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Linda Grant's Dys-Chrony: Interwoven Temporalities in *A Stranger City* (2019)

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This article argues that Linda Grant's BrexLit novel *A Stranger City* (2019) foregrounds interwoven temporalities in ways that demonstrate the author's 'dys-chronic' relationship with her own time. It draws on Giorgio Agamben's insight into the contemporary and incorporates different conceptualisations and understandings of time and temporalities in order to explore the novel's structure, its treatment of the central characters' ethics in terms of how to live and act, and its take on the complexities of nostalgia and haunting memories of the imperial past and the legacy of World War II. The article suggests that although Grant focuses on the darkness of her own time, manifested in Brexit and xenophobic responses to what the novel terms the nation's 'unwanted population,' *A Stranger City* locates cracks of light in the author's temporally immersed characters' ways of being and thinking in the contemporary period.

Introduction: Temporal Interweaving

Linda Grant's *A Stranger City* (2019) is a novel about time and about the time we live in now. It is about how the past, the present and the future interlace in the lives of its characters. The narrative evinces the author's relationship to the contemporary as a dys-chronic one, a position that is especially evident in the story's interwoven temporalities. In Giorgio Agamben's conceptualisation, dys-chrony indexes a 'special relationship with the past' (2009: 50) that is characterised by 'untimeliness,' 'disconnection and out-of-jointness' which nonetheless affords the 'truly contemporary' a superior capability of 'perceiving and grasping [her] own time' (40). As 'noncoincidence' dys-chrony is '*that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*' (41, italics in original). The contemporary person 'holds [her] gaze on [her] own time so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness' (44) and is in a unique position to do so because of the 'distancing and nearness, which defines contemporariness' (50). In other words, the contemporary writer works in and through what might be called temporal messiness from her out-of-sync position, and this location of insight is emblematic of the state that Agamben terms dys-chrony. This article argues that *A Stranger City* pivots on exactly such complicated perceptions of time as it foregrounds temporal mingling in ways that constantly dislodge readers' expectations of temporal chronology. To quote from the blurb: '*A Stranger City* is a novel about now, and the day after tomorrow' (Grant, 2019: np) or from an interview with Grant: 'It's about tomorrow as much as it's about today' (see Allardice, 2019: np). Since the focus is on the contemporary, I read the text as a BrexLit novel, even as I am mindful of the potentially limiting consequences of this perspective. BrexLit is defined by Kristian Shaw as works that 'directly respond or imaginatively allude to Britain's exit from the EU,' including texts that anticipate such central themes as anxieties about migration and imperial nostalgia (2018: 18). BrexLit novels can thus also be said to exist in a slightly disjunctive relationship to the present.[1]

Instead of easy-to-read chronology, then, the novel exposes its readers to what Russell West-Pavlov calls 'complex temporal interweaving' (2013: 46). West-Pavlov reconsiders time as temporalities, in his argument for 'an alternative model of multiple temporalities which are immanent to the very processes of material being itself in all its manifestations' (176). He elaborates on the 'complicated relationships

[1] Framing *A Stranger City* as an example of BrexLit risks downplaying the novel's broader resonances, which are only briefly referred to in the article. Indeed, BrexLit's focus on contemporary responses to the repercussions of Brexit can be troubling. Jonathan Coe, for example, holds that the potential downside of the extreme focus on the 'now' is that, 'in the rush to engage with the contemporary, we lose perspective. A novel is supposed to take the long view. It is supposed to speak to the future' (2018b: np). Grant's novel does take the long view even as it engages with the present, and this combination is an integral part of its interwoven temporalities. However, since Brexit haunts the novel, it is also typically labelled a BrexLit work.

between past, present, and future which make up temporality' (45) and claims that time is 'the vibrant, pulsing dynamic of life itself: a time immanent to the constantly changing being of things' (48). In my subsequent reading of *A Stranger City*, I study this vibrating, pulsing dynamic of life itself coming to fruition in the 'human' experiences of the novel's diverse cast of characters, focusing especially on the interlocking of temporalities in the urban space that is contemporary London.

