Janine Hauthal
Explaining Brexit

(Re-)Thinking the Nexus of Nation and Narration in Pre- and Post-Referendum British Fiction

Abstract: Die Abstimmung zum Austritt des Vereinigten Königreichs aus der Europäischen Union am 23. Juni 2016 wurde von Journalisten und politischen Kommentatoren schnell und übereinstimmend als das Resultat eines postfaktischen Wahlkampfes interpretiert. Im vorliegenden Beitrag wird gezeigt, dass die Diskursstruktur des Postfaktischen nur bedingt einen Rahmen liefern kann, um die Brexit-Abstimmung zu verstehen. In einem ersten Abschnitt werden die die Abstimmung begleitenden Debatten dafür daraufhin befragt, ob in ihnen die Erzähl- und Diskursmodelle des Wandels einerseits oder der Kontinuität und der Nostalgie andererseits vorherrschen. In einem zweiten Teil werden sodann die Brexit-Interpretationen, die den britischen Euroskeptizismus und die britische ‚postkoloniale Melancholie‘ als Erklärungen für die Abstimmung anführen, in den Blick genommen. Anschließend werden die beiden Spionageromane *The Innocent* von Ian McEwan (1990) und *Expo 58* von Jonathan Coe (2013) daraufhin befragt, ob in ihnen schon vor dem Referendum ein von Europa unabhängiges Großbritannien antizipiert wird. Abschließend werden diese beiden Texte in einem kurzen Ausblick mit der sog. „BrexLit“ verglichen, die seit der Abstimmung entstanden ist.

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On 23 June 2016, 51.9% of people in the United Kingdom voted in favour of 'Brexit', i.e. of the UK leaving the European Union. While it still remains to be seen what exactly British-European relations will look like in future, in the immediate aftermath of the referendum journalists and political commentators quickly and unanimously regarded the vote, and the campaign preceding it, as evidence of an emergent "post-factual" or "post-truth" politics – adjectives that the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) identically defines as "[r]elating or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" ("Post-fact" / "Post-

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truth", n. p.). Indeed, as evidenced by the OED, which selected 'post-truth' as Word of the Year in 2016 ("Word", n. p.), usage of the term peaked around the British EU referendum and again around the U.S. elections. That from the very beginning of the public debate 'Brexit' and 'post-factual' were linked is also evident from the earliest publications on Brexit and post-truth politics by James Ball (2017), Matthew D'Ancona (2017) and Victor J. Seidler (2018). All three authors draw on notions of 'post-fact' or 'post-truth' as explanatory frames for the British vote. Moreover, prompted by the need to distinguish the newly emerging 'post-factual' politics from its fact-based predecessor, such explanations of the Brexit vote tend to highlight the 'change' factor.

Others, by contrast, have pointed to the explanatory limits of the post-factual narrative of change. Derek Sayer, for instance, holds that the Trump and Brexit victories were "bound up with assumptions of national exceptionalism and racial superiority" (2017, 102), fuelled by "the privilege and entitlement that comes with being (indigenously) white" (103). Using the 'post-factual' as an explanatory frame in the aftermath of the Brexit vote amounts, he contends, to "a post-factual whitewash" (Sayer 2017, 103). By suppressing the racial, xenophobic and nationalist dimensions of the vote, it leads "to the erasure of race" (102). According to Sayer, these dimensions in particular point to lingering structures of continuity and nostalgia rather than to change.

Taking its cue from this debate, the following chapter has a threefold focus: Firstly, it will review the post-referendum debate on Brexit and its post-factual politics in light of the affordances and limitations of explanatory frames highlighting 'change' and 'continuity' respectively. A second focus will be on explanations that emphasize British Euroscepticism on the one hand and Britain's 'postcolonial melancholia' on the other. Thirdly, the chapter will turn to Ian McEwan's *The Innocent* (1990) and Jonathan Coe's *Expo 58* (2013) and inquire whether these two spy novels narratively prefigure Britain out of Europe. Finally, a brief outlook on the newly emerging subgenre of "BrexLit" (Shaw 2018, 15) will form the basis for a comparison between this new type of British fiction and the pre-referendum 'fictions of Europe' by McEwan and Coe.

1 Vote Leave Campaign and Post-Referendum Debate: Affordances and Limitations of the Post-Factual as an Explanatory Frame

Three years after the Brexit vote, it is generally accepted that the Vote Leave campaign was a prominent instance of post-factual politics, evidenced by the well-known lies about the £350 million a week for the British National Health Service and the millions of potential Turkish immigrants, but also by "the spirit in which the debates were conducted" (Sayer 2017, 92). Cases in point are the controversial anti-immigration poster "Breaking Point", that then UKIP-leader Nigel Farage unveiled on 16 June 2016,[1] as well as the Vote Leave campaign's strong verbal "appeals to emotion and personal belief" ("Post-fact" / "Post-truth", n. p.). Most notably, the slogans "Let's take back control!" and "We want our country back!" speak to the British auto-stereotype of being freedom-loving and independent – a sentiment that, according to European Studies scholar Menno Spiering (2015, cf. 34), has long fuelled British Euroscepticism. The slogans also imply a moment in the past when the people were in control and thus, at least implicitly, refers back to the heyday of the British empire, when 'Britannia ruled the waves'. The claim that "people in this country have had enough of experts", made by Conservative Member of Parliament Michael Gove – a figure-head of the Leave campaign – to dismiss warnings of negative economic consequences of a pro-Brexit vote, is another case in point.[2]

Statements by Farage, such as "When you challenge the establishment in this country, they come after you, they call you all sorts of things" (The Irish Times 2016), draw attention to another aspect of the referendum debate widely discussed in its aftermath, namely the alleged anti-establishment thrust of the Leave supporters. The rejection of expertise, as well as the Brexiteers' self-

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1 The poster uses a photograph of migrants crossing the Croatian-Slovenian border in 2015, with the only prominent white person in the photograph obscured by a box of text. The slogan reads: "We must break free from the EU and take control of our borders." The poster was reported to the police with a complaint that it incites racial hatred and breaches UK race laws (cf. The Irish Times 2016).
2 Gove made this claim in an interview with Faisal Islam on Sky News on 3 June 2016 (cf. R.P. Mackey's 2016 as well as Henry Mance's article in the *Financial Times* [2016]). These slogans and claims, as well as Vote Leave campaigners' use of algorithmic database-driven micro-targeting tools, feature prominently in *Brexit: The Uncivil War*, a Channel Four film released on 7 January 2019, in which Benedict Cumberbatch stars as campaign director Dominic Cummings.

positioning as 'underdogs', have helped to align the Brexit vote with the U.S. election: both are seen to mark the entry into a "post-fact era" or "post-truth age" ("Post-fact" / "Post-truth", n. p.). While the Vote Leave campaign clearly bears post-factual traits, the attempt to explain it solely in these terms does not do justice to its complexity: it also fuelled anti-immigration and xenophobic sentiments, appealed to past English glory and patriotism, and positioned itself in opposition to the political establishment.

