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ESSAY

"Little Bees": Difference, otherness, and exclusion in 21st-Century Europe

[version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]

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v1 **First published:** 19 Aug 2026, **6**:299
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.24677.1
Latest published: 19 Aug 2026, **6**:299
https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.24677.1

Abstract

The proposed paper discusses some works of the French philosophers Jean-Luc Nancy and Etienne Balibar on the ever so topical issues of difference, otherness and exclusion in the context of diverse, problem-ridden Europe in the 21st century. The urgency of these issues is prompted by the existing wide gap in the treatment of vulnerable people across the continent in addition to and beyond the sex-class divide.It is a gap that delineates the break between "us" and the asylum seekers, between their human rights, and the politics of the Western democracies in relation to the foreigner or the undocumented Other. A common thread in the writings of Nancy and Balibar seems to be an urgent call for basic humanity and ethical responsibility in the face of thousands of refugees who legally or illegally try to reach dream destinations in Europe only to end up very often in the hell of make-shift camps or detention centers, if they are "lucky," or else they end up washed off the shores of the Mediterranean Sea or the English Channel, or dead in refrigerator trucks and containers.

To give a literary context for the work of the two philosophers, I propose also a reading of the novel *The Other Hand/Little Bee* (2008) by the English writer Chris Cleave. What has changed since the publication of this novel in the USA and the UK? What makes it a poignant narrative of hope, suffering, indifference, and shame? Sixteen years later, does Little Bee still speak to Western readers engulfed by the problems of climate change, globalization, right-wing threat, and emotional numbness from thousands of similar real life stories? What has happened with the "world's fragile skin," to use Nancy's phrase, or with the fragile skin of Europe that we seem challenged to feel, think, and help?

Open Peer Review

Approval Status ?

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version 1 19 Aug 2026	? view

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Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

Keywords
Refugee, Asylum, Citizenship, Borders, Balibar, Nancy

This article is included in the Horizon Europe gateway.

This article is included in the The Political Novel in Europe and Migration/Exile collection.

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Author roles: Terzieva-Artemis R: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: The present research was supported by Horizon grant #101094658 for the project CAPONEU.
The funders had no role in study design, data collection and analysis, decision to publish, or preparation of the manuscript.

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How to cite this article: Terzieva-Artemis R. **"Little Bees": Difference, otherness, and exclusion in 21 st-Century Europe [version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]** Open Research Europe 2026, **6**:299 https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.24677.1

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In this essay, I want to discuss some works by the French philosophers Jean-Luc Nancy and Etienne Balibar on the ever so topical issues of difference, otherness and exclusion in the context of diverse, problem-ridden Europe in the 21st century. The relevance of these issues is prompted by the existing wide gap in the treatment of vulnerable people across the continent in addition to, and beyond, the sex-class divide. It is a gap that delineates the break between "us," Europeans, and the asylum seekers, between their human rights and the politics of the Western democracies in relation to the foreigner or the undocumented Other. A common thread in the writings of Nancy and Balibar seems to be an urgent call for basic humanity and ethical responsibility in the face of thousands of refugees who legally or, most often, illegally try to reach their dream destinations in Europe, only to end up very often in the hell of make-shift camps or detention centers – if they are "lucky" – or else, they end up washed off on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea or the English Channel, or dead in refrigerator trucks and containers.

To start off, I propose a return to a few simple definitions which have been firmly embedded in contemporary discourses on migration and exile for a long time now, yet, surprisingly, have been reinterpreted in very challenging ways by a variety of scholars, Nancy and Balibar among them: these are the very notions of "politics" and "the political." Or perhaps, I need to reverse my previous statement and say that migration and exile have been always embedded in the discourse of the political, starting with the very notion of the *polis*, of who belongs to it and who does not. From times immemorial, Nancy writes, the polis "subsumed more than politics – even though later politics reclaims as its own, or at least wants to, the totality of the polis" (2014: 9). In other words, as he writes, "'Polis' is shaken in its foundations – that which we called 'polis'. It is shaken as the 'Logos' is shaken and for the same reasons" (2014: 6).