As Jenann Ismael suggests in her exploration of 'the time of human experience' (2021: 80): 'The events of one's own life are encountered from multiple perspectives, first in anticipation, later *in praesentia*, and finally in retrospect' (91). Ismael ponders on how such multiple perspectives are contingent on spatiality and temporality in a synchronic and diachronic manner. Her analysis offers a helpful perspective on Grant's method of structuring narratives and presenting characters:

> When we ask how the world appears through the eyes of the temporally immersed human being at a particular moment, we are asking what the world looks like from their point of view at that moment. What do they know about other places and times? What are the thoughts, emotions, beliefs, attitudes they have at that moment? When we ask how the world looks through the eyes of the temporally immersed human being over some stretch of time, we are asking how these things shift from one moment to the next over that stretch of time. How are they transformed as the person moves through the world perceiving, thinking, acting and feeling? (82)

A Stranger City demonstrates how Grant illuminates such comprehensive questions about time – and place. Below, I focus first on the structure of the novel, since this is organically bound up in time – and in London, the eponymous stranger city. I then elaborate on two contrasting sections in the text that I call the London plane tree moment and the Island moment. These moments illuminate the disjunction of the past-in-the present in outward-looking and inward-looking ways – the long view taken in the novel. I then consider how Grant incorporates what she calls in an interview, 'a worst-case scenario which would operate in the realms of the possible' (see Wright, 2019: np) concentrating on how the nation deals with what the novel's narrator calls 'its unwanted population' post-Brexit (2019: 257). Finally, I dwell on Grant's evocation of nostalgia as a specific aspect of temporal interweaving by studying in particular how the 'temporally immersed' DS Pete Dutton ponders time as the very dynamic of life itself, indeed, as the time of human experience. Going forward, I keep in mind Kristian Shaw's comment that 'the spectre of Brexit looms large and haunts narrative events' (2021: 181), even if it is mentioned by name only once in the novel, with the reference to 'anti-Brexit marches' (2019: 318). Typically, Brexit is obliquely referred to as 'the *big*

thing' (109, italics in original), 'the vote thing' (145), 'the business' of the country (165), or, proleptically, when Francesca's Iranian grandparents, tourists-turned-refugees, can smell 'that life here in England was going through a process of transmutation into something different' (105). Nonetheless, Brexit remains a haunting presence in the novel and can be said to be emblematic of the darkness that Grant's dys-chronic gaze fixes in the present.

Structural Achronology

As a first observation on the novel's relationship to time, and in spite of its temporal disorganisation, readers are immediately anchored in specific clock-time. *A Stranger City* opens with the burial of the unknown Dead Body 27 in Manor Park, East London at 9.30 in the morning, February 2016. The narrative then loops back to July 2015, and Chapter 4 opens thus: 'Now it is late October' (37). The novel ends four years after the initial burial, in 2020 (306) – a year *after* the book's publication in 2019. Lindsay Moore comments thus on the novel's structure:

> *A Stranger City* is achronologically organized, formally fractured, and uses multi-perspectival, free indirect narration to represent provisionally intersecting London lives. It highlights the proleptic and analeptic potential of events – history as repetitive and anticipatory – and privileges chance (and failed) encounters as axes of potential intervention into wider processes of inclusion and exclusion (2021: 42–3).

Grant's 'achronology' is striking in her representation of the novel's central neighbourhood, the fictional Wall Park high street, Gunnersbury. We are introduced to the history of that street early in the novel. It is a location that has been there 'a hundred years' and it has seen changing times and demographics (2019: 23). In the 1970s, we learn that the street was abandoned and took on 'the manner of a retail Miss Havisham, forever dressed in the rotting fascia of its high-water mark' (24). The intertextual reference alerts us to (unsuccessful) attempts at arresting time – or to the simultaneous stopping of time even as time passes – emblematic of the fate of Charles Dickens' jilted Miss Havisham who grows older even as she wants to halt progression into the future. However, at the same time as Wall Park high street is backsliding, the 1974 civil war in Cyprus pushes the Mediterranean to 'extend its warm breath along the street bringing with it a general atmosphere of abroad' (24). Human migration revitalises the street: 'The essential Englishness of the street' is 'permanently breached' in favour of ethnic diversity and, years later, the original working-class community gradually has to give way to gentrification and 'young pioneers in search of commuter-land' (24–5). The narrator's choice of words suggests that such changes are good and necessary for the

street, and by implication, for the nation's well-being. We shall see, however, that a strange pocket of earlier English working-classness remains in what the novel terms the Island. The street in the narrative present houses a micro-brewery, a vintage clothing store and cafés (77). After the 2016 referendum, however, it is as if 'time was spooling backwards' (210). The Greeks, who came in the 1970s and established a delicatessen on the street, leave and with their departure 'metaphorically something older and more enduring reappeared in the climate of the country, a return to the sharp clarity of the seasons when winter asserted itself in Victorian form' (210) – a metaphor, one might say, of interwoven temporalities, too.

