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Introduction

In the Shallows of National Identity

Ina Habermann and Daniela Keller[1]

After 23 June 2016 when a slight majority decided that Britain should pursue a future outside of the European Union, and several exit deadlines had come and gone, Britain officially left the EU on 31 January 2020. Brexit, however, is still far from 'done' as negotiations between the UK and the EU may continue until 31 December 2020 (when the so-called transition phase is set to end), and possibly beyond that date.[2] Apart from the political and economic consequences likely to ensue, it is equally hard to fathom the cultural reverberations that this cut from the Continent will create. Several critics have argued that Brexit has always been less about the economy than about (national) identity (Bogdanor 18; see also Henderson et al. 643) and culture

[1] The editors would like to thank all contributors to this volume, the peer reviewers, the copy editor Alexandre Fachard, our student assistants Alexandra Grasso and Melanie Löw, the English seminar librarian Mario Piscazzi, and Sabina Horber and Martin Heusser for the cover design.

[2] The EU and the UK are finding it hard to dovetail their interests. As Chris Morris reported on 23 July 2020, trade negotiations will continue up to a point when the "pressure of time" will force both sides to take concrete decisions. A particular challenge is presented by the fact that "[u]sually if trade negotiations fail, things stay as they are. In this case, though, a breakdown in talks will lead to sudden and substantial changes in the economic relationship between the UK and the EU" (Morris). Among the most knotty issues are the Irish border, fishing rights, and the acceptance of standards designed to ensure a 'level playing field' in future trade relations and economic competition.

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(Donington 129; Eaglestone 1; Habermann, Introduction 2). Despite the many uncertainties, however, it is undisputed that Brexit has not only produced a rift between the United Kingdom and mainland Europe, but that it has also reignited debates about nation and identity *within* the United Kingdom and the British Isles (see, for instance, Bogdanor 20).

There are straightforward legal and political reasons for this. Firstly, Scotland and Northern Ireland voted Remain, whereas Wales and England supported Leave, but because "84% of the United Kingdom's population" live in England, "the vote to leave in England outweighed substantial Remain majorities in Scotland (62.0%-38.0%) and Northern Ireland (NI) (55.5%-44.6%)" (Henderson et al. 631).[3] The referendum, therefore, forces two nations within the United Kingdom to accept an outcome that they did not vote for, which underlines that "Brexit was made in England" (631; see also Kenny et al. 5). This is a fact that the devolved nations, such as Scotland, have not been hesitant to point out, because a second reason why they feel resentful about the Brexit outcome is that they might lose part of their current autonomy. As Neal Ascherson highlights,

> Scottish governments and agencies have spun a dense web of connections to the EU over twenty years of devolution, often to the irritation of Whitehall which constantly reminds Holyrood that only the UK government has the right to conduct negotiations with the Commission. (73-74)

Hence, it is not surprising that Scotland worries over the UK's "Power Grab" (73), as laws and agreements fall back into the hands of the UK Parliament based in London (see also Kenny et al. 11; Keating 44).

Brexit is a highly complex endeavour, not least because the United Kingdom is a union of divided parts much like the EU itself (Keating 40), and has to satisfy its four nations (and its overseas territory, Gibraltar) as well as find a consensus with the EU member states. As we propose to show in what follows, there is a considerable clash between the Leave camp's arguments urging simplicity and homogeneity, and the actual realities of difference, complexity, and chaos. This is reflected

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[3] Gibraltar should be mentioned here, too, as 95.9% of its population voted to remain (Ballantine Perera 79). Although Gibraltar is a British overseas territory, it faces similarly challenging prospects as Northern Ireland, since it shares a border with an EU nation (Spain). For more information on Gibraltar, which has often been overlooked in Brexit debates, see Habermann, "British-European Entanglements" and "Gibraltarian Hauntologies"; Sanchez.

