



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 28 | Spring 2019

Title	"A lie that pandered to racism and xenophobia": Brexit, <i>White Teeth</i> and (Inter)national Borders
Author	Orlaith Darling
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	28
Issue Date	Spring 2019
Publication Date	28/06/2019
Editors	Alex Calder and Dominic Richard

FORUM claims non-exclusive rights to reproduce this article electronically (in full or in part) and to publish this work in any such media current or later developed. The author retains all rights, including the right to be identified as the author wherever and whenever this article is published, and the right to use all or part of the article and abstracts, with or without revision or modification in compilations or other publications. Any latter publication shall recognise FORUM as the original publisher.

“A lie that pandered to racism and xenophobia”: Brexit, *White Teeth* and (Inter)national Borders

Orlaith Darling

University of Edinburgh

*Perhaps one of the most significant votes in British history occurred in June 2016. Primarily dominated by buzzwords such as “control,” “borders” and “immigration,” Brexit has been a hugely divisive process for the UK. This division and internal wall-building is nowhere more evident than in domestic British race relations; indeed, in the week following the referendum, the number of racial hate crimes committed rose by 500%. This article examines the idea of borders in a contemporary British context, drawing on historic and recurrent iterations of empire (historical colonialism and the Windrush Scandal) and the Second World War as a founding national mythologies. It argues that Brexit represents post-war paranoia regarding European invasion, nostalgia for the glory days of Empire, and a fear of the post-colonial “other” as a threat to monolithic tenets of British identity. Zadie Smith’s novel, *White Teeth*, is harnessed throughout as a means of giving literary scope to these arguments, and as a means of highlighting how this manic obsession with borders is a long-standing aspect of British life (the novel was published in 2000 and therefore preceded the Brexit conversation). Moreover, discussion of the themes of non-white British identities, inter-racial breeding and genetics in Smith’s novel will be placed alongside a contemplation of ‘maternity tourism’ which has recently abounded in the British press. “Maternity tourism” comprises, I argue, a fear of the post-colonial female body and a distrust of the maternal body as a weak border which threatens the cohesive, white homogeneity of British society.*

Of late, it has become clear that a central part of the UK’s border anxiety comprises an inability to face the legacy of ravenous imperialism and to acknowledge the historic national interest in aggressively extending British borders. The issue of race is paramount to this narrative which abounded during the Brexit debate, of “taking back control” of immigration and national borders. As David Lammy pointed out to the House of Commons recently, Brexit “cause[s] an extra 638 hate crimes per month,” prompting a “UN rapporteur to warn of increased racism in our country.” Ray Drainville elucidates that many of these instances of racial bigotry have comprised telling black Britons to “go home.” As such, this xenophobia forgets that race is not as simple as an us/them binary, particularly with a colonial legacy such as Britain’s: the UK is necessarily a melting pot of different cultures and heritages. Zadie Smith’s novel *White Teeth* (2000) is immersed in questions of British racial identity. Throughout, characters originally hailing from former colonies such as Jamaica and India search for stable identities as both British and non-white, reflecting the expanding and shifting tenets of British national identity from the 1950s to the 1990s. In her article on race and science in Smith’s novel, Mindi McCann surveys the racial concerns in *White Teeth*, outlining that “the text depicts questions ranging from pedestrian scenarios, like the nature/nurture debate through twins separated at a young age, to

the inflammatory, such as the eugenicist who now funds research in genetic engineering” (617). However, this article focuses on anxiety pertaining to borders and the destabilised definition of “Britishness” amid the ongoing Brexit debacle. Issues of race and reproduction resurface, both in *White Teeth* and contemporary British discourse, as the epicentre of this angst. As is made clear in national conversations regarding “maternity tourism,” miscegenation, reproduction, and the imposition of both international and domestic borders are all part of the nation’s current contemplation of itself. The idea that foreign women are abusing the NHS to give birth to non-British children corresponds to current scandals such as Windrush, in which binary definitions of who is and is not British were applied with devastating consequences. As a result of the Windrush scandal, many people hailing from Caribbean countries, former British subjects who had been living in the UK for decades, were unceremoniously uprooted and deported. In *White Teeth*, the motif of genes and genetics facilitates cogitation on racial diversification, a process culminating in Irie’s pregnancy by one of Bengali-British twins, Millat or Magid. Throughout this article, *White Teeth* will be intertwined with contemporary socio-political issues – such as “maternity tourism” as well as the Windrush Scandal – to establish a larger critical framework to analyse British borders and national identity in the Brexit era.