Having sketched the history of Wall Park through changing times, Grant effectively takes the reader on a stroll down that street while introducing the multicultural neighbourhood. Since the novel is focalised through these different characters, the language and the tone vary from character to character. In the novel's part Three, Grant juxtaposes a series of short chapters that synchronically indicates the here-and-now coexistence of the neighbours. There is Belfast-born filmmaker Alan McBride and Francesca. 'Halfway along the street' (80) we meet the German family who have made London home, since that 'global city,' to use Saskia Sassen's term (2005), appeals to their cosmopolitan sensibilities. 'Further along the street' Jewish Audrey Shapiro and her Indian friend Mrs Simarjit Kaur Khalistan are introduced, in a chapter that also – in a sweeping diachronic, or externally analeptic, gesture – concentrates on the year 1966 when Audrey and Simi first meet (2019: 81). Finally, 'down past all their houses' we see Vic Elliott walking his dogs, sporting in all probability his 'khaki greatcoat purchased in Carnaby Street in 1965' (84; 214). All of this is happening simultaneously. At the same time, as I will discuss in more detail shortly, just off that street is what we may call the anachronistic space of the Island, which is chronologically out of place in the novel's present. Thus, 'errors' in chronology, or, more precisely, disconnections and dis-junctures, make up Grant's sense of the period we call 'now.' In fact, the very structure of the novel, aligned with time through distancing and nearness, suggests one way of thinking about Grant's dys-chrony. Her sense of 'untimeliness' allows her not only to see, but also to understand our own time. Her sight – and insight – in the contemporary period of *A Stranger City* reminds us of the origin of the term 'novel'; it is the story of something new, or perhaps better, the novel *as* news.

Grant holds her gaze on contemporary time 'so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness,' to echo Agamben (2009: 44). If the contemporary author perceives the fault-lines of her own time, then Grant explores the very particular breaking point of Brexit in *A Stranger City*. But she does not do so in a fatalistic, nihilistic or despairing way. Instead, she sees in the fault-lines the 'encounter between times and generations,' as

Agamben puts it (52). I draw attention to how she does this next, focusing on two sections in the novel that evidence the repercussions of encountering the past in the present.

The London plane tree moment and the Island moment

In this section I explore two fable-like moments in the novel – the London plane tree moment and the Island moment. Both speak to 'untimeliness,' 'disconnection and out-of-jointness,' recalling Agamben's dys-chrony, albeit in very different ways. I call them fable-like because although they are organically ingrained in the narrative, they also seem to stand out as stories with a moral addressed to the reader. To Lindsey Moore, the Island is 'an uncanny zone haunted by the future as well as the past' and it indexes a myopic and insular nostalgia for a bygone era (2021: 43). In contrast, the London plane tree moment speaks of migration in an outward-looking gesture of hopeful, celebratory productivity. It is so short that it is easily missed. It is tucked in with reflections on time passing in autumnal London, and focalised from Vic's perspective. Vic takes the long view of things and the tone of voice he adopts is characterised by his deep love of the city of London:

> On the street where Alan and Francesca used to live, the London planes have finally disrobed their full green dress, the last to go. Neither of them knows much about trees. Vic Elliott [...] does, has recited a short poem about them. [...] London planes, Vic said, are now half of London's tree population and did not exist as a species until the seventeenth century when they came into being as a union between the American Sycamore and the Oriental Great Plane. They were plants from opposite ends of the world that would never have met had they not been brought together in a botanical garden in Vauxhall and discovered, having secretly and independently cross-bred, by John Tradescant the Younger. This tree, Vic said, is a Londoner by birth as well as name (2019: 182–3).

Vic cites fellow Londoner Amy Levy's poem 'A London Plane Tree' (1889) in order to give history and local context to his story about time – and place. Although the tale he tells is about trees, it is really a narrative about (natural and cultural) migration and hybridity, and how such phenomena are constant reminders of geographical mixture, and even more so of 'complex temporal interweaving' (West-Pavlov's phrase). Originally from opposite ends of the world, the trees migrated to London where their unplanned union became the now-iconic local London planes. Such unplanned hybridity is the productive, even hopeful, outcome of migration and, concomitantly, results in the varied demographic makeup of London. The real-life seventeenth-century gardener John Tradescant the younger discovered the tree in his own famous garden in Vauxhall, to his great delight. It is, in this sense, is a Londoner born-and-bred, ubiquitous and local to the city.

