

Albion Under Assault: Denouncing the Migrant Invasion Myth in *Small Island* and *Perfidious Albion*

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Abstract

During the period between the end of the second World War and *Brexit*, migration has represented one of the main topics of contention that has polarised the British society. In this context, the myth that Britain was under a migrant invasion has constantly informed the British imaginary. This paper presents a critical analysis of representations in two novels of the *migrant invasion myth*, which claims that Britain has been subject to a migrant invasion of unprecedented proportions that has jeopardised the social and economic order and has affected the harmonious functioning of the society. After examining the most significant patterns of constructing the *migrant invasion myth* in the form of narratives claiming that the territory of the motherland is insidiously infiltrated by foreign incomers who occupy the living and social space of the natives, I proceed to scrutinizing the aesthetical expressions by which these myths are denounced in two representative novels: *Small Island* (Levy, 2004), by second generation Caribbean immigrant Andrea Levy and *Perfidious Albion* (Byers, 2018) by contemporary English author Sam Byers. Both novels explore the anxieties that arise among natives when immigrants from the Caribbean after World War 2 (Levy) and from Central Eastern Europe in the post-*Brexit* years respectively (Byers) struggle to integrate in local British communities. These novels negotiate the emergence of nativism among a category of British natives who perceive migrant settlement as a claim to their domestic space and a threat to the social, moral, and economic order of their community. Through artful development of intertwining subplots, depiction of complex characters, and ingenious employment of narrative techniques and aesthetic devices, both novels provide a trenchant critique of the mythology that projects an aura of besieged fortress over British local communities, thus raising awareness about the dangers that such mythology represents.

Key words (alphabetically): Home, migration, migrant invasion myth, motherland.

1. Introduction

Race relations and immigration after the second World War have constantly represented a significant topic of social and political debate in Britain, but it was a particular event that has marked profoundly and irreversibly the way British natives relate to migration; the speech that Enoch Powell delivered at the meeting of the Conservative Political Centre in Birmingham on the 20th of April 1968 (Powell, 1968). The gloomy vision about Britain's future he pictured in the speech encapsulated all the tensions and anxieties accumulated during the two decades since the first Caribbean migrants settled and has equally set the ground for future developments of the mind-set of many British natives and official policies regarding migration. And even though the phrase from Virgil's *Aeneid* that made the speech famous, which also inspired its title – “As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see "the River Tiber foaming with much blood” (Powell, 1968) – is considered by many to have been the key to Powell's successful rhetoric, many commentators (Atkins & Finlayson, 2013; Crines, Heppell, & Hill, 2016) consider that the rhetorical tool that had had the strongest impact on Powell's audience was the anecdote about the old lady from Wolverhampton.

Eight years ago in a respectable street in Wolverhampton a house was sold to a Negro. Now only one white (a woman old-age pensioner) lives there. This is her story. She lost her husband and both her sons in the war. So she turned her seven-roomed house, her only asset, into a boarding house. She worked hard and did well, paid off her mortgage and began to put something by for her old age. Then the immigrants moved in. With growing fear, she saw one house after another taken over. The quiet street became a place of noise and confusion. Regretfully, her white tenants moved out. (Powell, 1968, n. pag.)

This is how Powell described in dramatic terms a reality that was far from real. The story he presented was an exaggeration, but this had little importance; what mattered in that time, and we still notice its consequences today, was the myth that Powell articulated. The powerful narrative delivered in dramatic form, an essential feature that makes myths to be believed, as Henry Tudor contends (Tudor, 1972, 17), was not just believed by Powell's followers, but it has simply engrained in the collective subconscious the idea that Britain was under assault. The myth of an immigrant invasion, which had been brewing for years, was now articulated, consolidated, and put to work.

These tensions, which were already permeating the relations between migrants and locals from the moment of the first arrivals in the 1950s were skilfully speculated by populist politicians, as the above mentioned example indicates, who channelled the popular discontent towards immigrants, thus

articulating a mythology that has ever since served to justify the hardships Britain was facing. As James Walvin claims, nativist populist politicians like Powell, or UKIP prominent figures in recent years, “studiously chose [their] timing and topics [...] to tap the deep wells of popular racial antipathy” (Walvin, 1984, 133). The British nativist discourse has thus successfully integrated in such periods various categories of myths that reinforce each other by creating the sensation of a necessary connection and continuity of these narratives.

