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# BREXIT WOUNDS: ARTS AND HUMANITIES RESPONSES TO LEAVING THE EU: INTRODUCTION

Fionna Barber and Eleanor Byrne

## Abstract

*This special issue offers a timely and current critical evaluation of the morbid symptoms and potential wounds of 'Brexit Culture' as its implications, causes and effects unravel in front of a global audience via multiple media in real time. Brexit cultures, for the purposes of our articles here, attends to the role of cultural production in forging political choices, and to the cultural dimensions of Brexit – as a response to living in times of crisis and uncertainty. Departing from solely political or economic evaluations of Brexit's effects, contributions to the special issue explore how the humanities and social sciences, artists and writers engage with the challenges, threats and potential disasters of Brexit. This issue interrogates how multiple constituencies that make up the inhabitants of the UK deal with a climate of continued uncertainty about definitions and effects of Brexit as they unfold in everyday cultural practices and specific locations, and what kind of responses or symptoms we can identify in current discourses of national and international culture.*

*In these unusual and unprecedented circumstances, this issue brings together academics and practitioners from the arts, humanities and social sciences in a creative and constructive dialogue around the cultural issues posed by Brexit. The articles cover subjects such as migration, citizenship and populism, violent borders and hostile environments, Brexit as an empty vessel, imaginary landscapes, fictions of the nation, banal nationalism, Brexit wounds – hurts, pains and feelings. They reflect on conceptualisations of Brexit as disaster, deferral, delay and repetition, Brexit and new cultural forms, Brexit metaphors and tautologies, populism and resistance, citizenship, race and belonging, Brexit's effects on individuals, communities and constructions or depictions of families.*

**Keywords:** Brexit, Great Britain, visual culture, arts, Europe

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Banner image: Rita Duffy, *Soften the Border*, 2017 (detail). Recycled fabrics, installation on the Belcoo, Blacklion Bridge - Co. Fermanagh / Co. Cavan border, 2.5 x 30m. Image credit: Copyright of the artist, Rita Duffy. Photo credit: Stanislav Nikolov

## Biographical note

Fionna Barber is Reader in Art History at the Manchester School of Art, Manchester Metropolitan University. Her current research interests focus on gender, postnationalism and the visual, particularly in an Irish context. She is the author of *Art in Ireland since 1910* (Reaktion, 2013) and the initiator and co-curator of the exhibition *Elliptical Affinities: Irish Women Artists and the Politics of the Body 1984- present* (Highlanes Gallery, Drogheda, and Limerick City Gallery of Art, November 2019 to March 2020).

Dr Ellie Byrne is Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Literature at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her research and teaching covers twentieth-century British, American and postcolonial literature and theory, feminism and queer theory. In 2018, together with Fionna Barber, she convened the Brexit Wounds symposium, sponsored by the Manchester Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence (MJMCE). She has published on Hilary Mantel, Muriel Spark, Tove Jansson, Ali Smith, *Queer Hospitality*, Hanya Yanagihara and Jamaica Kincaid. She was co-investigator on the British Academy funded network 'Troubling Globalisation: Arts and Humanities Approaches' (2016–17).