The limits of the post-factual as an explanatory frame become even more obvious in one of the first post-Brexit interpretations of the referendum result, namely the so-called "victory speech" that Farage held on 24 June 2016 at 4am.

> Dare to dream that the dawn is breaking on an independent United Kingdom. This, if the predictions now are right, this will be a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people. We have fought against the multinationals, we have fought against the big merchant banks, we have fought against big politics, we have fought against lies, corruption and deceit. And today honesty, decency and belief in nation, I think now is going to win. (Farage qtd. in Withnall 2016)

In this speech, the then UKIP-leader clearly emplots the results of the Brexit vote as change ('dawn is breaking'), refers to the British auto-stereotype of independence and interprets the vote as a revolt of the deprived and dispossessed, as a victory for 'real', 'ordinary', 'decent' people.

A similar self-legitimization characterizes a speech by the then Prime Minister Theresa May at the Conservative conference in Birmingham on 5 October 2016.

> [I]n June people voted for *change*. And *change* is going to come. [...] The referendum [...] was about a sense – deep, profound and let's face it often justified – that many people have today that the world works well for a privileged few, but not for them. It was a vote not just to *change* Britain's relationship with the European Union, but to call for a *change* in the way our country works – and the people for whom it works – forever.
> Knock on almost any door in almost any part of the country, and you will find the roots of the revolution laid bare. Our society should work for everyone, but if you can't afford to get onto the property ladder, or your child is stuck in a bad school, it doesn't feel like it's working for you. Our economy should work for everyone, but if your pay has stagnated for several years in a row and fixed items of spending keep going up, it doesn't feel like it's working for you. Our democracy should work for everyone, but if you've been trying to say things need to *change* for years and your complaints fall on deaf ears, it doesn't feel like it's working for you. (May 2016, n. p.; my emphasis, J. H.)

Her speech shows how May interprets the Brexit vote as a call for social change within Britain[3] in order to fashion herself as the spokesperson for 'the weak' and the 'ordinary working people'. Already in this part of her speech, May juxtaposes a privileged few with 'the people'. In later passages, her speech becomes even more explicit and reiterates the Vote Leave campaign's anti-elitist and patriotic sentiments.

> But today, too many people in positions of power behave as though they have more in common with international elites than with the people down the road, the people they employ, the people they pass in the street.
> But if you believe you're a citizen of the world, you're a citizen of nowhere. You don't understand what the very word 'citizenship' means. (May 2016, n. p.)

May accuses people in power of associating themselves with international elites rather than with the "imagined community" (in Benedict Anderson's sense, 2006 [1983]) of the British nation. Claiming elitism to be paired with a lack of national identification, she dissociates power from public opinion and legitimation.

Having identified the vote as British citizens' legitimate call for social change, May derives from this a political mandate for her Conservative party, which she believes best suited to build "that new united Britain" the people want (May 2016, n. p.). Envisioning "a country that works for everyone" (May 2016, n. p.), May uses the Brexit vote as a means to invigorate the national imagination. This becomes particularly palpable towards the end of her speech, when she frames the act of defying the establishment as a national trait of the British: "it took *that typically British quiet resolve* for people to go out and vote as they did: to defy the establishment, to ignore the threats, to make their voice heard." (May 2016, n. p., my emphasis, J. H.) Hence, May's interpretation of the Brexit vote as the voice of 'the people' and her focus on 'change' enable her to sketch a new national narrative. As acts of retrospective worldmaking, both Farage's and May's speeches thus point to the affordances of the post-factual as a narrative of change (and of changed times) for the nationalist imagination.

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3 'Change' is mentioned five times in the above-quoted extract, and 27 times in the whole speech (cf. May 2016, n. p.). Based on Matías Martínez's concept of truth-begging narratives ("wahrheitsheischende Erzählungen") in this volume, May's references to change in the quotation's first paragraph can be described as a configurative explanation of the vote (as a revolution of and for working-class people), while the second paragraph provides a causal explanation of it.

Of course, speaking of 'the people' ignores that 48.1% (of the 72.2% who actually went to the ballot boxes) voted 'remain'. As the "visual guide" published by *Politico Europe* (cf. Busquets Guàrdia 2016) reveals, such rhetoric excludes Remain supporters in Scotland and Northern Ireland. It fails to include the young, the educated as well as the Labour supporters and Liberal Democrats who voted 'remain'. According to Sayer, these statistics can help us see the limits of the post-factual narrative of change. There is, for instance, no correlation between voting Leave and low-income levels that would support views of the vote as a working-class revolt (Sayer 2017, cf. 96–97). Sayer also refers to Remain support in ethnically diverse areas which correlate with neither class nor education. In other words, not just rich and educated voters supported Remain, and "*the more ethnically diverse the area, the more likely it was to vote Remain*" (Sayer 2017, 99). Sayer therefore disputes interpretations that see the vote as a revolt of the poor and uneducated from deindustrialized regions who turned against an elite that ignored them. He contends that journalists who use the post-factual as an explanatory frame in order to read the Brexit vote as a failure of elites basically embrace the narrative put forward by Farage and reiterated by May. Sayer – and also Stephen Ashe (2016) – hold that the referendum results point on the contrary to structures of continuity. In the following section I will explore how such structures point to the persistence of British Euroscepticism (cf. Spiering 2015) and 'postcolonial melancholia' (cf. Gilroy 2004) and inquire how far these two notions can serve as alternative explanatory frames for the Brexit vote.

