REFLECTIONS ON POLARISATION AND INEQUALITIES IN BREXIT PANDEMIC TIMES

Fractured Lives in Britain

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Chapter 2

"STAY AT HOME": BRITISH LOCKDOWN NOVELS AND THE POLITICS OF HOME AND HOMELAND IN COVID-19 BREXIT BRITAIN

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British Lockdown Novels and the Politics of Home and Homeland in COVID-19 Brexit Britain

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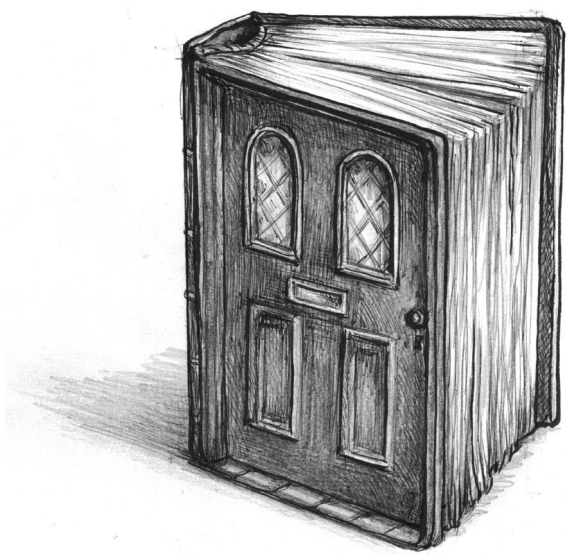

2.1

Introduction: On a Related Note

In a comic strip from Bill Watterson's series *Calvin and Hobbes*, 6-year-old Calvin complains to his tiger Hobbes that his parents drive him crazy, adding: "They don't understand *me* and I don't understand *them*. It's hopeless!" In the final panel, a disgruntled Calvin summarises this feeling with the

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much-quoted (and much-posted) line: "I'm related to people I don't relate to." (1993, p. 25). In Ali Smith's final instalment of her seasonal quartet, *Summer*, published in August 2020 towards the end of the first lockdown in the UK and two months before the second lockdown was announced, this issue of what makes a family is equally at the centre of the story. On the dust jacket, the novel's key concern is therefore described in terms of relations and connections: "This is a story about people on the brink of change. They're family, but they think they're strangers. So: where does family begin? And what do people who think they've got nothing in common have in common?" (Smith, 2020, n.pag.). As both these short texts reflect, being a family in terms of genetic relations does not safeguard a sense of connection. In spite of people living together as siblings and parents, family relations can be strained, ambivalent, or even estranged, estranging, and threatening. Using Smith's own semantic strategy of uniting oppositions into ambivalent noun constructions, a family can therefore be described as 'not-relations', similar to a separated couple in *Summer* being described as "not-partners" (Smith, 2020, p. 319). This construction combines a sense of relatedness with its negation, keeping the past relation while acknowledging the changed relationship in the present.

With this negotiation of what family and relatedness may and may not mean comes a reassessment of the key space in which Western ideas of family have been practised and imagined since 1800: the family home. Dominantly imagined as a positive safe space, a retreat from public pressures, and a place where we can be accepted among people we relate (and are related) to, home has been a key site for imagining what a community and family is, creating often intuitive and un-reflected mappings between built spaces, practices, affects, and identities. In that sense, ideas and ideals about home tend to condense a community's as well as a specific period's ideas about a 'good' life, 'good' childhoods, and wholesome, productive, or even idyllic social relations that help preserve that concrete community's way of life for the future (see also Baker, this volume).

It is no coincidence that a novel about a summer in which both Brexit and covid-19 shaped the daily lives and interactions of communities in the UK is fundamentally concerned with such musings on the nature of family ties. Questioning the allegedly self-explanatory social unit of the family is a means to make tangible, on the individual and seemingly mundane scale of the family home, how national communities and their governments relate some people to others while (again seemingly naturally) excluding others from this unit. In the literary representation of the often too familiar conflicts and quarrels of the families in Smith's *Summer*, readers can thus experience and uneasily relate to the more far-reaching effects of the nativist logics of exclusion so central to the Brexit debate as well as to changing social relations during the covid-19 lockdowns. As a consequence, organic ideas of the nation-state as the ancestral, bordered home of a national family come under scrutiny, and the spaces

and concrete practices used to include and exclude people and communities from the home spaces of the national family – the national homeland – come into view. Literary representations of lockdown in Brexit Britain thus help to de-naturalise what Anne McClintock has called "the iconography of the family […] as the figure of national unity" (1997, p. 110).

It is this de-naturalisation of home and/as homeland that informs the close readings of what I will call lockdown novels in the following. In the texts under analysis, home is not outside of or beyond public institutions and political decisions, and the Brexit rhetorics of exclusion and a homeland in need of defence from migrants (see also Brown, this volume) are closely related to governments' dealing with covid-19 in the novels' dramatisation of how individual people and families deal with lockdown. Home is also not clearly separated from spaces designated as not-home but is rather assessed as porous and open, making it often difficult to say where home begins and where it ends. In effect, home is shown to be a key site where norms, regulations, and practices of border control play out for the individual citizen. In the changing relations and practices of home during lockdown, the effects of a choice like the 'yes or no' of the Brexit referendum are felt and lived through, as for example in the protagonists' practices of taking in long-term detainees from immigration removal centres when they are released into a locked-down Britain due to rising infection rates at the centres.

