BREXIT WOUNDS: ARTS AND HUMANITIES RESPONSES TO LEAVING THE EU
Edited by Fionna Barber and Eleanor Byrne

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Banner image: Rita Duffy, Soften the Border, 2017 (detail). Recycled fabrics, installation on the Belcoo, Blacklion Bridge - Co. Fermanagh / Co. Cavan border, 2.5 x 30m. Image credit: Copyright of the artist, Rita Duffy. Photo credit: Stanislav Nikolov
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BREXIT WOUNDS: ARTS AND HUMANITIES RESPONSES TO LEAVING THE EU: INTRODUCTION

Fionna Barber and Eleanor Byrne

Abstract

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

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

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

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BREXIT WOUNDS: ARTS AND HUMANITIES RESPONSES TO LEAVING THE EU: INTRODUCTION
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Introduction
In April 2019, Anish Kapoor’s new artwork A Broxit, A Broxit, We All Fall Down, was featured in The Guardian newspaper, depicting a huge open wound down the spine of a three-dimensional map of England. The gaping void appears as an abyss without a safe landing place or visible end, or as a number of art critics noted wryly, a huge vagina (Jones, 2019). Kapoor’s work on infinite voids and perceptual trickery seems a particularly appropriate mode for depicting Brexit, even if it does little to offer any answers. The referendum of 2016 which appeared attractive to David Cameron as a weapon to kill off the threat to the Conservative party by UKIP, has instead (re)opened an unhealable wound in the (multi) national consciousnesses of the United Kingdom. Despite the claims of Leave supporters that Brexit will bring a reassertion of British sovereignty, there is the real danger that this will be achieved at the expense of the territorial parameters of the United Kingdom itself. This concern is mainly focused on the issues raised around the Northern Ireland border that have produced the seemingly irreconcilable arguments around the backstop and are beginning to undermine the achievements of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, and the possibility for a second referendum on independence in Scotland. In both Scotland and Northern Ireland a majority voted for Remain in the Brexit referendum. However, the two parts of the United Kingdom where a majority voted Leave – England and Wales – will also be significantly affected. Uneven development and social inequality have already increased across the regions of England since the 2016 vote (Jackson, 2018). Meanwhile, both Wales and the predominantly Leave-voting North East of England are already suffering economic losses due to their heavy reliance on exports to the EU; this is likely to deteriorate further when the current level of access to the single market disappears at the end of the transition period (Inman, 2019). Even as the figure of the divide has become ubiquitous in discussions of Brexit, there is no consensus on the nature or location of that divide, rather the post-referendum period has been the source of proliferating attempts to explain the surprise leave vote through varied oppositional modes – North and South, ‘metropolitan elites’ and ‘the people’, cosmopolitans and ethno-nationalists – whilst simultaneously borders also emerged as political/geographical splits, violent sutures between England and Scotland and the Northern Irish border with the Republic of Ireland demanding our attention. None of these binaries is fixed of course, as Richard Appignanesi notes, ‘The Brexit vote was already split, involving both a populist vote against what was perceived as an overweening Europe and a desire to stick two fingers to the British establishment’, by those who felt they had no voice in decisions made by those geographically and culturally distant from them (2018, p.569). A linguistic battle to find the most successful terminology to gain the political upper hand in the face of the perceived split has emerged that focuses on phrases such as ‘the will of the people’, ‘the 48%’, ‘the left behind’, #peoplesvote and has increasingly become entrenched, and, following the election of Boris Johnson as Conservative party leader in 2019, turning towards a militarised war-focused terminology of ‘traitors’, ‘coup’ and ‘the resistance’.

If ‘Leave’ cloaked its campaign in war rhetoric, ‘Remain’ mobilised images of self-harm, such as the popular protest placard depicting a union jack foot and a hand shooting a gun into it. Whilst this protest image is supposed to focus our attention on the ‘obvious’ stupidity of Brexit as self-inflicted suffering, the question of pleasures of self-harm is the recurring theme in Fintan O’Toole’s impressive Heroic Failure: Brexit and the Politics of Pain (2018), where he repeatedly figures Brexit as a pleasurable form of national self-harm. O’Toole’s focus on the ‘structures of feeling’ of Brexit unearthes what he argues is a strange imaginary oppression in the part of the English, where self-pity should be read as a form of aggrieved self-regard. This reflects the ‘incoherence of the new English nationalism’, which switches between fantasies of Empire 2.0 and a portrayal of the Brexit vote as ‘insurgency from below’ (2018, p.3). Conversely, he notes the emergence of popular fiction such as Len Deighton’s SS-GB and Robert Harris’s Fatherland which enacts fantasies of losing the Second World War and notes how British media accounts of Brexit talks mapped war rhetoric onto Britain’s relationship to the EU. In this scenario, one version of Brexit appears as a fantasised re-enactment of the Second World War, where Britain is tragically and frenziedly refusing to give way to the present political reality in the face of the attractions of feverish dreams of the past and as a result turns on itself. As Ben Noyes notes, Brexit ‘designed to raise a protective barrier against the EU seems to have resulted in a traumatic shock that is now having internal effects’ (2018,
addition to her work as an investigative journalist, beyond that determined by sectarian polarities. In part of a generation in Northern Ireland who had of the 1990s. McKee, who was born in 1990, was 'Troubles' brought to an end by the Peace Process should not necessarily be seen as marking an inevitable However, McKee's killing by dissident republicans intransigence and patterns of sectarian violence. This Agreement's intended resolution of both political and the status of the border with the Irish Republic have also resulted in serious threats to the Good Friday the actual referendum, and the killing of Arkadiusz Józwik in Essex two months later, supposedly because the culture of xenophobia attached to Brexit has had lethal consequences: the murder of MP Jo Cox in her the UK has also been fraught, experienced as a devastating loss of a sense of belonging and a real threat to future in the public sphere with 'Go Home' vans, and produced the 2018 ‘Windrush scandal’, resulting in at least 83 cases of wrongful deportation, with many further people suffering severe consequences of loss of housing, jobs or access to NHS treatment. Brexit’s other monstrous parent, the Conservative government imposed ‘Austerity’ programme, inflicted demeaning and severely damaging cuts on the social fabric of Britain whose effects have and continue to devastate lives. The case of EU citizens living in the country, not returning to the UK is continually promised that the war will be ‘over by Christmas’. In this scenario, as Stuart Heritage notes: ‘class contestation cannot be eliminated by all circumstances of the persecution of the early Christian church within the Roman Empire. Yet in the face of immense trials and tribulations the Apocalypse of Christian eschatology ultimately results in a world made anew for the faithful while unbelievers face eternal damnation. This ambivalence around the outcome of the destructive power of the apocalypse can also be seen as underpinning the temporalities of Brexit. With an event horizon continually extending into the future; apparently final dates such as 31 October 2019 were postponed as the election was called to break parliamentary deadlock, this point of no return represented for Remainers the beginnings of a descent into utter chaos. For Leave, however, the same date represented a moment of redemption, one
that banishes the fear of other cataclysms – the tide of immigration or European bureaucracy being just two examples. This uncertainty has not been assuaged by the recent, December 2019, election, as the question of negotiating the terms of Brexit and the threat of no deal remains central to the coming year’s political developments facing the new ‘final’ Brexit date of 31 December 2020, which in turn is now under pressure due to the global Covid-19 pandemic that has emerged just as this special edition is going into print.

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

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

Although the focus of Brexit is on the process whereby the United Kingdom leaves the European Union, it is also relevant to see this as part of a more widespread crisis in global capitalism, particularly around the project of neoliberalism that permeates politics in Britain, the EU and beyond. The referendum of 23 June 2016, as Finlayson points out, marked a point at which a range of complex processes crystallised into a specific political expression, which, because it took a solid form, has since affected the direction and altered the speed of the eddies and whirls of British political culture.

(Finlayson, 2018, p.598)

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

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

**Brexit’s affects**

Discourses of the ease and simplicity of performing Brexit have increasingly given way to a recognition of the multiple pitfalls, logistical difficulties and multiple modes of hurt and damage that it would inflict on citizens’ rights: to cross borders to work and live, their psychic wellbeing, their state of anxiety or sense of cultural or national identity. Furthermore, Brexit has enacted a series of assaults on the terms of definition of each of these categories, putting them into crisis in a national discursive space that is riven, polarised and increasingly traumatised. This special issue explores the ‘archive of feelings’ that Brexit has both created and been created by. Following in the wake of Ali Smith’s ‘state of the nation’ seasonal quartet of
novels that have attempted to excavate the ways in which affective life pervades public life, Brexit Wounds proposes to explore the ways in which contemporary writers, artists and cultural critics have anticipated, documented and explored the cultural, affective and aesthetic implications of weathering an ‘extended Brexit season’, of over three years of living in times of crisis and uncertainty, austerity and deprivation, accompanied by revivals of populist and far-right sentiments. ‘Weathering’ might be read here as a strategy for surviving in hostile conditions, following eco-feminist Astrida Neimanis’ use of the term to describe how the human body copes with cultural/ climate change (2018, p.118) and Christina Sharpe’s use of the weather to describe an all-enveloping racist hostile environment (2016, p.106).

Departing from solely political or economic evaluations of Brexit’s effects, this special edition explores how writers, artists and performers engage with the causes, challenges, threats and potential disasters of Brexit and asserts the importance of cultural assessments of notions of belonging, patriotism, nationalism. In a media environment saturated with entrenched and hardening positions around collective identity, nation and culture, the arts have a vital role crossing between private and public space in which to debate and perpetually rework arguments, propositions and uncertainty about definitions and effects of Brexit as they unfold in everyday cultural practices and specific locations in current discourses of national and international culture, identity and belonging. These disrupted and unprecedented circumstances invite a range of responses. There are many compelling reasons to see Brexit as ‘culturalpolitical’ almost entirely social, driven by affect, wish, perverse desires, ‘pure’ fantasy. As Robert Eaglestone comments following Lauren Berlant’s model of cruel optimism, to account for the cultural investment in a neo-liberal politics that actively harms those invested in it, Brexit should be read in terms of ‘cruel nostalgia’ (2018b, p.92). As many critics have argued, a key site of this nostalgia has been Britain’s ‘unaddressed and unredressed past’ as Nadine El-Enany discusses (2017). Brexit has worked as an empty vessel, filled by imaginary landscapes, fictional nations, banal nationalisms and been conjured as a solution to various wounds—hurts, pains and feelings. As such it might be fruitfully understood through Ernesto Laclau’s formulation of the ‘empty signifier’. Through its openness to interpretation and appropriation this acts as a focus for a range of different and disparate grievances that citizens hold in relation to their interaction in a given society that temporarily become linked together in a chain of equivalence. Laclau comments ‘the whole model depends on the presence of the dichotomatic frontier: without this, the equivalental relation would collapse and the identity of each demand would be exhausted in its differential particularity’ (2005, p.131). Appignanesi argues convincingly, that Brexit is best understood as the culmination of a populism brewing in the UK over a long time period: ‘Multitude democracy, as can be said of populism, reckoning itself disenfranchised, will threaten civil war against the absentees of privilege. A “mode” if not the reality of being on a war footing is symptomatic of populism’ (2018, p.565). Appignanesi, like Laclau, does not see populism as as structurally different from other forms of politics, for Laclau the dismissal of populism is the dismissal of politics tout court. Populism shares the same modes as any politics, it is simply a ‘way of constructing the political’ (Laclau, 2005, p.xi).

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

Artistic responses to Brexit

There has been an extensive range of responses to Brexit from artists. The vast majority are broadly identified with a Remain stance, with the exception of the group Artists for Brexit. Composed of members from across the arts spectrum, the intuitively populist
appeal of its website (Artists for Brexit, 2018) is in keeping with the prominent role initially played within the group by Munira Mirza, director of the Conservative Government’s Number 10 Policy Unit and appointed by Boris Johnson, after her earlier role as London’s Deputy Mayor, for Education and Culture. There has, however, been a real diversity of forms of critical engagement with the complexities of Brexit within artistic practice, whether this be street art or photography, collaborative craftivism right on the edge of the United Kingdom, or curatorial interventions right at its heart. Northern Ireland-based artist Rita Duffy’s *Soften the Border* (2017)(Figure 0.1) addresses the very real issues posed by a hard border with the Republic, and which threaten to undermine the legacy of the Good Friday Agreement. For three days between 10 and 13 August Duffy’s installation was situated on a bridge that marks the actual boundary between Northern Ireland and the Republic, and which she temporarily covered in soft furnishings knitted, crocheted and sewn by local women’s community groups on both sides of the border (Cathcart, 2017). On one level, the installation can be seen as staging the subversion of Brexit’s geopolitical implications within a specific localised context. Yet in its collaborative involvement of numerous unnamed women from different border communities, Duffy’s *Softening the Border* also proposes a different kind of female agency beyond the political figureheads who have dominated the debate – Theresa May, Angela Merkel or Arlene Foster.

By comparison with the territorial issues that figure in Duffy’s installation, which also underpin other work such as Laura Pannack’s *Separation* (2018), a photographic study of couples likely to be split apart by the impending legislation, the disruptive temporalities triggered by Brexit can also be detected in responses by other artists. These include not only Bob and Roberta Smith’s invocation of the iconoclastic destruction of England’s artistic culture during the post-Reformation (Brill, 2017), but also Mark Wallinger’s *This Way Up* (2019), posters designed to be installed on billboards across Britain in preparation for leaving the EU on 29 March 2019. An inverted photograph of Theresa May invokes a Bakhtian topsy-turvy world of contemporary
politics. This is reinforced however, by a quotation from Gerrard Winstanley, the seventeenth-century reformer and activist leader of the True Diggers, one of the radical groups emerging during the English Civil War, and whose occupation of public lands privatised by enclosures sought to challenge the ownership of property. Winstanley’s advocacy of ‘Freedom (as) the man who will turn the world upside down’ in the contemporary context suggests a world of workers’ rights very different to potential post-Brexit scenario of a pernicious disenfranchisement (Winstanley, [1652] 1973).

In a political climate where public space is increasingly dominated by pro-Brexit propaganda, Wallinger’s poster is far from the only intervention within a domain where the politics of Brexit become contested through visual means. Since the 2016 referendum, there has been a proliferation of Remain-related street art. A considerable amount of the resulting media coverage has, however, been focused around the already prominent figure of Banksy, particularly in connection with the mysterious destruction in the summer of 2019 of his Dover mural depicting a workman chipping away at one of the stars of the flag of the European Union (K. Brown, 2019). Banksy’s work also featured within a notable curatorial intervention in one of the main public bodies associated with conservative values of British national identity. In 2018, the artist Grayson Perry was the invited curator of the Royal Academy’s Summer Exhibition. Founded in 1768, the Royal Academy played a significant part in the formation of Britain’s national identity through its first president Joshua Reynolds’ advocacy of a visual canon that would both reflect and articulate Britain’s growing political and economic status. However, throughout its history the RA’s Summer Exhibition has been by open submission rather than invitation, with the final selection from a large number of works by both professional and non-professional artists being made by an artist-curator who is also a member of the Academy. The resulting eclecticism is popularly perceived as demonstrating the vibrancy and variety of contemporary art, although this can also be seen as a hegemonic strategy of containment by a historically conservative institution. Perry had already engaged
Situating Brexit Wounds

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

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

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

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

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

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

Muzna Rahman also addresses this subject through an analysis of alimentary metaphors that she argues have characterised Brexit debates. She argues that Brexit has been reported and represented within the media and elsewhere through the language and imagery of food and consumption. Whether this is articulated via real anxieties about the effects that pulling out of the European single market will have on British foodways, or through the specific lexicon deployed when imagining the metaphors of Brexit, gastronomical readings of the various ‘texts’ of and around Brexit provide productive ways of both understanding and contextualising the politics of...
the present moment. She identifies specific national alimentary discourses that surround and permeate the cultural and political context of Brexit, particularly with regard to race, examining the intersections of national identity, whiteness and British food cultures in order to examine and interrogate some key images associated with Brexit.

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

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

As will be very apparent from a reading of the above, even attempts to unpick the shifting sense of time involved in Brexit are themselves inevitably imbued with modes of temporality: it is the fate of contemporaneity itself to become rapidly outmoded. This applies also to cultural responses to the present situation, including our own. In Jonathan Coe’s novel Middle England, for example, events take place during the period between spring 2010 and autumn 2018, the prelude to the referendum and the beginning of the aftermath that we are still experiencing. Yet the challenge of writing fiction in the context of such recent events brings its own difficulties. In his review of Coe’s book, Sam Leith makes the observation that ‘the historical scaffolding is so familiar, and yet will date so fast’, a process which he sees as at the heart of the novel’s inconsistencies (Leith, 2018). The pressure of insistent change, and a sense of the ephemeral that Leith’s review points towards, however, have become predominant features of how Brexit is represented. In actuality, however, these are also underpinned by a range of other ways of thinking about and experiencing time; we have argued that the temporalities of Brexit are more complex than they might at first appear. Brexit is increasingly being understood as an ongoing or epochal phenomenon, and Brexit’s history still is far from being written.
Bibliography


‘WE ARE THE EUROPEAN FAMILY’: UNSETTLING THE ROLE OF FAMILY IN BELONGING, RACE, NATION AND THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

Hannah Jones

Abstract
In the Brexit referendum debates and their aftermath, one popular call to solidarity within the EU came from artist Wolfgang Tillmans, who released a series of posters with slogans intended to rally voters to support remaining in the EU. This article takes one of those slogans – ‘It’s a question of where you feel you belong. We are the European family’ – as a starting point to examine the openings and closures made available through calls to (trans)national solidarity on the basis of family. Drawing on critical autobiography, historical anthropology and analysis of trends in bordering and race politics, the article points to multi-layered and colonially inflected histories of ‘family’ in relation to national and continental belonging. Beginning with the sense of uncertainty over belonging and connection stirred up by Brexit, the essay acknowledges the comfort found by some in the seeming security of family. However, the article then engages with alternative realities of ‘The European Family’ – families separated by border controls, racialised as defective or oppressed by heteronormative patriarchy – and unsettles the problematic of ‘European’ in ‘The European Family’. The paper identifies how empirical and metaphorical family relate to (trans)national belonging and citizenship. Bringing Tillmans’ posters into conversation with some of Gillian Wearing’s work on family and place, the conclusion offers some possibilities for thinking family/nation while retaining ambiguity, resistance and potential and resisting the closure of normative ideas, in favour of a more empirically grounded engagement with how ‘real families’ relate to and through nation.

Keywords: Brexit, family, race, nation, Wolfgang Tillmans, Gillian Wearing

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‘WE ARE THE EUROPEAN FAMILY’: UNSETTLING THE ROLE OF FAMILY IN BELONGING, RACE, NATION AND THE EUROPEAN PROJECT

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Introduction

In the years-long ‘Brexit moment’, evidence of turmoil about belonging, nationalism and dislocation has been all around. While some have reached out for solace and connection, gestures of connection can themselves alienate others, through claiming attention for one experience of the pain of nationalist rejection while seemingly ignoring histories of longer, more acute racialised border violence (Emejulu, 2016; Piacentini, 2016). This paper reckons with one mode of seeking connection and belonging: the appeal to (metaphorical) (trans)national family. In doing so, I seek to understand the appeal of this call, its limitations and – tentatively – its possibilities for a more inclusive solidarity that can take into account histories of violence enacted through practices of nation and family.

The title of this paper comes from an encounter with work made by German photographer and 2000 Turner Prize–winner Wolfgang Tillmans, which promotes a ‘Remain’ vote in the EU referendum (see Tillmans, 2016a). Frustrated by the official Remain campaign, Tillmans worked with artists and other collaborators in his Between Bridges project to produce his own publicity materials. Using background images from his previous works in the series Vertical Landscapes (1995–), overlaid with short messages promoting voter registration and a Remain vote, the posters were distributed as open-source files which the public were encouraged to print and display, and use on social media. Hard copies were also distributed. Around 25 designs emphasised themes including having a democratic voice, youth mobility, and transnational familial and cultural links.

The poster which helped to trigger the thinking in this paper states Fig. 1.1): ‘It’s a question of where you feel you belong. We are the European Family.’ Seeing this particular poster shared on social media in the aftermath of the referendum result, it became clear that it also acted as a source of comfort for some, a reassertion of connectedness and belonging across national borders within the European Union, no matter what the referendum said. The ‘question of where you feel you belong’ is not a simple one. It is cross-cut by questions of power, history and personal circumstances – including during the ‘Brexit moment’ of uncertainty, anxiety and anger. The feeling of where one belongs is not a personal feeling but a public feeling (Ahmed, 2007; Cvetkovich, 2012). While ‘family’ is often thought of as a source of comfort, connection and safety, it is also – much like nation – an exclusive institution, and one that involves power, hierarchy, submission and oppression within its empirical and figurative manifestations. It is much easier to imagine family, and belonging to one, as an undifferentiated comfort and good, for those who have not experienced domestic abuse, ostracization or family breakdown. Similarly, it is much easier to imagine national belonging or homeland as an easy or unproblematic ‘good feeling’ for those who have not experienced racism, citizenship discrimination, transnational separation or diasporic melancholy. One does not simply ‘choose’ to belong to a nation, or
family, but depends on a reciprocal relationship which might be denied in a way that goes to the very essence of who a person is seen to be (Ahmed et al, 2003).

In many ways, Brexit is not a unique moment. It is one within which echoes and hauntings of earlier and ongoing divisions of racialised nationhood and practices of family inclusion and exclusion resonate in powerful ways (Bhambra, 2017). This article considers the fractures visible in the Brexit debates as just one example of how borders and inclusion/exclusion across them, and one’s belonging, can change without oneself changing or moving in any way. In doing so, the trope of (trans)national belonging evoked through a metaphor of family, as in Tillman's work, is re-examined. While both family and nation tend to be used rhetorically as if they are timeless and fixed, the first section of the paper considers how they actually parallel one another in their blurrings, shiftings and contradictions. Some contradictory attempts to fix shared family forms and (trans)national ideals are highlighted, including both rejection of queer families and racialised religious groups from the nation, and the reincorporation of one of these groups in order to stigmatise the other.

To extend this recognition of shifting forms of family, and the implications of family in constructing race and nation, the next sections consider examples of family practices used to construct the position of racialised insiders and outsiders to The European Family. Firstly, drawing on Ann Laura Stoler’s work on the codification of intimate relationships in Dutch colonies and Gloria Wekker’s critical autobiographical reflections on being a ‘postcolonial’ Dutch subject, I point to (a) how intimate family practice is a fundamental part of constructing both race and nation, and (b) how the European project (of developing and maintaining European power) always involved the labour and bodies of those deemed outside the racialised European Family and continent.

Coming back to the current moment, I consider how state-sanctioned marriage and patriarchal presumptions continue to be instrumental in maintaining racialised border controls in Europe. This is explored with particular reference to the case of Mohamed Bangoura, a six-year-old boy deprived of his British citizenship in 2018 on the basis of his mother’s marital status, while out of the UK without his parents.

As another example of how one’s belonging can shift without one moving or changing, and to demonstrate the immediacy of how intimate family and history intervene in current bordering and racialising practices, I draw on my own experience of becoming a dual national in response to the Brexit result, which I pursued in response to being made to feel an outsider, but clearly from a position of citizenship privilege. Keeping in mind the historical contingency and the racialised, classed and gendered power relations at play in the status of citizenship/family, this experience is put into conversation with the contemporaneous ways in which holding dual nationality – or just the potential of it – has become a risk, particularly mobilised against those suspected of terrorist involvement, such as in the case of teenage mother Shamima Begum.

Having laid out these complexities of what ‘The European Family’ and ‘the question of where you feel you belong’ might mean, but recognising the deep appeal of familial connection, I return to contemporary political art to look for other possibilities of reimagining family, race and nation. In this instance, I consider the work of Gillian Wearing on her projects Family Monument, A Real Birmingham Family and A Real Danish Family, which have attempted to expand the connection between real and imagined families and place identities in ways that rely less on fixed and exclusive ideal types.

The final section of the paper draws these cases together to make sense of what an imaginary of national or European family might enable or foreclose. Here, I return to Tillmans’ posters but bring them into conversation with Wearing’s work which begins with the intimate (and ‘real’) and reflects on the local, regional and national collective. Might this provide an alternative way of imagining connection and solidarity without closure and exclusion?

**Shifting and reifying European family**

Christian democracy protects us from migration, defends the borders, supports the traditional family model of one man, one woman, considers the protection of our Christian culture as a natural thing.

(Orbán quoted in Reuters, 2018)

Family is an inherently gendered and racialising category in the context of Western Europe. State sanctioning of intimate relationships has historically served to organise economic relationships, national inclusion and practices of racialisation. There have always been alternative formations of family and practices called family, which reject the normative model or enact it in alternative ways (longstanding examples include informal adoption or cross-generational care arrangements), alongside more recent changes in the cultural and legal acceptance of same-sex unions. Similarly, the European subject exists in multiple forms, often transgressing the normative vision of whiteness, Europeanness or...
legitimacy. If this were not the case, there would be little need for the proclamations of those such as Hungary’s prime minister Viktor Orbán, who fear these everyday ‘alternative’ ways of being might prove more attractive than his ‘Christian, one man, one woman’ dream. Family, however defined, tends to relate back to obligation, care and biological relatedness (whether real or fictive). The home and family are most often used metaphorically to mean comfort, but can also be places of repression, control and violence (e.g., Barrett and MacIntosh, 1982; Ahmed et al, 2003).

