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Open Wounds and Physical Divisions: Pre-Brexit Visions of a Divided Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

This article frames Brexit as the consequence of social and demographic fissures running through the United Kingdom, thereby arguing that Britain's exit from the European Union is symptomatic of a specifically English rather than British crisis of national identification. It shows how such internal faultlines within the UK's society intersect with the evocation and employment of various kinds of border imagery and border discourses in the run-up to the Brexit Referendum in 2016. For the main part of the analysis, the article sets out to broaden the by now well-established genre of "BrexLit" (Shaw, Everitt) by focusing on what could be called "Pre-BrexLit," that is, novels written well before Brexit became a term, let alone political reality. By way of three exemplary texts—Julian Barnes's *England, England* (1998), Tony Saint's *Refusal Shoes* (2003), and Rupert Thomson's *Divided Kingdom* (2005)—the analysis retraces how literary accounts of how to establish, maintain and control borders—both real and metaphorical, mental and physical, external and internal—prefigure some of the divisive issues around which the Brexit struggle would revolve, while at the same time avoiding the necessarily contentious and biased labels attached to post-fact Brexit literature. (WF)

KEYWORDS: borders, Pre-BrexLit, English national identity, Julian Barnes, Rupert Thomson, Tony Saint

Introduction: the trauma of Brexit

In April 2019, Anish Kapoor published his own reflections on Britain's exit from the European Union. Titled "A Brexit, A Broxit, We All Fall Down," the image which Kapoor created for *The Guardian* (3 July 2019), shows an aerial view of the British Isles and Ireland marked by a gouging and festering wound that cuts across Great Britain from the South East to the North West. While the artist himself has refused to offer any further comment on his work, preferring to literally leave it gaping back at us, *The Guardian*'s art critic Jonathan Jones observes how Kapoor's work has, in "an attempt to psychoanalyse the British, . . . captured our morbid obsession with the futile

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chasm of Brexit, the perverse character of a nation that wants, in some sad corner of itself, to be back in the trenches" (2019).[1]

In order to provide a preliminary contextualization of my investigation of borders in pre-Brexit literature, I shall highlight three aspects in particular with regard to Kapoor's image. Most obviously, the United Kingdom depicted by Kapoor is anything but united, as the defining feature of the picture consists of a gash running right down the middle of the country, a raw and gory "trench of blood" which suggests little hope of healing anytime soon (Jones). Secondly, this dreadful cut has utterly reshaped the geography of the island as we have known it, most obviously by introducing a seemingly insurmountable barrier between the east and west of the country. Brexit, Kapoor implies, not only exposes what Jones calls the "bottomless void at the heart of Britain," but also the literal faultlines and divisions within this now riven island. And thirdly, on closer inspection one could assume that this horrible slash, which stretches roughly from the South Downs to the Forth of Clyde, seems to be an English rather than a British affliction, with Wales, Northern Ireland and (large parts of) Scotland remaining relatively unscathed.

With regard to the border imagery with which this essay will engage, one could thus argue that Brexit was not mainly concerned with solidifying and consolidating the demarcation line between the UK and the EU; it can also, to a greater degree, be ascribed to an English desire and compulsion to explain, define, and justify itself as a nation. Kristian Shaw observes, for example, that "Brexit is . . . often referred to as an English revolt or English nationalist movement, dominating the overriding perception of a Eurosceptic Britain" (59), while Dulcie Everitt notes that since the referendum, "a seismic shift has occurred towards a collective effort and desire to (re)discover the meaning of Englishness among those who consider themselves as part of the national group" (1). Fintan O'Toole likewise makes a powerful case for this view on Brexit as resulting from a particularly English identity crisis, an argument he supports by way of this rather astonishing statistic:

> When Scots and Welsh were asked to identity [sic] which layer of government had most influence over their lives, just 8 per cent and 7 per cent respectively cited the EU. This was very much typical of responses in regions throughout Europe from Bavaria to Brittany. The great exception was England, where 31 per cent of people cited the EU as the most influential layer of government . . . (190)

The presumed necessity to cut the UK off from the EU is, in O'Toole's reading, akin to a Freudian displacement activity, based on the failure to come to terms and define a proper English identity. "Unable to name the 'us' of England," O'Toole contends, "it was offered the chance to name the 'them' of the EU (and implicitly the real and imagined migrants that somehow embodied it) and took it" (191–92). Thus, eventually, the promise of cutting itself loose from the EU is "at heart, a liberation, not from Europe, but from the torment of an eternally unresolved conflict between superiority and inferiority" (8).

