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Hostile Households: Deportability and Reproductive Geography in Natasha Brown's *Assembly* and Marco Varvello's "Brexit Blues"

Vanessa Montesi
University of Sunderland – Dance City, UK
vanemontesi@gmail.com
ORCiD: 0000-0003-4492-4689

ABSTRACT:

This article argues that Comparative Studies adequately show how literature can serve as an original resource for animating interdisciplinary geopolitical debates, contributing in important ways to other disciplines (in this case, social and political theory) and the theories used to analyse them. It does so by focusing on the comparative analysis of two works of fiction that deal with the intimate repercussions of the UK's hostile environment rhetoric and policies on transnational couples, showing how they challenge and complicate Bridget Anderson's concept of "community of value" (2013) and add significant elements to Sara Ahmed's theory of *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2014). Through a comparative approach to the discussion on how deportability impinges upon intimacy and romantic relationships, I consider Marco Varvello's short-story "Brexit Blues" (2018) and Natasha Brown's novel *Assembly* (2021) as "scale-bending" (Smith 2004) literary projects that highlight the scalar slide between household and nation to reveal the intertwinings of migration and reproductive politics in today's "climatic context of anti-blackness" (Gedalof 2022) and immigration eugenics (D'Aoust 2022).

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RESUMO:

Este artigo defende que os Estudos Comparatistas demonstram adequadamente como a literatura pode servir como um recurso original para animar debates geopolíticos interdisciplinares, contribuindo de maneira importante para outras disciplinas (neste caso, a teoria social e política) e para as teorias de análise aí usadas. Focando-se na análise comparativa de duas obras de ficção que lidam com as repercussões íntimas da retórica e das políticas de ambiente hostil do Reino Unido sobre casais transnacionais, o artigo mostra como as obras desafiam e complexificam o conceito de "comunidade de valor" de Bridget Anderson (2013) e adicionam elementos significativos à teoria exposta em *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, de Sara Ahmed (2014). Desenvolvendo uma abordagem comparativa da discussão sobre como o risco de deportação afecta a intimidade e os relacionamentos românticos, argumenta-se que o conto "Brexit Blues" (2018), de Marco Varvello, e o romance *Assembly* (2021), de Natasha Brown, são projetos literários de "desdobramento de escala" (Smith 2004) que enfatizam o deslizamento escalar entre família e nação para revelar os entrelaçamentos da migração e da política reprodutiva no atual "contexto climático de anti-negritude" (Gedalof 2022) e da eugenia da imigração (D'Aoust 2022).

KEYWORDS:

border bodies; intimate geopolitics; Brexit literature; black British literature; scale

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

corpos fronteiriços; geopolítica da intimidade; literatura do Brexit; literatura negra britânica; escala

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Introduction

THIS PAPER ARGUES that literature can serve as original resource for interdisciplinary geopolitical debates and theory, demonstrating the meaningful import that literature and its comparative study can represent for other disciplines and neighbouring theories. If theories can be defined as "strumenti ottici che ci permettono di vedere nei testi qualcosa che altrimenti non vedremmo mai" ["optical tools allowing us to see what we would not otherwise see in texts", my translation] (Bertoni 2018, 40), can the reverse be said as well, and can works of literature not only be seen as illumining each other when read comparatively, but also as illuminating and complicating the social, geographical, and political theory used to understand them? In this paper, I argue that the comparative reading of Marco Varvello's short story "Brexit Blues" (2019) and Natasha Brown's novel *Assembly* (2021) cannily register the changing emotional and reproductive geographies of post-Brexit London, while also complicating Bridget Anderson's concept of "community of value" (2013) and adding important nuances to Sara Ahmed's theory of *The Cultural Politics of Emotions* (2014).

Published only two years after the Brexit referendum by the London-based Italian correspondent of the main Italian news channel, Rai 1, *Brexit Blues* gives the title to a collection of seven stories exploring various ways of coming across the UK border and bordering practices from the diverse points of view of an ex-minister, a pregnant teenager, an unscrupulous businessman, a man who exploits the NHS (National Health Service), and several transnational couples. The short stories are connected to each other by the first-person narration of the narrator's own experiences and feelings as he asks himself whether the result of the Brexit vote means that he is a "cittadino nei documenti ma pur sempre straniero" ["citizen on paper but nevertheless a foreigner", my translation] (2008, 15). The last story of the book, "Brexit Blues", charts the spiralling trajectory of emotions and events following the Italian protagonist's receipt of a letter from the Home Office that rejects his application for settled status and warns him to prepare for deportation. While it soon transpires that the letter was sent by mistake, the anxieties and worries about what a failed application would mean for his life and relationship with an English woman re-open "past history of contact" (Ahmed 2014, 165), leading the protagonist, Giovanni John Onorato, towards a series of actions which, in a self-fulfilled prophecy, culminate with his own deportation.