One parallel between the European Union and the project of the modernised normative family is their continual reinvention; their reimagining of restrictive structures (patriarchy, national borders) while still hanging onto the original form and therefore the problems of exclusive, hierarchical logics. The European Union project is at one level of course about breaking down national borders – in terms of trade certainly, and in an idealistic vision, in terms of a peace project between European nations previously divided by war and political conflict. However laudable this may seem, there are limits to this vision both in its idealistic form and in practice. The most obvious being that the transnational, borderless ideal itself has borders, ones that are increasingly fiercely guarded in part as a result of the freedom of movement within the territory: Fortress Europe. Like families, nations themselves have shifting internal allegiances and rivalries.

Even those who have lauded the post-national idealism of the EU project (e.g., Favell, 2019) recognise that EU freedom of movement and related easy connections beyond national legal and affective belonging is, in the simplest terms, only available to EU citizens. The Schengen area of frictionless movement and the removal of internal borders has since its inception been dependent on enforcing ever more stringent external borders. Increasingly, this also involves enlisting neighbouring countries in the process of restraining entry to the EU for ‘immigrants’, in return for partial access to movement within the EU for those neighbouring countries’ citizens (Grzymski, 2019). The boundaries of who ‘belongs’ to the European family is strictly policed – even to the extent of reinstating internal EU borders (Lendaro, 2016).

The EUrpean dream of liberalism, the free market and free movement is not just premised on exclusion, but also challenged from ‘within’ by far-right illiberal populism in countries such as Poland and Hungary (Graff, Kapur and Walters, 2018, p.551), and increasingly in more long-standing EU family member countries. Politicians’ claims to defend ‘Christian marriage’ are mobilised as a reason for defending EU borders (from Muslims). Elsewhere, those apparently on the opposite end of a political spectrum use a defence of LGBT+ rights to likewise stigmatise and exclude Muslims from inclusion in the Euro/national family (Puar, 2007), while minority fundamentalist Muslim, Jewish and Christian groups form coalitions in opposition to queer families (Haynes, 2019; Volpe, 2019; Barnabas Fund, 2019).

The persistence of family in empire
‘The European’ can hardly be imagined without an understanding of Europe’s embroilment with geographies and peoples of the world (Goldberg, 2006). Both national identity and race/racism as we currently understand and experience them have been produced through histories of colonial conquest, genocide, slavery and resource extraction by Europeans (Bhattacharyya, 2018). This developed through physical force, certainly, but also through technologies of family and reproduction. Anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler’s (1989, 2002) landmark work on Dutch colonial practices is exemplary in demonstrating how this worked in practice, in this instance through the transforming practice of ‘concubinage’, or informal but institutionally accepted coupledom, in which norms of race and gender not only related, but constituted one another. The ‘European family’ considered in Stoler’s work is a projection and construction of ‘European’ identity and pretended superiority, as performed in parts of the world dominated and ransacked by European national powers, to sustain this power through the ongoing construction of racialised privilege. Within the relationships formed by early European settlers and local women, in both everyday relations and formal bureaucratic rulings, race as a category was constructed over time through the instigation of taboos and how they related to material changes in circumstance:

Unions between Annamite women and French men, between Javanese women and Dutch men, between Spanish men and Inca women produced offspring with claims to privilege, whose rights and status had to be determined and prescribed. From the early 1600s through the 20th century the sexual sanctions and conjugal prohibitions of colonial agents were rigorously debated and carefully codified.

(Stoler, 1989, p.637)
‘White’ or ‘European’ superiority and separateness from locals had to be maintained in order to maintain colonial authority. White poverty, sickness and old age was shipped back to Europe (Stoler, 1989, p.655). When white supremacy was thought to be in jeopardy, vulnerable, or less than convincing, colonial elites moved from endorsing concubinage to bringing European women to colonies as wives in ‘full-blooded’ European families (p.639). As such, the colonial project was intimately entwined with social and legal constructions of family. While intimate life involved personal feeling and connection, this was recognised as either a political tool or political threat in connecting or separating groups through defining entitlement (or not) to resources, rights and respect.

Stories of promise of membership of The European Family ultimately thwarted by race are visible too in the embers of European empires. In White Innocence (2016), gender theorist Gloria Wekker considers her own ‘European family’ story, and how it fits into ongoing, multi-layered European racialising regimes. She writes:

My own family migrated to the Netherlands in December 1951, when my father, who was a police inspector in the Surinamese force, qualified to go on leave for six months to the ‘motherland,’ where we eventually stayed permanently … The regulation for leave in the motherland was of course meant for white Dutch civil servants only, who should not ‘go native,’ losing their sense and status of being Dutch, but my father had risen to a rank where he qualified for that perk … It was only decades later that I realized that the reason why we found our first house in the old Jewish neighbourhood of Amsterdam was that 70 percent of Jews in the Netherlands were abducted during World War II…

Wekker continues:

My family became subject to the same postwar disciplining regime that was meant for ‘weakly adjusted,’ white lower-class people and orientalised Indonesians … The postwar uplifting regime consisted of regular unexpected visits from social workers, who came to inspect whether we were duly assimilating, that is, whether my mother cooked potatoes instead of rice, that the laundry was done on Monday, that we ate minced meatballs on Wednesday, and that the house was cleaned properly.

In her account, Wekker highlights the nature of European racialising logic. Firstly, the same regulations described by Stoler, intended to keep Dutch colonial officers connected to the motherland. Then, when the Wekkers exceptionally took up this offer, they found themselves re-classified from Dutch (colonial) citizens to ‘undesirables’, ostracised from national belonging through the surveillance of their family life – and the inseparability of racialising processes of class and classed processes of racialisation (see also Virdee, 2014) – while noting that the home they found was itself cleared by the internal European racial ‘regulation’ of the Holocaust.

The Wekkers are one way to reconceive a quintessentially ‘European Family’ as exceeding the bounds of European continental territory, or as a family that exists in relation to Europe, its history and present. They grew and lived in a European-controlled territory, and took advantage of the myth-making of that territory which relied for loyalty and order in part on an idea that the wealth of and belonging to Europe was available to its imperial subjects. In moving to the ‘motherland’ within Europe, the racial differentiation at the heart of European identity and ‘civilisation’ was demonstrated again, with the policing of behaviours within the continent of Europe – even, ironically, where the cleanliness and fastidiousness, which apparently needed to be inculcated within families, such as the Wekkers, were made more difficult by the less ‘civilised’ housing conditions in Amsterdam than in Suriname (‘having come to the motherland, we did not have an indoor shower and had to bathe in a tub in the kitchen, as was usual [in the Netherlands] at the time’ (p.8)). Thus the ‘European Family’ was policed, codified and reimagined outside the territory of continental Europe, as part of the wider project of defining and defending white supremacy. This expectation of welcome and inclusion in a European empire that was taught to imperial subjects, only to find the opposite on arrival in the ‘motherland’, is something mirrored elsewhere, including more recent reverberations in the case of the ‘Windrush Scandal’ in the UK (Wardle and Obermuller, 2018; De Noronha, 2019).

Taken together, we can see through these examples crossing time and continents a way of imagining The European Family differently. It is both a national and an intimate project, one that assigns legal rights through governmental regulation of personal relationships, and one that reasserts that only some are truly recognised as family members.

**The persistence of marriage as bordering technology**

I have so far discussed the ways in which ideas of an inclusive transnational family of the EU are challenged by the barriers around the EU, tensions within it and
the ongoing familial connections and denials associated with colonial adventures of individual EU member states. However, in an era of superdiversity, we can see that both reconfigured transnational relations, and reconfigured familial relations, can still end up with a bitter reminder of the restrictions of inclusion in both national and intimate families.

Consider the case of six-year-old, British-born Mohamed Bangoura. In 2018, he was refused re-entry to the UK and thereby separated from his mother for two weeks until the matter was resolved following campaigning, media outcry and support from his MP and MEP. Mohamed had been visiting his uncle in Belgium over the summer. His mother, Hawa Keita, had come to the UK from Guinea and the Home Office claimed it had sent her a letter revoking Mohamed’s passport in March 2018, on the basis that ‘Mohamed was only entitled to British citizenship through his mother or her husband, but neither was settled in the UK when he was born’ (BBC News, 2018). That is to say, Mohamed was registered as having British citizenship for the first six years of his life, but at that point, the Home Office apparently identified new information about his parents’ visa status and revoked his citizenship – leaving him effectively, in the words of media reports, ‘stranded and stateless’ (BBC News, 2018). Keita stated that she never received the letter and consequently did not anticipate problems when Mohamed went to visit family and friends for the summer holidays. It was only on the return to the UK that border guards reported a problem.

In the mainstream news coverage, the case was resolved when Mohamed was issued with a temporary travel document enabling him to be reunited with his mother – following pressure from both MPs and journalists. The final outcome for Mohamed and his mother was not made public.

What did emerge more quietly in legal analysis was that this is not an isolated case (Hickman, 2018). The problem with Mohamed’s status derived from the marital status of his mother. Both of Mohamed’s parents were legally resident in Britain at the time of his birth, and his biological father’s name was entered on his birth certificate. His parents assumed that he qualified for British citizenship because of having one parent who was ‘a British citizen or has settled status (i.e. the right to remain in the UK permanently) at the time of [his] birth’ (Hickman, 2018). Mohamed would qualify through his father, who was a British citizen, and it was on this basis that his passport was issued. The problem arose because in British citizenship law, it is the husband of the mother who counts as the ‘father’ for citizenship purposes – and not the biological father. Keita was still married to another man, who was not a British citizen; they were separated, and he was living in Guinea (Crisp and McCann, 2018). This was what the Home Office had discovered, and on this basis had revoked Mohamed’s citizenship lawfully, though perhaps not fairly. Other cases where citizenship has been denied on the same principle exist; one case heard around the same time in court prompted a judge to make a ‘Declaration of Incompatibility’ stating that the legal situation is incompatible with human rights law and should be changed by government (Hickman, 2018). While the British Nationality Act 1981 made it possible to receive British nationality through one’s mother as well as one’s father, it retained this patriarchal attachment to marriage, which expects a mother to be in a married relationship with the father of her children.

It is not clear how Mohamed’s parents’ marital status ‘came to light’ at the Home Office. It is worth noting however that it is not only in this situation that the apparently anachronistic importance of marital status determines residence and citizenship rights. Civil partnership and established non-marital (but evidentially cohabiting, coupled and romantic) relationships are now considered valid family connections in immigration applications to the UK. However, the marriage route still remains the ‘safest’ in terms of convincing authorities of a valid and legitimate connection; hence the Home Office’s fascination with the idea of ‘sham marriages’ (Wemyss et al, 2018). While marriage and family continue to be considered valid reasons for transgressing national borders, the policing of the ‘truth’ of the romantic relationships underpinning marriage contracts becomes a concern of the migration-minimising state. In the UK, the Home Office has demonstrated this through its high profile and militarised raids on wedding ceremonies, often in the company of local journalists who will publicise further the government interest in identifying the absence of true love (Jones et al, 2017, p.69).

There are countless examples of the way in which gendered and racialised familial relations are policed as a way of enforcing (trans)national borders, often reinforcing potentially repressive relations within the intimate family: the privileging of family reunification as a means of attaining residence in a territory; discriminatory income thresholds for being allowed to bring a foreign spouse into a territory; the strange logic of the ‘Surinder Singh’ route to family reunification in the UK through which British citizens could avoid the income threshold otherwise required to bring their non-EU spouse to join them, by moving to another EU country, and becoming qualifying European nationals; the ‘primary purpose rule’ in the UK which, between 1983 and 1997 required applicants for family reunification visas to demonstrate ‘that the
marriage was not entered into primarily to obtain admission to the United Kingdom; the barbaric ‘virginity testing’ of South Asian women seeking UK visas, to ascertain whether they were ‘really’ new brides; the recognition (or not) of same-sex marriage within immigration regimes; the rejection of asylum claims grounded on homophobic persecution on the basis of a judge's assessment of a claimant's sexuality and relationships; and the mobilisation of claims to respectability and stability of family relationships by those who would otherwise question the institution’s conservatism, in order to attain geographical security (Lutz, 1997; Chavez, 2013; Sirriyeh, 2015; Wemyss et al, 2018; Griffiths, 2019).

Until now, I have discussed the crossing of borders largely with a lens of entering (or being rejected from) belonging to a particular/new trans/national family. However, another way in which family practices and lived experiences of bordering are parallel, is that one can be a member of more than one family (intimate or national) at once – and that this multiple membership itself, while mundane, can also fundamentally bring into question some of the claims about absolute loyalty or belonging that lie at the base of both institutions.

Dual nationalities: citizens of the world/nowhere

Talking about family is personal. So let me give a personal example. My maternal grandfather came to the UK from Germany in 1938, when he was twelve, travelling with his parents from Nuremberg where, had they stayed, they would not have survived. Once in England, they were all made stateless by the removal of German citizenship from all Jews by the Nazi government. Later they were naturalised as British citizens. As I discovered after the Brexit vote, this fortunate escape from unspeakable consequences had become my own opportunity to acquire ongoing EU citizenship, whatever happened to UK membership.

It was only after the referendum that I found out that descendants of those Jews, trade unionists and others who had been deprived of German citizenship between 1933 and 1945 were entitled to ‘restoration of citizenship’, as a form of cross-generational reparation from post-war German governments. I learnt some German at school but had always felt uneasy visiting Germany because of this family history, and doubt that I would have pursued this citizenship at all if it had not been for the threat of Brexit.

The number of British people seeking restitution of German citizenship as I have increased dramatically since the Brexit vote – from around 20 per year before 2015 to 3,380 in the two years following the referendum (Harpin, 2018). There has been some news coverage of this, in which people affected tend to emphasise either their wish to travel freely and maintain EU rights after Brexit, or re-discovering their family history and roots as German Jews (BBC One, 2017). The central motivation for me was less the ability to skip passport queues, than a feeling of threat – perhaps irrational, but viscerally felt. The feeling of the walls closing in; the feeling of the necessity of collecting as many passports as possible in case of the need to flee.

While many non-UK citizens from other EU countries are feeling uncertain about their ability to stay in this country, many UK citizens are considering whether they will be forced to stay whether they want to or not, in a place that may continue to change in unanticipated ways. That latter group of people may say ‘lucky you!’ in response to my explaining that I am a dual British-German citizen now. Indeed, it is a privilege to now hold not one but two of the world’s most ‘powerful passports’ in terms of mobility through visa-free travel (Passport Index, 2019). But I am not sure if luck is the right word. What is? The instinct to apply for ‘restitution’ of my German citizenship was born of fear, possibility and a cheeky desire to play the insane citizenship system at its own game. The absurdity of having both passports when I have no desire to live in Germany with all its hauntings, or away from the UK with its more familiar ghosts. The question about what my Grandpa would have thought of it. The absurdity of applying for restitution of a citizenship I have never had, when without the removal of it from my grandparent neither my mother nor I could exist. The idea of being grateful my great-grandparents had to leave behind their home, friends and belongings to survive; the idea of not being grateful that they were able to when so many others could not escape.

This is all part of a complicated, entangled family legacy, a European legacy and a European family legacy. But, at present, my citizenship and residency are not in question. For me, dual nationality is an option, an opportunity. But I gained it at the same time that others are finding that dual nationality – or even just eligibility for it – puts them at risk of having one citizenship removed, or even of being rendered stateless. The legal processes that have enabled this denial of one membership of national family, casting out by reinstating another, has been documented by Nisha Kapoor in her work on understanding the counter-terror matrix (2018), and it has been brought to public attention by the case of Shamima Begum.

Begum, a British teenager, travelled to Syria in 2015 at the age of 15 with two friends of the same age, planning to join the Islamic State (IS) militant group. Four years later, she was found in a Syrian refugee camp by a Times journalist and her presence highly publicised – as was the imminent birth of her third child. At nineteen, two of her children had already
died in refugee camps, and her Dutch husband – an IS fighter – was being held in Kurdish detention in Syria. Begum told journalists she wished to return to the UK with her child, but, following successive front-page headlines such as ‘No Regrets, No Remorse, No Entry’ (The Sun, 15 February) and ‘Jihadi Bride Wants Baby on NHS’ (Metro, 15 February), British Home Secretary Sajid Javid revoked her UK citizenship; she was no longer considered part of the British/European family (‘You’re Up Brit Creek’, The Star, 20 February). Nor was her baby son, who died at a few days old. This was a populist move, indicated by the outrage at Begum’s apparent involvement in IS. However, it was controversial in less populist milieus for two main reasons: firstly, the removal of her British citizenship made her stateless – an action forbidden in both UK law and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; secondly, as a child her involvement in IS was the result of abuse, meriting her protection (Yusuf & Swann, 2019). The statelessness question was argued on a technicality – that because Begum’s mother was ‘believed to be’ a Bangladeshi national, Begum was entitled to apply for Bangladeshi citizenship until her 21st birthday (BBC News, 2019). Since she had made no such application, she was made stateless by Javid’s actions; the Bangladeshi government made it known they would reject any application from her. What we see here is that fundamental tenets of human rights law, established as principles of European (and global) life after the Nazi Holocaust, are not maintained for those who are deemed not European enough. National citizenship – like family – is not a ‘question of where you feel you belong’, but a question of power. It is a racialised and gendered power to exclude from not only (trans)national family belonging but here it is particularly relevant to focus on three forms of intimacy or family (e.g., Tillmans, 1992, 1993). The ‘question of where you feel you belong’ is not the simple personal choice or affiliation implied by Tillmans’ poster, but something regulated by power and privilege shaped through forces of class, race, gender, sexuality, history and nationality.

Membership and full recognition within this family is at the expense of others who are not part of the family. Attempts to join are rebuffed as an intrinsic part of maintaining a feeling of belonging – and power – for existing members. But are there other ways of constituting family as a form of non-exclusive connection?

Gillian Wearing won the Turner Prize in 1997, three years before Tillmans. In the years since then, family and relationships have become a major theme of her work. This extends to a number of her pieces, but here it is particularly relevant to focus on three of them: Family Monument/A Typical Trentino Family (2007), A Real Birmingham Family (2014) and A Real Danish Family (2017) (Figs. 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4). Through each of these interventions, Wearing has engaged in studies of the contested nature of belonging, place and connection, through a seemingly simple device of constructing a bronze sculpture as a monument to local family. My suggestion is that these engagements provide a more capacious understanding of connections across, within and regardless of borders, while also drawing attention to the wider wounds from which the Brexit debate can distract.

While my attention to Tillmans’ work begins with a metaphor of family which I have tethered back to empirical families, Wearing’s work starts with empirical families but ties them to bigger questions of place, connection and belonging. In her first piece in this series, she worked with a gallery in Trento, Italy, Real families

We … asked people what they thought the ‘family’ was, and they said the usual things – 2.4 children and a mum and dad, and so on. And then we asked them about their own families, and it was very different: ‘Oh, it’s just me and my mum.’

(Wearing quoted in Aspden, 2014)
Figure 1.2: Gillian Wearing, *A Typical Trentino Family*, 2008. Bronze and granite. Trento: Piazza Dante. (Photograph by Francesco Serra, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Figure 1.3: Gillian Wearing, *A Real Birmingham Family*, 2014. Bronze and granite. Birmingham: Ikon Gallery/Centenary Square. (Photograph by Brianboru100, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)

Figure 1.4: Gillian Wearing, *A Real Danish Family*, 2017. Bronze, spray paint and granite. Copenhagen: SMK. (Photograph by Ann Priestley, licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0)
to engage with local concerns about the demise of the nuclear family and falling birth rates. To explore these questions, a statistical profile of the ‘typical’ family in the city was put together (a heterosexual married couple with two children), and families fitting that profile were invited to audition to be cast as a bronze statue for public display.

After the Trento piece, Wearing wanted to explore less the ‘typical’ family, but ‘real families’. It was in the Birmingham and Danish pieces that the project developed in more expansive ways. Foremost, candidates to become the ‘real family’ cast in bronze simply had to identify themselves as a family; they could be a group of people constructed in any way (or a single person), as long as they self-identified as family. This in itself invited a contemplation of the various meanings of ‘family’, as we can see from the statement from Wearing quoted above. Further, the tying of each project to a place identity (whether city or nation) invited an examination of what such belonging might mean. Where this element might easily have created precisely the kind of exclusions I have critiqued around the idea of The EUropean Family above, in practice a more historically and sociologically minded recognition of shifting belongings was able to prevail, in dialogue between the artists, curators, the ‘judges’ invited to help choose the final families and the accompanying TV shows, events and their audiences (Fabricius et al., 2017). Though the statue often appears as the focus of each of these projects, the process of engaging ‘real families’ and a debate about belonging and representation, through the selection of the family, is really at the heart of each work.

For A Real Birmingham Family, Wearing encouraged a broad and open idea of family and also an emphasis on belonging to a place (the city of Birmingham). The family chosen were two sisters, Roma and Emma Jones, and their two sons (and Emma’s pregnancy bump). Ikon Gallery, through which the project ran, stated that ‘no limits were placed on how the twenty-first century family might define itself’ (Ikon, 2014) and the sisters said:

“Our family is made up of two sisters who are single parents that support each other and play a major part in each other’s lives. We have lived in Birmingham all our lives, in many different areas across the city. Being mixed race we feel at home here as it’s so diverse and multicultural. […] We feel it highlights the fact ‘family’ is an indestructible bond between people that is universal. It doesn’t matter how it is made up.

(Jones family quoted in Authi, 2013)

This challenge to the idea of the nuclear family differed from the statue built in the original Family Monument project in Trento, which had focused on statistical norms and finding a final ‘perfect family’ as one newspaper described it (Drake, 2007). Even in the statue of the nuclear family of the Giulianis, there was challenge to the fixity of local belonging, with the group including a Greek wife, an Italian husband, their daughter, son and dog. Wearing made clear that one motivation for developing a similar project in her hometown of Birmingham was to move from the perfect family to a real family and highlighting a variety of forms families can take (Brown, 2014).

The beyond-the-nuclear-family approach appeared to be in retreat in the following work, the 2017 Real Danish Family, which resulted in a statue of Yenny and Michael Lysholm Thorsen and their child. However, the apparent nuclear family ideal was subverted, in that the decision-makers emphasised the Lysholm Thorsens’ story: Yenny became pregnant within weeks of them meeting, and they decided to marry quickly to become parents, while recognising their relationship may not last forever. This seemed to please both marriage-enthusiasts and ‘modernisers’ identifying the contingency of family units. Further, this Real Family also emphasised quietly the transnational making of Danish families: Yenny was born in Colombia and grew up in Denmark, adopted by white Danish parents; Michael was born to Danish parents living in Italy.

What these Real Families offer is not only an engagement with the variety of family structures and their change over time (which is also evident in the statues themselves, with both Emma Jones and Yenny Thorsen pregnant when they posed). They also gesture, perhaps less visibly, to the ways in which families and belonging are made up across place and time, even when a particular family is embedded in a particular place (Jones & Jackson, 2014). As the curators’ publication from A Real Danish Family notes, not only are people in families made up of connections across places and times, but creating the Real Danish Family involved global connections including a British artist, Danish families and judges, a sculptor in London and a bronze casting workshop in China (Fabricius et al., 2017, p.45).

Conclusion: more than Brexit wounds
Perhaps Tillmans and Wearing would see themselves as having similar conceptions of the family: Tillmans, I am sure, would argue that his call to ‘the European family’ we are all in was intended as an inclusive one. It was, after all, part of an explicitly political intervention with an impulse to maintaining transnational relationships. But as outlined above, the weight of the signification of ‘The European Family’ is too heavily racialised, both in symbolism and in continuing legal, institutional and everyday practices, for this message to be an inclusive or liberatory one. What Wearing’s work discussed here offers and Tillmans’ anti-Brexit
work does not, is an opening to question the (located) family – without necessarily jettisoning anything of worth it may contain. This is not simply a result of the end-process of the families chosen and cast in static bronze, but in the conversation about making and remaking families, transnational families, queer families, race, marriage and time.

