Brexit fiction. And so it seems like a good time to ask what this fledgling sub-genre — call it Brexlit — might look like.¹²

- 10 Daly initially identifies two different strands of writing in Brexlit: the first he describes as “a kind of gleeful, frenzied dystopianism” and the second as “intimate novels that have retreated to the margins in order to explore the putative divide between metropolitan liberal elitism and economically deprived provincial despair”.¹³ He includes in the first category such works as Douglas Board’s *Time of Lies* (2017) and places in the second category Amanda Craig’s *The Lie of the Land* (2018), Adam Thorpe’s *Missing Fay* (2018) and Anthony Cartwright’s *The Cut*.
- 11 Daly is wary about the success of “novels about contemporary events written before the political ink has dried” which he claims “can feel like barely padded polemics, clothing in fictional form what would be better expressed in an essay or newspaper column.”¹⁴ He also suspects that this fiction will have more to say about the state of the UK since the one element that seems to be missing in the crop of early BrexLit novels reviewed by Daly is Europe or the EU. In short, “the Brexit novel — so far — turns out not to be about Europe at all, but about the littleness of Britain.”¹⁵ Since Daly’s review, other works published fall into the categories he identified: Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England* (2020), Ian McEwan’s *The Cockroach* (2019), and Ali Smith’s *Seasonal Quartet: Spring* (2020), *Summer* (2021), *Autumn* (2017), *Winter* (2018) which all speak to an English/British audience, while Wales has been confronted with its own Brexit demons, more especially in the Welsh language by such works as Manon Steffan Ros’s *Llyfr Glas Nebo* (2018) and Llwyd Owen’s *Iaith y Nefoedd* (2019).¹⁶ The flurry of writing instigated by the Brexit referendum would appear to show that British writers are avid to translate the upheaval of June 2016’s result into creative texts that might help illuminate in a different light the divisive debates that Brexit has thrown up in the UK. The very cohesion of the United Kingdom could end up being the major victim of Brexit, but before envisaging this outcome, it is worth examining whether the writers of the various nations have depicted the aftermath of the vote in different ways. National identities – in the present paper, those of England and Wales – have necessarily shifted with the result and fiction can and does take stock of these changes.¹⁷ We shall now turn in more detail to the two novels in question.
- 12 *The Cut* in its very construction is a divided affair: the novel is composed of alternating chapters simply labelled *Before* and *After* suggesting that the Brexit referendum marked a watershed in the history of the UK since nothing would be the same afterwards.¹⁸ The main characters, Cairo Jukes and Grace Trevithick, come from different worlds: Cairo, a boxer from Dudley in the Midlands, survives on occasional manual work in construction provided by his ex-wife’s *nouveau riche* Leave-voting husband, Tony Clancey. Cairo lives with his father and his daughter Stacey-Ann and the latter’s baby son, Zachariah. Their world is penetrated by the gaze of Grace, a documentary filmmaker from London, who has been sent to the Midlands town to interview the town’s people on their attitudes to the impending referendum. The novel takes place on the day of the referendum, but the narrative is a toing and froing between different moments in a more extensive temporal span. With Cairo serving as a guide to the Black Country landscape of Dudley crisscrossed by the “cuts”, the canals that symbolize the area’s past industrial wealth, Cairo and Grace’s conversations turn into a love story, one that the reader suspects will not end happily as these two characters learn more about each other yet fail to let go of their respective prejudices. The tragic ending of the

novel serves as a confirmation that the divisiveness opened up by the Brexit campaign can only end in sterile, self-inflicted violence.

13 *Easy Meat* takes place on 23 June 2016. We follow the daily grind of the main protagonist, Caleb Jenkins, a 30-something worker in a meat-packing factory, as he navigates the latest obstacles that life throws at him. Caleb lives with his cannabis-smoking, unemployed brother Mason, along with his parents in a household for which he is the sole bread-winner. Mr. Jenkins senior's business selling carpets has ground to a halt, the shop having been repossessed; it now serves as a shop selling cupcakes. Caleb had risen to ephemeral fame a few years previously when he took part in a television reality show. He is also famed for his talents as a cross-country runner. But none of this can save his day from the constant tension of confrontations with the factory's manager, Morris, and the gruelling conditions in which Caleb and his Latvian, Portuguese and Polish co-workers slave at Cleflock Beef. The novel is a first for Rachel Trezise as the main protagonist is a man, unlike her previous work.