While 'the government' or 'the nation' might therefore tend to be experienced as abstract entities, they become concrete in the practices and relations within the home, and they became specifically tangible in lockdown regulations across the globe. In the UK and elsewhere, lockdown made visible the practices and people producing and maintaining homes. This process of explication unearthed what this chapter understands as a politics of home that shapes single practices, rules, and relations. Shopping for groceries turned from a mundane daily activity to one of the 'reasonable excuses' listed in government regulations that permitted people to leave their homes, tidying up made sure that there was enough room for homeschooling and working from home, and cooking a home-made meal became a visible reminder of the necessity of nutrition in the face of potential illness rather than an alternative to going out to a restaurant. Social relations as one of the key homemaking practices were equally changed, making visible in many cases who was doing care work and who was not, who was being paid for their labour and who was not, and who had a space of retreat in the home and who did not. Lockdown thus made the power politics of home explicit by showing how collective ideals of community are being produced and reproduced, i.e., how they are being 'done', in the most private places and relations of our lives. Home therefore is what Blunt and Dowling call "a porous, open intersection of social relations" (2022, p. 28). By seemingly closing the home, the lockdowns of the covid-19 pandemic effectively showed its openness.

Given this tight connection between home and larger communities, people's emotional attachments to home have been used to enable citizens to relate to an otherwise vague or even meaningless social and political unit like the nation-state and to enable or even encourage often extreme acts, as Tagore expressed so vividly: "the geography of a country is not the whole truth. No one can give up life for a map" (1921, p. 96). The novels under discussion show how norms and expectations towards making and controlling home are mirror images of much wider concerns with nation, citizenship, and belonging. The novels' assessment of home as a problematic, political space with porous, shifting borders makes explicit the ultimate consequences of an idea that was central in the Brexit Leave campaign: Britain as the clearly demarcated 'homely' home of a naturally related national family. The key reading of this chapter is Ali Smith's *Summer* (2020), a novel combining "the ticking clock of Brexit" with "the stalled clocks of lockdown" (Collins, 2020, n.pag.). The analysis of *Summer* is further framed by a look at additional lockdown novels from the UK, Ireland, and the USA, namely Ali Smith's sequel to the seasonal quartet, *Companion Piece* (2022), Sarah Moss' *The Fell* (2021), Catherine Ryan Howard's *56 Days* (2021), Peter May's *Lockdown* (2020), and Sequoia Nagamatsu's *How High We Go in the Dark* (2022). What unites all these lockdown narratives is that they scrutinise how home can be a space of control, violence, and exclusion. However, they also show how practices of home and family can question defensive ideas of home, opening up a sense of conviviality and hospitality through outlining the connectedness of people and the often multiple places they call home. The novels under discussion thus posit a new, alternative politics of home, using lockdown experiences to show that home can be a setting that transcends narrow imaginaries of home as a tiny, bordered homeland in need of defence. In order to frame the novels' analysis, the chapter will now relate lockdown measures and their impact on practices of home to interdisciplinary research on home as a physical space, a social unit, a concrete practice, and as affective ties.

2.2

Locking Home: The Politics of Imagining Home/Lands

When covid-19 hit countries in Europe at the beginning of 2020, most governments reacted by imposing a range of restrictions to slow the spread of the virus. Chief among these restrictions was putting societies into lockdown, a measure that included social distancing and staying inside, restrictions on travel, the closing of businesses, schools, and preschool daycare, as well as the widespread practice of working from home. Slightly later than other European countries and amidst fevered debate about their necessity, the UK installed lockdown measures starting on March 23, 2020.

The lockdown forced people, often under threat of police penalties such as fines or arrest, to remain in their private homes, an experience that made many re-evaluate this seemingly familiar space. Instead of a warm, cosy space of retreat, home became associated with tedium and dullness at best or isolation and imprisonment at worst. This changing sense of home during the lockdown had several, often immediate effects within British society. Studies conducted in the UK during the first lockdown showed a surge in health anxieties and mental health problems (Rettie and Daniels, 2021), a slowed experience of time with increasing age and decreasing satisfaction with the levels of social interaction (Ogden, 2020), and increasing educational inequalities with students from less well-off families having less access to study space and time to study at home (Andrew et al., 2020). A rise in domestic violence during the lockdowns underlined that home is not necessarily a safe place to begin with (Krishnadas and Taha, 2020), and sometimes aggressive verbal attacks on minority households and their perceived lack of 'proper' social distancing reproduced well-known images of allegedly naturalised cultural and racialised 'differences' and the reproduction of the white middle-class 'nuclear' family as the ideal norm (Pearson et al., 2021). It became obvious to many people that home is not 'their' private refuge but open to public state interference and a site of negative feelings, inequalities, and social disparities. Covid-19 and the ambivalent, often negative experiences of home spaces, relations, and practices during the lockdown thus brought into sharp focus already existing but often hidden ambivalences and anxieties within widely shared positive notions of home.

This reassessment of home spaces, homemaking practices, and social relations within the home brought to the fore that home – just like terms like 'family' or 'cohabitation' – is not as self-explanatory as one might assume, and that ideas and experiences of home are far from universal across factors like class, gender, 'race', ethnicity, or age. This diversity and intersectionality of home has been covered in highly interdisciplinary research in the previous decades (for an overview, see Blunt and Dowling, 2022; Fox, 2016). Researchers from such a wide array of disciplines like geography, sociology, political sciences, history, anthropology, architecture, art history,

literature, or cultural studies (to name just a few) have interpreted home, its forms, developments, representations and imaginaries, cultural practices, and emotional effects (for the breadth of perspectives, see the interdisciplinary annotated bibliographies by Boccagni et al., 2018; Mallett, 2004). This productive interdisciplinarity "is not least owing to the complex and multi-scalar character of home as a concept" (Birke and Butter, 2019, p. 118). Home is a multidimensional term that may refer to physical structures like a house, social units like a family, a place of origins, concrete practices, or affective ties. It is assessed as a place, a practice, an imaginary, a feeling, or a sense of self, sometimes all at the same time (Mallett, 2004). Home is also a scalable concept that may start with the mind or body as home, a house as home, and end with a nation or even the globe as home (Marston, 2003). These multiple scales and dimensions of home can explain the conceptual vagueness of the term, but they can also account for the relative effortlessness with which common-sense understandings of home often conflate house and home, home and homeland, or home, family, and identity.