Tillmans’ comments on the nature of belonging and connection he and others find in the European Union project were underlined by comments he made on his ‘Anti-Brexit’ blog, such as: ‘We have in the last decades become a European family, with much less dividing us than connecting us’ (Tillmans, 2016b). This statement presaged the ‘we have more in common than what divides us’ sentiment which became associated with British Member of Parliament Jo Cox after her assassination at the hands of an anti-EU white supremacist misogynist in June 2016. Like the More in Common project to memorialise Cox, Tillmans’ politics are moderate rather than radical or revolutionary (Jones, 2019). Tillmans told The Guardian newspaper in 2016: ‘I’m an activist for moderation […] I have lived here for 26 years and contributed to British taxes […] I have been the recipient of the Britain’s biggest art prize […] So, I think I’m allowed to speak on something I believe passionately in’ (Tillmans quoted in O’Hagan, 2016). This appeal to the narrative of the good and worthwhile migrant, rather than a claim to universal rights, matches his calls for solidarity with ‘refugees from terror and war’ (Tillmans, 2016b) which similarly remain mired in tropes of undeserving vs. deserving travellers (signalled by refugees), with less attention to the complications of the journeys of those whose movement is neither EU-sanctioned nor within the narrow scope of the recognised refugee (Jones et al, 2017, pp.120–40).

The problem with such a position is the same as the problem with the call to The European Family – most specifically to the definite article in this phrase, which reinforces an idea of an exclusive and identifiably, bordered European ideal, which necessarily cuts out other possibilities. This contrasts with a reading of Tillmans’ background images to his EU posters, ‘photographic images of horizon lines between sea, cloud and sky’, as about ‘the non-solidity of borders speak[ing] to the predicament of the political situation we are in’ (Demircan, 2016, p.35). Perhaps there was possibility there, for a more encompassing response of solidarity rather than solidarity; but the nature of engaging with a political moment and its hegemonic insider/outsider logics lends itself to reproducing the enclosure of The European Family rather than the possibilities of less bordered connection.

My suggestion is that the idea of belonging to a/the European family can only begin to be an inclusive vision if, as in these works by Wearing, we take as our starting point the lived experience of actual families in/ across/between Europe. That is, if we recognise that families are partial, shifting, separated, traumatic, as well as connected, whole, comforting – and that the same goes for nationhood. The Brexit moment’s shifts in dual nationality and hence dual allegiance within/ across/outside ‘The European Family’ are a direct response” to The European Family’s own closures and containments, but also rely on a re-awakening or re-evaluating of trans-national and trans-historical familial connection. The ‘question of where you feel you belong’ can contradict – yet still co-exist with – power structures that allocate belonging.

In examining some non-normative examples of European families, I do not intend to reclaim a celebratory notion of this concept. Rather, the cases I outline are about trauma, fear and disruption as much as attachment, comfort and support. The point is, these experiences of family are as much a part of the fabric of ‘EUropean’ experience as any other; indeed, they haunt the imagined ideal of cosy, safe, home which EUropean family conjures and allows for only some.
Bibliography


‘THE BRITISH PEOPLE HAVE SPOKEN’: THE MONOLOGUE IN HEADLONG THEATRE AND THE GUARDIAN’S BREXIT SHORTS
Shauna O’Brien

Abstract
On 24 June 2016, veteran political commentator David Dimbleby announced the result of the EU Referendum. ‘The British people have spoken’, he said, ‘and the answer is we’re out.’ While it was clear that 52% had voted to leave the EU, what was less certain was exactly how this exit should be realised. To further complicate matters, the divisive rhetoric deployed during the campaign period had served to yoke each side to broader socio-political issues and, in the aftermath of the referendum, various factions were claiming the result as an endorsement for their own ideological viewpoints. If the British people had indeed spoken by voting to Remain or Leave the EU, as Dimbleby had declared, then their voices had effectively been purloined in the process and recirculated in the public sphere to express ideological viewpoints they did not necessarily all hold or share.

Perhaps a large degree of circumspection should be applied, therefore, to any artistic project that claimed to be ‘giving voice’ to these voters. After all, it was the dichotomising lens of the EU Referendum that had arguably reduced voters to these polarised abstractions in the first place. Yet this was precisely the claim made by one of the earliest theatrical responses to the EU referendum – Brexit Shorts, a series of nine short monologues commissioned by Headlong Theatre and the Guardian. This project proffered itself as a possible remedy to the gulf that had opened up between voters on each side of the intractable referendum divide. In this article, I will interrogate the reasons why this project chose to adopt the monologue to pursue this goal, a theatrical form that might initially appear too limited to present the polyvocal and complex reactions of the British people to Brexit.

Keywords: monologue, Brexit, online theatre, Guardian, Headlong Theatre

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Banner image: Rita Duffy, Soften the Border, 2017 (detail). Recycled fabrics, installation on the Belcoo, Blacklion Bridge - Co. Fermanagh / Co. Cavan border, 2.5 x 30m. Image credit: Copyright of the artist, Rita Duffy. Photo credit: Stanislav Nikolov
‘THE BRITISH PEOPLE HAVE SPOKEN’: THE MONOLOGUE IN HEADLONG THEATRE AND THE GUARDIAN’S BREXIT SHORTS

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Introduction
On 24 June 2016 at 4:40am, veteran political commentator David Dimbleby announced the results of the EU Referendum. ‘The British people have spoken’, he said, ‘and the answer is we’re out’ (Engineer, 2016). In the aftermath of the result, however, commentators struggled to decipher exactly what ‘out’ meant, an ontological conundrum that reached its nadir with the answer proffered by the newly appointed Prime Minister Theresa May that ‘Brexit means Brexit’. It was clear that 52% of British voters who had participated in the referendum had chosen to leave the EU. What was less certain was exactly how this exit should be realised. While the former PM David Cameron had claimed that the EU referendum would offer voters a ‘straight in-out’ option, the truth was that this dichotomisation was anything but straight-forward for the voting public. Indeed, it was the distillation of the question down to a binary choice that arguably problematized for voters their support for one option over another.

After all, the EU Referendum became a site onto which voters’ broader anxieties were projected and ultimately manipulated. What was perhaps initially envisaged as a simple question to answer became complicated by the increasingly divisive rhetoric that was being ever more aggressively employed by referendum campaigners as the polling date drew closer. Foreboding economic forecasts were presented by Remain campaigners to cast Leave campaigners as reckless and ill-informed. Leave campaigners dismissed these claims as fearmongering, arguing that these forecasts were being propagated by a Westminster/metropolitan elite whose only concern was to maintain the status quo that was keeping them in power. Vote Leave notoriously pledged a sum of £350 million that the UK paid to the EU weekly to the NHS if Britain voted to leave, a claim repeatedly invoked even after it was debunked. Most contentious, however, was the inflammatory anti-immigration rhetoric that was deployed by the Leave. EU campaigners in particular to convince constituents to vote for Brexit, with UKIP’s Nigel Farage unveiling a billboard that suggested that convoys of immigrants were marching on the UK from Syria.

The deployment of such divisive strategies to persuade the British public to vote Remain or Leave served to irrevocably yoke each side of the campaign to these issues, and view support for either side as an endorsement of the ideological views being expressed by their fellow Leave or Remain-voters – whether this was the case or not. Remain voters became homogenised as members of a metropolitan liberal elite, so-called ‘snowflakes’, who were out of touch with the ‘real’ British people, yet perfectly happy to preach what many saw as idealistic and lofty values to those bearing the brunt of these values’ consequences. Leave voters were moulded into another homogeneous group: poorly-educated ‘middle-Englanders’ who were assumed to be motivated by their xenophobia more than any sincere dissatisfaction with EU influence. It was taken for granted that these were the people who had googled ‘what is the EU?’ the day after the referendum.

If the British people had indeed ‘spoken’ by voting to remain or leave the EU, as Dimbleby had declared, their voices had effectively been purloined in the process and recirculated in the public sphere to express socio-political views they did not all necessarily hold or share. As Stephen Coleman observes, ‘[s]ubstituting votes for voices is a means of compressing multivocality into a single communicative act, designed to exclude qualification or nuance from the expression of preferences’ (2013, p.12). Perhaps a large degree of circumspection should, therefore, be applied to any artistic project that claimed to be ‘giving voice’ to these voters in the aftermath of the Brexit vote. After all, it was the dichotomising lens of the EU Referendum that had arguably reduced voters to these polarised abstractions in the first place.

Yet, this was precisely the claim made by one of the earliest responses to Brexit by the British theatrical community – Brexit Shorts, a series of nine short monologues commissioned by Headlong Theatre and The Guardian and published on The Guardian’s website and Youtube almost a year after the referendum. According to The Guardian’s Stage Editor, Chris Wiegand, these short dramas sought not only to interrogate ‘the causes and consequences of Brexit’ but also to ‘reflect the hopes and concerns of remainers and leavers’ (2017). In order to achieve this goal, this collaborative project tasked its participating playwrights from Scotland (A.L. Kennedy), Northern Ireland (Stacey Gregg), Wales (Gary Owen), and England (Abi Morgan, James Graham, Meera Syal, Maxine Peake, Charlene James, and David Hare) to respond to the referendum by writing monologues ‘from the perspective of their home region’. By providing nine short responses from different...
geographical and socio-political contexts, the series attempted to ‘lay bare [the United Kingdom’s] complex national responses’ to the referendum (Wiegand, 2017).

This article will interrogate the reasons why Headlong Theatre and The Guardian chose to address this contentious and complex issue with what at first glance appears to be one of the most limiting of theatrical forms – the monologue. Eddie Patterson defines the monologue broadly as ‘any sustained speech by a single subject that does not require an “other” to speak to, nor needs a reply’ (2015, p.13). In comparison with other theatrical approaches, the monologue is often considered a ‘static, even boring’, and ‘anti-dramatic’ form (Pavis, 1998, p.218). Furthermore, the very nature of its delivery (a solitary character addressing a non-speaking interlocutor) seems to undermine any prospect of a realistic portrayal of the speaking subject that the playwright or director could hope to conjure with its performance. This potentially heightened artifice of the monologue would appear to hinder rather than foster the identification of audiences with the monologue’s speaker. For a project attempting to parse out the reasons why the British people voted the way they did in the referendum and foster dialogue between individuals on both sides of this referendum divide, the artifice and univocal nature of the monologue form at first glance appears counterproductive. However, this article will attempt to demonstrate how the opposite is true. Drawing extensively on Judith Butler’s influential work Excitable Speech, this essay will explore how the monologue is a particularly suitable form to show what Butler refers to as the ‘disjuncture between utterance and meaning’ that lies at the heart of the British voters’ purloined voices (1997, p.87). Dividing these nine monologues into three groups, I discuss how each grouping of monologues explores a different facet of this ‘disjuncture’.

‘I talk like this because I am like this. I want to be’ (Kennedy, 2017).

According to Butler, ‘language sustains the body not by bringing it into being or feeding it in a literal way; rather it is by being interpellated within the terms of language that a certain social existence of the body becomes possible’ (1997, p.5). Butler argues that interpellation ‘does not “discover” this body, but constitutes it fundamentally’ (p.5). Regardless of a subject’s affirmation or objection to these terms of address, this ‘force of interpellation continues to work’ and ‘force itself upon [the subject], to delineate the space [the subject] occupies, [and] construct a social positionality’ (p.33). Indeed, Butler argues that ‘one need not know about or register a way of being constituted for that constitution to work in an efficacious way’ (p.31). Consequently, the subject endures the trauma of being brought ‘into a linguistic world’ that ‘precedes [the subject’s] will’ (p.38) and, in effect, is ‘put in one’s place’ by such speech (p.4).

Three monologues in particular respond to this ‘linguistic vulnerability’ of the speaking subject: Stacy Gregg’s Your Ma’s a Hard Brexit, A.L. Kennedy’s Permanent Sunshine, and Gary Owen’s The Pines. Each of these monologues explores how their speakers are mapped according to national, social, linguistic, and religio-political labels, terms of address that have come to constitute who they are and appear to demarcate the boundaries of this identity. As Clare Wallace observes, the absence of a speaking interlocutor in the monologue form, allows the playwright ‘to focus attention intensely upon the speaker and upon the way in which s/he expresses her or himself’ (2006, p.6). In this way, the speaker’s language is ‘foregrounded’ in the monologue (p.6). This intense focus on the speaking subject facilitated by the monologue, therefore, presents playwrights with an effective medium to explore how ‘one is socially constituted’ in language (Butler, 1997, p.31). However, while these monologues demonstrate how these terms of address ‘produce [their characters’] social contours in space and time’ (p.34), they also show how this ‘founding subordination’ (p.38) provides the possibility for these contours to be negotiated and even reshaped by the speaking subject.

The reshaping of these ‘social contours’ is perhaps no more explicitly addressed than in Gregg’s monologue, in which the boundaries separating seemingly irreconcilable identities are challenged and undermined by the monologue’s speaker: a Protestant working-class woman from a Loyalist background (played by Bronagh Gallagher). Walking along the peace-line (a barrier separating predominantly Protestant and Catholic communities in Northern Ireland) with her young son, the woman (who remains nameless) describes how her partner, Craig, has applied for an Irish passport in the wake of the Brexit vote in order to secure work south of the border in the Republic of Ireland as well as Europe. This decision, however, has created a confrontation between herself and her father, a staunch Unionist and UVF supporter who she recalls ‘near blown a fuse’ when he learned of her partner’s plan. Unlike her father, however, the speaker does not consider Craig’s act a threat to her sense of identity. ‘I couldn’t give a toot’, she admits, her flexibility seeming to belie her Loyalist upbringing. As she points out, ‘[i]f it means [Craig] won’t be seen off for work, he’s Irish’ (Gregg, 2017). Indeed, Craig’s application for an Irish passport and the speaker’s acquiescence to his decision arguably undermines what most viewers would regard as the
mutual exclusivity of these two identities – Loyalist/ British and Irish/European (Gregg, 2017).

The speaker of A. L. Kennedy’s monologue, in contrast, struggles to negotiate the labels conventionally attributed to him and used to exclude him from certain spheres of influence. Set in the city centre of Glasgow, the viewer follows the Remain-voting Chummy, a young Glaswegian man from a working-class background (played by Scott Reid), as he makes his way to George’s Square. The director immediately presents Chummy as a so-called NED (defined in The Guardian as non-educated delinquent), as he stalks towards the camera, the hood of his Adidas tracksuit initially obscuring his face (Wiegand, 2017). The tone of his monologue, which is inflected with local slang and delivered in a strong Glaswegian accent, coupled with his confrontational style of addressing the camera seems at odds with his monologue’s socio-political observations and lyricism. That this combination of factors appears incongruous demonstrates the stereotypical representations of the ‘working-class’ that saturate various media and have come to constitute what this label signifies in the popular imagination. This ‘demographically’ of the British population that became widespread during the referendum is interrogated in Chummy’s monologue. ‘But you think I’m what?’ he asks the viewer, ‘[n]othing? Inappropriately urban? I’ve got a sociology degree’ (Kennedy, 2017). Working class yet Remain-voting, unemployed yet highly-educated, Chummy disrupts the labels ascribed to him to delimit his identity. He ridicules English politicians’ inability to relate to individuals like himself who do not conform to their categorisations, and the absurdity of populist politicians claiming that they can ‘speak for the neds of the world against the lefty elite!’ (Kennedy, 2017).

Perhaps the importance of language in constituting character is most significant, however, in Gary Owen’s monologue The Pines, the only contribution to the series delivered in a language other than English. Despite being performed in Welsh (an indigenous British language), the speaker’s language signifies his and his linguistic community’s marginalisation within the UK. Delivered by the character of a Welsh farmer (performed by Steffan Rhodri), the speaker outlines his reasons for voting to leave the EU. For the farmer, the threat to his cultural and linguistic heritage, and his livelihood stems not from outside the UK’s borders (as much of the rhetoric of the Leave campaigns claimed) but from within. In the monologue, this threat is embodied for the farmer in the form of ‘[a] woman from London’ who has ‘sold her flat in Clapham’ and bought the speaker’s grandmother’s cottage (Owen, 2017). Despite the woman’s commercialisation of this local cottage, the speaker describes how she has refused to integrate into the community or support the farmers’ local co-op, the farmer regarding her choice to eliminate the Welsh name of her property as a palpable signifier of her rejection of the local community. Indeed, the farmer uses his language to define himself in opposition to this woman from London, and effectively positions her as an outsider to his community through his use of English phrases to refer to her business. Throughout the monologue, the English language is deployed as a term of derogation, not only to refer to the woman from London but to English metropolitan areas in general. In this way Owen inverts the dichotomising anti-immigration narrative that was circulated during the Referendum campaigns. After all, it is the English language and culture that the farmer claims is threatening to decimate this Welsh community, a threat embodied in the migrant woman from London who is unwilling to support the local communities from whom she benefits financially (Owen, 2017).

All three of these monologues disorientate the viewer by undermining their expectations about the specific identity each individual speaker should conform to and the position they should occupy by virtue of their dress, accent, language, and religio-political background. This disorientation is fostered by the monologue form that each contribution to the series takes, confining the viewer to the speaker’s perspective without any interlocutor to contradict or comment on the speaker’s assertions or claims. The world of the monologue is calibrated primarily according to the speaker’s words rather than the words that others have used and continue to use to map the speaker and fix their identity. Instead, the viewer depends almost solely on the speaker to provide a context within which their character can be located. At the same time, the geographical backdrop against which each of these monologues is delivered suggests the importance of these locations and landscapes in the lives of the speakers. While the monologues attempt to challenge the reduction of the speakers’ identities to absolute geographical and socio-political labels, they also demonstrate how the environments identified by these labels have shaped the speakers’ identities. These labels, therefore, are not necessarily regarded by the speakers themselves (as they are perhaps by others) as derogatory apppellations. Butler observes this double-edged aspect of interpellation: [a]ne comes to ‘exist’ by virtue of this fundamental dependency on the address of the Other. One ‘exists’ not only by virtue of being recognized but in a prior sense, by being recognizable’ (1997, p. 5, italics in original).

These three monologues explore this tension between the speakers’ frustration with how these
labels or terms of address are used to fix their identity and their desire to affirm their identity via these same terms.

Gary Owen’s Welsh farmer vacillates between English and Welsh, demonstrating that his use of Welsh to communicate with the viewer is not due to an inability to speak English but rather results from a conscious choice to use and preserve his native language in spite of the economic benefits that could result from his adoption of English. His language not only erects a barrier between himself and the English-speakers of the play (the woman from London) but also with the viewer of the monologue. The subtitles translating the monologue demonstrate the Welsh language’s relative marginality as well as Headlong Theatre and The Guardian’s assumption that this indigenous language will not be understood by the majority of its viewers (The Pines, 2017). Kennedy’s Chummy also demonstrates his unwillingness to forfeit the labels that his accent and presentation to the viewer imply, in spite of these labels arguably excluding him from employment opportunities and certain social networks. Despite his Scottish, Glaswegian, working-class identity being used to categorize him and effectively exclude him from certain social spheres and politically empowered positions, Chummy consciously refuses to modify his behaviour or identity in order to satisfy the narrow parameters that would afford him easier access to these positions. At one point, Chummy perfectly mimics a Received Pronunciation English accent, partly to mock the superficiality of this accent as a signifier of a particular type of person, but also to highlight the fact that he could mimic this speech if he chose to. He simply chooses not to adopt this speech and this choice (like Owen’s speaker) not only presents an obstacle between himself and those who act as gatekeepers to specific social, cultural, and political arenas but between Chummy and the audience as well. Throughout the monologue, Chummy’s colloquialisms are never translated for the viewer, thereby alienating the majority of viewers (particularly non-Scottish viewers) from the content of his monologue (Permanent Sunshine, 2017). In Kennedy’s and Owen’s monologues, therefore, it is the majority of these monologues’ viewers who become the excluded subjects.

Gregg’s monologue, in contrast, presents the viewer with the possibility that barriers can be dismantled rather than set up. While her partner is applying for an Irish passport, the monologue’s speaker argues that he is not doing so at the expense of his Northern Irish and British identity. For the speaker, these two identities are no longer mutually exclusive (as her father considers them) but can coexist. The speaker of Gregg’s monologue refers to three generations of her family to demonstrate this radical transformation in Northern Irish society. Indeed, the speaker is attempting to dismantle the very boundaries that her father worked to preserve. She describes to the viewer how the European Union has been instrumental in establishing and supporting cross-community initiatives that have allowed her to work towards this goal. Her flexibility with regard to her own identity and that of her partner’s reflects the potential malleability of these physical and psychic boundaries that have until recently presented immovable barriers between communities in Northern Ireland.

At one point in the monologue, Gregg’s speaker attempts to demonstrate this flexibility by mimicking an Irish accent. However, unlike Chummy, her attempt almost completely fails. ‘Tap a’the marnin to ya beorrra begorra!’ she jokes. This hackneyed citation of Irishness reveals her inability to fully or convincingly adopt this identity (at least at the present time) and instead reveals the liminal position that this particular woman appears to occupy in Northern Ireland as a working-class Protestant woman, no longer fixed to the unyielding British identity to which her father clings so tightly but also not able to embody or embrace an Irish identity either (at least beyond parody). The presence of a third generation in the form of her son, however, suggests a future where these identities might not be so intractable and that what it means to be interpellated as a Protestant, Catholic, or Northern Irish is being changed through these reinscriptions (such as Gregg’s monologue) of what these identities actually signify (Your Ma’s a Hard Brexit, 2017).

In fact, all three of these monologues present themselves as examples of such reinscriptions, demonstrating the disjuncture between the labels they have been ascribed by others and the reality that these labels (or what these labels have come to mean) obscure. Not only do the speakers of these monologues not conform to the stereotypical ‘Brexit’ or ‘Remainer’, they also disrupt the fixedness and homogeneity of the identities that their national, social, linguistic, and religio-political labels imply. As Butler points out: ‘[I]nterpellation is an address that regularly misses its mark’ (1997, p.33). These three monologues confront the audience with the trauma of this linguistic vulnerability, that regardless of how one presents oneself to the Other, how one is received is never fully within one’s control. The address ‘regularly misses its mark’, yet in spite of this misfire, contributes to the ‘sedimentation of its usages’ (p.36) that come to constitute what these labels or terms of address signify.
'Chaos. Is. The Point' (Graham, 2017). While the three monologues examined above demonstrate how the subject is constituted in the language others use to address them, Butler points out that language is also something the subject does:

We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing we do. Language is a name for our doing; both ‘what’ we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that which we effect, the act and its consequences.

(1997, p.8)

Just as the previous three monologues explore the linguistic vulnerability of the subject to address, Butler points out that all language is subject to this vulnerability of ‘miss[ing] its mark’, that is, the ‘disjuncture between utterance and meaning’ that can produce effects ‘that [the speaking subject] does not intend’ (1997, p.87). Citing Shoshana Felman, Butler observes that speech ‘says more, or says differently, than it means to say’ (1997, p.10). For the speakers of these monologues, therefore, while their characters are constructed through their own words, these words may create or convey meanings that they might not necessarily intend or even be conscious of having communicated. From the casting of a vote to a slogan on a T-shirt and the virtual utterances of internet trolls, the monologues of James Graham, Meera Syal, and Maxine Peake, in particular, address the speakers’ recognition of this ‘limit to sovereignty’ (Butler, 1997, p.41) over their speech, the trauma of this recognition, and the responsibility they bear for the occasionally destructive consequences of this ‘limit’ for themselves and for others.

Graham’s monologue *Burn* focuses on the character of an internet troll called Carol (played by Joanna Scanlon) who engages in actively and enthusiastically goading individuals from both sides of the political spectrum (from ‘proper fundamentalist Remoaner[s]’ to ‘the ‘kippers’ and former BNP members) into online confrontations (2017). Although the monologue is set in Nottinghamshire, Hodge’s direction emphasises Carol’s dislocation from her geographical and physical surroundings by presenting her sitting at a computer in her living room with the curtains shut to block out the daylight. For Carol, who works nights, the internet provides her with a social space that can accommodate her demanding schedule. However, the identity Carol performs in this space differs radically from the one she presents to others in the more tangible world of ‘real-life’ interactions. Indeed, while Carol directs the majority of her monologue at the viewer, she also performs a simultaneous (albeit unheard) dialogue with others via her online interactions. Carol’s identity, therefore, is fragmented through the varied comments she expresses in her online and offline environments, a fragmentation underlined by the various devices she employs to perform her online selves, repeatedly switching from her desktop computer to her Android phone to facilitate her communications (*Burn*, 2017).

Like Carol, the speaker of Syal’s monologue *Just A T-Shirt* curates her utterances in order to present a particular version of herself to the addressee of her monologue. This monologue, which is delivered by Priti, ‘a middle-aged British born Indian woman’ (performed by Meera Syal), is directed at a police officer, who remains unseen and from whose perspective the viewer sees the character. Set in a non-descriptive police interview room, Priti’s monologue is presented in the form of a police statement describing an attack to which she and her neighbour were both victim (*Just A T-Shirt*, 2017). As her monologue progresses, however, Priti begins to deploy similar anti-immigration rhetoric to that which was circulated during the EU Referendum. Although she acknowledges that as immigrants her parents were forced to work ‘twice as hard and for half the money of the English people’, she also argues that ‘at least there were jobs’ and blames this shortage on the recent influx of refugees to the UK, who she also ironically claims are nothing more than ‘benefits scroungers’. In contrast to these ‘bad immigrants’, she argues that her family ‘has never drawn one penny from this country’ (*Syal*, 2017). Syal uses the monologue form, therefore, to reveal the irony of Priti’s invocation of the same ‘immigrant threat’ that was used to discriminate and demonise her parents’ generation of immigrants. As the monologue eventually reveals, Priti herself is a contributor (albeit unconsciously) to the anti-immigration discourse that has emboldened her attacker, the monologic presentation of Priti’s speech allowing Syal to demonstrate this self-reflexivity that defines Priti’s narrative.