14 Both novels tackle the question of working-class masculinity and the shifts that Caleb and Cairo both come to terms with in the world of work. The traditional model of the male as family bread-winner is no longer viable in a zero-hour contract economy, or as Mason, Caleb's brother, puts it: "*There ain't no jobs to find, Cal. I'm doing all the work the agency will give me. That's what a zero-hours contract is; zero, fucking hours!*"¹⁹ The alienated masculinity of the South Wales Valleys is echoed in the Black Country, where Cairo too questions where he stands: "*How white-collar boxing differs from that of his own people Cairo is not sure. He is blue collar. He is possibly no collar.*"²⁰ Add to the home-grown angst of this aggrieved British precariat the presence of EU migrant workers and the situation is ripe for scapegoating and finger-pointing. However, what emerges from both novels is not so much the alien presence of the protagonists' EU co-workers, but a nostalgic yearning for the same solidarity that the South Wales Valleys and the Black Country offered their working class in their industrial heyday. Caleb's vision of his Polish co-workers in the shower room is reminiscent of what his grandfather talked about in the days of the coal industry:

Caleb had noticed how tactile the Poles were in the showers. They washed each other's backs, the heels of their hands pushed into the hollows of each other's ribs like miners in the old collieries, making sure every speck of dirt was cleaned. He felt a twinge of jealousy at this. They had something he didn't; they had each other.²¹

15 Similarly, Cairo admires the ordinary heroism of a group of Kosovan Albanians, out in all weathers, having been through wars.²² These scenes would seem to undermine the over-simplistic conclusions that many political commentators drew after the referendum result: that the victory of the Leave camp stemmed entirely from the white, working-class male. Anthony Cartwright evokes this need to have a more nuanced debate as one of the main impulses for writing *The Cut*, which he saw as "*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.*"²³ Although the initial polls after the referendum seem to point to the preponderance of white, male, low-skilled workers as having voted Leave in the main,²⁴ this picture needed to be qualified and fiction appears to be the right place in which to paint a more nuanced picture.

16 Not that the signs were not there in the recent past of the deindustrialized regions of the UK. *The Cut* and *Easy Meat* are perhaps at their most trenchant in their voicing of

the "structure of feeling" that had been building up in the post-industrial communities of England and Wales, those "*affective elements of consciousness and relationships*" that froze the population into an eternal present of tension. Faced with the ghosts of a past landscape, Caleb muses about the very nature of progress, a future where the working communities are nothing more than a huge theme park for the entertainment of outsiders:

The sun gleamed on the reflective paint of the crash barrier overlooking the old colliery. Apparently, there were plans to build Europe's fastest zip line, and thrill seekers from all over the world were going to travel to fly down the length of the Bryn on a pulley at a hundred miles an hour.²⁵

- 17 Cairo as a "tatter" – the Black Country dialect word for a scrap collector – whiles away his days digging up artefacts from the past, with an archaeologist's knowledge of the phantom communities he is unearthing:

And here were the ruins, and here were the ghost people among them, lost tribes, fields of bones, that the people who had done so well from it all now wanted gone, erased. Not one reminder of where they had come from was to stay.²⁶

- 18 Despite the will to have the past erased, generational transmission of local knowledge ensures that the past is firmly present since Caleb and Cairo are receptacles for their parents' and grandparents' pent-up frustrations. However, there is no nostalgia for the hardships of the past, as Cairo's father puts it in this blunt, unromantic vision:

'Folks had hard lives. And things am easier now. Some things am easier. Although you wouldn't think it, some of the things that have happened, some of the stuff you young uns face now. What I'm saying is you shouldn't wish it back, but we never wished for the way things am today either. We need to start afresh, change direction'²⁷

- 19 The internal turmoil experienced by these voters is manifest in the words of most protagonists as they take aim at the political establishment that has failed to do anything for their communities. The British Left in particular comes in for some stinging criticism. As Caleb unravels his family's leftist affiliation,²⁸ the reader understands how the Labour-voting population of Rhosybol have slid into the media-induced stereotypes of the 'cultural wars', with nothing but their anger to sustain them, as here in the words of Caleb's dad:

The old man shook his head. 'I blame Blair and Bush. They've torn the world into two extremes with their fake wars. We've got Mosleyites or snowflakes, and nothing sensible in between. The working classes used to have real clout in Britain. Now it's these champagne socialists, these neoliberals with their degrees in media studies and hedge-fund management who think they can tell everyone else how to live.'²⁹

- 20 And there is no outlet for their rage in those parties whipping up anger against the EU. Caleb has seen through UKIP - "*The purple UKIP sticker in the phone shop window said, 'Let's Take Our Country Back'. Back to what? Caleb wondered*"³⁰ – just as soundly as Cairo, commenting on Dudley's UKIP whizz kid, Jamie Iqbal ("*big on ideas, but never his own*") launches into a diatribe against Grace when she points out that the far right was targeting "*people of colour*" to legitimize their discourse:

That was the phrase she used, people of colour, and he remembered it as something strange. Zachariah was a person of colour, Cairo was not. Was that what it meant? Jamie Iqbal was indeed a person of colour. The idea that people like Grace thought certain politics were illegitimate, and how that might make those politics more appealing to other people, that was what she didn't get. People were sick of being told what to think and not think.³¹