What this short discussion of definitions of and associations with home outlines is that the term is a kaleidoscope of shifting dimensions, scales, and meanings. Nevertheless, what many associations and definitions share is their seeming stability and boundedness and their sense of home as a positive place of belonging or even becoming (Fox, 2016, pp. 2–4). In these understandings, home is the centre of the self and a place where meaning is made. It is thus seen as an essential setting for the grounding of one's identity, and it enables the grounded self to extend its selfhood into the outside world (Blunt and Dowling, 2022, p. 13). Morley describes such understandings of home as part of a "sedentarist metaphysics" that focuses on being there, on proximity (both physically and emotionally), rather than on movement (2017, p. 59). These organic, sedentarist notions of home as roots, belonging, and identity underlie many, if not most, nationalist imaginaries of home and homeland. A bounded sense of home as being and always already having been 'here' is connected to the more abstract collective ties within a national community. In these representations, "[t]he family home appears as an integral location for imagining the nation as a whole" (Blunt and Dowling, 2022, p. 189). Calling a space home or representing a place as homely, e.g., in literature or painting, is therefore "a social act with a political dimension and emotional connotations" and "rarely understood as a neutral description" (Birke and Butter, 2019, p. 119). Imaginaries of individual homes are used to attach communities and individuals to more abstract entities like a homeland, first and foremost emotionally, making it unnecessary to explain why exactly people's feelings for their homeplaces should seamlessly extend to their national community. In this logic, "[h]ouses are assumed to become homes because they provide and become the environment within which family relationships – close, private, and intimate – are located" (Bowlby, Gregory, and McKie,

1997, p. 344). A house without a family does not seem to be a real home, and, in turn, a national community devoid of kinship ties does not seem to be a homeland. This mapping can then be extended to an individual's role within the home and the homeland, creating an intense and seemingly logical connection between home and identity: "A house identified with the self is called a 'home', a country identified with the self is called a 'homeland'" (Tabor, 1998, p. 218, cited in Morley, 2000, p. 266). The naturalised trope of the family home thus offers an extremely powerful tool for explaining and sanctioning social, cultural, and political hierarchies and sometimes radical and violent actions against those deemed to threaten this home.

William Walters' notion of domopolitics is helpful to make sense of this connection between home, homeland, and defensive notions of selfhood and belonging. Taken from the political sciences and published in 2004, domopolitics "implies a reconfiguring of the relations between citizenship, state, and territory. At its heart is a fateful conjunction of home, land and security. It rationalises a series of security measures in the name of a particular conception of home" (Walters, 2004, p. 241). Walters attempts to explore contemporary governance and security through an analysis of aspirations to "govern the state like a home" (2004, p. 237). He shows that the justification of this aspiration cashes in on widespread positive associations with home as "hearth, a refuge or a sanctuary in a heartless world" (Walters, 2004, p. 241) while simultaneously playing on the fears and anxieties underlying a conception of home as "*our* place, where we belong naturally, and where, by definition, others do not" (Walters, 2004, p. 241). Activating positive imaginaries of home while mobilising the fear of losing this home is then, ultimately, used to explain to the individual citizen why the will to control or 'securitise' the homeland will also require measures that will impact the home life and practices of individual citizens, a governmental strategy that was key to explaining and justifying the lockdowns across the globe.

A domopolitics is thus not only concerned with traditional border control but rather redefines borders (and, in turn, the homeland) as "control functions [that] start to disperse into networks of information and surveillance" (Walters, 2004, p. 251). Border control turns into a tacit management of semi-permeable membranes that can allow people and influences in if they are useful and that can extend the borders of the nation to any place within or beyond the state where the interests of the homeland are affected (Darling, 2011, pp. 263–266; Walters, 2004, p. 255). In consequence, the British border might begin at a Czech airport where your visa is already checked by a British official (Walters, 2004, p. 253) or extend into a British hospital where your migration status will be checked to make sure that you can legally claim public health services (Lonergan, 2018, p. 1; Tyler, 2010, p. 70). Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy state that this type of state control is a case of "everyday bordering" that "has become a major technology of control" in

the Western world (2018, p. 228). In this logic, anything designed to protect the national home is a valid measure, and these measures might redraw the borders of the territory in need of protection as well as open up the privacy of individual homes within the nation. Instead of simply abolishing movement, domopolitics manages and enables mobility for some people while preventing it for others. In the UK, this took the shape of concrete political programmes like New Labour's "*managed migration* paradigm" (Lonergan, 2018, p. 6, italics in original). Domopolitical governance was also one of the key ideas in the Conservative post-referendum narrative that envisioned, in Theresa May's famous speech to the Conservative Party Conference on October 5, 2016, a newly sovereign "Global Britain" that would independently manage its ties (and, implicitly, its borders) to the world (Daddow, 2019; Shaw, 2018, p. 17). Thus, domopolitics paradoxically present the national home as naturally pre-existent, predicated upon an organic image of the family home and of static dwelling, while at the same time bringing this home and its territory into being through its creation and managing of borders (both internal and external), of mobility, and their control.

However, the logical flipside of organic notions of home is that "all forms of mobility, which 'disembed' individuals from their local communities, have been seen to undermine social cohesion", associating mobility with danger, pollution, and destruction (Morley, 2017, p. 59). Sedentarist conceptions of home have accordingly been criticised for their lack of understanding of how experiences of dwelling cannot be separated from social structures and often discriminatory institutions that make and shape our experiences of home (Irigaray, 1992; Young, 1997). Seeing individual experiences of home as entangled with issues of power outlines how home can be threatening rather than integrating for some groups, e.g., for women, asylum seekers, the elderly, or people with disabilities (Blunt and Dowling, 2022, p. 15). Home has therefore been explored as indeed central "for the construction and reconstruction of one's self" (Young, 1997, p. 153), but a focus on home as a positive, integrative site for identity formation has been amended by the study of home as a site of potentially violent, constricting identifications, e.g., of gender, sexuality, or 'race' (Back, Cohen, and Keith, 2007; Gorman-Murray, 2006; Pink, 2004).