In contrast to Priti, Carol deploys her online utterances knowingly to provoke negative reactions from their various addressees. For Carol, this involves putting liberal Remainers ‘on the radar’ of the ‘most frothy-mouthed Leavers’. When she alerts the online persona of Luke Morris, a former BNP member, who she describes as a ‘nasty piece of work’, to the existence of the Remain-voting @ GreenGenie, however, her online actions have real-world consequences. Carol explains to the viewer that she has been actively spurring Morris on to engage in belligerent and antagonistic discourses online. Indeed, her description of Morris as her ‘long-term project’ summons up the image of online grooming, a practice not only associated with sexual predation but also ideological predation by terrorist groups’
targeting potential recruits online. The language used by Carol to describe Morris’ potential strengthens the association with this latter group (Graham, 2017). ‘He’ll lob a couple of grenades into this [debate], get it going’, she says, ‘I just know Luke is going to go off any second – easy’. She describes herself as a ‘warrior who’s been waiting for a war’, and refers to her computer as a ‘weapon’, jokingly mimicking gunfire as she sends messages with the click of her mouse. Her figurative use of the language of violence, war, and terror to describe her online utterances foreshadows its literal manifestation at the monologue’s conclusion. Carol’s online messages have been reduced to an instrument of discord, their truth-content of secondary importance to their efficacy in prompting and contributing to this discord. She presents herself as a facilitator or agent of ‘chaos’, orchestrating online encounters between individuals with polarised views in order to agitate these individuals and attributes her vote to leave the EU to the fulfilment of this mission (Graham, 2017).

The speaker of Maxine Peake’s monologue Shattered is on the frontline in the battle to counter the destructive consequences of this so-called ‘chaos’ created by individuals such as Carol. Set in the ‘unassuming building’ of the Greater Manchester Law Centre, Peake’s monologue is delivered by the character of Dalir (performed by Nasser Memarzia), an immigration lawyer who works at the centre. Dalir’s first lines express the seemingly insurmountable task confronting the centre. ‘Where do I start?’ he sighs, before providing a brief summary of one of the cases he is involved in, concerning ‘a young woman from Pakistan’ who was unable to secure a visa from the Home Office to stay in the UK despite being at risk of serious harm if she was deported to Pakistan. In spite of this danger, Dalir explains that her case was lost because ‘the Home Office won’t believe the danger she’s in’ (Peake, 2017).

In contrast to Carol, Dalir uses his rhetorical skill to defend individuals who have been subject to racially motivated attacks and discriminatory practices but do not have the legal protections afforded to British citizens. Dalir can be seen as a mirror-image of Carol, a ‘warrior-like’ figure on the front-line of what he regards as Brexit-related violence against immigrants. Like Carol, he uses language and words (specifically the law) to affect change in the real world and in the lives of individuals. Where Carol’s provocative language results in acts of discord and ultimately violence, Dalir’s words are instruments of preservation, his clients employing his rhetorical skill to ensure their literal survival. In contrast to Carol, Dalir is painfully aware of the high-stakes real-world implications that his words can wield. Identifying the EU Referendum as an instigating event for the rise in hate-speech and hate-crimes targeting immigrant communities in the UK, Dalir suggests that these attacks are further aggravated by people’s unwillingness to question the anti-immigration rhetoric of the various campaign groups involved in the referendum. A connection is established, therefore, between the so-called online echo-chambers populated by internet trolls like Carol, the voters who were seduced by this anti-immigration rhetoric like Priti, and the real-world consequences that result from contributions to these discourses.

Indeed, the minimal references to the speakers’ geographical locations and the non-descript settings of each monologue (in contrast to the first three discussed in this article) suggest that the virtual and real-world trenches of these battles can potentially open up in any location. Even when the subject who contributes to these discourses is not in close proximity to the recipients of their speech, this distance does not necessarily mitigate the consequences of this speech for this recipient. While Carol never leaves her home and never physically engages the individuals she interacts with on the internet, her inflammatory online utterances nevertheless prompt Luke Morris to commit an act of physical violence on @GreenGenie (who we discover is a Polish woman). Furthermore, while Carol (somewhat naively) does not intend for her words to prompt Morris to engage in anything more than an online verbal assault, Graham demonstrates the ‘limit of intentionality’ (Butler, 1997, p.10) that prevents her from exerting such control over her speech’s reception.

Syal’s monologue, however, provides the most extreme example of this ‘limit of intentionality’, Priti’s anti-immigration rhetoric resulting in consequences she not only did not intend but perhaps never even envisaged as possible. She tells the police officers that while she was talking to her Polish neighbour Pavel, her attacker spat at her and delivered a racist slur intended to denigrate her ethnic heritage. The attacker’s targeting of Priti (a British-born woman) as the outsider reveals the deeply-rooted racist foundation of the attacker’s nationalist ideology and exposes the irony of his greater identification with a first generation economic immigrant simply by virtue of his whiteness than with a fellow compatriot as a result of her ethnic heritage. In fact, his racist abuse reconstitutes her position within British society, repositioning her as an outsider in her own homeland. Syal suggests that the Brexit vote (to which Priti contributed) has unintentionally emboldened the far right and legitimised their ideology, an ideology whose parameters of Britishness exclude even its own citizens, such as Priti. This link between Brexit and these acts of violence perpetrated against immigrants is made explicit in the message emblazoned across
Priti’s attacker’s T-shirt: ‘YES WE WON! NOW SEND THEM ALL BACK!’ (Syal, 2017).

Peake’s monologue demonstrates, however, that this ‘disjuncture between utterance and meaning’ also allows for the possibility that these speech acts might not necessarily have destructive or injurious consequences even if this was the speaker’s intention. While Dalir observes that the legal rules and regulations that determine a refugee’s right to asylum in Britain have never been so ‘cruel’ or ‘vindictive’ in the thirty years of his career, he also argues that the Brexit vote has galvanised people to work together to resist and contest these legal frameworks. Indeed, the discord depicted in Graham’s monologue finds its inversion in the concluding moments of Peake’s monologue with the appearance of the Women Asylum Seekers Together (WAST) choir. The euphony of their voices in song as they stand together provides a stark counterpoint to the voiceless cacophony of conflicting opinions and divisive rhetoric circulated in the online sphere (Shattered, 2017). This group of people acting in unity to counter intolerance contrasts with Carol’s isolated yet fragmentary and contradictory identities. Priti, in contrast, has to confront the trauma of her own interpellation by an ‘other’ as an outsider in her homeland, an address ironically prompted by an anti-immigration discourse to which she has herself contributed. She has been forced to view herself as both addressor and addressee of such speech, a self-reflexivity that the monologue form is particularly effective at conveying. However, Priti’s monologue itself can be seen as a response to her vote to leave the EU being co-opted by far-right nationalist groups, her account of the attack becoming literally inscribed into the official record as a police statement. By signing the statement, her experience can be used to express her opposition to the acts of violence carried out under the banner of her vote and reclaim her citizenship from those who would seek to seize it.

In contrast, while Carol clearly did not intend for her inflammatory words to exert physically violent consequences on individuals in the ‘real’ world, she nevertheless actively contributed to a discourse that purposefully dichotomises individuals according to their political preferences, homogenizes them according to these categories, and agitates individuals on the extremes of this political spectrum. The online social media platforms of Facebook and Twitter provide a fertile environment for these discourses’ rapid circulation, the frequency and potentially global scale of their ‘reiterative operation’ (Butler, 1997, p.34) facilitating the swift ‘sedimentation’ of these injurious discourses, ‘a repetition that congeals’ and ‘gives the name its force’ (p.36). The volume or scale of this ‘sedimentation’ arguably lends a veneer of legitimacy to such discourses by giving other users of these online platforms an inflated impression of these discourses’ prevalence and popularity. Therefore, while this loss of or ‘limit to sovereignty’ might appear to suggest a loss of agency or accountability on the part of the speaker, Butler observes that ‘agency begins where sovereignty wanes. The one who acts […] acts precisely to the extent that he or she is constituted as an actor and hence, operating within a linguistic field of enabling constraints from the outset’ (p.16). Carol’s contribution to these online ‘echo-chambers’, in spite of the fact that she does not sincerely believe the sentiments she is espousing, implicate her in this sedimentation, her contributions inflating support for divisive ideological movements and increasing the gulf between various socio-political positions.

‘52% of the country can’t all be scum, they can’t all be idiots, racists, or xenophobes’ (James, 2017).

It is the distress caused by this ‘sedimentation of […] usages’, which gives the appellations Leave and Remain their ‘force’, that is explored in the final three monologues of the series written by Charlene James, David Hare, and Abi Morgan. All three of these monologues examine the trauma experienced by the speaker when their voting preference is used to map their socio-political identity. As Butler argues, ‘[t]he name has […] a historicity, what might be understood as the history which has become internal to a name, has come to constitute the contemporary meaning of a name’, a historicity that is sedimented through its iteration (1997, p.36). The terms Leave and Remain, by virtue of their accelerated circulation and iteration via online social media platforms allowed this sedimentation to become entrenched rapidly, each term becoming reified into an indicator of voters’ broader socio-political positions. As these monologues all demonstrate, ‘such terms carry connotations that exceed the purposes for which they may be intended’ (p.38). Each speaker in the following three monologues is forced to confront this ‘excess’, which has come to (re)constitute their identity overnight by virtue of their voting preference.

In the case of Charlene James’ monologue Go Home, the speaker discusses the trauma of being interpellated as xenophobic and close-minded by virtue of voting to leave the EU, an experience used to reflect the broader divisions and tensions between England’s metropolitan and regional constituents after the Brexit vote. Set in a train station in Wigan, James’ monologue is delivered by Reece (played by Dean Fagan), a 20-year-old student as he waits for his girlfriend Hannah to arrive by train from London (Go Home, 2017). As he awaits her arrival, Reece describes how he and Hannah met at university in
London where he became friends with people ‘from all different walks of life’ (James, 2017). The day after the referendum result, however, Reece encounters first-hand the polarised reactions that were being expressed throughout the UK. He receives two text messages, ‘[o]ne from [his] dad that simply says: BREXIT!!!’ and ‘one from Hannah’ that contains ‘no words. Just emojis. A torn Union Jack. A sad face. A crying face. An angry face. A little pile of poo with a face’. James uses the reactions of Remain voters like Hannah and her friends to Leave voters like Reece’s father to expose the gulf that has opened up between those living in metropolitan and regional areas. Their demonising of the voters ‘up north’ (like Reece’s father) and their references to these areas as ‘idiot-town[s]’ and their constituents as ‘scum’ reveals an intolerance that Reece (somewhat generously) ascribes to their unfamiliarity and remoteness (both geographically and socially) from these regions. 

Reece attempts to bridge this gulf by explaining that for communities ‘up north’ who feel forgotten and ignored by the Westminster politicians and so-called metropolitan elites, the Brexit vote was an opportunity to confront this political establishment with the reality of their existence.

Reece’s appeal, however, is met with intransigence from Hannah’s friends, who he recalls merely invoked ‘their twittergram phrases about being right’. James suggests that meaningful dialogue is impossible if people are unwilling to venture outside the ‘echo chambers’ that recirculate opinions they already agree with (James, 2017). Indeed, as Graham’s monologue demonstrates these closed networks of communication have the potential to impede communication altogether by inflating the dichotomisation between various socio-political positions and consequently obstruct dialogue between individuals with differing views. The monologue is a particularly effective theatrical form to explore this socio-political isolation and alienation that occurred during and after the Brexit vote. Not only does the limited perspective of the monologue’s speaker convey their subjective experiences and the opinions formed as a result of these experiences (as well as the opinions that shape their reception or interpretation of these experiences), but the monologue also allows the viewer to witness the struggles encountered by individuals as they attempt to negotiate one another’s subjectivities. As Reece discovers this struggle is sometimes greatest with those we consider closest to us.

When Reece informs Hannah that he voted for Brexit, his admission triggers a complete breakdown of communication between them. Hannah cannot reconcile her boyfriend with her perception of Leave voters, who are defined by and for her as xenophobic, reckless, and idiotic. By divulging this information, Reece has effectively been re-mapped for Hannah according to these Brexiteer co-ordinates. ‘I didn’t hear from her for a week’, Reece recalls. ‘I sent her messages, no words, just emojis. Face blowing kisses, the flamenco woman dancing, smiley face, heart, heart, broken heart’ (James, 2017). Reece’s use of emojis rather than words mirrors Hannah’s reaction to Brexit, his trauma at being interpellated as a Brexiteer reflecting her distressed reaction at the referendum result. In fact, Reece’s use of emojis conveys his frustration with language, in particular its failure to represent him to his girlfriend as something other than a bigot. His use of emojis that eschew a clear meaning (i.e. its ‘historicity’ is less unified) in the context of his text (e.g. the flamenco woman dancing) allows Reece to draw on a pictorial vocabulary not as trenchantly bound to the ‘sedimentation of [its] usages’ as the highly-charged terms of the EU Referendum. Hannah’s arrival during the concluding moments of the monologue suggests that this new lexicon has successfully bridged the gap between them, not in spite of its ambiguity but because of it.

While James’ monologue ends on a hopeful and reconciliatory note, David Hare’s monologue Time To Leave is less optimistic (2017). For Hare, the possibility of reconciling voters on both sides of the EU Referendum divide is unlikely since most voters are not aware themselves or unable to recognise exactly why they voted one way or another. Set in the Home Counties, the monologue is delivered by a ‘well-spoken’ upper-middle class woman called Eleanor Shaw (played by Kristin Scott-Thomas) who discusses her reasons for voting to leave the EU. While Eleanor repeatedly denies that her decision to vote Leave was influenced by campaign rhetoric, she also struggles to articulate exactly what prompted her decision. Declaring that she is ‘not an idiot’, Eleanor claims that she was not persuaded by the jingoist sloganeering of the Leave campaigns (Hare, 2017). In fact, she repeatedly asserts that this was not a determining factor in her decision almost as if she fears being cast in the same mould as what has become ‘sedimented’ and homogenized in the popular imagination as the stereotypical Leave voter – xenophobic, working-class, regional constituent. Unlike these voters, Eleanor maintains that ‘[w]hen they told me I’d get my country back, I knew it wasn’t true’ (Hare, 2017).

However, Hare suggests that Eleanor is simply unable to recognise the similarities between herself and those she perceives as these ‘other’ Leave voters who she is attempting to distance herself from. Beneath the veneer of her middle-class sensibilities, Hare implies that Eleanor harbours and simultaneously disclaims. As Butler observes, ‘one may
The End monologue

their own interpellation as Brexiteers, Abi Morgan's monologues struggle with and attempt to refute the UK's own vulnerability to address. In Morgan's contribution to the series, the breakdown of the relationship between a husband and wife is used as an allegory for the post-Brexit relationship between Britain and Europe respectively (2017). Delivered by the wife, Helen (played by Penelope Wilton), the monologue conveys the personal shock and trauma she feels in response to her husband's abrupt departure from their marriage. Helen, therefore, becomes an allegorical conduit for the EU's perspective on the UK's decision to leave the EU. Looking back on their marital history, Helen recalls that while their marriage might not have been perfect, she and her husband had 'built a good life together' and had 'compromise[d]' and '[t]hrashed things out' to sustain their relationship (Morgan, 2017). In Morgan's monologue and Jeremy Herrin's direction, the figure of Helen's husband is notably absent, only existing in the background noise of a TV, or in objects around the house, such as his wedding ring discarded on a shelf in the couple's bedroom (The End, 2017). His absence becomes a void that is filled solely with Helen's words, which cast him as feckless and driven by self-interest. In response to her husband's assertion that they are now free to spend their money as [they] choose. To live as they choose,' Helen retorts that he is now also free '[t]o spend [their] choose[s]' (Morgan, 2017). In Morgan's allegory, Britain is constituted as similarly reckless, free to pursue possibly destructive policies without oversight from a partner.

In this case, the monologue form allows Morgan to demonstrate how the UK is also vulnerable to this interpellation from the 'other' regardless of whether it is conscious of this interpellation or not. Butler argues that 'one's social constitution takes place without one's knowing' and 'the name wields a linguistic power of constitution in ways that are indifferent to the one who bears the name' (1997, p.31). As Helen reflects, 'there is no coming back from this. Once you're out. You're out' (Morgan 2017). Just as the EU became a site onto which many voters projected their anger, dissatisfaction, and frustration, so too can Britain become such a site for the EU – a dichotomisation that belies the internal fractures and contradictions occurring not only at a national and regional level, but within the individual voter also. Indeed, Butler warns that 'one may, as it were, meet that socially constituted self by surprise, with alarm or pleasure, even with shock' (1997, p.31). Perhaps it is only by gazing into this linguistic mirror of the 'other' that our mutual (individual and collective) subjectivities can ever be negotiated.

By engaging the viewer directly, the monologue form proffers itself as a potentially productive looking glass to achieve this goal. As Pavis points out, because the monologue 'does not depend structurally on a reply from an interlocutor', the form 'establishes a direct relationship between the speaker and the

well imagine oneself in ways that are quite contrary of how one is socially constituted [...] [f]or the measure of that constitution is not to be found in a reflexive appropriation of that constitution, but, rather, in a chain of signification that exceeds the circuit of self-knowledge' (1997, p.31). The language Eleanor employs in her monologue suggests such self-(mis)recognition. So unconscious is she of her own biases that she unintentionally reveals them to the viewer herself. She argues that the EU's failure stems from the lawless and lackadaisical Mediterranean countries, rather than the ‘thrifty, hard-working’ northern European countries, and frequently deploys language inflected with xenophobia (Hare, 2017). For Eleanor, Europe is embodied in the cheap immigrant labour she hires to do handiwork around her property.

The monologue form is particularly effective in demonstrating Eleanor's lack of self-reflection. She is unable to recognise the personal experiences and biases that have prompted her decision to leave the EU and as a result is unable to articulate what she had envisaged as the desired consequence of her vote. 'I don't understand why it hasn't worked', Eleanor says, 'I don't understand why I don't feel better' (Hare, 2017). In a moment of clarity, Eleanor suggests that she and her fellow Leave voters might have been motivated by anger and frustration at their own government as much as anything else. As Patrice Pavis observes, 'the 'monologue' is an internalized dialogue, formulated in 'inner language', between a speaking I and a listening I' (1998, p.218). Hare's use of the form reveals how this 'internalized dialogue' of the speaker is, nevertheless, still subject to the same 'disjuncture of meaning and utterance' that afflicts all speech (Butler, 1997, p.87). As both addressor and addressee (in addition to the viewer) of the monologue, Eleanor constantly 'misses the mark' and her speech reveals her xenophobia even as she repeatedly refutes it. As James' and Hare's monologues demonstrate, constituents voted for a variety of (conscious and unconscious) reasons to leave the EU. In the aftermath of this decision, however, these diverse and multifarious reasons must be reconciled into a single unified action. In spite of the dichotomisation between Leave and Remain voters, the majority decision to leave the EU ironically disguises a lack of consensus even within this majority, a problematic reality that has been exposed by the UK's continued struggle to determine what exactly Brexit means.

While the speakers of Hare's and James' monologues struggle with and attempt to refute their own interpellation as Brexiteers, Abi Morgan's monologue The End confronts the viewer with the UK's own vulnerability to address. In Morgan's contribution to the series, the breakdown of the relationship between a husband and wife is used as an allegory for the post-Brexit relationship between Britain and Europe respectively (2017). Delivered by the wife, Helen (played by Penelope Wilton), the monologue conveys the personal shock and trauma she feels in response to her husband's abrupt departure from their marriage. Helen, therefore, becomes an allegorical conduit for the EU's perspective on the UK's decision to leave the EU. Looking back on their marital history, Helen recalls that while their marriage might not have been perfect, she and her husband had 'built a good life together' and had 'compromise[d]' and '[t]hrashed things out' to sustain their relationship (Morgan, 2017). In Morgan's monologue and Jeremy Herrin's direction, the figure of Helen's husband is notably absent, only existing in the background noise of a TV, or in objects around the house, such as his wedding ring discarded on a shelf in the couple's bedroom (The End, 2017). His absence becomes a void that is filled solely with Helen's words, which cast him as feckless and driven by self-interest. In response to her husband's assertion that Helen and himself are now free to spend their money as [they] choose. To live as they choose,' Helen retorts that he is now also free to [t]o spend [their] choose[s]' (Morgan, 2017). In Morgan's allegory, Britain is constituted as similarly reckless, free to pursue possibly destructive policies without oversight from a partner.

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“it” of the world of which he speaks’ (1998, p.219). Wiegand explained that this immediacy and direct address was particularly important for the series since they were not performed live on a stage but were recorded and published online. For Wiegand, this ‘direct communication’ that was enabled by the straight-to-camera address was ‘vital’ (Wiegand, 2017). Furthermore, this direct address positioned the audience as the addressee of these characters’ speeches. As Pavis argues, by ‘address[ing] the spectators as an accomplice and a watcher-hearer’, the monologue potentially ‘communicates directly with all of society’ (1998, p.219). In a context in which ‘[w]e find ourselves living through an insurgency of the unheard’ (Coleman, 2017, p.118), the monologue form offers a medium that can perhaps foster dialogue by forcing the addressee to listen first and foremost.

Nevertheless, the responses to the monologues by some online and media commentators demonstrate the difficulty of ‘undoing […] this process of discursive constitution’ (Butler, 1997, p.19). For example, Toby Young writing in The Spectator dismissed most of the series as Remain ‘agit-prop’ and accused the playwrights of ‘having swallowed project fear’ (Young, 2017). Young’s response, however, contains several factual errors, the most egregious being his identification of only one Leave voter among the nine monologues in spite of the majority of speakers (5 out of the 9) in the series depicting Leave voters. While Young’s engagement with the series does not seem to have been particularly rigorous, perhaps his mistake can be at least partly ascribed to this ‘discursive constitution’ of the subject. Was The Guardian’s left-wing and pro-European imprimatur so pervasive for Young that it prompted him to dismiss the majority of contributions to the series as representing its newspaper’s main demographic? Indeed, the series might have limited the scope of the ‘reinscription’ of its Remain voices by posting them in a context where they are more likely to be viewed by a Remain-voting audience than a Leave-voting one. In this sense, the more ‘successful’ monologues in the series (in the sense of having the largest potential for ‘reinscription’) are those of the Leave-voting speakers since these contributions are more likely to find a Remain-voting audience on The Guardian’s website.

Conclusion
In 2016, Dimbleby claimed that the British people had spoken. Four years later, however, the United Kingdom is still struggling to determine exactly what was said. While the Brexit Shorts series was inevitably criticised for variously presenting a reductive image of Leave and Remain voters, for conveying the biases of their playwrights (and indeed The Guardian newspaper), and for excluding certain perspectives from the series (e.g., over-65s), their monologue form nevertheless allowed viewers to see how we are all subject to the ‘vulnerability to being named’ (Butler, 1997, p.30) regardless of our political affiliations or whether we agree with or choose to affirm these identities or not. The series demonstrates how the monologue form can provide a particularly effective medium to undermine and re-signify the reductive appellations that were used to constitute voters’ identities during and after the EU Referendum. Each monologue challenges the viewers’ preconceptions of the speakers’ identities, exposing the reality that not only are individual voters often motivated by conflicting and occasionally contradictory socio-political positions (themselves to greater or lesser degrees shaped by personal experiences and emotions) but that these positions are not static, fixed, or even always consciously occupied by the subject.

Jacques Derrida argues that ‘[t]he letter, inscribed or propounded speech, is always stolen. Always stolen because it is always open. It never belongs to its author or to its addressee, and by nature, it never follows the trajectory that leads from subject to subject’ (2005, p.224, italics in original). By re-presenting the ‘purlonied’ voices of the EU Referendum, these monologues allow each of their speakers to at least partly dispel the ‘ether of speech’ within which they have been and continue to be obscured (p.221). As Coleman asserts, ‘[p]opulists adopt what the philosopher Richard Rorty calls a “final vocabulary”: they know what things mean, and anyone who disagrees with them is implicated in a betrayal of moral certitude’ (Coleman, 2017, p.111). Perhaps what these monologues most acutely expose is the somewhat disquieting reality that the British public has been forced to confront in these intervening years, that in contrast to the certainty promised by this ‘final vocabulary’, what one actually discovers is that ‘[t]he更多 contemplate oneself in language, the more one loses oneself precisely there where one is sought’ (Butler, 1997, p.30).

