ARTICLE
SPECIAL SECTION

Britain's Imperial Past and Contemporary Borders in Adichie's Americanah and Zadie Smith's 'Fences'

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Recent literary works draw attention to the multifaceted legacy of Britain's imperial past, not only but including its impact on current UK border practices. The works of postcolonial and Black British authors illustrate especially strongly that the spatial epistemologies of empire are still prevalent in twenty-first century border debates. This article engages with Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's Americanah _(2013) and Zadie Smith's essay "Fences" (2016) as literary works that negotiate UK border practices both before and after Brexit. They draw attention to the intersections of empire, race, gender, and class in the recent resurgence of British bordering practices and emphasize the necessity to make visible both contemporary and historical borders in the UK in order to come to terms with the underlying colonial epistemologies of many border practices._[1]

Introduction

The Brexit referendum has led to widespread discussions about Britain's borders, including its present and historical bordering practices (Delanty 2017; Staudt 2018). Although the relationship between geographical boundaries and state boundaries is complex and frequently fraught (Wilson & Donnan 2012, 1–22), the triumph of the Leave campaign has been commonly linked to the renaissance of what has been called Britain's island mentality. The reference to the geographical boundaries of the island is used to refer critically to the rise of a new kind of national isolationism in parts of the UK—and especially in England—that stands in stark contrast to ideas of supra- or postnationalism. While debates about Britain's borders after the referendum frequently focused on the borders between Northern Ireland and Ireland, critics have since made clear that these and other border issues are closely connected to the "legacies of empire" that was one of the underlying discourses in the Brexit campaign (Saunders 2020, 1140; see also Koegler et al. 2020). In line with such approaches, literary and cultural works radically question the future possibilities and dangers of bordering practices not only in Ireland and Northern Ireland (Lehner 2020) but also in relation to other colonial and postcolonial border epistemologies that are connected to the current renaissance of borders in the UK.

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Postcolonial and Black British authors have long played a key role in negotiating British border aesthetics, past and present. This article discusses Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's novel *Americanah* (2013) and Zadie Smith's essay "Fences" (2016) as two texts that deal with racial, cultural, and material border epistemologies in the UK, focusing especially on the links between empire, race, gender, and class. Written in different genres—a novel and an autobiographical essay—*Americanah* and "Fences" illustrate how closely the resurgence of Britain's island mentality in the twenty-first century is connected to the legacies of the British Empire. The article opens with a discussion of how theorists and critics have entered the discussion about empire and borders in the UK and how historical Western bordering practices are relevant for a discussion of British border debates today. The subsequent reading of *Americanah* (2013) and "Fences" (2016) explores the literary strategies authors use to make visible those historical practices of empire, race, and class that influence contemporary border regimes. They insist on the necessity to overcome what Paul Gilroy has called *Postcolonial Melancholia*, i.e., the wilful ignoring or repression of Britain's colonial history (Gilroy 2004), by refusing to be silent about the residues of colonial border epistemologies.

Borders, Brexit, and Empire

Britain's borders have been significantly shaped by the country's highly diverse literary traditions (Fellner & Frenk 2020). The renewed attention given to UK borders in the context of the Brexit referendum has not only led to a renaissance of border tropes in literary and cultural works but also in scholarly discussions and theories of British literature and culture (e.g., Habermann 2020; Rostek & Zwierlein 2019; Sandrock 2019; Zwierlein & Rostek 2019). One particularly prominent strand of critical reflections on British border practices emerges from Black British and transnational authors, including authors from formerly colonized countries. Authors such as Zadie Smith and Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, Bernadine Evaristo, Olumide Popoola or Mohsin Hamid illustrate how the globe is still influenced by the borders created by the former British Empire and how issues of integration, migration, inclusion and diversity are inherently linked to the naturalization of the UK as an island nation, however geographically fraught such an interpretation may be because it excludes not only Northern Ireland but also formerly colonized parts of the British Empire (McCall 2012). Their works illustrate that the renaissance of Britain's island mentality in the years before and after the Brexit referendum must be contextualized in the larger historical processes of British expansion around the world and that it is necessary to confront not only spatial border practices but the entire epistemologies underlying the lines of division in the UK today.