The London plane tree is thus a marker of place, specifically of bustling, unplanned city life, of ingrained multiculture and hybridity, that can only happen over time. It speaks to the longevity of the global in the local, too, and of the strength that comes from both the unplanned combination of differences and from the mixing of time. The moral of the story is, arguably, an extension of Grant's migration-positive sensibility. She wants to understand what will happen to London – a global city (of contemporary post-colonial time) layered upon a world city (of colonial time), to evoke Saskia Sassen's terminology again (2005) – when the majority of the nation's citizens want to turn their back to the world, and withdraw 'back into themselves like a mollusc to its shell' (Grant 2019: 319–20). The choice of words here suggests a critical stance towards nationalistic fervour, an attitude that is characteristic of the entire novel. Will there ever be such fecund unions again in the future, Grant's seems to be asking, from her ever-watchful dys-chronic position, alert to the presence of the past.

If the London plane tree is a commonplace Londoner, the Island moment introduces the unexpected and exotic into the novel. And if the London plane tree moment is easily missed, the Island moment stands out in the novel. The Island is described as a 'geographical anomaly' (221), which 'didn't like newcomers' (223) and is presented to the reader from Francesca's perspective. Francesca is class-conscious, rather snobbish and somewhat condescending, and she observes her position in the world with the prejudices that come with such an outlook. To her, the Island recalls 'another England, one that is half in this time, half in an older age' (224) with a backwards environment that seems to her both 'unfamiliar' and 'distrustful' (220). It is a strange place indeed, a mixture of 'old ways' (220) and present day living, ready to be explored yet not locatable on a map.

How do we read this Island? I see it as an example of what Anne McClintock (1995), in her study of colonial discourses, has called 'anachronistic space' (40). To her, anachronistic space is 'prehistoric, atavistic and irrational, inherently out of place in the historical time of modernity' (40) – it is 'a permanently anterior time within the geographic space of the modern empire' (30). It may seem somewhat far-fetched to approach the Island from this perspective. However, if we bear in mind McClintock's comment that we can draw an 'analogy between colonized lands and working-class communities' (120) and her descriptions of what she calls 'social explorers,' Victorian middle-class men who pose as 'explorers embarking on voyages into unknown lands' when they 'ventured into the terra incognita of Britain's working class areas' (120), then it is possible to argue that this is not unlike how the refined, sophisticated and class-conscious Francesca recoils in horror and fascinated disgust when she encounters

the Island's English working-class community. To her, their Victorian houses reek of 'bacon fat odours' and, stereotypically, display dusty 'chipped plaster ducks' on their crumbling, mouldy walls (2019: 218).

The encounter with the times and generations of the Island has a profoundly disturbing effect on Francesca. On her visit to its surrounding marshes, she is reminded of a much earlier visit to a Polish concentration camp with her Jewish-Iranian grandfather. The haunting layering of such disturbing memories makes her think of the term palimpsest (227). In order to make sense of Francesca's thoughts, I mobilise Sarah Dillon's ideas on how the palimpsest is 'created by a process of layering' that leaves what she calls ghostly traces (2007: 12). In fact, Dillon couples the palimpsest with complex temporality arguing that '[t]he palimpsest has not drifted into the past and never could. In its persistent figurative power and its theoretical adaptability it determines how we view the past and the present, and embodies within itself the promise of the future' (9). Operating with text in its broadest sense, she further insists that '[t]he "present" of the palimpsest is only constituted in and by the "presence" of texts from the "past", as well as remaining open to further inscription by texts of the "future"' (37). Thus, that layering of texts from the past, present and future demonstrates how the present moment always 'contains within it "past", "present" and "future" moments' (37). In Francesca's mind, she sees earlier dark times sedimented in the landscape, from lost Medieval peasants to the Blitz and 'deportees hemmed in on all sides awaiting future arrangements for their permanent departure' (2019: 227). She intuits how that present moment on the Island contains within it ghostly traces of the past even as it points to the future. Such observations in the novel substantiate Robert Eaglestone's comment that World War II 'has moved from living memory – with its fluidity, confusing currents, difficulty and perhaps trauma – into myth and into history. What once was the living sea has now become sediment, petrified as sentiment, a thick, significant layer in the geology of British memory' (2018b: 104).

I will elaborate on the deportees in the next part of the article. For now, I draw attention to how the eerie and out-of-time feeling that Francesca tries to deal with rationally is exacerbated by the disturbing and plaintive presence of a dying elephant which she hears before she encounters it face-to-face:

> But the elephant was at the end of the street in a lock-up garage, it resided in there in the dark, its days as a performing act in the circus were long gone. It had been abandoned several years ago, and lived there now [...]. The elephant stared at her [Francesca] with a hating dark eye. It seemed very old, resigned to the cold and absence of company of its own species (2019: 223).