Emerging initially from in the context of migration from the British colonies after World War 2, this mythology has been integrated into a coherent nativist discourse, which is sometimes described as Powell’s legacy (Earle, 2018; Sweney, 2018), and has constantly nurtured a sense of panic in the face of an alleged invasion by alien migrants, thus functioning for many British natives as a justification to defend the national territory and identity against such intrusions. In reaction to the production and dissemination of such myths, successive generations of novelists have engaged in exposing the instrumentalisation of anti-migrant mythology by British nativist discourse and in challenging the anti-migrant culture it reinforces. Taking its starting point in the debate over immigration in Britain, this paper aims to provide a scrutiny of how literary responses to immigration can challenge false representations of immigration as a form of invasion of reception societies and of migrants as aliens invading local communities, taking over the natives’ living space, and jeopardising natives’ access to the welfare privileges that should be their exclusive right.

By analysing Andrea Levy’s *Small Island* (2004) and Sam Byers’ *Perfidious Albion* (2018), two novels that respond to this issue in two different historical moments, I will examine how these works negotiate migrant invasion myths in the context of the Caribbean migration to Britain after World War 2 (Levy) and from Central Eastern Europe in the post-*Brexit* years respectively (Byers). Imbued with zeitgeisty energy, these novels capture the impact of nativism among a category of British natives who perceive the act of migrant settlement as a claim to their domestic space and a threat to the social, moral, and economic order of their community.

In my analysis, I first delineate the meaning of *migration myth* in the context of this study, and in connection to this, I proceed by examining the most significant patterns of constructing the migrant invasion myth in the analysed novels. Consequently, I will scrutinise how, through artful development of intertwining subplots, depiction of complex, situationally adaptive characters, and ingenious employment of narrative techniques and aesthetic devices, both novels provide a trenchant critique of the mythology that projects an aura of besieged fortress over British local communities,

thus raising awareness about the dangers that the perpetuation of such mythology in the British collective subconscious represents.

2. *Migration Myths and the Fear of a Motherland Invasion*

Since the end of World War 2, the British society has continuously been influenced by migration, which has brought diversity, but also triggered divisions between supporters and critics of migration. In this context, migration myths have often influenced the debate on immigration, acting as convenient explanations for societal, political, or economic failures, as well as for shaping and justifying British natives' anti-migrant attitudes. As prominent migration scholar Hein de Haas claims, in contemporary Britain “much conventional thinking about migration is based on myths rather than facts” (De Haas, 2014). Given this importance of migration myths in the public debate, migration researchers started to show interest in the implications these myths have in the emergence of nativist attitudes (De Haas, 2005, 2008, 2014, 2016; Finney & Simpson, 2009; Hayter, 2004; Wickramasekara, 2014) and work towards a critical assessment of myths and facts in order to dispel misconceptions about migrants and migration. In these studies, migration myths are generally described as narratives about migration that are untrue, as in the expression ‘that’s just a myth’, and which imply overstatements, oversimplifications, and generalisations meant to influence the public perception of migration (Finney & Simpson, 2009).

Myths, however, are complex phenomena that have permeated all cultures at all times and their function cannot be reduced just to misleading the way an individual or a group perceives phenomena, people, and events. Characteristic for myth is to provide collectively accepted explanations for the way things work, to help understand the positions a group occupies in society at a certain time, to provide means to crystallise common beliefs and attitudes, and to underpin ideological group positions and political preferences. As Christopher Flood argues, “mythicality arises from the intricate, highly variable relationship between claims to validity, discursive construction, ideological marking, and reception of the account by a particular audience in a particular historical context” (Flood, 2002, 2). It is therefore sensible to consider that myths address a particular event or situation and are rooted in the culture of a particular group. They do not provide just an explanation, but also a practical argument that imposes a certain course of action, whose finality is either the survival or the empowerment of a community. It is these characteristics that explain the myth’s pervasiveness, despite the low degree of veracity informing the narrative it contains. Myths are followed, although not necessarily believed, just because they concentrate a way of understanding, thinking of, and

expressing about social issues, such as migration, that are commonly accepted by the members of a group. Myths become memorable because they repeat what is already known to be ‘true’, and this makes them culturally entrenched and therefore difficult to challenge.

Although the common understanding of myth in today’s social context has derogatory connotation, not all myths are harmful; by contrary, myths can be seen as “narratives that coagulate and reproduce significance [...] by which the members of a social group or society represent and posit their experience and deeds.” (Bottici, 2007, 201) and thus contribute to the construction of the social imaginary and constitute the framework for policy making. Myths become problematic when they promote a narrative that “pivots around the dichotomy that opposes a ‘we’ to a ‘they’” (Bottici & Challand, 2013, 11), thus stimulating prejudice, division, discrimination, hostility, and tension between groups. Migration myth is understood in this study, in the light of the explanation provided by Bottici and Challand, as a category of myth whose subject matter involves fabricated or exaggerated references to migrants or instances of migration, originates in the antagonisms raised by the interaction between migrants and natives, and aims at justifying nativist attitudes, actions, and policies as well explain the existence of an alleged ethno-politically homogeneous and stable body nation.

