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# 'I Don't Want to Be *Other*. I Want to Be *Normal*': Mental Boundaries and the Polish Experience in the UK in Agnieszka Dale's *Fox Season and Other Short Stories*

**Isabel María Andrés-Cuevas**

Department of English and German Philologies, Faculty of Filosofía y Letras, University of Granada, 18071 Granada, Spain; iandres@ugr.es

**Abstract:** Borders and frontiers are often problematized in Agnieszka Dale's *Fox Season and Other Short Stories* (2017), where mental borders seem to be more divisive than spatial boundaries. Many of these narratives feature Polish immigrants in Britain who struggle with their displaced condition in various ways. As some of the stories in the collection reveal, the scenario of post-Brexit Britain compromises conviviality amongst different groups, including the Polish community. Special attention is placed upon how several narratives in the volume underscore the prevalence in British society of Polish stereotypes as the crystallisation of the still widespread animosity against non-Europeans. Homi Bhabha's notions regarding the formation and dynamics of stereotypes will be helpful in understanding the mechanisms beneath such constructions. Likewise, some of the major tenets of social theory, as well as Edward Said's notion of 'Orientalism', will contribute to shedding light upon this resentment towards the Polish minority, occasionally adopted too by already established immigrants against their former compatriots. This article will ultimately intend to draw attention to the cautionary nature of Dale's collection as a call for harmony and the appreciation of difference among nations, thus preventing the gloomy perspectives the dystopian futures of some of these stories forecast upon Europe.

**Keywords:** Agnieszka Dale; *Fox Season*; short story; Polish migrants; stereotypes; borders; hostility; UK immigration; dystopia; Polish jokes



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## 1. Introduction and Historical Context

"Do you not like me here?", the narrator of *What We Should Feel Now* asks everyone around on the streets (Dale 2017, p. 75). Most of the stories in Agnieszka Dale's collection *Fox Season and Other Short Stories* revolve around the lives of Polish characters, especially immigrants in Britain, who are frequently forced to confront a scenario marked by their difficulties to be accepted as citizens in their own right due to their condition as white others. Dale is part of a generation of young/middle-aged Polish authors, many of whom deal with feminist and controversial issues, such as playwright and novelist Dorota Masłowska, 2018 Nobel laureate Olga Tokarczuk, or the also feminist novelist and academic Joanna Bator. On the grounds of her thematic approach and life circumstances, Dale can also be aligned with other female authors, such as A. M. Bakalar or Wioletta Greg (Grzegorzewska). As Martyna Bryla points out, the three authors share the condition of their being Polish immigrants in the UK. Even when dealing with the issues derived from contemporary immigration from different perspectives, and according to different genre conventions, these three authors "provide insight into the dynamics of (non)belonging in the specific Polish-British context as seen from a female migrant perspective, while at the same time reaching beyond national dichotomies (particularly in the case of Greg and Dale) to narrate the ambivalence of living in liquid modernity" (Bryla 2023, p. 163).

As a Polish-born author based in London, Dale offers a first-hand insight into those social and psychological boundaries making Poles, as members of an ethnic minority in

the UK, the frequent target of prejudice and rejection. Some of the stories in the collection bring to the surface how Britain's withdrawal from the European Union just seemed to intensify the sentiments of distrust towards immigrants and put a strain on conviviality. In keeping with this, particular attention will also be paid here to the presentation of Poles as the recipients, still in the twenty-first century, of historically rooted stereotypes as a means of denouncing inequality and senseless compartmentalisation. Significantly, one of the stories in the collection envisions a dystopian future in which, quite tellingly, life in a supposedly borderless Europe is marked by suspicion and strict surveillance—a not too unrealistic prospect, the narrative warns, should this situation not be prevented.

The emigration of Poles to the UK chiefly occurred after the German–Soviet invasion of Poland in September 1939 at the outburst of the Second World War. The subsequent establishment of a Polish government-in-exile in London triggered a substantial influx of political immigrants seeking refuge in Britain (Sword et al. 1989; Stachura 2004). By the early 1950s, over 250,000 Poles had turned to a series of resettlement camps located across England, Scotland and Wales to start a new life away from a Poland subjected to a harsh Communist regime. In 1981, the introduction of martial law in this country led again to a massive exodus of Polish refugees to the UK and other European destinations, fleeing from the oppression of totalitarianism. The fall of the Iron Curtain and the end of Communism in 1989 transformed the nature of Polish migration to the UK from a political to a voluntary departure, frequently of a generation of young and well-educated Poles who, encouraged by the general mobility across unified Europe, left their country in search of more promising careers and cultural perspectives (Rostek and Uffelmann 2011). On other occasions, especially in the case of intellectuals, these left the country in quest of the modernity offered by Europe, more open to feminist beliefs or to queer identities (Kosmalska 2018, p. 134). Nonetheless, it was as a consequence of the European Union enlargement in 2004 and the incorporation of Poland to the EU the same year that large migration flows entered the UK, motivated by their new accession to the right to freedom of movement and settlement across the European Union. Likewise, the British policy of granting immediate full access to its labour market to citizens from the new member states had an immense pull effect for Poles. As a result, the Polish minority in Britain has gradually increased since then, being nowadays one of the largest ethnic groups in the country, with a population of approximately 682,000 citizens, a figure that has grown more than tenfold since 2001 (Garlick 2022).