From a sociological perspective, Gurminder K. Bhambra has argued that empire and race have been underestimated categories in relation to the Brexit referendum. Writing with regard to discussions of class, Bhambra writes that "the category of 'class' is not being used as a neutral or objective one, but rather as a euphemism for a racialized identity politics that is given legitimacy through this evasion" (Bhambra 2017, 227). For Bhambra, it is clear that the history of the British Empire needs to be in the foreground of Brexit discussions and, with it, discussions of inclusion and exclusion in the UK today:

> Such arguments [about class], however, profoundly misunderstand the history of Britain, which has never been a nation but an empire, and thus misidentify the extent of the populations who belong historically to the polity and would, as a consequence, be more appropriately understood as '*insiders*'. (Bhambra 2017, 220, emphasis in original)

When looking at the renaissance of border tropes in the context of Brexit, a central question is therefore how ethnicity, migration, and class intersect in the creation of internal divisions. Black British and global authors offer intersectional perspectives on this debate, and they illustrate that the renewed rise of British borders precedes the Brexit referendum by several decades. These discussions are not isolated from other theoretical approaches in the fields of British, Irish, and Anglophone literature and culture, but postcolonial scholars have long been critical of the epistemologies underlying Western conceptions of nationalism and citizenship, arguing that the ideological basis of empire-building is closely linked to the ideologies of nationalism and capitalism.

There is a long scholarly tradition that investigates Anglophone literature in global and transnational contexts. Borders are particularly relevant to such analyses. In the wake of the work of Congolese philosopher Valentin-Yves Mudimbe in the 1980s, for instance, postcolonial critics and thinkers have challenged the ideologies of European nationalism that once led to the division of Africa and other colonized parts of the world in the colonial era. In *The Invention of Africa* (1988), Mudimbe argues that Europeans and Africans alike have produced images of Africa that are framed by paradigms rooted in the West. For Mudimbe, European empire-building was not only based on a "philosophy of conquest", but contemporary processes of bordering and rebordering continue this "philosophy of conquest", even if these processes are often made invisible (Mudimbe 1988, 69). What is at stake is not merely a change of national borders. Rather, Mudimbe challenges the epistemological basis of national and spatial thinking in the West, which has led to the rise of colonialism in the first place.

Mudimbe takes recourse to the concept of "gnosis", which has been taken up by Walter Mignolo in *Local Histories/Global Designs* (2000). Developing earlier concepts of knowledge and space in the Americas, Mignolo argues that local, non-Western conceptions of space can provide alternatives to the colonial legacies of Western bordering practices (Mignolo 2000; see also Sandrock 2019). Mignolo introduces the concept of "border thinking" to spell out how interpretation without authority over the interpretation could work:

> The goal is to erase the distinction between the knower and the known, between a "hybrid" object (the borderland as the known) and a "pure" disciplinary or interdisciplinary subject (the knower), uncontaminated by the border matters he or she describes. (Mignolo 2000, 18)

Mignolo questions not only what borders mean; he questions the entire epistemology of the border, how we get to know what borders are, how we approach them, how we interpret them and what role researchers and critics play in the formation of borders. Knowledge itself can be used to create borders, which is why literature that relates alternative experiences about borders is so central to change our understanding of them. Mignolo argues for the de-colonization of spatial structures by means of "pluritopic hermeneutics" (Mignolo 2000, 16–18). By approaching spaces and knowledge from a multiplicity of spaces, it is possible to de-colonize our understanding of spatial structures because Western concepts of space no longer dominate border hermeneutics. The literary works below by Adichie and Smith demonstrate a similar tendency to question not only the spatialization of borders but the very traditions and practices of thinking along the lines of dividing practices, be it citizenship, empire, race, gender or class.