both in the treacherous banality of the referendum itself as a choice between 'in' or 'out,' and by meaningless, pseudo-clear slogans such as Theresa May's 'Brexit means Brexit.' In fact, Brexit means many things. Among them, as Maurice Fitzpatrick points out in this volume with reference to a Sinn Féin campaign, 'Brexit means Borders.' In October 2019 it was decided that the border between the UK and the EU would run down the Irish Sea and not between the North and South of Ireland. But Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been reluctant to admit that in this case there would have to be border checks between Northern Ireland and Great Britain (O'Carroll), thus elegantly evading – and appearing to downplay – the difficulties that Brexit entails. According to Lisa O'Carroll, Johnson had initially even advised companies that if they were required to "fill in extra paperwork, they should telephone the prime minister 'and I [Boris Johnson] will direct them to throw that form in the bin.'" Another disarmingly simple and straightforward way to 'get Brexit done' – one is inclined to say – in answer to far more complex queries and conundrums. In line with this somewhat cavalier approach, the British Government proposed an Internal Market Bill, accepted in the House of Commons in September 2020, that is designed to go back on the promise of avoiding a hard border in Ireland. Opponents of this bill, including senior Tories, argued that this unilateral change to the withdrawal agreement effectively constituted a breach of international law, while Johnson is suspected widely to have voted for the withdrawal agreement in the first place 'with his fingers crossed.'

Despite such belated and highly controversial attempts at preserving the unity of the United Kingdom, Brexit is driving wedges between its nation-states. This is perhaps discursively compensated for by such bold ideas as building a bridge (or a tunnel) between Northern Ireland and Scotland (BBC).[4] But even a grand symbolic gesture and physical connection such as a bridge between nations cannot mend the far deeper rifts and the challenges to a common identity that are not only defined by physical or geographical circumstances but also, most crucially, by culture. Building such a bridge will not change the fact that a large number of Leave voters, according to a Channel 4 survey conducted in November 2018, were "not at all concerned" if Northern Ireland left the United Kingdom to re-unite with the Republic of Ireland (O'Toole 62), just as the Eurotunnel did not reduce Euroscepticism (see Redford).

[4] Although this idea has not been investigated further by the government, it is nevertheless kept on the table by Boris Johnson as he remarked that the bridge is a "very interesting idea" (qtd. in BBC). Others have proposed building a tunnel instead (Carrell).

The English Channel's example shows that the construction of material links such as bridges and tunnels will not automatically overcome borders of the mind. In fact, a focus on the sea highlights the paradoxical and ideological nature of the whole discourse: the existence of the English Channel supposedly proves that the British are separate from continental Europe, while the Irish Sea is no impediment to a United Kingdom that includes Northern Ireland, just as there can be a special friendship with the US across the Atlantic Ocean, and a Commonwealth that spans the Seven Seas. Many advocates of Brexit systematically overstate a selective geographical evidence for separation, at the same time downplaying the fault lines within Britain.[5]

Likewise, they insinuate that 'nation' and 'identity' can be defined in a simple manner – the former as geographical space and the latter as citizenship, for instance. No attempt will be made here to summarize the extensive critical debates surrounding these highly charged terms; for the present purpose it suffices to recall that they are not essentialist and self-evident, but always constructed, mediated, and entangled with "'fuzzy' phenomena such as cultural myths, narratives and images which circulate in literature, travel writing, films and other media" (Habermann, Introduction 2). While Brexit is driving a wedge between the different nations making up the UK, the notion of identity, which comprises a wide range of intersectional social categories such as age, class, ethnicity, or gender, is now employed in a divisive manner to explain the Brexit vote. In her contribution to this volume, Victoria Allen quotes social geographer Danny Dorling, who shows that Brexit was "unfairly blamed on the working class in the north of England" (1) since the majority of voters who endorsed Brexit are actually middle class and live in the south of England. The decision to leave the EU is also strongly associated with the older generation. Craig Calhoun, for instance, reflects on the fact that "[f]ully 75 percent of voters aged 18-24 opted for a future in Europe. Sixty-one percent of those over 65, along with a majority of all those over 45, voted against" and contemplates that "those who will have to live longest with the consequences wanted a different choice" (60). As Harald Pittel's discussion of Ali Smith's Seasonal Quar-

[5] Joanna Rostek and Anne-Julia Zwierlein also point to Conservative rhetorical strategies aiming to hold the UK together. In their introduction to *Brexit and the Divided United Kingdom* they discuss an excerpt of Theresa May's speech on triggering Article 50 where she used the word 'together' several times desperately to underscore the strength of the union in face of a threatening disunity (9). On another occasion, Theresa May "pledged that 'I will always fight to strengthen and sustain this precious, precious Union,' one precious," as O'Toole insists, "clearly not being enough" (63).

tet in this volume illustrates, however, literature can subvert and oppose the danger to cement a counterproductive divide between 'old Leave voters' and 'young Remainers,' because it acknowledges that the 'blame game' is not the way forward. Rather, a dialogue which does not supress difference is key to coming to terms with the challenges that the UK faces. David McCrone and Frank Bechhofer suggest that it is "helpful to get away from 'identity' (as a noun), implying that it is a badge which affixes to people, [...] and treat it more as a verb, 'to identify with,' which implies a more active process of doing, which varies according to context" (17). The contributions to this volume substantiate this by demonstrating that it matters as much *how* constructions of identity are embedded in political or literary narratives, as *who* defines the identities and narratives, and from *where*, from which perspective or political and social position this is done.