2 British Euroscepticism and Postcolonial Melancholia: Explanatory Frames Beyond the Post-Factual

As the rise of the *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) in Germany and of the *Front National* in France demonstrate, a mistrust of supranational politics in general, and of EU bureaucracy in particular, exists in many European countries. This is often paired with right-wing, anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments. However, no 'Frexit', 'Nexit', or 'Grexit' has been voted for so far. Could May be right, and is there something specifically British about Brexit? Spiering, who has looked into the relationship between Britain and Europe in several of his publications, holds that British Euroscepticism does indeed differ from that of other EU countries in that it is characterised by a strong cultural component and rests

on the long-established tradition of contrasting the British Self with the European Other. According to Spiering, British Euroscepticism encompasses more than a rejection of EU regulations and the 'dictates of Brussels'; it is not just about the EU, it is about feeling un-European.

> Perceptions of identity are formed by means of oppositional thinking, by contrasting the Self with the Other. The British are not French, the French are not German. The case of Britain is special in that the Other can also be Europe. The Europeans are either viewed *en masse* as non-British, or one nation is made to represent Europe as a whole. (Spiering 2015, 20)

Hence, while it is part of a wider set of dynamics across Europe, British Euroscepticism is largely defined by cultural exceptionalism and, as such, it becomes an expression of national identity. In other words, opposing Europe contributes to the formation of British national identity.[4]

In this light it is curious that May's speech did not exploit British Euroscepticism in order to construct her narrative of a new, united Britain. Instead of contrasting the British Self with a European Other, May directs her reflection inward by interpreting the vote as a call for change *within* British society and democracy. Again, we have multiple explanations that complement rather than exclude each other: even though British Euroscepticism draws attention to Europe's continuing significance (as 'Other') in the national narrative, its potential as sole explanatory factor seems also limited.

Let me, therefore, turn to another advocate of continuity as an explanation of the vote: the British writer Ian McEwan. In an interview in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* on 26 October 2016, McEwan argues that the Brexit vote is the continuation of an old story of Britain's innocence, and claims that this strong national narrative is the reason why Britain was never really part of the European project.

> Ich glaube, dass es sich beim Brexit um die Fortsetzung einer alten Story handelt. Der Zweite Weltkrieg war für Großbritannien ein Augenblick des Triumphs und der Tugendhaftigkeit. Ganz Europa war besetzt oder lag in Schande, aber Großbritannien war ohne Schande, war gut und edel. Anders als die Niederlande und Belgien waren wir nicht besetzt, anders als das französische Vichy-Regime hatten wir nicht mit Nazideutschland kollaboriert. Anders als Deutschland hatten wir keinen Holocaust zu verschulden. Großbritannien war unschuldig und hat sich die Unschuld seitdem bewahrt. Dies ist ein sehr starkes nationales Narrativ und erklärt, weshalb Großbritannien nie wirklich Teil des Eu-

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4 This opposition also largely informs early 20th-century British writing about Europe (cf. Nyman 2000).

ropäischen Projekts war, das aus den Trümmern des Zweiten Weltkriegs entstanden ist. (McEwan 2016, 35-36)[5]

McEwan refers to the establishment of the European Union as a mission of peace-keeping after WW2 and shows how British sensibilities differed from the rest of 'the Continent', as the British – in stark contrast to the Germans, French, Belgians and Dutch – felt innocent (a sentiment that features prominently in McEwan's 1990-spy novel discussed below). Moreover, the post-WW2 sense of being both victorious and virtuous came at a time when Britain had long been neither victorious nor innocent, but a nation of colonizers suffering from the loss of its empire. The possibility of outshining Europe and distancing themselves from the European project in the aftermath of the war offered the British relief from what Paul Gilroy (2004) has called Britain's 'postcolonial melancholia'.

The concept of postcolonial melancholia describes a condition characterised by a mixture of guilt and pride, which prevails in contemporary Britain and indicates Britain's ambivalence *vis-à-vis* its brutal colonial history, undermining the moral legitimacy of the imperial project and damaging the nation's self-esteem (cf. Gilroy 2004, 100). According to Gilroy, the "repressed and buried knowledge of cruelty and injustice" actively shapes "the hostile responses to strangers and settlers" in Britain and informs an understanding of "immigration as being akin to war and invasion" (Gilroy 2004, 102).[6] It is clearly such an understanding of immigration that the UKIP poster "Breaking point" visualises and appeals to.[7]

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5 "I think that Brexit is the continuation of an old story. For the UK, the Second World War was a moment of triumph and virtue. All of Europe had been occupied or was in disgrace, but Britain was without shame, it was good and noble. Unlike the Netherlands and Belgium, we were not occupied; unlike the French Vichy regime, we had not collaborated with Nazi Germany. Unlike Germany we had not perpetrated a Holocaust. Britain was innocent and has retained that innocence ever since. This is a powerful national narrative and explains why Britain never really participated in the European project which has emerged from the ruins of the Second World War." (my translation, J. H.) For a detailed account of McEwan's political commentary on Brexit and on how his 2016-novel *The Nutshell* reflects his "anti-Brexit mindset", see Felicitas Meifert-Menhard (2019; here: 195).

6 See also the following quote: "Indeed, the incomers may be unwanted and feared precisely because they are the unwitting bearers of the imperial and colonial past." (Gilroy 2004, 110).

7 The poster is a good example of communicative action that aspires to irritate, which Andreas Langenohl refers to in his contribution to this volume. Indeed, some have argued that Remain lost the vote because their visual marketing could not compete with that of the Brexiteers. At the same time, it is important to note that the UKIP poster does not demonize postcolonial migration but lashes out against (Eastern) European (and Muslim) migrants.

Gilroy further argues that the failure to accommodate its cruel history of colonialism has prevented Britain from mourning its loss of empire. In compensation, the country nostalgically clings to its victory in WW2, i.e. in a war "against foes who are simply, tidily, and uncomplicatedly evil" (Gilroy 2004, 97).[8] Reading on, there are clear similarities between what Gilroy wrote in 2004 about Britain's neurotic obsession with WW2 as "a privileged point of entry into national identity and self-understanding", as "an ethnic myth" and as "the place or moment before the country lost its moral and cultural bearings" (Gilroy 2004, 97)[9] and McEwan's 'strong national narrative'.