Many contemporary migration myths are therefore problematic because they impede communication between migrants and natives and thus create and uphold symbolic borders between these groups. The myth claiming that a migrant invasion threatens to take over the national territory and destabilise social, economic, and political order, in the way professed by Powell, has proven to be an efficient instrument exploited by nativist actors in generating moral panic and a sense of besieged fortress in both historical periods that I address in this study. The analysed texts expose many concrete instances in which characters with a nativist views express their adherence to this myth, debunking the recurrent narratives which spread fear that areas in which immigrants settle would be transformed into alien territories.

The increased immigration ensuing the adoption of BNA 1948, as well as the EU extension in 2004, has triggered overstated anxiety among a large sector of the British native population in what concerns its impact on the local society (Walvin, 1984). In both cases, immigration has been regarded differently by the members of the majority population, but the generalised popular perception was that too many immigrants have been allowed into the country and this has fuelled the belief that

immigration was at unprecedented levels. The adherence to this narrative and the alarmist feeling accompanying it has triggered the myth that the country was exposed to a migrant invasion of an exceptional magnitude, which engenders a take-over of the national territory by immigrants and threatens the ethnic and cultural cohesion of the nation. As a result of this invasion, the myth professes that areas in which immigrants settle would be transformed into alien territories as the native British would be forced out of their ancestral hearth, thus natives need to defend their territory against such intrusions.

3. Resisting the ‘Migrant Invasion’ in *Small Island* and *Perfidious Albion*

The first manifestations of the migrant invasion myth in the British imaginary can be connected to the arrival of immigrants from the colonies after World war 2. The significant impact on the collective perception about migration that the myth triggered is however a result of its entrance in the political discourse of populist politicians, and this phenomenon is suggestively expressed by one of Enoch Powell’s statements:

From these whole areas the indigenous population, the people of England, who fondly imagine that this is their country and these are their home towns, have been dislodged. ... I do not believe it is in human nature that a country, and a country such as ours, should passively watch the transformation of whole area which lie at the heart of it into alien territory. (Quoted in Sinfield, 1989, 149)

Such alarmist approaches to migration, which intentionally inflict a sense of panic in the face of an imagined foreign aggression are denounced by Andrea Levy and Sam Byers in the novels *Small Island* (Levy, 2004) and *Perfidious Albion* (Byers, 2018) respectively, two pungent fictional responses dealing with the historical reality of the periods they represent.

Small Island (2004), which is Levy’s fourth and most successful novel, approaches retrospectively the significant transformations that Britain has undergone under the influence of immigration from the Caribbean colonies in the era ensuing the end of World War 2. It is a polyphonic novel, which alternates between and contrasts the stories and perspectives of four characters, two Jamaican and two English, on events that unfold in two different time periods; before the war and in 1948. The stories voiced by the four protagonist/narrators interweave, delivering, as Mike Phillips contends in his review of the novel, a “historically faithful account” (M. Phillips, 2004, n. pag.) of the tense atmosphere characterising the inchoate interaction between British natives and Caribbean immigrants in the late 1940s. The novel switches between narrative times and locations, depicting meticulously

the most significant events defining the profile of the four protagonists and establishing their place in the story.

First to enter the stage is Gilbert Joseph, a former RAF serviceman from Jamaica, who arrives in Britain on-board the famous *MSS Windrush* in 1948, planning to make for himself and his family a future in the ‘mother country’. The expectations of a quick and smooth integration are, however, sorely dashed, as war time solidarity has vanished and a large number of British natives bemoan the arrival of immigrants from overseas. Gilbert finds lodging in the house of an English woman whom he had met during the war, Queenie Blight, who lives alone in the decrepit house she and her husband, Bernard, own in London. As Bernard delays his return after the end of the war, Queenie subsists by renting out rooms to Caribbean immigrants, which draws the exasperation of her neighbours and, later on, Bernard’s irritation upon his return. The fourth protagonist, Hortense, joins her husband, Gilbert, having high expectations to pursue a teacher career in Britain, just to have her plans undermined by Englishmen’s widespread prejudices about immigrants and systemic nativism.

Perfidious Albion, Sam Byers’ second novel, has been characterised by Justin Jordan in his review in *The Guardian* as “a furiously smart post-*Brexit* satire” (Jordan, 2018, n. pag.) in which the “nebulous anxiety about the approaching future” (idem.) permeates the entire story. The novel’s plot is built on several levels, depicting the near-dystopian post-referendum experiences of several inhabitants of the fictitious small provincial community of Edmundsbury, in which the controlling ambitions of global high-tech corporations interlacing with local politics, internet saturation, and the anxieties of common people about an alleged migrant invasion prompt societal polarisation and the unleashing of disproportionate hostility among antagonising camps. Although Edmundsbury is a community imbued with *Brexit* ethos, the focus of the novel is not on *Brexit* itself, which is mentioned only once in the course of the novel, but rather on distilling the social, political, and economical structures that have made it possible, such as the way the media, both conventional and new, and populist politicians manipulate people’s affective response to issues regarding immigration and their reactions to the major transformations it entails.