# BREXIT WOUNDS: ARTS AND HUMANITIES RESPONSES TO LEAVING THE EU: INTRODUCTION

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## Introduction

In April 2019, Anish Kapoor's new artwork *A Brexit, A Broxit, We All Fall Down*, was featured in *The Guardian* newspaper, depicting a huge open wound down the spine of a three-dimensional map of England. The gaping void appears as an abyss without a safe landing place or visible end, or as a number of art critics noted wryly, a huge vagina (Jones, 2019). Kapoor's work on infinite voids and perceptual trickery seems a particularly appropriate mode for depicting Brexit, even if it does little to offer any answers. The referendum of 2016 which appeared attractive to David Cameron as a weapon to kill off the threat to the Conservative party by UKIP, has instead (re)opened an unhealable wound in the (multi) national consciousnesses of the United Kingdom. Despite the claims of Leave supporters that Brexit will bring a reassertion of British sovereignty, there is the real danger that this will be achieved at the expense of the territorial parameters of the United Kingdom itself. This concern is mainly focused on the issues raised around the Northern Ireland border that have produced the seemingly irreconcilable arguments around the backstop and are beginning to undermine the achievements of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, and the possibility for a second referendum on independence in Scotland. In both Scotland and Northern Ireland a majority voted for Remain in the Brexit referendum. However, the two parts of the United Kingdom where a majority voted Leave – England and Wales – will also be significantly affected. Uneven development and social inequality have already increased across the regions of England since the 2016 vote (Jackson, 2018). Meanwhile, both Wales and the predominantly Leave-voting North East of England are already suffering economic losses due to their heavy reliance on exports to the EU; this is likely to deteriorate further when the current level of access to the single market disappears at the end of the transition period (Inman, 2019). Even as the figure of the divide has become ubiquitous in discussions of Brexit, there is no consensus on the nature or location of that divide, rather the post-referendum period has

been the source of proliferating attempts to explain the surprise leave vote through varied oppositional modes – North and South, 'metropolitan elites' and 'the people', cosmopolitans and ethno-nationalists – whilst simultaneously borders also emerged as political/geographical splits, violent sutures between England and Scotland and the Northern Irish border with the Republic of Ireland demanding our attention. None of these binaries is fixed of course, as Richard Appignanesi notes, 'The Brexit vote was *already* split, involving both a populist vote against what was perceived as an overweening Europe *and* a desire to stick two fingers to the British establishment', by those who felt they had no voice in decisions made by those geographically and culturally distant from them (2018, p.569). A linguistic battle to find the most successful terminology to gain the political upper hand in the face of the perceived split has emerged that focuses on phrases such as 'the will of the people', 'the 48%', 'the left behind', #peoplesvote and has increasingly become entrenched, and, following the election of Boris Johnson as Conservative party leader in 2019, turning towards a militarised war-focused terminology of 'traitors', 'coups' and 'the resistance'.

If 'Leave' cloaked its campaign in war rhetoric, 'Remain' mobilised images of self-harm, such as the popular protest placard depicting a union jack foot and a hand shooting a gun into it. Whilst this protest image is supposed to focus our attention on the 'obvious' stupidity of Brexit as self-inflicted suffering, the question of pleasures of self-harm is the recurring theme in Fintan O'Toole's impressive *Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain* (2018), where he repeatedly figures Brexit as a pleasurable form of national self-harm. O'Toole's focus on the 'structures of feeling' of Brexit unearths what he argues is a strange imaginary oppression in the part of the English, where self-pity should be read as a form of aggrieved self-regard. This reflects the 'incoherence of the new English nationalism', which switches between fantasies of Empire 2.0 and a portrayal of the Brexit vote as 'insurgency from below' (2018, p.3). Conversely, he notes the emergence of popular fiction such as Len Deighton's *SS-GB* and Robert Harris's *Fatherland* which enacts fantasies of losing the Second World War and notes how British media accounts of Brexit talks mapped war rhetoric onto Britain's relationship to the EU. In this scenario, one version of Brexit appears as a fantasised re-enactment of the Second World War, where Britain is tragically and frenziedly refusing to give way to the present political reality in the face of the attractions of feverish dreams of the past and as a result turns on itself. As Ben Noyes notes, Brexit 'designed to raise a protective barrier against the EU seems to have resulted in a traumatic shock that is now having internal effects' (2018,

p.565). The turn to war rhetoric by Eton-educated Leave politicians is calculated to be emotive, and is still broadly effective as an attempt to paper over class divisions, as Appignanesi following Tom Nairn notes: ‘class contestation cannot be eliminated by all conquering nationalism; however it can be “contained” or neutralised over considerable periods of time’ (2018, p.575).