Gilroy's concept of postcolonial melancholia allows one to connect the Brexit vote not just with Europe but with the continuous imperial nostalgia in Britain today. The concept also helps one understand the repeated friendly references in the Vote Leave campaign to the former British settler colonies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. Brexiteers frequently argued (and argue) that Britain has no need of the EU when it 'has' the Commonwealth, i.e. a vast untapped network outside the EU built around a common political system and a shared cultural heritage in which Britain can reassume its global role. On 14 March 2016, for instance, *The Telegraph* published an article by Tamara Chabe, whose accompanying photograph evoked Britain as an imperial power, showing the Queen visiting Tuvalu in 1982, and in which Chabe holds that

> Britain's continuing membership of the EU is holding the nation back from fostering stronger trading links with Commonwealth countries, many of which are growing at a faster rate than EU economies. [...] [L]eaving the EU would allow Britain to rekindle and re-engage with independent Commonwealth countries, and strike fairer trade deals which

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8 Other compensatory strategies of the British, according to Gilroy, include selective commemoration of its colonial past, which emphasizes Britain's role in ending the slave trade and 'granting' independence to former colonies but tends to forget e.g. "the brutal conduct of the war against 'Mau Mau' insurgents in Kenya" (2004, 101), as well as the fact that the UK joined the U.S. invasion of Iraq, presumably in the attempt 'to be great again' (cf. Gilroy 2004, 103–104).

9 In full, the quote reads as follows: "[T]here is something neurotic about Britain's continued citation of the anti-Nazi war. Making it a privileged point of entry into national identity and self-understanding reveals a desire to find a way back to the point where the national culture [...] was [...] both comprehensible and habitable. That memory of the country at war against foes who are simply, tidily and uncomplicatedly evil has recently acquired the status of an ethnic myth. It explains not only how the nation remade itself through war and victory but can also be understood as a rejection or referral of its present problems. That process is driven by the need to get back to the place or moment before the country lost its moral and cultural bearings." (Gilroy 2004, 97)

> would better reflect Britain's role as a leading pioneer of free market enterprise. [...] Also Britain's immigration policy now discriminates against Commonwealth citizens in favour of EU migrants, many of whom have no links to Britain. The Commonwealth and Britain have a shared history, cultural links, common legal systems, business practices, and much more. Membership of the EU is forcing Britain to become more insular and regional, and a vote to leave the EU would allow Britain to become internationalist and a reinvigorated, self-governing, global trading nation. (Chabe 2016, n. p.)

To conclude, the notion of British Euroscepticism and, in particular, the concept of postcolonial melancholia, make it possible to align the Brexit vote – and the campaign leading up to it – with 'continuity' rather than with post-factual 'change'.

In the following, third section of this chapter, the reflection on the limits of 'continuity' or 'change' as explanatory frameworks for the Brexit vote will be taken into the literary field by means of a case study exploring whether British writing about Europe before the vote already prefigured a Britain outside Europe – or at least outside the European Community. If Brexit, as Robert Eaglestone (2018, 1) has claimed, "grew from cultural beliefs, real or imaginary, about Europe and the UK", this shift in focus allows us to see Brexit not just as a political, economic and administrative event but as "an event in culture, too".

Concretely, I will compare Ian McEwan's *The Innocent or The Special Relationship* (1990), which came out just after the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and Jonathan Coe's *Expo 58* (2013). As I have already demonstrated elsewhere, both spy novels reflect Britain's decline as an imperial power in the early stages of the Cold War and are characterised by an emergent transnational perspective (cf. Hauthal 2019, especially 146–150). Building on this earlier article, the following analysis will scrutinize whether (and how) the novels also nourish, and / or critically challenge, a sense of 'postcolonial melancholia'.[10]

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10 My reference to Gilroy's concept, however, is not meant to imply that one of the two novels explicitly engages with Britain's or Europe's colonial past. Rather, this radically different (and not always equally critical) way of confronting postcolonial melancholia characterizes Black British fictions of Europe by authors such as Caryl and Mike Phillips, Bernardine Evaristo and Jamal Mahjoub. Mike Phillips's *A Shadow of Myself*, for instance, presents London as the best (i.e. most multicultural) place to live for the majority of his novel's mixed-race characters.

3 Prefiguring Britain out of Europe?
The Innocent and *Expo 58*

Both McEwan's and Coe's novels are set in the 1950s, at the beginning of the Cold War. The main action of *The Innocent* takes place in Berlin in the mid-fifties (1955/56), while Coe's novel, as its title already indicates, is set largely in Brussels around the time of the 1958 World's Fair. Both novels feature unassuming young male British civil servants, both of them 'innocents', who encounter and experience historical change and whose stays in Europe deeply unsettle their private and professional lives. *The Innocent* centres on Leonard Marnham, a 24-year-old Post Office technician from Tottenham still living with his parents. Leonard is sent to Berlin, where he works on a secret British-American intelligence project that involves installing tape recorders in a tunnel underneath Berlin's Soviet sector in order to tap into Soviet landlines. Coe's protagonist, Thomas Foley, is 32 and lives with his wife Sylvia and his baby daughter Gill in the suburbs of London (Tooting). Working as a junior copywriter for the Central Office of Information, he is sent to Brussels to supervise the 'Britannia', the replica pub that forms the heart of the British exhibit at 'Expo 58', where he becomes involved in secret operations by British, American and Russian intelligence. Focusing on the portrayal of their male British protagonists and the latter's 1950s mindset, the following section inquires into the novels' retrospective worldmaking by asking how the 1950s mentality they depict can be (re-)read from the contemporary point of view of their literary creation.