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1 While it is difficult to determine the demographic of viewers on YouTube, it is possible that the series reached a much broader and more varied audience on this platform.
Bibliography


THE HURT AND HEALING OF ‘BREXITANNIA’: TOWARDS A GENDERED TAKE ON BREXIT VISUAL CULTURES

Lara Cox

Abstract
This article examines the manifestations of the national allegory of ‘Britannia’ in the contemporary moment defined by Brexit. The representations of ‘Brexitannia’ in commemorative coins, illustrations to opinion pieces, music videos, and advertising campaigns that have emerged during or since the UK referendum on the EU are argued to reveal forms of women’s agency and/or emancipation used in the name of British nationhood and Brexit. ‘Brexitannia’ reveals both national hurt and healing, and through her agency covers over and heals national wounds that the vote for Brexit has exposed.

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Banner image: Rita Duffy, Soften the Border, 2017 (detail). Recycled fabrics, installation on the Belcoo, Blacklion Bridge - Co. Fermanagh / Co. Cavan border, 2.5 x 30m. Image credit: Copyright of the artist, Rita Duffy. Photo credit: Stanislav Nikolov
THE HURT AND HEALING OF ‘BREXITANNIA’: TOWARDS A GENDERED TAKE ON BREXIT VISUAL CULTURES

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Great Britain’s national symbol ‘Britannia’, in her best-known guise bearing a shield emblazoned with the British (or sometimes English) flag, a brush helmet, and Poseidon’s trident, has been a recurrent iconographical figure circulating since 2016, as an expression of Britain’s decision to exit the European Union. Indeed, Britannia has historically flourished in British visual cultures at times of change, crisis, and renewal, first appearing on coins to celebrate the re-establishment of the British monarchy during the Restoration of 1660. Produced annually since 1987, the Royal Mint’s ‘Britannia coin’ of 2017 (Fig. 3.1), for instance, seemed to encapsulate the decision to ‘Brexit’ of the preceding year. Britannia’s body, in the coin designed by Central St Martin’s student of Fine Art Louis Tamlyn, was Great Britain itself (Northern Ireland appeared a strange-looking cloud to her side). The figure is positioned in profile facing the right with her eyes cast ambivalently downward and/or to the right—gazing, thus, in the direction of the European Union. With a trident in her right hand, it is no wonder that Oxford historians Danny Dorling and Sally Tomlinson label the coin ‘particularly warlike’ (2019). Britannia wields her sharp weapon, mythologically known to stir the seas into great swells and historically representative of Britain’s naval strength, in the direction of the European Union. This seemingly conveys an intent to inflict pain on her continental neighbours.

And yet, another reading may be made, one in which Britannia is not the wounding agent but the wounded party. Throughout the centuries, Britannia, likened to Athena, the Greek Goddess of knowledge and warfare, has borne a shield and a trident in her ‘dominant’ guise (Dresser, 1989, p.40). The war-like shield is often emblazoned with either the English or British flag as a marker of patriotism and the trident is grasped firmly as if ready to wage battle, as can been seen in the Royal Mint ‘Britannia coins’ from 2013 and 2016, for instance. In Tamlyn’s coin, the shield is held away from the viewer, so that all that can be seen is the handle, without any visible Union Jack flag. The trident is cocked in Britannia’s right hand not as if turning into battle, but indeed, turning away from it.

The 2017 post-referendum Britannia of Tamlyn’s design is not in an offensive position but a defensive one, turning her back in retreat. The action of withdrawal or retreat is figured by an inaccurate representation of the geography of northern Scotland, which doubles up as Britannia’s shoulders. Britain’s right topographical ‘shoulder’ dips downward in the northernmost eastly point of the country as if to imply the motion of turning away from the continent. Indeed, the action is cast as one performed at speed as Britannia’s left arm stretches out straight behind her while her trident is cocked to the side in her right hand as if preparing to sprint. In this act of retreat, injury from the country’s interactions with the EU can be espied.

Understanding ‘Brexitannia’, defined throughout this article as the representations of Britannia in the post-referendum setting, as the embodiment of hurt positions her in historical continuity with previous manifestations of this national symbol. Along with Marianne in France and Columbia in the United States, Britannia is an example of the ways in which countries...
are allegorised as female in order to facilitate readings of a nation’s sexualised vulnerability and need of armed protection. If these symbols imply the feminised nation’s susceptibility to hurt, they also imply a maternal capacity for reproduction, regeneration, and reinvention (Sinha, 2006)—in short, for healing. Britannia was initially created by the Romans to characterise their conquest of Britain under Hadrian and Antoninus Pius (Warner, 1985, p.45). The idea of a woman symbolising national subjugation or the country’s imminent vulnerability to injury, re-emerged as a motif during the American Revolutionary (1775–83) and Napoleonic wars (1803–15) when American independence and invasion from the French empire spelled a British loss of empire. At other times, such as the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the British victory in the Seven Years’ War (1756–63), and imperial expansion under Queen Victoria (1838–1901), Britannia was cast as a ‘mother of the race’ (Wilson, 2003, p.94), promising new beginnings and national healing, victoriously and variously wielding a shield, an olive branch, a spear, and/or a trident.

It is my contention that Brexitannia, the embodiment of the nation as a woman in the time during and since the referendum on the EU in 2017, performs hurt and healing that can be found throughout the history of the allegory. Brexitannia as a manifestation of public hurt will be studied in the first part of the article and her role as a healer will be analysed in the second part. Examples in each of the article’s two parts illustrate that Britannia, as a long-serving allegory of the nation, has appealed to both Brexiteers and Brexit-sceptics. In each case, Brexitannia will be connected to earlier examples in British art history. I adopt a methodology rooted in feminist visual cultural studies, which as Marquard Smith defines, is concerned with the ways in which ‘politically motivated images are produced, circulated, and consumed to both construct and reinforce and resist and overthrow articulations of sexual or racial ontologies, identities, and subjectivities’ (2006, p.474).

The imbrication of nation and gender in the figure of Britannia sheds light on the question of how women have participated and are contributing to the construction of Brexit in the contemporary British imaginary. In each of the following cases, the theme of women’s emancipation and/or agency facilitated by an expression of nation can be detected. This is not necessarily an echo of Britannia’s role, particularly in Victorian iconography, as promoting the expansion of empire, as an actor in what Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar first described as ‘imperial feminism’ (1984). If in the following examples ‘Brexitannia’ may sometimes be understood as an expression ‘as part of the last vestiges of empire working their way out of the British psyche’ as Dorling and Tomlinson frame Britons’ vote for Brexit (2019), this article also pinpoints cases when she is critical of the ideal of British nationhood, expressed in the Union Jack, even as she mobilises the latter for her own agency. ‘Brexitannia’ does not therefore simply convey an idea of (neo)imperial feminism or even ‘nationalist feminism’ (e.g., Herr, 2003); rather what can be identified is a conflation of the performance of nation with gendered agency and/or emancipation, a kind of feminism in the name or service of British nationhood. This makes a contribution to the current literature on the question of Brexit, which has tended to position women as a collective group as the victims of the country’s decision to leave the EU, despite the agency of individual women actors in the Brexit process such as Theresa May or Angela Merkel (Dustin et al, 2019; Duda-Mikulin, 2019). This literature attributes responsibility for the referendum result to a stereotype of ‘angry old white men’ (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018, p.xxiii).

The interest of analysing Britannia in contemporary British visual cultures is that she has a deep-seated historical resonance with the British public, and is thus, to some degree, a barometer for collective feeling (as opposed to the musings of just one artist). She was revived as a symbol to celebrate the new union of Scotland and England during the 1600s, distanced from her origins in Roman conquest, and was promoted in works such as John Ogilby’s Britannia (1675) and in Britannia Fortior: Or, the New State of Great Britain and Ireland Under Our Sovereign Queen Anne (1709) which both published the national figure as frontispiece of these geographical and historical works presenting the new nation (Major, 2012, p.26). Britannia has hardly disappeared from sight today: most years the BBC proms culminate in symphony performances of Thomas Arne’s song ‘Rule Britannia!’ (1740), a song known to patriots across the country and whose tune is at least recognised by a large proportion of contemporary Britons. Throughout her history as national allegory, Britannia has appeared on coins and currency, in political cartoons, and on commemorative medals and paintings that become future heirlooms. ‘Brexitannia’, as shall be explored, also figures in such everyday and accessible artforms: on commemorative coins, in advertising campaigns, in illustrations accompanying opinion articles on Brexit, and in music videos. This means that an analysis of pro-Brexit visions of Britannia, insofar as she can be understood as an emblem of popular will, potentially
reverses a tendency, mistakenly as Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin make the point in National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy (2018), to dismiss the collective anxieties and feelings at stake in those who voted to leave as the ramblings of an ultranationalist minority.

Brexitannia’s hurt

Britannia has, throughout her history, had a double occupation of straddling elite and non-elite worlds. She has been ‘an easily recognisable symbol in everyone’s pocket’ as a ‘stable and consistent emblem on British low-denominational base metal’ since the eighteenth century, as numismatic historian Katharine Eustace observes, having been popularised in the previous century on the English farthing designed by John Roettier (2006, p.329). She has also been the figure on collectible commemorative medals, first struck in 1667 to celebrate the restoration of the British monarchy in 1660 (p.326) and commemorative coins such as those made yearly by the Royal Mint. The five-ounce gold coin designed by Tamlyn was priced at £8,645, confirming Britannia’s role in the art of collecting, which is, as art historian Michael Yonan observes, as ‘an elite pastime […] tilted toward the experiences of the privileged and wealthy’ (2011, p.237).

The celebratory coin struck by the UK branch of Bradford Exchange to commemorate the UK referendum on the EU fuses Britannia’s double function as a populist figure ‘in everyone’s pocket’ and her elevation to the status of (future) heirloom in one item. Bradford Exchange sets out to furnish the world with ‘quality collectables’ whose value will increase with time (Bradford Exchange, 2020a), yet priced accessibly at just under fifty pounds for the coin-sized version (2020b) and at just under one hundred and thirty pounds for an ‘oversized commemorative’ version (2020c), the ‘UK EU referendum’ coin promises to confer the status as a collectible and thus ‘a special and privileged kind of good’, as Yonan describes (2011,p.236), on ordinary people. In the publicity blurb accompanying the Bradford Exchange coin, promises are made about the coin’s value rising with time (Bradford Exchange, 2020c), yet priced with ‘quality collectables’ whose value will increase with ‘time (Bradford Exchange, 2020a), yet priced with ‘quality collectables’ whose value will increase with time (Bradford Exchange, 2020a), yet priced

2 An image of the coin can be found on the Bradford Exchange website: https://www.bradford.co.uk/referendum-commemorative.html

vote for Brexit as a choice of the “real”, “ordinary”, “decent” Briton against “the multinationals, […] the merchant banks, […] [and] big politics” (Farage, 2016). Through the coin’s twenty-four carat gold-plating, the ‘Landmark Vote for Britain’s Independence’ inscribed on the coin’s circumference becomes a feat of alchemy, peddling a long-term golden future for the average Briton and the country over short-term market anomalies.

Indeed, Bradford Exchange’s ‘UK EU Referendum’ alchemical coin targeted at the ordinary individual enlists the theme of women’s emancipation to doctor the past. Bradford Exchange have altered a propaganda lithograph featuring Britannia from 1918 made by James Montgomery Flagg, which was entitled Side by Side Britannia! The latter celebrated the British-American alliance during the Great War as an ‘early visual representation of the special relationship (a term not yet coined) between America and Britain […] that would become ubiquitous decades later but remarkable in 1918’ as Alan Dobson and Steve March note (2017, p.66). The meaning of ‘to doctor’ is to ‘restore to good condition’ (Merriam-Webster, 2020, s.v. doctor v.1b) following the word’s medical origins. Read according to this first meaning, Bradford Exchange’s ‘Brexitannia’ has been made ‘good’ by casting free of the presence of Uncle Sam, and the United States that he represents. In the original Uncle Sam wields a sword and is accompanied by an American Eagle to his right, while Britannia wields a trident, seemingly strewn with blood as she walks apace with a lion, the beast historically used to represent Great Britain. The lion is still present in Bradford Exchange’s commemorative coin but all traces of weaponry, barring a Union Jack shield, have disappeared. While gender scripts are altered, racial ones are not: Britannia’s rose-hued cheeks emphasise the pallor of her arms and a performance of white female beauty, confirming the allegory’s historical role as a ‘mother of the [white] race’ (Wilson, 2003, p.94) both in the Flagg lithography and the Bradford Exchange coin. The coin thus mobilises a double message of racial purity and gender emancipation.

It may seem a curious choice to have excised Uncle Sam from the Bradford Exchange coin, given the liberal Atlanticism of many of the leave campaigners, most notably the pro-Trump Nigel Farage. Yet, the aesthetic choice plays out Brexit as an altered, doctored, act of emancipation. Brexitannia becomes the independent woman and concomitantly the emancipated nation - no longer in need of her male, American partner, Uncle Sam. This visually translates an idea of Brexit as Britain’s very own ‘Independence Day’, a term Farage
used to describe 23 June 2016, when Britain voted to leave the European Union. Modelled on the American holiday, Britain’s ‘Independence Day’ becomes an act of white female emancipation in the Bradford commemorative coin.

The second meaning of the verb ‘to doctor’ is ‘to alter deceptively’, implying the act of concealment or covering up of past wounds rather than long-term cures (Merriam-Webster, 2020, s.v. doctor v.2b). The coin rehearses this second meaning, albeit unconsciously. Britannia carries a trident in the original lithograph by Flagg, an object that allowed the mythological figure of Poseidon to stir the seas into great swells. Britannia has tended to bear a trident on British coinage, as a symbol of the British nation’s ‘nautical and marine significance’, ever since the penny pieces of 1797 (Eustace, 2006, p.330). The trident also served to link the British conquest of America with the nation’s reputed maritime strength in earlier iconographical works such as Francis Hayman’s The Triumph of Britannia (1762), which pre-emptively celebrated the British victory in the Seven Years War (1756–63), by representing Neptune, the Roman god of the seas, clutching Poseidon’s trident as he drives a chariot supporting Britannia, who, in turn, leads a cohort of sea nymphs caressing adoringly the portrait of famous British sea admirals. Bereft of her trident, Brexitannia’s separation from Uncle Sam is complemented by another absence — that of Britannia’s long-term prop symbolising peace: Athena’s olive branch. A Union Jack flag replaces both the trident and an olive branch. With a Union Jack shield in her right arm (also present in the Flagg lithograph) and a Union Jack in her left hand, the coin becomes a somewhat overwrought performance of national identity, compensating for or concealing a deeper-set wound.

Deprived of her power to inflict injury (figured in the Flagg original through the blood-strewn weapon to Britannia’s left side), Bradford Exchange’s Brexitannia might be understood as suffering from metaphorical amputation. Indeed, this connects to Britannia’s longer history as an emblem, as Wilson argues, of ‘recurrent anxiety about the masculine potency, honor and resolve of the national character in its dealings abroad’ (2003, p.238 n.9), particularly in the wake of American independence. While dating from the eighteenth century, ‘[a]nxieties about a lost naval nation’ have been re-invested in the service of mounting Euroscepticism in Britain in the past decades as media studies scholar Jack Black argues (2016, p.783). This anxiety was captured succinctly in news reports about an ill-equipped and under-funded fleet to accompany the country’s fanfare for the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee in 2012, itself symptomatic of national anguish at a long-lost British empire (Black, 2016, p.790). Maritime castration anxiety also has a deeply rooted history of Britain’s presence in the European Union as is demonstrated by the accusations of stolen fish and seas during the Leave campaign of 2016 resulting from the Common Fisheries Policy (begun in 1983) which has reduced British-only waterways from a two-hundred to a twelve-mile parameter (Barclay, 1996).

Concealing maritime castration, Brexitannia on the Bradford Exchange coin loosely recalls Britannia cartoons emerging in the eighteenth century that articulated fears of national wounding with the ever-burgeoning need of the Americans for their independence. This can be seen in an engraving attributed to Benjamin Franklin entitled The Colonies Reduced, in which Britannia’s shield and spear are posed on the ground, ungraspable by the dismembered national symbol whose limbs bear the names of the soon-to-be former British colonies (Wilson, 1995, p.223). The difference with the Bradford Exchange coin is that amputation and anxiety are made implicit, rather than explicit, with the modern-day language of white female emancipation covering over and targeting, to recall the collectible coin’s accessible price, a working-class audience. This, in turn, echoes right-wing appropriations of a feminist agenda in the name of the Brexit process. Theresa May’s re-appropriation of fellow Tory Kenneth Clarke’s insult of being a ‘bloody difficult woman’ in the run-up to the Conservative leadership contest of 2016 is another example of this feminist framing of Brexiti.

Indeed, Theresa May becomes the figure of Britannia in the satirical illustrations of Gerald Scarfe, who has been a cartoonist for The Sunday Times, Private Eye, and The New Yorker (among others). Scarfe’s illustrations speak to both the act of Brexit as one of female emancipation and as one of national amputation seen in earlier historical scripts on the national symbol. In ‘Onward’ (c.2017), May is seen riding on the back of Boris Johnson, whose incompetence as the then–foreign secretary is emphasised by his clown suit, while other prominent members of her Brexit cabinet trail pathetically behind her wielding tattered Union Jacks marked with the word ‘Brexit’ (see Scarfe, n.d.b). Whereas the tattered flags imply the collapsing of the nationalist dream of emancipation from Europe owing to the complexities of the process, May nonetheless stoically wields a trident as a modern-day Britannia ready to charge forth to win the battle of Brexit.

3 A number of commentators have cast doubt on the sincerity of May’s feminist pronouncements. See, for instance, Rhiannon Lucy Cosslett (2016).
charge-ready belligerence stands in ironic contrast to the caption: ‘THE RETREAT FROM EUROPE’. As the caption continues, ‘DESPITE CONFUSION AND OPPOSITION THE INTREPID BAND GOES ON’.

While Scarfe’s caricatural style prevents the idealised version of Britannia seen in the Bradford Exchange coin, female strength is implied in May’s determined grimace and the trident poised to inflict injury should the Brexit process be stymied.

In ‘Theresa May – Brexit’, on the other hand, Britannia’s performance of male castration anxiety is revived through the former Prime Minister cutting off her own head while blood spurts forth (see Scarfe, n.d.a). Splashes of red ironically flirt with the red bristles of her war-ready brush helmet. The replacement of Britannia’s trident with a dagger slashing May’s own neck positions this ‘Brexitania’ in terms of a script of female vulnerability, as opposed to emancipation, while a crepuscular sun – as red as her blood – implies the metaphorical setting of the sun on the Brexit dream.

On the other side of the political spectrum from the Bradford Exchange commemorative coin, in the left-wing, anti-Brexit political magazine the New Statesman, an iconic image from the period known as ‘Cool Britannia’ was doctored in the 28 April – 4 May edition of 2017 with a message that equates Brexit not with female self-harm but male sickness.4 This special edition dedicated to the topic of ‘Cool Britannia: Twenty Years On’ featured on its front cover a mock painting by illustrator Jason Seiler, in which model and actress Patsy Kensit shares a bed with former British prime minister Tony Blair (see Harris, 2017). The image is a parody of a front cover of Vanity Fair in 1996, which became, along with Gerri Halliwell’s Union Jack dress at the Brit Awards in 1997, emblematic of the ‘Cool Britannia’ Zeitgeist.5 In the original, Kensit nestles up to her soon-to-be husband and star of Britpop band Oasis, Liam Gallagher. The New Statesman parody of 2017 replaces a young Gallagher with a withered but realistically recent-looking Tony Blair, while Kensit remains ever-youthful. Seiler’s mock painting of the Vanity Fair photograph playfully implies that the proper space of Cool Britannia iconography, in 2017, is that of the museum, adding to the idea of infirmity through agedness inscribed in Blair’s body. Meanwhile, the image is in fact made readily available via the digital and print media (Yonan, 2011, p.237) used by the New Statesman to disseminate its articles. Like Bradford Exchange’s coin, the magazine’s ‘Brexitannia’ has been designed to appeal to a mass audience, albeit of a left-wing, anti-Brexit persuasion. The image invites viewers to make connections between Brexit, Blair’s contemporary sickly body, and the ‘Cool Britannia’ ’90s of two decades ago. As the by-line to the front cover confirms, ‘Cool Britannia: Where did it all go wrong?’ (Harris, 2017).

Cool Britannia imagery united youth, beauty, the nation, and its creative talent, seeking to promote a new British ‘knowledge economy’ (Valaskivi, 2016, p.34) of fashion, music, art on a worldwide stage. Dubbed little more than a ‘Blairite rebranding exercise of the 1990s’ (Fergusson, 2018, p.24) by the most cynical, the initiative was part of what Mark Leonard, working for the think-tank Demos that advised the Blair government, described as contemporary Britain’s self-conscious distancing from the nativism of the Thatcher years and from Britain’s imperial past. Shedding its image as ‘backward-looking and hidebound, arrogant and aloof’, the country’s creative industries sought to turn instead to a ‘forward-looking, multicultural identity’ of decolonial Britain (Leonard, 1997, p.6). ‘Coool Britannia’ was not simply a play on words referencing Thomas Arne’s patriotic song ‘Rule Britannia’ (1740); traces of Britannia were manifest in the women of the pop and fashion industries who donned Union Jack drapery and clothing: most conspicuously, Gerri Halliwell wore a low-cut, tight-fitting, and hyperbolically short Union Jack dress at the Brit Awards in 1997. British supermodel Kate Moss was seen at the London Fashion week of the same year wearing a Union Jack jumper. A few years later in January 2002, female models, including Naomi Campbell, sported Union Jack outfits for the front cover of Vogue, to emblematise what the magazine described as the British ‘fashion’s force’. They were dubbed by the magazine the country’s ‘Brit Pack’.

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4 The image can be consulted on the New Statesman website: https://www.newstatesman.com/1997/2017/05/cool-britannia-where-did-it-all-go-wrong

5 Indeed, Gerri Halliwell’s trademark dress of the ‘Cool Britannia’ ’90s might similarly be taken as appropriation of another moment from the ’60s, when British super-model Twiggy donned a Union Jack dress, designed by Mary Quant, for a Vogue photoshoot in 1967. Twiggy’s performance of nationhood must be aligned with the rapid collapse of the British empire that took place during this decade (notably in Africa with Sierra Leone, Kenya, and Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) all gaining independence). This also leads us to make connections between later fashion-based performances of national identity (the Cool Britannia ’90s, the wake of the referendum of 2016) and domestic feelings of insecurity about pre-eminence on the international stage.
While, as social anthropologist Marcus Banks describes, ‘Cool Britannia’ constructed itself as a ‘benign form of British nationalism that could be embraced by the nation’s youth’ (2006, p.50), harnessing an image of young and beautiful women to do so, The New Statesman cover of 2017 re-frames the ‘Cool Britannia’ ’90s as the source of a diseased or malignant body – Tony Blair’s. The former prime minister has a withered appearance in Seiler’s parody. Via a staging of old age and the onset of illness, Blair is divested of the ‘halo of youthful coolness’ that Cool Britannia offered him as author of Cool Nations: Media and the Social Imaginary of the Branded Country Katja Valaskivi argues (2016, pp.35–36). In the original Vanity Fair image, Liam Gallagher appears as youthful as his soon-to-be wife, Kensit, with just the faint traces of a moustache implying young adulthood on an otherwise clean-shaven baby face. By contrast, Blair has deep-set wrinkles around his mouth and under his eyes, and his teeth are yellow and crooked, the result of excessive smoking and festivities implied in the cigarette he holds in his right hand, also present in the original. In the original Vanity Fair image the cigarette that Gallagher holds implies the post-coital moment and the star’s sexual prowess, buttressed by the magazine’s headline ‘London Swings Again!’, which frames Gallagher and Kensit as re-living the sexual revolution of the 1960s. Blair appears anything but a ‘sex god’ in the Seiler parody: his nose appears oddly flattened, almost imploding, referencing the abundant cocaine that fell on London ‘like snow’ as music journalist John Harris describes in the accompanying article (2017), contemplating the effects of the ‘Cool Britannia’ ’90s, and the generation of conspicuous consumers that it gave rise to, on Brexit. Blair’s skin is an unattractive hue of salmon pink and patches of white, unlike Gallagher’s evenly white complexion. This is perhaps an index of the ‘anaemic’ culture that also produced the ‘hopelessly derivative music’ of Britpop as Harris puts it (2017). Blair’s pathologised pallor also pokes fun at the white dominance of the Cool Britannia ’90s as Harris describes in the accompanying article (2017); despite the period’s claims of forward-looking multiculturalism, Naomi Campbell is one of the only, thus tokenistic, examples of the British women of colour who wore Union Jack outfits as an expression of Britannia at the end of the twentieth century.