The novel takes the reader on a journey to find answers to a quasi-rhetorical question raised by the mysterious organisation who call themselves ‘The Griefers’, whose randomly re-occurring slogan - “What don’t you want to share?” (Byers, 2018, 14, 31, 70, 347) resonates like a leitmotif throughout the entire narrative. The plot development follows journalist, Robert Townsend, a self-proclaimed

left-wing intellectual who writes for the progressive blog, ‘The Command Line’, but whose ideas promptly move to the opposite side of the political spectrum, as, under the influence of his boss, Silas, he discovers the spellbound power that far-right populism can provide. His transformation provokes the dissolution of the already superficial relationship with his partner, Jess, who copes with her emotions of rage and aversion by creating multiple online personas that she uses to lambaste Robert’s articles. Meanwhile, a frail widower residing in the crumbling Larchwood housing estate, Alfred Darkin, is portrayed as a victim of disinformation promoted in *The Daily Recorder* by nativist populist journalist, later turned politician, Hugo Bennington. Darkin is stubbornly clinging on to his decrepit Larchwood flat, resisting the dubious redeveloping plans for the Larchwood estate proposed by the local company Downton, as he genuinely believes that the gentrification project is a pretext for the settlement of “immigrants and scroungers” (Byers, 2018, 106).

The plot line following the near-organic relationship between Darkin and Hugo Bennington is the one that provides the most comprehensive commentary on *Brexit* Britain and on the nature and effects of nativist populism throughout the entire *Brexit* process. The character Hugo Bennington, a far-right populist politician whom John Harris characterised in his review in *The Guardian* as “essentially 70% Nigel and 30% Boris Johnson” (Harris, 2018, n. pag.) epitomises such leaders standing at the head of nativist populist movements, somehow embodying through his discourse and deeds the zeitgeist of his time. His agenda represents a simple and straightforward path to political success: “Brexit was over, but the energy it had accumulated had to be retained. Fears needed to be redirected. Hatreds needed to pivot.” (Byers, 2018, 119)

A major trope employed in the novels to infuse urgency and immediacy in the narrative about an invasion of the national territory is the concept of home. Although often depicted through the imagery of a house or a neighbourhood, as concrete living spaces, the concept of home is detached from its real location in the nativist discourse that the texts negotiate, and instead connotes a sacralised dimension in which the connection between dwellers and space manifests through ritualistic acts of preventing any intrusion of alien elements. This way of perceiving home is inextricably linked to the sense of belonging to a cultural space of identity comfort in which immigrants “must appear as antinomies to an orderly working of state and society” (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002, 309). In illustration of this widespread perspective, the texts depict many instances in which the settlement of migrants in communities inhabited by British natives, either as

tenants or as house owners, is deplored by native dwellers as an invasion that disturbs the nearly mystical ethnic, social, and cultural cohesion of the British society.

The physical and symbolic spaces of the metropole, which represents the pivotal trope in *Small Island*, is depicted as a ground of contention, since, what is seen by Caribbean migrants as a legitimate claim to a domestic and social space in the metropole of the empire to which they belong is interpreted in nativist key by many British people as an invasion of their ancestral motherland. The myth claiming that a migrant invasion is unfolding is explicitly articulated by Queenie's neighbour, Mr. Todd, who approaches her, displaying a "motley mixture of outrage, shock, fear, even" (Levy, 2004, 112) and bemoans "how respectable this street was before they [the Caribbean migrants] came" (112). He also insidiously blames Queenie that she has facilitated the invasion of their neighbourhood: "Darkies! I'd taken in darkies next door to him. But not just me. There were others living around the square. A few more up the road a bit. His concern, he said, was that they would turn the area into a jungle" (113). The drama and tension caused by change and the illusionary fear of dispossession eventually determine Mr. Todd and his sister to sell the house and move out as he is convinced that "the street has gone to the dogs. What with all these coloureds swamping the place. Hardly like our country anymore" (436). Before that, another neighbour and old friend of Queenie, ironically named Blanche, and her family move out, telling Queenie it was her husband's decision because "this country no longer feels his own [and] she had her two little girls' welfare to think of (...) Forced out, she felt. All those coons eyeing her and her daughters up every time they walked down their own street" (115).