My choice of spy novels in the context of Brexit, and of these two texts in particular, is informed by two recent works on the genre, namely Luc Boltanski's *Mysteries & Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies* (2014) and Sam Goodman's *British Spy Fiction and the End of Empire* (2016). Boltanski approaches literary history from the angle of sociology and connects the emergence of the genre to the modern nation state by arguing that both crime and spy fiction subject the nation state to "a trial or *test*" (2014, 18; cf. also 124), thereby calling into question 'the reality of reality'. They set up situations which seemingly indicate that the state does not have reality under control (cf. Chapter 1 "REALITY versus *Reality*", 2014, 1–39) and, in this way, could be said to prefigure post-truth conditions. Understanding espionage as the profession concerned with the spreading of lies directed against an enemy, Boltanski points out how the corruption of truth is centrally at stake in spy fic-

tion. This first affects the spies themselves, making them a professional group living in a post-truth age long before we conceived of that notion,[11] then the states they work for, and ultimately also the readers of this genre, causing profound disorientation. While the post-truth dimension of spy fiction is not the main focus of the two texts in question here (better examples in this respect can be found in the work of John le Carré), it is nevertheless implicitly discernible in both novels, since both Leonard and Thomas become involved in espionage operations whose purposes are never fully revealed to them.

Sam Goodman, in turn, has linked British spy fiction, in particular, to the end of empire by demonstrating how British spy novels have been strongly affected by decolonisation and Britain's increasing imperial decline. According to Goodman, this shows, for instance, in the "compensatory fantasy" (2016, 12) of Ian Fleming's James Bond, a British spy who tirelessly maintains the integrity of Empire in predominantly exotic contexts, and thus throws the dwindling state of the British empire into reverse. A second strand of British spy fiction, such as the later spy novels by John le Carré and Len Deighton, also reflects on Britain's diminishing international standing but rather mirrors it by relegating the spy from international agent to domestic detective and by shifting focus to geographically and politically proximate European locations (cf. Goodman 2016, 10–12; cf. Hauthal 2019, 146). The novels by McEwan and Coe belong to this latter strand: in both *The Innocent* and *Expo 58*, the European setting is indicative of the diminishing influence of British interests overseas.

Moreover, the portrayal of the white male British protagonists in both novels reflects Britain's growing insignificance in a post-imperial world. In both *The Innocent* and *Expo 58*, the protagonists represent their country abroad. They are portrayed as stereotypically English and, in each novel, this Englishness is challenged. In *The Innocent*, for example, Leonard asks for tea in the American canteen on his first day at work – of course, to no avail. In addition, there are numerous incidents in which Leonard observes a stiffness in the way he is dressed, as well as in his manner of communicating, that he ascribes to his 'Englishness' and opposes to the American display of self-confidence:

> He had an idea there was something risible about his stiffness of manner. His Englishness was not quite the comfort it had been to a preceding generation. It made him feel vulnerable. Americans, on the other hand, seemed utterly at ease being themselves. (*TI* 7)[12]

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11 Of course, Boltanski does not yet talk about post-truth or post-fact.

12 Here and in the following, quotes from McEwan's novel will be referenced as *TI*.

Leonard feels "foolish" and ashamed of his "English dither" (*TI* 4) when he first talks to his American superior Bob Glass over the phone. The role-model function that Americans such as Glass have for Leonard also clearly shows in sentences like the following: "His [Leonard's] voice sounded prissy in his ears. In deference to Glass, he was softening his 't's and flattening his 'a's" (*TI* 9).[13] By depicting Leonard's Englishness as a source of embarrassment, the novel can be seen to reflect Britain's imperial decline and to demonstrate how it affects the national psyche of its male protagonist.

The Innocent evokes a sense of postcolonial melancholia in its insistence on Leonard's innocence, as well as by revealing his obsession with WW2. When Leonard first arrives in Berlin, he thinks of Germany as "a defeated nation" (*TI* 5) and walks through the city "with a certain proprietorial swagger, as though his feet beat out the rhythms of a speech by Mr Churchill" (*TI* 5). The heterodiegetic narrator, however, points out that Leonard was too young to contribute to the victory he feels proud of, and that not the British but the Russian army had liberated Berlin. The narrator thus mocks Leonard's display of national pride and ridicules his feelings of superiority (cf. Hauthal 2019, 148). At the same time, by demonstrating how national imagination and patriotism coincide not only with strong emotions such as pride and proprietorship but also with a tendency to downplay and ignore facts – and even one's own lived experience – the passage indicates that postcolonial melancholia and post-factual attitudes are intricately linked in McEwan's retrospective portrayal of a typical 1950s British mindset.

In *Expo 58*, postcolonial melancholia features in a similar way. Critics of Coe's novel have described its protagonist Thomas Foley as "a sort of anti-James Bond" (Connolly 2013, n. p.) and have seen in him "the classic Englishman abroad: well-meaning, apologetic, and a martyr to misunderstanding" (McCrum 2013, n. p.). Contrasting Thomas's "obtuse [...] stupefaction" (*E* 9)[14] and his "indifference" (*E* 10) with his superiors' conviction that he is their "man in Brussels" (*E* 11), Coe also ridicules his protagonist with the help of the novel's heterodiegetic narrator. His way of doing so, however, is less explicit than McEwan's.

The crisis of national imagination arising from Britain's decline as an imperial power is also reflected in both novels through the protagonists' insecure masculinity. Both Leonard and Thomas are not only young and hopelessly inexperienced, but – what is more – they embody 'new men'. The way they relate to women contrasts sharply with the "virile cult of competence" (*TI* 18) and

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13 For the preceding analysis of Leonard's Englishness, cf. Hauthal (2019, 147–148).

14 Here and in the following, quotes from Coe's novel will be referenced as *E*.

aggression of their working environments, which are almost exclusively inhabited by men. Thomas, for instance, is fully aware of (and ill at ease with) his 'different' masculinity: "What sort of man preferred a stroll in the park with his wife and baby daughter to the pressing business of getting on in the world?" (*E* 13)[15] As the narratives proceed, these 'new men' form love-relations with European women – with the older German, Maria, in the case of Leonard and with Flemish-Belgian Anneke in the case of Thomas. While in both novels the U.S. and Russia are suspended in Cold War concurrence, competition and enmity, the British characters introduce a transcultural element into this constellation, and by extension into the spy genre.