This focus on the ambivalent interplay of place, cultural norms and practices, social institutions, and individual identifications has led to an understanding of home as a process rather than an organic, unified whole: "home is a (stative) verb rather than a noun […]. […] Home […] is not simply a person, a thing or a place, but rather it relates to the activity performed by, with or in person's [sic], things and places." (Mallett, 2004, pp. 79–80). It is this understanding of home as a relational process that will be central to the following analyses of lockdown novels and their reassessment of home in covid-19 Brexit Britain. Understood as a relational process, doing home

can have positive and negative outcomes, can be constricting and liberating, but can never be static, whole, or enclosed within fixed borders. It is related to and produced by the interplay between public and private spaces, chosen and imposed social norms and relations. In effect, home as a process is therefore always already shaped by the power structures of a given community, because it is produced and reproduced within what Doreen Massey calls the flows of the power geometry between homes and other places, whereby "different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections" (1991, p. 25). The ways in which people and communities 'do' home are therefore shaped by and shape how we do citizenship and how borders are justified, maintained, and questioned.

In the following analyses of the chosen lockdown novels, I will discuss how the texts perform, in their form and content, such an imaginary of home as a flexible and often ambivalent process that relates people, places, and collectives to each other. This performance enables the reader to feel with or at least relate to the protagonists and their often-fraught experiences of home and homeland, making it possible to scrutinise invisible, organic assumptions of national belonging.

2.3

Border Relations: Literary Performances of Connectedness and Porosity

As outlined above, the idea of a national family maps its imaginary of a collective homeland on individual people's and community's experiences and ideals of a private home-as-sanctuary, creating affective ties that help to justify and enforce defensive measures of 'managing' and reinforcing border control both within and beyond the nation-state. In the UK, even before the Brexit referendum, this idea of the bordered homeland took the shape of measures such as Theresa May's 'hostile environment' policy enforced through the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016 (Kirkup and Winnett, 2012), or, short-lived but famously, through 'Operation Vaken' in 2013, in which "two vans were driven through six of London's most ethnically diverse boroughs with

government billboards that asked 'In the UK illegally? GO HOME OR FACE ARREST'" (Blunt and Dowling, 2022, p. 273). What this slogan implies is that there is exactly *one* fixed place of origin that *everyone* calls home. In this logic, you can be asked to return to this original home from anywhere else, which automatically turns into your 'not-home'. Ali Smith encapsulates this idea in *Companion Piece*, where one of the characters, who has dual citizenship, is aggressively asked by the official checking her two passports: "Is one country not enough for you?" (2022, p. 7). Home is therefore defined as a singular, identifiable place where the native self is in control, as George so keenly observes: "home is the place where one is *in* because an Other(s) is kept *out*" (1999, p. 27).

During the run-up to the Brexit referendum, this notion of home as control dominated the Leave campaign, peaking with Nigel Farage unveiling the famous UKIP 'Breaking Point' advertisement on June 16, 2016. The advertisement featured a photograph by documentary photographer Jeffrey Mitchell. The image showed a seemingly endless mass of mostly Syrian men walking towards the viewer, taken "with a telephoto lens to flatten perspective" and designed "to capture as many people as possible" (Bradshaw and Haynes, 2023). The controversial poster featured the slogan "Breaking Point: The EU Has Failed Us All. We must break free of the EU and take back control of our borders". In spite of many politicians, including Boris Johnson, distancing themselves from the poster and its message (Stewart and Mason, 2016), it put into a nutshell the overall idea of a national home in need of defence that loomed large in pro-Brexit rhetorics. In its use of '*us all*' and '*our* borders' in combination with 'take back control', the UKIP poster is a representative example of the domopolitics of nationalist discourse discussed above. The lockdown novels analysed in the following all attempt to make visible, counter, and qualify the idea that everyone has one home they can (or should) return to and that a home or a homeland can ever be contained, managed, and fixed at its borders. They use their form and content to make the reader not just *read about*, but *experience* the porosity, openness, and elasticity of home/lands, and they are careful to show the futility of taking control while performing the consequences of trying to close a home to others.

Sequoia Nagamatsu's debut novel *How High We Go in the Dark*, published in January 2022, is a good example of this performative openness and porosity. Set against a pandemic that the novel calls the 'Arctic Plague', the Japanese-American author uses a loose, episodic structure of short-story-like chapters that can be read in isolation, but that develop multiple connective, overarching patterns when read in sequence. The main protagonists of single chapters reappear as minor protagonists or even just fleeting presences in other chapters: as someone else's relatives, neighbours, ancestors, lovers,

colleagues, or clients, creating the sense that none of the characters as well as their life stories before, during, and after the Arctic Plague can be separated from each other. In that sense, the chapters' as well as their protagonists' stories are tentacled into each other, creating a community that is loosely, often unwittingly connected to each other, but connected nevertheless.