Like the plane tree moment, this too is intertextually layered. Grant's elephant seems to be a call-back to George Orwell's elephant from his 1936 essay on the crumbling of the British Empire, 'Shooting an Elephant.' If characters migrate, as Umberto Eco suggests (2006: 8), then Orwell's elephant has migrated to Grant's novel and brought with it the whiff of Empire. Here is Orwell's elephant:

> He [the elephant] looked suddenly stricken, shrunken, immensely old, as though the frightful impact of the bullet had paralysed him without knocking him down. [...] His mouth slobbered. An enormous senility seemed to have settled upon him. [...] He was dying, very slowly and in great agony (1994: 23–24).

If Orwell flagged troubles abroad in the shape of Empire, Grant explores troubles at home in the shape of Brexit. The hatred that Orwell describes percolates into Grant's narrative. Grant's elephant exists on an island that cannot be located on a map, with a 'topography [that] is wrong' (2019: 231), in an imaginary space that we can read as the author's symbolic indication of the presence of the affective legacy of empire. Even if it has been half-repressed, it is still there, at the corners of the English psyche, and it makes its presence felt in troubled times, as Francesca experiences when she struggles to make sense of this animal. She is a cosmopolitan – a citizen of nowhere as Theresa May (2016) would have it – and not engaged in nostalgic ideas about Empire. It is not *her* nostalgia, because such imperial nostalgia would exclude her as not fully English. Perhaps, then, and through Grant's intertwined temporalities, the elephant can be seen not only as a backwards reminder of Orwell's elephant (and thus of both the legacy and the lingering death of Empire) but also as a forward gesture to how excluding memories of empire, however repressed and hitherto hidden, surface forcefully in Brexit Britain's xenophobic climate.

Indeed, central to any understanding of Brexit, and by extension, BrexLit, is that legacy of Empire and its concomitant imperial nostalgia. According to Peter Mitchell's exploration of the UK's ambiguous relationship to its imperial past, Britons continue to live 'in the ruins of Empire, haunted by its violences and humiliations, traumatised as a society by the things we have done and had done to us in our name, and in thrall to its fantasies of cruelty, subjugation and supremacy' (2021: 5–6). Or, as Sathnam Sanghera admits, it has 'become a cliché to think that Brexit is an exercise in imperial nostalgia' (2021: 115). What is more, Kevin O'Rourke reminds us of another legacy that is central to Britain's relationship to the past – the memory of World War II: 'The legacy of war in most of Europe has been support for European integration. This has not been the case in the United Kingdom' (2019: 7). Writing about BrexLit, Robert Eaglestone gathers together these two nostalgic strands, suggesting that '[t]here are two dominant forms

of affect memory in the UK at the moment: one is the memory of Empire and the other, and I think more powerful, is the memory of the Second World War' (2018b: 97). Small wonder, then, that the 'Brexit rhetoric' is characterised by a vocabulary of temporalities – legacy, nostalgia, recollection, memory, taking back control. This discourse is folded into Grant's narrative. The Island moment, in particular, interlaces both imperial nostalgia *and* the legacy of World War II – albeit in a round-about way.

We noted how Francesca 'saw' deportees being rounded up in the complex temporal layering of the landscape of the Island and its marshy surroundings and how such hallucinations bring World War II into the 'now.' In fact, the presence of deportees becomes more noticeable as the novel progresses, especially when the central characters comment on the events in the period immediately after the referendum. I want to discuss the deportations we see in the novel as examples of Grant's attempt to imagine a worst-case scenario within the realms of the possible (see Wright, 2019). In the novel this worst-case scenario is a kind of speculative prolepsis – anticipating events that have not happened and that may not happen but that *could* happen in 'real life.' They *are* already happening in the novel: 'The nation was being emptied of its unwanted population' (2019: 257). The use of a passive progressive voice leaves out the responsible agent and it emphasises how the act is ongoing, with no clear beginning or end. This impreciseness is emphasised by the unruly temporality of the representations of deportations. From his garden, Alan notices 'deportation trains' and protesters holding up 'placards of protest and solidarity' (254). He also sees more disturbing presences:

> Inside the trains the deportees raised their palms, pleading at the glass. The deportation infrastructure formed a network of cross-hatching across the eternal landscape of England, its woods and remaining patches of forests, its indigenous trees and its invaders [...]. Across all this solid lines of track were moving towards temporary detention centres and on to airports and sea ferries. Several months ago prison ships had appeared in the Thames estuary confining illegal immigrants before they were floated back to mainland Europe (254–5).