Through their romance plots, both novels place Britain within Europe and draw attention to European rather than national concerns.[16] In *The Innocent*, the specifically European dimension of the transnational discourse that emerges from the lovers' encounter is reflected in the speech that Leonard's American boss gives on the occasion of Leonard's and Maria's engagement:

> We all of us in this room, German, British, American, in our different kinds of work, have committed ourselves to building a new Berlin. A new Germany. A new Europe. [...] We all know that the place, the only place, to start making a Europe free and safe from war is right here, with ourselves, in our hearts. Leonard and Maria belong to countries that ten years ago were at war. By engaging to be married they are bringing their own peace, in their own way, to their nations. [...] Marriages across borders increase understanding between nations and make it slightly harder each time for them to go to war ever again. (*TI* 124)[17]

Significantly, both novels link the shift in focus from a national to a transnational perspective to the protagonist's process of maturation. Leonard reflects:

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15 In *The Innocent*, Leonard embodies a similarly 'different' masculinity, as Maria's first thoughts about him reveal: "The man scrabbling to leave by her front door was less like the men she had known and more like herself. [...] How wonderful it was, not to be frightened of a man. It gave her a chance to like him, to have desires which were not simply reactions to his" (*TI* 54–55).

16 Transculturality as a result of mixing romance with other generic features characterises many contemporary British 'fictions of Europe', cf. e.g. Tim Parks' *Europa*, David Edgar's *Pentecost*, David Greig's *Europe*, John Berger's *Once in Europa* and Malcolm Bradbury's *Doctor Criminale*. See also Luisa Passerini's study, which connects the idea of love to the idea of a united Europe (1999).

17 Leonard's German fiancée Maria, however, criticizes Glass's speech: "'It was a terrible speech,' Maria said, although from her look he thought she did not really mean it. 'Does he think I'm the Third Reich. Is that what he thinks you are marrying? Does he really think that people represent countries? [...]'" (*TI* 129)

"Germans were no longer ex-Nazis, they were Maria's compatriots. [...] Leonard took it as a sign of his new maturity that he could work contentedly alongside the man Glass had described as a real horror" (*TI* 63).

The novels' attention to the protagonist's development reveals that in addition to the romance, the *Bildungsroman*, too, exerts an influence on these two texts. The influence of both generic templates is most clearly discernible in the way the novels end. In *The Innocent*, a postscript set in 1987 tells how Leonard returns to Berlin, receives a letter from Maria that she wrote after her husband's (Glass's) death and how Leonard imagines flying to the U.S. to reunite with her (*TI* 213–226). Similarly, the last chapter of *Expo 58* summarizes major historical events and relates what happened to Thomas and his family. It culminates in Antwerp, where 84-year-old Thomas meets Anneke's friend Carla, who insinuates that he might be the father of Anneke's oldest son (cf. *E* 262). Informing readers in detail about what happened to the lovers after their separation, the endings exceed spy fiction's traditional closures and indicate that actions and settings merely serve as a backdrop for the primary exploration of the psychology and identity of their characters.[18]

However, in neither of these two texts is engaging with Europe without ambiguity. In both *The Innocent* and *Expo 58*, the protagonists' relationships with European women eventually fail. In *Expo 58*, Thomas is persuaded by his mother not to leave his wife and daughter for Anneke, or – as his mother puts it: "this girl in Brussels" (*E* 232) – and he continues his unassuming life in the English Midlands. The life of Leonard, who is repeatedly identified throughout the novel as the eponymous "innocent" (cf. *TI* 129, 201, 208), takes a radical turn when he and his fiancée kill Maria's violent ex-husband Otto in self-defence and, together, dismember his dead body with a saw – an event that eventually brings their relationship to an end. A closer look at the novels' endings thus suggests that the cross-cultural relationships they depict are only temporary and do not lead to any permanent relocation of their British protagonists to Europe. Moreover, the emergence of transnational discourses in these texts does not result in a convivial Europe. Ultimately, both texts narratively prefigure, in this sense, a 'Britain out of Europe'.

Through their depiction of British young men in crisis, both novels reflect Britain's decline as an imperial and international power in the early stages of the Cold War. While, given their role and age as well as the time in question, Leonard's and Thomas's behaviour and mentality would seem perfectly natural, the novels' narrating voices indicate and invite a retrospective (re-)assessment

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18 For this and the preceding four paragraphs, cf. Hauthal (2019, 148–150).

of their 1950s mindset: they do not just evoke and ridicule the protagonists' postcolonial melancholia but also demonstrate how their crises of national and gender identity facilitate cross-cultural exchange with other European characters. Imagining European spaces as places of transnational encounter complicates the traditionally nationalist rhetoric of spy fiction and hybridizes the dichotomous universe that traditionally characterizes Cold War and post-Cold War espionage fiction. This shift in focus tends to coincide with mixing the genre of the spy novel with elements from other genres, including the romance and the *Bildungsroman*. Transculturality thus coincides with, and is reinforced by, generic hybridity (cf. Hauthal 2019, 154).

McEwan's and Coe's pre-Brexit novels not only offer glimpses of transculturality, they also point to the continuities of British Euroscepticism and postcolonial melancholia which help to understand the Brexit vote. In both respects, the two novels contrast starkly with British writing that appeared after the vote and which critics and publishing houses were quick to call 'Brexit literature' or "BrexLit" – a label which, according to Kristian Shaw, defines "fictions that either directly respond to or imaginatively allude to Britain's exit from the EU or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain's withdrawal" (2018, 18). These fictions and their retrospective worldmaking and nation narration will form the focus of the following outlook.

4 BrexLit's Retrospective Worldmaking and Nation Narration: A Brief Outlook

So far, the 'BrexLit' label has been applied to Anthony Cartwright's *The Cut* (2017), Ali Smith's seasonal quartet (including *Autumn*, published 20 October 2016; *Winter*, published 2 November 2017; *Spring*, published 28 March 2019, i.e. the day before the UK was originally scheduled to leave the European Union; and *Summer*, announced for August 2020) as well as to Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2018) and John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2018).[19] All these novels can be