While Jones concludes that Kapoor's artwork depicts Brexit as an apocalyptic "trench . . . where meaning ends and reality dissolves," this essay will attempt to shed light on at least some aspects of the divisions and ruptures emergent inside the United Kingdom, divisions which have arguably not been engendered by Brexit but which the lacerating and, on occasion, even bloody disputes around it (forever linked, for instance, to the murder of Jo Cox MP) have made obvious. Taking my cue from Kapoor, I will frame Brexit as a topological engagement with fissures in and through the once United Kingdom, as a reshaping of the contours of, in this case, a specifically English rather than British national identity and geography. In this context, I will also show how the establishment of internal boundaries within the UK, which Kapoor depicts as Brexit's traumatic legacy, intersects with the evocation of various kinds of borders and border discourses in the run-up to the Brexit Referendum in 2016, with the result that Brexit has often been envisaged as a political manifestation of the hitherto concealed faultlines of English national identification. For the main part of my analysis, I will broaden the by-now well-established genre of "BrexLit" by focusing on what I suggest calling "Pre-BrexLit"—novels written well before Brexit became a term, let alone political reality.[2] By way of three texts—Julian Barnes's *England, England* (1998), Tony Saint's *Refusal Shoes* (2003), and Rupert Thomson's *Divided Kingdom* (2005)—I will show how literary accounts of establishing, maintaining, and controlling borders—both real and metaphorical, mental and physical, external and internal—prefigure, and as such contribute to historizing and contextualizing some of the divisive and trenchant issues (see Kapoor and Jones) around which the Brexit struggle would revolve. At the same time, however, this focus on BrexLit novels *avant la lettre* also constitutes an appropriate procedure precisely because these literary representations elude the influence of a standardized nexus between borders and Brexit. The novels under investigation potentially offer a new perspective on the underlying causes and preconditions behind Brexit.

What a difference four years make!—London 2012, Brexit and the borderlines of English identity

Both scholarly and literary narratives of Brexit often use the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics as their starting point. Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018), which has frequently been described as *the* state-of-the-(post-Brexit-)nation novel chronicling the political upheaval before and after the Brexit referendum in parallel with the life of protagonist Benjamin Trotter's extended family and circle of friends, thereby providing a particularly pertinent example in this regard. Watching the ceremony is one of the few moments in the novel which inspires a feeling of communality and shared delight, prompting even Doug, Benjamin's friend of yore and political pundit, to admit that "at this moment he felt proud, proud to be British, proud to be part of a nation which had not only achieved such great things but could celebrate them with such confidence and irony and lack of self-importance" (Coe 132). This sentiment of being simultaneously proud of the nation's achievements and ironically undermining this very pride, has by and large been mirrored by political, academic, and cultural critics. *The New York Times*'s reviewer Sarah Lyall was blown away by what she describes as a "slightly insane portrait of a nation" and specifically by how, with "its hilariously quirky Olympic opening ceremony . . ., Britain presented itself to the world . . . as something it has often struggled to express even to itself: a nation secure in its own post-empire identity, whatever that actually is."

At least partly, the almost universal appeal of the ceremony to its contemporary audience is, I would argue, due to the fact that Danny Boyle, Frank Cottrell-Boyce, and the creative team behind the event managed to suspend the notion of national identity as a grand narrative, as a historical pageant of the great and good, opting instead for what Catherine Baker refers to as "a 'mosaic' mode of representing the nation, which presents the nation as the sum of multiple and divergent personal biographies" (412). This triumphant exhibition of unity in and resulting from individuality and diversity—focusing on London, but very much intended to encompass the country as a whole—was the acknowledged objective of the event, as the ceremony's media guide unabashedly confirms: "This evening's ceremony celebrates the best of London's past, present and future. After centuries as a global centre for culture and commerce, London enjoys a diversity unrivalled anywhere in the world" (*Media Guide* 2012, 7).

In one dominant reading, the story of Brexit is being told as tracing a tragic trajectory from the halcyon days of inclusiveness, hilarity, and cheeky

self-deprecation of London 2012 to the bitter antagonism, vindictiveness, and utter lack of self-irony which came to surround both the referendum and the implementation of Brexit only four years down the road. Adopting Lyall's assessment of the opening ceremony, we can ask whether the opening ceremony was indeed so expressive of a confident national identity after all and if so, what was it exactly that happened in these years, which destroyed the nation's security "in its post-empire identity," eventually leading to the gaping wound which Kapoor so poignantly depicted.[3] This question has baffled, and continues to baffle, many critics, probably none more so than Frank Cottrell-Boyce, who had written the script for the ceremony and who—in a rousing article for *The Guardian*—recounts how, following the ceremony, "strangers would clasp my hand, stare into my eyes and thank me for helping them feel proud to be British, even for helping them to feel British at all." By painting "a portrait of a progressive, inclusive, innovative, funny nation stuffing an astonishing heritage into its backpack as it strode into a brilliant future," he claims, the ceremony "didn't depict a nation, it revealed it. It didn't describe Britain, it WAS Britain." Reading the subsequent "divisive orgy of fear and loathing that was the referendum campaign" as "a kind of anti-opening ceremony," Cottrell-Boyce ends his own account of the narrative arc from 2012 to 2016 with a serious and balanced inquiry into the potential reasons for this, on the whole lamentable, development. "The nation we saw in the opening ceremony and the nation we saw in the referendum are both real," he soberly notes. "One holds out the possibility of inclusion and ease. The other might be seen as a kind of scream of pain and fury that tells us how it feels to be excluded from that ease. We need to listen to both." Still, one could appropriate and slightly reverse Cottrell-Boyce's learning curve by asking whether the implosion of the self-image of Britain in all its post-imperial, diversified, inclusive, and self-mocking glory really was all that unexpected and unforeseeable if there really were, so to speak, no ominous signs on the wall.