Such narrative instances depicting characters who bemoan the 'swamping' of the national territory by undesirable aliens and profess a destabilisation of the social order are all too recognisable for the historically aware reader. As Kim Evelyn sustains, through her depiction of neighbourhood racism as an extension of national views on race and nationalism and Queenie's status as landlady, Levy echoes the rhetoric of two of the most prominent anti-immigrant British politicians of the twentieth century, Enoch Powell and Margaret Thatcher (Evelyn, 2013, 139). There is a striking similarity in the manner of expressing the myth that migrants invade British local communities in their discourses and in Levy's text. The word "swamping" that Mr. Todd uses recalls a famous comment Thatcher made in an interview in 1978, that Britons were "really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture" (Thatcher, 1978, n. pag.). The same character's belief that the neighbourhood looks "hardly like our country anymore" (436) resonates Powell's speech when he speaks of "homes and neighbourhoods changed beyond recognition" (Powell, 1968, n. pag.),

while the moment when Blanche and her husband move out resembles Powell's description of the old-age pensioner's drama of losing her neighbours as "she saw one house after another taken over [and] her white tenants moved out" (idem).

As Levy writes the story in retrospect, she benefits of the vantage point which provides historical evidence that Powell was wrong. History has shown that Powell was cynically capitalising on the fears of people when he, by rehashing the myth of the country's invasion and rendering it in articulated form, legitimised a mythical anti-migrant discourse which was already permeating the British public sphere and thus introduced it in the official political debate. In *Small Island*, Levy signifies upon the narrative promoted by Powell by constructing the core narrative of the novel to resonate the story of the presumably fictional old-age pensioner who, as Powell claims in his speech, after having lost her husband in the war resorted to renting out rooms as a means of subsistence until "the immigrants moved in" (Powell, 1968, n. pag.). The supposedly catastrophic meaning underlying this poignant sentence is pivotal in Enoch Powell's narrative to express the situation of the woman and, by extension, of the entire nation. Starting from this point, Levy performs a deconstruction of the migrant invasion myth, as Graham MacPhee explains, by rewriting the story recounted by Powell in his 'Rivers of Blood' speech, of the white war widow who refused to rent rooms to non-whites, and found herself undermined by bureaucratic council staff and 'savage' immigrants alike (MacPhee, 2011, 162).

In *Small Island*, the house that Queenie has inherited from her husband's family has therefore a central place in the deconstruction of the take-over narrative, which Powell ominously proclaimed in his speech with the phrase: "she saw one house after another taken over" (Powell, 1968, n. pag.). Through this, Levy signifies on one of the most important tropes of British-Caribbean literature, since the house, as Brigitte Bönisch-Brednich and Catherine Trundle explain, "remains a deeply contested and symbolically rich site in which to constitute the self through the micropolitics and everyday rituals of place-making" (Bönisch-Brednich, Brigitte and Trundle, 2010). Levy represents the house as a metaphor for the 'mother country', which, in the context she describes, makes the object of two conflicting mythologies. On the one hand, animated by the colonial myth by which Susheila Nasta (Nasta, 1988, 80) explains the readiness of many West Indians to migrate to Britain, the newcomers claim a legitimate place and the right to integrate in the centre of the empire for which they fought in the war and of which citizens they are. On the other hand, a large number of

British natives adhere to the myth claiming that the territory of the ‘mother country’ is invaded by migrants.

Through juxtaposing antagonistic viewpoints on the idea of who is entitled to reside in the house, the novel is able to raise crucial questions and issues about the nation and national belonging. The dispute over accessibility and control over the space of the house that arises between the Caribbean couple and Bernard upon the latter’s return home is representative in this sense. If in Bernard’s absence, the house was transformed in a liminal space of conviviality, as Queenie managed to make it a functional homeplace accommodating peacefully both English landlady and Caribbean lodgers, on his return from the war, Bernard starts to embody the figure of the stereotypical British nativist, transferring the myths and the attitudes of the neighbours from the street into the house.

The dispute about which rights each side has over the space they share, where, like in Powell’s pensioner’s story, home becomes an extension of the nation, is addressed in the scene when Gilbert and Hortense catch Bernard ferreting around in their room. Gilbert reacts to this intrusion into the couple’s privacy and sustains that the room belongs to him on contractual basis, as long as he pays the rent, but from Bernard’s reply – “This is my house. [...] I can go anywhere I please in my own house. [...] I’ve got a key to every room. [...] I fought a war to protect home and hearth. Not about to be invaded by stealth.”(Levy, 2004, 470) – transpires the idea that, like many of his British contemporaries, he considers that the right to live in the house, and by extension in the national territory, should be an exclusive privilege of the natives.