If the stories contained in *Brexit Blues* can be read as an attempt to understand the geopolitical situation that lead such an unexpected scenario to become reality and the author's own feelings about it, Brown's novel reads as an experiment in relaying the complicated endeavour of simply existing as a Black British woman[1] in the aggressive climate created by the Hostile Environment rhetoric that culminated in the Brexit vote. Narrated through a series of short vignettes that acutely witness and dissect the hypocrisies, violence, and racism of contemporary British and

[1] Here I am using the capitalised Black British in reference to Stuart Hall's definition of it as a political identity and a term capacious enough to accommodate "the common experience of racism and marginalization in Britain" (1996, 27).

corporate culture, Natasha Brown's 100-pages novella *Assembly* (2021) depicts moments in the life of its Black British female protagonist, an unnamed investment banker, recently promoted and diagnosed with cancer, about to get engaged with the white son of an influent conservative politician.

The choice of these two literary works is not fortuitous. Both books can be seen as a reaction to what has come to be known as the "Hostile Environment", a governmental attitude expressed by influential politician Theresa May in 2012, when she was Home Secretary, and since then translated into a series of increasingly restrictive migration policies and bills, as well as into a general rancorous disposition towards migrants from politicians across party lines[2]. If, starting from its very title, *Brexit Blues* is explicitly a reflection on the impacts of Brexit on European citizens living in the UK, in *Assembly*, whose protagonist and author are British, the outcomes of Brexit and the environment of hostility that characterised the referendum are more subtly evoked through conversations, TV appearances, and references to the Windrush scandal as the last straw of a longer and unending history of " organised, systematic brutality that their [white British] soft and sagging children can scarcely stomach – won't even acknowledge" (Brown 2021, 75).

Furthermore, both narrations make explicit references to the bureaucratization of rights and the importance of papers, forms, and passports in determining who will be accepted and who will be cast aside[3]. Both reference the pressure to assimilate: in "Brexit Blues", the protagonist welcomes it by changing his name Giovanni into the more British sounding John, while in *Assembly* it becomes a central knot, given the problematic collapsing of English with White, identified by Alessio as one of the main issues at stake in the Brexit vote (2020). Both works use cancer as a metaphor and metonymy, and observe how migration policy, intervening into the private sphere of the protagonists, becomes reproductive politics. Lastly, both protagonists feel the need to distance themselves from the British poor and working class in a way that simultaneously illustrates and complicates Anderson's concept of "community of value" (2013) and Ahmed's political analysis of the feelings of anger, disgust, fear, and shame (2014). What differs, besides the obvious fact that one protagonist is a white male European and the other is a Black British woman, is their reactions to the hostile environment they wade through, the orientation and intensity of their movements. Giovanni John Onorato's disorientation manifests itself in frantic and directionless movements and unbridled monologues, whereas within the whole 100 pages of *Assembly*, the only voices we hear are those of the other characters; if the protagonist ever answers, the narrator does not give us access to her replies, and it is through silence and immobility that she formulates her most poignant attack at the end of the novel.

Following the abovementioned belief in the capacity of fiction to complicate and contribute to social, political, and geographical theory, in this paper I will examine

[2] This can be seen in the Labour's 2024 manifesto on migration, which reiterates the Tory party's commitment to reduce net migration and purports to set up a new return and enforcement unit.

[3] References to changing passports are a recurrent theme in Brexlit and the State of the Nation subgenre according to Alessio (2020), preceding and echoing populist media's appeal for passports to "be returned to their traditional blue covers as a 'symbol of British independence'" (Earle 2016) in the lead up to the Brexit referendum.

how Anderson's and Ahmed's theories complement each other in delineating not only why the migrant and the poor are pitted and pit themselves against each other, but also the emotional process through which this happens and how disgust concurs with shame. I then demonstrate how the lens offered by the superimposition of Anderson's and Ahmed's theories allow us to analyse these two works comparatively, and what their combined reading tells us about the theory used to read them. I conclude with a consideration on how Irene Gedalof's statement that "all migration politics is reproductive politics" (2022, 540) applies to these works of fiction and propose that, alongside being examples of, respectively, BrexLit and Black British Literature, "Brexit Blues" and *Assembly* can be figured as "scale-bending" (Smith 2004) literary projects: works that, by formally highlighting the scalar slide between the household and the nation, work to "challenge and undermine existing arrangements which tie particular social activities to certain scales" (MacKinnon 2010, 25), showing the at once "politicised and politicising dimensions of the reproductive" (England et al. 2019, 10).