Before retracing and maybe deciphering a few of these omens in the selected pre-Brexit novels, the question how and why borders and walls feature so prominently in the Brexit imaginary should be addressed. The most obvious case in point here is John Lanchester's novel *The Wall* (2019), which arguably represents the quintessential post-Brexit text to employ the metaphor of border control and threatened invasion,[4] with early BrexLit texts such as Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) and Zadie Smith's "Fences: A Brexit Diary" (2016) also frequently discussed in this context. In her attempt to map out the metaphorical potential of specifically geographical lines of

demarcation for defining (also a term with etymological roots in spatial differentiation) national structures of feeling after Brexit, Kirsten Sandrock highlights how "Brexit invites closer attention to the long history of hegemonic spatial politics that have shaped the nation" (142), arguing further that "borders exist everywhere where people of different geographical, cultural, or ideological backgrounds come together, and where this meeting leads to a clash of worldviews" (141). Coe's *Middle England* provides a literary illustration of this perspective when it notes how the citizens of the UK "might be living cheek-by-jowl in the same country, but they also lived in different universes, and these universes were separated by a wall, infinitely high, impermeable, a wall built out of fear and suspicion and even—perhaps—a little bit of those most English of all qualities, shame and embarrassment" (90).

Following Sandrock, I suggest that Brexit should be envisaged as "a semiotic space where border thinking can arise" (147). Let me pinpoint the most significant aspects of this form of "border thinking," which I would propose to call the "standard model of Brexit and borders": this model typically involves two separate but closely related arguments which pertain respectively to the dual purpose a border traditionally serves: first, it helps to keep different groups of people apart from one another, and secondly, it helps to deny certain groups or individuals access to the space within. The prerogative of how, and to what aims, to apply this model can be seen as more than just an academic exercise. Tim Oliver claims that Brexit, on the one hand, confronted "the UK with a series of questions and debates about its identity, society, political economy, trade, security, international position, constitution, legal system, sovereignty, unity, party politics and the attitudes and values that define it" (1), while, at the same time, also with the "lack [of] a clear narrative, making the fight to define that narrative the defining issue of UK politics" (101). If we accept this, then the discursive depiction of borders, which draws attention to and contends or reinforces various formations and mechanisms of internal and external exclusion, plays an important part in determining this narrative of Brexit.

Walls function to keep people apart, and walls and fences in the context of Brexit recurringly function as signs of a variety of internal rifts, along the lines of age, education, income, place of residence, among others, which the result of the Brexit Referendum has presumably helped to throw into sharper relief, and which David Goodhart has famously summarized as "two tribes," which he labels "Anywheres and Somewheres" with "Anywheres making up 20 to 25 per cent of the population, compared to

around half for Somewheres (and the rest Inbetweeners)" (4). More precisely, Goodhart claims that Brexit has contributed to a shift in demographic allocation, from the traditional socio-economic categories toward more lifestyle-oriented forms: "The old distinctions of class and economic interest have not disappeared but are increasingly over-laid by a larger and looser one—between the people who see the world from Anywhere and the people who see it from Somewhere" (3). And, of course, there is an abundance of statistics and diagrams which bear out this apparently "central divide in British society" (19), which Oliver summarizes succinctly, but with a certain lack of differentiation, by stating that "the average Leave voter left school before the age of 17, was above the age of 44, had few if any educational qualifications, worked in a less-secure, low-income job, lived in an area that had not seen high levels of immigration, identified themselves strongly as English and held an authoritarian-leaning political outlook" (84–85). Bearing in mind the assumption that Brexit is, by and large, the result of a psycho-pathological failure of England to properly define itself (see O'Toole and Shaw above) and in view of the etymological root of the word "define" in Latin *fines*, meaning border, it should come as no surprise that the symbolic representation of borders, and their physical manifestations as walls, fences, and other demarcation lines, has by now been established as one of the axiomatic characteristics of any analysis of BrexLit.