Such descriptions mix World War II images of the Holocaust with Dickensian prison hulks from *Great Expectations* (1860–1) and exemplify how Grant imagines worst-case happenings post-Brexit. The English landscape is scarred by infrastructure that cuts indiscriminately through both indigenous and invasive species, such as the London plane tree. We also note how interweaving temporalities shape our imaginative responses to this near future deportation. The only way such acts of getting rid of an unwanted population can be imagined is by situating them in the sedimented imagery of past events – imagined and real – of xenophobia and intolerance.

It is not only Alan who is profoundly disturbed. Pete Dutton comments upon the prison ships that disturb the tranquillity of the Thames:

> The deportees were kept locked up now in the hold, the poor wretches. [...] The poor devils were to be transported [...] back to chemical weapons and nerve gas and aerial bombardments [....]. Nor was it only refugees from war zones but anyone whose visa had run out or had the wrong paperwork (303).

Here we are in the realms of the possible; as I am writing this Denmark and the UK are trying to send *their* unwanted populations to Rwanda. To be sure, Grant is hyper-aware of the darkness within our time and also how it is a constant reminder of darkness in earlier times. Juxtaposing Holocaust and Dickensian realist prison ships images, she alerts readers to how worst-case scenarios were, in fact, cruel realities of the past that remain ingrained in Europe's memory and in how European nations treated people deemed unwanted. Furthermore, she draws attention to the accompanying lexicon of deportation. Grant describes 'the deportation trains which came through in the night, carrying their cargo of the removed, deported, departed, banished, transported, expelled, exiled, exported. These days of human waste' (314).

Such observations in the novel do interesting, if chilling, work. They yoke together different temporalities. But it is not only messy temporality that is striking. The language used speaks to Zygmunt Bauman's writing both on the unpredictability of what he calls liquid times and on responses to the anxiety-inducing figure of unwanted strangers. In his exploration of society's responses to the ambivalence embodied in the stranger figure, Bauman draws on two opposing strategies proposed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), the anthropophagic and the anthropoemic strategies. The latter, 'man vomiting' emic strategy, is displayed in Grant's evocation of how the nation gets rid of its unwanted population on deportation trains and prison ships. To Bauman, the persistence of such order-building strategies illustrates how the project of what he calls solid modernity lives on as tradition in contemporary liquid times, evidenced in European nations' continued 'ordering zeal' (Bauman in Beilharz, 2001: 201). There is thus a sense of out-of-jointness displayed in how the legacies of solid times are operative in the current liquid times. Strangers were and are, from a xenophobic perspective, seen as out of both place and time and perceived as not fitting within the nation's sense of origin.

Human waste disposal, Bauman insists, is 'about the production of order' (1991: 15), and, in Grant's novel, it seems to have become a way of taking back control, one might say, in her imagining of a worst-case scenario in post-Brexit Britain. In this connection, it is important to note, however, that although Grant homes in on such

evocative xenophobic schemes, they are at the same time commented upon by her outraged characters. The central characters embody, in their different ways, the light in dark times, even if they do not perform any important actions to change the events happening. Their thoughts point us in alternative directions to the emic strategies they react to. Good-hearted, likeable, no-nonsense Irish nurse Chrissie, for example, thinks about 'the poor refugees from Syria, the little kid drowned, washed up on the beach, she'd signed the petition' (2019: 33). It is admittedly a weak and ineffective reaction to human tragedy, but, on the other hand, it is not detrimental to fellow human beings. Her breathless and spontaneous response to present darkness illustrates her emotions and thoughts at this specific moment in time, reminding us of Ismael's reflections on temporally immersed subjects.

Alan's father rails on his radio show about 'floating concentration camps' and the 'heinous expulsion of good people [...] who had come to this land only to make a living and better lives for themselves' (255). Again, it is a counter-rhetorical gesture that serves as discursive corrective rather than actual change. The comments seem to kindly and thoughtful Alan to represent a much-needed '[m]oral clarity' (255) even if he is not sure how to react to what he calls 'this single, large, remorseless fiasco' (255). He is bound up in how the liquid times of uncertainty are threatening his own personal middle-class living: 'The lives Alan and Francesca had aspired to were getting away from them. Those planned futures seemed to be just beyond reach, not caught up' (255).