‘Brexitannia’ of Seiler’s parody is the ever-youthful Kensit, and she is positioned as the literal bedfellow of a diseased, white masculinity incarnated by Blair. Because of the incongruence between the fresh beauty of Kensit and her malignant, ageing bed partner, the image draws attention to the sexualisation of Kensit as she nestles demurely up to Blair. This connects to Harris’s suggestion that Brexit, euphemistically called the current ‘national conversation’, could be a result of the ‘lad culture’ expressed in Cool Britannia, ‘the period when the flag was suddenly stripped of its problematic aspects’ (2017). As scholars such as Rosalind Gill (2017) and Angela McRobbie (2008) have argued, British ‘lad culture’ flourished in the ’90s, authorising (especially white) men to act oafishly and construe women in objectifying ways as long as such sexualisation was done in irony and playfulness, thereby paying due respect to feminist activism of the preceding two decades (McRobbie, 2008) and appealing to both men and women. In Cool Britannia iconography, sexualisation was connected to an expression of nationhood in the ubiquitous Union Jack fashion of the era. Halliwell’s flesh-revealing dress and the breast-revealing suit jackets of Vogue’s ‘Brit Pack’ are just two examples of a playful patriotic sexiness that, as Harris describes, was ‘drenched in irony and playfulness’ (2017). However, as he continues, this gradually translated into ‘patriotic iconography [...] played completely straight’ (2017) in the Brexit era - for instance, in the men and women who have donned Union Jack suits and flags in pro-Brexit marches that have occurred since the referendum. The playful sexualisation of women evident in the Cool Britannia ’90s is reversed in the Seiler parody: it is masculinity, implied to be anaemically white and nationalist, that is made risible via the depiction of Blair’s diseased body. Racism and sexism are implied to be British illnesses of the Cool Britannia past and the Brexit present.

The New Statesman ‘Brexitannia’ reconfigures the Cool Britannia ’90s, calling attention to the period’s sexism and racism, but it also speaks to and rescripts the domestication of Britannia, and subsequently the subordination of gender in the name of nationhood, which stretches back two centuries. The Seiler parody repeats an aesthetic history of British caricature that connected Britannia’s vulnerability to injury to a mockery of masculine, patriotic strength, and simultaneously alters this history somewhat. Towards the end of eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, Britannia began to lose her warrior-woman attributes in political caricatures, becoming sweeter and more docile as an expression of her sexualised vulnerability to attack from abroad at a time
when American independence from Britain and the French Revolution threatened to reach monarchical Britain and diminish national strength (Hunt, 2003, p.139). For instance, in Physical Aid – or Britannia recover’d from a trance (1803) (Fig. 3.2), Britannia is depicted fainting on the English coastline, at risk of violation from Napoleon’s encroaching militia (whose ships loom in the back right of the image). She is defended by a fellow countryman whose incompetence is conveyed, like Blair’s in the New Statesman cover, via bodily sickness: he is red-faced and overweight, possibly as an acknowledgement of the British industrialists who would later literally become fat from the riches caused by the Napoleonic wars (1803–15) and the country’s isolation from the continent. This reflects the fact that Britannia iconography, to recall Wilson’s description, could reveal a fear of British male impotency (2003, p.238 n.9), particularly at a point in history when its burgeoning empire was threatened by the French. Unlike the fainting Britannia of Physical Aid, ‘Brexitannia’ of Seiler’s 2017 parody is not figured as the source of injury or sickness herself: rather all suggestions of ‘anxiety about […] masculine potency’ (Wilson, 2003, p.238 n.9) are shifted onto the decrepit body of Blair. Kensit remains the unchanging picture of youth and (albeit sexualised) health. In this exclusive mockery of masculinity, the Seiler parody harnesses the figure of Kensit to appeal to a gender-conscious readership critical of the white male chauvinism of the pro-Brexit campaign. This pro-feminist depiction of Brexitannia is also bolstered by the relative restoration of Kensit’s modesty and dignity in the Seiler parody:

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**Figure 3.2:** James Gillray, *Physical Aid, or Britannia recover’d from a trance; also, the patriotic courage of Sherry Andrew & a peep thro’ the Fog*, 1803. (© Trustees of the British Museum)
her nipples are exposed in her translucent black bra of the Vanity Fair front cover but are concealed in the opaque underwear of the Seiler parody.

Kensit thus evinces a degree of agency against the backdrop of the Union Jack. The image appeals to a similar combination of gendered agency, nationhood, and white female beauty of the Bradford Exchange pro-Brexit commemorative coin. Both harness this combination, moreover, to appeal to mass audiences, albeit from different ends of the political spectrum and standpoints on Brexit. Though the Seiler parody may impugn white masculinity, the vision of an evenly complexioned, rose-cheeked Kensit performs white female Britishness in the name of the nation in a similar way to Bradford Exchange’s Britannia. The Seiler parody does not make available a visual regime in which women of colour are able to express agency through nationhood, repeating the white dominance of Cool Britannia’s women in the ’90s and earlier in Britannia’s iconographical history. The following will turn to an example in which the identity of Britannia as a woman of colour has been made available in the post-referendum visual culture.

Brexitannia as healer

In November 2018, London-based advertising agency St Luke’s launched its ideas to ‘rebrand’ Britain via a news report entitled ‘Brand Brexit Britain: How to sell the UK after the EU’ on 19 November, 2018, created for the left-leaning, Brexit-sceptic Channel 4 News. Presented by the channel’s economics correspondent Helia Ebrahimi as a ‘post-Brexit campaign to rescue the brand’ of ‘unflappable cool’, in a loose reference to the Cool Britannia ’90s, St Luke’s unveiled ‘Game-changer Britain’, in which Duchess of Sussex Meghan Markle features as Britannia ‘leading in the new generation’ of modern Britons. Markle wears a Roman robe, holds a trident in her hand and a Union Jack shield in her left, and is at the centre of a group of racially and gender-diverse people who imply the idea of the nation’s advancement through their professional activities: a female doctor of ambiguous ethnic origin works in the nation’s hospitals, a black male musician brings the country culture, a white male architect builds infrastructure, and a professionally suited woman of East Asian origin works, possibly, for the nation’s economy. They form what is implied to be Markle’s troop, led in the name of the nation, represented by her Union Jack shield. Markle, herself of bi-racial, immigrant origins—her mother being African-American, her father white American—is associated with the female doctor to her immediate left behind her via the use of colour: both wear loose, white clothing and have the same light-brown skin tone in contrast to the other young professionals who wear black and dark brown and whose complexion is lighter (as is the case of the businesswoman and architect to her left) or darker (as is the case of the musician). The advertising board seems to seek to ‘sell’ the idea of ‘Brexitannia’ as a source of metaphorical cure, akin to the doctor behind her as a healer of the nation. This is also emphasised in St Luke’s explanation that ‘Game-changer Britain’ hopes to encapsulate the country’s historical role as a ‘force for modernity’, alluding to, among other things, the conception of the universal and free healthcare system, the National Health Service, established in 1948 as part of the Welfare State created to recover from World War II (Channel 4, 2019).

‘Game-changer Britain’ recalls a history of Britannia as the simultaneous heralder of national health and challenger of gender boundaries, which dates from the mid-eighteenth-century period of British imperialism. As Wilson argues, working-class women from agricultural and craft industries in England, Scotland, and Ireland (2003, p.101) of the Georgian period were active participants in Britain’s imperial project in America, serving as nurses in major conflicts such as the Seven Years War (1756–63) (p.97). Britannia iconography of the period enabled these women to perform their ‘national and gender identities’ in ‘imaginative and innovative ways’ (Wilson, 2003, p.94) since the allegory tended to represent both caregiving healer, thus corresponding to a gender norm about women’s maternal capacity, and active warrior, defying gender injunctions to assume a passive role. In a lithograph entitled Peace Introducing America and Britannia (1775), for instance, Britannia holds a spear and shield, emblazoned with the English cross, while her other hand is gently taken by the allegorical figure of Peace, as she seeks to introduce her to America, embodied by a Native American. Peace and Britannia are joined in visual symmetry as both have one or both breasts exposed and each wear a white robe. In ‘Game-changer Britain’ similar associations may be detected: Brexitannia is both an active warrior grasping her weapons (a trident and Union Jack shield) and she promises a peaceful bestowal of cures in her colour-coordinated pairing with the doctor behind her.

‘Game-changer Britain’ also re-performs eighteenth-century aesthetic codes to suggest new ways in which women at the intersection of race and gender may become curers of national woes in the post-imperial age of Brexit. Britannia art of the Georgian period, as Wilson continues, was made to fit a pattern of ‘visual representations of English encounters with new worlds [which] were crucial in
gendering and racializing those worlds, often creating [...] a hierarchy between the imperial and colonized lands and peoples’ (2003, p.94). To return to Peace Introducing America and Britannia (1775), for example, the white women Britannia and Peace tower over the conquered indigenous woman representing ‘America’. The indigenous woman looks admiringly up to Peace hovering above ground. Britannia’s and Peace’s racial superiority is emphasised not only by height but also by their blanched robes, in contradistinction to America’s dark robe covering her waist. What would, in contemporary feminist terms, be called the ‘white female saviour narrative’ on display in this image is re-defined in ‘Gamer-changer Britain’: Markle and the doctor behind her don the white robes, historical markers of white superiority, as women of colour. The image not only provides a corrective to the gendered racist hierarchies of the imperial age but also responds to oversights earlier in the history of post-imperial Britain. At one point in the Channel 4 News report, ‘Strategy Partner’ Dan Hulse displays a storyboard drawing a line of continuity between racist skinheads brandishing the Union Jack and Gerri Halliwell’s Brit Award dress of the ‘Cool Britannia’ 90s. Markle as ‘Brexitania’ significantly reverses the near-invisibilisation of women of colour during the Cool Britannia Zeitgeist, and she becomes shorthand for the multicultural Britain, welcoming of immigrants and racialised people, which was overlooked by the empty promises of two decades prior. The caption ‘Game-changers welcome’ seeks to strike a relationship with the many ‘Immigrants/Refugee welcome’ placards that have been seen in anti-Brexit demonstrations, particularly given Markle’s American origins. As the embodiment of a health-giving warrior who is both a woman of colour and a recently naturalised British citizen (emphasised by her Union Jack shield), Markle’s ‘Brexitania’ rehearse the possibility of intersectionality – feminism at the crossroads of race and gender, that allots agency to women of colour – in an age of Brexit which has been labelled variously as intolerant, neo-imperial, and racist.

Choosing the liberal Channel 4 News programme to market their ‘Game-changer Britain’ pitch, St Luke’s aimed their vision of an intersectional ‘Brexitania’ at a mass audience on the left-leaning, anti-Brexit side. The campaign was taken up enthusiastically, but not by the intended political grouping. The Channel 4 News audience were, ironically, largely sceptical, about the idea of an intersectional, immigrant Britannia. Economics correspondent Helia Ebrahimi posted ‘Game-changer Britain’ on Twitter to announce the Channel 4 News report on the 19 November 2018. While some tweeters responded with enthusiasm, others noted the incompatibility of Markle and Britannia, based on an idea of the permanence of her foreignness (‘She’s American’; ‘Next ad no doubt – queue jumpers not wanted’). Other tweeters confessed indignation at the reinforcement of Scottish and Welsh exclusion in the idea of an immigrant Britannia hailing from the United States (‘NOTHING Scottish or Welsh in that campaign?? It’s like we don’t exist. And then you wonder why GB is so unpopular’; ‘Once again—not for viewers in Scotland’ (in Ebrahimi, 2018). Meanwhile, in the right-wing, pro-Brexit, newspaper The Express, Aurora Bosotti, enthused on 21 November 2018, ‘Meghan Markle as BRITANNIA! Duchess of Sussex to promote Brexit Britain’. Bosotti notes the compatibility between Brexit and Markle’s Britannia, slotting the Duchess into a story about the British Royal Family’s capacity to act as trade negotiators when the UK leaves the EU. Markle’s marriage to Prince Harry makes her adaptable to the Royalist stance of the right-wing tabloids. In this sense, her role as ‘Brexitania’ is nothing new, but repeats a history in which members of the royal family have inspired the nation’s allegory, first beginning with the Duchess of Richmond (1647–1702) who posed for the first Britannia medals and coins revived in seventeenth-century Britain and who, like Markle, was ‘well-known [...] for her beauty’ (Eustace, 2006, p.328). What the Express’s circulation of Markle demonstrates is an agency of women of colour that may be made in the name of nationhood, confounding the popular liberal ‘myth’ (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018, p.17) that all Brexit supporters nostalgic/harbour designs for a return to pre-multicultural, racially pure, white Britain (e.g., Leonard, 2017; Dorling & Tomlinson, 2019).

On the right side of the political spectrum, Theresa May reappears as the health-imbued healer of the nation in Carla Miller’s accompanying illustration to an article entitled ‘Maggie May’ for Conservative Home, an online news and debate resource for (pro-Brexit) Conservatives in January 2017 (Goodman, 2017). Author Paul Goodman discusses the ‘formidable’ task that lay, at that time, before Theresa May of securing a deal with the European Union that coheres with the public wish to limit immigration while securing low-tariff trading. The colour of ‘steel’ (Goodman, 2017) inflects American illustrator Miller’s image, as her Roman robe complement the former prime minister’s hair in differently nuanced greys as an index of the former Prime Minister’s age and experience. The variegated shades of grey recall May’s self-positioning as the new Thatcher-esque ‘Iron Lady’ of the Brexit
negotiations. May-as-Britannia clutches a Union Jack shield that is partially covered by her silvery robe and which, with the aid of Goodman’s description, is likened to a surfboard. As he writes, ‘May is more like a surfer riding the waves’ with ‘the great wave of the referendum result that, though closely fought, has given her the biggest mandate in history for her negotiation’ (2017). Indeed, in Miller’s illustration the healthily toned hand of May suggests a suntan gained through outdoor sport that clutches the Union Jack shield as one would carry a surfboard. The Britannia brush helmet, often red when depicted in colour, is cast in a blue-green hue with an S-shaped movement in the helmet’s tail completing the impression that it is at one with the sea that May is purported to ride with great skill and ‘steeliness’ (Goodman, 2017).

With the modernity of the surfer combined with the steely hues of a new ‘Iron Lady’, Carla Miller’s ‘Brexitannia’ in the figure of Theresa May becomes the nation’s healer, because she overturns the pathologisation of Britain from earlier decades, particularly at the moment when the UK joined the EEC in 1974. Britannia figured at this point in time not as the ‘sick man of Europe’, but as what may be described the ‘sick woman of Europe’ – an ageing woman whose sickness and proximity to death can only be abated by jumping aboard the EU ship. This latter trope, as Robert Saunders notes, was prevalent in the 1975 referendum on the European question in his cultural history *Yes to Europe!* (Saunders, 2018, p.380). The ‘sick woman of Europe’ can be seen, for instance, in the 1975 cartoon authored by Franklin and published in *The Sun*, which then supported EEC membership, on 2 June (reprinted in Saunders, 2018, p.147). In this illustration, Britannia has boarded a liner called ‘Europe’, alongside other prominent figures of the pro-European ‘Britain in Europe’ campaign such as former Tory prime minister Ted Heath and Roy Jenkins. Britannia’s age is visible in the deep bags under her eyes and wrinkles around her nose and mouth. The less-than-spritely national allegory on the ship represents the declining imperial nation of Britain, while HMS ‘Europe’ shields her from the treacherous waters, infested with sharks and octopi, surrounding her – a symbol of the political, economic, and social costs of not joining the community at this point in time. By contrast, Carla Millar’s cartoon for *Conservative Home* in 2017 recasts age, in the figure of Theresa May, as the picture of sun-kissed health capable of leading the nation to a cure through surfing the treacherous waters on her own. This draws on and modernises Britannia’s maritime prowess in previous centuries.

Allusions to national feminism that ‘heal’ the

Figure 3.3: Mandy Boylett, still from Mandy Boylett’s ‘Britain’s Coming Home (Brexit Song)’, 2016. Song and video. (Reproduced with permission from the author)
misanogynistic ‘lad’ culture ‘90s are present in the ‘Brexit song’ parodies made by Mandy Boylett, who unsuccessfully stood for election as a UKIP representative in Stockton North in 2015. Boylett released, as part of the ‘Grassroots Out’ campaign to leave the European Union, the playful parodies ‘Britain's Coming Home (Brexit Song)’ in February 2016 and ‘Get the Party Started (aka Brexit Song Two)’ in June 2016. The first song is a parody of the ‘Three Lions’ anthem, originally released by the Lightning Seeds, composed by British comedians Frank Skinner and David Baddiel, on the occasion of England's hosting of the Euro championships in 1996. Boylett replaces the refrain ‘Football's coming home’ with ‘Britain's coming home’ (2016a), appealing to what Benedict Anderson had labelled an ‘imagined community’ (2006) built around the cultural signifier of British football. This community has been constructed in the popular imaginary, whether accurate or not, as ‘essentially proletarian’ (Blain et al, 1993, p. 5), male-, and white-dominated world. The videos hinge on a paradigm of accessibility to the masses (defined in gendered and classed terms), which is also reinforced by the seeming ordinariness of the video’s do-it-yourself aesthetic. Two women, both Boylett herself in a feat of computer trickery created in her basement, sing – poorly – ‘Britain's Coming Home’ in front of Union Jack computer-generated background. Boylett frames the low-quality aesthetic in terms of a self-deprecatory sense of humour, which may be understood as performing nationhood as a quintessentially British form of comedy (Bracewell, 1994). Boylett apologises in the end credits to her second ‘Brexit song’, a parody of Pink's ‘Get the Party Started’, to the popstars whom she parodies (Boylett, 2016b). An interlude from Nigel Farage impels the target ‘lad’ audience, to spread a pro-Brexit message, to ‘twat’ on twitter place him as part of the video’s ‘fundamental structure of the universe’: ‘frustrating’ (see, Baddiel, 2019).

Boylett appeals to a white ‘lad culture’ audience similar to that cultivated during the period of Cool Britannia ‘90s (described earlier), but her performance of an equally ordinary white British womanhood suggests a feminist-inflected rescoping of the Zeitgeist’s sexism, albeit while leaving its racial biases and white domination intact. In a sparkly Union Jack top, white shorts and knee-high boots, Boylett’s clothing is a parody of Gerri Halliwell's Union Jack dress, drawing attention to the sexualising paucity of material of the former ‘Spice Girl’s’ original outfit at the 1997 Brit Awards, which was short enough to reveal blue underwear (fitting the national colours) and low-cut enough to reveal the popstar’s generous cleavage. Boylett’s strategy of bodily re-robing is also present in the knee-length Union Jack dress that she dons for her second ‘Brexit Song’, ‘Get the Party Started (2016b). Boylett’s songs therefore reconstruct Halliwell’s Britannia in the ‘Brexit’ moment nineteen years later as someone who chooses to cover up and whose body is, additionally, older and more realistically proportioned. Boylett combines her redefinition of Cool Britannia with an image of health, which is performed as a feminist show of strength. In both ‘Britain's Coming Home’ and ‘Get the Party Started’ she raises her fist in an allusion to the cultural icon of ‘Rosie the Riveter’, the character who unrolls her to bear a muscular arm of Howard Miller’s 1943 poster. The poster was originally designed to recruit women to the war effort in the United States, but it has since been recuperated in the contemporary moment as a popular feminist motif. A middle-aged, healthy, and feminist ‘Brexitannia’ is juxtaposed with the EU, which is described in the lyrics of ‘Britain’s Coming Home’ as suffering from a kind of social sickness of corruption, criminality, and hunger for power—‘want[ing] prisoners to vote’, being ‘full of flaws’, ‘overrul[ing] many laws’, ‘tak[ing] all our fish’ (Boylett, 2016a).

Halliwell’s ‘Girl Power’ Cool Britannia of the ‘90s becomes ‘mature woman power’ Brexitannia in Boylett’s parodies, reflecting an expression of gender agency in the name of the nation. Whether audiences loved or hated the videos, they were widely circulated (especially ‘Britain’s Coming Home’) on the internet, going ‘viral’ in a way that suggests viewers’ pleasure, acknowledged or not, gleaned from the videos’ playfulness. Indeed, ‘Britain's Coming Home’ was described by Daniel Baddiel, who co-authored the original song ‘Football's Coming Home’, as ‘brilliantly naff’ (in Wilkinson, 2016). The left-wing comedian, who may be described as, at least to some degree, a Brexit-sceptic, found Boylett’s ‘naffness’ enough of a reason to retweet her song. This retweet subsequentely helped to spread Boylett’s Leave campaign message, receiving four hundred and sixty-eight responses, and three hundred and twenty-one ‘likes’. Here the idea of women’s agency in a performance of nation gains new meaning: Boylett’s humoristic ‘Brexitannia’ proved enough to persuade Baddiel, whose constant allusions to ‘twat’ on twitter place him as part of the video’s target ‘lad’ audience, to spread a pro-Brexit message that does not correspond fully to his convictions.

7 For instance, he compared the Brexit process to the difficulty of quantum physics and the ‘fundamental structure of the universe’...
Indeed, Baddiel performed this reluctant pleasure and suspension of political beliefs in his tweet re-posting the song: ‘just to be clear: me and Frank [Skinner] didn’t give permission for this. But it’s so brilliantly naff, we might’ve anyway’ (quoted in Wilkinson, 2016).

Conclusion

This article has examined ways in which the figure of Britannia performs national hurt and healing that can be found throughout the history of the figure in the post-referendum British visual culture. This has allowed me to espy metaphorical wounds in the Brexit process where patriotic hubris seems dominant, such as Bradford Exchange’s Brexit commemorative coin’s unconscious articulation of Britain’s maritime and naval impotency. It has also enabled me to establish, more hopefully (and regardless of one’s convictions about whether Brexit is a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ choice for the country), opportunities for collective healing—particularly through the salve of humour and parody—at a time of uncertainty and, to many, of national emergency as the process of exiting the European Union becomes more complex and stalemated by the day.

In his book *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*, cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy contemplates examples in which diasporic identities have been made to coalesce with a notion of Britishness to powerful effect (2002). For instance, Lurline Champagnie, the first black woman candidate to stand for election for the Conservatives, declared to the cheers of a standing ovation at the Tory party conference in 1985, ‘I am a Conservative, black and British and proud of all three’ (in Gilroy, 2002, p.60). Gilroy concludes that the left have not known how to mobilise patriotism like the Tories have, shying away from the claims of nationalist fascism that progressive liberals tend to associate with displays of national belonging. This complaint could also be lodged against the Remain campaign during the referendum on Brexit of 2016, which favoured the less culturally resonant European Union flag as a signifier to rally support over the Union Jack. The left-leaning examples of ‘Brexitannia’ (St Luke’s campaign centring on Meghan Markle as Britannia and *The New Statesman* parody of Patsy Kensit as ‘Cool Britannia’) have tentatively demonstrated a turn towards the theme of national belonging as a source of strength for Brexit sceptics. However, this article has also shown that that the theme of women’s emancipation and/or agency may be made pliable to a right-wing, pro-Brexit agenda by means of the potent signifier of national belonging (expressed in Brexitannia’s Union Jack). St Luke’s ‘Game-changer Britain’ was embraced more fully by the right-wing press than the liberal audiences for which it was intended. Left-wing sceptic David Baddiel was brought to disseminate a pro-Brexit, right-wing message in Mandy Boylett’s ‘Britain’s Coming Home’ despite himself.

It must therefore be asked, in concluding, the extent to which gendered agency expressed in the service of nationhood can be qualified as compatible with a left-wing politics or indeed with the notion of ‘feminism’ if the latter is understood to be based on the left-leaning collectivist abolition of structural differences caused by class, race, and gender. As Gilroy states, while ‘the ideological theme of national belonging may be malleable to some extent [...] its links with the discourses of classes and “races” and the organizational realities of these groups are not arbitrary’ (2002, p.55). White nationalism does not simply disappear from the history of the Union Jack nor the latter’s presence in contemporary Britannia iconography simply because new forms of femininity—be it women of colour (Markle) or more mature, ordinary, or working-class women (Boylett)—perform national belonging. If this article has illustrated that gender scripts from Britannia’s history may be ‘healed’ to a certain extent in contemporary performances of ‘Brexitannia’, racial ones remain ‘hurt’ by empire and a neo-imperial Brexit imaginary. The resultant effect is that white womanhood may use British nationhood as a conduit for emancipation, but women of colour—barring those who are deemed ‘good immigrants’ (Shukla, 2016) for their royalty, light-skinned complexion, or beauty—cannot appropriate the figure of Britannia for agency.
Bibliography


REFLECTIONS ON THE RHETORIC OF (DE)COLONIZATION IN BREXIT DISCOURSE
Anshuman A. Mondal

Abstract
This essay begins with an acknowledgment that attempts to understand Brexit are, at this stage, condemned to partial understanding, at best, because as an event it is incomplete and moving in contradictory directions. Just a brief inventory of the many ways in which Brexit can be, and has been, approached gives one a sense of this centrifugalism — sovereignty; globalization; free trade; immigration; racism; disenfranchisement; nostalgia; affect; generational schism; post-imperial decline; neoliberalism; populism; poverty; austerity; class; multiculturalism; cosmopolitanism; far-right and Islamist extremism; Islam and Muslims; refugees; and so on and so on. One particular line of thought emerging among more scholarly treatments from within the arts and humanities (for example, as found in several essays in the volume Brexit and Literature) concerns itself with Brexit as an affective phenomenon, one that speaks to the structures of feeling that bind ‘Britishness’ into a cultural assemblage that goes beyond the artefactual sense of ‘culture’ to that nebulous and barely perceptible ‘way of life’ which constitutes the affective economy of most people living in the British Isles. This, however, is articulated — in the sense used by Stuart Hall — in very different ways depending on class, gender, region, educational background, nationality and, of course, race and ethnicity. This essay will probe the ways in which the affective economy of Brexit is mobilized by picking out one particular thread from within the tangled knot of multiple determinations that have brought the United Kingdom to where it now is: this thread follows the trope of (de)colonization across Brexit rhetorics and places it within a long durée that illuminates the extent to which the affective economy underlying Brexit is deeply embedded in a racialized sense of nationhood that reaches back to the beginnings of Britain’s colonial and thence post-colonial history.