Despite the notable presence of Poles in the UK, testimonies of anti-Polish sentiment in the country are still documented (Alexander 2014; BBC News 2008) and even seem to have particularly revived as a result of Brexit (Taylor 2016; Viña et al. 2016). A correlate of Britain's withdrawal from the European Union had been the resuscitation of some of the UK's innermost ancentral fears, especially regarding the dread of seeing the alleged purity and harmony of their country disturbed (Smith 2019), along with their jobs and career opportunities taken away and their health system collapsed. Concurrently, the reality of the Polish diaspora in the UK and the astounding increase in the Polish population in Britain between 2004 and 2019 (Meuwissen 2024) also reignited a number of traditional ethnic stereotypes against this community. These, which had been originally fuelled in the specific context of 1980s East Germany in order to discredit *Solidarność* (Solidarity), chiefly relied on the fact that these Poles had access to only some menial jobs, that their command of English was rather limited, or that they often showed deep attachment to their language and traditions. These general facts buttressed forth the image of Poles as backward, unintelligent, indolent and ineffective or prone to drinking in excess, among other negative features (Oleksiak 2015). Even when emerging in circumstances notably different from those of British Poles in the twenty-first century, in which Poles cover the labour market across virtually all sectors and all qualification levels (Migrant Essential Workers 2021), these prejudices remain latent in the UK. In the last decade, those Poles living in Britain have encountered the somewhat oxymoronic convergence of two realities. Hence, the 2004 European openness of borders granting the free movement of its citizens

clashes with the tense situation in the UK and the increasing hostility among the British population towards immigrants as a result of the nation's exit from the European Union in 2016.

## 2. Otherness and Border Spaces

Their condition as a minority group often forces British Poles to validate their own in-betweenness—or position in Bhabha's "third space"—in a way that becomes satisfactory for them while enabling them to gain acceptance in the host community. This marginality—with all the obvious disadvantages it entails for members of an ethnic minority living abroad—cannot be separated from its positive side. For Judith Butler, this boundary is indeed a space of transaction and negotiation in which it is precisely separateness that serves as a bonding element between the different parts (Butler 2009, p. 44). Donna Haraway's concept of "significant otherness" insists on this idea of alterity as the converging space that enables encounters that "are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures" (Haraway 2003, p. 7).

Yet at the same time, this liminal space also allows for transformation, inasmuch as it "opens up the possibility of articulating different, even incommensurable cultural practices and priorities" (Bhabha 1990, pp. 210–11). According to Bhabha, this third space is characterised by its disruptive power. Liminality hence engenders new political, social and cultural possibilities, giving birth to a multiplicity that counters essentialism and monadism. This subversive potential is aided by fiction. Shameem Black underpins the role of stories in this representation and materialisation of social difference and locates prose fiction as in a privileged position for the articulation of different forms of border crossing, "helping shape expanded views of human potential" (Black 2010, pp. 8–9). Edward Said also highlights the decentralising function of border representation, inasmuch as "the power to narrate" is aligned with the power "to block other narratives from forming and emerging" (Said 2003, p. xiii). The short story in particular has been considered as especially fitting for such destabilisation of the status quo. Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann have defined it as "the liminal genre *par excellence*" in view of its poetics and literary status (Achilles and Bergmann 2014, p. 4). It is this marginal intrinsicality of the short story that has led Claire Drewery to mark it as an apt vehicle for the articulation of minoritarian discourses from "isolated individuals, often women, who occupy an ambiguous place" (Drewery 2011, p. 11).

## 3. Stereotypes: Some Theoretical Considerations

Even when his views are essentially focused on racist stereotypes, Homi Bhabha's tenets about the way in which these constructions emerge and operate will indeed help understand the types of mental imaginings and the rationale beneath stereotypes. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha contends that one of the functions of stereotypes is to establish a defensive barrier for the subject or dominant group between themselves and the object—or subordinate—group. Stereotypes signal an opposition between subject and object that ensures there is a clear and incontestable difference separating them (Bhabha 1994, p. 81). This negation that is carved upon the dominated group, he notes, imprints upon them the indelible mark of the lack (Bhabha 1994, p. 77), and one which is impossible to revert or satisfy insofar as stereotypes are built upon immobile binary diachronic structures (Bhabha 1994, pp. 71–72). This fixity guarantees the subject the control over the object, thus allowing them to dissipate the anxiety that the difference they recognise in the Other provokes in them. Through the construction of this object Other as the carrier of lack and negation of what is to be acceptable and valued, the subject legitimises their right to dominate the object on the basis of the latter's alleged inferiority. The stereotype makes this weakness attributed to its target evident and renders the Other—or colonised, in Bhabha's terms—in need of control by the subject—or coloniser. Even when the relationship between native Britons and Polish immigrants in the UK is not one to be deemed in colonial terms, Bhabha's tenets regarding the dynamics of stereotypes between a dominant and a dominated group seem to

be pertinent when attempting to articulate the tensions and the forces operating nowadays between both communities:

> (I)t effectively displays the "separation", makes it more visible. It is the visibility of this separation which, in denying the colonized the capacities of self-government, independence, Western modes of civility, lends authority to the official version and mission of colonial power. (Bhabha 1994, p. 83)

A similar system of binaries lies at the core of Edward Said's foundational concept of 'Orientalism'. In his seminal work on this notion, Said defines this idea as a set of constructed fictions "despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a 'real' Orient" (Said 2003, p. 5), discursively built by Europeans as a means to define Oriental people as inferior—as opposed to the West—and thereby justify their exploitation and domination over it. Under this lens, which rests upon the assumption of cultural hegemony as a factor granting superiority to the West, the Orient is deemed as barbarian and in need of control and rule by Europeans:

> Orientalism is never far from [. . .] a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely [. . .] the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient, themselves reiterating European superiority over Oriental backwardness [. . .].
>
> In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand. (Said 2003, p. 7)

Said refers to this self-assumption on the part of the Orient of their alleged inferiority as the precious ally of European domination. These projections and imaginings of the Orient are in consonance with the Polish construction of the self and the other. In her study of Polish migrants in Ireland nowadays, Kinga Olszewska detects a self-Orientalising discourse among Poles in their identification with Europeanness. As she notes:

> Self-orientalisation as an identification with the inferior Other has been a dominant mode of articulation of Poland's precarious relationship with Western Europe. Sociologists, economists, historians, and politicians often indicate that Poles perceive their economic, cultural, social, and political achievements as unsatisfactory compared to those of 'Europeans'. (Olszewska 2011, p. 160)

This notion of self-Orientalisation was proposed by Adeeb Khalid in order to describe the cultural self-definition of migrants from Slavic countries living in German-speaking countries and who identify themselves—and their migrant compatriots—as wild, barbarians and uncivilised (Khalid 2000, pp. 698–99). Regarding the specific context of Britain and the way in which stereotypes function in societies, David Smith detects in his study of the sociological reasons behind Brexit and the state of post-referendum Britain the existence of certain archetypes—already present in ancient civilizations—which would work as resources perpetuated within communities with a view to survival. These instinctive attitudes were aimed at reinforcing the idea of nationhood and establishing clear-cut limits about who belongs to it and who is to be considered as the Other. At a political level, this translates into—for instance—the establishment of specific labels for the classification of UK citizens. Especially telling is the inclusion into the UK census since 2011 of the term 'Other White', or 'White Other', as a means to describe people who self-identify as white persons but do not belong to the English, Welsh, Scottish, Romani or Irish ethnic groupings (Gardener and Connolly 2005, p. 7), with Poles being the largest minority in this "White Other" compartment (2011 UK Census).

At a social level, this need to demarcate who belongs or does not belong to the nation state often manifests through stereotypes. They serve to classify these 'outsiders' as being separate from the community by virtue of an absence in themselves as subjects. In his

commentary on the concept of barbarism, Koivukoski insists on the notion of stereotypes as markers of social unfitness, inasmuch as they consist in a set of values "generated through an imagined projection beyond the margins of a civilizational framework, whereby an identity is formulated in terms of an essential other" as a result of collective anxieties (Koivukoski 2014, p. 6). Stereotypes of barbarism are a series of inscriptions of moral, intellectual or psychological standards on what is deemed as alien and unacceptable when compared to the canons of the host society. Yet, the paradox here is that they are frequently adopted by their recipients, once they have become admitted into the host group as full—or almost full-fledged—members and applied back to those who, like them, are struggling for inclusion into the receiving community. This acquisition of prejudice associated with the homeland origin is explained by the main tenets of social identity theory. Originally formulated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s and the 1980s, this theory—modelled in the context of social psychology—"explores the phenomenon of the 'ingroup' and 'outgroup', and is based on the view that identities are constituted through a process of difference defined in a relative or flexible way dependent on the activities in which one is engaged" (Benwell and Stokoe 2006, p. 25). Social identity theory thus attempts to predict certain intergroup behaviours particularly on the basis of the way in which status differences among groups are perceived, along with the legitimacy and stability of those status differences, and the perceived ability to move from one group to another (Tajfel and Turner 1979, p. 40).

Accordingly, individuals "strive for a positive self-concept", which is partly contingent on "maintaining positive social identity" (Tajfel and Turner 1979, p. 40). Hence, being accepted by the ingroup provides individuals with a source of self-esteem, which is simultaneously used as an evolutionary coping mechanism for anxiety and the terror provoked by the awareness of death (Pyszczynski et al. 2004, p. 130). Certain cultural values which ultimately entail social acceptance—including values such as national identity (Greenberg et al. 1990, p. 58)—are thought to offer symbolic immortality, inasmuch as they are linked to feelings that one is part of something greater that will outlive the individual.

Consequently, adherence to the norms dictated by the ingroup largely conditions an individual's choice of behaviour. This is especially true when the ingroup is dominant, and in contrast with another possible ingroup which ranks lower in the scale of the social hierarchy. As shown by cross-cultural studies, ingroup derogation—or the tendency to criticise members of one's own group or culture more harshly than members of outside groups—frequently occurs among members of minority groups, which explains why "minorities sometimes endorse system-justifying views of their group" (Ma-Kellams et al. 2011, p. 24). This emerges as an essentially unconscious strategy to gain acceptance from the new ingroup and thus avoid the possibility of being outcast. Diasporic identities are considered to be especially fluid and fragmentary (Erikson 1968). According to Stuart Hall, the notion of diaspora describes the identities of those individuals moving between cultures and "unsettling the assumptions of one culture from the perspective of the other" (Hall 1996, p. 48). In the case of migrants, attachment to the sociocultural norms dictated by the dominant group may further them into this community and outside the previously marked as subordinate and lower group. The outcome of this mobility amounts to an enhancement of the formerly denigrated individual's self-esteem, derived from their sense of having constructed for themselves a positive social identity. Through this ideological constitution of the self, the individual acquires a particular ideological version of the world, liable to serve hegemonic ends and preserve the status quo. The individual becomes thus colonised by identity, which operates as a force directing and shaping them, yet in return gains the so zealously craved acceptance from the dominant group.

## 4. The Condition of Poles in Fox Season and Other Short Stories

Agnieszka Dale's collection problematises the complex situation of the Poles living in post-Brexit Britain. The overall tone of the volume distils a sense of pessimism with respect to the present and even the not very distant future. Some of these narratives are

set in a dystopian—though not very remote—prospective society a few decades ahead plagued by wars and in which the political organisation in Europe has taken a radical turn with the establishment of dictatorial regimes. According to Gregory Claeys, dystopias select some potentially self-destructive aspect of contemporary society and develop it to its uttermost consequences (Claeys 2010, p. 123). Claeys enumerates some of the principal elements characteristic of dystopian stories. Hence, these narratives present elements such as: hierarchical societies with ferrous divisions between classes; constant surveillance by the authorities and state police agencies; the cancellation of individuality; technologically more advanced societies; a back story that justifies the dramatic social changes; and a protagonist that questions the system (Claeys 2010, pp. 119–20). By offering these potentially negative possible scenarios, dystopian fictions are intended as mirrors for society to alert readers against the plausible reality that might take over the stage in the near future, should present flaws not be corrected. Insofar as dystopias urge for a reconsideration of the ways in which society operates, thus positing the need for revaluation, these stories prove adequate to narrate experiences in which societies are challenged by the issue of migration, the limitations of current border practices and the necessity of imagining new border realities. Since they "are often built around the conflicts inherent in oppression", dystopias portray more accurately realities of inequality and marginalisation (Schimanski 2021, p. 59).