To understand Britain’s current obsession with borders, race and “Britishness,” Fintan O’Toole suggests a return to World War Two. In his article “The Paranoid Fantasy Behind Brexit,” O’Toole outlines a number of post-1945 narratives which voiced the fear of an alternative history: that Britain, the plucky little island, had been invaded and subdued by the German foe. One such invasion fantasy novel was published in 1978 and crystallises “the anxieties of Britain’s early membership of the European Communities” (O’Toole). The language of war and invasion has always been evident throughout Britain’s engagement with the EU, and particularly so during the Leave Campaign of 2016. Writing for *The Telegraph* in November 2018, Boris Johnson employs this combative lexicon in describing Britain’s present-day relationship with Europe. Comparing Theresa May’s deal (which would out-rule a hard border in Ireland, thereby retaining an EU-UK land connection) to a defeat on the scale of Suez, Johnson displays hubristic faith in British imperial sovereignty: “I really can’t believe it but this Government seems to be on the verge of total surrender.” Such blatantly militaristic rhetoric serves to illustrate the belief that it is Britain’s inalienable right, as a former world power, to *fight*, a belief that is furthered in musings such as, “I’m not

sure I wouldn't rather have the shelters and the chance to fight back than simply being taken over by economics" (O'Toole). This same strident jingoism informs UKIP's ongoing entreaty to loyal Britons to "fight for the nation" (Robert Hill).

The sacred right to fight is, for Britain, a throwback to two World Wars in which England, in its own opinion, was the crux of Allied victory. This erasure of other identities from the wars so central to Britain's national mythology is touched on in *White Teeth*: even within the ranks of the British Army, firm borders remain erected. Although Bengali Samad fights for the British Army, he is subject to abuse during the war – "Indian officers? That'll be the bloody day" (88) – and in national memory afterwards – "[t]here were certainly no wogs as I remember – though you're probably not allowed to say that these days are you? But no...no Pakistanis" (172). Far from being accoladed as war-heroes like British soldiers, peoples such as Samad are regarded as merely another threat to British sovereignty. In his article, Drainville highlights the similarities between Leave Campaign visuals and war maps, demonstrating the way in which groups who previously aided Britain to wartime victory are now being re-cast as invaders (see *Fig. 1*). In these images, the Britain which is "plagued" by immigration from former colonies in the twenty-first century is the same Britain which faced down the barrel of Nazi invasion in the last. Wartime Britain plucked victory from the jaws of defeat by batting away the encroaching arrows of invading foreigners; contemporary Britain does the same with the new form of "invasion," immigration.