- 21 Indeed, there is nothing left but anger, frustration, loneliness, tiredness, hopelessness and ultimately self-harm, a whole gamut of emotions that guide decisions sometimes in the most spectacular and tragic ways. Caleb knows that he must find a way of channelling his growing anger.³² When Cairo is interviewed for Grace's documentary, he voices his and the population's anger repeatedly in "We've had enough", yet the message does not get through to the other side, as if it were spoken in a different language: " '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."³³
- 22 The left-behind are tired of talking, tired of explaining that their stasis in a perpetual state of poverty, is unbearable and that something will have to give. The tiredness is mirrored all around them in the decrepit dereliction of their physical surroundings:
- Tiredness has worked through everything, like the damp that warps the walls and the back fence and the wallpaper in the bathroom, has worked its way through the hills themselves, the undermining of the tunnels and great caverns that shift below them, slowly, not in human time, bent everything out of shape in the end. But tiredness is human, that much is certain, and the damage done.³⁴
- 23 These are people who know they have lost; it is not so much that they feel they have lost, the loss is very real because they have felt it.³⁵ Trapped in a psychological stasis between memory and the sense of loss, the left-behind of *The Cut* and *Easy Meat* lash out at the people whom they feel are most responsible for their suffering, the "liberal elite", who have plunged them into a state of anomie.³⁶
- 24 Lies and illusions abound in both novels, so most characters will find it difficult to actually locate where to direct their anger. Caleb in *Easy Meat* is lied to by his girlfriend, Savannah, who has him believe that their drunken one-night stand two years previously has resulted in his son, Oscar, whereas the truth is that Oscar is the child of a friend of Savannah's that she occasionally looks after. Yet Savannah herself is a victim of the ambient deprivation and her only answer is to direct the pain towards herself. When Caleb asks her what the deep scars are on her forearm, she gives the following explanation:
- 'Because I was angry. I was trying to finish my degree and pay my rent. My parents wouldn't lend me any money. I felt helpless. It made me feel better, like I had some control over something.'
- How could hurting herself make her feel better? That was like trying to keep yourself dry by diving into an ocean. 'You did it to spite them?' he asked her.
- 'Yeah, a little bit, if you want to put it like that'.³⁷
- 25 Cairo's final desperate gesture of self-immolation mirrors this inverted pain; in a play on words on "the cut", Cairo the aging boxer predicts the outcome of the referendum he has just voted in before his ultimate gesture of defiance:
- He never cut, barely ever, and if he did the blood would come slow and they could stem it and hide it. Cuts were never a problem. Getting hit was never a problem. They voted to relight the fires. He will be the furnace and the flames.³⁸
- 26 For the left-behind, leaving the EU represented the ultimate gesture of violence. In *Easy Meat* a character from Ebbw Vale expresses the momentous shock that the Brexit referendum result could represent: " 'Chuck a hand grenade in, I reckon,' the man said. 'See what happens'."³⁹

Post-devolutionary angst and the Brexit result

27 Attitudes towards the EU are not explicitly rendered by either of the main characters of *Easy Meat* or *The Cut*, but when they are expressed, they are redolent with the sense of hopelessness that was long instilled in both the South Wales Valleys and the Black Country due largely to policies enacted by successive UK governments. In *The Cut*, as Cairo and Grace drive back from the Indian restaurant where a fight broke out between the UKIP supporters and a gang of denizens, they approach the old railway station, "long since shut," and it is then that Cairo "thought to mention the flowers planted on the roundabout, EU-funded".⁴⁰ The juxtaposition of the closed-down station and the roundabout blooming with EU-funded flowers embodies so much of what the populations of the working-class Leave-voting communities of the UK felt: that austerity had not been mitigated by EU membership or, as Peter Dorey states:

Indeed, many Leave supporters argued that as their communities had already suffered long-term economic decline and a relentless loss of industries and jobs during recent decades – which EU membership had apparently done little or nothing to prevent or replace – they had nothing else to lose by voting to Leave the EU.⁴¹

28 Lying awake in his sweaty bed on the night of the referendum result, relieved for once that he does not have to share it with his brother Mason since the latter has borrowed his car to go to a last-minute job the unemployment agency has sent him to honour, Caleb Jenkins wonders what he will do if Mason does not return in time for him to drive to work. There is no bus or train to go from his home to the Cleflock Beef factory on the other side of the valley, his bicycle has a flat tyre, so he will not be able to use it. The final pages of *Easy Meat*, like so many other pages, are filled with the musings of Caleb about the basic practicalities of life: the lack of transport, the poor pay that will not enable him to envisage anything else but pay the mortgage and put petrol in the tank of the car. For Caleb, the Brexit referendum result procures a warm sensation of satisfaction:

As he fell asleep, he felt a pang of contentment vibrate in his belly, like a plucked guitar string – a vague sense of something brilliant having happened, though he couldn't quite remember what it was.⁴²

29 Though Caleb seems to feel that getting out of the EU will improve his living conditions, the novel seems to suggest that nothing, even the existence of a devolved parliament in Wales, can be done to alleviate the general desperation of the population of the post-industrial communities of South Wales. And although *Easy Meat* never indicates explicitly that the shortcomings in the infrastructure – transport, in particular – cannot be solved by a Welsh government in one fell swoop, characters like Caleb will not see it this way. As the promise of EU funding rides off into the sun with Brexit, the dependence on Westminster for the funds needed in Wales has become the default position. Moreover, with the UK Internal Market Act of 2020, the restrictions on the devolved institutions have been accentuated. The constitutional reality of the UK devolved institutions is a long way from the possible solutions evoked by commentators in the wake of the referendum.⁴³ The Caleb Jenkinsons of Rhosybol are now even less likely to access decent transport infrastructure.