In line with such critical approaches, the works by Adichie and Smith challenge the epistemology of borders: our knowledge about them, our ways of seeing them, our ways of interpreting them and the tendency to ignore those borders that determine the spaces of those living around us. Smith and Adichie do so by making visible borders that are otherwise made invisible to large parts of the population and by turning to borders of administration and infrastructures, borders of racism, gender, and class—many of which have been naturalized in contemporary society. Following Caroline Koegler, Pavan Kumar Malreddy and Marlena Tronicke's argument that Brexit was not an "unforeseeable 'event'" because "Britain's departure from the EU [is] the result of a long-standing process, rooted in persisting imperial attitudes and, arguably, narcissistic yearnings" (Koegler et al. 2020, 585), the present article is particularly interested in how Black British and global authors question the nostalgia that is often linked to the naturalization of Britain's borders:

> Populist campaigns built around the commingled tropes of Brexit, empire, and World War II have proven highly effective across various sections of British society, and have exerted a particular force amongst those who witnessed the gradual crumbling of empire after the war. (Koegler et al. 2020, 586)

Literary works have the power to make visible these and other "commingled tropes" in British society today. They illustrate that the rise of a renewed island mentality in the UK has nothing to do with the geographical or natural site of the island of Great Britain. Instead, British border tropes are frequently linked to the material, political, and cultural epistemologies of colonial times, which have an ongoing effect in the present. To change this in the future, it is necessary to make visible the intersections of empire, race, gender and class, which are among the pressing issues of British borders today.

Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie's *Americanah* (2013)

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) is an award-winning novel that has reached a global audience.[2] It was shortlisted for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction in the UK, it has won the US American National Book Critics Circle Award and was picked for the "One Book, One New York" reading program that is meant to foster community among New Yorkers while also promoting literacy. As such, *Americanah* has been widely received as a novel that has the potential to transgress boundaries. It discusses both the promises and the problems of globalization with regard to border movements and critically engages with the interdependencies of globalization, capitalism, and the longevity of imperial power dynamics in the present (Sandrock 2018). While large parts of the plot focus on the US and on Nigeria in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, one plot strand is concerned with the UK and the relationship between contemporary migration practices and the complex history of the British Empire. The following discussion suggests that *Americanah*, which was published three years before the referendum in 2016, indicates several years before Brexit why migration and the question of Britain's borders became such a vital matter in the Leave campaign. A brief introduction to the plot will help to contextualize my reading of the novel as an early voice in the debate about British bordering practices that brings a postcolonial perspective into Brexit discussions long before the referendum was announced.

Americanah is told from a third-person perspective. It frequently uses focalizers to yield insights into the thoughts and feelings of the characters, especially the two protagonists, Ifemelu and Obinze. Both grow up in late twentieth-century Lagos, and both seek to go abroad after finishing school in order to study elsewhere. Their families are not poor, but like many people in post-independence Nigeria, some members of their families struggle with the ideological and practical conditions

of life after the country's emergence from Civil War.[3] Ifemelu, the female protagonist, eventually goes to the United States on a student visa. Her experiences in the US bring to the fore the intersections of gender and race, especially when she is exploited by a male tennis coach who takes advantage of her material situation not long after her arrival. Later, she becomes a famous blogger in the US who engages critically with the intersections of race, class, and gender before eventually returning to Nigeria in her early thirties. Ifemelu becomes one of Nigeria's growing population of 'Americanahs', i.e., Nigerians who return to Nigeria after having lived in the US for some time. Obinze, the male protagonist, also applies for a student visa to the US, but it is repeatedly denied to him without any reasons that would explain the rejections. Obinze then goes to the UK on a tourist visa, which he outstays in the hope of finding a job in the UK. He is eventually deported from Great Britain back to Nigeria in a process that makes obvious the power dynamics between the UK and its former colonies.