Brexit’s wounds however are far from only fantasised ones of a WW2 or civil war re-enactment without the weapons. What are war games for some are lived real threats of resurgent conflicts, and the violences and murders already enacted there, as the intractable issue of the Northern Irish border with the Republic of Ireland demonstrates. One of Brexit’s monstrous parents, the ‘hostile environment’ enacted by Theresa May as Home Secretary, performatively advertised its harassment of racial minorities and immigrants in the public sphere with ‘Go Home’ vans, and produced the 2018 ‘Windrush scandal’, resulting in at least 83 cases of wrongful deportation, with many further people suffering severe consequences of loss of housing, jobs or access to NHS treatment. Brexit’s other monstrous parent, the Conservative government imposed ‘Austerity’ programme, inflicted demeaning and severely damaging cuts on the social fabric of Britain whose effects have and continue to devastate lives. The case of EU citizens living in the UK has also been fraught, experienced as a devastating loss of a sense of belonging and a real threat to future rights to live and work in Britain. In addition to a significant rise in racist hate crimes (BBC News, 2019), the culture of xenophobia attached to Brexit has had lethal consequences: the murder of MP Jo Cox in her Batley constituency on 16 June 2016, a week before the actual referendum, and the killing of Arkadiusz Józwiak in Essex two months later, supposedly because he was speaking Polish in public.

Meanwhile in Northern Ireland, uncertainties over the status of the border with the Irish Republic have also resulted in serious threats to the Good Friday Agreement’s intended resolution of both political intransigence and patterns of sectarian violence. This was a definite factor in the death of Lyra McKee, a Northern Irish journalist shot by the New IRA as she was standing by a police Land Rover observing a riot in the Creggan area of Derry on 18 April 2019. However, McKee’s killing by dissident republicans should not necessarily be seen as marking an inevitable regression to the destructive temporalities of ‘the Troubles’ brought to an end by the Peace Process of the 1990s. McKee, who was born in 1990, was part of a generation in Northern Ireland who had grown up with the possibility of a different future beyond that determined by sectarian polarities. In addition to her work as an investigative journalist,

she was also a prominent LGBTQ activist, who in 2014 published a ‘Letter to my 14-year-old self’ that was widely reprinted posthumously. The letter was full of hope, suggestive of a queer futurity not based around constructs of the conflict-determined past in its confident affirmation: ‘It won’t always be like this. Things will get better’ (2019).

This question of the future is everywhere in the political and cultural discourse of ‘Brexit times’ and is itself notably marked by a split. An increasingly toxic atmosphere of division, accompanied by a strange ongoing stasis, deferral of decisions and the dominant mode of *postponement*, has produced a kind of cancellation of the future, that we might term a ‘Brexit Season’ that following the vote showed no sign of ending and has produced a nationalist embattled war rhetoric on the part of the Conservative government and the Leave.EU campaign, where the population is continually promised that the war will be ‘over by Christmas’. In this scenario, as Stuart Heritage notes in his article for *The Guardian*, Brexit is our version of the 1993 film *Groundhog Day*, where, like Bill Murray, no matter how outlandishly or creatively we try to end things, we are trapped in a political impasse (2018). Boris Johnson’s 2019 election campaign seized on this stasis with his campaign slogan of ‘Get Brexit Done’, with the ‘punchy’ phrase printed on his podium during speeches and an image of him wearing blue boxing gloves emblazoned with the slogan circulated in the press.

Conversely, Brexit has also been depicted as a kind of ‘end times’, the notion of the apocalypse holding a particular significance in the representation of Brexit. As a pervasive theme in Western culture, the vision of a cataclysmic destruction of individual, social and cultural existence is modelled on the Judeo-Christian Apocalypse in the New Testament Book of Revelations. Yet despite the prediction of overwhelming annihilation in the Apocalypse of St John, promising the end of time itself, this was also an account fashioned within the specific historic circumstances of the persecution of the early Christian church within the Roman Empire. Yet in the face of immense trials and tribulations the Apocalypse of Christian eschatology ultimately results in a world made anew for the faithful while unbelievers face eternal damnation. This ambivalence around the outcome of the destructive power of the apocalypse can also be seen as underpinning the temporalities of Brexit. With an event horizon continually extending into the future; apparently final dates such as 31 October 2019 were postponed as the election was called to break parliamentary deadlock, this point of no return represented for Remainers the beginnings of a descent into utter chaos. For Leave, however, the same date represented a moment of redemption, one

that banishes the fear of other cataclysms – the tide of immigration or European bureaucracy being just two examples. This uncertainty has not been assuaged by the recent, December 2019, election, as the question of negotiating the terms of Brexit and the threat of no deal remains central to the coming year's political developments facing the new 'final' Brexit date of 31 December 2020, which in turn is now under pressure due to the global Covid-19 pandemic that has emerged just as this special edition is going into print.

