

A European in Wales, in Times of Brexit

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Originally from Osnabrueck, Germany, Elena Schmitz (Cardiff) is currently Head of Programmes at Literature Wales, the national company for literature development in Wales. In her very personal contribution (written in February 2020), she describes responses to Brexit and other challenges by the Welsh Government and by artists living in Wales and reflects on her own identity in uncertain times.

‘And now we’d like you to give us the European perspective’ – I remember this moment very distinctly. It was in 2001 and I was a visiting exchange student from Germany at Bangor University, North Wales, on a six-month Erasmus-funded place to study abroad. I looked around the room and wasn’t sure who the question was directed at. As far as I could tell, we were all Europeans in the room. It took a repeat of the question before it dawned on me that I was meant to answer, the only evidently non-British person in the room. I was ‘the European’. It is a small example of the UK’s troubled relationship with Europe and uncertainty of its place within

it. The EU referendum in 2016 did not come from nowhere and was maybe inevitable after decades of right-wing Tories stoking anti-European sentiments, further funnelled by increasingly harsh austerity measures. However, the extent to which these anti-European feelings and outright xenophobia have been unleashed and are now publicly and proudly displayed are hard to understand and accept.

I now live in Cardiff. Europe’s so-called youngest capital with around 350,000 inhabitants, it has only been a city since 1905 and became the capital of Wales in 1955. Wales or *Cymru* in Welsh, its native tongue. This small, beautiful, ancient, geographically varied, linguistically diverse, and culturally rich nation on the western edge of the island of Great Britain. Finally conquered and colonised by the English in the 16th Century (with many much earlier attempts), it has been struggling with its relationship to its all-powerful Eastern neighbour ever since.



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Nothing is straightforward here.

Wales forms part of the United Kingdom but is the only nation not reflected in the UK's national flag. Is it a country, nation, region, home nation, principality? Choose the wrong term, and your political allegiance – or ignorance – is laid bare. Devolution ensured the creation of the National Assembly for Wales in 1999, to which 60 *Assembly Members* (AM) or – since May 2020 – *Members of the Senedd* (MS) are directly elected. Responsibilities fully devolved to Wales include education, health and culture, for instance. The *Senedd*, or the Welsh Parliament and the seat of Welsh Government, stands proud in Cardiff Bay. Welsh and English are both official languages (the Welsh Language Act (1993) and the Welsh Language (Wales) Measure (2011) enshrine this in law) and the

country has a dual education system (English and Welsh medium schools), with demand for Welsh medium education rising.

I have now called Wales my home since 2004, long before the 2008 financial crash, and before anyone would have considered the 2020 reality of Brexit a remote possibility. I have worked in the arts sector in Wales ever since and have experienced how things have changed since I first arrived. After more than a decade of UK Tory Government imposed austerity, public funding for the arts has seen reduction upon reduction, which would have been unthinkable in 2004. Local authorities, for instance, responsible for anything from schools, public toilets, care for the elderly, libraries and leisure centres, have in large parts of the country cut their arts budgets altogether, while dozens of

libraries have closed (see Ballinger 2017).

When I arrived, I came as part of my degree in *British Studies* at Humboldt Universität in Berlin and undertook a 4-month work placement with the Arts Council of Wales. I was a German European, on a fleeting visit. I have now called Wales my home for 16 years and have lived in Cardiff longer than in any other city. But I am not so sure anymore how best to describe myself or how other people might describe me. European, German, Welsh, British or a citizen of nowhere? Brexit has certainly had an impact on us migrant workers, even before it has really happened. Established concepts of identity, previously taken for granted, have shifted and despite us all having more in common than divides us, it has polarized attitudes and perceptions. I feel less British now than ever before, although I became

naturalised as a (dual) British citizen in 2017, in direct response to Brexit. I am more aware of my ‘otherness’ and will never quite be able to trust this country in the same way as I did before the 2016 referendum.

Brexit is all-encompassing and all around us. And yet, explicit cultural, artistic or literary works directly dealing with this theme are still relatively uncommon or less visible. Possibly because the shock of the referendum result and subsequent departure from the EU still sits deep. There is denial, grief, sadness and disbelief on the one hand, celebration and euphoria on the other, but also a shared uncertainty and worry about what Brexit will actually mean in practical terms.

A lot of artists focus on dealing with the general paranoia and this state of



Flags outside Senedd after Brexit - no EU Flag. © Schmitz

uncertainty in their works and this is also a looming theme in cultural and intellectual debates everywhere. The increasingly divisive discourse has also brought to the fore real xenophobic attitudes, as well as a rise in hate crime (see Quinn 2019), including incidents of racist attitudes to the use of languages other than English (see also Weaver 2020). In Wales, where Welsh is frequently spoken (predominantly in some parts of the country), this is felt very acutely by some communities, but also highlights the lack of knowledge and understanding between the UK's own home nations and its diverse inhabitants.