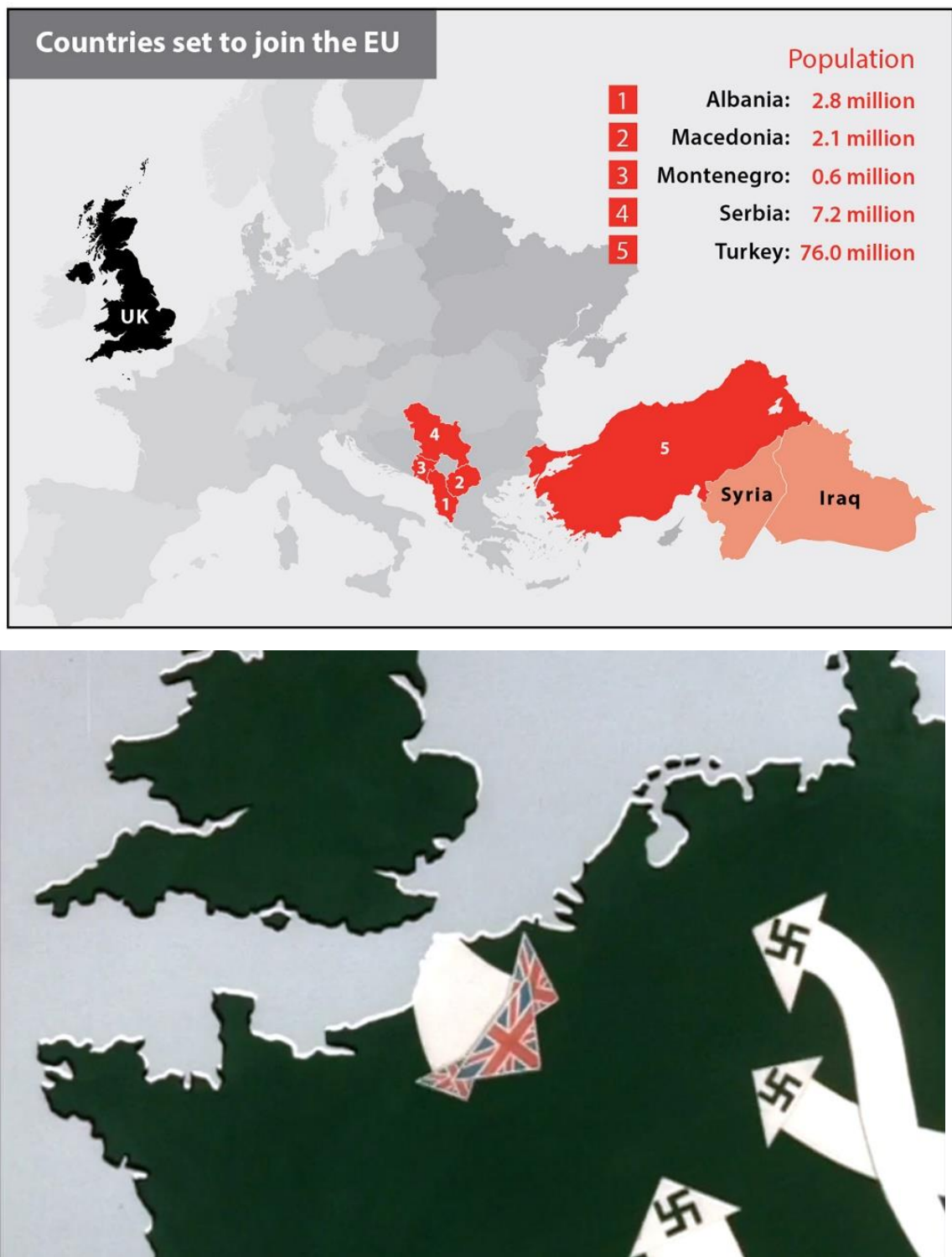


Fig. 1. Source: Ray Drainville. <https://hyperallergic.com/310631/the-visual-propaganda-of-the-brexiteer-leave-campaign/>

If immigration is seen as another form of “invasion,” the fear of being overwhelmed by “foreigners” conveniently forgets the facts of colonialism. As Nick

Bentley argues, “anxiety and instability [about] England’s legacy as a colonial power continues to [effect] the construction of national [and racial] identity” (484). Indeed, except for the fact that there remains a distinct pride in Britain’s former colonial conquests, one would be forgiven for thinking that anti-immigration English nationalists (such as UKIP and its ilk) had forgotten they were once the largest and most brutal coloniser in the world. Current British rhetoric not only ignores the facts of imperialism but appropriates a colonial identity. Describing Britain’s “[v]ertiginous fall from ‘heart of Empire,’” O’Toole makes the point that “[i]f England is [no longer] an imperial power, it must be the only other thing it can be: a colony.” That is, if England no longer exercises independent power or sovereignty, curtailed and restrained by a collective European and global identity, then those apparently invading and ravaging the nation for its resources through welfare and by using public services such as the NHS are the new colonisers, exploiting the borderlessness imposed on Britain by Europe.

At this juncture, Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* warrants mention as an early satire of British society’s distrust of “foreigners” which overlooks the colonial reasons for their presence in Britain. In a sense, Smith anticipates proliferated rhetoric of aversion to “foreigners” which was a large governing factor of the Brexit referendum. In her novel, she foregrounds that many British immigrants hail from former colonies. The reflexive conflation of being post-empire and being colonised is evident throughout *White Teeth* in the latent xenophobia in throw-away statements such as: “it’s like Delhi in Euston every Monday morning” (72). Besides the racist suggestion of “too many” Indians in this statement, in evoking the city that represented the heart of British Empire in the East, the position of colonial “other” is appropriated. While Indians are the postcolonial subjects in this scene, the native Briton displaces them in assuming the role of subordinated, conquered victim and casting the Indians as invading marauders. Incidentally, the location of London’s main train station further invokes the latent idea of invasion, as British train-stations famously received soldiers retreating from Dunkirk, a point during the Second World War at which Britain most feared a German conquest.