Bernard’s comment that he and his British co-nationals fought in the war “to protect home and hearth” (470), expresses the most direct link between the house and the nation by drawing upon the domestic metaphor of the nation as a house. Giving expression to the nativist mythology that emerged concomitantly with the first migrant arrivals from the Caribbean, Bernard claims, just like Powell, who used imagery of the war to parallel the danger of a migrant invasion with that of Nazi Germany, that “home and hearth” are again in danger “to be invaded by stealth” (470). Despite Bernard’s claim that ownership of the place provides him the right to dispose of any section of the house as he pleases, Gilbert challenges his landlord and the dialogue in which they engage represents a suggestive metaphor for the negotiation of a place that migrants claim in the space of the metropole:

‘I can go anywhere I please in my own house,’ I told him. [...] Said he paid plenty of rent. ‘I’m not interested in what you pay,’ I said. ‘This is my house.’ The conversation was over as far as was concerned. He, of course, had other ideas. Had the nerve to ask me how I got into the room. [...] My house, and I’ve a key to every room. [...] Still told me to get out. (Levy, 2004, 470)

The negotiation of the right to inhabit the house in which the protagonists of *Small Island* engage anticipates the complex processes that Britain underwent during the second half of the twentieth century, which led to the emergence of multiculturalism in the form we know it today. An important aspect of this transformation implied the contestation of the myths that intended to reify the idea that a homogenous (white) Britain was threatened by a migrant invasion.

Andrea Levy signifies on important questions regarding these societal transformations through the allegorical depiction of the interaction between the homeowners and the Caribbean tenants, which results into a resolution of the residence rights dispute. The turning point in this sense is reached when Gilbert, in confrontation with Bernard, defends the legitimacy of migrant presence in Britain and predicts an unescapable future marked by cohabitation and cooperation: “Listen to me, man, we both just finish fighting a war – a bloody war – for the better world we wan’ see. And on the same side – you and me. [...] We can work together, Mr. Blight. You no see? We must”, to which Bernard replies simply and conclusively – “I’m sorry” (Levy, 2004, 525).

The significance of this scene is symbolically marked at the end of the novel by the birth of the mixed-race baby that Queenie has conceived with a Jamaican soldier she had met after the war. This baby is the harbinger of hope for a multicultural future, whom Bernard has gradually accepted when he even agrees to adopt the child as his own son. Queenie, however, insists that the baby be adopted by Hortense and Gilbert, and the consensus of all four protagonists on this represents a recognition of the possibility to create a future marked by cosmopolitan conviviality, in the sense expressed by Paul Gilroy (Gilroy, 2004, xi), which involves harmonious cohabitation and interaction in a multicultural society. By offering an alternative history of the present to that conjured by Powell, the novel’s ending may be interpreted as establishing a foundational myth of a new, multicultural Britain, which counteracts the anti-migrant mythology of invasion of the ‘motherland’ by migrants that was ingrained in the nativist paradigm and had powerful impact on the way a large majority of the British natives perceived immigration and race relations in the late 1940s and on. In her reading of Levy’s novel, Cynthia James suggests that, by using the *Windrush* as a narratological marker for the identity transformation of Britain, Levy intends to emphasise the importance of Caribbean migration in the

irreversible transition towards a new kind of shared future. Put side by side, the 'Before' and '1948' chapters narrate a history about the 'mother country', in which two antagonising world views and mythologies intersect, are negotiated, and prompt a reinterpretation of the relations between migrants and natives and a reconfiguration of the ideas of nationhood and belonging in a post-nationalistic key.

It can be thus said that, to a certain extent, the myth of the culturally and ethnically homogeneous 'motherland' on which British nativists in the 1950s often underpinned their attitudes is less powerful today, since a more cosmopolitan, pluralist, and inclusive Britain has emerged through the integration of migrants arriving mostly from the former colonies during the second half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the course on which Britain seemed to engaged in 2004, the year *Small Island* was published, took a dramatic turn. In the same year, ten new countries, most of them from Central and Eastern Europe joined the European Union. As citizens of these countries received access to the common labour market, a significant number of workers migrated to Britain, which has triggered the re-emergence of nativism and anti-migrant discourses in both public and political spheres. Migration has thus become once again a prevalent topic of contention in the British society and themes, slogans, and images that were at the core of the anti-migrant discourse of the 1950s and 1960s were reclaimed by nativist actors to promote the narrative of a migrant invasion.

In relation to this, Sam Byers' *Perfidious Albion* (2018) represents one of the many literary responses dealing with the role of immigration from Central Eastern Europe in the period marked by the *Brexit* referendum, featuring explicit references to the myth of a migrant invasion and providing a critical comment about its deceptive character. Byers' representation of Edmondsbury and its inhabitantssss reveals a community in which disinformation and manipulation are the driving forces of the entire social fabric, the town acting as a metonymy of the *Brexit* Britain, with archetypal characters representing both camps of the debate clearly delineated.