This "border thinking" gains additional dimensions when we turn to the second function that borders conventionally serve in the standard model. They serve to symbolize one of the central political issues underlying the Brexit campaigns, that of British sovereignty, in particular the kind of sovereignty which is epitomized by "taking control" of one's own external borders and so being able to decide who, and under which circumstances, is allowed to cross the (national) border. O'Toole again provides a helpful context to this when he analyzes how the rhetoric and image of a threatened "invasion" was being employed in the run-up to the Referendum, most fiendishly so in the UK Independent Party's infamous "Breaking Point" campaign. In tune with his underlying interpretation of Brexit, O'Toole asserts that the idea of invasion serves as "a structure of feeling that unites the two great neuroses—encompassing the unfinished psychic business of *both* the Second World War *and* the end of Empire." Seen in this light, "invasion," as a metaphor for the forceful and hostile penetration of one's own national borders, "does crucial work for Brexit: it fuses the war, the end of Empire, immigration and the EU into a single image" (92).[5] The presumed threat to both the impenetrability of national borders and the integrity of

national identity inherent in the notion of invasion can therefore be seen as one more indicator for the tenuous and painstaking attempt to define what it means to be English, or, as Everitt puts it: "Once again, the overlap between a declining Empire and the lack of a cohesive English identity leads to an almost desperate and morally void quest to unify the nation" (25).

Re-arranging Britain: Renegotiating borders in literature before Brexit

In order to investigate how literature has reflected this "void quest to unify the nation," let me now turn to novels written well before Brexit became an issue, but which still, to varying degrees, prefigure some of the notions and political consequences of Brexit, and which I would, following Everitt, tentatively propose to classify as "Pre-BrexLit" (63–112). It is arguably still too early to establish any clear-cut formal or thematic categories or classifications for this vast and potentially undeterminable body of works. One uniting feature, however, is that these texts, as Everitt argues, "provide vital insight into how Englishness is portrayed in literary texts in the two decades leading up to the Brexit referendum" (64) and thus, these texts also potentially offer a more unreconstructed view of the underlying causes and preconditions of the Brexit border imagery and thereby challenge some of the assumptions about the role and significance of borders—real as well as imaginary—in the post-referendum debates around Brexit.

The quintessences of a nation: Julian Barnes's *England, England*

The connections to Brexit with regard to Julian Barnes's *England, England* seem to be quite tenuous at first glance, but I still agree with Shaw, who argues that it "provides a frighteningly accurate foreshadowing of the post-Brexit fallout" (69). Everitt likewise points out the significance of Barnes's text in this context, claiming that "this novel is extremely valuable, and almost prophetic, in its engagement with Englishness, isolationism, and the invocation of history and myths as a tool of manipulation, making it central to the BrexLit discussion" (64). I argue that this text is of particular relevance when it comes to depicting the instability of England's national borders as well as English national identity, lamenting as it does, according to Nick Bentley, "the belief that we cannot access an authentic place of origin, whilst it simultaneously critiques those who celebrate the fact" (494).

The novel's plot departs from the assumption that England in its current, that is, late twentieth-century shape and form is not really fit for the purposes and demands of a consumer capitalist society at the brink of the twenty-first century. As one character in the novel pithily puts it: "So England

comes to me, and what do I say to her? I say, 'Listen, baby, face facts. We're in the third millennium and your tits have dropped'" (Barnes 37). In order to rectify this, to lift the tits, as it were, a businessman by the name of Jack Pitman comes up with the rather ingenious idea of radically redrawing the geographical map and recreating the gist of all that is considered to be English as a theme-park within the practical, and tourist-friendly, dimensions of the Isle of Wight. This is achieved by, for example, simply referring to the Isle of Wight's own Whitecliff Bay as the new White Cliffs of Dover or rebranding Osborne House as Buckingham Palace. On the back of Pitco's (Sir Jack's company) apparently inexhaustible financial means, and assisted by Martha Cochrane, the novel's protagonist, this theme-park version of England is put in place with breath-taking speed and efficiency, with the result that the replica, which is named "England, England," quickly becomes much more successful than the original, both in terms of economic revenue and with regards to its international reputation, to the point even that it eventually assumes England's former role on the global stage, while Old England renames itself "Anglia" and swiftly degenerates into a pre-industrial backwater.

Barnes's novel has been thoroughly analyzed from a large number of critical approaches already,[6] so I will concentrate here on how its redrawing of the political and geographical landscape of England prefigures some of the fissures subsequently exposed by Brexit. First, and rather generally speaking, *England, England* offers an obvious illustration for the assumption that national identity, and the "imagined community" it supposedly implies, to borrow Benedict Anderson's words (1983), are, and cannot be anything but an artificial and retrospective construction.[7] The vulnerability of this construction is based in equal measure on the unreliability of personal as well as collective memory, which in turn makes it prone to being used or misused for a variety of political and cultural purposes (as the instrumentalization of the insularity and invasion metaphor in the Leave-campaign would forcefully demonstrate). Firmly incorporated as it is into the logic of the "pure market state" of the theme-park "England, England" (183), this endeavor to display "Englishness as a series of signifiers" (Bentley 486) ultimately has the effect that these signifiers are literally consumed beyond recognition and become disinvested of any actual power of signification and identification. This is illustrated not least by the fates of both Sir Jack, who becomes replicated and impersonated after his death and ends up as just another tourist attraction in his own theme park, and Martha, who eventually loses her belief in the power of the simulation and resettles in Anglia, where she encounters a different

form of collective identification which, according to Dominic Head, symbolizes "a more positive construction of Englishness, rooted in humility" (17). In contrast to Anglia's humble and non-profit-oriented form of communal identification, what reigns supreme in "England, England" is cynicism and materialism, from which a "cruel nostalgia emerges that testifies to the impossibility of recapturing these fetishized artefacts and traditions—their very presence betray[ing] their absence" (Shaw 65). Consequently, the redrawn geographical and communal boundaries of this "fast-forward version of Englishness" (Mergenthal) which Barnes evokes in *England, England* can also be cited as evidence that any attempt to determine, control, and willfully manipulate this constructed identity will very likely end in failure and desperation.