In a concrete sense, British refusal to accept immigration as the natural conclusion of Empire has produced a raft of re-othered racial bodies. In 2018, for instance, the Windrush Scandal saw threats of deportation issued to children of Commonwealth citizens under the misconception that they were living in the UK

illegally. The “Windrush Generation” of some 524,000 British subjects from Caribbean countries arrived in Britain between 1948 and 1971 to fill post-war labour shortages (BBC). Clarity on the status of these former colonial subjects was denied due to lack of documentation, an issue exacerbated by the fact that, in 2010, the Home Office destroyed the landing cards of the Windrush settlers. This administrative error reflects attitudes to “foreigners,” with the symbolic destruction of immigration records comprising an act of abjection. Not only was an entire generation of Caribbean British residents deracinated, but their claims to British naturalisation were belied through this administrative excision, all in the name of maintaining tight control over the definition of British society. On this issue, Smith is once again prescient in gauging these attitudes before they manifested in 2010 and 2018 – like Irie in *White Teeth*, the Windrush generation was “without reflection [in the mirror that was England]. A stranger in a stranger land” (266).

Windrush/Jamaica and abjection are strong presences throughout *White Teeth*, embodied by Ambrosia, Irie’s great-grandmother. In Smith’s depiction of twentieth century Jamaica, the hackneyed argument that the British Empire brought benefits to colonised peoples is made ridiculous, and the idea that the colonised natives benefited from a British education is firmly repudiated. The desire to give “an English education” to colonial subjects results in the impregnation of Ambrosia, a vulnerable Jamaican maid, by her English employer; this pregnancy then develops into an opportunity for other English men to sexually exploit her. The motif of “an English education” is harnessed ironically by Smith throughout *White Teeth* as a means of demonstrating British ignorance of its own history. The novel is replete with characters who cannot distinguish between past and present, and with those who glorify former days of empire. Samad, for instance, refuses to accept that his forefather, Magal Pande, was less of a revolutionary hero and more of a haphazard, failed rebel. Whole families are obsessed with:

their desire to see Dickinson-Smith blood spilled on foreign soil. And on the occasions when there wasn’t a war the Dickinson-Smiths busied themselves with the Irish situation, a kind of Dickinson-Smith holiday resort of death which had been ongoing since 1600. (Smith 90)

Moreover, Archie and Samad’s experience of war is excised for being insufficiently glorious: “memory has made no effort to retain [it]” (Smith 90). In naming the school attended by the children of former colonial subjects (Irie with her Jamaican heritage,

and Millat and Magid with their Bengali parents) after Captain Glenard who is Ambrosia's would-be colonial rapist, Smith suggests that, far from learn from the horrors of colonialism, Britain continues to revel in imperial nostalgia. If Smith's characters act "as though [they] were being given the opportunity to rewrite history here and now," then Brexit relies on the fantasy that Britain can at once ignore and regain its colonial history (172). The entreaty to learn from history, made by politicians such as Lammy, who reminded Westminster that Brexit "forgets the lessons of Britain's past," has tended to fall on deaf ears. The nostalgia of colonial splendour, the narrative which "still mourn[s] Suez, Britain's last fling of the colonial dice," blames the revolting colonial "other" and claims that immigration is the new conquest of Britain. In fact, as both Lammy and O'Toole highlight, in refusing to relegate colonial ambition to history and confront the ugly facts of imperialism, "England, that was wont to conquer others, hath made a shameful conquest of itself" (Lammy citing Shakespeare's *Richard II*).

As well as foreboding the ignorance to British history which recently resulted in acts of racial abjection such as Brexit and Windrush, *White Teeth* also sketches the gendered element of racial abjection which reared its head in the "maternity tourism" scandal. In Smith's novel, Ambrosia's abandonment by her English lover and colonial overlord is described thus: "it is not...that he doesn't want to help her, or that he doesn't love her (oh, he *loves* her; just as the English loved India and Africa and Ireland; it is the love that is the problem, people treat their lovers badly)" (361). Here, the colonised country is sketched in the familiar terms of the ravaged maiden who is loved and abused by "her" coloniser. This image is made literal in the figure of Ambrosia, who is sexually "loved" and abused by such an Englishman. Thus, Ambrosia's becomes the colonised body – the "other" onto which Britishness can abject its taboo urges. Through Ambrosia's impregnation by a colonial Englishman, the colonised female body is set up as the cornerstone of historic empire. Moreover, in contemporary discourse, the *post*-colonial female body remains the method by which Britain exercises imperial nostalgia in a post-colonial age. Just as the English colonist in *White Teeth* abjects his subversive sexual desire for the black female body onto Ambrosia, post-colonial British society projects its taboo desire to regain the Empire onto the post-colonial female body.