I propose to start with these concepts as they are not only keywords in our European project "The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe" (CAPONEU), but because it seems to me that in these days of somewhat fluctuating interest in certain topics of social importance, the political continues to be an important discursive focus, although a focus with varied dimensions across the borders of different European and "third-world" countries, across the borders of race, class and gender, as well. The 20th century and the 21st century even more so require a reinterpretation of the political and, perhaps, a reinterpretation of what politics could do to deal with the ever-increasing human migration to this continent. The political then is a keyword in finding new ways to encounter the Other and, in the process, to encounter ourselves; however, the political is not going to be enough in this endeavor unless it is paired with a strong ethical insight. Nancy, for example, contends in "The Political and/or Politics,"

> (…) if our politics (*la politique*) is no longer simply and strictly that of sovereign states, then it is no longer 'politics' as we have known it for a very long time (despite the fact that we can and must analyse sovereignty in other respects). To be treated in terms of politics, the international order would require that we know how to solve the enigma of non-statist 'public right', which would also displace the idea of politics. (5)

Of course, Nancy is referring here to the politics governing the European Union, that amalgamation of sovereign "non-sovereign" states which have to deal with a long line of domestic, international, and universal problems, among which migration looms crucially on our common horizon. The optimistic reference to solving the enigma of "public right," however, relies on our ability to apply a non-statist approach because it is hardly an option to be "statists" any longer while facing to a continuous flow of migrants who are trying to escape social, ecological, and, naturally, political conditions elsewhere in the hope of building new lives for themselves … elsewhere. In these chaotic conditions, politics largely hides behind "policies" while, as Nancy goes on to say, we observe the phenomenon rather how "'politics' displaces itself, deports itself, deconstructs itself" (2014: 6). Thus, what we should do in response to this "retreat of the political (*le retrait du politique*)" is to find a way "to re-trieve the political, draw it out, trace it again in a different way" (2014: 7).

The new "different" way is not going to be easy or even in the singular for that matter. What is at stake are centuries-long traditions of demarcation of "us" and the Other, of a negation and separation which Balibar, on his side, defines as the results of the operation of three "anthropological categories" which play a significant role in that process: namely, difference, otherness, and exclusion (2005: 19). Such a negative, separatist way of thinking about the Other, the one who does not belong with us, has outgrown the psychoanalytic dyad of binary ideation "me/not me" and has turned into a litmus test for belonging or exclusion to the larger *polis.* When thinking turns into treating the Other in such a way, for Balibar it becomes a manifestation of quintessential racism, or in other words, racism as a 'normal' or 'pathological' development of institutional *community-feelings* which discriminate between 'us' and 'them', or the 'self' and the 'others', at different levels, national and supranational, such as the so-called level of 'civilizations', again with or without an explicit reference to the notion of race, and with very different ways of naming and defining 'races.' And the centrality of exclusion is associated with the prevalence of more directly political debates on the status of persons and groups within various constituencies and societies, with respect to the rights to citizenship and residence, and to normative qualifications and disqualifications, or simply to equality and liberties (2005: 20).

While Balibar clearly posits the origins of racism in a hostile differentiation embedded in the state and its official politics in relation to the Other, Nancy holds some hope that change is possible: as he says, "What we ask of politics is that it give form and visibility to the possibility of living together" (2014: 12). If the latter phrase translated from French into English prompts us to translate it once more with the Heideggerian *Mitsein*, i.e., the "Being-with" as a characteristic feature of Dasein in its multiple manifestations, we then might end up with two possibilities: one, the optimistic vein of Nancy about communal "living together" or else with the polemic view of Balibar who finds that *community-feelings* as originators of racism and the discourse of otherness whose political embodiment is the state. Note here the affective, imaginary dimension of *community-feelings* vis-à-vis any essential underlying biological differentiation. The migrant, the one who does not belong, is seen as the one who cannot be readily accommodated by this *Mitsein*, but easily accommodates the negativity of *community-feelings*, and hence could be "ex-communicated": for convenience, this could be excommunication in a camp, in a detention center, or a deportation to the country of origin or to Rwanda.