By focusing on the lives of two Nigerians who are dependent on foreign visa permits to travel and live abroad, *Americanah* makes visible that borders of race, citizenship, and class continue to shape contemporary border regimes. Globalization processes have not made international boundaries liquid or flat. They have merely opened up certain borders for privileged parts of the world population whereas others, especially those from formerly colonized parts of the world, remain unable to participate in free global travel (Sandrock 2018). This contrasts directly with practices in the former British Empire, where British people went to Nigeria and other places without asking the permission of locals. Following the idea that borders are an epistemological phenomenon, some of the most prominent borders in *Americanah* are not geographical but legal and administrative boundaries as well as cultural and discursive ones. Borders dwell in the spaces of visa application forms, in work permit requests, in the exploitation of women and materially disadvantaged people, in attempts to gain citizenship and in racist encounters with people abroad. These processes shift an understanding of borders from geophysical sites to institutional and discursive processes. As Ifemelu reflects in the novel: "I just can't get up and go to Paris. I have a Nigerian passport. I need to apply for a visa, with bank statements and health insurance and all sorts of proof that I won't stay and become a burden to Europe" (Adichie 2013, 242). *Americanah* illustrates how legal and administrative processes are impenetrable for those without Western or Northern passports. The border concept underlying such impenetrable borders is deeply embedded in ideologies of national as well as economic privileges, as postcolonial critics have shown. Following Caroline Levine's argument that racism functions as an infrastructure in *Americanah* (Levine 2015), a similar argument can be made for bordering practices in the novel: they are an infrastructure that works smoothly for some while constantly reminding

others of the global hierarchies once created by Western colonialism. As one character in the novel remarks: "Many of the internationals understand the trauma of trying to get an American visa" (Adichie 2013, 173). One key accomplishment of the novel is to make the border infrastructures for non-Western parts of the world population visible for all readers, and to critically engage with the bordering practices that are built on Western and Northern epistemologies and ideologies.

As Johan Schimanski and Stephen Wolfe suggest in their book *Border Aesthetics*, aesthetic configurations of borders help us to recognize and understand which borders are made visible and which ones are made invisible in society (Schimanski & Wolfe 2017). Drawing on Jacques Rancière's concept of political aesthetic, visibility and invisibility are posited as key categories in the study of border aesthetics. Visibility is a central concept for Rancière because it determines whether and how people participate in the social order:

> Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. (Rancière 2004, 13)

For Rancière, the modes of participation are determined by implicit rules and conventions. Literary texts and the arts have a crucial function in society because they help us to reflect on what is visible and what is invisible, what is heard, what is seen, what is perceived. This is also how processes of inclusion and exclusion work. Aesthetic regimes of the "sensible" (Rancière 2004) determine what is made visible in society and what is made invisible, and the works by Adichie and Smith illustrate that these modes of visibility and invisibility also strongly determine British border aesthetics when viewed from a Black British and postcolonial perspective.

Obinze's story as an unregistered migrant in the UK engages with such practices of visibility and invisibility.[4] Obinze outstays his tourist visa in the UK and, despite his hopes, never receives a work permit. For three years, he works on someone else's identity card and lives in a constant state of invisibility. When he sees other people in London, he envies them their visibility: "His eyes would follow them, with a lost longing, and he would think: *You can work, you are legal, you are visible, and you don't even know how fortunate you are*" (Adichie 2013, 281). The passage reflects on Britain's borders from Obinze's perspective, from someone who wishes to enter the UK and live there but who is repeatedly denied a working permit or a visa. *Americanah* makes the border regimes in the UK visible, by emphasizing how unregistered migrants are usually made invisible. Obinze "lived in London [...] invisibly, his existence like an erased pencil sketch; each time he saw a policeman, or anyone in a uniform, anyone with the faintest scent of authority, he would fight the urge to run" (Adichie

2013, 318). The "erased pencil sketch" marks the active process of invisibilization: what used to be there is now erased (Sandrock 2018). Obinze is dwelling on the borders of the UK, even though physically, he is inside the country. His borders are not geographical; they are the borders of the modern nation-state, where being somewhere does not mean being part of it. The politics of invisibility shape this border regime for those living in the global North and West. For everyone else, borders remain strikingly visible and insurmountable in an allegedly globalized world.