In the novel, this failure to establish an inclusive and satisfactory form of (English) national identification is squarely laid at the door of a rampant postmodern consumer capitalism, since every interaction of the inhabitants/visitors of the theme-park with the signifiers of national identity on display there is solely aimed at generating economic revenue. While this makes *England, England* in its original context something like a state-of-the-nation-under-capitalism novel, I would like to highlight in particular two passages in the book, which reflect in their own way specific chapters from the Brexit narrative. The first concerns the process by which "England, England" gains its independence from Old England, its very own Isle-of-Wexit if you will. To keep this procedure on the straight and narrow, the historically authentic purchase of the Isle of Wight by England's king Edward I in 1293 is investigated and declared "manifestly dubious and quite possibly illegal" by the team of barristers employed by Pitco (126). This royal scheme is then—and here the parallels with Brexit set in—styled into an elitist "fraud on simple folk to whom the treaty had never been properly explained" (171). The move towards independence is thus justified as a case of "us" (the ordinary people) holding their own against "them" (the ruling elite), with the eventual consequence that "a bright and modern patriotism . . . engendered a proud new insularity" (203). Arguably, this kind of pretend class-bias prefigures certain aspects of how the Leave campaign were to attempt, successfully to all accounts and purposes, to construct a vote for Leave as a signal of resistance against a ruling, leftist, liberal, out-of-touch elite, thus deploying to great effect the idea that England as a nation is, and always has been, divided by invisible borders of class, worldview, and privilege.[8]

My second example of how *England, England* prefigures Brexit concerns the fate of Old England, which, after being made politically and,

more importantly, economically redundant, eventually finds itself on the wrong side of border controls:

> [T]here were enough documents leaking from Brussels and Strasbourg to confirm that many high officials regarded Old England less as a suitable case for emergency funding than as an economic and moral lesson: it should be portrayed as a wastrel nation and allowed to continue in free-fall as a disciplinary example to the overgreedy within other countries. Symbolic punishments were also introduced: the Greenwich Meridian was replaced by Paris Mean Time; on maps the English Channel became the French Sleeve.
>
> Mass depopulation now took place. Those of Caribbean and Subcontinental origin began returning to the more prosperous lands from which their great-grand-grandparents had once arrived. Others looked to the United States, Canada, Australia and continental Europe; but the Old English were low on the list of desirable immigrants, being thought to bring with them the taint of failure. Europe, in a sub-clause to the Treaty of Verona, withdrew from the Old English the right to free movement within the Union. Greek destroyers patrolled the Sleeve to intercept boat people. After this, depopulation slowed. (251–52)

Especially the final image of migrants from England being intercepted by Greek patrol boats renders this a very interesting intertext and counterpoint to John Lanchester's novel *The Wall*. What unites these two novels apart from their bleak and dystopian setting and outlook is that they illustrate the consequences of defining too unequivocally the confines (both spatial and notional) within which national identification is allowed to take place, thereby rendering national identity into a static and firmly determined and delineated provision rather than a potentially malleable process of becoming, such as depicted in the London-2012 Opening Ceremony.

Border control in Tony Saint's *Refusal Shoes*

The maintenance and control of Britain's external border, which Barnes satirically reverses in the passage just quoted, takes center stage in Tony Saint's *Refusal Shoes* from 2003. Unlike *England, England*, this novel does not present a dystopian future scenario of meaningless and cruelly nostalgic Englishness but is very much situated in the brutal reality of the here-and-now. Saint can claim to write from an unusually knowledgeable perspective when it comes to the policing of borders, insofar as he had worked for the UK Immigration Service (as it was known until its suspension in 2007) for

ten years before publishing his novel. The story, with its somewhat preposterous murder plot, involving a murderous gang of "'illegal" Chinese immigrants and the narrator's quest to uncover the systemic corruption inside the Force which enables their criminal activities, is clearly and pointedly fictional. Its setting, however, can claim a certain kind of informed authenticity and realism concerning its milieu and its protagonists who, as Immigration Officers (IOs) at Heathrow's Terminal C, quite literally embody, "weather-beaten but unbowed" as the novel has it (20), the borderline that the UK as a country has put in place to regulate who is admitted in and who is not.