In further discussion of the politics which make such excommunication possible, Balibar dwells on specific methods for reinventing the stranger, as the title of one of his essays provocatively suggests: "Reinventing the Stranger: Walls all over the World, and How to Tear Them Down." While walls have been traditionally associated with protection against threats and invasion, they have become symbols *and* an embodiment of violence or of an obstacle that will keep the stranger, *sic* the alien, away. The walls and their embodiment in borders are a "type of pure 'discretionary' institution, which is the opposite of democracy" (2017: 30). From protection to obstruction, to the redistribution of biopower in the Foucauldian sense, the pathway that Balibar outlines is simple:

> But when the fortified border becomes supplemented and in fact merged with myriad controls and checkpoints inside the territories themselves, a qualitative change takes place, which … affects the definition of the citizen itself: it is not only, as I argued in the past, that the border becomes ubiquitous, it is more profoundly that it becomes practically indiscernible from the space "both geographic and institutional) that it encloses and protects. (2017: 30).

With this, Balibar points to something quite paradoxical that he terms the "undemocratic condition of democracy itself" or, in other words, what political theorists call "militant" or "defensive" democracies (Müller, 1253): borders, which no doubt stand for security, are in fact imposing "differentiated restrictions to this mobility, depending on the utility and the reliability of the groups and individuals concerned from the point of view of hegemonic structures," they are a "pure 'discretionary' institution, which is the opposite of democracy." (29–30).

From the physicality of borders and *community-feelings*, we then move to the treatment of those who do not belong in the polis and the imaginary creation of the triad foreigner – stranger – alien. This triad, however, exposes another inherent issue in the concept of politics: Article 13 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights "recognizes a limited right to freedom of movement across boundaries: it recognizes the right to emigrate – that is, the right to leave a country – but not the right to immigrate – the right to enter a country" (Benhabib, "Borders, Boundaries, and Citizenship," 674). As Benhabib points out,

> The Universal Declaration is silent on states' obligations to grant entry to immigrants, to uphold the rights of asylum, and to permit citizenship to alien residents and denizens. These rights have no specific addressees and they do not appear to anchor specific obligations of compliance on the part of second and third parties. Despite the cross-border character of these rights, the Declaration upholds the sovereignty of individual states. Thus a series of internal contradictions between universal human rights and territorial sovereignty are built right into the logic of the most comprehensive international law document in the world. (2005: 674).

Later documents, namely the Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951), and its Protocol (1967), are the next most important international documents dedicated to cross-border movement, yet they also fail to protect immigrants, and neither does the existence of the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees manage to hide the obvious weakness that the Convention and its Protocol are binding for signatory states only, while non-signatories (and sometimes signatories too) disregard its application. In this way, a discrepancy, a paradox, and a tension arise and persist in politics: between the sovereignty of states and the citizens' democratic attachment to them, between the borders of bounded communities, and the freedom to move, between the rights of "us" and the fewer, lesser, weaker, dubious rights of the Other. To isolate one corner of the world in relation to this, Balibar named the result "European apartheid" in his book *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* back in 2004. Did he foresee in any way that twenty years later we will be living in this apartheid, with variations, of course, but always with the same result: that the lives of the Others are exhibited on the TV screen, in an image, in a number, while politicians juggle all of these to reach an end result that reflects a lack of ethical engagement with the Other on a wider political scale. Hence, as Balibar concludes,

the new regime of biopolitics is the true marker of the modernity we live in, in which the production of "differential xenophobia" results from and is invested back into the *community-feeling* (2017: 36–38).

To give a kind of literary context for the work of Nancy and Balibar, I propose a brief analysis of the novel *The Other Hand/Little Bee* (2008) by the English writer Chris Cleave. As we expect that good literature will offer more than just political commentaries, I am looking for the ethical dimensions of the text and its messages for contemporary readers. What has changed since the publication of this novel in the USA and the UK? What makes it a poignant narrative of hope, suffering, indifference and shame? Eighteen years after its publication, does the protagonist, Little Bee, still speak to Western readers, who are engulfed by the problems of climate change, globalization, right-wing threats, and the emotional numbness resulting from listening to screens announcing thousands of similar real-life stories? What has happened with the "world's fragile skin," to use Nancy's phrase (2021), or with the fragile skin of Europe that we seem challenged to feel, think, and help today?