30 This paper has focused on elucidating the question of whether a distinct "structure of feeling" to the question of Brexit might emerge from the writing of English and Welsh novelists. Given that the novel can be determined as a genre in which the members of a

nation are depicted as the members of the "imagined community" that the nation embodies,⁴⁴ it is therefore pertinent to examine whether a distinct Welsh "structure of feeling" emerges from Rachel Tresize's *Easy Meat*. Ironically, when the Welsh characters reflect upon their Welshness, it is often at the instigation of the EU migrant workers in their midst: Caleb is fascinated by the way his Polish co-workers break into song in the afternoons, which inspires this thought: "A capella singing killed fear dead, that's what his old man reckoned, and that's why Welsh people were always at it."⁴⁵

- 31 In Caleb's eyes, there is more that brings the Welsh and the Poles together than separates them. Similarly, it is the international working-class solidarity of the past that Caleb's Latvian co-worker Mykolas evokes, whilst underlining the absurdity of the imminent Leave vote in the referendum:

Mykolas stopped walking. 'Latvia raised fifty thousand pounds for you in the UK miner's strike. '84, '85. We sent it in solidarity to pay for your food. Toys for the *bērni* at Christmas.' He stared grimly at Caleb. 'You don't believe me? Ask your grandfather! Latvia stood by you.'
 'My grandfather's dead, butt.'
 Mykolas let the weight of the cow hide drop to his shoulder. 'Now you're going to vote to leave EU.'⁴⁶

- 32 Class solidarity trumps national identities, consequently in the strongly Labour-voting South Wales Valleys, the nationalism of the working class might just as well be British rather than Welsh. It is, however, interesting to see that Caleb bristles at the thought that his Polish co-worker Lucasz might take him for an Englishman for having simply said "sorry" for asking for his boning knife back:

'You said you're sorry,' Lucasz said. 'There's no need to be sorry. You are always very sorry, you English people.'
 Caleb bristled. 'I'm Welsh, pal. This isn't England.'
 Lucasz laughed like an exhaust pipe backfiring. 'I know,' he said. 'I am joking with you'. He slapped Caleb's upper arm. 'South Wales', he said. He pronounced it *Vales*. 'I lived here eleven years. Before that I lived in England. But on both sides, everybody sorry.'⁴⁷

- 33 The Brexit referendum appears to have put everyone on edge in *Easy Meat* and the identification of the characters with their Welshness certainly emerges since "a decisive moment such as the Brexit referendum confronts people with the fact that they have been imaging their nation in very different ways."⁴⁸

- 34 However, one of the important markers of national identity in Wales, the Welsh language, is perceived as being another internal dividing line. Caleb comes across "a cluster of middle-aged women gathered on the pavement outside the old carpet shop" – his father's old business – "chattering about the referendum in Welsh. 'Y prif weinidog hwn! Dim blydi ceilliau.'"⁴⁹ He vaguely picks up on the conversation being "something about David Cameron's balls".⁵⁰ Caleb politely reacts to the women as he tries to make his way into the shop:

'Esgusodwch fi,' Caleb said with his best school Welsh as he cut a path through the women.⁵¹

- 35 The new cupcake shop that has now opened in the premises that used to house his father's carpet shop is the brainchild of Sioned Treasure, a girl who was in school with Caleb, "in the top sets for drama and languages", but who, unlike Caleb, had "got straight out of *Rhosybol* like all the cleverest people did."⁵² The Welsh language is here associated with academic success, with leaving poverty behind, with the bright, new service sector

of retailing, the cupcakes in question servicing the middle-class yearnings of well-off Valleys women quaffing Prosecco in a haze of pink plastic flamingos. This is a far cry from the masculine world of the working men of the collieries and the steelworks. The Welsh language is experienced vicariously as something for others, for another social class, another world.⁵³

36 Neither is the Welsh nationalism of the Valleys population translated into a political vote. In the conversation between Caleb and the man from Ebbw Vale, who tells Caleb "Out, I'm voting, I'm telling you now", to which Caleb replies: 'Isn't that like a turkey voting for Christmas? All that money you've had from them,'" ⁵⁴ the man clearly states his reasons: "I don't give a shit about their money,' the bloke said. 'That's just refurbishment not regeneration. Nonsense and fripperies.'" ⁵⁵

37 Ebbw Vale Man goes on to lament the money wasted on the statue of a dragon and "a town clock that's never right". ⁵⁶His alienation from the political establishment is complete when he says of these EU-funded niceties:

'Cosmetic surgery, butt. Jobs we need, but we won't get them voting for Labour. Labour's never done shit for us.'