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Biographical note
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Banner image: Rita Duffy, Soften the Border, 2017 (detail). Recycled fabrics, installation on the Belcoo, Blacklion Bridge - Co. Fermanagh / Co. Cavan border, 2.5 x 30m. Image credit: Copyright of the artist, Rita Duffy. Photo credit: Stanislav Nikolov
Brexit has induced a political crisis within the United Kingdom that may lead to its political disintegration. It is possible, perhaps even probable, that Scotland will seek independence, especially if a ‘hard’ Brexit materialises, and it is impossible to predict the consequences of such an outcome for Northern Ireland; indeed, it is possible that it may achieve the unification of Ireland in a way that would have been unthinkable until now. If these things happen, Brexit will have produced two of the greatest of historical ironies, the dissolution of a political unit brought about by its search for some kind of undiluted sovereignty and the re-unification of Ireland precipitated by people apparently committed to the Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. On another level, the electoral system is another likely casualty of the Brexit process. The series of crises and debacles that have accompanied the tortuous crawl towards departure have thrown the entire political system into disrepute, culminating in a political humiliation for both the main political parties in the somewhat pointless, but nevertheless highly significant, elections to the European Parliament in May 2019. This exploded the two-party political ecology of British democracy, and the first-post-the-post electoral system that is its corollary. Britain’s political environment is now a multi-party system that, in the long- (perhaps even short- or medium-) term cannot be adequately serviced by its current electoral system. In terms of both its political architecture and its political infrastructure, then, Brexit has brought about a situation in which ‘the centre cannot hold’, to use Yeats’ resonant phraseology of political apocalypse (Yeats, 1991, p.187).

This essay is an attempt to interrogate and explore the value and significance of certain metaphors mobilized within Brexit discourse, so it is perhaps apposite to begin by pointing out that Brexit is a political explosion that is likely to have consequences in which the metaphor is materialised and made manifest in several ways. Brexit is an event, one that is still unfolding, is yet incomplete – despite the official departure of the UK from the EU on 31 January 2020 – and is moving in multiple and contradictory directions. To try and account for it, to gather one’s thoughts about it is difficult – I won’t say impossible – precisely because, as a still unfolding event, it involves an explosive scattering in all sorts of directions all at once. Just a brief inventory of the many ways in which Brexit can be, and has been, approached gives one a sense of this centrifugalism – sovereignty; globalization; free trade; immigration; racism; disenfranchisement; nostalgia; affect; generational schism; post-imperial decline; neoliberalism; populism; poverty; austerity; class; multiculturalism; cosmopolitanism; far-right and Islamist extremism; Islam and Muslims; refugees; and so on and so on. How can one account for all these and more ways in which Brexit has charged the social imaginary of twenty-first-century Britain, and galvanized forces that had lain dormant only to erupt in a furious mass of swirling, inchoate and perhaps uncontrollable social energy?

With this in mind, I am going to pick up one little thread in the rhetorical fabric of Brexit discourse and try to unravel some of its implications. This is the trope of (de)colonization that periodically surfaces, but which is more or less latent in Brexiteer discourse. It becomes visible mostly during moments of acute crisis – the critical weeks and months leading up to and immediately after the referendum itself, for example; or during the periods when the Brexit negotiations reach crunch point, such as after the brokering of what has become known as the Chequers agreement when Boris Johnson resigned from the Cabinet, arguing that the Chequers plan would reduce the UK to the status of a colony (Stewart et al, 2018).

This was not the first time that the trope of colonization surfaced in Brexit discourses. Indeed, the legacy of British imperialism is a fundamental determinant of the Brexit imaginary (Mondal, 2018; Dorling & Tomlinson, 2019; O’Toole, 2019). In an earlier essay (2018), I suggested that the dominant narrative that was established immediately after the referendum, which had it that Brexit was principally driven by the frustrations, disempowerment and disenfranchisement of the ‘left behind’ remnants of a disaggregated, disintegrated urban working-class who formerly voted for the Labour Party, was in fact belied by close analysis of the voting patterns, which suggest that the majority of Brexit voters were relatively well-off, middle-class voters in the rural, suburban and small urban centres of the Tory shires.1 What these two groups (the ‘left behind’ and the well-off) had

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1 This has been corroborated through more detailed analysis of much more extensive data by Danny Dorling and Susan Tomlinson (2019).
in common was, to my mind, an ‘imperially nostalgic nationalism’ that constituted an affect, a structure of feeling, in which a (perhaps, the) principal ingredient was a racial imaginary rooted in the hierarchies of British imperialism. The mobilization of this affective relation to the Empire could be seen in the importance of immigration as the premier logic determining voting intention at the referendum, and the continuities between the discourses on unrestricted migration from the EU with the discourses surrounding post-war migration from former British colonies. The Brexit imaginary may have appeared, on the surface, to be referring principally to white migration from the EU – hence its apparent alibi against accusations of racism – but it was, in fact, a displacement of a colonial racial imaginary that is principally concerned with non-white racial others. As I also pointed out, within British racial imaginaries certain ‘white’ groups have in any case always been racialized by association with non-white racial others depending on political context, as the Irish and southern Europeans have long known, and now eastern Europeans have found out.

My reflections here on the trope of (de)colonization are therefore offered as embellishments and refinements of this previous argument, and I will begin by drawing attention to the brackets in the title, for they signal a notable doubleness in the trope that I want to investigate. The brackets signal the way in which the trope gestures, simultaneously, towards both colonization and decolonization as operative metaphors within the Brexit imaginary. Johnson’s statement, for instance, speaks to the idea that a certain kind of Brexit, as represented by the Chequers plan or, more generally, by the term ‘soft Brexit’ will lead to Britain becoming a colony of the EU. But much of the force of Brexit as a mobilizing affect involves the imagining of Britain as already being a colony of the EU. Other terms have been used in Brexit discourse to reference this, such as vassalage or dependency, but the desire for ‘independence’ – articulated most clearly by Nigel Farage the morning after the referendum – clearly signals a cluster of emotional resonances concerning colonization (seen as a bad thing) and decolonization (seen as good). When Farage – a man not known for his reluctance to overstate his case – declared on 24 June 2016 that it would henceforth be known as ‘our independence day’ he was simultaneously drawing on the affective capital of the Fourth of July celebrations in the United States as a signifier of Liberty, and turning the tables on Britain’s characterization as a colonial overlord that suppressed the spirit of liberty. Britain was now no longer an oppressor, but one of the oppressed, longing to be free. According to this line of thinking, Brexit was the moment when, to borrow from Nehru a little, the ‘soul of a nation, long suppressed’ found ‘utterance’.

One can witness this trope – and its double signification – playing out not only in public political discourse, but also in the more rarefied arena of academic historical enquiry. In a recent book, the maritime historian Andrew Lambert (2018) has argued that liberal values – and therefore, presumably, liberty and the rule of law – were propagated by ‘seapowers’ (of which early modern Britain was the exemplary example) in contrast to repressive, authoritarian ‘landpowers’. Reviewing the book in the Times Higher Education, Sarah Kinkel suggests that,

[t]his may be because, like everyone else, [Lambert] has Brexit on his mind. Explaining history as a long struggle between progressive, liberal seapowers and repressive hierarchical land powers is a justification for the claim that the European Union is a new continental hegemon, on a trajectory to become ‘an empire, not a nation, closer to Russia and China than the liberal democratic nation states that are the legacy of seapower.’

(Kinkel, 2018)

What is remarkable about that final statement, and indeed the thesis of Lambert’s book as a whole, is the way in which it refers at once to the decolonization trope and yet also lays claim to the mantle and legacy of liberal imperialism that stands in the long historical lineage that connects Whig advocates of empire like Macaulay with the liberal humanitarian interventionism of Tony Blair. Moreover, there is something very intriguing about the structure of Lambert’s thesis which also exposes the doubleness of the trope of (de)colonization within Brexiteer discourse. As Kinkel notes (2018): ‘The implication is that Britain will rediscover the good parts of seapower once it’s freed from European shackles.’ Re-discover. The moment of liberation, of unshackling, of decolonization is posited – as it usually is by all Brexiteers – as a new beginning. But it is a new beginning that circles back to a previous beginning, the moment when Britain embarked upon its long journey toward maritime pre-eminence, a journey that took in, along the way, the colonization of much of Australasia, Asia, Africa and the Americas; a
journey that concluded in its assumption of the mantle of Empire. If it seems somewhat ironic that Lambert should both castigate the EU as an imperial formation and celebrate Britain’s liberation from empire by returning to the beginning of its own historical journey towards becoming an empire, then this is an irony that Brexiteers can, it seems, live very comfortably with.

There are two further points that can be teased out of this double-signification. The first is that it corroborates Robert Eaglestone’s point that Brexit is an affect that can be characterized as a ‘cruel nostalgia’ (Eaglestone, 2018). Drawing on the affect theory of Lauren Berlant, whose book Cruel Optimism (2011) analyses the affective power of the American Dream, and conceptualizes it as a ‘cruel optimism’, Eaglestone writes that ‘[o]ptimism becomes cruel when hoping or striving for what you desire is actually harming you…the object of desire remains a fantasy, and your commitment to that fantasy damages you: “get rich or die trying” [which is one of the key axioms of the American Dream] isn’t healthy’ (p.95).

Eaglestone quotes Berlant as saying that ‘an optimistic attachment is cruel when the object/scene of desire is itself an obstacle to fulfilling the very wants that people bring to it: but its life organising status can trump interfering with the damage it provokes’ (p.95). Insofar as Brexit looks forward to a new beginning, it can be characterized as a cruel optimism – and the people of those regions of the UK most dependent on EU funding, those regions that most overwhelmingly voted Leave, may soon find out just how cruel their optimism was. But, says Eaglestone, Brexit is ‘nearly’ a very good example of cruel optimism. There is, however, one crucial difference: ‘Most affect theory deals with the present or (as in the case of cruel optimism) a focus on the future which ignores the detrimental effects in the present: but Brexit focusses on the past. Not cruel optimism, but cruel nostalgia’ (pp.95–6). But again, we find a doubleness that is not necessarily inscribed in nostalgia per se. Nostalgia, as such, does not have to look to the past in order to look forward; Brexit, however, does. It is, perhaps, both cruel optimism and cruel nostalgia.

The second point is that Lambert’s particular return to the beginning calls forth the trope of (de)colonization in a way that rehabilitates a crucial historical distinction that is often now overlooked and, in the process, sheds some light on the affective force of ‘free trade’ as a term within the Brexit lexicon. Imagining Brexit as a new beginning that is also a re-iteration of a prior beginning, as Britain begins to rule (once more) the waves, recalls an early association between trade, colonization and liberty, which was opposed at first to ‘imperialism’ and then, gradually and eventually, enveloped within the latter concept as the loss of Britain’s major colonies in America shifted attention to the east, where trading companies such as the East India Company were increasingly assuming the roles and responsibilities of government over the territories they had acquired as a result not of ‘colonization’ but of trade and commerce.

It is worth excavating some of the history of this transition in order to illuminate some of the subterranean political imaginings that have been exhumed and re-animated by Brexit. The association of colonization (as opposed to decolonization) with liberty can be traced – in the English and American social imaginaries, at least – back to the establishment of the first American colonies, a mythic inscription of the desire for religious liberty on American soil being the motivation for the Mayflower settlers in Plymouth. But it is worth recalling that, historically speaking, the first English colonists in America were motivated by a desire for enrichment, inspired by the earlier Spanish expeditions and conquests and legends of gold and El Dorado. The failure of these early colonies prompted the establishment of colonial economies in which trade became a vital element of survival, and thence economic growth, development and expansion (Pagden, 1998, pp.35–6). The key move, which was necessary for the establishment of the early colonies within the orbit of European commerce, was the development of an agricultural economy that in turn instituted a logic of territorial settlement in the colony, as inscribed in the common name for the ‘colony’ at the time: ‘plantation’. As Nicholas Canny has noted, the term ‘plantation’ has ‘gentler, horticultural associations’ and ‘the various English settlements in North America were known from the outset as “plantations”’ (2001, p.8).

This in turn meant that the problem of colonization in this early phase was the securing of rights over the lands on which the plantations were to be established. Enter John Locke and his Second treatise of Government (1988) which would enable the theorization of such territory as ‘unoccupied’ because a man could only secure rights of ownership over something if he ‘mixed his Labour with it’ (p.306): in other words, the land needed to be worked, and since the Native American tribes the settlers encountered were not agriculturalists who worked the land in ways that the Europeans could understand – since, that is, they lived in a ‘pre-commercial’ state (Pagden, 1998, p.45) – they had no claim to it and it could be appropriated by the settlers (p.42). This, of course, was a prelude to the terra nullius concept that would
facilitate settler colonialisms elsewhere, most notably in Australia and Southern Africa, but the key point here is that it obscures and overwrites any association of colonization with conquest, and enables English colonists to imagine themselves as having ‘freely’ acquired their territorial possessions. The space of the colony remains a space of liberty.

We see here, then, in the very origins of English colonization of the Americas a nascent nexus of religious liberty, trade and territorial settlement that gave to the term colonization a positive meaning that was contrasted with a Spanish imperialism that was associated with cruelty and despotism. ‘Since the English were eager to insist … upon the peaceful nature of their settlements, and to dissociate themselves from the image of conquest’, writes Pagden, ‘[f]ew Englishmen believed that they … had deprived anyone of their inheritance’ unlike the Spanish who ‘had invaded territories rightly occupied by legitimate, if primitive, rulers’ (the perceived civilizational difference between the urban Aztecs and Incas and the nomadic north American tribes was hugely significant here) (1998, p.51). Indeed, many believed they ‘were not the conquerors of Indians, but their saviours, not only from paganism and pre-agricultural modes of subsistence, but also Spanish tyranny’ (p.52). Nothing captures this early sense of colonization as a handmaiden to liberty better than Daniel Defoe’s novel Robinson Crusoe, in which a self-reliant, self-inventing and therefore ‘free’ individual (what better metaphor is there for the kind of liberty in which an individual is free from external constraints on their will – the kind later thought of as ‘negative’ liberty – than the desert island man?) is rewarded with vast riches and, more significantly, sovereignty in both a personal and political sense for his efforts in establishing a colonial outpost on unoccupied earth. As Ian Watt has pointed out, part of the enduring appeal of Defoe’s narrative is its ‘mythic’ character, one which clearly resonates today in the ersatz colonial nostalgia of Brexit in which Britain ‘goes-it-alone’; but it is also important to heed John Richetti’s warning that in Robinson Crusoe we do not find this myth fully established but rather in the process of being fashioned (Richetti, 2001). It is interesting, then, to find this passage in which Crusoe resolves not to kill the cannibals on the island by suggesting that such an act would be akin to the cruelty and barbarism of Spanish imperialism (thereby implicitly contrasting it with England’s more benevolent ‘colonialism’ in the reader’s mind):

This would justify the conduct of the Spaniards in all their barbarities practis’d in America… where they destroy’d millions of these people… the rooting them out of the country, is spoken of with the utmost abhorrence… by all other Christian nations of Europe, as a meer butchery, a bloody and unnatural piece of cruelty, unjustifiable to either God or man.

(Defoe, 2001, p.136)

This association of despotism with Catholic Spain’s imperialism was reinforced by Protestant England’s concurrent characterisation of the Ottoman Empire as similarly despotic (Pagden, 1998, p.52; Matar, 1999). In this early phase, then, the phase of mercantile colonialism – the phase that is so memorably articulated by Robinson Crusoe – imperialism was pejoratively opposed to colonization, and associated with authoritarianism, despotism, Catholicism and Islam: the imperial powers were Spain, Portugal, Hapsburg, Ottoman and Mughal. As traders, Britons had to deal with empires, but were not themselves representatives of an imperial mission.

The idea, as found in the early discourses of colonization, that colonization as an accompaniment to ‘trade’ (and vice versa) is a form of liberty morphed, eventually, into the fully-fledged ideology of ‘free trade’ in the service of an imperialism that, in the British conceptualization of it, nevertheless remained associated with liberty, a process of ideological transfiguration that was so effective that, as Jennifer Pitts has shown, the scepticism of late eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers such as Edmund Burke, Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham towards imperialism had, by the time of James and thence John Stuart Mill, been transformed into an imperial zeal that could not only accommodate the seeming contradiction between empire and liberty but appear to dissolve it altogether (2005).3 David Armitage (2000) has traced in detail the ways in which this transition happened through the course of the eighteenth century, and it was the figure of ‘trade’ that proved to be the crucial, alchemical category through which an empire of liberty could be rhetorically brought into some form of coherence. Drawn as they were to classical models and precedents through which they thought through political concepts and ideas, early modern and eighteenth-century English intellectuals were inevitably aware of Sallust’s account of imperial overreach as the reason for the collapse of the Roman Republic.

3 Duncan Bell (2016), although somewhat critical of the specifics of Pitts’ account, nevertheless concurs with the overall argument. See also Uday Singh Mehta (2018), which also offers a similar overall argument but with slightly different emphases to both Pitts and Bell.
The obvious conclusion was that imperialism and liberty were invariably at odds. At the same time, however, British overseas territorial possessions were becoming ever larger such that, according to Armitage, the phrase ‘imperialism’ becomes self-consciously associated with ‘Britain’ for the first time in the mid-eighteenth century (2000, p.8). Pride in this emergent empire wrestled with received wisdom of the threat to liberty posed by imperialism. This necessitated a redefinition of the term ‘empire’ and it was achieved by drawing on the earlier positive associations gathered around ‘colonization’, particularly its association with ‘commerce’ and ‘trade’ for these would enable the expansion of the British ‘empire’ without the military over-extensions that had so bedevilled the Roman exemplar and (given that by the late eighteenth century, the Spanish, Ottoman and Mughal empires were clearly in decline) more recent imperial polities. It is trade, then, that mediates and supervenes the opposition between empire and liberty; an empire based on trade offers a path to (imperial) glory that does not succumb to corruption, decadence and the loss of liberty (Armitage, 2000, p.142). A further important distinction was drawn between the nascent British empire and these other examples: they had over-reached militarily because they had expanded through territorial conquest; that is, they were land-based; the British empire had grown out of its trading colonies, plantations and outposts, and these had all been enabled by Britain’s mastery of the sea. The British empire would be different from the others because, as Armitage pithily puts it: ‘Empire could only be compatible with liberty if it were redefined as maritime and commercial, rather than territorial and military’ (p.142). Since the British empire would be an ‘empire of the sea’, ‘not only would empire be at last reconciled with liberty, but liberty would be its essential foundation’ (pp.142–3). It is worth quoting Armitage’s final assessment in full here because it shows just how much the entire structure of an early imperial imaginary, as Britannia initially sallied forth to ‘rule the waves’, is rehabilitated and reproduced in contemporary Brexit discourse by right-wing historians such as Lambert as much as by Brexit-supporting politicians and journalists:

The vision of a maritime trading empire, and the diagnosis of England’s fitness to capture it, identified the success of a trading nation with the liberty of its government, distinguished territorial conquest from the unlimited potential of empire upon the sea, and thus laid the foundations for a blue-water policy designed to enrich England while defeating universal monarchy in Europe. A typology thereby emerged which would hold sway for at least half a century. The Bourbon monarchies were ambitious for universal monarchy, their designs lay on the continent of Europe, their monarchies were absolute, and hence they could not flourish as commercial powers. England (and, after 1707, Great Britain) was a free government, which encouraged rather than depressed trade, and its destiny lay in the empire of the sea rather than in territorial conquest, which was a danger to liberty itself, as well as a diversion from the nation’s true commercial interests.

(p.144)

By the time of the Opium Wars, a liberal imperialism fully reconciled with, and committed to the extension of liberty across the globe had become firmly rooted in the British (and especially English) social and political imaginary (Pitts, 2005; Bell, 2016). Amitav Ghosh, in the second and third instalments of his magisterial Ibis Trilogy, accounts for the formation of the colonies of Singapore and Hong Kong as part of a process whereby these south-east and east Asian footholds can serve both as conduits for the trade between Imperial China and British India, and launchpads for military offensive, all in the service of liberty (Ghosh, 2011, 2015). This trilogy of novels is particularly acute in showing how colonization was, materially speaking, a fundamental and necessary vehicle for the operation of ‘free trade’ and, conversely, how ‘free trade’ was integral to the ideological justification of colonialism. The emphasis on ‘Free Trade’ in the Brexiteer lexicon cannot but carry this historical freight.

But part of the polysemy, the doubleness, of the trope of (de)colonization is the way in which it also indexes the decolonization and dismantling of Britain’s imperial infrastructure as a rupture in this narrative, and Brexit discourses surreptitiously imbricate this other sense of (de)colonization in a euphemistic, some might say dog-whistle, register that alludes to the perceived consequences of decolonization (in this disruptive sense) on Britain’s self-perception, self-identity and ‘way of life’. The ‘pastoral’ nostalgia (yet another!) that Ankhi Mukherjee (2018) finds lurking within the affective economy of Brexit, in a reading of Roger Scruton’s imagining of it, has been ably documented in relation to class and the ways in which a conservative tradition has imagined the consequences of industrialization, urbanization and the emergence of radical working-class politics within the urban proletariat. But, as Edward Said has shown, even as sensitive and rich a documentation of this persistent sense of loss as Raymond Williams’ The Country and the
City (1973), has been blind to the ways in which race and post-war immigration presses upon the structures of feeling that constitute post-imperial Britain (Said, 1994, p.14, p.77). The task, then, is to connect these two narratives of loss: of the pastoral Arcadia, and of imperial pre-eminence. Brexit is one such point of connection.

As I have noted elsewhere (Mondal, 2018), this period of decolonization coincided with the period in which Britain’s imperial decline is accompanied by its gradual incorporation into the European project and eventual accession into the EU, and it might perhaps be speculated that this coincidence is precisely what determines the Brexiteers’ retrospective re-telling of this period in terms of Britain’s ‘colonization’ by Europe, which is itself sutured to the sense that decolonization’s consequences have led to the ‘reverse colonization’ of Britain itself by those it once colonized.

Louise Bennett, the Caribbean poet, coined this phrase with her tongue rather firmly in her cheek in order to satirize the racist essentialism that accompanied popular British attitudes towards post-Windrush non-white immigration (Bennett, 1982), but certain strands within post-imperial British life and thought have taken it at face value, as a fact that offers a premise for an argument: both Powell’s ‘rivers of blood’ speech and Thatcher’s reference to ‘swamping’ during the 1979 general election campaign articulate this anxiety over a perceived ‘reverse colonization’, anticipating of course the Brexiteer discourse deployed during the referendum implicating the EU in the overwhelming of Britain by Others, both European and non-European, and prefiguring the later characterization of the EU as the agent of Britain’s abject colonization (which is always-also-and-already the ‘reverse colonization’ to which the discourse of British post-imperial nationalism initially referred). Hence, the narrative of colonization by the EU, which, in its doubleness, is also the narrative of ‘about to become colonized’ by the EU, is invariably – if euphemistically – racialized even if, on the surface, concern with EU migration appears not to be.

There is, I think, a connotational link between the language of ‘swamping’ directed towards non-white immigration, and the idea of ‘encroachment’ by the EU on Britain’s sovereignty, mediated by a pastoral ‘idea of England … threatened with extinction’ (Mukherjee, 2018, p.80). With regard to race the mediation works in two ways: on the one hand, it associates the disruptive black presence in England (principally) with the infernal space of post-industrial urban centres, with an added rhetorical layer of associations drawn, as Paul Gilroy showed in There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack (2002), from the archive of racialized colonial tropes. On the other, it secures the whiteness of this pastoral space by registering the disruptiveness of any black presence outside those urban centres (Loh, 2013). Within the affective economy of this pastoral vision, the authentic Arcadia that has been successively corrupted by capital, immigration and the EU is signalled as a ‘white’ space, a subterranean bedrock that has been overwritten by layer upon layer of coloured ink, first formerly commonwealth black, thence EU blue.