The cracks appearing in the myth of seamless national identity have also revived discussions of the so-called English Question, which concerns the uneven distribution of power between the nations of the UK.[6] Devolution, which has provided Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland with their own parliament or assemblies, has raised awareness that Scottish or Welsh MPs can vote on laws that might only concern England (which does not have its own government), although England has no say in Scottish or Welsh decisions. As the Brexit vote has shown, however, momentous decisions that affect the whole UK can be dominated by English voters because they make up the majority of the UK's population. The referendum has therefore conflated England and Britain and thus brought the problematic nature of this conflation back to people's attention. In 2006 Robert Hazell could still comfortably claim that "[w]e cannot readily disentangle Englishness from Britishness in our history or in our institutions" (45). The tide has turned since, as Kenny et al. argue in 2018: "[T]he traditional conflation of England and Britain *is* growing harder to sustain, because of the growing politicisation of English national identity and political divergence between the nations of the UK" (5). As the devolved nations become more self-assured in establishing their own national identities,[7] English identity is seeking to

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[6] As Robert Hazell explains, "[t]he English Question is not a single question, but a portmanteau heading for a whole series of questions about the government of England" (37).

[7] Devin Beauregard, for instance, insists that "[i]f there is one thing, then, that can be said of Scotland's cultural policy since devolution, it is that it has emblemized a sort of (re)awakening of Scotland's sense of culture and identity – one that had, for a long time, sat dormant" (132).

emancipate itself from British identity and growing more confident as, for instance, a political marketing strategy (see Berger in this volume).

Another significant development in the Brexit discourse on identity can be seen in the Conservatives' Leave strategy to replace the broader identity of a 'European Britain' with a 'Global Britain,' which served to imply that the UK will remain a well-connected country after leaving the EU. Instead, "the May government's advocacy of Global Britain only exacerbated widely-held suspicions about the family resemblance between the ghost of empires past and the first rumblings of Brexit futures" (Ward and Rasch 3). UKIP did not shy away from suggesting the Commonwealth as the better alternative for trade relations in their manifesto (Kenny and Pearce 203), nor were supporters of Brexit hesitant to stage 'the Anglosphere' as a far more significant community of "true friends" compared to the member states of the European Union (Baxendale and Wellings 223).[8]

While 'Leavers' have turned their backs on the Continent to look outwards to other global players, they tend to look backward with regard to time. Many critics have highlighted the role of imperial nostalgia in Brexit debates (Donington 122; see also Straumann and Witen in this volume) and the dangers of painting a picture of a continuous and homogenous history (see Berger in this volume) that employs a "calculated forgetting" (see Fisher Fishkin in this volume). There is a significant tension in the ways that the Brexit-affected nations deal with their own history and identity. As Fintan O'Toole aptly summarizes:

> In Ireland, we have been trying to awake from the epic into the ordinary, from the gloriously simple into the fluidly complex, from the once-and-for-all moment of national destiny into the openness and contingency of actual existence, with all its uncertainties and contradictions. In the England of Brexit, on the other hand, this process is working in reverse. The imagined movement is from the ordinary into the epic, from the complex to the gloriously simple, from the openness and contingency of real life in a society of multiple identities into a once-and-for all [sic] moment of destiny: 23 June 2016 as Independence Day, a sacred day of destiny from which a new history begins – a day that cannot therefore be revisited or returned from. (64)

[8] As Eva Namusoke elucidates, the Anglosphere was "sometimes used interchangeably" (224) with the Commonwealth by Leave supporters and often only refers to white settler nations, such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.

As Maurice Fitzpatrick's essay elucidates, the European Union was able to create a home for such a crucial state of indeterminacy in the case of Northern Ireland (as it did for Gibraltar). The devolved nations appear to be more aware of a necessary flexibility, as Adam Tomkins, a Member of the Scottish Parliament, remarked that "the Union not only accommodates but requires difference [...] it is not a unitary state with a single seat of power in which the entire land is ruled in a uniform way" (qtd. in Kenny and Pearce 32). Nation and identity, therefore, cannot, and should not, be homogenous and simple. It remains to be seen to what extent the unions of Britain *and* Europe can strengthen their communities by acknowledging and promoting their differences within.