In this climate, Alfred Darkin's story epitomises the dangers to which society is exposed when people become captives of myths that are created and disseminated by unscrupulous, influential leaders and partisan media. Darkin is portrayed as a weak, frustrated British pensioner, an epitome of the class of 'left-behinds' (Ford & Goodwin, 2017, 4) ostensibly neglected by society and mainstream politicians. His vision of reality, which is heavily influenced by his choice of newspaper, *The Daily Record*, suggests that idea that Byers wants to draw a signal on the important role that printed

media played in the *Brexit* campaign. In the introductory scene of the novel, Darkin is reading *The Daily Record*, a fictitious tabloid that appears to be a satirical amalgamation of many of the UK's 'red top' tabloids, such as *The Sun*, the *Daily Star*, or the *Daily Mirror*, which paints Britain as an invaded nation, a country "overrun, under threat, increasingly incapable [with] hordes of immigrants massed at its borders" (Byers, 2018, 24). From the pages of *The Daily Record*, it appears that a war is going on between the native British and 'migrant invaders', as "those who have grown up here [must] share their hard-fought space with those who have just arrived; and those who deserve their place, to share it with those who merely envy it" (26). The lexicon linked to war and invasion, such as the terms "hordes" and "hard-fought", hint to the discourse of politicians who have exploited martial terminology to infuse a sense of danger and urgency in their message, such as Nigel Farage, who, resonating Enoch Powell's speech, started the referendum campaign with the statement "We will win this war" (Earle, 2018, n. pag.) and designated politicians who opposed *Brexit* as 'quislings', a reference to collaborators of the Nazis during World War 2.

The Daily Record's narrative seem to pervade Darkin's life, affecting the way he connects to the reality around him and how he reacts to events. Thus, when Darkin talks about the Larchwood situation, he basically parrots the discourse of the newspaper, as both the ideas and the vocabulary, such as the reference to "quotas", come directly from Bennington's article. Byers intentionally portrays Darkin as a two-dimensional character, who unequivocally believes in the alarmist narrative of an ongoing migrant invasion and, consequently, solemnly engages in what he trusts to be the patriotic duty of preserving the "hard-fought space" (Byers, 2018, 26) of the 'motherland' from being invaded by foreigners by stubbornly refusing to sell his flat to Downton Corporation. The decrepit Larchwood flat becomes thus an ideological battleground representing the physical and symbolic space of the motherland, which, in the nativist discourse he adopts from *The Daily Record*, is under siege as "immigration had increased hugely, and suddenly they [the British N/A] were being asked to move out" (94).

By describing Darkin's near-mystical connection to his flat, Byers resonates Andrea Levy's story of the house in *Small Island*, but also Powell's story about the pensioner from Wolverhampton. Darkin's position in the debate over the dwelling space places him somewhere between Bernard and Powell's pensioner, who believe it is their duty to resist an alleged invasion of "home and hearth" (Levy, 2004, 240) by immigrants from the Caribbean. Similarly, Darkin refuses to 'share' his living space with the immigrants of the new century. If, however, Levy reverses the logic of Powell's

story by placing Queenie at the centre of the housing debate and thus offering an alternative story to that of Powell, Byers, by contrary, re-casts Darkin in the role of Powell's widow. Through this narrative strategy, Byers intends to provide a political comment on what appears to be the role of Powell's legacy in the continuity of nativism in Britain, and, implicitly, to denounce the revival of a strikingly similar anti-migrant mythology in the context of contemporary immigration.

The resistance of nativist characters to cosmopolitan conviviality in a 'shared' space represents a major theme that both Levy and Byers approach. Nevertheless, the two authors employ different narrative strategies to negotiate migrants' right to a living space; if Levy distils the invasion mythology by constructing her novel in a manner that provides access to opposing perspectives, Byers chooses to eliminate completely the physical presence of immigrants and implicitly any opportunity to negotiate their position in the community of Edmundsbury. The employment of ellipsis in the conversation between Darkin and Robert – "But if you look at the statistics ..." (Byers, 2018, 51), which suggests the exaggeration of the migrant presence is supplemented by the intervention of the omniscient author, who, by providing Hugo Bennington's reflections on his political plots, discloses the inconsistency of the invasion myth:

But the powers of paranoia and oversimplification were, Hugo found, more pervasive than he could have imagined. The more Downton leaned on tenants in the Larchwood, the more convinced the tenants became of their own victimization, and the easier it was for Hugo to point the finger elsewhere, a phenomenon that explained the apparent anomaly in Edmundsbury's opinion polls: Edmundsbury was home to fewer immigrants than almost anywhere else in the country, yet anti-immigration sentiment had never been higher. (Byers, 2018, 106)

By depicting Edmundsbury as a space of exclusion, in which extensive fear of immigrants is discursively constructed, Byers provides a pungent comment on the pervasiveness of anti-migrant myths in the small, provincial communities, where migration is virtually inexistent and where the lack of cosmopolitan dialogue nurtures the emergence of a moral panic relating to an alleged migrant invasion. Edmundsbury is therefore a metaphor for such a space, one invaded, not by immigrants, but rather by a blatant anti-migrant mythology.