Throughout the novel, everyday work at Terminal C is described in terms of a battle to stem the presumed "tide of illegal immigrants" who stop at nothing to cheat their way into the safety of Britain's supposedly lavish social benefit system. This self-stylization as Britain's "last line of defence" (20) has profound consequences for the "work ethic"—for want of a better word—of the officers in charge of policing the border. In view of the way the physical boundary of the UK, which it is their responsibility to protect, is conceived as a "trench" in a "stand-off" (78) against both illegal immigrants and the supposed bleeding-heart do-gooders who support them, it is small wonder that the IOs on the whole are not too much bothered with the nuances of Immigration Law and how it might be interpreted for the benefit of their customers. Instead, the prestige and position of the individual IO is the direct result of their refusal statistics and/or ingenuity, not to say preposterousness, of the reasons they can conjure up to refuse entry. This semi-official policy is conveyed to Henry Brinks, the novel's protagonist, in no uncertain terms by his superior, who informs him that "You are paid to refuse people. You're not refusing people, you're not doing your job" (192). That the EU, of which the UK was at this point still a subscribing and largely unquestioned member state with its policy of freedom of movement, is seen to be contributing to, and being part of, the problem of illegal immigration is repeatedly expressed in the novel: Henry relates that his colleague "Ken's darkest day came when we joined the Common Market, the day when Frogs and Eye-ties, not to mention your Dagoes, your Krauts, your Bubble and Squeaks, could walk into the country with a barrowful of bow ties and give him two fingers on the way. When European Community citizens became exempt from immigration control, a little piece of Ken died" (51).

There is, I think, no need to stress the direct line that connects this form of border control with UKIP's "Breaking Point" campaign. What I would like to stress, however, is the recurrent invocation of the IOs working

environment as "the real world," a place where "people are segregated by nationality *only*," (48; emphasis in the original). Like Barnes's reference to "a fraud on simple folk," this very much anticipates the Leave-campaign's summoning of the ideological separation between "ordinary decent citizens" on one side and a presumed elite of privileged, out-of-touch liberals on the other, whose concerns are with the symbolic politics rather than the hard reality of immigration: "Just as the Home Office is out to discredit as many asylum seekers as possible," Henry remarks at one point, "so Miriam Cooper Associates maintain that everyone is a genuine refugee. Thus the trenches are dug and two equally absurd brands of moral indignation stand off" (78). In his novel, Saint does his level best to demonstrate that this "reality," where "hatred is the only thing we *do* have in common" (49; emphasis in the original), is a place which ferments mutual aversion, tribal thinking as well as all sorts of appalling behavior, thereby foreshadowing the apparently unbridgeable and inappeasable separation into the two distinct "tribes" of Leavers and Remainers that seemed to dominate how Britain was seen from abroad, and arguably to a large extent, how it saw itself, in the wake of the 2016-referendum.

What makes Saint's novel particularly interesting is that it can serve as a poignant and bitter illustration for the claim, voiced most compellingly by O'Toole, that the seemingly clearcut antagonism of the "us" of the legal citizens of the UK against those "Others" who are threatening the integrity of its borders (any "illegal immigrants" as much as the EU, whose open-border policies are very much seen as responsible for allowing them 'in') is undercut by an equally strong and irreconcilable division *within* the United Kingdom. For, as much as the Immigration Officers can be said to present a united front of suspicion, hatred and naked abuse against what they perceive and define to be illegal immigrants, there exist at the same time equally disdainful and obnoxious faultlines within the ranks. Following the internalized logic that "nationality" is the standard measure of identity, these run in equal, and perhaps even stronger, measure between the different nations within the UK, the notional "borders" of which are maintained by strategies of othering similar to those between the citizens of the UK and the immigrants. When Henry describes one of the senior officers, Sandy, as a "quintessential hard-drinking, hard-smoking, fat-sucking Caledonian" who "is a big wheel in the Jock Squad and is revealed for the contempt in which he holds his own organs and his loathing for foreigners, particularly the English" (96), Saint aptly illustrates that the strategies of othering involved in establishing the borderlines between "us" and "them" are by no means

restricted to the color of your passport. Paraphrasing O'Toole, one could argue that the IOs' uncompromising and often blatantly inhumane and unconstitutional treatment of the illegal immigrants can, at least to an extent, be seen as a displacement activity which can only scantily paper over the clannish cracks within the different parts and nations of the United Kingdom itself. On a rather superficial level, one could draw the conclusion from *Refusal Shoes* that a glorification, not to say fetishization, of external borders and their rigorous monitoring is indicative of internal boundaries, which do not appear as obvious or manifest as the external one, and which are therefore both harder to identify and more difficult to police. Or, in other words, maybe external and internal borders are two symptoms of the same underlying condition and any attempt to keep them apart only serves to blur the boundaries even further.