The key metaphor that this connectivity takes is presented in the chapter "Through the Garden of Memory". In the chapter, the seemingly comatose (or dead?) protagonist Jun, who caught the Plague and was hospitalised, is in an intense dream-like state in which his consciousness and memories are connected to an immeasurable, even endless mass of people who also seem to be in the same state as him. In the often surreal, fragmented prose of the chapter with its sequence of connected, yet non-linear scenes, the reader feels like the characters themselves, sharing their past selves by (quite literally) walking through orbs of each other's memories. These orbs have invisible, yet permeable membranes that contain each person's most intimate moments, and the chapter describes them as "spheres of iridescent light" descending "like a school of jellyfish" (Nagamatsu, 2022, p. 71). These orbs "descend as far as we can see, illuminating the faces of thousands" (Nagamatsu, 2022, p. 71), creating a sense of a multitude of connected, yet individual lives. In contrast to the imaginary of endless masses used in UKIP's 'Breaking Point' advertisement, that were used to create fear and instil a sense of the necessity of closing borders, the multitudes in Nagamatsu's novels are allowed to inhabit, in the contained-yet-open orbs of their memories, other people's lives for a short moment, sharing experiences of joy, sadness, loss, or exhilaration. The crowds in the chapter congregate "around tiny planets of memory", and the membrane of the orbs "washes over our bodies as we pass through, as if we're walking through a waterfall" (Nagamatsu, 2022, p. 72). Even the space the characters inhabit shares the orbs' state in-between solidity, fluidity, and evanescence: "I sit down on the ground (or space or whatever it is)", and Jun wonders whether "perhaps one day (whatever time counts for here), we'll find another way to occupy the dark" (Nagamatsu, 2022, p. 77). The orbs and the spaceless place the characters inhabit have no 'breaking point', no clear origin, or destination to which they could (re)turn. The chapter thus performs the inherent connectedness between single people with individual life stories. *How High We Go in the Dark* makes readers feel and relate to the "new appreciation for the shared community" of the characters (Nagamatsu, 2022, p. 253) while, at the same time, experiencing the evanescence of that connection and the necessity or even unavoidability of moments of separation, first and foremost in death.

This focus on loose, yet inescapable connections made visible by a pandemic is shared by a number of lockdown novels, independent of their genre or thematic focus. With their focus on mobility and becoming rather than

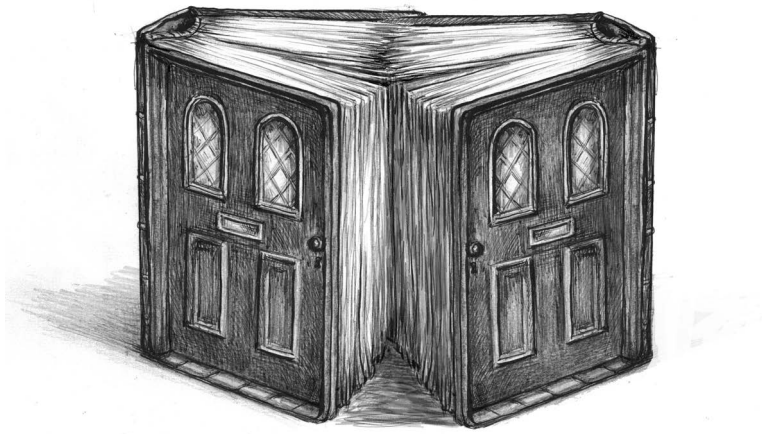
staying and being, the novels share a sense of porosity that counters ideas of control and defence so central to the idea of a breaking point. Sarah Moss' *The Fell* (2021), one of the major lockdown novels published in the UK so far, presents four entangled storylines in her condensed presentation of a few hours in the lives of four characters. The short, sometimes even very short chapters with their minute descriptions of such mundane activities as washing a pan, eating cookies, or looking out the window create a web of four lives that overlap, meet, and depart from each other. The same events – most prominently one of the characters breaking quarantine – are often presented from more than one point of view, none of which is given precedence. In addition, the novel outlines that in terms of their personalities, it is the non-related protagonists who can be most clearly matched with each other. Kate, who goes out for a walk during quarantine, is therefore much closer to Rob, a member of the rescue team looking for her on the moor, who is as much attached to being outside and moving as Kate. Kate's son Matt, on the other hand, is presented as keen on not crossing the threshold (of his home space, towards adulthood, of finding out whether his mother is still alive), even choosing to keep himself in the dark when the police call him: "He may or may not take the call. He might rather stay here, not knowing." (Moss, 2021, p. 175). This distances him from his mother and her need to move while relating him to his elderly neighbour Alice, who has not left her house for weeks and who has chosen to ignore the possibility that her breast cancer might have reappeared. The novel thus weaves a web of four lives whose connective threads are as fragile as conspicuous, making the novel itself a form of communal space for exploring relations within and beyond the home that extend ideas of a biological family.

The lockdown thriller has shown to be equally concerned with the issue of connectedness. Catherine Ryan Howard's *56 Days* (2021) interweaves the storylines of three main characters in alternating chapters that jump back and forth within the inexorable countdown of the title that implies both the days since lockdown as well as the days towards the crime that the plot circles around. As in *The Fell*, key events and spaces are presented twice, sometimes even three times, making the reader constantly reassess their own assumptions in the typical fashion of the thriller. The first covid-19 lockdown in Dublin is not a mere backdrop to the novel's events, but rather a catalyst and enabler of the domestic drama that unfolds between a couple that has always been connected without them being aware of it. As a final example, Peter May's thriller *Lockdown*, published in April 2020 at the very beginning of the first lockdown in the UK, interlaces the investigative plot about the murder of a young girl with the serial killer's perspective and the storyline of the forensics expert in a story about a deathly flu that kills large parts of the global population and that creates an empty, locked-down London as the eerie stage for the novel's action. In all these texts, people

and their families are inescapably connected through their pasts and their vulnerability towards each other and the virus. Yet, these connections are far from stable, fixed, and often unreliable and fleeting. Home and the communities within are therefore shown to be porous and permeable, no matter how eager some of the protagonists may be to close and control their domestic spaces.