'Who'd you vote for? Caleb asked him. 'Plaid Cymru?'

'I don't vote. It only encourages the bastards.'⁵⁷

38 It is this paralysis of political disengagement that *Easy Meat* chooses to portray, a black and white photograph of a community frozen in time.⁵⁸

39 Regional pride can also be felt in Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut*. The presence of the Black Country dialectic in the dialogues of the people of Dudley imparts a feeling that the English Midlands are almost a foreign land, especially for outsiders like Grace's cameraman, Franco. In a telling conversation with Grace, he finds no saving grace in the people of Dudley, whom he suspects of mocking his appearance outside a pub:

'This 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 window. It's a sunny afternoon in the English Midlands.'⁵⁹

40 Grace, however, is capable of seeing that "there is a culture here that has been neglected, forgotten,"⁶⁰ but even she cannot dispel Cairo's angry suspicions that Grace looks at him "from her world that was not his".⁶¹ The "us and them" antagonism of the English regions as viewed by the London elite is an under-current that irrigates the minds of both Cairo and Grace, as each tries to accommodate their respective prejudices. Once again, it is Cairo who voices the fears triggered by the English metropolitan incomprehension of working-class desperation as he speaks in Grace's video:

'A lot of it is gone. 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 another. 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.'⁶²

41 *The Cut* represents more than just the dividing line between people in the matter of the Brexit referendum; it is "England as two distinct nations, both trying, but failing, to understand the other." ⁶³And "this division and the unbalanced power relations are often associated with a division between London and the rest of England."⁶⁴

- 42 The post-devolutionary UK at the heart of much of the working-class frustrations of the English Midlands is most certainly indicative of the gaping hole in the Blair government's settlement of 1999. England, as a constituent nation of the UK, has no representative chamber, thus Westminster implements policy in the areas that the Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland governments decide upon for their nations. The England that the people of Dudley hanker after in *The Cut* is not necessarily one of domination over the rest of the UK, or at least it is not made explicit in this way; the Welsh hills are visible from the Black Country and the network of canals acted as connections between different parts of the UK. However, the sense of grievance embodied by various characters is redolent of the political discourse coming from the English regions since devolution. In the words of Ailsa Henderson and Richard Wyn Jones: "It is tempting to assume that the rise of a politicized English national identity is an English response to what has already occurred in Scotland and Wales."⁶⁵
- 43 Grievances, when not assuaged, lead to calls for radical change. The Brexit referendum represented too great an opportunity for the aggrieved English voices of June 2016 not to seize upon it in a way that would force change, at least it would seem so in the minds of working-class Leave voters.⁶⁶ Ailsa Henderson and Richard Wyn Jones caution against failing to operate the "radical constitutional change"⁶⁷ that post-devolutionary UK territorial democracy demands since, in post-Brexit times, this could simply be interpreted by an increasingly vocal English nationalism as being a return to some *status quo ante*, driven by English nostalgia for Empire and Britain's pre-EU position in the world.⁶⁸
- 44 It would be a mistake to think that this return to imperial order would solve English discontent. In *The Cut*, Cairo gives vent to his anger when Grace suggests that the people of Dudley could be tempted to vote Leave because of their opposition to immigration, in other words due to some form of racism:
- 'All you people want to say is that it's about immigration. That we'm all racist. That we'm all stupid. You doh wanna hear that it's more complicated than that. It lets all of you lot off the hook. Never considered the problem might be you.'⁶⁹
- 45 Failing to acknowledge an English voice in UK politics does not bode well and, as Cairo throws the match onto his petrol-doused body in the centre of Dudley market-place, his yearning is for visibility, for recognition:
- 'The show is here. You wanted a show and here it is.'⁷⁰

Conclusion

- 46 This paper began with the question of whether a distinct "structure of feeling" could be captured in the fiction motivated by the working-class Brexit vote in both England and Wales. It would appear that the authors of *The Cut* and *Easy Meat* have used their dual vantage-points as insiders and outsiders to great effect and have embodied in their respective novels the affect behind the Brexit Leave vote that both authors had been studiously portraying in their fiction before June 2016.
- 47 From a political point of view, the analysis of the Brexit vote in so-called BrexLit fiction has more to offer in the understanding of the shifting tectonic plates of UK post-devolutionary politics than mere statistics. The absence of a constitutional settlement for England appears even more as a gaping hole than pre-Brexit. The present

devolutionary measures for Wales do not appear to be implementing the benefits that the economically-deprived areas of Wales need.