Divisions of temperament: Rupert Thomson's *Divided Kingdom*

The shifting focus towards the internal rifts inside the UK after Brexit is anticipated and fleshed out in extensive detail in the final literary pre-BrexLit example, which, like *England, England,* comes in the form of an imaginative and dystopian reorganization of the parameters by which national identification conventionally happens. The borders that divide the once United Kingdom in Rupert Thomson's novel *Divided Kingdom* (first published in 2005) are, however, of an entirely different nature. The demarcation lines they signify are, on the surface, not to do with political, racial, or economic separation; instead, they symbolize and unite different character traits. Like many other Pre-BrexLit novels (including *England, England*, or James Hawes's *Speak for England*),[9] *Divided Kingdom* also starts with the assumption that all is not well with the current state of Great Britain, a condition summarized as follows by the protagonist's teacher:

> [Britain] had become a troubled place, she said, obsessed with acquisition and celebrity, a place defined by envy, misery and greed. Crime was rampant: the courts swamped, the prisons overflowing. Divorce followed marriage as quickly and predictably as teenage pregnancies followed puberty. Homeless people slept in every doorway, ditch and underpass. Racism was more widespread and more firmly rooted than ever before. Violence lurked round every corner. . . . For decades, if not for centuries, the country had employed a complicated web of manners and conventions to draw a veil over its true nature, but now, finally, it had thrown off all pretense to be anything other than it was—northern, inward-looking, fundamentally barbaric.
>
> (Thomson 7)

To counter this sorry state of the nation, the so-called Rearrangement has been enforced: a measure introduced by the government of the day to contend with what they define as the continuing moral, economic, and social decline that had apparently been prevalent at the time. As the deplorable state of affairs has been diagnosed to be a consequence of repeated clashes of apparently mismatched character dispositions, a drastic and ingenious solution is found: the UK is carved up into four different countries, which are only referred to by their colors (red, blue, green, and yellow), with each representing one of the four traditional humors (sanguine, phlegmatic, melancholic, and choleric), which for the best part of Western medical history, have been taken to be constitutive of the human individual's disposition. Overnight, the entire population is re-located to the country which best corresponds to their own individual disposition, a sledgehammer approach to demographic and social engineering which, in an eerie anticipation of Kapoor's image, has generated borders that "often had the look of a stitched wound" (59), but which all the same has resulted in twenty-seven years of relative peace and stability, at least according to its creators (80).

The novel's plot revolves around one Thomas Parry, who was a young child at the time of the Rearrangement and who in the course of the book embarks on a picaresque journey through the different parts of the now Divided Kingdom, a quest to recapture memories of his lost childhood and, by association, his own real self. Although his voyage of self-discovery is remarkable in itself, the implications the radical spatial reorganization of Britain can have for thinking about Brexit are to be highlighted. First of all, it needs to be emphasized that the novel's terms and practices of spatial separation can be understood as a simplification and absolutization of the inherently contingent and endlessly nuanced thing, that is, the individual human character, as evident in this description of the physical manifestation of these, as it were, metaphysical foundations of division: "Throughout the divided kingdom the walls of concrete blocks had been reinforced with watch-towers, axial crosses and even, in some areas, with mine-fields, which rendered contact between the citizens of different countries a physical impossibility" (24). The physical maintenance of the—once metaphysical—borderlines in this rearranged kingdom has rendered any form of exchange or interaction between the four states and their inhabitants well-neigh impossible, which means that everybody can, or much rather, is forced to live happily and uncontestedly in their own dispositional bubbles.

Even though, as Shaw points out, *Divided Kingdom* might also speak to contemporary "fears surrounding turn-of-the-century devolutionary reforms from an English perspective" rather than addressing or prefiguring the UK's temperamental separation from the EU (139), this enforced streamlining and equalization of individual personal characteristics and disposition offers at least some parallels to the aftermath of Brexit, when the individual voter's decision, influenced as it undoubtedly was by a very idiosyncratic and nuanced rationale in each individual case, came to be represented as a subscription to one of two opposing and mutually exclusive world-views, the "tribes" of Anywheres and Somewheres, which Goodhart identifies as essential for marking the individual's decision for or against Brexit (7). Until the very end of the novel, Thomas fails to fully acknowledge this ambiguous nature of the borders as being both protective and prescriptive at the same time, but the language he uses reveals that even though he himself presumably feels very much at home in his sanguine body and country, the sheer existence of the walls testifies to the fact that he—and the entire kingdom—is nevertheless not quite at one with himself:

> During my early twentieth I was gripped by the sense of history that emanated from such places [formerly used bridges; WF]; they were like abandoned gateways, entrances to forgotten worlds. Also, of course, I felt that I had stumbled on a physical embodiment of my own experience. There were bridges down inside me too. There was the same sense of brutal interruption. (69)

If we ask what this spatial rearrangement of the UK can tell us about the use and function of borders in more general terms, arguably the novel shows that borders, even when they work according to plan, as they undoubtedly do in *Divided Kingdom*, do not so much reflect a given socio-political or cultural *status quo* (as the IOs in *Refusal Shoes* would very likely argue), but rather, function as a means to constitute and preserve this presumed *status quo*.