Ali Smith's *Summer* explores very similar ideas in her assessment of family, the borders of home and community, and the effects of rigid definitions of home as control. In the same fashion as the lockdown novels sketched above, she creates a loose, yet connected web of characters who appear, disappear, and reappear in the novel as much as in each other's lives. On a second level, though, *Summer* is also the final instalment of a quartet of novels that are not only connected through the motif of the seasons (with *Autumn* published as the first text in October 2016), but through their characters who keep reappearing throughout the quartet. Daniel Gluck, the centenarian who was the first character to be introduced in *Autumn*, makes a reappearance in *Summer*, and the chapters on his experience during the internment as an 'enemy alien' during World War II and his sister's experience in the French Resistance are two of the most poignant in terms of Smith's exploration of borders, home, and family. Although more explicitly tied to concrete political events like Brexit or the first lockdown of 2020 than the novels discussed above, Smith equally plays with the form of the realist novel in order to create often fluid transitions between time periods, reality and imagination, text and intertexts, external action, and internal monologues. Giving up "any reliance on the conventions of narrative realism" (Lea, 2018, p. 396) is therefore one way of *Summer* (and Smith's other writing) to make readers reflect upon their often-unquestioned expectations of order and borders, narrative or otherwise, and each novel, each character within each novel, as well as the quartet as a whole have permeable membranes that simultaneously contain and connect each piece.

This fluidity of the novel's form is mirrored in how its polyphony of voices, perspectives, and characters is used to work out that "human interaction [is] perennially caught between conflict and resolution", filling her narrative with "contrasting points-of-view, which often forcefully express their right to primacy. These voices explain the world as it appears to them, but none are allowed the ultimate satisfaction of determining the meaning of another's experience" (Lea, 2018, p. 397). What Smith thus relies upon is "the argumentative grist of opposed perspectives, replacing singular with plural truths" (Lea, 2018, p. 397). In order to show how this strategy is specifically used to undermine essentialist notions of home and homeland in *Summer*, I will now zoom in on scenes and characters in which family relations and home spaces are foregrounded, looking at the porosity and elasticity of borders within and beyond the homes and families described in the novel.



2.4

Particles Meeting: Rejecting Defensive Notions of Home

The central characters introduced in *Summer* are the Greenlaw family, consisting of the siblings Sasha and Robert Greenlaw and their mother and father. In its representation of the Greenlaws' family relations, the novel works through concrete political events like the Brexit referendum as well as more abstract issues of growing up and growing old, falling in love, or anxieties towards the future. The Greenlaws are surrounded by characters reappearing from the earlier instalments in the seasonal quartet, including Daniel Gluck or Art and Charlotte, the estranged couple from *Winter* (2017). Although the Greenlaws are connected via genetic family ties, the family members often feel disconnected from each other, while many of the most central meetings in the novel happen by chance. This does not mean, though, that these random connections have less of a consequence for the lives and development of characters. Meeting Charlotte, 13-year-old Robert feels that "everything is different. Everything, changed." (Smith, 2020, p. 75). Like the polyphonic, fluid community of voices of the novel as a whole, Robert's body seems to shed its solidity in the act of falling in love: "he *is* light, actual light, light itself" (Smith, 2020, p. 75), and he muses upon Einstein's theory about "*a force which bodies, by their very presence, exert upon each other*" (Smith, 2020, p. 76, emphasis in the original). What Robert expresses here is the idea of single individuals being necessarily tied and related to each other, no matter how tenuous, random, or even unacknowledged this connection might be. This idea is repeated twice in the novel through Robert's further exploration of Einstein's theory, forming a connective thread within the narrative. However, through the often intense and consequential chance meetings that

happen to the Greenlaws, the novel also makes clear that this sense of connection makes communities elastic and open towards change and inclusion. Charlotte thematises the potential of such an openness towards others when she talks about Robert's crush on her: "Such a powerful connection, it's a chance to make the world bigger for someone else. Or smaller. That's always the choice we've got." (Smith, 2020, p. 364). The novel's analysis of communal ties expands the family as a metaphor for a community that is porous and open to change and chance.

The novel does not stop at such metaphoric explorations, though. *Summer* directly maps the logic of connection and separation within the Greenlaw family onto concrete political events in the UK, making the Greenlaws a fighting ground for conflicts within the national community. This mapping of family home and homeland becomes most salient in the family's reaction to Brexit. Grace, Sasha's and Robert's mother, voted to leave, while their father voted to remain. This political difference is used by Robert to make sense of his parents' separation and divorce: "our father voted *remain* and our mother voted *leave*. But […] it's our father who, in the end, was the one who literally had to. *Leave*. […] Which makes it, [Robert] says, like the people who voted leave were sort of also issuing a command. It's quite clever really." (Smith, 2020, p. 80). In Robert's sarcasm, the idea of one national family united in their will to gain control of their homeland is put on the spot by showing that the pro-Brexit rhetorics of organic family ties have made visible how divided families actually are. The 'breaking point' conjured up in the UKIP poster is therefore not reached because of external threats or strangers invading the family's home space. The different political views of Robert's parents rather bring already fraught internal relations to a breaking point, making his parents literally break up. This sense of political differences among genetically related people is also repeated on the level of the Greenlaw siblings. Sixteen-year-old Sasha is concerned about climate change, is keen to help a homeless person she has befriended, and is staunchly pro-immigration, while her younger brother Robert is fascinated by Boris Johnson, supports Brexit, and aggressively makes racist comments at school. In her review of *Summer*, *The Guardian* columnist Sara Collins therefore likens Sasha to Greta Thunberg, while Robert stands in for a public persona like Jordan Peterson (2020). As Sasha reflects at the beginning of the novel: "She loves him, but. He's her little brother. But." (Smith, 2020, p. 33). The repetitive, short sentences with their disruptive full stops make clear that Sasha, Robert, their mother, and father are united *and* separated, not in spite of being a family, but exactly *because* they are family.