1. The community of value: reading Anderson through Varvello and Brown

In *Us and Them* (2013), Bridget Anderson posits the community of value – where value is to be understood in both its moral and economic meanings – as one of the ways in which the state claims legitimacy and distributes rights and duties. Offering an overview of the history of the vagrant in Great Britain from the middle age onwards, as well as its shifting representations and management by state authorities, she demonstrates how this disruptive figure came to be the chrysalis for how the migrant and the poor are represented and dealt with. Allowing a seamless move between the local and the national, the community of value is defined from the outside by the non-citizen, whose contemporary embodiments are gendered as the (male) illegal migrant and the (female) victim of human trafficking, and from the inside by the (male) failed citizen and the (female) benefit scrounger, who, in failing "to live up to liberal ideals" (2013, 6) takes the shape of the criminal, and who, like the non-citizen, must be excluded from the community of value. Somewhere between the good citizen and the non or failed citizen are the tolerated citizens, themselves not an integral part of the community of value but lingering at its thresholds, and whose "fragility of hold" (6) and potential to slip out of it permeate the politics of citizenship, pushing them to become "the guardian(s) of good citizenship" (6) and disassociate themselves from any additional factor of exclusion. Anderson's brilliant examination of the state's attempt to immobilise the poor as a way to initially extract cheap labour and then reduce the claims to public funds highlights how images of the poor and the migrant came to be folded onto each other so they became two sides of the same coin – a conflation that compels them to counteract this movement by setting themselves apart from and against each other, as seen in the white working-class appeals to their rights as native and in the legal migrants' accentuation of their irreprehensible work ethic.

As removal enters the lexicon of migration in addition to that of criminality, deportability, not only as in the act of deportation itself, but as a constant possibility

and a state of anxiety worsening "the quality of life of migrants, their perceived universe of constraint and opportunities" (Anderson 2013, 126), further pushes them to seek acceptance within the community of value. This impulse can be clearly seen in the short story "Brexit Blues", by Marco Varvello. Its introduction painstakingly sets out the professional profile of its protagonist, detailing his economic success and sketching him as the prototypical hard-working, tax-paying liberal subject who "never asked for benefits" (Varvello 2018, 219) and whose life is dominated by his career to the point that even his partner is one of his colleagues. Giovanni John's disillusion with the UK after Brexit and his consequent anger can be seen as a reaction to the realisation that, no matter how hard he tries and believes to be part of the community of value, his position as a European migrant marks him out as a tolerated citizen. As such, he is always susceptible to being deported, as clearly spelled out in the letter he receives from the Home Office.

Despite its protagonist being British, a similar anxiety pervades Natasha Brown's *Assembly*. This is visible in the passage where the protagonist swaps the maroon-coloured EU passport with a new one, which she receives with a sigh of relief and disbelief attributed to "the readiness of this government and enterprising home secretary to destroy papers, our records and proof" (Brown 2021, 54). Referencing what came to be known as the Windrush scandal, where British subjects of Caribbean descent were detained and deported or threatened with deportation after the Home Office destroyed their landing cards and refused to issue their documents, Brown's one-hundred pages complicate Anderson's conceptualization of the community of value as made up of the good citizen, the non-citizen and the failed citizen as well as its porosity. The British-born, economically and socially successful protagonist of her book is unable to move to and claim her place among the community of value despite her determined effort to "transcend". Unlike Giovanni John Onorato, changing her name, getting rid of an accent, or obtaining the right papers will not suffice for admittance. Nowhere is this clearer than in the passage that sees her listening to the rant of a European male colleague distressed over Brexit and who likens his status to hers, exclaiming "We felt unwelcome. It's like if they said to you: Go back to Africa. Imagine if they told you: no-no, you are not a real Brit, go back to Africa" (Brown 2021, 5). This man's and Giovanni's surprise at the sudden hostility of a community they believed to be part of throws into stark relief the temporality of their position within Anderson's triad and their capacity to slip in and out of it. The same capacity is also possessed by the British poor and embodied in Brown's colleague Lou, a working-class banker who is promoted alongside her in the same bid for diversity and who, the narrator tells us:

> will make it […] He'll upsize, then upsize again, soon enough. Get the kids on waiting lists for the right schools. Schmooze up with the right people, get that next promotion, the ski invite, start buying better suits. He'll evolve. Until he slips in, indistinguishable. His children will grow up knowing only this. Believing it's free. (Brown 2021, 78)

The reference to reproduction here is not marginal. If Anderson's triad *good citizen, failed citizen and non-citizen* offers no distinctive space or possibility of movement for Brown's protagonist, this is because in the wake of slavery and the contemporary

"climatic context of anti-blackness" in the UK (Gedalof 2022, 548), the black body is always already deprived of a status, inheriting non-being from the mother, as skilfully reminded by Spillers' refrain "partus sequitum ventrem"[4]. Referencing slavery and the academic theory produced in its wake in the context of Britain might appear to gloss over historical differences between the U.S., where slavery was present for four hundred years, and Britain, where people of African descent lived as free subjects from as early as 300 A.D. and even participated as sailors to the voyages of discovery in Elizabethan times. Whilst not recognising this difference might serve selectively blind views of British history as only recently multicultural, it must be recognised that "British postcolonial history remains pivotal, and the policies and cultural shifts impacting [Black British] authors mostly emerge in the 20th century" (Wyatt and George 2020, 7). However different the cultural heritage, there exists "similarities in how Black women in the U.S. and Britain experience racism, irrespective of whether they have previous knowledge of or exposure to ancestors who were previously enslaved" (Norwood 2022, 7). Moreover, Wyatt and George demonstrate that contemporary Black writers from both sides of the Atlantic have produced networks of citations and drawn on one another to "develop literary techniques enabling them to produce 'racial literacy' in their readers" (2020: 7) – something that can be identified as a major aim in Brown's Assembly, with its careful and detailed account of episodes of microaggression and its mobilisation of focalisation to highlight the affective dimension of systemic and institutional racism. Deportability, Brown reminds, is not only a feature of the migrant and the poor, but also and always affects the Black British body: indeed,

> What is citizenship when you've watched screaming GO HOME vans crawl your street? When you've heard the banging, unexpected, always, at the door? When British, reduced to papers, is swept aside and trodden over? (Brown 2020, 54).