Set around the year 2050, "Hello Poland" shows the dire aftereffects of totalitarianism in Poland, and provides a glimpse into a gloomy future in which the supposed increase of freedom and progress only masks a reality of state surveillance and the loss of individuality. This future society depicts a new European reality marked by the existence of a new political regime characterised by the absence of nationalities and the ubiquitous effect of globalisation. The narrative brings to the fore the paradoxical overlap between a futuristic society in which people have developed wings to move around and where even life expectancy has soared to hundreds of years, and their subjection to a dictatorial regime, reminiscent of martial law in Poland between 1981 and 1983. On December 13th 1981, General Wojciech Jaruzelski had implemented this measure to prevent the opposition from gaining popularity and political influence in the country (Piek 1981). This led to the arrest and detainment of tens of thousands of people linked to the Solidarity Movement, including Lech Wałęsa, as well as to the deaths of around a hundred people (BBC News 2006). The law entailed, among other impositions, a nationwide travel ban, together with curfews, censorship and food rationing, until it was lifted on July 22nd 1983 (Sanford 1986). Even when the plot occurs in what used to be Poland—now just part of the new globalised order of User Experience—the narrative hints at the situation of migrants in an apparently global and deterritorialised European Union. Jan, its protagonist, has been indeed a political refugee for many years—hundreds of them—in this new futuristic reality.

A former member of the secret police, Jan, is back in Warsaw after having been intercepted in the past while trying to escape to Germany during martial law, an incident in which his daughter, revealingly called Poland, got kidnapped. Upon his arrival in Warsaw, he meets Hanka, a young woman with whom he flirts, but whom he gradually begins to suspect to be his daughter. Hanka's candid remarks when she celebrates the new order—this derivation from martial law where everything is user-tested on citizens and which has allegedly managed to correct the faults of democracy—highlight the irony in the new European scenario. Hence, despite the unrealistically futuristic and technologically advanced turn of society, citizens are subjected though to ferreous tyranny:

> 'Was martial law tested on the users, before it was declared? You know, the way we now test wars, before we declare them, with artificial intelligence, especially developed personas as enemies?' she asks [. . .].
>
> 'No', he says. 'User experience didn't exist then, you know'.
>
> 'Sounds insane, that world. Unsafe [. . .]. Jaruzelski found the golden formula. The solution to all evil. Martial law, and then Round Table Talks, which Americans—then Americans—replicated after democracy failed but with guns against people's heads so that people just talked, and didn't leave the table until they all filled in

> their questionnaires. Then came the User Experience, which replaced all systems, even general elections'. (Dale 2017, pp. 37–38)

This new order, called User Experience—whose initials seem to hint at those of the European Union, even if in the reverse order—entails the strict surveillance of citizens, all of whom are simultaneously informers, "(i)nforming and living. Living and informing" (Dale 2017, p. 34). The narrative underpins the aleatory nature of power and also of oppression as the other side of the coin—an idea articulated, precisely by Polish author Joseph Conrad, in *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Societies feed on the fragility of other peoples: "strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others" (Conrad 2021, p. 8). Hence, after explaining the tragic outcome of martial law in Poland for both himself and his daughter, Jan reflects: "(p)eople need enemies. They can't function without enemies" (Dale 2017, p. 39). Yet, the story also warns against the danger of obliterating the past and the possibility of learning from it. Hanka's affirmation that she does not care about history, which is probably the reason that makes her naively conceive of her present reality as a utopian form of organisation, gives voice in fact to the dominant idea in that future society the story is set in, at the same time as it seems to function as a critique of our postmodern, post-truth Western world: "(s)he wants things black and white, he thinks. User-tested. Simple. No past, just easy presence. Like all of them now. Easy is the new successful" (Dale 2017, pp. 38–39). In this world, nevertheless, where everything is under strict vigilance and control, any action has become "a test, a game, an imitation of life" (Dale 2017, p. 34). The narrative suggests the possibility that Hanka is actually Poland, Jan's daughter. They both seem to be the same age and, after their encounter at the hotel bar, Hanka and Jan arrange to meet for lunch the following day with her promise to help him find Poland. The story ends with Jan imagining how that day he will say goodbye to Hanka and immediately afterwards say hello to Poland, which points at the idea that Hanka and Poland may be the same person, but who has yet had to be in hiding as a consequence of political restrictions.