The novel's plot builds on a chance encounter between a Nigerian girl called Little Bee and a British couple, Sarah and Andrew, on a beach in Nigeria. While the couple is enjoying a holiday and working through their marital problems, the girl, together with her sister, are running for their lives. In an absolutely horrendous moment referred to through flashbacks throughout the novel, life is lost, violence is exercised, and souls are tainted forever, but the novel is actually about the "after," the next day, and how bearing witness to the Other's suffering demands each one to be responsible before the Other, whose experience we probably can never fully share. The Other's body of affect, of humanity incarnate, more than the body of the migrant, the refugee, the stranger, the foreigner, the alien politically defined, is exposed as absolutely necessary for my own body of affect to exist as human in this turbulent world.

As Little Bee somehow ends up in a refugee camp or a "detention center" in England, she is dreaming first of survival and then of making a safer life for herself in the aftermaths of her escape from Nigeria. Cleave's achievement is not simply to narrate what it means, but how it feels to be arrested in the gray zone of not-belonging, while facing the blanks of an uncertain future. A civilized European society which for centuries has been emblematic for its "English ways," English humor, English tea, the Queen's English, to name a few set phrases, has long been torn between preserving itself and opening up to new-comers, those from the former colonies and the new refugees. Preserving history and traditions, but also political and social stability, while encountering the Other has always been difficult for any nation. What is even more difficult is preserving an ethical relation with the Other which is "non-synthesizable par excellence – totalizing all meaning within a single knowledge – but it is also nonsymmetrical" in the sense that I am responsible for the Other without waiting for reciprocity (Savu, 91). The ethical approach, therefore, goes beyond the moral code of behavior as understood by the majority, and also beyond the "compulsion to understand the other" as Cleave says in an interview when he points out,

> I knew this was a compelling story but after agonizing over which character would be the best one to narrate it, I realized that the strongest perspective would actually be a dual one. This is the story of two worlds: the developed and the developing, and of the mutual incomprehension that sometimes dooms them to antagonism. So by taking one woman from each side of the divide, and investing each with a compulsion to understand the other, I was able to let the story unpack itself in the mind of the reader … One shouldn't underestimate the role of the reader in this novel. I wanted to write a story that was never made fully explicit; which relied on the reader's interpretation of the characters' dialogue. ("Q & A").

The novel uses two narrators, Little Bee and Sarah, who stand unapologetically for two worlds apart: the world of the comfortable suburban life, of the job at a women's magazine, and the seeming familial "happiness" that Sarah enjoys, while the other world is the world of violence back in Nigeria and the gray zone of the detention center that Little Bee lives in. This double narrative point of view is not simply a juxtaposing technique for its own sake, but creates a space for merging voices in a realistic polyphony which gives access to the voice of the protagonists as well as the voices of the secondary and accidental characters in the novel. In this way, Cleave "imagines an alternative mode to voicing the story of the selfsame subject of Western modernity" – of that unified subject of a sovereign country – vis-à-vis the encounter with the Other, which creates the opportunity for "healing, and change across the divide" (Savu 92). This is perhaps why Little Bee contemplates that "just as a girl's scars are a form of beauty because it means that she has survived, so sad stories take on a beauty of their own because they mean that their storytellers are alive" (9). In both cases, those of Sarah and Little Bee, healing is not about the forgetting and covering of traumatic memories, but about becoming vulnerable through the exposure of wounds and overcoming the past. Perhaps that is why the structure of the novel is also divided in two parts: the first one told in flashbacks and sporadic episodes in the present, while the second part moves forward towards an uncertain future, but a future after all. The novel, however, does not offer any promises of a happy ending; instead, it stages the uneasy process of a genuine ethical, most often painful, engagement with the Other, and weaves into the narrative threads of hope and new possibilities.

Despite the humorous tone, Little Bee's sense of emotional disposition can already be felt in the very first sentence of the book: "Most days I wish I was a British pound coin instead of an African girl. Everyone will be pleased to see me coming" (1). During the long detention, she has understood the complex relation between money, language, and power: "A pound coin can go wherever it thinks it will be safest … It can disguise itself as power, or property, and there is nothing more serious when you are a girl who has neither" (1).