Unlike Giovanni and Lou, and despite her citizenship and capital, Brown's character is stuck in the uncomfortable status of tolerated citizen, which she will pass on to her offsprings. The misogynistic and racist micro-aggressions that dot the pages of the book are a constant reminder of her position, from which the only move possible is towards what people openly associate with her skin[5]– foreign or failed. While being cognizant of the racism underpinning the community of value and its exclusion of the immigrant and the poor, Anderson's theory risks erasing the experience of Black British citizens, whose shape does not fit comfortably in either of those categories and who experience less intergenerational social mobility. At the same time, her concept of deportability allows to comprehend the lives of British-born UK citizens of Black descent and the sense of "fragility of hold" that ceaselessly pervades their and their imagined offspring's realm of perceived possibility. It is thus not surprising that the central metaphor and metonymy of the novel, a breast cancer, is attacking the protagonist's reproductive system.

[4] Gedalof translates this as "the child follows the belly" (2022, 547).

[5] Take for example the description of a white British labourer looking at her cross the garden and saying "Pretty lady, you think it's fair? You stroll in the sunshine while I work, eh? What a world" (2021, 74).

As mentioned above, cancer is a common metaphor that connects the two books. For Giovanni it represents the feelings of anxiety "devouring the sense of well-being that had welcomed him home" (2018, 205) and spreading into unforeseen and unwelcome events. In *Assembly*, it becomes receptacle and representamen of different meanings, orientations and emotions in a way that exemplifies Ahmed's argument that emotions and meaning can "move sideways, through sticky associations between signs, figures, objects, as well as forward and backward" (2014, 43). Stickiness and affective capital are central to Ahmed's theory of emotions and their political valence, but they also help us understand *how* the association between migrant and poor comes into being and accrues value, thus complementing Anderson's careful explanation of the *why* of it.

2. Sticky histories of contact and border bodies

If Anderson carefully explains the long historical process that brought together the images of the poor and migrant, and why this was needed and encouraged by state authorities, Ahmed's book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014) can provide answers to why this association became so strong and how it accumulated value over time. In it, Ahmed sets about to explore how "emotions work to shape the surfaces of individual and collective bodies" (2014, 1). She formulates a theory of emotion that, far from residing in objects and subjects, come into being as the result of contact between subjects, objects, and signs. As temporal proximity and repetition enable emotions and signs to move from one object to another, they carry with them past histories of contact and accumulate affective capital which makes them stickier, reinforcing their associations and binding signs to bodies in ways that "block new meanings" (2014, 92). Stickiness can then be defined as a "transference of affect" enabled by the concealing of the repeated association between words and the past history of contact between bodies they conjure: a sticky sign is the one that evokes "other words, which have become intrinsic to the sign through past forms of association" (91-92). The stickiness and accrual of affect described by Ahmed is clearly portrayed in relation to the word deportation in Varvello's short story. More than the (mistaken) rejection of his application per se, it is the history evoked by the words "be ready for deportation", put on paper by the Home Office, that disturbs him:

> Deported? Had it been any other word, get ready to leave the country, go away, pack your bags, say bye to your loved ones and hop on a plane…take a ferry from Dover and cross the Channel. […] Any other word would have made him think that it was an error. A bureaucratic, administrative mistake. […] But the letter said deported. Expelled. Just like during the war" (205, my translation).

These words become a refrain, opening up the history of the Italians who were detained and deported from the UK in the 1940s, of concentration camps and the intolerance that marked the pre-World War II years, and the more personal history of migration running through his family, the sentiment of being forever a guest felt by his father while admitted in Germany as a *gastarbeiter*, a guest worker. Just like the word deportation cannot be untangled from its historical association with a Europe

of growing divisions, intolerance, and fascism, a history that Giovanni John Onorato is afraid will repeat itself, the words "GO HOME" painted on vans in 2013 as part of May's politics of Hostile Environment are indelibly associated to the racist slogans chanted by far-right organisations active in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the National Front. This association does not go unnoticed by Brown's protagonist, and it is linked by temporal proximity to the Windrush scandal. Indeed, the passage on the vans is preceded, just a few pages earlier, by a paragraph detailing how after recruiting British subjects, Enoch Powell (and a series of successive governments, both Tory and Labour) drew up new migration laws that revoked people's rights. By juxtaposing these scenes, Brown uncovers the sticky history of contact of the expression "Go Home", once infamously used against British citizens of imperial descent to imply that they would never be considered "at home" in the UK.