The contributions in this volume are based on papers that were given at the biannual conference of the Swiss Association of University Teachers of English (SAUTE) on nation and identity that took place on 3-4 May 2019 at the University of Basel. In our call for papers, we asked our speakers to respond to the "debates about national identity [that] have received new currency in recent years in a context of demonstrations of national self-assertion." Beyond the introduction of authoritarian measures in some member states of the European Union, these developments produced the Brexit decision in Britain and significant changes in American international policies. The following essays scrutinize these trends, on the one hand by critically analysing the tendencies of political and literary narratives to look back in time and yearn for a nostalgic, distant past and, on the other, by pointing towards their potential to reimagine a future that is 'closer to home' and based on the actual and present condition of the UK. The latter is perhaps both the most challenging and the most pressing, as "the cosmopolitan elites who shaped the new Britain failed to generate a new narrative, a new national self-understanding to make sense of the changes and membership in the transformed country" (Calhoun 60; see also Wenzl in this volume). In any case, the stories of Brexit have not all been told yet and will require continued attention in the next years, perhaps decades, to come.

The first part of our volume begins with 'Cultural Constructions of British National Identity.' Matthias D. Berger elucidates Henderson et al.'s contention that "Brexit was made in England" (631), highlighting the Leave campaigners' strategies of glorifying *English* medieval history in order to promote ideas of a *British* nation forced to fight for sovereignty against an oppressive EU. In particular, the essay scrutinizes "trained historian-turned-politician" Daniel Hannan's portrayal of a

continuous and natural British/English history (and national character) in his book *How We Invented Freedom & Why It Matters* (2013). Conflating England and Britain in this way is certainly strategic here, adding a historical dimension to the geographical pseudo-evidence of the English Channel as a firm dividing line between 'Europe' and Britain.

Barbara Straumann similarly identifies continuity and nostalgia as two defining features of national identity, focussing on fictional representations of Queen Victoria in two films from the 1930s (*Victoria the Great* and *Sixty Glorious Years*) and a recent depiction of the queen in *Victoria & Abdul* (2017). The essay explores how Queen Victoria as a national icon serves different purposes at different times. Most recently, in *Victoria & Abdul*, she appears to respect and appreciate the Commonwealth. As the film foregrounds her admiration for her servant Abdul Karim's culture and country, it celebrates a carefully edited glorious imperial past. There is an intriguing parallel between the spectacle of a caring monarch and her subservient admirer and a (supposedly) open and outward-looking United Kingdom that seeks to strengthen its global ties with the Commonwealth, failing, however, to treat all its nations as equal players.

Our second part, 'Brexit Discourses,' addresses the discursive power of political language. Martin Mik and Jo Angouri analyse the representation of the relationship between the UK and the EU in the Queen's Speeches, which provide a political constant throughout the decades. Particular attention is paid to the time leading up to the UK's two referenda on European integration in 1975 and 2016. This idiosyncratic genre showcases the British Government's intentions within a ceremonial framework whose symbolic weight must not be underestimated as it contributes significantly to shaping the public's understanding of the European-British relationship. Nora Wenzl then proceeds to analyse the Leave and Remain discourses within the Conservative party, asking how they construct British identity. Wenzl's study perfectly exemplifies Calhoun's critical stance when he laments that (especially pro-EU) politicians missed the opportunity to create "a new national self-understanding" (60). Basing her argument on a Critical Discourse Analysis of parliamentary proceedings in the House of Commons from May 2015 to June 2016, Wenzl unveils that *both* sides framed Britain as exceptional and in opposition to Europe. Hence, Conservative supporters of the Remain campaign failed to promote EU membership as the better alternative to exceptionalism.