Some of the narratives included in the collection comment on the harsh situation of Polish immigrants in post-Brexit Britain, where the necessity to categorise the population according to their entitlement to remain in the country has sharpened. Hence, "A Happy Nation" offers the scythed dialogue between Krystyna and her interviewer, who is questioning her right to stay in Britain. The text only allows access to her interventions in dialogue form, which is full of irony and incredulity from the start. In her conversation with the agent, she points out that the question of immigrants is nothing but "an inconvenience": "I don't believe this is an emergency for Great Britain, officer. It's just a crisis, you know, a little crisis. See, in an emergency you call an ambulance. You call the police. But a political crisis is different. It's just an inconvenience" (Dale 2017, p. 66). Throughout her monologue, Krystyna underpins the hypocrisy of a society that questions the right of immigrants to remain in the country, yet profits from their work: "But how come you don't mind the Indian corner shops any more, or the Jamaican fruit and vegetable market on a Monday morning? Or Chinatown? Why *us*? Why *me*?" (Dale 2017, p. 71). She also mocks the senselessness of the label "White Other" in the UK Census, one of the reasons why her right to live in Britain, as that of many others labelled as belonging to a minority, is under examination: "(b)ut I don't think it's all about appearances, really, our shade of white—eggshell or potato—only clear to you if we open our mouths" (Dale 2017, p. 72). Her discourse debunks the idea of race and nationality as clear-cut categories and endorses Homi Bhabha's view that nations only exist in the imagination of their purveyors: "nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye" (Bhabha 1990, p. 1). Furthermore, it also underscores the paradoxical attempt in the present to delimitate British nationhood and identity in view of the nation's colonial past, considering that, through the expansion of the Empire, approximately one quarter of the population of the earth had become by 1913 technically British (Maddison 2001, p. 97): "(h)ow would you define 'British', officer? Do you know who you are?" Did you learn about Great Britain in your English classes?" (Dale 2017, p. 70). Throughout the story, different moments from Krystyna's speech foreshadow the ending. At the beginning,

it is herself that shows empathy towards the officer, claiming that she understands he is doing his job and asking him to take a seat. She even notices some sort of connection between them: "(y)ou are just too nice. You like me, don't you? That's the problem, you like me a lot" (Dale 2017, p. 67). Nearer the ending, Krystyna also remarks: "(i)sn't it funny that I look like you? You must be British. White British" (Dale 2017, p. 71). In her analysis of Dale's Brexit narratives, namely "A Happy Nation" and "What We Should Feel Now", Vedrana Veličković points out how especially the former showcases the present situation in post-Brexit Britain, with the emergence of new racisms and a revival of imperial nostalgia (Veličković 2020, p. 656). Wiktoria Tuńska insists on this idea that Krystyna voices out the fears, especially awakened by some political campaigns encouraging withdrawal, the presence of immigrants awakens in British natives: "(t)he main character directly addresses collective anxieties, including the dread of incursion, and endorses them in her utterance, thereby establishing her authoritative position as a subject that should be feared as it is capable of taking over one's homeland" (Wiktoria Tuńska 2023, p. 12).

The twist at the end, when we discover the officer's name, provides one of the clues to understand Dale's position in the collection, as we infer that the immigration officer is probably a second-generation immigrant of Polish provenance. The resolution of the story insists on the ineffectiveness and arbitrariness of ethnic labels. After seeing his ID card, Krystyna's sarcastic attitude sharpens, and she ends up by teasing the officer into granting her the permit:

> And your ID card is here too, next to mine. Let me see. Adam. That's a nice name. Adam Michalowski, born in Lambeth, White British. You have always seemed nice.
>
> So wakey, wakey, Mr Michalowski, do let me out. (Dale 2017, p. 73)

On the other hand, in the story mentioned at the opening of this article, "What We Should Feel Now", the issue of acceptance seems to vibrate more intensely as something latent in everyday life, rather than as a legal or as a political matter. This is marked by a reality of inequality and discontent towards the Poles despite the attempts to conceal these sentiments behind ideals of conviviality. In this case, a first-person narrator addresses different interlocutors—seemingly British-born citizens—ultimately asking for empathy and appealing to the similarities between them, yet meeting with their attempts to avert the question. In this hypothetical dialogue, one of the interlocutors assures: "(f)or a start, you are busy like us, with children, jobs, and rotting apples in your garden. But let's talk about the weather. It's a little grim here today, don't you think?" (Dale 2017, p. 75). The notable brevity of the story, as well as the assertive opening, intending to dissuade British interlocutors from their alleged idea of superiority, confer on it an almost parable-like quality. The narrative starts abruptly and with a sententious tone: "I want to assure you: you are not what you think we might think. You are not. YOU ARE NOT. Put big signs in your bedrooms. Put a magnet on your fridges. Absolutely not" (Dale 2017, p. 74).

The narrator then covertly complains that Polish immigrants might be considered as "thugs" and points out that there is no possible confusion, as "politicians don't bend down to kiss their feet, they put them in prisons, where they belong" (Dale 2017, p. 74). The accusatory tone at the beginning gives way to the irony expressed by the narrative voice, who remarks on the necessity of adjusting to the varying rules determining what each part—immigrants and native Britons—should feel: "I better check what I should feel, what my neighbours have been feeling, what everybody is feeling right now, and if they are feeling like they should, like we ought to, like we are told we should feel, or not feel, according to some rule" (Dale 2017, pp. 74–75).

The story is a commentary on anti-Polish sentiment in the UK. While discrimination against Poles—as has been noted above—sinks its roots deeply in history, the mass arrival of Polish immigrants as a result of the 2004 European Union enlargement seemed to reignite the embers of old hatred against this minority. Paradoxically, whereas this EU agreement granted Poland and all other new members freedom of movement and access to the labour markets in all of the other member states, the social atmosphere was not always welcoming.

