

### Panel 3: Between Us and Them: Lanchester's *The Wall*

Lena Steveker

#### **“Fenced Off and Walled In: Narrating British Borders in Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) and John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019)”**

Both Ali Smith's *Autumn* (2016) and John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019) explore the cultural repercussions of the British vote for Brexit. Set in the fall of 2016, Smith's *Autumn* is a 'condition-of-Britain' novel which traces the divisory lines running through British society in the post-referendum period. Lanchester's *The Wall* is a dystopia which not only negotiates twenty-first-century anxieties about climate change, but also comments on the debates on immigration and British identity which have fed into the Brexit vote.

I suggest reading these two novels as border narratives, and I take my cue from their shared strategy of using physical means of demarcation as metaphors for the cultural impact of the Brexit referendum: in *Autumn*, an electrified steel fence – complete with razorwire and security cameras – is built on common land, without any explanation as to its initiators or its purpose. In *The Wall*, Britain is surrounded by a gigantic concrete wall built in reaction to rising sea levels and increasing numbers of immigrants. In my paper, I will analyse how the fence in Smith's novel and the wall in Lanchester's novel serve to narrate different, and indeed competing, stories of Britain and its borders, both physical and cultural. As I will argue, *Autumn* rejects the idea of borders as lines of territorial enclosures in favour of the notion that borders, in particular those of Britain, are historical and cultural contact zones. In contrast to the open, outward-looking and inclusive notion of borders put forward in Smith's novel, *The Wall* conceptualises British borders as closed, inward-looking and exclusive. I will show that despite the novel's dystopian vision of its titular wall, which reviewers have interpreted as a warning against isolationism, *The Wall* in fact continues the narrative of Britain as an 'island story', its culture best flourishing within the borders established and patrolled by the 'grand narratives' of patriarchy, Christianity and the canon of English literature.