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19 Some critics have also attached the BrexLit Label to Amanda Craig's *The Lie of the Land* (2017; cf. Kean 2017, Pearson 2017). Brexit, however, has not just been narrated in novels, as Carol Ann Duffy's verbatim play *My Country: A Work in Progress* (2017) and the British television drama *Brexit: The Uncivil War* (2019; directed by Toby Haynes) demonstrate. While both Duffy's play and Haynes's film still await analysis, short narrative forms have already received

described as attempts to come to terms with the divisive forces in Britain that the referendum result laid bare.[20] As such, they illustrate the wide range of responses to Brexit – not just in terms of literary genres and styles[21] but also in how they variously focus on the state of the British nation by making a plea for understanding the other side and imagining hopeful futures (*Middle England*), issuing a warning (*The Wall*), (re-)imagining Englishness (*Middle England*) or simply fictionalizing the public debate (all except *The Wall*). Moreover, while some novels provide a sense of closure for the – at this very moment – open-ended political process (*Middle England*), others rather resemble 'broken narratives' in that they "foreground or even flaunt the impossibility of coherence, order and attempts at sense-making" (Nünning and Nünning 2016, 75). And while several writers have opted for a realistic style (*The Cut*), others have moved the action into the future and resorted to satire and dystopia (*The Wall*). Yet, despite the stylistic, structural and thematic differences of these works, existing research has predominantly sought to connect Brexit fictions to the political realities of present-day Britain through thematic analyses (cf. the contributions in Eaglestone 2018; Wally 2018), arguing that – like the political discourse and public debate after the vote – BrexLit is not about Europe but about Britain (cf. Pittel 2018, 59).

In addition, a closer look at BrexLit in light of the above analysis reveals three other, equally striking similarities. BrexLit so far (1) emphatically embrac-

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some attention. In his 2019-article, Roy Sommer, for instance, approaches Brexit as social drama in the sense of Victor Turner and argues that the *Guardian*-commissioned *Brexit shorts: Dramas from a Divided Nation* (monodramas that were made into short films and published online, see www.theguardian.com/stage/series/brexit-shorts) "try to cope with crisis by exploring the minds of political others" (2019, 317). In their introduction to the special issue "Literatures of Brexit" (Zwierlein et al. 2019), Anne-Julia Zwierlein and Joanna Rostek also mention reflections of Brexit in other media than literature (2019, 126); cf. also Christoph Reinfandt's observations concerning Brexit and Billy Bragg (2019).

20 Cf. Hobolt (2016). Post-referendum Britain as a divided country is also the focus of a recent special issue of the *Journal for the Study of British Studie*s, titled "Brexit and the Divided United Kingdom" (Rostek and Zwierlein 2019).

21 By way of example, see the contrast between Smith's season-inspired cyclical emplotment of her tetralogy and the near-future dystopian set-up of Lanchester's novel. Zwierlein and Rostek suggest distinguishing "three dominant representational modes of Brexit (novel) writing" (2019, 127): "1) the satirical / dystopian, 2) the testimonial / verbatim, 3) the realist / panoramic" (126). While their typological approach helpfully maps this literary field, the slight overlap between modes 2 and 3 (Zwierlein and Rostek 2019, 132) prompts the question whether the testimonial / verbatim mode could be considered rather as a variation of the realist one (cf. Hauthal 2013).

es the notion of change rather than continuity, (2) tends to dramatize difference and conflict, and (3) is inclined to focus inwardly and to privilege England (even though Brexit will affect the UK as a whole). Before the implications of these similarities are further discussed, all three aspects will be briefly outlined.

To begin with, all these novels narrate Brexit with recurrent reference to the notion of change. Ali Smith, for instance, emplots Brexit as an agent of change[22] and even explicitly refers to the notions of 'post-truth' or the 'post-factual'. *Autumn*, the first in her seasonal quartet of contemporaneous novels, reflects on the conflict-ridden post-referendum mood of the country through its concern with the construction of fences, both physical and psychological.[23] The novel begins with an intertextual reference to Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), which at the same time indicates Smith's preoccupation with both divisive and dystopian as well as cyclical dynamics: "**It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times.** [sic] Again." (Smith 2016, 3; emphasis in original; cf. Zwierlein and Rostek 2019, 133) The eventfulness, and crisis- and division-inducing character, of Brexit (as opposed to the familiarity and the idea of renewal that the tetralogy's seasonal cycle evokes), as well as the totality of the nation as the novel's main frame of reference, come most clearly to the fore in the oft-cited litany about the conflicting feelings and contradictory actions of 'people' 'all across the country' in the immediate aftermath of the vote:

> **All across the country,** there was misery and rejoicing. [...]
> All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. All across the country, people felt they'd done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing. All across the country, people looked up Google: *what is EU*? [...]
> All across the country, everything changed overnight. [...]
> All across the country, the country was divided, a fence here, a wall there, a line drawn here, a line crossed there, [...] here/there. (Smith 2016, 59–61; emphases in original)

While change and division prevail in *Autumn*, in the course of *Winter* and *Spring*, Smith's concern with the post-factual dimension of the vote and the role

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22 Also in *The Wall* the notion of change is paramount. Throughout the novel "the Change" (Lanchester 2019, 11) is frequently referred to and shaped as an incisive event dividing the storyworld into a "before and after" (110). However, change here refers not to Brexit but to the effects of climate change, i.e. "one particular shift, of sea level and weather" (Lanchester 2019, 110), which led to the construction of a wall around the island of Britain.
23 The same concerns also occupy Zadie Smith in her essay "Fences: A Brexit Diary" (2018). On the significance of border thinking in both texts, see Kirsten Sandrock (2019, 143–147).

social media played in manipulating voters comes increasingly to the fore. In *Winter*, the notion of truth, and how one is to decide what is true, is central, as characters pretend to be someone else (Lux agrees to act as Art's girlfriend Charlotte; Charlotte has hacked Art's nature blog and posts false entries in Art's name), experience delusions (Art's mother Sophia sees and talks to a floating head), try to tell themselves or others the truth (cf. Smith 2017, 244; 247; 251; 297) and even reflect on the beauty of truth (Smith 2017, 211). *Spring*, in turn, right from the start, explicitly and ironically confronts the effects of post-truth politics, hate speech and of politicians' appropriation of the will of the people:

> **Now what we don't want is Facts.** What we want is bewilderment. What we want is repetition. What we want is repetition. What we want is people in power saying the truth is not the truth. What we want is elected members of parliament saying knife getting heated stuck in her front and twisted things like bring your own noose we want governing members of parliament in the house of commons shouting kill yourself at opposition members of parliament [...] (Smith 2019, 3; emphasis and different font sizes in original)

Similarly, in *The Cut*, the chapter headings "After" and "Before" (referring to the vote) alternate ten times throughout the novel, segmenting the narrative into smaller units and drawing attention to the divisive power of the change that the referendum result brought about. In *Middle England*, finally, the changing force of Brexit can be seen to inform the novel's tripartite structure, with headings shifting from 'merrie' and 'deep' to 'old' England. The post-factual as a narrative of change (and changed times), which Farage and May can be seen to have exploited for their political purposes in the post-referendum public debate, clearly also reverberates in BrexLit.