That is, the "foreign" female body has long been held responsible for so-called breaches of national borders, and the narrative which recently erupted into hysteria

surrounding the “maternity tourism” scandal has a long lineage in Britain. For instance, in his infamous “Rivers of Blood” speech of 1968, Enoch Powell argues that “we must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependents.” Continuing in this vein, Powell makes a point of describing Englishmen who “found their wives unable to obtain hospital beds in childbirth” due to a saturation of foreign women. No longer a blank body which can be “othered” as a vehicle of colonial self-representation, the post-colonial body has asserted itself as regenerative in its own right through giving birth in British hospitals. However, Powell represents this self-assertion as a parasitic act. The suggestion that English women cannot use English services due to foreign women portrays the post-colonial “other” body as one which obtains access to the clean “subject” body and lays eggs which continue to hatch within it, befuddling all hope of eradicating the source contagion. Christina Sharpe elaborates on this idea of infestation, outlining that black migrants are “imagined as insects, swarms, vectors of disease; familiar narratives of danger and disaster attach to our already weaponised bodies” (15-6). Tellingly, Powell is mentioned in *White Teeth* in conjunction with Archie learning that he is to become a father. Archie’s boss’s insistence that he is not a “racialist” and that “[he would] spit on that Enoch Powell...” is inextricable from Archie’s colleagues’ inability to rationalise the mixed-race child to whom Archie will be father. While Noel refuses a celebratory Pakistani sweet, Maureen muses “tersely” that “miracle of nature” is the “polite” way to phrase the reality of inter-racial breeding (Smith 70; 72; 68-9). Powell’s anxiety regarding the birthing of mixed-race and foreign children in England is shown to resonate with the characters inhabiting the “normal” English world of *White Teeth*. While black Britons might remain objectified as “others” to white British subjectivity, the mixing of races threatens this binary of black/them and white/us. Though none of Smith’s characters openly admit it, the idea of racial miscegenation is distasteful to them: Archie being married to Clara has always been seen as “strange,” but it is the latter’s pregnancy which prompts the office into action in excluding and marginalising her (Smith 72).

In her study, *Mothers: An Essay in Love and Cruelty*, Jacqueline Rose argues that, women’s bodies have long been portrayed as a source of contagion and disintegration: the maternal body “inconveniently blur[s] the boundaries between inside and out” (23). In this sense, the containment and ejection undertaken by the maternal body resonates with the idea of thresholds which permeates national

identity. As mothers, women perpetuate society and nation through giving birth to future citizens. As such, the pregnant body is a site of inscription of both national values and anxieties. Because their bodies represent a place of permeable boundaries – blurring the distinction between inside and outside, self and other – women are easily portrayed as unstable and untrustworthy, posing a threat to the security of the nation. Following on from Powell’s fearmongering regarding invasion by non-white mothers and unborn post-colonial subjects, the recent gaslighting surrounding the notion of “maternity tourism” in the UK press exhibits a national concern with the maternal body and miscegenation. Lately, headlines such as “foreign mums rip off NHS to get free treatment” and “SCANDAL revealed: Foreign mums rip-off NHS” claim to have uncovered a growing number of foreign women travelling to the UK in the late stages of pregnancy in order to have their babies (MacDermott; Sheldrick). Editorial comments such as, “[t]hese figures prove that the NHS is clearly seen as a soft touch,” nod to the national anxiety regarding borders. Moreover, the specific use of the concept of “softness” evokes the maternal body’s permeability, thereby at once accusing the maternal body of breaching British sovereignty and projecting this perceived failure in British boundaries onto that body. That is, women intentionally and maliciously flood Britain with foreign babies, but they also represent the weakness of borders through their own bodies. Another misrepresentation is that of the foreign, black maternal body as excessive. In her work on stereotypes applied to black women, Patricia Hill Collins notes that black womanhood is a “dumping-ground for those female functions a basically puritan society could not confront;” in supposedly possessing unbridled sexuality, the black woman is “a surrogate to contain all those fears of the physical female” (74). This idea is nowhere clearer than in the rampant reporting on Bimbo Ayelabola, a Nigerian woman who gave birth to quintuplets by Caesarean Section in 2011. For tabloids, the question of whether or not she was entitled to NHS care was not so relevant as the fact that she gave birth to five children – implications of sexual excess abounded. Writing about this case, Rose links the tirade against “maternity tourism” to the idea that:

we are living in an increasingly fortified world, with walls, concrete and imaginary, being erected across national boundaries, reinforcing the distinctions between peoples ... [we are told] that our greatest ethical obligation is to entrench our national and personal borders ... it is a perfect atmosphere for picking on mothers. (6-7)