- 48 In *The Cut* and *Easy Meat*, the presence of EU migrant workers pre-Brexit is not depicted as a threat among the UK's low-paid precariat, contrary to popular belief. Class solidarity appears as a greater security in a world where merely surviving the day-to-day grind of unregulated, uncertain working conditions is the norm.
- 49 Readers of both novels will have understood that for the British working class, the past is another country. Without recognition of Britain's industrial past there is no progressive future available for them. The working-class characters of *The Cut* and *Easy Meat* are caught up in a stasis of the present and EU membership has not changed what successive UK governments over the past forty years have failed to deal with.
- 50 Finally, UK politicians would do well to consider the constitutional changes that the working-class Leave vote portends. The Labour Party cannot take these voters for granted, as the fragility of the English Red Wall suggests. In Wales, Welsh Labour, despite the results of the recent Welsh parliamentary elections, can no longer rely on what might seem to be the captive vote of the South Wales Valleys, especially if the very cohesion of the United Kingdom were to be jeopardized by another independence referendum in Scotland and the possible reunification of Ireland.

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NOTES

1. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 132.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 132.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 132.

4. Anthony Cartwright, *The Cut*, London, Peirene Press, 2017, 129 ps.
5. Rachel Trezise, *Easy Meat*, Cardigan, Parthian Books, 2021, 121 ps.
6. Cartwright (born 1973) first came to the fore with his novel *The Afterglow* (2004), which won the Betty Trask Award for first novels by writers under 35. *Heartland* (2009), *How I Killed Margaret Thatcher* (2012) and *Iron Towns* (2016) subsequently helped cement his position as a major English writer focusing on the UK's precariat and urban decay.
7. Rachel Trezise (born 1978) went on to publish her second book, *Fresh Apples*, in 2005. It was awarded the first-ever Dylan Thomas Prize for writers under 30. *Dial M for Merthyr* (2007), a non-fiction book, "part social history and part memoir", like her previous works, is set in the South Wales valleys and highlights the ambitions and frustrations of Valleys youth. Trezise has also written plays for theatre and radio.
8. Anthony Cartwright studied Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia and now lives and works in London, having previously worked in teaching in East London and Nottinghamshire. Rachel Trezise studied journalism and English at Glamorgan University. Trezise mentions that in the evenings she would often accompany her mother, a cleaning lady, to the local Treorchy Library where she would set about reading as her mother worked because there were no books to speak of at home (see interview of Trezise in documentary film produced by Parthian Books in 2022 on *Easy Meat*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cS-o7SKI-8o> consulted 23 May 2023. Trezise still lives in the Rhondda Valley today.
9. Anthony Cartwright, *The Cut*, p. 3.
10. Interview with Anthony Cartwright, June 28, 2017. <http://wormhole.carnelianvalley.com/interview-with-anthony-cartwright-author-of-peirene-press-the-cut/> consulted 23 May 2023.
11. Interview with Rachel Trezise on the Welsh Libraries website, 6 September 2021, <https://libraries.wales/aotm/rachel-trezise/> consulted 2 June 2023.
12. Jon Daly, "Brexit: the new landscape of British fiction", 28 July 2017. <https://www.ft.com/content/30ec47b4-7204-11e7-93ff-99f383b09ff9> consulted 2 June 2023.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. Manon Steffan Ros, *Llyfr Glas Nebo*, Y Lolfa, 2018. An English translation of the novel appeared in 2022, *The Blue Book of Nebo*, Firefly Press Ltd. Llywd Owen, *Iaith y Nefoedd* (The Language of Heaven), Y Lolfa, 2019. Both these novels fall into the category of dystopian fiction. Ros's novel, set in Gwynedd, is a dual narrative written by a mother and her son after a nuclear attack has wiped out vast areas of the UK. Owen's novella is set in a Wales ten years after "the vote" where the Welsh language has been forced underground and its speakers are terrorized by militaristic authorities and violent vigilantes.
17. What some critics have applied to Englishness could also be said of the national identities of the constituent nations of the UK, as here in the words of Dulcie Everitt: "*BrexLit seeks to re-examine the nature of Englishness, and offers readers an extraordinary opportunity to step outside of the chaos, reflect, and in many cases, heal, from the dismal anxiety of the present.*" In *BrexLit: The Problem of Englishness in Pre- and Post-Brexit Referendum Literature*, Zer0 Books, 2022, p. 182.
18. "The Before/After structure of his novel, leads the reader to imagine the story as belonging to two different times and the political event of Brexit functions as a temporal reference." Consiglia Del Peschio, <https://www.academia.edu/40823399/Narrative_techniques_in_Cartwrights_The_Cut_and_Smiths_How_to_be_both> consulted 26 May 2023.
19. Rachel Trezise, *Easy Meat*, p. 3.
20. Anthony Cartwright, *The Cut*, p. 10.
21. Rachel Trezise, *Easy Meat*, p. 34.