Secondly, in an attempt at "redressive action" in the sense of Victor Turner (Turner qtd. in Sommer 2019, 298), Brexit novels tend to have in common that they first dramatize difference and conflict before offering a retrospective explanation – and, as in the case of *Middle England* and *The Wall*, they even provide a prospective sense of closure by imagining a possible future (resolution / dystopia). Like the redressive action initiated by *The Guardian*'s Brexit shorts (Sommer 2019, cf. 304–308), *The Cut* was commissioned to "build a fictional bridge between the two Britains that have opposed each other since the referendum day", as Pereine-publisher Maike Ziervogel explains in her foreword to the novel (Ziervogel in Cartwright 2017, n. p.). Accordingly, the short novel confronts representatives of different classes (and genders) in the encounter of Grace and Cairo, for whom geography becomes destiny. Depicting the successful documentary film-maker Grace travelling from London to the Black Country in order to interview those she suspects of having voted for "Leave", *The Cut*

revisits the archetypal conflict between city and country by juxtaposing London and Dudley, a large industrial town in decline near Birmingham.[24] *Middle England*, in turn, features a couple (Sophie and Ian) whose differences over the vote at first break their marriage apart; however, they come together again and will, as readers learn at the novel's close (set in September 2018), welcome a baby on the day that Britain was – at the time Coe wrote the novel – supposed to leave the European Union (29 March 2019). Conflict and its dramatization also clearly propel the plot of Lanchester's dystopia: *The Wall* centres on, and is narrated by, Joseph Kavanagh, a young 'Defender' whose task it is to protect 'the Wall' against attacks from 'the Others' (or die / be sentenced to death if he fails to do so). At a time where the actual Brexit still has to happen, or be warded off for good, the narrativization of the social drama of Brexit is in full swing. While Britain's national crisis is still gathering momentum, with British Parliament suspended by Prime Minister Boris Johnson at the time of writing, BrexLit clearly forms part of the redressive action already in place and seeking to limit the spread of the crisis. Yet, this redressive action is limited in scope, as the third commonality of Brexit fiction reveals.

With their focus on present-day Britain (or rather: England), and on the attempts of their protagonists to make sense of the Brexit vote, Brexit novels have so far largely lent themselves to the generic labels of the "condition of England novel" (Lusin 2018) and of the "state of the nation novel" (Guignery 2006).[25] Even Lanchester, who alludes to refugeeism and climate change in a global context,[26] while at the same time imagining a future Britain literally walled off from the rest of the world, shares with other writers the tendency first noted by Harald Pittel (2018, cf. 58–60) to privilege England and hence the idea of indigenous Englishness. Ultimately, given their national perspective and frame of reference, it is hardly surprising that Europe is rarely mentioned in any of these

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24 The novella is also briefly discussed by Zwierlein and Rostek (2019, 134–135) and Gerold Sedlmayr (2019, 40).

25 Cf. Shaw (2018, 27–28): "Rather than engaging with the larger realities of European life, the first wave of post-Brexit fiction largely seems to be detailing the specific frailties and parochial trivialities of an insular and diminished island – updated forms of state-of-the-nation novels that retain a narrow focus on British society and its isolation from the continent." See also Zwierlein and Rostek on the link between what they call 'realist / panoramic' BrexLit and these 19th-century traditions (2019, 131–135).

26 For a reading that situates *The Wall* in the context of climate change fiction, see Carolin Gebauer (2020).

texts.[27] Rather, by mirroring the inward-turned gaze of British politics as evidenced in an exemplary way by May's 2016-speech, BrexLit provides a contrasting foil to McEwan's and Coe's pre-referendum 'fictions of Europe' and the cross-cultural encounters they depict.

Due to its England-centred bias, the scope of BrexLit as redressive action is clearly limited and exclusive. Moreover, reading these texts as 'condition of England' or 'state of the nation' novels may lead to interpretations of equally limited analytical value. Both labels, to begin with, are notoriously vague and tell us little about how exactly Brexit is narrated. It is not yet clear how far recent narratological concepts such as turning points (Nünning and Sicks 2012), broken narratives (Babka et al. 2016), narratives of crisis (Nünning 2012) or prospective worldmaking (Sommer 2019, 309–316) might be used in order to further explore contemporary Brexit fiction, and its focus on 'change', as well as the functions that the narration of Brexit potentially fulfils in these narratives. This may also help us to determine whether (or not) the newly emerging subgenre of BrexLit (merely) denotes a thematically defined generic term pertaining to works of fiction that thematize and / or reflect Brexit, or if, and on what grounds, this type of fiction could be understood as a specific kind of post-truth narration.

5 Conclusion

While re-reading McEwan's and Coe's pre-Brexit spy novels in the aftermath, and through the lens, of the British EU referendum does not radically change my earlier analysis of these texts (cf. Hauthal 2019), it does prompt me to nuance my conclusions slightly differently. Before the Brexit vote, my emphasis when analysing McEwan's and Coe's novels was on profiling the post-insular identities and transnational discourses against previous readings informed by postcolonial theory and the concept of Euroscepticism (cf. e.g. Nyman 2000). Yet McEwan's and Coe's novels form an even starker contrast to post-referendum British fiction or BrexLit, with its unmistakably inward turn. In other words, even if in pre-referendum fictions of Europe, as illustrated here by *The Innocent* and *Expo 58*, imagining British characters in Europe is often tem-

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27 Zwierlein and Rostek also observe that "there are hardly any significant European characters or European locations throughout the currently emerging canon of Brexit writing" (2019, 137).

porary and not without ambiguity, it still broadens the nexus of nation and narration by hinting at the emergence of post-insular identities and transcultural discourses. It remains to be seen whether British novelists and dramatists will still imaginatively venture across the Channel in a post-Brexit future or whether the inward turn that comes with the focus on change in BrexLit will prevail.

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