Yet despite the representation of Brexit as a seemingly inescapable apocalypse, the disruption of modes of temporality on other levels has also taken on a particular significance. This involves a fierce contestation of formations of the past, the present and the future. Although, ultimately, the experience of time and space are fundamentally inseparable, it would be useful here to point to some aspects of the temporalities of Brexit as a means of situating the speed of change. As Russell West-Pavlov suggests, despite its function as 'one of the great "natural" givens of our culture' (2013, p.5), the concept of time is also 'riddled with issues of power and hegemony, and is at stake in much political struggle' (p.3). In this sense the Brexit referendum has been profoundly counter-hegemonic. As any degree of political consensus has been eroded by the polarisation of Leave and Remain, even the experience of time as a naturalised construction begins to crack and falter, allowing a range of often contradictory temporalities to rise to visibility.

In this volatile reality, a sense of the present, a continuous 'now', becomes a pivotal moment from which both past and future may be constructed. The contradiction of contemporaneity, however, is that it always appears to be 'now' – yet as soon as that perception of instantaneity, a sense of the current moment, is recognised, it has already been superseded and become 'past'. The rhetoric of Brexit (from both sides) is nevertheless also dominated by projections of the future. As Alan Finlayson argued in 2017, the underlying philosophy of 'Brexitism' has been articulated through a sense of the future as being unknowable – the sentiment that 'You don't know what will happen' as a calculated yet populist strategy that further undermines the role of experts castigated by the then pro-Brexit Secretary of State for Justice, Michael Gove, in 2016.

Although the focus of Brexit is on the process whereby the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, it is also relevant to see this as part of a more widespread crisis in global capitalism, particularly around the project of neoliberalism that permeates politics in Britain, the EU and beyond. The referendum of 23 June 2016, as Finlayson points out, marked a point at which a range of complex processes

crystallised into a specific political expression, which, because it took a solid form, has since affected the direction and altered the speed of the eddies and whorls of British political culture.

(Finlayson, 2018, p.598)

Yet within its immediate context, Brexit has the potential to set in motion a number of consequences largely unforeseen before the referendum and extending far beyond Britain. These include the undoing of the more recent evolution of transnational identities in the alliances and legislative procedures of the European Union, already undermined by the financial and economic crises across the Eurozone that led to the increasing adoption of neoliberalist policies (Jessop, 2016, p.6), in addition to the rise of rightwing populism both across the EU and within Britain. Appignanesi notes as much when he opens his piece 'Ultima Britannia' with Franco Berardi's 2017 letter to Yanis Vafroukis and the DiEM25 (Democracy in Europe Movement) condemning Europe for its open complicity in the deaths of migrants attempting to cross Europe's fortified borders and renouncing his own Europeanness (2018, p.567).

If it still seems useful to read Brexit in relation to the rise of transnational populist movements in Europe and the US, it is not because this is a new form of political mobilisation. Rather, it is to think about how transnational populist right-wing figures have been able to mobilise chains of equivalence across radically heterogeneous social terrains and become increasingly visible as players in what was portrayed as an act of national reclamation of power from the interference of supranational organisations like the EU. Following the exposures of Cambridge Analytica and Facebook, as well as alliances between various Leave groups and US far right figures, it now appears much clearer than it did during the referendum period that Brexit is a global event and its players and influencers extend on a staggeringly transnational scale.