Sticky signs and objects, tells us Ahmed, not only block new meanings, but can function to bind subjects together. Disgust is a particularly sticky emotion that "can move between objects through the recognition of likeness" (2014, 88). If we return to Anderson's description of the good citizen, the poor and the migrant, and superimpose it to Ahmed's claim that contemporary representations of borders assimilate them to skin – "soft, weak, porous, and easily shaped, or ever easily bruised by the proximity of others" (2014, 2) – we can understand how it is that the abject becomes a common property of the poor and the migrant's body and how it is that disgust easily shifts to shame. According to Kristeva, the abject is not only what threatens us from the outside – what threatens to perforate the surface of the (individual and collective) skin – but also what threatens to move from the inside out – "as the skin, a fragile container, no longer guaranteed the integrity of one's 'own and clean' self, but scraped on and transparent, gave way before the dejection of its content" (Kristeva 1982, 53). What is placed at the border of the body and what is placed at the border of the nation becomes an object of disgust, while disgust engenders border bodies as something that can be expelled from the community of value at any given moment.

The forced proximity that links the poor and the migrant as objects of disgust (border bodies) allows signs to slide across each other and get stuck. This explains Giovanni's sudden unease about his heavily accented English as well as the way *Assembly*'s protagonist becomes the ultimate receptacle for a host of diverse associations made by other people, who respectively attribute to her the characteristics of foreigner, working-class, sexual object, progressive left-wing protester, criminal, poor. But disgust can also move in the opposite direction, causing subjects to pull away from their objects of disgust "with an intensity that can be undoing" (Ahmed 2014, 84). Disgust expels the badness and sticks it to the body of others, as does Giovanni when he, unironically and as a form of revenge, describes the twentieth century English working class as "cannon fodder sent to die for the homeland" and "scrounger" (2018, 219-220) before starting a fight. So does *Assembly*'s protagonist, whose merciless gaze hovers not only on the working-class poor, but also on her colleagues, her partner and his family members, turning them into objects to distance and dissect. Returning the studying glare that has been imposed on her throughout her whole life, she strips them of their social and cultural subjectivity and turns

them into bare flesh and tendons whose mechanics of eating can be described as if observed through a magnifying glass:

> I watch her swallow. Then sip tea. Bite again, chew. Swallow. […] The mother, oblivious to this sudden slowing of our time, bites once more. Her jaw grinds rhythmically, bulging and elongating: tendons, emerging taut, flicker up past her ear and into grey wisps of hair. By her temple, a bone or cartilage or some other hard aspect of her bobs and strains against the stretched-white skin. The entire side of her face is engaged in this elaborate mechanical action, until, climatically, the soft-hung skin of her neck contracts familiar and the ground-down-mushed-up toast, saliva and butter, worked into a paste, squeezes down: is forced through the pulsing oesophagus, is swallowed. (Brown 2021, 71)

The difference between the two protagonists, however, is in the latter's inability to fully eject the disgust and move away from the sticky grounds of tolerated citizen. Indeed, when the self is only accessible through the gaze of others, as Du Bois and Fanon acutely described in *The Souls of Black Folk* (2008) and *Black Face, White Mask* (1986), disgust doubles back and turns into shame, producing a subject whose "movement back into itself is simultaneously a turning away from itself" (Ahmed 2014, 104). This is evident in the narrator's "ever-present threat of the same impulse. To protect this place from me" (Brown 2021, 85) and adds a new layer to Ahmed's analysis of the cultural politics of disgust. Not only "what gets unstuck can always get re-stuck and can even engender new and more adhesive forms of sticking" (100), but the stickiness of the associations and the histories of contact they at once conceal and manifest can make some bodies stickier than others. This is powerfully articulated by Brown in the multi-layered metaphor/metonymy of cancer, where she allows meaning and affect to slide and stick to signs and objects, the breast cancer coming to stand for multiple and contradictory things.

3. The self has nowhere to turn: immobility/silence as refusal and weapon

Just like Varvello, initially Brown uses the metaphor of a tumour to describe the atmosphere of hostility and what Rob Nixon called "slow violence": "'a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (2013, 2)[6]. By juxtaposing a passage where the main character is the victim of an act of racism, a passage on the white family's wealth, and a passage where the protagonist is told by the doctor that the untreated tumour could metastasise and "spread through the blood to other organs, growing uncontrollably, overwhelming the body" (Brown 2021, 77), not only does the narrator provide a tangible image for the workings of slow violence, but she also links that violence with the practices and institutions that tacitly sustain it and whose power comes from a still open, although unspoken, history of colonization and aggression. The tumour, however, takes on

[6] While Nixon's definition of slow violence was developed in relation to environmental damage, his concept has since been applied to various forms of structural violence, including austerity and the weaponization of a hostile environment against refugees and asylum seekers (Mayblin 2020; Benwell et al. 2023).

