

Keynote 1

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'This Blessed Plot': BrexLit and the Island Mentality

Britain's recent exit from the European Union on 23rd June 2016 signalled an unprecedented historic moment for the nation and has resulted in a form of political isolationism unthinkable at the turn of the millennium. The years leading up to the EU referendum witnessed a sudden and violent shift towards right-wing populism, hostility towards supranational forms of cosmopolitical democracy and global interdependence, extensive opposition to open border policies, discontent with the cultural implications of globalization, and a xenophobic resistance to both immigrants and transnational mobility more widely. Such developments call for a re-evaluation of how Europe is narrated in Britain and the impact of 'national' literature on the cultural imaginary. Beginning with a brief analysis of Brexit and its immediate consequences, the paper will then provide a timely close reading of post-Brexit fictions – forming a literary genre which I have termed 'BrexLit' (Shaw 2016) – including *Spring* (2019) by Ali Smith, *Exit West* (2017) by Mohsin Hamid, *Breach* (2017) by Annie Holmes and Olumide Popoola, and *The Wall* (2019) by John Lanchester.

The paper will also argue that British antipathy towards the European project and the ongoing construction of an island mentality was already evident in the late twentieth-century British fictions of Kingsley Amis, Tim Parks and Malcolm Bradbury, which betrayed a Eurosceptic resistance to immigration and the renegotiation of borders, casting the British as 'reluctant Europeans' – inhabitants of an inward-looking island resisting cosmopolitan imaginaries and the worst excesses of globalized society. In comparison, selected post-Brexit works will be shown to envision potential European political futures and conceptualize new cosmopolitan forms of belonging across borders. In so doing, the first wave of BrexLit indicates literature's potential to engage with emergent geopolitical realities and anticipate the fate of the nation.