### **Brexit's affects**

Discourses of the ease and simplicity of performing Brexit have increasingly given way to a recognition of the multiple pitfalls, logistical difficulties and multiple modes of hurt and damage that it would inflict on citizens' rights: to cross borders to work and live, their psychic wellbeing, their state of anxiety or sense of cultural or national identity. Furthermore, Brexit has enacted a series of assaults on the terms of definition of each of these categories, putting them into crisis in a national discursive space that is riven, polarised and increasingly traumatised. This special issue explores the 'archive of feelings' that Brexit has both created and been created by. Following in the wake of Ali Smith's 'state of the nation' seasonal quartet of

novels that have attempted to excavate the ways in which affective life pervades public life, *Brexit Wounds* proposes to explore the ways in which contemporary writers, artists and cultural critics have anticipated, documented and explored the cultural, affective and aesthetic implications of weathering an 'extended Brexit season', of over three years of living in times of crisis and uncertainty, austerity and deprivation, accompanied by revivals of populist and far-right sentiments. 'Weathering' might be read here as a strategy for surviving in hostile conditions, following eco-feminist Astrida Neimanis' use of the term to describe how the human body copes with cultural/ climate change (2018, p.118) and Christina Sharpe's use of the weather to describe an all-enveloping racist hostile environment (2016, p.106).

Departing from solely political or economic evaluations of Brexit's effects, this special edition explores how writers, artists and performers engage with the causes, challenges, threats and potential disasters of Brexit and asserts the importance of cultural assessments of notions of belonging, patriotism, nationalism. In a media environment saturated with entrenched and hardening positions around collective identity, nation and culture, the arts have a vital role crossing between private and public space in which to debate and perpetually rework arguments, propositions and uncertainty about definitions and effects of Brexit as they unfold in everyday cultural practices and specific locations in current discourses of national and international culture, identity and belonging. These disrupted and unprecedented circumstances invite a range of responses. There are many compelling reasons to see Brexit as 'culturalpolitical' almost entirely social, driven by affect, wish, perverse desires, 'pure' fantasy. As Robert Eaglestone comments following Lauren Berlant's model of cruel optimism, to account for the cultural investment in a neo-liberal politics that actively harms those invested in it, Brexit should be read in terms of 'cruel nostalgia' (2018b, p.92). As many critics have argued, a key site of this nostalgia has been Britain's 'unaddressed and unredressed past' as Nadine El-Enany discusses (2017). Brexit has worked as an empty vessel, filled by imaginary landscapes, fictional nations, banal nationalisms and been conjured as a solution to various wounds – hurts, pains and feelings. As such it might be fruitfully understood through Ernesto Laclau's formulation of the 'empty signifier'. Through its openness to interpretation and appropriation this acts as a focus for a range of different and disparate grievances that citizens hold in relation to their interaction in a given society that temporarily become linked together in a chain of equivalence. Laclau comments 'the whole model depends on the presence of the dichotomous

frontier: without this, the equivalential relation would collapse and the identity of each demand would be exhausted in its differential particularity' (2005, p.131). Appignanesi argues convincingly, that Brexit is best understood as the culmination of a populism brewing in the UK over a long time period: 'Multitude democracy, as can be said of populism, reckoning itself disenfranchised, will threaten civil war against the absentees of privilege. A "mode" if not the reality of being on a war footing is symptomatic of populism' (2018, p.565). Appignanesi, like Laclau, does not see populism as structurally different from other forms of politics, for Laclau the dismissal of populism is the dismissal of politics *tout court*. Populism shares the same modes as any politics, it is simply a 'way of constructing the political' (Laclau, 2005, p.xi).

How do contemporary arts and culture negotiate the current national emergency of Brexit, diagnose or identify its causes and anticipate its legacies? This special issue seeks to risk writing alongside political events as they unfold in real time, to offer a current critical evaluation of the national and international, political and cultural upheavals spawned by the 2016 Brexit vote and its subsequent ramifications, as speculation around its implications, its causes and its effects unravel in multiple media in real time. At the current moment of writing, with Boris Johnson's premiership fueled by the strategizing of Dominic Cummings, this temporal indeterminacy has been both displaced and made more complex by a teleological confidence in the inevitability of Britain's exit from the European Union very soon indeed. However, this should not distract from the continued assertions of the post-Brexit future as fundamentally unknowable – other than as a return to the past. In the current (March 2020) Leader of the House of Commons Jacob Rees-Mogg's directives to his staff, this includes both the return to imperial measures and a clear differentiation between gender roles through the addition of the long-outmoded suffix 'Esquire' for all non-titled male addressees, a requirement that also evokes a golden age of hierarchical class distinction (Wright, 2019). Yet the atavistic revival of an imperial Englishness has also had more sinister manifestations. As Victor Merriman observed, 'the dismissal of the EU as a plot, by duplicitous others and local collaborators, against a pristine primordial Englishness installed xenophobic attitudes at the centre of discussions around Britain's membership of the bloc' (2018, p.606).