As well as outlining the “threats” to British society posed by foreign mothers, tabloid reporting on “maternity tourism” situates the issue within the discourse of a border which has *already* been breached. In addition to lambasting foreign women, this media highlights the foreigner within, citing “concerns” pertaining to the lifting of restrictions on foreign-national groups and ominously portending that “tens of thousands [more could be encouraged to] arrive and be entitled to benefits” (Sheldrick). Tellingly, this particular article points out that “7 out of 10 Britons want to retain current restrictions – even if it means breaking European Union laws. Almost half favoured changing EU laws to limit the number of migrants who can move to Britain” (Sheldrick). The message here is clear: British borders are to be reasserted, even at (or possibly with the happy side-effect of) the expense of British connections with other nations. The manic fear of a break-down of British borders is again revealed in the idea that the NHS is becoming the “International Health Service,” ceasing to be exclusively British and part of a monolithic British identity, and instead becoming a means by which Britain is involuntarily globalised – again, through the pernicious, and foreign, maternal body (Butler).

While this aversion to foreign mothers is shown to be anxiety regarding the weakness of British borders and disquiet pertaining to the potential diversification and dilution of the term “British,” *The Guardian* also recently highlighted that “some [mothers] with secure immigration status have also been mistakenly charged for treatment” (Amelia Hill). As a spokesperson for the charity Maternity Action noted, many “undocumented [women] specifically fear detention or deportation if they were unwilling to pay” for their natal care (Amelia Hill). An open letter to the Minister for Health from Maternity Action asserts that women who cannot produce ID even though they are UK residents may have their naturalisation process delayed or rejected as a result. The implication of these threats is sinister. Maternal women are the most porous members of society, capable of producing diverse beings with the potential to further problematise simplistic conceptions of “Britishness.” As these tabloids would have it, the foreign-national maternal body acts as an enemy within, internally assaulting the borders of British identity. Therefore, in order for comfortable notions of Britishness to be restored, the threat of the enemy within must be subdued and eliminated. Julia Kristeva famously articulated the abject as that which “disturbs identity, system, order, [that which] does not respect border” (4). This definition applies directly to the treatment of the foreign maternal body in this scenario, which

is abjected and excised – through deportation. To borrow Kristeva's terms, that which "escapes...social rationality, [the] logical order on which a social aggregate is based" must be "jettisoned" (65). For British society to continue being British under this logic, the foreign-national mother is what must be expelled.

The confusion, identified by *The Guardian* and Maternity Action, of "foreign" women and British women who do not conform to stereotypes of Britishness in the "maternity tourism" crusade is also evident in Irie's experience as a British female of colour. Throughout *White Teeth*, Irie internalises ideas that her own body, rather than racism in her society, is the reason that she cannot establish a stable identity. As McCann argues, Irie acts on an internalised hatred of the black female reproductive body, and, as such, the maternal becomes abject as she tries to suppress her matrilineal inheritance (629). Irie's primary dissatisfaction is with her curvaceous figure – wearing "belly-reducing knickers and breast-reducing bra[s]" – a detail which is significant: firstly, because it is attributed to her Jamaican foremothers and is therefore associated with blackness, and, secondly, because her generous figure is a reminder of her child-bearing potential and the connected potential to disrupt Britishness (Smith 265). Indeed, whenever Irie inwardly curses her genes, she does so with her "right hand placed carefully upon her stomach," a posture which could be interpreted as her desire not to perpetuate her own genes through pregnancy and maternity (Smith 266).