Through the eyes of Obinze, *Americanah* reflects upon the historical reasons for this state of invisibility of unregistered migrants in the UK. The novel draws a connection between the history of the British Empire and the lingering of racial bordering regimes in the UK:

> The wind blowing across the British Isles was odorous with fear of asylum seekers, infecting everybody with the panic of impending doom, and so articles were written and read, simply and stridently, as though the writers lived in a world in which the present was unconnected to the past, and they had never considered this to be the normal course of history: the influx into Britain of black and brown people from countries created by Britain. Yet he understood. It had to be comforting, this denial of history. (Adichie 2013, 320–321)

Paul Gilroy has coined the term *Postcolonial Melancholia* for the rise of racism and xenophobia in the UK that is only possible because of a wilful act of ignoring or repressing Britain's colonial history (Gilroy 2004; see also Sandrock 2018). According to Gilroy, "[w]e need to be able to see how the presence of strangers, aliens, and blacks and the distinctive dynamics of Europe's imperial history have combined to shape its cultural and political habits and institutions" (Gilroy 2004, 142). This also means to acknowledge "[t]he immigrant is now here because Britain, Europe, was once out there; that basic fact of global history is not usually deniable" (Gilroy 2004, 100). *Americanah* helps to make this "basic fact of global history" visible to readers. Obinze turns into a figure of identification whose story brings out the paradoxes of European and Western border practices.

Obinze's story ends with his deportation. He is caught in the attempt to enter an arranged marriage and brought to a detention centre at Manchester Airport. Manchester Airport represents an ambiguous site in *Americanah*. An airport usually signals mobility and border-crossing. For Obinze, it marks immobility. The detention centre is not located at a geographical border, but it is a border site for Obinze: "There he was, in handcuffs, being led through the hall of Manchester Airport […]. In detention, he felt raw, skinned, the outer layers of himself stripped off" (Adichie 2013, 345; 347). The image of being stripped off his skin illustrates the attempted process of making him invisible. The skin is a permeable border and, with the "outer layers of himself stripped off", Obinze is made vulnerable to society. In Michel Foucault's terms, one could think of the detention centre as a non-space, a heterotopia—a space that contains people or things that are other or disturbing or unwanted (Foucault 1986). Yet, a border approach emphasizes the lack of agency associated with the detention centre in Obinze's case. He is not only made vulnerable; he is stripped of parts of his identity, made invisible in a system that would rather not deal with its border practices openly and silently deport unregistered migrants even though their countries might have a historical relationship to the UK that connects contemporary bordering processes to earlier practices of empire-building.

Zadie Smith, "Fences"

In her essay "Fences: A Brexit Diary", Zadie Smith offers a comment on Brexit immediately after the referendum in 2016.[5] The essay was first published two months after the Brexit referendum, in *New York Review* of Books, which attests to the global readership Smith is likely to have reached with her essay. The author is internationally known not only for her essays but also and especially for her novels, including *White Teeth* (2000), *On Beauty* (2005), and *NW* (2012). "Fences" is a non-fictional essay, but one that works with aesthetic means to negotiate border practices. The author uses the symbol of fences as a springboard from which to comment on these and other ruptures in the current UK (Sandrock 2019). Smith argues that Brexit was a symptom, not a cause of what she considers to be an intersectional phenomenon of building more wide-ranging boundaries:

> One useful consequence of Brexit is to finally and openly reveal a deep fracture in British society that has been thirty years in the making. The gaps between north and south, between the social classes, between Londoners and everyone else, between rich Londoners and poor Londoners, and between white and brown and black are real and need to be confronted by all of us, not only those who voted Leave. (Smith 2016)

Smith's argument prefigures what has become a truism of Brexit discussion: that the referendum made visible the divisions that had created ruptures in the UK for some time. As Kristian Shaw puts it: "Brexit did not divide the nation, it merely revealed the inherent divisions within society" (Shaw 2018, 16). Focusing mostly on the urban environment of London, "Fences" uses the divisions in the capital as a magnifying glass of both diversity and division within the UK. In the passage above, the divisions of "social class", "rich Londoners and poor Londoners" as well as "white and brown and black" almost outshine the division between "Remain" and "Leave" voters. For Smith, the real bordering practices lie elsewhere in British society, as her example of fences around schools illustrate.