### Artistic responses to Brexit

There has been an extensive range of responses to Brexit from artists. The vast majority are broadly identified with a Remain stance, with the exception of the group Artists for Brexit. Composed of members from across the arts spectrum, the intuitively populist





Figure 0.1: Rita Duffy, *Soften the Border*, 2017. Recycled fabrics, installation on the Belcoo, Blacklion Bridge - Co. Fermanagh / Co. Cavan border, 2.5 x 30m (Copyright of the artist, Rita Duffy. Photo credit: Stanislav Nikolov)

appeal of its website (Artists for Brexit, 2018) is in keeping with the prominent role initially played within the group by Munira Mirza, director of the Conservative Government's Number 10 Policy Unit and appointed by Boris Johnson, after her earlier role as London's Deputy Mayor, for Education and Culture. There has, however, been a real diversity of forms of critical engagement with the complexities of Brexit within artistic practice, whether this be street art or photography, collaborative craftivism right on the edge of the United Kingdom, or curatorial interventions right at its heart. Northern Ireland-based artist Rita Duffy's *Soften the Border* (2017) (Figure 0.1) addresses the very real issues posed by a hard border with the Republic, and which threaten to undermine the legacy of the Good Friday Agreement. For three days between 10 and 13 August Duffy's installation was situated on a bridge that marks the actual boundary between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and which she temporarily covered in soft furnishings knitted, crocheted and sewn by local women's community groups on both sides of the border (Cathcart, 2017). On one level, the installation can be

seen as staging the subversion of Brexit's geopolitical implications within a specific localised context. Yet in its collaborative involvement of numerous unnamed women from different border communities, Duffy's *Softening the Border* also proposes a different kind of female agency beyond the political figureheads who have dominated the debate – Theresa May, Angela Merkel or Arlene Foster.

By comparison with the territorial issues that figure in Duffy's installation, which also underpin other work such as Laura Pannack's *Separation* (2018), a photographic study of couples likely to be split apart by the impending legislation, the disruptive temporalities triggered by Brexit can also be detected in responses by other artists. These include not only Bob and Roberta Smith's invocation of the iconoclastic destruction of England's artistic culture during the post-Reformation (Brill, 2017), but also Mark Wallinger's *This Way Up* (2019), posters designed to be installed on billboards across Britain in preparation for leaving the EU on 29 March 2019. An inverted photograph of Theresa May invokes a Bakhtinian topsy-turvy world of contemporary





Figure 0.2: Grayson Perry, *Matching Pair*, 2017. Glazed ceramic, diptych, each: 105 x 51 cm; 41 3/8 x 20 1/8in (© Grayson Perry, courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro)

politics. This is reinforced however, by a quotation from Gerrard Winstanley, the seventeenth-century reformer and activist leader of the True Diggers, one of the radical groups emerging during the English Civil War, and whose occupation of public lands privatised by enclosures sought to challenge the ownership of property. Winstanley's advocacy of 'Freedom (as) the man who will turn the world upside down' in the contemporary context suggests a world of workers' rights very different to potential post-Brexit scenario of a pernicious disenfranchisement (Winstanley, [1652] 1973).