Throughout the novel, the maternal body is seen as the site of inscription of national or non-national values. This is parodied through the Chalfen family, whose middle-class, white, British credentials, their familial insularity and neurotic concentration on the importance of good breeding, ironically produces a family who are effectively inbred. The introduction to Joyce's gardening book notes the "self-pollinating plant," thus foregrounding the idea of a Britishness which remains pure and avoids the cross-contamination intrinsic to diverse society. The Chalfen matriarch's gardening philosophy seems, on the surface, to benignly reflect the benefits of a racially dynamic community:

Yes, self-pollination is the simpler and more certain of the two fertilisation processes, especially for many species that colonize by copiously repeating the same parental strain. But a species cloning such uniform offspring runs the risk of having its entire population wiped out by a single evolutionary event. (Smith 309)

However, while Joyce might write self-congratulatorily on the virtues of diversification, she sticks to variation on known themes of Britishness:

It is said cross-pollinating plants also tend to produce more and better-quality seeds. If my one-year-old son is anything to go by (a cross-pollination between a lapsed-Catholic horticulturalist feminist, and an intellectual Jew!), then I can certainly vouch for the truth in this. (Smith 309-10)

Here, the recognisable tropes of agnosticism presume to comment on the radical Islam later featured in the book, and the son of two white, middle-class, monied British parents is implicitly compared to the sons of Indian immigrants in low-paying jobs; in short, the white, British idea of diversity is completely disconnected from the material reality of immigrant and non-white national experience. Moreover, the real test of successful societal diversification is run in the microcosm of the Chalfen family. It is Joyce's branching out and providing nurturance to non-white children (Millat and Irie) which symbolically precipitates the disintegration of the white British Chalfen family unit. Thus, metaphorically, the message is that the widening of the definition of "family" and, by extension, "society" to include non-white Britons is tantamount to self-destruction. The public culmination of the Chalfens' fragmentation and combustion sees Joshua take an active stance against his father and Marcus's FutureMouse project destroyed, all while the genes of Irie (Jamaican) and Millat/Magid (Bengali) gestate in the former's womb, forming a baby who will, no doubt, be birthed by the NHS.

However, Joyce is right in one sense: it is the children of immigrants who are the most accepting and receptive to new identities. Anxiety about the melding and mixing of genes is reciprocal across all elements of older, traditional society in *White Teeth*. Rather than revelling in the possibility of a daughter of a new racial identity to either himself or Clara, Archie rather presents the idea that Irie could have blue eyes as a battle: "[Archie] couldn't imagine any piece of him slugging it out in the gene pool with Clara and *winning*. But what a possibility!" (Smith 67). That is, there is only conflict of genes, not unification and diversification. Through the same war vocabulary noted earlier, it is implied that there will be a genetic winner and loser, a conqueror and a conquered. Similarly, for Samad and Alsana, racial diversification is synonymous with "dissolution, *disappearance...*" (Smith 327). Alsana fears that:

Millat (genetically *BB*; where B stands for Bengali-ness) marrying someone called Sarah (aa where 'a' stands for Aryan), resulting in a child called Michael

(Ba) who in turn marries someone called Lucy (aa), leaving Alsana with a legacy of unrecognisable grandchildren. (Smith 327)

Clara worries that “the tide [of pink skins] would take [Irie] away,” and Samad frets that his sons “will marry a white woman called Sheila and put me in an early grave” (Smith 328; 406). Here, the fear of assimilation and annihilation is played out within the boundaries of the maternal body – a horror of genetic loss through reproduction.

By contrast, Irie seemingly welcomes variety, wanting “to merge with the Chalfens, to be of one flesh: separated from the chaotic, random flesh of her own family and transgenically fused with another.” While the idea of becoming “[a] unique animal. A new breed” defies her parents’ generation’s obsession with pure, untainted lineage, the fact remains that, in wanting to fuse with a white, easily-identifiable British family, Irie is deferring to norms of British identity (Smith 342). Just as her earlier attempts to grapple with her blackness are to deny it, singeing her Afro hair off during her quest to chemically straighten and lighten it, her merging with a white family represents naturalising herself in a society by quashing difference. However, this initial suppression is qualified by Irie’s peace at the end of *White Teeth*. While Clara expresses desire to categorise her unborn child – “I arks de doctor what it will look like, half black an’ half white an’ all dat bizness” – Irie’s pregnancy with either Millat or Magid’s child prompts a more nuanced approach to belonging (Smith 67). While the maternal body is inscribed with national boundaries and values, Irie concludes that her body comprises a “map to an imaginary fatherland,” thus acknowledging that national identity is a myth with no concrete cartography (Smith 516).