Little Bee is introduced when she is about to be released from a fictional yet all-too-recognizable center after a two-year detention. While writing the novel, Cleave studied the available information regarding the ten such centers operating in the UK at the time. As he stated in an interview, the novel comes out of a sense of his "complicity in some of the evils in the world" and his confronting the suffering of the other through "imaging the most striking example of someone who is disposed – Little Bee – coming to ask for help from someone – Sarah – who is a bit more like me" ("Q & A"). Little Bee soon finds herself "in between our world and yours," pretty much like other refugees "floating on the oceans right now" (46). To succeed, she has to master the Queen's English, to familiarize herself with English culture, history, and government (if she only knew the kind of surprises she was in for in her day-to-day dealings with governmental agencies and agents), all sourced by a textbook for immigrants called *Life in the United Kingdom* in order to prepare for their citizenship exam. The epigraph to the novel comes from this textbook and reads: "Britain is proud of its tradition of providing a safe haven for people fleeting (sic) persecution and conflict." As Cleave observes, the typo is a "nice example of a bureaucracy that is pretending to care, but not pretending very hard." He further observes that given the qualities that asylum seekers embody – intelligence, farsightedness, motivation, resilience, and humor – they are "the people you want to have on your side. It will be a monument to our hubris if we allow ourselves to start thinking of them as a burden."

Ethics and consent

Ethical approval and consent were not required for this paper.

Data availability

"No data are associated with this article."

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Open Peer Review

Current Peer Review Status: ?

Version 1

Reviewer Report 11 September 2026

https://doi.org/10.21956/openreseurope.26740.r80713

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This essay brings Jean-Luc Nancy and Étienne Balibar into dialogue with Chris Cleave's *Little Bee* to address difference, otherness, exclusion, borders, and ethical responsibility in contemporary Europe. The discussion of Balibar is particularly useful, especially in relation to differentiated mobility, citizenship, borders, and the tension between universal human rights and state sovereignty. The manuscript, however, would benefit from further revision before its central contribution is fully established.

My main concern is the relation between the theoretical discussion and the literary analysis. Nancy and Balibar occupy most of the essay, while *Little Bee* appears relatively late and functions largely as an illustration of the ethical and political problems already outlined. The literary section needs a more sustained engagement with the novel's formal and ideological complexities. In particular, the discussion of dual narration, refugee agency, language, citizenship, detention, and the relation between Little Bee and Sarah could be developed further. The essay reads the encounter between the two protagonists primarily in terms of ethical responsibility, vulnerability, healing, and the possibility of crossing divides. A more critical consideration of the limits of this ethical framework would strengthen the argument. The manuscript might consider whether the novel also reproduces unequal relations between the refugee subject and the privileged Western subject, and whether refugee suffering can become instrumental to humanitarian self-understanding.

The relation between Nancy and Balibar also needs greater conceptual precision. Nancy is associated largely with coexistence and ethical possibility, whereas Balibar provides the stronger political vocabulary of racism, exclusion, citizenship, and borders. The essay should clarify whether these positions are complementary or whether the tensions between them are significant to its argument. The three terms foregrounded in the title – difference, otherness, and exclusion – could likewise be used more systematically throughout the analysis.

The scholarship on *Little Bee* should also be updated and expanded. The literary discussion relies heavily on Savu's 2014 article. Given that the manuscript explicitly asks what the novel means eighteen years after its publication, it should engage more recent criticism on refugee

representation, humanitarian discourse, narrative agency, and the politics of representing refugee suffering. Such engagement could help complicate the predominantly affirmative ethics-of-encounter reading developed here.

A few further points should be addressed. The manuscript moves between the terms refugee, asylum seeker, migrant, immigrant, and undocumented person without sufficient distinction, although these categories have different legal and political meanings. In particular, the statement that the Refugee Convention and its Protocol "fail to protect immigrants" needs clarification. There is also an inconsistency between "sixteen years later" in the abstract and "eighteen years" in the main text. The Cleave "Q&A" cited and quoted in the discussion should be included in the Works Cited. Finally, the essay needs a proper conclusion that returns explicitly to Nancy, Balibar, and *Little Bee* and states more clearly what the literary reading contributes to contemporary debates on European bordering and refugee exclusion.

I would therefore recommend Approved with Reservations, subject to substantive revision.

Is the topic of the essay discussed accurately in the context of the current literature?
Partly

Is the work clearly and cogently presented?
Partly

Is the argument persuasive and supported by appropriate evidence?
Partly

Does the essay contribute to the cultural, historical, social understanding of the field?
Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Critical Refugee Studies; Postcolonial Theory

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.