And yet, Brexit has also triggered an outpouring of support and solidarity with Europe, Europeans and the values associated with a post-WW2 united and peaceful existence. *Wales in Europe* have tirelessly campaigned for keeping Wales in the EU, while the Leader of Cardiff Council, Huw Thomas, has publicly declared that “Cardiff will always be a welcoming home to the tens of thousands of EU citizens who live here, and no one can take away from us the fact that we are European” (@huwthomas_Wales). Since Brexit day on 31 January 2020, the Welsh Government have also announced that they will support EU citizens with their settled status applications and will cover the costs for these. Their advice website declares: “EU citizens – we want you to stay” (Welsh Government). The *Yes Cymru* movement towards an independent Wales has also seen a surge in support, with the stated “belie[f] in an inclusive citizenship, which embraces and celebrates the fact that everyone who chooses

to make Wales their home – regardless of their background – are full citizens of the new Wales” (Yes Cymru).

There is a lot of soul-searching happening, where views conflict and opinions clash. Who represents the UK, who speaks for Wales? What does it mean to speak and use Welsh, English, Arabic, Polish, German, Mandarin or Urdu in contemporary Wales? Who decides what is and isn't representative? And why does language, nationality and identity matter so much? And why should it matter? I feel that these questions have become more urgent, more loaded and politically charged than ever before. I have reflected a lot on Stefan Zweig's writings about nationalism, identity and ‘the intellectual unity of Europe’ recently, when the world seems to be moving again in the opposite direction.

One of the most direct Brexit-related art works I have seen last year is an exhibition called ‘Go Home Polish’, shown by Ffotogallery as part of the city-wide Diffusion Festival in Cardiff.¹ It featured works by Polish photographer and artist Michal Iwanowski and chronicles his walk, on foot, from his home in Cardiff to his native Poland, after having seen the words ‘Go Home Polish’ graffitied onto a wall near his home in his adopted city. A deeply moving, thought-provoking and poignant piece of work, very much of these times.

Despite this unease and sense of uncertainty, there are examples of hope, forward-thinking policy making and initiatives of solidarity to highlight. Wales has many areas of excellence to offer, celebrate and shout about.

These are areas where Wales can perhaps offer unique learning points and inspiration to others.

Bilingualism and specifically Wales' above-mentioned legal framework (the Welsh Language Act (1993) and Welsh Language (Wales) Measure (2011)) around protecting the Welsh language and securing its future are a key aspect. How this forms part of public and civic life, as well as how this is reflected in the education sector in Wales is exemplary and something Wales can be proud of. We have a lot to offer other bi- and multilingual nations in terms of best practice in this area. Additionally, Welsh Government's strategy to roll out a new curriculum from 2022 and root the creative arts firmly in the education sector is impressive and worth celebrating.²

The fact that culture and education are devolved matters is not well-known overseas (or even in England) and I think this should be emphasised and utilised more as an asset. The harsh financial environment and increasing necessity to 'diversify income streams' and justify 'return on investment' for any arts and cultural organisation has forced a more streamlined approach to strategic planning and budgeting. Despite the challenges, it has also enabled a professionalisation and clearer focus in the arts. There are now more experts in Wales in the areas of arts and health, combined with a passionate understanding that the status quo is no longer acceptable when it comes to striving for more equality and diversity. Arts and cultural provision has to be relevant, accessible, inclusive and representative of a wider group of people and many arts organisations in Wales are

increasingly serious and innovative in making this happen, including the one I work for, Literature Wales.

Brilliant work is also being done in arts and health, arts and sport and in using arts and culture generally to meet the aims of the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015. The fact that Wales has legislation around protecting its indigenous language, as well as the wellbeing of future generations is in itself worth emphasising and many other countries might be really interested in this kind of legislation, which is unique and different from that of other parts of the UK. Very recently, Welsh Government also declared a Climate Emergency, as one of the first governments to do so. There are great examples of artists who work in an ambassadorial capacity on these key messages, including the *Poet in Residence* for the Future Generations Commissioner, Rufus Mufasa.³

Overall, Wales is a tolerant, welcoming and inclusive nation and strives for a more equal society with opportunities for all. These core values underpin a lot of current cultural activities, particularly in international contexts.

So, what of my identity living in Wales in 2020? Am I European? British? Welsh (enough)? German (still)? More than anything, I believe in our common humanity. We're in this together and we've got to find better ways and creative solutions to the bigger, global challenges. And if that makes me a citizen of nowhere, I take that anytime.



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We would all do well to remember Stefan Zweig's words, written down in his *Memories of a European* from 1942, that "all our differences and our petty jealousies must be put aside in order that we might achieve the single aim of faithfulness towards our past, and of our community-based future".

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Endnotes

- 1 For more information see <https://www.ffotogallery.org/programme/go-home-polish>.
- 2 See <https://gov.wales/education-changing> for details.
- 3 Check out Rufus Mufasa’s reading of her poem “Can’t Change Slow Got to Change Completely” at <https://futuregenerations.wales/news/cant-change-slow-got-to-change-completely-rufus-mufasa-poet-in-residence/>.