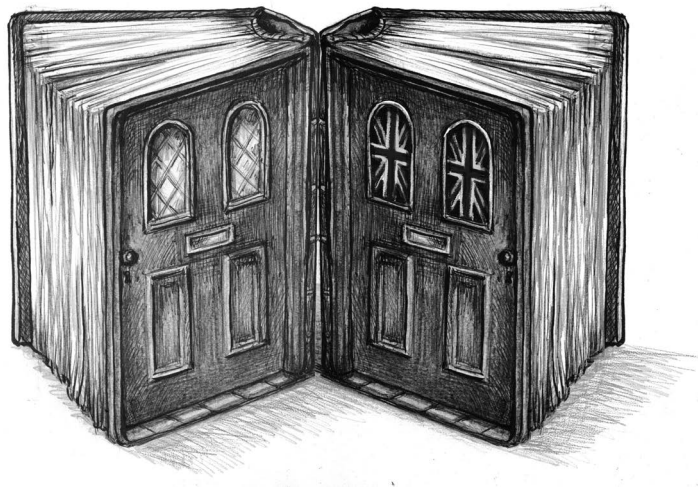
However, Robert and Sasha's father has not vanished from their lives since their parents' divorce, and home as a built space is one of the key dimensions used to outline this. Instead of leaving, their father has moved into the house next door, turning into what his children call "next door dad" (Smith, 2020, p. 78). Grace comments: "But we're a family, we couldn't bear not to be

together. Or at least close. So when next door came up for sale we bought it and he moved out. I mean, in." (Smith, 2020, p. 78). In Smith's skilful play with the ambivalence of 'out' and 'in', it becomes obvious that definitions of home are a matter of perspective rather than of clear-cut, physical borders between private and public, inside and outside. After the separation, the Greenlaw family is spread across two parents, two political attitudes, as well as across two home spaces that are 'in' and 'out' at the same time, but they are still "one big happy family", as Sasha wryly states (Smith, 2020, p. 78). The demand of the Leave campaign to 'take back control' is thus ridiculed as futile: if it is unclear from the outset what the borders of a (national) family and home/land are, it is impossible to take back control, and the attempt to keep the borders of the Greenlaws' family space intact – by defining only the previously shared house as the 'proper' family home – would exclude members from the family who actually are genetically tied to Robert and Sasha. In the Greenlaws' family situation, the novel makes clear that people may not have exactly *one* home to which they can return. Rather, someone may call multiple and even fluctuating spaces and people home, while some spaces or relations designated as home or homely may not be safe, comfortable, and therefore not a place you can or may want to return to (Ahmed et al., 2020).

This sense of tenuous connections and porous, multiple borders is enacted on a very specific space in the novel: thresholds. Thresholds take on added meaning in *Summer* and they expand narrow definitions of home by spatially enacting the ambivalence of 'in' and 'out'. In the novel, key moments of realisation take place on this ambivalent point of home spaces, e.g., when the Greenlaws decide to travel to Suffolk with Art and Charlotte, when Daniel Gluck is taken from the doorstep of his father's house to the internment camp for 'enemy aliens', or when Charlotte decides to open herself up to the plight of refugees during lockdown. In this last instance towards the end of the novel, Charlotte has left Art in Suffolk and moves in with his aunt Iris, who lives in a 16-bedroom house in Cornwall. When covid-19 forces the government to release many long-term detainees from immigration removal centres into a locked-down Britain, Iris immediately prepares the house to welcome them in. Charlotte, who is already struggling with life under lockdown and her physical separation from Art, is overwhelmed by the idea of sharing the house with 15 strangers and isolates in her room for three days, even blocking the door with a chair to prevent Iris from coming in. Iris, however, accepts Charlotte's self-isolation and puts her food on the threshold without enforcing contact. This silent acceptance leads to Charlotte coming out of her anxious self-isolation and depression, ready for "things coming together" (Smith, 2020, p. 359): "She gets up off the bed. She takes the chair away from the door. She opens the door. She looks down. Soup in a bowl at her feet. Iris left it there, must be two hours ago. But there's still a modicum of warmth in it. She sits down in the threshold. It does taste fine." (Smith,

2020, p. 359). The clipped prose of this passage and the repetition of the pronoun 'she' at the beginning of sentences create a rhythmic pattern of successive, yet connected actions of an agentive, individual subject: getting up, moving the chair, opening the door, looking down. This movement out of the room, but within the space she calls home during lockdown, counters what Charlotte did when Iris took the lock off her door after deciding to open her home to the detainees from the removal centres. Here, she went upstairs, into her room, shut the door, and wedged it shut with the chair under the handle (Smith, 2020, p. 347). Sitting on the threshold of her room and eating the half-warm soup left by Iris enacts what Charlotte was unable to do three days earlier: opening up her sense of self and the space she calls home at this moment in time to those who have been deemed 'aliens' by government policies long before the lockdowns of covid-19.

Given that immigration was a key point in the Leave campaign (Bradshaw and Haynes, 2023), this insistence on open doors and thresholds during a pandemic condenses the novel's concern for home as "a porous, open intersection of social relations" (Blunt and Dowling, 2022, p. 28) and relates political rhetorics during covid-19 to the political message of taking back control during the Brexit referendum. As Iris puts into a nutshell when discussing lockdown: "*I wish they'd stop using war language, war imagery. This isn't a war. The opposite of a war is happening. The pandemic is making walls and borders and passports as meaningless as nature knows they are*." (Smith, 2020, p. 345, italics in original). This rejection of war metaphors is also made a topic in *The Fell*, where Alice, one of the 'extremely vulnerable' due to her illness and age, reflects: "Shielding, they call it, silly military metaphors, first you have to battle cancer and then you have to shield from a virus, as if life was one of those wargames where there's nothing to do but kill or be killed." (Moss, 2021, p. 126). The novels make clear that such defensive notions lock people *in* as much as they attempt to lock other people or the virus *out*. Without propagating reckless behaviour (Iris is only too-aware of the threat that covid-19 poses to people's health), Iris' act of opening her home to strangers deemed 'aliens' helps the reader work through organic ideals of family and home so central to the Brexit debate, expanding notions of community towards practices of hospitality. It is therefore no coincidence that Hero, one of the recent detainees who has come to live with Charlotte and Iris, has the last word on the novel's final pages with a letter to Sasha. Here, he sends wishes to Sasha "and [her] family and [her] friends and [her] loved ones" (Smith, 2020, p. 379). This long, uninterrupted, and unpunctuated enumeration of relations, both genetic and otherwise, connects everyone with the simple copula 'and'. The novel thus keeps its sense of polyphony and differing voices but ties them together into a collaborative 'being-with-others' that happens on the porous and permeable borders and thresholds of families, homes, and homelands.