In 2007, Polish Britons reported almost twice as much "racially motivated violent attacks" against them than in 2004 (BBC News 2008). On 11 July 2012, a series of Polish flags was burned in several locations across Belfast (Mitchell 2012). Incidents in Belfast propitiated by hatred against the Poles also recurred in January 2014, when different Polish homes were attacked within ten days (Alexander 2014). Even politicians have expressed anti-Polish sentiments in their political campaigns, as is the case of the far-right British National Party (BNP), which proposed a ban on all Polish migrant workers to Britain (Norfolk 2007). Dale's above-mentioned story gradually turns from the sombre, combative tone at the start to the quasi-magical invocation of "love everywhere" (Dale 2017, p. 75) as a desirable future:

> '[. . .] I love you, I love you. I am putting signs in my bedroom and on my fridge. Signs of love. Little hearts everywhere. Hearts. Big hearts. Love, love everywhere'.
>
> 'Love, love everywhere', you repeat. 'Love, love, love. Just love. Just love'. (Dale 2017, p. 75)

Even when this excessive insistence on the ubiquitous presence of love as the longed-for scenario might appear to be sarcastic, the final image of the story confirms the necessity for the narrative voice to aspire to a future of empathetic coexistence. The final paragraph then offers the image of a first-person plural subject—assumingly British natives and Polish immigrants—growing apples together in an Edenic scene of conviviality and understanding. In this hypothetical future, the apples are dissociated from any ideas of discord or of sin to function as symbols of the possibility of mutual cordiality:

> We don't feel love right now, but we shake hands. We'll get through this, you say. We'll just get on with it. I say it too. We'll grow new apples together. One day. We'll grow them on pear trees, on flowers, on grass. Anywhere we can find. For next season. Or the season after. For everybody to share and admire, and then we'll eat together. Our apples. Apples that do not rot. (Dale 2017, p. 75)

## 5. Polish Stereotypes in *Fox Season*

Some of the stories in this collection exemplify this use of nation-related stereotypes by presenting Polish Britons whose attitude towards other Poles is one of hostility and despair, in keeping with the self-Orientalising tendency proposed by Said or Khalid. The opening story, "Peek-a-boo", is narrated from the point of view of Milka, a female Polish immigrant and the finicky mother of Maja, a toddler whom she constantly surveys, even using Skype from her workplace while the child is at the nursery. Milka is shocked to find out that the new nurse at the kindergarten is Bohdan, an ex-boyfriend of hers who has also recently emigrated to the UK. Her attitude in front of him evinces that she now tries to prove she has assimilated Britain's alleged modernity and does not fit in the stereotype of the traditionally unshaven and unrefined Polish woman: "I jam my arms by my sides to hide my armpits even though I shaved them last night" (Dale 2017, p. 17). Also, when she observes Bohdan patiently playing games with her daughter, her reaction is one of irritation at the thought that he might be excessively submissive, an idea in tune with the stereotype of the unintelligent Pole: "I can't decide if he is doing it because he is kind or because he is so helpless. Maybe he doesn't know himself. His stillness is now so irritating that I can't watch it anymore" (Dale 2017, p. 19).

She then decides to invite him over for dinner, an occasion which brings to the surface again the persistence of national stereotypes. Milka points at the contrast between the moderation of her husband at the table and Bohdan's gluttony—which she sees as proof of his alleged barbarism: "Erik eats two bowls of soup and nothing else. Bohdan devours three bowls of barszcz and then eleven dumplings" (Dale 2017, p. 21). In fact, the evening could not be more tense between Bohdan and Erik, Milka's husband. Erik indeed takes the opportunity to ridicule Bohdan as much as he can regarding the quality of houses in Poland, the necessity of many Poles to go back home due to post-Brexit immigration laws, or even his manners:

> 'My house in Krakow is a bit like that only bigger'.
>
> 'Is it worth a lot less than houses in London?' Erik asks.
>
> 'I wouldn't be so sure any more. With the pound going down and the value of złoty rising. . .'
>
> 'Is that why so many Polish people are going back home now?'
>
> 'It's not just that. Most Polish men prefer to settle down with Polish girls. And vice versa'.
>
> Bohdan is wearing tight black leather trousers that make a funny noise when he sits back in his chair, like a quiet fart. Whether or not it was wind or Bohdan's trousers making a noise, Erik looks amused.
>
> 'Are you always so generous with your Baltic wind?' Erik asks Bohdan.
>
> 'It's my trousers', says Bohdan. 'But I can fart. Freely. Something to do with my diet of cabbage', he says. (Dale 2017, p. 20)

The tone of the conversation keeps getting more and more aggressive. Yet it is interesting to note that, as much as Erik tries to Orientalise Bohdan and ridicule him by resorting to stereotypes based on his nationality, which even Bohdan himself tries to laugh off, the narrative artfully leads us to suspect that Erik could also be of Polish origin, in view of the spelling of his name. As in the children's game of peek-a-boo, which typically involves hiding one's face behind one's hands and suddenly reappearing in front of a child—and which enables the little child to learn that in fact the adult is still present—the development of the story eventually entails a similar trick. Hence, even though Milka, and especially Erik, strive to hide away their Polishness and they treat Bohdan as inferior, the narrative slyly hints at the possible origin of Milka's husband. This reality unveils their strategy of displacement of the likely previous targets of scorn and derision onto another subject once the status of the former has changed and they have achieved a certain degree of integration within the host—and socially dominant—community.

It is interesting to note that a recurring leitmotif in the story is that of the washing machine spin cycle. The story opens with a surprising confession: "Maja was conceived during the spin cycle of our Hotpoint WT965 twenty-one months ago" (Dale 2017, p. 9). The washing machine even achieves character status as it is linked to cosy moments of home relaxation for Milka and her daughter: "(a)t home we would be cuddled up together on the sofa, snoozing, with the washing machine finishing its first song of the day" (Dale 2017, p. 12). The motif also works as an image to represent precisely the opposite feeling. Milka envisions her moments of anxiety as though her stomach were a washing machine spinning at varying speeds, as "a heavily overloaded washing machine drum" (Dale 2017, p. 16), or as in the midst of a rinse cycle, when she manages to keep her uneasiness at bay (Dale 2017, p. 11). The wet sensation when her breasts get filled up with milk also finds a parallel with the washing machine cycles, as she reports feeling like "laundry taken out of a tumble drier [. . .] still damp" (Dale 2017, p. 14). The story ends with Milka and Erik having sex by the washing machine: "(w)e put the washing machine on, and by the time it's spinning, I can feel its white metal doors open wide below me, the soapy warm water spilling everywhere, like warm waves of milk, coming in and out, again and again and again" (Dale 2017, p. 21). The indifference she shows regarding their attitude to Bohdan and her lack of empathy towards him confirms again her necessity to obviate her origin and reinforce her new *Britishised* identity. In this sense, the circular structure of the narrative, which opens and closes with the motif of the washing machine, suggests the reiteration of discrimination against Poles—on this occasion, by those who have probably been before the targets of similar treatment.

