

Panel 5: Bordering and Rebordering in Ireland

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„'over the road', 'over the water' and 'over the border'" – Political, social, and mental borders in Anna Burns's *Milkman*

Borders play a central role in Anna Burns's award-winning novel *Milkman* (2018). Set in Northern Ireland at the height of the troubles, the text traces the restrictions and limitations created by mental, physical, and political borders. The novel's reduced and abstract style mirrors the claustrophobia and anxiety of a life defined by these visible and invisible borders. Identity – which is created by and through the definition of self and other – becomes blurred as all the nameless characters are reduced to their relational function: middle-sister, almost boyfriend, third brother-in-law, etc. Thus, the life of every individual is defined by endless mirrors of borders: the political border to England – the country 'over the water' – is repeated in the opposition of 'renouncers' and 'defenders of the state', i.e. republicans and unionists. This, in turn leads to an unbearable restriction of the lives of every individual trying to act and appear 'normal' – in itself a highly problematic term. This norm is synonymous with being invisible in a society characterized by anxiety and terrorism, and anyone who fails to act accordingly is deemed 'beyond-the-pale'. Burn's novel thus shows how the life of every individual is defined by political but even more so by social, mental, and linguistic border: it is no longer defined by social reality but rather by rumour and the gossipy creation of facts – turning *Milkman* into arguably the most important novel of our post-factual age.