Empathetic Pete is equally embroiled in his own personal discontent to perform any corrective action to the deportations, apart from verbal reactions, resorting to a language of remorse and repulsion: it is a 'disgrace' to see 'the poor wretches' on '[b]arbaric' prison ships (303). Still, in spite of any real action, the characters speak to an alternative ethics – also enmeshed in time and place – to the emic, xenophobic ideology, as imagined in the novel. I consider ethics in line with Simon Blackburn's 'ethical environment' consisting of a 'climate of ideas about how to live' (2003: 1). Add to this Geoffrey Galt Harpham's two vital questions in connection with ethics that pivot on the 'one indispensable word in ethics, *ought*' (1995: 395): 'How ought one to live?' and 'What ought I to do?' (395). In fact, Robert Eaglestone argues that 'Brexit is unavoidably to do with identity as well as analysis, it is about "who we are" as well as "what we do"' (2018a: 2). Ethics is indeed inseparably aligned with the word 'ought.'

Grant's characters ponder ethical questions about identity, living and acting. However, they do not know how to answer them or navigate in an unpredictable and polarised national landscape. They do not know what they ought to do or what the right

behaviour ought to be in such a chaotic present. In spite of this aporetic situation, I make a case for how hope is embodied in their down-to-earth humanity, as it were, even in dark times. Indeed, in her relationship with the present Grant seems to be on the same wavelength as Michael Ignatieff: 'In dark times, nothing so abstract as faith in History, Progress, Salvation, or Revolution will do us much good. These are doctrines. It is people we need, people whose examples show us what it means to go on, to keep going, despite everything' (2021: 259). In the last part of this article, then, I reflect on how Grant's characters are situated in the novel's interwoven temporalities, this time in the interlocking of hope and nostalgia. I focus especially on Pete Dutton and on how the language characteristic of his focalisation alerts the reader to a specific outlook on current times.

Pete's Hopeful Nostalgia

I suggested above that hope is embodied in the characters of Chrissie, Alan and Pete. Hope is also a temporal concept and an emotion that has to be considered from the perspective of time. Hope is, as Ernst Bloch insists, an 'expectant emotion' (1995: 3), arguing that the 'anticipatory [...] operates in the field of hope' (12). What is striking, however, in Grant's characterisation, it is not only the sense of futurity that operates in the field of hope, it is also the awareness of the past, a specific kind of retrospection. Grant's sense of hope is enmeshed in nostalgia, so much so that a central aspect of Grant's complex interlocking temporalities *is* nostalgia. It thus makes sense here to think about nostalgia as a temporal category.

To be sure, Svetlana Boym proposes that nostalgia is 'a yearning for a different time' (2007: 8). She diagnoses nostalgia as a 'symptom of our age' – connected to a 'changing conception of time' (12) – and warns that even if it is usually considered retrospective, it is prospective, too: 'The fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future' (8). Boym offers a typology of nostalgia that is helpful in my reading of *A Stranger City*. She distinguishes between restorative and reflective nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia emphasises home (*nostos*), which it tries to reconstruct, under the rhetorical guise of truth and tradition, the values of family and homeland, and the promise of a return to origins. In short, it wants to restore, or re-establish, the past. Reflective nostalgia, in contrast, emphasises longing (*algia*) and is haunted by the ambivalences of 'human longing and belonging' (13). It is an 'individual narrative that savors details and memorial signs' (15) which it 're-flects' on with a new flexibility marked by humour and irony.

In this last part, I read Pete from the perspective of Boym's reflective nostalgia, a nostalgia that is untimely and disorderly, retrospective and anticipatory simultaneously.

This nostalgia is both private and benign and a helpful tool for that Pete's manoeuvring in the hegemonic and loud restorative nostalgia with its promise of return to origins that characterises the successful Leave rhetoric and that has had such an explosive effect on the nation. Pete is endearingly fussy, always somewhat out-of-time in the present. As a teenager, he is a 'working-class dandy in the age of punk' (2019: 13) and remains a working-class dandy who sets great store by his appearance. He is portrayed as a sensitive, ordinary Englishman who becomes emotionally engaged in his cases, as we see in his obsession with DB27. His tone is undemonstrative and understated as expected of such a private character. As a policeman, he is fine-tuned to deal with disorder and complexities. That is why he finds the rhetoric of the Leave campaign grating, as we see in his response to the 'old triumphalist signs' that shout 'Leave' thirty-four times at the beginning of Chapter 16 (129). 'It's not a very subtle message, is it?' (129) Pete comments to his wife Marie, who is recovering from breast cancer. She desires change, and wants to leave London in search of a setting that is more authentically English for her new café, in pursuit of her dreams of 'the old life, the old England' (304).