One fence specifically becomes a border symbol: a fence that has been built around the local primary school in a North London district, which symbolizes for the narrator the epistemologies of bordering practices in the UK. Smith's autobiographical narrator opens the essay by describing how she moved back to London after some time abroad. One of the first things she noticed in London was the upsurge of fences around various buildings in her London neighbourhood, including the school:

> I noticed the fence. For this Victorian school, which, for a hundred years, has found cast-iron railings sufficient to mark its periphery, had now added what looked like tall bamboo slats between the bars, as well as six feet of plant life climbing these slats, blocking the view of the playground from the street and therefore of the children as they played. (Smith 2016)

The essay links this practice of building fences to a wider social and cultural process of rebordering in the UK (Sandrock 2019). Demarcating spaces, creating boundaries in order to regulate society and using safety and security as keywords to whitewash the normative practices behind border processes has become part of the twenty-first-century London cityscape.

Whereas Smith's earlier novel *White Teeth* was still hailing a politics of "cultural diversity", albeit not always an unproblematic one (Acquarone 2013, 133), Smith's reflections on London have become more sober over the decades. With regard to her 2012 novel *NW*, Shaw notes that "*NW* reflects a rise in transnational relations and the construction of a cultural model of cosmopolitan communication haunted by national identity and the difficulties of negotiating cultural diversity" (Shaw 2017, n.p.). In "Fences", this sense of being haunted by a British national past and a European history of imperialism and fascism is equally strongly noticeable and seems to dominate the local atmosphere. The London that is emerging behind the fences and material boundaries around schools, religious institutions and other places is presented as inward-looking, spatially limiting and insular:

> These days the Jewish school looks like Fort Knox. The Muslim school is not far behind it. Was our little local school also to become a place behind a fence, separated, private, paranoid, preoccupied with security, its face turned from the wider community? (Smith 2016)

Rebordering processes make manifest the larger tendencies of isolationism in the UK, which Smith's essay links to the Brexit vote: "Two days later the British voted for Brexit" (Smith 2016). Here as well as elsewhere, "Fences" links the drawing of close boundaries around material spaces to the political tendency towards isolation from the EU (Sandrock 2019). The tone of the essay is deliberately polemical, critical, and sometimes self-ironic. It is clear to Smith that the middle-classes, to

which she counts herself, are a key part of the problem when it comes to border-building, especially those borders that are meant to mark the divisions between races, class, and cultural heritage.

Smith connects the fence-building in London both to class and to the legacy of the British Empire. Similar to Adichie's novel, where Ifemelu experiences unacknowledged racism in the treatment of middle-class friends and employers, "Fences" criticizes the complacency of the middle-classes and their unwillingness to acknowledge the lack of diversity in their lives. Despite the city's highly diverse population, class and economic boundaries fulfil a gate-keeping function in the perpetuation of racial boundaries:

> For many people in London right now the supposedly multicultural and cross-class aspects of their lives are actually represented by their staff—nannies, cleaners—by the people who pour their coffees and drive their cabs, or else the handful of ubiquitous Nigerian princes you meet in the private schools. The painful truth is that fences are being raised everywhere in London. Around school districts, around neighborhoods, around lives. (Smith 2016)

The passage highlights the ambivalent practices of debordering and rebordering in the UK. The reference to "Nigerian princes" partly brings up the imperial legacy of the UK, but it also points to the intersections of economics and class, where money can partly transcend other markers of cultural division, such as race, but only for the top privileged parts of the world population.

Smith's essay underlines what Gurminder K. Bhambra has written about the Brexit referendum, namely that discussions of the vote are frequently informed by "methodological nationalism" and "methodological whiteness, that distorts the populations they see as constituting contemporary polities" (Bhambra 2017, 227). For Bhambra, "[i]t is only through an appropriate acknowledgement of the imperial and colonial histories that shape most current Western national polities that we will be able adequately to reckon with the long-standing injustices that increasingly bear down upon us" (Bhambra 2017, 227). "Fences" pursues a similar line of thought in its insistence that the racial, economic, cultural, and national borders that shape the UK and its former empire must be acknowledged and made visible. For Smith, the first step towards changing the culture of "Londoncentric solipsism" she criticizes is to uncover the structures and epistemologies that underly the fence-building practices in the UK (Smith 2016). For the author, those who "have been living behind a kind of veil, unable to see our own country for what it has become" need to face reality and see British society for what it is (Smith 2016): filled with gaps, boundaries, and ruptures that materialize, amongst other things, in physical and non-physical fences.