In a political climate where public space is increasingly dominated by pro-Brexit propaganda, Wallinger's poster is far from the only intervention within a domain where the politics of Brexit become contested through visual means. Since the 2016 referendum, there has been a proliferation of Remain-related street art. A considerable amount of the resulting media coverage has, however, been focused around the already prominent figure of Banksy, particularly in connection with the mysterious destruction in the summer of 2019 of his Dover

mural depicting a workman chipping away at one of the stars of the flag of the European Union (K. Brown, 2019). Banksy's work also featured within a notable curatorial intervention in one of the main public bodies associated with conservative values of British national identity. In 2018, the artist Grayson Perry was the invited curator of the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition. Founded in 1768, the Royal Academy played a significant part in the formation of Britain's national identity through its first president Joshua Reynolds' advocacy of a visual canon that would both reflect and articulate Britain's growing political and economic status. However, throughout its history the RA's Summer Exhibition has been by open submission rather than invitation, with the final selection from a large number of works by both professional and non-professional artists being made by an artist-curator who is also a member of the Academy. The resulting eclecticism is popularly perceived as demonstrating the vibrancy and variety of contemporary art, although this can also be seen as a hegemonic strategy of containment by a historically conservative institution. Perry had already engaged

with Brexit-related issues within his own practice, more specifically the production of *Matching Pair* (2017) (Figure 0.2), popularly known as the Brexit Vases, and which depict key figures associated with both Leave and Remain within a shared iconography of more normative British identity (M. Brown, 2019). His Summer Exhibition, which also marked the Academy's two hundred and fiftieth anniversary, was particularly notable for curatorial decisions that pointed not only towards an undermining of the institution's status but a fracturing of British national identity through its explicit engagement with contemporary politics. As one critic observed, the 'hard biscuit of Brexit has been bitten into with some aplomb' (Glover, 2018).

### Situating Brexit Wounds

Brexit's temporality/ies also informs how we position this collection in relation to others. Brexit remains an ongoing process, continually unfolding and its wider cultural and economic implications shifting, even as it appears to be in political stasis.

This present collection represents a set of cultural responses derived initially from a particular moment: the *Brexit Wounds* symposium at Manchester Metropolitan University in October 2018, and subsequently gestated over the following nine months in addition to further commissioned essays, resulting in a composite and to-a-degree hybridised collection in this special edition. As such, it both builds on and positions itself relative to other collected responses such as the *Third Text* special edition of November 2018 edited by Richard Appignanesi, and Robert Eaglestone's edited collection *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (2018a), which represent a snapshot of other moments in the temporal continuum of Brexit: and there will no doubt be others to come. The essays here address the cultural and historical causes and effects of Brexit, as well as considering how its 'affects', a sense of feeling – both personal and social – might be best understood.

In Hannah Jones's essay, 'We are the European Family: Unsettling the role of family in belonging, race, nation and the European project', this question is approached via a reading of artist Wolfgang Tillmans's intervention, who released a series of posters with slogans intended to rally voters to remain in the EU. Taking one of those slogans – 'It's a question of where you feel you belong. We are the European family' – as a starting point, it examines the openings and closures made available through calls to (trans)national solidarity on the basis of family. The article then engages with alternative realities of 'The European Family' – families separated by border controls, racialised as defective or oppressed by heteronormative patriarchy – and unsettles the problematic of 'European' in 'The European Family',

identifying how empirical and metaphorical family relate to (trans)national belonging and citizenship.

Shauna O'Brien's 'The British people have spoken: The monologue in the Brexit Shorts series' draws on Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech* to examine the different modes of 'linguistic vulnerability' explored in voicing the 'British people' in a series of monologues produced by Headlong Theatre and *The Guardian* reacting to the referendum and post-Brexit cultural and political uncertainty. Reflecting on the ways that the monologue offers a potentially limiting artistic form she argues nonetheless that the speakers in the series defy easy categorisation around their choices to vote leave or remain, and undermine the demarcated boundaries of preconceived identities based around geographical, class, national or linguistic markers of the speakers involved.

In 'The hurt and healing of "Brexitannia": Towards a gendered take on Brexit visual cultures', Lara Cox examines the manifestations of the national allegory of 'Britannia' in the contemporary moment defined by Brexit. The representations of 'Brexitannia' in commemorative coins, illustrations to opinion pieces, music videos and advertising campaigns that have emerged during or since the UK referendum on the EU are argued to reveal forms of women's agency and/or emancipation used in the name of British nationhood and Brexit. 'Brexitannia' reveals both national hurt and healing, and through her agency covers over and heals national wounds that the vote for Brexit has exposed.