2.5

Conclusion: Reading (in) the Times of Lockdown

How do we relate to people we feel unrelated to, and what do we have in common with people we seem to have nothing in common with? The lockdown novels discussed in this chapter tackle these questions in the context of political events that conjured up the vision of a homeland in need of defence and of homes as places of safety and self-isolation. The 'Stay at Home' directive of the covid-19 lockdowns and the Brexit rhetorics of a natural, national family taking back control of their homeland thus share the ideal of home as a closed, organic safe space occupied by people who have a natural right to be there. Contemporary lockdown novels challenge this sedentarist metaphysics of homeland by making visible, on the level of individuals and families, how fraught and ambivalent relations, practices, and spaces within the home can be. Being a family does not preclude internal rifts and political differences, as the Brexit conflict within the Greenlaw family in *Summer* outlines. On the other hand, chance meetings with strangers can expand and enrich a community and explicate similarities and sameness beyond genetic connections. This necessity of remaining open towards such meetings was made all the more visible by pandemic restrictions on practices of conviviality, and lockdown novels perform the consequences of such defensive notions of home in their narrative exploration of ideas of control, borders and their alleged safety, vulnerability, and isolation.

The novels enact this multiplicity of communities and homes in their form and content, creating a polyphony of voices in which none of these single voices is allowed to take precedence. Brexit's binary choice of remaining or leaving and the lockdown opposition of (safely) self-isolating or (unsafely) opening out are thus shown to be problematically simplistic. Organic notions

of home as being *in* and *from* a place with fixed, natural borders are made permeable and porous. With this porosity, the easy mapping of family and national community, private home and collective homeland are problematised in their power to attach people to an abstract entity and dangerous ideal. What lockdown novels thus explicate is that organic ideas of home as belonging and genetic ties are never self-explanatory or neutral and that home is not a private space isolated from social structures and institutionalised hierarchies. As the protagonists of Ali Smith's *Summer* experience, home is inescapably entangled with wider structures of inequality and power, but it is also a site for often ambivalent connections and relations that include love and compassion as much as anxiety, anger, or helplessness. Accepting this ambivalence and polyphony is what makes family and home possible, and the lockdown novels make the reader relate to and experience the challenge that this acceptance brings.

In the light of this crucial role of readerly practices, I, therefore, want to close with a short reflection on the novel in the times of lockdown and how reading itself can be assessed as a homemaking practice. Reading, especially reading novels, was for many people one of the key mechanisms for coping with confinement and stress during the covid-19 lockdowns. Despite a general steep drop in household spending, book sales were one sector that offered a bright spot for retailers: "In the UK, fiction sales climbed by a third and children's educational titles went up 234% to the third-highest level on record in the final week of March [2020]" (Charlton, 2020). Staying at home in self-isolation made people turn to reading, specifically fiction titles, an activity that enabled those affected by lockdown to both escape their four walls and "understand what is happening around us" (Charlton, 2020). As has been noted by studies of the novel, reading "allows us to be alone and in company at the same time" (Boxall, 2015, n.pag.). This phenomenon is specifically interesting for lockdown literature, because this type of novel deals with feelings of solitude (in the representation of isolation and social distancing), but also with aspects of sharing our home spaces with others far more intensely than before, making us reassess experiences of solitude and solidarity while reading. The novel and its "world-making power" (Boxall, 2015, p. 11) can thus be understood as a practice of homemaking in the sense of home being the site for the feeling of connecting with others, including those who are absent, and so not feeling alone.

The contemporary novel, and the lockdown novel specifically, can therefore be a vehicle for coping with political events like Brexit or global issues like the covid-19 pandemic, both in terms of escaping and facing such events and their aftermath. Accordingly, reading and writing lockdown novels is a central site where notions of home "and the values attached to their familiar rhetorical usage become tangible, in different ways: sometimes reinforced, sometimes critically deconstructed or subverted, sometimes transformed" (Birke and Butter, 2019, p. 120). The question of the representation of home is therefore more than a formal analysis of a chosen text because "how

anything is represented is the means by which we think and feel about that thing, by which we apprehend it. The study of representation is […] the study of one of the prime means by which we have any knowledge of reality" (Dyer, 1997, p. xiii). Reading a literary text in which home, family relations, and ideals of homeland are represented therefore is an act of performing our identification with or distancing from norms, ideals, and rhetorical uses of home. As readers, we are spectators of a narrator's or protagonist's home spaces, relations, and practices, and each text mobilises the reader's pre-existent knowledge about norms of behaviour, political attitudes, and social position. Fictions of home can thus help to make explicit the categories that we as readers use to make sense of imaginaries of home in a given text and thus uncover often unreflected cultural norms and ideals. Novels like *Summer*, *The Fell*, or *How High We Go in the Dark* make the reader experience how their protagonists' locked-down home spaces and family relations are criss-crossed by political decisions and attitudes. Through this experience, the novels create affective ties between the reader and the people represented. In that sense, these novels can become tenuous, ambivalent, and temporary homes to inhabit while reading, at least for a short time, while making readers question how private, safe, and closed-off their own homes actually are.

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