Consequently, what I do want to challenge in the present analysis is the way in which both the deployment of borders and border thinking as a symbolic representation of Brexit is threatening to become a cliché in and by itself, an easy, maybe too easy, shortcut which solidifies and thus perpetuates such demarcations instead of putting them to the test. I argue that the borders we use as symbols for social division might not be self-fulfilling prophecies in themselves, insofar as they shape and uphold the self-image as well as the hetero-stereotype of those inside and outside of them.[10] This is an insight that

even Thomas eventually arrives at in *Divided Kingdom*, and this realization marks the end of his journey to enlightenment. His job for the Government provides him with the rare chance to cross into other countries. On a business trip to Aquaville, the capital of the blue, that is, phlegmatic part of the kingdom, he initially is forced to acknowledge that the reductive strategies of othering that have helped to maintain his own sense of humoral superiority are somewhat deficient and that "the reality of the Blue Quarter [is] more subtle and complex than I'd been led to believe" (71). Finally he even comes to entertain the possibility that the "famous differences" deployed to justify the partitioning of the kingdom could be no more than "convenient fictions" (153) brushing over the sense of a "divided kingdom [which] was united after all, by one thing: longing" (236), a longing for transcending precisely those artificially imposed boundaries that have kept it in its static state for so long. What the novel thus suggests is that Britain's borders are mere fictions, which—just like the convenient, straightforward, and often undifferentiated narratives that have too often been spun out of, and around, Brexit—tend to simplify and escalate divisions instead of acknowledging and embracing the idiosyncratic individual disposition in every individual and every voter.

As this sentiment presents a suitable conclusion for my argument, let me finish on a rather different note. Although bringing Brexit and the Covid-pandemic together may not seem innovative, I argue that this link has the potential to shed new light on the issues of borders and their transcendence. After all, one of the endlessly repeated facts about the virus has been its apparent disregard for any kind of border, as it has been able to effortlessly penetrate even the most rigorous line of national defense. On the other hand, however, the pandemic has also helped to reveal and strengthen new demarcation lines that have resulted from Brexit, be they external—as in the case of the vaccination disputes between the UK and the EU—or internal, as in the case of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic. It is, of course, too early to say if and how the pandemic has the potential to eradicate, solidify or challenge both real political borders and the imaginary faultlines within Britain. If the representation of borders in the Pre-BrexLit examples in this article is anything to go by, however, we should at any rate refrain from accepting any too convenient fictions about them.

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Notes

1 Kapoor's image as well as Jones's comments on it can be found at https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/apr/03/anish-kapoor-brexit-artwork-britain-edge-abyss. Web. 30 Sept. 2022.

2 For the most comprehensive overview of the BrexLit genre, see Shaw (2021), who is also generally credited with coining the term BrexLit, Everitt (2021), and Eaglestone (2018).

3 For a more critical reading of the Opening Ceremony, see Karschay (2019).

4 *The Wall* imagines the entire island of Great Britain as engirdled by a wall "ten thousand kilometers long, more or less [with] a watch house every three kilometers: three thousand-plus of them" (Lanchester 2018, 14) and every citizen of the realm required to do two years of service defending this wall against any incursions from without.

5 This potential threat of invasion could fall on such fertile ground during the Leave campaign due to its long-established currency in English literary and cultural discourse. Most famously perhaps, "This sceptred isle" readily lent itself to being ideologized by Shakespeare's John of Gaunt in *Richard II* as a "fortress built by Nature for her self," implying that its borders are comparatively easy to define and defend, a time-honored misconception accentuated by the complexities of, for example, the post-Brexit status of Northern Ireland.

6 For a discussion of Barnes's novel in terms of its re-definition of Englishness, see Nünning (2001), Bentley (2007) and Everitt (2021, 64–82). For an analysis of the authenticity of the project, see Miracky (2004) and Funk (2015, 107–22).

7 The creators' main guideline for what aspects or markers of English identity to include in the theme park consists of the top 50 results of a survey among the public about the "quintessences of England" (Barnes 1998, 83–85), which is unsurprisingly topped by the "Royal Family," but also features somewhat more startling entries such as "Untrustworthiness" (33) or "Flagellation/Public Schools" (48).

8 The most infamous case in point here is probably the Enemies-of-the-People headline on the cover of the *Daily Mail* (Nov. 2016), which blamed the judges of the High Court of England and Wales for not following the will of the people when they ruled that Parliament had to be consulted and must consent to the triggering of Article 50.

9 For a more comprehensive account of this hilarious example of pre-BrexLit, see Berberich (2009), Funk (2012) and Palitzsch (2012).

10 Christine Berberich helpfully addresses this potential blind spot in the specific context of BrexLit when she claims that "it is probably unlikely that a convinced Leave voter

will pick up and read a BrexLit novel, most of which are at least covertly anti-Brexit and urge for multiculturalism and inclusion. Hence, much of the literary production *could*, potentially, further contribute to the already rampant division in the country, with the Remainers reading BrexLit for confirmation of their own opinions and Leavers eschewing it for contradicting them" (2019, 156; emphasis in the original).

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