additional meanings as a particularly sticky object of disgust, a "new malignant part of me" (46). As a disruption to her career, it comes to stand for the exhaustion she feels at the prospect of the interminable ascent of the socio-economic ladder, the type of thinking that "leads to undoing. Or else, not doing, which is the slower, more painful approach to coming undone" (51). It is the feeling of resignation she needs to expel to move on, and at the same time the unspoken but all too real disgust impressed on her body (as a border body) by the surrounding cultural climate of racism that stops her in her tracks, demanding that her inconvenient body be "dissect(ed), poison(ed), destroy(ed)" (46) into a shape that fits the colonial canon. In epitomising the contingency of her acceptance within the community of value, the tumour also becomes a metonym for her whole body, her womanhood, her blackness, herself; hence her refusal to treat it is not an act of surrender, but of survival. In a searing passage towards the end of the book, we watch Brown's black heroine watching her white colleague Lou watching the filmed black body of Philando Castile being killed by a white police officer while reaching for his ID card. A description of the burrito her colleague is eating while doing that is followed by her memory of a visit to the doctor. In these few lines, the cancer oscillates between being the slow violence that is killing her, and her own body as seen through the white gaze as having a "malignant intent":

> I recall Lou, eating lunch at his desk while Philando Castile's death played out between paragraphs on his screen […] The doctor said I did not understand, that I did not know the pain of it; of cancer left untreated. […] Pain, I repeat. Malignant intent. Assimilation – radiation, rays. Flesh consumed, ravaged by cannibalising eyes. Video and burrito, finished. Lou's sticky hand cupped the mouse and clicked away. (2021, 83)

Excising the tumour equals excising her body; but if the body is what she needs to leave behind in order to assimilate, then to assimilate means to die. Survival for the Black body is only possible through escape from the "cannibalising eyes" (81) of whiteness. In leaving the cancer untreated, the protagonist mobilises immobility as the ultimate refusal to a system in which sustenance she has been complicit, but in which, she has come to understand, she will never be fully accepted. The relentless effort of moving forward and up, epitomised by the repetitions of the words "move on", "transcend", "keep moving", only translates into the stillness of not sliding backwards and down for Brown's heroine. This is because the community of value, brilliantly exemplified by the white and wealthy guests at her partners' family gathering, needs the "the sharp, black outline" (69) of border bodies to define them from the outside.

Looking, staring, observing, examining, scrutinizing – the eye as a tool of knowledge and surveillance is a recurring motive in the book. The seemingly random assemblage of its paragraphs becomes a conscious choreography of the gaze caught between looking at itself, looking at others, and looking away. Sara Collins, reviewing the novel for *The Guardian*, rightfully points out its connection with Du Bois' concept of double consciousness as "this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 2008, 8). However, Brown does more than showing that – by omitting the protagonist's answers, her name and physical description,

she constructs a "fugitive narrator" who turns the silence and immobility imposed on a "Black body sealed into crushing objecthood" (Fanon 1986, 109) into her own weapons. Paula von Gleich describes fugitivity as a "constant struggle against the Black border" characterizing the lives of Black individuals in the unresolved and enduring history of enslavement (2017, 204). Fugitivity is nothing but a form of agency expressed by those "who cannot and do not remain in the proper place, or the places to which they have been confined or assigned" (Campt 2012, 87). In Brown's novel, the narrator's decision to omit any description of herself that would place the readers in the position of being able to identify her - either by naming or by physically or psychologically describing her, or making them imagine her voice - can be seen as a refusal to remain in her assigned narratorial place and an escape for the "cannibalising eyes" of the reader, who is therefore equated to the white onlooker. While Giovanni reacts to the perceived hostility with an excess of unbridled movement and speech – perhaps a luxury he can afford as a white male character – Brown's heroine is mostly still and silent. Immobilised by the persistent demand to keep moving as well as by the everyday micro-aggressions she painstakingly details, she turns that silence and immobility into a crushing response at the end of the story, when her white, upper class, loving boyfriend proposes to her as they lay on the grass of his family estate:

> I should meet his kiss. Then we'll clumber up, brush off, and walk back down to the house holding hands. Guests will be here soon, it's almost time. […] His lips tremble with the strain of pursing; confident in the assumed yes, and yet, uncertain. Suddenly, so uncertain. (Brown 2021, 100)

In her description of hatred, Ahmed demonstrates that "some bodies move precisely by sealing others as objects of hate" (2014, 60). Immobilised by the everyday micro-aggressions and a hostile environment for the large part of the book, Brown's character ultimately immobilises her partner – and the reader – in the uncertainty of an unanswered question, as his whiteness becomes inextricable from the unresolved history of white hatred and racial abuse he is, at least and perhaps unwillingly, implicated in.