After the referendum and his wife's full recovery and subsequent relocation to the Lake District, Pete feels that the spouses live 'in two separate spheres' (301) with the marriage in tatters. A crumbling marriage typically mirrors the identity crisis of the nation in many BrexLit novels, such as in Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018a). In Grant's evocation of marital and national crises, Pete is made to feel that 'something had ripped in his life, torn it' (303). He sees reflected in his wife's reaction the 'mood that had overtaken people, nostalgia' (301), but not of the reflective sort. While Pete admits to being nostalgic for 'Johnny Rotten before he went weird and fat' he is not nostalgic for 'toasted crumpets and the old pound note' (301). Pondering on what Boym calls 'the romance with one own's fantasy' (2007: 7), Pete recalls summers when he mudlarked, looking for treasure buried in the sand on the banks of the Thames. Climbing down the stone steps to the river bank was like 'a portal to another city,' as if slipping through a 'crack in time' (2019: 302). In contrast to cosmopolitan Francesca's dislocating and upsetting time-travelling visit to the insular Island, encased in her class-conscious and somewhat disdainful account, Pete's comforting mudlarking memories are of a city that is global in outlook, of a world city that 'once had an empire' (302). In line with the novel's migration-friendly tone and its predominantly positive language when effects of migration are referenced, Pete also seems to be of a more cosmopolitan persuasion, but without Francesca's supercilious class-consciousness. He remembers trying to explain to Marie that you cannot have 'London without foreigners' (302).

That would be 'a lily-white National Trust mock-up' that had never been London (302), words that suggest a distaste for nationalistic ardour. It would be a fake past-in-the-present, not the 'real' past embodied in the material reality of things that you can touch, feel and smell, which he found mudlarking as a youngster, such as 'Tudor clay pipes,' 'Edwardian bottle-soppers' and 'foreign coins' – all the 'historic rubbish' (302) that indexes the continued mixing of time and place.

In his nostalgic mood, musing on his changing emotions over a stretch of time, to evoke Ismael's ideas again, Pete continues to think about what he ought to do and how he ought to live in a nation that seems to be developing along polarised trajectories with cemented identities as remainers and leavers. Such 'affective polarisation' is 'emotional and identity-driven' (see Packer and van Bavel, 2021: np) and not a sustainable way forward for a torn nation, Pete intuits. And since Pete loves his wife and is an affable and kind person who tends to shy away from conflict and drama, he feels ill at ease in a climate of affective polarisation. Thus, he realises that the way forward is compromise – that is how he ought to live: 'It was all so fucking ridiculous and it seemed to him that there was no way there couldn't be a resolution between them, a compromise, maybe summer in the Lake District, winter in London' (2019: 305). This resolution does not make him happy, but he still feels that 'voluntary exile' is the right thing to do, even if it means that he has to leave London, 'the good city that nourished him' (314).

Conclusion: Temporariness

A Stranger City ends with a bird's-eye view of London, the city that gathers together all of Linda Grant's dys-chronic musings on darkness and light, on past and present and on interwoven temporalities. The narrator positions the reader together with Chrissie on a plane towards Australia: 'From the air the Thames is a wiggling serpent. It has not always had this shape, it will not in the future. The seas will rise, the barrier will not hold them. Like everything, London is a temporary place, a temporary condition' (321). This last image of the stranger city is a temporal one – London is not permanent, since it will last only for a limited period of time, *sub specie aeternitatis*. But that is the way of the world, and nothing to despair about, the novel seems to insist. If it is true that '[l]iterature thinks,' and that it is 'where ideas are investigated, lived out, explored in their messy complexity,' as Robert Eaglestone holds (2013: 1), then *A Stranger City* is indeed a novel that thinks. Its interwoven temporalities and the author's dys-chronic relationship with the contemporary help to explore the untidy and unwieldy entanglement of the past in the present of Brexit Britain. Focusing on the vibrant dynamic

of life itself and on temporally immersed human beings through the intersecting lives and different attitudes of her three protagonist-focalisers, Grant manages to evoke the light that can be detected through the fault-lines of our dark times. Even a worst-case scenario imagined within the realms of the possible cannot completely eclipse hope. At the end of the novel, when the plane has to return to London, Chrissie remains unfazed: 'For she might leave her seat and step back out into the departure hall and return to everything she knows, she isn't sure. She has choices and chances' (2019: 322). She also has an Irish EU passport, and thus easy access to the rest of Europe. The novel's ending arrests time as Chrissie hovers in the air, not sure what the future will bring. What she does know, though, is that she is an agential creature with the option to go forwards in life. This is the light in the darkness of the 'now' of *A Stranger City*.

Competing Interests

[[COMPETING INTEREST STATEMENT TO BE PROVIDED]]

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