The narrator's own movements across borders narrated in her essay—transatlantic, between Northern Ireland and England, and inner-European—seeks to transgress these limits of a mono-hermeneutic border epistemology. In the end, the narrator finds herself in a space of not-knowing. "When everyone's building a fence", she asks, "isn't it a true fool who lives out in the open?" (Smith 2016). "Fences" here offers a question, a position of not-knowing as an alternative to a hermeneutics of 'knowing', which is what Mignolo aims for in his conceptualization of border thinking as an alternative to Western border epistemologies. There might be a reference to *King Lear* in Smith's question whether "a true fool" might be someone "who lives out in the open" (Smith 2016), where Lear's catharsis comes in a moment of 'living out in the open' and leaving behind one's secure boundaries and spaces. By asking questions, rather than giving answers, the essay embodies what Mignolo posits as an alternative to colonial epistemologies. Border thinking is not always about crossing material or geographical borders. It is also, and perhaps primarily, about the borders of thinking and knowing that we need to acknowledge before being able to change them.

Conclusion

Both "Fences" and *Americanah* critically engage with bordering practices in contemporary society. Reading the two texts together illustrates how important outsider or insider-outsider perspectives are for a critical negotiation of borders. Through the perspectives of travellers and migrants, the texts make visible both inner-European and global bordering practices that may be invisible to those who have long been familiar with a place and its regimes of inclusion and exclusion. In *Americanah*, Obinze comes to the UK for the first time and, after outstaying his tourist visa, experiences British bordering practices as an outsider. Similarly, Smith states in the beginning of her essay how she "noticed a change" in the border regimes of her "North West London" neighbourhood "after a long absence" (Smith 2016). Both texts use the outsider or insider-outsider perspective to raise diversity concerns and make visible the manifold borders that shape the lives of migrants and culturally diverse people in the UK today.

Comparing these two texts further illustrates that many of the border issues addressed in the works are not new to Brexit but that they have a long history in the imperial practices of the Western world and the former British Empire. The racism and exclusion Obinze and Ifemelu experience in *Americanah* is different from the situation Smith as a well-known author finds herself in. Yet, there are echoes of similar xenophobic encounters in "Fences" when the essays recounts how a lady on the street tells Smith's mother "and the half-dozen other people originally from other places" after the Brexit referendum: "Well, you'll all have to go home now!" (Smith 2016). By offering different perspectives and by enabling readers to see the world through someone else's eyes, literary works have the ability to challenge the dominant spatial epistemologies. Both texts open up an alternative hermeneutics of space, where multiple spatial epistemologies coexist in the critical engagement with different kinds of border regimes. This is the case, for instance, when Smith contemplates her own role as a writer, a mother, and a politically interested person who is perceived by others in a space demarcated by class, culture, ideology, and gender, or when Obinze and Ifemelu both return to Nigeria and are confronted with their own conflicted positions as members of the affluent Nigerpolitan Club. None of these positions turns out to be easy or ideal. Instead, what *Americanah* and "Fences" illustrate is that border practices are a constant process of negotiation and re-negotiation, both on an individual and a collective level. If we need an alternative hermeneutics of space, one that radically challenges the rise of new border regimes across Europe and the world, then it is up to every individual to engage with bordering practices in our daily lives. This is one thing Americanah and "Fences" illustrate.

Notes

1 This article is part of the Special Section: Border Renaissance, edited by Astrid M. Fellner, Eva Nossem, and Christian Wille, in *Borders in Globalization Review* 5(1): 67–158.

2 For another discussion of Adichie's *Americanah*, on which this one is partly based, see Sandrock 2018.

3 The Biafran War (1967-1970) is treated extensively by Adichie in her book *Half A Yellow Sun* (2007), which tells the story of Biafra wanting to secede from Nigeria in the late 1960s.

4 For another discussion of Obinze's story, on which this one is based, see Sandrock 2018.

5 For another discussion of "Fences" on which this one is partly based, see Sandrock 2019.

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