4. Who gets to belong, with whom, and under what circumstances? Scalar politics and reproductive politics

The fact that both stories end with the couples splitting up is something that has not received much attention by literary reviewers and scholars, who have preferred to focus on the protagonists' own feelings and the socio-political issues related to racism, intersectionality and the hostile immigration rhetoric that surrounded the Brexit vote (Alessio 2022; Pittel 2021). However, I argue that this is a major point of both narratives and one that sets them out as examples of scale-bending literature, which I define as literary works that reveal the reverberation of political discourse on the level of the body and the household, but also help us reflect on the effects that couples' and families' choices can have on the make-up of the nation, thus undoing

the material and discursive practices that "fix" certain dimensions of life on a particular scale and highlighting the intersection of migration and reproduction.

To understand how this works, the concept of scalar politics developed by Danny MacKinnon will be useful. In an article titled "Reconstructing scale: Towards a New Scalar Politics," MacKinnon attempts a synthesis between political-economic approaches to scale, concerned with its construction as material entity, and post-structural approaches that privilege its discursive formation and the performativity of scalar practices. Scales, such as the regional, the local, or the global are not pre-given entities, but the "physical, social, and conceptual product of social and natural events and processes" (Smith 2004, 196) reflecting the "material expression of evolving power relations" (MacKinnon 2010, 22). In partitioning experience into different, hierarchized realms that once established are expressed and perceived as natural, scalar discourses can be used by powerful social actors to disempower subaltern groups by confining them to the lower scales, like the neighbourhood or the household, while they command 'higher' scales such as the global and national. Moreover, by producing scale and presenting it as a material given, they can hide the scalar aspects and repercussion of particular political projects (MacKinnon 2010).

The concept of scalar politics is fundamental to understand Gedalof's claim that "all migration politics is reproductive politics" (540), as it allows us to pay attention to the repercussions that laws explicitly designed to affect the scale of the nation (like migration control) have on the scale of the household (who gets to reproduce with whom?) and the reverse: how individual choices, such as with whom to form a family, can produce and reconfigure reproductive geographies and affect the nation. This is a critical issue in both Brown and Varvellos' stories, as both works repeatedly highlight scale as materially and discursively produced through formal tools such as repetition, temporal proximity, metaphor, and metonymy.

Indeed, the "turning away from others" engendered on a national level by the mobilization of hatred on the part of politicians (Ahmed 2014, 51), becomes a turning away from each other on the level of the couple. For Giovanni, this is lived as a betrayal, as he associates the feeling of rejection caused by the British decision to leave Europe to his partner's increasing distance from him, as articulated in the sentence "si era persuaso che l'amore fosse reciproco" ["he had persuaded himself that love was reciprocal," my translation], which he applies to both the UK and Lauren. The border suddenly surfacing between the collective bodies of the British and European communities raises the question of where one's allegiances lie, leading him to ask his partner if she would "deport herself" should he be sent away, and to perceive her lack of response as an admission of disloyalty. For *Assembly*'s character instead, the delineation of borders and the distancing that comes with it does not have the same element of surprise but is lived as a collection of moments and events where the political slides on the personal, revealing the mosaic-like quality of scalar relations (Brenner 2001). This is expressed at its best on page 42, as a vignette describing Theresa May's resignation speech ending with the words "the country I love" – a love that, following Ahmed's analysis of love and hate, produces the nation as a concrete effect of how "some bodies move towards and away from other bodies" (2014, 133) – is followed by one where her boyfriend declares his love for her and she reflects on its performativity, "the saying of it, and then the acting it out" (2014, 42). Distancing,

in Brown's novel, is the inevitable outcome of getting close[7]: the move towards, which in the phenomenology of disgust precedes the move away from, forces the heroine to look at and see how the unresolved history of colonialism is still living in the present of the social and power relations quietly but strongly defended by her partner's family and by white society's refusal to acknowledge and address them. What is unresolved on the socio-political level cannot be solved on the individual one, as the two dimension of existence do not belong to different scales but are co-produced and affect each other. Both works then show how the politics of deportability and illegality, and the emotions mobilised on a national level (hatred, fear, anger, disgust) slide to the individual sphere and intrude on intimacy as they re-open unsolved histories of harmful contact and produce tense geographies and bodies.

The concept of scale also allows us to answer Gedalof's question: "how does living in the wake of empire and slavery continue to intervene in the ways in which reproduction is differentially put into play when migration policy/politics confronts the lives of Black Britons?" (2022, 574). According to Neil Brenner's theory of scalar structuration, scalar politics allows elements of a scalar fix (scales that become apparently fixed through the interaction of major institutional forms such as capitalism and nation state) of one period to be carried forward and constrain the evolution of future scalar configurations. Elements of the scale of property that characterised imperial configurations of slave subjects and patriarchal configurations of women are carried forward and into the scale of reproduction and romantic love, reproducing hetero-patriarchal and racist reproductive ideas within current marriage migration politics/policies that defines who gets to belong, with whom, and on what terms[8].