The absence of immigrant characters or of native crossing characters who, as in *Small Island*, could negotiate the influence of anti-migrant myths in the text, is compensated by Byers' extensive employment of irony and by the caricaturing of the most representative nativist protagonists. Darkin, for instance, accommodates a series of contradictions that undermine his credibility and hence his inconsistency calls in question his viewpoints, attitudes, and ways of acting. His unassailable

conviction that the migrant invasion is happening makes him act as a self-confident promoter of ideology in his dialogue with Robert. Nevertheless, it is clear for the reader that Darkin's statements merely reproduce the rhetoric of the newspaper and when Robert challenges him to utter his personal viewpoint about immigrants, he replies: "Not that I've got something against them personally" (Byers, 2018, 51). This reveals the fact that Darkin is captive in the parallel reality that is discursively constructed by nativist populist actors like Hugo Bennington, in which the induced fear of abstract migrants governs people's lives.

His credibility is however ridiculed as the plot line following his relation to Hugo Bennington, beyond the communication channel represented by *The Daily Record*, reveals Bennington's true intentions and the schemes he designs and co-ordinates. Byers uses dramatic irony to unravel the aberrant relationship between Bennington and Darkin, as the reader knows that the real source of Darkin's tribulations is the alliance between Bennington and Downton, who plot the eviction of Larchwood residents and the gentrification of the area, and not the immigrants. Darkin, however, never comes to know that he is manipulated so that he eventually sells his flat to Downton frightened by Bennington's scenarios which claim that, sooner or later, immigrants would anyhow assail the flat to take by force what "should have been rightfully his" (Byers, 2018, 106).

Since most of the plot revolves around Hugo Bennington, who is also the main promotor of anti-migrant mythology in the novel, Byers employs significant resources to delineate him as an unreliable character in order to denounce the insubstantial character of the myths he promotes. Early in the novel, he is already mentioned when Darkin ritualistically begins his day reading Bennington's columns in *The Daily Record*, and the dramatic tone imbuing the text of the column gives the impression of a fanatic patriot whose answer to the question 'what don't you want to share' would be a "historical England, which had once made him proud and secure" (Byers, 2018, 103). Byers establishes from early in the novel an understanding of the character's duplicity, as Hugo's description is informed by irony and a succession of contradictions that are juxtaposed in such way as to ridicule his pompous chauvinistic allegations. He engages in a campaign that formally criticises Downton's redeveloping of the Larchwood estate, using the situation to profess the image of a country invaded by migrants who are about to take over the dwelling space meant for the native British while he secretly receives campaign money from Downton in exchange for help to evict all the Larchwood residents. Meanwhile, the same Hugo is at the core of movements such as the "self-styled 'militia' called Brute Force" (Byers, 2018, 84), a fictional equivalent of 'English Defence

League’ placed in the service of the ‘England Always’ party to carry out the “street-level race war” (84).

The depiction of a meeting between Bennington and the party’s executive, Alan Elm, represents a compelling sample of irony, by which the author exposes Bennington as a character with, in his own words, a “high ability to navigate the modern moral mishmash of equivocations and evasions” (Byers, 2018, 121). Even though both party leaders share similar nativist values, they, obviously or not, seem to have no problem to meet “over pints of beer and curry” (119) in an all-you-can-eat Indian restaurant to discuss strategic decisions for the party’s future. The sarcasm of the situation is emphasised by the repeatedly mentioned association of “beer and bhaji” (120) that the interlocutors enjoy, which for the liberal contemporary British may simply represent a symbol of Britain’s cosmopolitanism, but in these particular circumstances suggests a dissonance between the values the protagonists promote and their deeds, which raise questions over both their morality and the truthfulness of their discourse.

4. Conclusion

This paper has discussed how literary responses to immigration can challenge the myth professing an alleged invasion of Britain by migrants in two different historical moments. By paralleling *Small Island* and *Perfidious Albion*, two novels that respond to this issue in two different historical moments, I have examined how these works negotiate myths that have permeated the British society since the end of World War 2, highlighting patterns of continuity of a nativist ethos among a large group of British people. A major common theme on which the novels signify is the sense of victimhood and besieged fortress, which, through clear allusions, is linked to the nativist legacy of Enoch Powell, which, after fifty years, appears to still haunt British politics and large parts of the British society.

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