22. Anthony Cartwright, *The Cut*, p. 34: "The Romanians are already at work. ... They are not even Romanian. They are from Moldova ... 'Moldova,' he'd said, like some country from a storybook. It is the same with the Albanians. Cairo has not seen them for a while. They come from Kosovo, call themselves Albanian, these men who worked in the sleet last winter, have been through wars, who disappear in the mist."
23. Richard T. Kelly, "Brexit in Fact and Fiction: A Few First Drafts of History." *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 60, no. 2, 2018, p. 79.
24. The Lord Ashcroft polls of 24 June 2016, when the results read for socio-economic category, race, level of education, gender, home-ownership and newspaper readership, seem to uphold the generalisations. However, the very fact that 24% of Leave voters stated that they decided on their vote in the week leading up to the referendum indicates that commentators should have been more circumspect in their conclusions. See <https://lordashcrofthpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/> consulted 3 June 2023.
25. Rachel Tresize, *Easy Meat*, p. 6. One of these theme parks was unsuccessfully foisted upon the local community in the Rhondda in 1987. Western World was supposedly based on Dolly Parton's Dollywood resort in the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. Local people were employed, dressed up as cowboys or Native Americans, in the hopes of entertaining up to 100,000 visitors. The theme park closed rather ingloriously after a month. See <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/lifestyle/nostalgia/forgotten-wild-west-theme-park-15054106> consulted 29 August 2018.
26. Anthony Cartwright, *The Cut*, p. 100.
27. *Ibid*, p. 56.
28. Caleb lists all the disappointments: from the miners' strike of 1984-85, where his grandfather had tried to deliver limestone to a striking mine and had dutifully refused to cross the picket line (Rachel Tresize, *Easy Meat*, p.67: *You must never cross one of them*"), to Caleb accompanying his father to an anti-war march in London during the Iraq War and his father's subsequent loss of faith in politicians after Tony Blair's continued stance on Iraq ("That's when his old man stopped talking about politics except to say, 'To hell with the lot of 'em. They're all out for themselves", *ibid.*).
29. *Ibid*, p. 100.
30. *Ibid*, p. 107.
31. Anthony Cartwright, *The Cut*, p. 70.
32. Rachel Tresize, *Easy Meat*, p. 4: "Caleb slammed the door and stood for a microsecond on the landing gritting his teeth, full of aggressive energy he didn't know where to put. He had to find a way to harness it."
33. Anthony Cartwright, *The Cut*, p. 21.
34. *Ibid*, p. 99.
35. In a conversation with Grace, Cairo has this to say: "We'm sitting on one of the places we've lost. You 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." *Ibid.*, p. 40.
36. For an interesting analysis of this, see Peter Dorey, "Explaining Brexit: The 5 A's - Anomie, Alienation, Austerity, Authoritarianism", *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, XXVII-2 | 2022. See especially p. 6: "A final aspect of the anomie experienced by many Brexiters is a sense of "victimhood", a perception that they and their communities have suffered most from recent economic, social and technological changes, yet which they have had no control or influence over. Instead, they consider these changes to have been imposed upon them without their consent, either by "liberal elites" who are themselves unaffected by them or their consequences, or by external forces, namely the EU and/or globalisation. In short, they perceive themselves to have been "left behind" and abandoned by mainstream politicians and policy-makers, and their views and voices ignored."
37. Rachel Tresize, *Easy Meat*, p. 64.
38. Anthony Cartwright, *The Cut*, p. 127.
39. Rachel Tresize, *Easy Meat*, p. 51. Readers of the novel could probably not ignore the reference to Ebbw Vale. As the dust of the referendum result settled, *Guardian* journalist Carole Cadwallader

published a notable article from Aneurin Bevan's old constituency that pondered on what the working class of this economically-deprived area of Wales had just accomplished with their Leave vote, echoed in the comment of one of those interviewed: "What has the EU ever done for us?" See <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jun/25/view-wales-town-showered-eu-cash-votes-leave-ebbw-vale> consulted 25 June 2016.

40. Anthony Cartwright, *The Cut*, p. 80.

41. Peter Dorey, "Explaining Brexit: The 5 A's - Anomie, Alienation, Austerity, Authoritarianism, Atavism", p. 11.

42. Rachel Trezise, *Easy Meat*, p. 121.

43. The Welsh government in 2017 put forward the idea that powers over devolved matters reverting back to the UK after its departure from the EU should revert to the devolved governments and that there should be a broad framework for policies to be negotiated among the four constituent nations themselves or between the nations and the UK government. It turns out that none of this has been put in place. For a discussion on this question at the time, see Michael Keating, <http://www.centreonconstitutionalchange.ac.uk/blog/devolve-or-not-devolve> consulted 11 August 2017.

44. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso (1983), 2016. p. 5: "It [the nation] 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."

45. Rachel Trezise, *Easy Meat*, p. 58.

46. *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

48. Emma Linders, "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*", Master thesis: Literary Studies, Literature in Society: Europe and Beyond University of Leiden, 2020, p. 9.