In 'Reflections on the rhetoric of (de)colonization in Brexit discourse', meanwhile, Anshuman Mondal examines the trope of (de)colonization that periodically surfaces, but which he argues 'is more or less latent in Brexiteer discourse'. Arguing that it becomes visible mostly during moments of acute crisis, he explores the paradoxes of the ways the trope of colonization arises in Brexit discourses, asking how they intersect with the legacy of British imperialism and how they are a fundamental determinant of the Brexit imaginary.

Muzna Rahman also addresses this subject through an analysis of alimentary metaphors that she argues have characterised Brexit debates. She argues that Brexit has been reported and represented within the media and elsewhere through the language and imagery of food and consumption. Whether this is articulated via real anxieties about the effects that pulling out of the European single market will have on British foodways, or through the specific lexicon deployed when imagining the metaphors of Brexit, gastronomical readings of the various 'texts' of and around Brexit provide productive ways of both understanding and contextualising the politics of the present moment. She identifies specific national

alimentary discourses that surround and permeate the cultural and political context of Brexit, particularly with regard to race, examining the intersections of national identity, whiteness and British food cultures in order to examine and interrogate some key images associated with Brexit.

Eleanor Byrne's 'Autumn, Winter, never Spring, Ali Smith's Brexit season' explores the ways in which the first three novels in Ali Smith's season-themed state-of-the-nation quartet, *Autumn*, *Winter* and *Spring*, have attempted to articulate a series of contemporaneous narratives, the experience and meaning of events following the Brexit referendum result in June 2016 up to the present. Arguing that the seasonal quartet is as much about undoing as affirming seasonality, she explores how Smith devotes her attention to each of the seasons in her three published novels of the sequence, whilst highlighting the ways they have been culturally and politically altered. She also attends to the ways in which the political and cultural impact of Brexit has been experienced as a sudden, shocking 'event' yet produced an extended terrible contradiction of interminable frenzy/stasis/repetition that is 'Brexit Season', the paradox of the Brexit referendum result, experienced both as a singular and unanticipated 'event' and as an 'old new story', a haunting, a spectral revenance.

Finally, Sara Dybris McQuaid returns to the question of Brexit's wounds in 'Walking wounded – the peace process and other collateral Brexit damages'. She discusses the ways in which the difficult transition from war to peace, which has been ongoing in Northern Ireland at least since the peace agreement in 1998, is now further complicated by the indeterminate status of Brexit. Drawing on three conceptualizations from first aid, triage and psychology, the article uses the metaphor of the 'walking wounded' to explore how Brexit interacts with the political culture of the staggering peace process in Northern Ireland. Finally, the essay turns to the literally walking wounded – those seriously injured during the conflict – still seeking redress.

As will be very apparent from a reading of the above, even attempts to unpick the shifting sense of time involved in Brexit are themselves inevitably imbued with modes of temporality: it is the fate of contemporaneity itself to become rapidly outmoded. This applies also to cultural responses to the present situation, including our own. In Jonathan Coe's novel *Middle England*, for example, events take place during the period between spring 2010 and autumn 2018, the prelude to the referendum and the beginning of the aftermath that we are still experiencing. Yet the challenge of writing fiction in the context of such recent events brings its own difficulties. In his review of Coe's book, Sam Leith makes the observation that

'the historical scaffolding is so familiar, and yet will date so fast', a process which he sees as at the heart of the novel's inconsistencies (Leith, 2018). The pressure of insistent change, and a sense of the ephemeral that Leith's review points towards, however, have become predominant features of how Brexit is represented. In actuality, however, these are also underpinned by a range of other ways of thinking about and experiencing time; we have argued that the temporalities of Brexit are more complex than they might at first appear, Brexit is increasingly being understood as an ongoing or epochal phenomenon, and Brexit's history still is far from being written.

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