The issue of stereotypes is the central theme in "A Polish Joke", precisely the last story in the collection. As is usually the case with most ethnic-based jokes, those portrayed in Dale's story rely on deriding Polish people on the basis of derogatory preconceptions and are contingent on the listener's prior notions and antipathies (Cohen 1999, p. 21). Magda

is preparing a stand-up performance on Polish stereotypes and the jokes often circulating around them. The transcript of her speech—which appears in italics—intersects in the narrative with her own reflections, which reveal her awareness of the resonance of Polish stereotypes in present British society. Hence, the script opens with her apparent amazement at how the word "Polka" is endowed with negative connotations in the Western world: "(i)t was only when I travelled West that I became labelled as stupid, and a Polak—a Polish man in fact—even if I behaved wisely and very lady-like" (Dale 2017, p. 183). As she is planning her script, Magda thinks about how "she finds it strange not to be laughed at by other nationalities, very strange" (Dale 2017, p. 183). Even at the very start of the narrative, Magda assures she *loves* (*sic*.) Polish jokes" (Dale 2017, p. 182). She celebrates her present situation, apparently in contrast with the time when she emigrated: "(a)nd now, she is laughing at these jokes, laughing in English, with the Brits, holding her British passport which cost her two thousand pounds, but it's not the same as being laughed at" (Dale 2017, p. 183). Her discourse, permeated with irony and sarcasm, evinces her awareness that, in a Western context, the British will predictably continue to remain as the dominant subjects and Poles will be doomed to a subordinated position, a scenario which will probably guarantee the prevalence of these Polish jokes in the future. Yet, considering the protagonist anticipates that her audience will be predominantly British—and one that, Magda guesses, "never saw a Polish stand-up comedian before" (Dale 2017, p. 182)—her decision to deprecate herself and her compatriots in front of a British public becomes a strategy of subversion, whereby Magda appropriates these jokes and thus turns into an agent, rather than remaining as the passive recipient of them. Her discourse situates her as a herald of Europe's Orientalisation of the East, yet with the purpose of demolishing these constructions once they are shown in their utter ridiculousness. By stressing the disproportionate exaggeratedness and the obvious inconsistency of these stereotypes, Magda is in fact laughing with and back at the dominant group. Her action has the effect of carnival laughter, which, as Bakhtin notes, results in the dissolution of hierarchies and the suspension of distance (Bakhtin 1984a, p. 160) between, in this case, the respective usual agents and the targets of these Polish jokes. Joseph Boskin has remarked on that transgressive use of laughter as an element of political contestation and liberation. For Boskin, laughter "facilitates the inversion of [. . .] stereotypes. Just as it has been utilized as a weapon of insult and persecution, so, too, has humor been implemented as a device of subversion and protest" (Boskin 1997, p. 38).

When she attempts to change the subject of the joke, from Polish to British women, Magda makes it evident that it indeed does not work, as the joke relies on the stereotype of backwardness and brutality associated with the Poles, and one that endures, as much as society may have evolved. Nevertheless, she also exposes the irrationality, as well as the unfairness, of these types of stereotypes. In her script, Magda thus turns the mirror back towards her British audience and makes them feel in the first person what it is like to be derided merely on the grounds of one's nationality, while foreseeing that their reaction would be one of offence:

> How many years, generations and light years will need to pass before she is asked:
>
> *Question: Why don't British women use their vibrators too much?*
>
> *Answer: Because it chips their teeth!*
>
> Nobody will laugh. It's understandable. It's rude AND sexist AND racist AND, and it's usually told, it's a Polish joke. (Dale 2017, pp. 183–84)

Her wondering whether the joke would be told differently in a hypothetical 2075 society, when perhaps gender separation has been blurred and maybe women no longer care about men, voices out her denunciation of the present status of Poles, who are still subjected to discrimination in spite of other societal changes. In fact, the already ingrained anti-Polish sentiment in the UK has been reported to have increased after Brexit. Following the British referendum of European Union membership, more cases of Polonophobic occurrences were registered (Mirsky 2016; Micklethwaite 2016). In her study of this phenomenon in

Greater Manchester, Alina Rzepnikowska notes the particular hostility against women from this minority and the mere fact of looking Polish as a reason for being stigmatised (Rzepnikowska 2019, p. 74).

Magda then imagines "a fashionable [. . .], post-sexist way" (Dale 2017, p. 184) version of the same joke in the hypothetical case that society evolved to the extent of a blurring of gender differentiation. By envisioning this futuristic variant, the absurdity of the stereotype it relies on becomes even more patent:

> *Question: Why do all British women stick highly sophisticated vibrators in their mouths? This is not where highly sophisticated vibrators normally go, is it?*
>
> *Answer: Maybe there is something wrong with these women? Maybe they like their teeth chipped?* (Dale 2017, p. 184)