49. Rachel Trezise, *Easy Meat*, pp. 107-108.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 108. The quotation in Welsh expresses more precisely the UK Prime Minister's lack of such attributes! Words in Welsh are not italicized in the text, whereas words in Polish are.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

53. Despite the existence of Welsh-medium secondary schools in the South Wales Valleys for the past half-century and more, the Welsh language does not seem to be a marker of national pride for a majority of the Valleys population. Paradoxically, the same Valleys people constantly self-identify as more Welsh than British in poll after poll since the devolution settlement of 1999. Early work on this question can be found in Denis Balsom's 'Three Wales Model' based on analysis after the 1979 referendum on devolution: Denis Balsom, 'The Three-Wales model' in J. Osmond (ed.), *The National Question Again: Welsh Political Identity in the 1980s*. Llandysul: Gomer Press, 1985. See also Daniel John Evans, Welshness in "'British Wales': negotiating national identity at the margins", *Nations and Nationalism*, 2018, 1-24. See <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/nana.12390> consulted 2 February 2018.

54. Rachel Trezise, *Easy Meat*, p. 50.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

58. The idea of the photograph frozen in time is picked up by Polly Winn in her review of the novel for the Institute for Welsh Affairs book review section: "An important addition to the growing genre of Brexit novels, it does not seek to hypothesise circumstances surrounding the EU referendum;

instead, *Easy Meat* provides a valuable and moving snapshot in time from an area so often commented upon amidst the debate yet too often with an absence of local voices." See <https://www.iwa.wales/agenda/2021/06/book-review-easy-meat/> consulted 30 May 2023.

59. Anthony Cartwright, *The Cut*, p. 111.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

62. *Ibid.* p. 111.

63. Jude Cook, in "The Cut by Anthony Cartwright Review – the Big Divide in Brexit Britain," *The Guardian*, 23 June, 2017. See <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/23/the-cut-by-anthony-cartwright-review> consulted 29 May 2023.

64. Emma Linders, "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*", p. 16.

65. Ailsa Henderson, Richard Wyn Jones, *Englishness: The Political Force Transforming Britain*, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 135.

66. See Ailsa Henderson, Richard Wyn Jones, *Englishness: The Political Force Transforming Britain*, p. 101: "The strong and significant relationship between English national sentiment and hostility to the UK's membership of the EU was instrumental in determining the result of the 2016 referendum."

67. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

68. The nostalgia exhibited in such novels as *The Cut* cannot be equated with that of the glory days of Empire. As one critic points out: "... these novels show the painful non-elite version of this nostalgia, which lacks any sense of 'restoration' and, instead, is filled with self-hate, despair, victimisation and destruction." See Robert Eaglestone, " 'The little links are broke': Ethnocentrism and Englishness in contemporary British fiction, in *Frontiers of Narrative Studies* <https://doi.org/10.1515/fns-2022-2024>, p. 19.

69. Anthony Cartwright, *The Cut*, p. 24.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 128.

ABSTRACTS

This article sets out to explore contemporary novels from England and Wales for which their authors have stated that Brexit was a call to action or is the actual backdrop to the writing. Although both nations voted in favour of leaving the EU, the reactions in fiction show both common ground and cultural differences. The question of class and its impact on the Brexit vote will be examined in English writer Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2018) and Welsh author Rachel Trezise's *Easy Meat* (2021). How have these novelists reflected the debates that took place before and during the Brexit referendum? Where do the writers' sympathies lie? Does the cultural formation of the novelists participate in their written production? These are some of the questions that will be put under the microscope to ascertain whether there was a different 'structure of feeling' in England and Wales to the disruptive event of 23 June 2016.

L'article cherche à explorer des romans contemporains publiés en Angleterre et au pays de Galles dont les auteurs affirment que le Brexit a provoqué chez eux une prise de conscience ou dans lesquels le départ du Royaume-Uni de l'UE sert d'arrière-fond au récit. Bien que ces deux nations constituantes du Royaume-Uni aient toutes deux voté en faveur d'un départ de l'UE, les réactions dépeintes dans les œuvres de fiction démontrent à la fois des points communs et des différences

culturelles. Nous nous attellerons à examiner la question de la classe ouvrière et de l'impact de cette dernière sur le vote à travers deux romans : *The Cut*, de l'écrivain anglais Anthony Cartwright et *Easy Meat* de l'écrivaine galloise Rachel Tresize. Comment ces deux écrivains ont-ils rendu compte des débats qui ont animé le Royaume-Uni avant et pendant le vote ? Les écrivains éprouvent-ils de l'empathie pour l'un ou l'autre des camps ? Les origines culturelles et sociales des écrivains participent-elles à façonner leur écriture ? Ce sont quelques-unes des questions que nous étudierons afin de déterminer l'existence ou non d'une « structure d'expérience », selon le terme du critique et théoricien gallois Raymond Williams, spécifique à l'Angleterre et au pays de Galles face au grand bouleversement du 23 juin 2016.

INDEX

Mots-clés: Brexit, classes sociales, écriture, culture

Keywords: Brexit, social classes, writing process, culture

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