Our third part turns to 'BrexLit' as a type of fiction that contributes to the discourses of Brexit. In 2017, Kristian Shaw coined the term

'BrexLit' to describe literature that in some form responds to the referendum. Ali Smith's novel *Autumn* (2016), famously considered to be the first piece of post-Brexit literature, is part of Smith's so-called Seasonal Quartet, which also includes *Winter* (2017), *Spring* (2019), and *Summer* (2020). Unlike the previous contributions that tackle the political dimension of national identity, Harald Pittel reads Smith's Brexit fiction with a focus on community building, and specifically in light of age. Along with the divisions between the UK's nation-states and such other markers of difference as class, as mentioned above, Brexit has also revealed a gap between an older and a younger generation. But rather than accepting this opposition, Smith's four contemporary novels write back to the stereotypes of old age and ageing. Moving beyond stereotype and also insisting that literary traditions can be rewritten, Smith's Seasonal Quartet challenges dominant perceptions of old age and provides a new post-Brexit myth of communal understanding.

Michelle Witen takes up the issue of nostalgia again in her analysis of parodies of children's literature concerned with Brexit. She argues that such texts as *Alice in Brexitland* or the Ladybird spoof *The Story of Brexit* form a sub-section of BrexLit that is as yet under-appreciated but may be seen as particularly influential because it uses the visceral appeal of children's literature and readers' nostalgic memories of childhood to make a case about Brexit and its relation to English/British identity. The humour of these stories has a double function, since it offers both a satirical stance, and an emotional coping mechanism in the aftermath of a Brexit decision that has turned out to be extremely disruptive and divisive. Christine Berberich then shifts the focus to the role EU migrants play in BrexLit. She finds that contrary to their actual presence in British society and to the somewhat magnified discursive role they played in the Leave campaign, EU migrants are almost invisible in BrexLit, and if they appear at all, they tend to be reduced to cameo appearances of Eastern European cleaners and similar marginal(ized) characters. Over three million people are silenced in this way, and the question remains whether BrexLit mirrors an actual situation or even colludes in perpetuating it.

Our fourth part, 'Beyond the Home Counties,' continues the preoccupation with identities marginal(ized) from a home-counties and London perspective. Victoria Allen reads Stuart Maconie's travelogue *Long Road from Jarrow: A Journey through Britain Then and Now* (2017) as a non-fictional contribution to BrexLit. Maconie produces a footsteps narrative, revisiting the route of the 1936 workers' protest march from Jarrow to London as he reflects on the current condition of England from a Northern working-class perspective. Travelling yet further north, Ian

Goode offers a historical view of cinema-going in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland made possible by the Film Guild and the Screen Machine, which is run by Regional Screen Scotland – an institution that has profited from European financial support for remote areas. Therefore, as also for historical reasons connected to politics and religion, the Scottish ties to the Continent differ markedly from those of England, which goes a long way towards explaining the different referendum result and many Scottish people's annoyance at being forced into Brexit by the English majority – an annoyance also felt in Northern Ireland. In his contribution, which closes this part, Maurice Fitzpatrick explores the unique challenges that Brexit presents for Ireland as well as for Ireland's relations with the UK. In particular, Fitzpatrick emphasizes how Brexit jeopardizes the peace process implemented with the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, because the Irish border threatens to become a 'hard' external EU border. Predictably, although this was downplayed by the Leave campaign, the Irish situation has become a major crux in the Brexit process and related negotiations.

In the fifth part, 'Across the Atlantic: Nation and Identity in America,' we widen the scope of our discussion of national identity to include the United States as a major player within the 'Anglosphere' with which Britain claims to have a special relationship. Both Cécile Heim and Shelley Fisher Fishkin reiterate the claim made in this volume that it is problematic to treat the concepts of nation and identity as stable and homogenous. Heim queries the ostensibly seamless connection between 'nation' as territory and (individual or collective) identity by contrasting the ways in which white settlers and indigenous peoples relate to their land in Chickasaw author Linda Hogan's novel *Mean Spirit* (1990). Heim's contribution invites us to rethink what it means to own, as opposed to belonging to, a plot of land, as she deconstructs the idea of private property as key to shaping a nation. Finally, Shelley Fisher Fishkin revisits the notion of nostalgia, which runs like a leitmotif through current British and US-American discourses of identity. Crucially, as she insists, this is a nostalgia for a past that never was, based on calculated forgetting and the fabrication of false or fragmented memories. Deconstructing notions of splendid isolation and exceptionalism, Fisher Fishkin argues that both the UK and the US have always been multicultural; her analysis of American literature reveals an inherent transnationalism by showing how writers were "influenced by what [they] read and by where they travelled." Fisher Fishkin ends with the clear message that it is illusory to think that national borders are impermeable, and that it is the responsibility of literary and cultural critics to acknowledge and

promote writers who celebrate heterogeneous alternatives to hegemonic discourse.

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