As she continues with the outline of her script, Magda feels indignant and wonders: "(w)ill the world ever laugh at British men, collectively, the way they laughed at Polish men in the twentieth century? Will the world see them as not only stupid but also drunk [. . .]?" (Dale 2017, p. 184). She then plans to remark on the injustice of these Polish stereotypes, which she can only justify by the arbitrary fact that Poles are considered as White Others. Magda refers to the imaginary subject of all these jokes as a "Polak [who] is not white. He is just a Polak colour. He is stupid. He likes to fuck animals, especially chickens!" (Dale 2017, p. 186). Her use of the present tense when describing the current condition of Poles nowadays, as well as her feelings of utter indignation while remembering each of the jokes, reveals a reality in which, if not the jokes per se, the prejudices against this minority still prevail with force. Yet at the same time, the ridiculous animalisation of the subject of this joke unveils not only the cruelty, but also the profound senselessness of such a depiction in our globalised twenty-first-century world. Towards the end of the outline of her speech, Magda reiterates the joke. This excess, also an element associated with carnival laughter (Bakhtin 1984b), highlights the utter irrationality of such pejorative stereotypes: "(d)id you ever hear the one about the Polack who falls in love? And not just with chickens but with a fellow Polish woman? Or just a woman. Any woman. A woman he likes" (Dale 2017, p. 186). This is followed by a story narrated from the point of view of a Polish man who meets a Polish girl at a disco in the hypothetical future of 2075. Since they live in different locations, they decide to start a relationship on Skype, which includes virtual sex. They just meet in person at her mother's funeral, an occasion which becomes the alibi to agglutinate together a compilation of those conventional stereotypes of Poles as people of limited intelligence, who are heavy drinkers and who lack the least bit of refinement or morality:

> The priest was too drunk, or too stupid, or just forgot to come [. . .]. Nobody else came to the funeral either [. . .]. They must have hated her so much. Or were just busy fucking each other, or fucking chickens?
>
> So they buried the mother themselves, on their hands and knees, digging dirt with their fingernails. But first, they took off all her jewellery, all her rings off her fingers. They had to cut off one finger in order to do that. And then, on top of the grave, exhausted, the Polack just lifted up his girl's miniskirt. She had no underpants on, of course, so it was easy. (Dale 2017, pp. 190–91)

Nevertheless, the story also reveals the pernicious and deceitful nature of stereotypes. Just like the narrative of the two young Poles is cramped with clichés related to their nationality, the story brings to the surface how the same destructiveness applies in the case of other ethnic-related constructions. Hence, upon learning that the girl is half-British, the boy is suddenly and inexplicably haunted by the idea that she might be sexually easy:

> If her mum was British then she was not just Polish. She was also half-British. So maybe, maybe sex first, before the first kiss. He didn't know why he was thinking this, or why this was important, but it was [. . .]. With a Polish girl he would never consider this in real life but now. Yes. [. . .] She must like sex. She must like it a lot. All the time. (Dale 2017, p. 190)

The uncanny story of her mother's burial, followed by their intention to have sex immediately afterwards and the remark that she had no underwear further emphasize the ongoing existence of such stereotypes. The narration brings to the fore the complete lack of verisimilitude of its protagonists, who, acting according to the stereotypes that supposedly define them as Polacks, turn into a pair of redundantly bizarre props. The story ends with the quaint resolution of this framed narrative, in which the guy decides he cannot have real intercourse with the girl as he prefers to do it on Skype and then just record in his mind the "memory of his fingers almost touching his fingers; her little dirty fucking Polack fingers" (Dale 2017, p. 191). These lines, which conclude not only the story, but the entire collection, confirm the backlash in Magda's attitude. Aware of the existence of those Polish stereotypes, her decision to restate them comes as a means of relocating herself—as mentioned above—from a passive to an active position in which she takes over the role of the oppressor, yet not with the aim of accomplishing any type of vengeful act, but in order to demonstrate the harmful ineffectiveness of stereotypes, notwithstanding their target or their perpetrator.

## 6. Conclusions

In *Fox Season and Other Short Stories*, Agnieszka Dale offers a rather bleak panorama of a post-Brexit Britain plagued with conflict, division and a discriminatory treatment towards the Polish community. "Hello Poland" launches a warning against European policies that promise egalitarian forms of coexistence by depicting a dystopian turn of these nations, in which surveillance and dictatorship are concealed behind the mask of progress—indeed, a tale susceptible to being envisioned as a futuristic retelling of the permanent suspicion to which many migrants find themselves subjected in the UK. In this line, "A Happy Nation" focuses on the difficulties those labelled under the category of "White Other" experience in order to continue to be accepted as citizens in post-referendum Britain. Krystyna's monologue unveils a series of paradoxes that take place in this context, in which integration and cordiality between British-born citizens and Polish immigrants are essentially contingent on political and economic decisions. "What We Should Feel Now" precisely points out the divorce between the ideas of unity and hospitality preached from political stands and the hostile reality these Polish migrants occasionally meet. Located midway into the collection and endowed with remarkable brevity, the narrative eventually casts a glimmer of hope in a not too distant future of mutual understanding.

This conviviality is compromised by the permanence in the twenty-first century of a series of senseless and cruel stereotypes against the Poles—a panorama which urges for a profound change in society. Two of the stories examined here shed light on an adjacent ramification of this issue, as is the appropriation of these stereotypes for different purposes. On the one hand, the Orientalisation of one's own compatriots and, contrarily, the Westernisation of oneself have proven to be a strategy to gain acceptance within the host land community. And this is so even if that means tearing apart from one's original group and charging against their former fellow citizens, as has been shown in the analysis of "Peek-a-boo", where Bohdan is derided precisely by other Poles. Significantly, though, the final story takes a different turn. Magda, the protagonist of "A Polish Joke", decides to appropriate a set of nation-related stereotypes in order to confront her British audience with the absurdity and the dangerousness these utterly nonsensical constructions entail. In the story, the draft for a stand-up performance on the topic ends up crammed with a plethora of stereotypes which, once verbalised, cannot but flash out their fallaciousness. All in all, Dale's collection seems to launch a cautionary tale against the pernicious effects of discrimination at large, not only for individuals, but also for societies, and invites readers to reconsider difference as the space which should bring us together.

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