To conclude, Smith’s novel pre-emptively summarises and ironises the questions currently facing Britain – can there be a black British identity? How do mothers of diverse children threaten national borders? Who is “British,” how is national identity policed, and how can exclusionary national definitions be reconciled with the facts of colonialism? In his article on Englishness in *White Teeth*, Bentley argues that symbolic orders can be threatened by the assertion of the “Real” (487). In the case of Brexit, borders, and race relations in the UK, the “Real” has been shown in this article to comprise both the history of colonial violence and the resultant self-assertion of generations of non-standard, non-white Britons. As Bentley elucidates, accepting this as “Real” is to threaten the very existence of England as an imaginary chain of signifiers, and is to reveal the fallacy of Britain’s “imaginary fatherland” (487;

Smith 516). Instead, Brexit Britain chooses denial, clinging to a fast fading fantasy and indulging the idea that resurrecting borders can claw back some sense of exclusionary “Britishness.” This process has, as evinced in *White Teeth* and the media frenzy concerning so-called “maternity tourism,” included the reclamation of the maternal body as a border of nation, as well as the attempted cordoning off of racial groups which disrupt binary definitions of Britishness. In primarily fearing racial diversity, right-wing British thought targets some of the most vulnerable in society – mothers. The bleak reality of this reaction, as opposed to “build[ing] a new image of Britain [to] bring the country together after years of division,” is increased polarisation within British society itself (Lammy). The delusion that, with the abjection of people of colour and the tight policing of British citizenship through birth, Britishness can become, once again, “independent” and “sovereign” threatens to impose borders not only between Britain and the world, but between factions of British society.

Works Cited

- BBC. 'Windrush Generation: Who are they and why are they facing problems?'. 18/04/2018. <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43782241>>. Web.
- Bentley, Nick. 'Rewriting Englishness: imagining the nation in Julian Barnes' *England, My England* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*.' *Textual Practice*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2007). Web.
- Butler, Jo. 'Rise of the Maternity Tourist'. *The Daily Mail* [undated]. Web.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*. London: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Drainville, Ray. 'The Visual Propaganda of the Brexit Leave Campaign.' *Hyperallergic*, 12/07/2016. Web.
- Gilligan, Andrew. 'The 300 maternity tourists.' *The Telegraph*, 28/12/2013. Web.
- Hill, Amelia. 'NHS fees for maternity care putting migrant mothers at risk.' *The Guardian*, 18/09/2018. Web.
- Hill, Robert. 'This is a fight for #thenation and our union.' UKIP Northern Ireland Archives, 16/11/2018. Web.
- Johnson, Boris. 'My Brother is Right: Mrs May's deal is the biggest statecraft failure since Suez.' *The Telegraph*, 12/11/2018. Web.
- Key, Chris. 'Mutineers and Saboteurs: How war imagery took over the Brexit movement'. *Politics.co.uk*, 16/11/2017. Web.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. Print.
- Lammy, David. 'Britain Did Not Become Great in Total Isolation.' Speech to House of Commons. *New Statesman*. 05/12/2018. Web.
- MacDermott, Nick. 'Birth Tourism.' *The Sun* 02/01/2018. Web.
- Maternity Action, 'Open Letter to Matt Hancock.' 02/07/2018. Web.
- McCann, Mindi. 'British Black Box: A return to race and science in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*.' *MFS* 58:3 (2012). Web.
- O'Toole, Fintan. 'The Paranoid Fantasy Behind Brexit.' *The Guardian*, 16/11/2018. Web.
- Powell, Enoch. 'Rivers of Blood.' Speech. Birmingham, ATV Company, 20/04/1968. Web.

Rose, Jacqueline. *Mothers: An Essay in Love and Cruelty*. London: Faber and Faber, 2018. Print.

Sheldrick, Giles. 'Heath tourism SCANDAL revealed.' *The Express*, 03/01/2018. Web.

Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016. Print.

Smith, Zadie. *White Teeth*. London: Penguin, 2001. Print.

Author Biography

Orlaith Darling is a student on the MSc: Literature and Modernity: 1900 – Present programme. Previously, she read English Literature and History at Trinity College Dublin. In 2016, she was elected a University Scholar, and in 2018 she graduated with a joint first-class honours degree. Her research interest is primarily modern and contemporary women's fiction, and previous publications include "A Pre-natal hold": Elizabeth Bowen, mothers and daughters' in Volume 14 of *Estudios Irlandeses* (2019). In September, Orlaith will return to Dublin as a postgraduate fellow to begin a PhD in contemporary Irish women's short fiction.