It is not by accident that the powerful metaphor/metonymy of the tumour, mobilised by Brown to simultaneously signify the climate of racist hostility surrounding her character, her exhaustion, her body as what needs to be expelled, and her refusal to succumb to whiteness, is attacking nothing less than her breast, organs linked to reproduction and to the passing on of life and nourishment. When the nation is invested in keeping the Other at a distance, both the other from within and the one from without can be barred from the reproductive sphere on account of their inability to reproduce sameness, while also being excluded from the "normative familial reproductive sphere because their individual kinship ties are devalued if not completely negated" (Gedalof 2022, 522). In light of this, the protagonist's tumour in *Assembly* can be also read as a metaphor for what D'Aoust calls "immigration eugenics" (2022, 271): the increasingly spectacularised interference of the state with matters of reproduction through marriage migration legislation which "obstruct(s) and facilitate(s) the admission of parents and future parents", delineating what types of marriage and citizens are considered legitimate while also showing "what the state would do to citizens – and to which citizens – if it could dictate who among the

[7] On page 39 she describes the train she has taken to her partner's family house as "tearing us together".
[8] The implicitly hetero-patriarchal and racist figuration of the foreign spouse as property becomes apparent in the UK spouse visa requirement for a Minimum Income Requirement set so high that, as of November 2024, only 40% of the UK population could "afford" to sponsor their partner, in the prohibitive cost of resettling totalling £12,500, as well as in the implicit assumption that the foreign partner will not be able to participate in public life, work and pay taxes (thereby the request that the UK sponsor maintain them both and pays NHS taxes upfront, as well as the exclusion of the foreign spouse from all forms of social assistance) (Jorgensen 2024).

citizenry could marry and bear children" (2022, 271). Far from this being an unfortunate side-effect, the constant linking of the intimate and national scales in both Varvello and Brown suggests that the government's interference in family life is an intrinsic aspect of hostile environment politics and policies, pointing towards the central place of reproduction in "the life-maximising and life-negating dimensions of bio-power" (England et al 2010, 13). By approaching the geopolitical "from the starting point of those who experience its embodied repercussion" (Smith 2020, 15), literature emerges as a rich field of enquiry for feminist and reproductive geographers.

Conclusion

This paper started with the assertion that literature and Comparative Literature can provide important insights and reflections to the social, geographical, and political theories used to analyse its objects of study. I have argued that a comparative reading of Varvello's short story "Brexit Blues" (2018) and Brown's *Assembly* (2021) exemplifies Bridget Anderson's conceptualization of the "community of value" and its tripartition into good citizen, non-citizen, and failed citizen as partially blind to the experience of Black British citizens, for whom movement into and out of this configuration is precluded. At the same time, I have demonstrated the applicability of her concept of deportability to their lives, despite their British nationality. Sara Ahmed's theory of the cultural politics of emotions can help us understand the mechanisms that bound the image of the poor and that of the migrant together so strongly, and how disgust works to produce border bodies as/and tolerated citizens.

Again, reading the works by Varvello and Brown comparatively contributes with significant elements to Ahmed's theory, stressing, for example, the fact that some bodies are stickier than others, and how emotions work not only to orient bodies towards and against other bodies, but also to disorient them. Anger and shame can be seen as producing difficulties in orientation that leads to stillness and/or misdirection. This becomes clear in Brown's multi-layered metaphor/metonymy of the tumour as simultaneously symbolising her characters' surrounding environment, her exhaustion, her own body and the denied reproductive rights in the context of Britain's contemporary "immigration eugenics" (D'Aoust, 2022). This analysis led me to define these works as scale bending literary projects that, by highlighting the scalar slide between the household and the nation, work to "challenge and undermine existing arrangements which tie particular social activities to certain scales" (MacKinnon 2010, 25) and reveal how the "a-geographical realm of the body, the home, and intimate relationships are key sites at which discursive and material relations of geopolitical power are continuously reproduced and challenged" (Massaro and Williams 2013, 574).

Literature carries the potential to be scale-bending because of its simultaneous embrace of the characters' intimate lives and the wider socio-historical and political landscape that allows it to account for "the embodied experience of people whose lives have been rendered territorial" (Smith 2020, 9). In addition, literary devices such as repetition, metaphors, metonymies, and juxtaposition help emphasise the scalar slide from the intimate to the political and vice-versa. It is exactly through its

formal structure, as well as its material and spatio-temporal affordances, that the literary form can powerfully articulate complex and contradictory experiences of the world, contributing to our understanding of it, while the tools of Comparative Literature can become instruments of political and geographical analysis, as they simultaneously borrow from and enrich neighbouring theories.

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Vanessa Montesi is a Lecturer in Dance Studies at the University of Sunderland, having moved there on a spouse visa. She is the author of *Dance as Intermedial Translation,* published by Leuven University Press (2024). Her articles on dance and translation have been published by *TIS, JosTrans, Babel, Chaiers de Littérature Orale* and other journals. She collaborates with the Centre for Comparative Studies of the University of Lisbon, where she is currently coediting a multilingual and multimedia zine. She has been a research assistant for Dramaturgical Ecologies at Concordia University, working closely with Angélique Willkie on a project examining the intersections between blackness and dance dramaturgy.