Which brings me to the rise of racist populism as the principal register of Brexit discourse. It is a truism, now, that the cold rationalism of Remain arguments about economic damage did not stand a chance against the affective mobilizations of the Leave campaigns, even though this alignment of Remain with reason, and affect with Leave does not really hold (Meek, 2019); much of the Remain strategy depended on the generation of fear of the economic consequences of Brexit, such that it was characterized, with egregious hypocrisy on the part of the Leave-supporting media, as Project Fear. Moreover, there was cold-blooded calculation on the part of Leave, not least in the sophisticated use of social media algorithms to generate a snowball of emotive messages leveraging fear of otherness in order to mobilize the vote. Nevertheless, the Leave campaign was a paradigmatic example of affective politics, in which “politicians… do not have clear, complex policies but rather seek to embody moods” (Eaglestone, 2018, p.95). As with Brexit, so with Trump, and even if it is not true that democratic politics is now all about affect whereas before it was reasonable and rational (how much more affective a politics can you get than the Conservative election poster in 1964 warning ‘If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour’?), then it is certainly the case that today’s digital instruments of affective politics have magnified and multiplied messages that neither require nor seek argumentation but rather catch and charge inchoate social energies into subliminal, barely perceptible and sometimes explicit messages of fear and loathing.

But even so, there is, in theory, no necessary reason why the principal register of Brexit should have become a populist racism. Indeed, there are some prominent Brexiteers (who have now largely departed the stage or have struggled to attract the limelight) who have been frankly appalled by this register and its mobilization on behalf of Brexit (one thinks of

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4 There is also a connotational adjacency to the use of the term ‘reverse racism’ (and, latterly, the linkage of this term to the notion of ‘political correctness’) by the New Right from the late 1970s onwards, as it critiqued and hollowed out the discourses of anti-racist movements that had mobilized in the name of non-white migrant communities to Britain from the former colonies (see Barker, 1981).
Douglas Carswell and Daniel Hannan, principally).\(^5\) It has been the core of my argument so far, such as it is, to provide plausible reasons as to why this has become the case – and, indeed, it is notable that both Carswell and Hannan were both born and initially raised in two of Britain’s former colonies, Hong Kong and Kenya, such that it is probably the case that they are psychologically animated by the project of rehabilitating the kind of colonial nostalgia that I have identified above, one built on the resonances of an early association of free trade and liberty.

But, of course, this racist populism is not unique to Britain. It is even more prominent on the continent, within the very EU from which Britain is departing. It would thus appear to be the case that racist populism is fast becoming the only common ground between the political cultures of the EU and Britain. And this should not surprise anyone, because colonization, racism and the consequences of decolonization are not part of the story of Britain only, but of Europe as a whole. As Marlow puts it in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, ‘all Europe went into the making of Kurtz’ (Conrad, 1983, p.86), that archetypal figure of the colonial imaginary that is the diabolical double of the ‘good’ colonial figures that populate, for example, Kipling’s short stories.

And the narrative of decolonization is a narrative that encompasses all of Europe too, not least because the racial imaginaries of European countries have also had to reckon with and acknowledge the tumultuous consequences of decolonization, both in terms of the position of European economies in a world economic system that has shifted, not radically but certainly perceptibly and significantly, away from Europe (and even, now, the United States) towards Asia; and in terms of the arrival, within their own boundaries, of peoples from territories they either governed during their own imperial periods, or, latterly in the form of refugees, from the poisonous legacies bequeathed to entire regions by colonial governments as they carved out enormous swathes of territory for mutual European benefit and rivalry. Put simply, decolonization inaugurated a structural readjustment in the global economy and in geo-politics that is playing itself out, at one level, through the epiphenomena of Brexit and the emergence of racist populism.

To elaborate on this a little, if we move from the European to the global scale, then both the EU itself and Brexit are responses to the problematic of decolonization, the provincialization of Europe and the ‘West’ – that historic if nevertheless unfinished and glacially slow re-orientation of the world economy and readjustment of global hierarchies of power.\(^6\) Europe has, through the consolidation of its economies into an EU, managed to hold off the economic consequences of this readjustment for a period, but it has increasingly struggled to do so; meanwhile, to paraphrase Churchill – which, given his commitment to racist imperialism as well as greater European co-operation, seems both appropriate and somewhat ironic – the skies of Europe are indeed darkening with pigeons coming home to roost: the refugee crisis is merely the most extreme and visible symptom of the EU’s increasingly feeble attempts to contain the consequences of the problematic of (de)colonization.

Fleeing the consequences of structural underdevelopment, and the redrawing of political territorialities on behalf of the administrative convenience of colonizing powers, the ensuing economic and political disturbances of erstwhile colonies have led to unprecedented migrant flows, both forced and unforced: the other side of the refugee crisis is the hollowing out of many societies in the global South by the need for skilled as well as unskilled migration from former colonies in order to stem the inevitable decline in productivity within Europe arising from an ageing population; this is the economic ‘pull’ that is the accompaniment to the ‘push’ of war, famine, disease, unemployment and poverty. Inevitably, the arrival of these dark-skinned others has disrupted the psychogeography of race as established by colonial and imperial racism, and its constitutive role in the formation of European nation-states (Lentin, 2004; Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991), which simultaneously draws attention to and calls into question the twin privileges of European universalism and whiteness.

The Europe-wide response, of course, has been articulated through a racialized register that, for a brief interlude, was muted but never absent, and has now broken out into the open on the continent and in these islands. Brexit is therefore merely a British-inflected variant of this pan-European or Western reflex to reassert white privilege through the discursive hierarchies of racism. These are the morbid symptoms that Gramsci identified as the inevitable accompaniment to periods of interregnum, when the old order is dying but a new one is yet to be born. Where this will lead is anyone’s guess, but the signs are not good.

On the other hand, if decolonization offers a frame within which to make sense of these large scale changes in economy, society and politics, as

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5 Dorling and Tomlinson (2019) have noted that several of the leaders and campaigners of both Leave campaigns were born and raised in distant outposts and former colonies of the erstwhile British empire. Many of them were not quite so appalled by the racism of the campaign, indeed some, like Arron Banks, were instrumental in racializing the referendum.

6 The phrase is, of course, taken from Dipesh Chakrabarty’s highly significant book, *Provincializing Europe* (2009).
well as providing at least a significant key to unlocking the mystery of the affective structure mobilizing Brexit, then it can also perhaps be used as a frame within which to re-consider the idea that Brexit is an unprecedented event. It is certainly unprecedented in the history of the European Union, but that is a very small and very recent frame. Shift the frame, enlarge it somewhat spatially and elongate it temporally, and one can see that decolonizing nations were themselves seceding from a customs union and free trade area, a kind of Brexit *avant la lettre*, also animated by affects structured by nationalism, claims for sovereignty and a desire for independence. The fates of many post-colonial nations, politically speaking, do not augur well for the consequences of Brexit. For one thing, what the painful history of decolonization tells us is that when the high hopes of independence are thwarted, as they invariably are, the result is a kind of bitter resentment and an increase in chauvinism and xenophobia, nativism and sectarianism, a rise in political and religious fanaticism.7

The rise of modern Islamism, for example, is a fiendishly complex story that is prone to gross oversimplification, but it is surely no coincidence that modern Islamism emerges, pluralistically, with the formation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt in 1928 partly as a result of the inevitable disillusionment that accompanied the illusory 'independence' granted to Egypt in 1922; from the withering of the promise of Pakistan as a Muslim nation-state; and also the CIA-induced overthrow of the democratically elected Mossadeq-led socialist government in Iran, and the subsequent consolidation of the Shah’s reactionary and brutally authoritarian regime by the US and its allies. Likewise, the emergence of Hindutva as a major political force in postcolonial India, or of the highly chauvinistic Sinhalese nationalism in Sri Lanka, or of Duterte’s authoritarian populism in the Philippines, cannot be distilled into a singular causal explanation, but in each case a potent factor is the succumbing of mythic plenitude, of wholeness, contained in the promise of ‘independence’ to the realities of dependency and interdependency, with their attendant compromises, adjustments and defeats. Unlike the real colonization and brutal exploitation of these former colonial territories (with the exception, of course, of Iran, which was never formally colonized), the reduction of Britain to the status of a colony may be, as I have argued, merely a phantasmagorical figure in the rhetorical assemblage of the Brexit imaginary, but so too are the sunny uplands promised by a soon-to-be-independent Britain setting forth to rule, once more, the waves.8 Brexit nationalism shares with many of these thwarted anti-colonial nationalisms not only an entangled history, but also a desire for something that will not, indeed perhaps cannot, come to pass. What will happen then? It may behove many in Britain to stop navel-gazing and take a look around at what has happened elsewhere in the last half-century: it is not a story that is alien to them. Indeed, to paraphrase one of the characters in Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* (1992), the trouble with the British is that most of their history happened overseas – but they will fully forgotten or, indeed, never even noticed it (Dorling & Tomlinson, 2019).

By way of conclusion, let me say explicitly that by offering these thoughts on Brexit and (de)colonization I do not mean to imply that Brexit can be reduced to this, as if it were a singular causal explanation. History simply does not work like that. I am aware that, as Robert Eaglestone and Fintan O’Toole (among many others) have noted, the Second World War plays perhaps as big if not bigger part in the Brexit imaginary as does Empire – but the empire, as Santanu Das and Michael Ondaatje have reminded us, was as deeply implicated in that war, and the one that preceded it, as Europe (Ondaatje, 1993; Das 2011, 2017, 2018). I am aware, too, that class is ever-present, but this does not mean that class trumps race, or that the logic of capital in the era of post-colonial globalization is more important than the logic of capital in the period of colonization: all these stories intersect, run into one another, form the series of local to global scales that bear down on this thing called Brexit and all that it means and can possibly mean. As I said at the beginning, Brexit involves a scattering, a kind of centrifugal force that runs in several directions all at once. It therefore presents a challenge to thought of a quite unusual, if not quite unprecedented, kind. It is not a challenge that can be met by the peculiar pleasures of parochialism.

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7 This would be presumably inserted into the recurring series of disappointments, thwarted dreams and fantasies and ‘betrayals’ that Fintan O’Toole has so acutely dissected in his discussion of Brexit in *Heroic Failure* (2019).

8 Note also the egregious recent comparison of Brexit Britons to African slaves rising up against their masters made by Ann Widdecombe, the erstwhile Tory MP and minister who now sits in the European Parliament as a Brexit Party MEP (see Scott, 2019). The word ‘chutzpah’ does not begin to cover it.
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CONSUMING BREXIT: ALIMENTARY DISCOURSES AND THE RACIAL POLITICS OF BREXIT
Muzna Rahman

Abstract
This article argues that Brexit has been reported and represented within the media and elsewhere through the language and imagery of food and consumption. Whether this is articulated via real anxieties about the effects that pulling out of the European single market will have on British foodways, or through the specific lexicon deployed when imagining the metaphors of Brexit, gastronomical readings of the various ‘texts’ of and around Brexit can provide productive ways of both understanding and contextualising the politics of the present moment. Specific national alimentary discourses surround and permeate the cultural and political context of Brexit, particularly with regard to race. This essay examines the intersections of national identity, whiteness and British food cultures in order to examine and interrogate some key images associated with Brexit, and considers the ways that colonial and neo-colonial narratives – in particular discourses around consumption and the alimentary self/body – are reanimated and re-deployed in representations of it.

Keywords: food, Brexit, colonialisim, neo-colonialism, nostalgia, nationalism

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CONSUMING BREXIT: ALIMENTARY DISCOURSES AND THE RACIAL POLITICS OF BREXIT

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Brexit has been approached in a multitude of ways. Globalisation, economic and political sovereignty, national identity, populism, immigration and asylum, nostalgia, working-class revolt, neo-imperial fantasies – there are a number of lenses through which Brexit might be viewed productively. However, as the event is incomplete, the best means of understanding it remains, at this point, obscured. In the midst of all these intersecting approaches and theorisations, a strong theme that has emerged in the nascent academic treatments of Brexit is that of imperial nostalgia. The socio-political directionality of Brexit is set against a matrix of affect that produces and is produced by a nostalgic national imaginary. This national imaginary is constituted of romantic mythologies about Britain’s past, the British empire and Britain’s participation in the Second World War. This nostalgia has been reported in the media and in scholarly work as a pernicious force that fuels ‘belligerent national autarchism as a psychological defiance to socioeconomic disparities’ (Shaw, 2018, p.23), especially in those known as the ‘left behind’ contingent who, it is proposed, used the referendum as a platform to express their general social and political disaffection.1 Robert Eaglestone rebrands Lauren Berlant’s ‘cruel optimism’ in order to account for this nostalgic mechanism, calling it ‘cruel nostalgia’ (Eaglestone, 2018, p.20), while Anshuman A. Mondal calls it ‘imperially nostalgic nationalism’ (Mondal, 2018, p.115). These critical descriptions differ in their specific focus and context but point to vital common ground. Brexit Britain’s national identity and politics are mediated via the mythologies of a very specific past, one with a very specific flavour. This article is interested in these debates and framings of Brexit, but also concerned with a more commonplace topic that, pervasive as it is, has remained overlooked so far in the burgeoning academic discourse surrounding Brexit: food. This work offers a reading of the alimentary: a semiotics of hunger, consumption and food that pervades popular and media texts about Brexit Britain.

The aesthetics of Brexit often have a distinctive alimentary expression, reflective of a particular ‘structure of feeling’ that emerges at the juncture of present political circumstances and a redeployment of an oft called-upon British nostalgic imaginary. This imaginary combines revisions and redeployments of collective memories of Britain’s past, focusing upon but not limited to its imperial past, and its heroic role as defender of sovereignty against fascist European power, as per popular discourses of the Second World War. By reading the somatic dimensions of our present moment (and this refers to both the national and extra-national bodies that are the actors involved in Brexit, and also the larger body politic that is stretched this way or that: remain or leave) we can consider our current events with greater care than a received popular national discourse that struggles with undigested nostalgias, that continually clog up the national arteries, threatening at any moment to co-opt the now into a forever-and-always-better ‘back then’.

In his chapter ‘Scratching the post-imperial itch’ in the timely Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses published in 2018, Mondal states that:

This imperially nostalgic nationalism is the only thing that working-class leavers in the post-industrial wastelands of the 21st-century Britain and the well-to-do leavers in the leafy Tory shires have in common, and it is rooted in what Raymond Williams calls the ‘structure of feeling’ produced by ideology, in this case the structure of feeling produced by imperial ideologies and imaginaries that have still not fully wound their way through the digestive tracts of the United Kingdom’s body politic.

(2018, p.114)

This imagery makes clear the suitability of alimentary metaphors when thinking through Brexit and its various nostalgic modalities. Something that is undigested in the body remains unabsorbed; it cannot be expelled, nor can it be assimilated. ‘The “undigested” elements of trauma may remain in our psyche like “foreign bodies” blocking our normal functioning directly or by taking up psychic space […] locked away in a corner of our mind’ (Barnett, 2002). It can wreak havoc in the system. However,
According to this metaphor something undigested is, above all, a distortion of time. It is an interruption in the correct functioning and processing of a historical temporal order, the result of which can be read as signifying a sort of repressed national trauma – pushing the past into the present, endlessly repeating and mutating into adaptive forms that may be co-opted by present needs. By coupling William’s concept of the ‘structures of feeling’ with this alimentary logic, this article tries to think through some of the material expressions of William’s idea. It is also useful for a consideration of how and why the affective economy of Brexit is articulated through alimentary discourses.

In ‘Formations of feelings, constellations of things’, Ben Highmore (2016) makes clear the connection between ‘structures of feeling’ and material cultural structures, paying attention to material objects that exist in historical processes of social production and reflection. Highmore explicates that attitudes and social patterns that affective structures contain and are constitutive of have material analogues, and these in turn translate into synesthetic social feelings.

By reminding ourselves that ‘feeling’ is related to a world of touch, […] I hope to push social and cultural history towards an attention to changes in the hum-drum material world of carpets and curries, beanbags and bean sprouts. My intuition and my gamble is that the felt world is often experienced in something like a synaesthetic mode where feelings of social flourishing and struggling take on particular flavours, sounds, colour-schemes and smells; where hope and nostalgia, melancholy and exuberance have sensual forms that are sometimes durable and sometimes fleeting.

(2016, p.145)

In light of this, it becomes possible to read the historically located materiality of our current context, and to bring emergent patterns of cultural discourse – as articulated via alimentary imagery – into focus. This essay attempts a specific look at food and the somatic in order to tease out the affective structures of Brexit, and considers their origins and historical trajectory. Food has become a hot-button topic in current discussions about Brexit. Anxieties about food price, quality and availability are expressed regularly in the media, and the issue represents the largest impact that may be felt by the greatest number of people, as food lies at the very mundane heart of everyday life, or ‘lifestyle’, as Highmore describes above. Food contains a potent symbolic power, especially when matters of identity are considered – particularly national identity. Food is a demarcating line that distinguishes a particular culture from another; food is about belonging, identity and it is crucially, about survival. ‘Food identifies who we are, where we came from, and what we want to be’ (Belasco, 2008, p.1). It is not surprising that what is clearly a crisis in national identification and belonging is playing out in the arena of food. What may happen to the foodscape of Britain post-Brexit (which is already precarious for a great many people) is anyone’s guess, but tentative predictions involve skyrocketing prices, a lowering of nutritional standards and an unavailability of certain vital imported goods. Although these very real concerns are literal and pressing, the ways in which Brexit has been discussed on the level of metaphor tells us more about just these contemporary concerns. The alimentary language of Brexit represents a historical lineage that obeys the logic of an imperial and post-imperial romanticism, and it may be possible to trace a brief history of this legacy if we look into the discursive language of Brexit itself.

In November 2018, the BBC created a series of light-hearted shorts for the Victoria Derbyshire Programme designed to explore Brexit. These took the form of a blind date, participants were minor celebrities from the UK and beyond, and each participant was located on opposite banks of the political spectrum. They were encouraged to engage in honest, informal discourse about Brexit that a viewing public could relate to, without descending into the litigious exchanges that the issue so often produced. One particular episode paired Swedish-turned-British-television-personality Ulrika Jonsson and American screenwriter Dustin Lance Black, also a resident in the UK. These shorts mimic existing reality television formats – recreating the premise of Channel 4’s popular ‘First Dates.’ Beyond the popularity of the format, however, the commensality signified by the shared dinner table can be read as a sobering reminder that whatever the results of the referendum, the changes that Brexit would usher into the national context would be shared amongst those in the UK, irrespective of which side of the table or political spectrum one sits. Meanwhile, the parameters of a meal-for-two provided a productive metaphor for the increasingly bipartisan politics that defined Brexit. However, even beyond this, the show alerts us to the fact that the politics of Brexit are mediated through the alimentary signifiers of its (often dyspeptic) aesthetic.

The televised blind date between Jonsson and Black makes it possible to examine the material dimensions of Brexit and consider how national feelings and structures of affect are communicated through popular, and historically specific, alimentary discourses. During the date, Jonsson represents the ‘Leave’ camp (intentionally represented by a Swedish national in order to avoid reinforcing any pre-
conceived tropes of what a Leave voter might look like in terms of UK demographics) and Black represents the ‘Remainer’ (undoubtedly a cosmopolitan elite, but like Jonsson an a-typical Remainer – American and somewhat removed from the British political sphere). Neither of these celebrity figures could actually vote in the referendum, and this further neutralizes any potential overzealous political rivalry that the date might produce. The setting is a typical British ‘café’ – the stage is generic and suitably placeless – so in effect the date occurs in a clearly recognizable British food culture, one that is meant to appear as a democratic platform where ‘common people’ might congregate to discuss political matters. The date is affable, and the mood is light. Pleasantries are exchanged and talk soon turns to the subject at hand. Jonsson states that she would have voted leave, if she could have voted, while Black states ‘cards on the table’ that he would have voted ‘Remain.’ Jonsson states: ‘I feel that the EU has become a massive, bloated machine that is taking big chunks out of, I don’t know, sovereignty and law …’ (Brexit Blind Dates: Ulrika Jonsson and Dustin Lance Black, 2018, 2:11). It is the language used by Jonsson that is of interest here, not the more obvious contradiction of a Swedish national advocating so strongly for Brexit. The sense of Europe that is conveyed here is an uncomfortable one. It is fat, overextended, ravenous and stretching beyond normal limits. Putting aside for one moment the obvious fascist associations made about Europe by Jonsson, this ravenous imagery is important for the purposes of this paper for two reasons. Firstly, it makes firm the link between an alimentary body politic and the politics and poetics of Brexit. The alimentary language deployed around the issue of Brexit has existed since the phrase was first coined, and recent fears about British food security has only amplified this. Secondly, Jonsson alerts audiences to a word that has appeared again and again in popular Brexit discourse – and that word is bloat. The word is both a somatic and an object image, its connotations are felt and seen, sometimes even smelt and tasted. All of these connotations are interesting not just because of their vivid sensory associations – they convey, in effect, how Brexit feels to a great many people - but also because contained within them is a number of temporal, spatial, historical and national intersections that can convey a lot about the politics of Brexit. I want to trace a brief – albeit rather imprecise – genealogy of these intersections, through a reading of a number of different media, mostly popular and online.

The Daily Express is a conservative media platform that regularly voices the opinion of the right and has traditionally been staunchly pro-Leave. The headlines that they tend to emphasize are sensationalist and espouse similar feelings as Jonsson expresses above. A headline from November 2017 reads: ‘Brexit Victory? EU finally admit bloated budget WILL collapse without huge UK contribution’ (Falvey) while a May 2018 headline decries: ‘EU at a CROSSROADS! Juncker makes desperate attempt to DEFEND bloated EU budget’ (Bosotti, 2018). Both of these headlines exemplify a somatic sense of Europe. The headlines use the word bloat again, and it is being deployed to emphasize a sense of greed and overabundance – namely because of what is being portrayed as the unfair contribution of British money. Again, the sense here is one of too-much-ness, of taking more than one’s share, and the result is a sort of unwieldy, grossly oversized Europe. An article from a month earlier, again, gives a sensory taste of Brexit: ‘Brexit escape! EU reveal citizens WILL be forced to maintain BLOATED agricultural budget’ (Pyne, 2018). Again, the implication here is that Europe is taking, unfairly, more than it should from the British economy. This evokes the language and imagery of the colonial state, except in this contemporary reversal, Europe is the colonial power and Britain the exploited colony.

The Sun follows suit with a very similar language. The headline to a February 2019 article reads: ‘Low-grade Labour nobodies bloated with self-importance still say they know better than 17m Brexit voters’ (The Sun, 2019). The Sun is similar to The Express in its political position, but here the bloated imagery is being associated with Labour politicians instead of the EU. This is useful in observations of the ways in which this kind of alimentary imagery can be deployed in different ways and in different contexts, whilst still maintaining (and somewhat reconfiguring) the same social connotations. Here, bloated in the sense of being superior is being used to describe a politically alienated, liberal government whose elitist attitudes run counter to democracy itself. The headline’s anti-elitist sentiment echoes a common explanation offered by the media and academic discourses: left-voting urban elites who are out of touch with the common person and their desires were blind-sighted by a retributive voter base who had one purpose alone – to make their vote felt.

However, this somatic language can also be deployed in completely contrary directions. The liberal platform The Guardian demonstrates how anxieties about bloating, burping and even bursting manifest across the political spectrum. Ann Perkins writes: ‘Westminster is so bloated on Brexit, it can’t even manage its bread and butter’ (2018). The smaller headline reads: ‘Debates aren’t happening. Potential new laws are stuck in the pipe. All because of a monstrous bit of legislation’ (2018). Dyspeptic connotations abound here, pipes are described as clogged once more and the body in question here is the British political process itself. Accusations of
pomposity are not limited to the ‘elite middle class,’ as the discomfort of dysfunctional bodily processes spills onto the political stage. ‘Bread and butter’ suggests that the political solutions to Brexit are manageable, but this metaphor intentionally contrasts with the complications described within the article itself. This headline demonstrates that this specific sense of the somatic – the bloated body – pervades the national politics of the moment and is multidirectional in its reach. The sense of a large, greedy, inefficient and overextended organic body pervades the national consciousness and grafts onto different entities and issues. It often refers to an unwieldy EU which, and in this iteration of the metaphor, the EU is described as an administratively gargantuan imperial power, from which Britain must break free. This idea is certainly reiterated by a strand of alarmist politics that overtly recasts Britain as victim in a colonial drama, as expressed here by David Blake, writing for pro-Brexit website Brieffings for Brexit. ‘The EU is incapable of agreeing solutions – and instead has plans to create a European Empire. The withdrawal agreement makes us a colony of an empire that will soon disintegrate’, writes Blake (2019). In this image, the EU is coloniser, and Britain is cast as the plucky colony seeking independence, reversing the decolonising narratives of Britain’s ex-colonies. This image evokes Britain’s independence, reversing the decolonising narratives of Britain’s ex-colonies. The withdrawal agreement makes us a colony of an empire that will soon disintegrate”, writes Blake (2019). In this image, the EU is coloniser, and Britain is cast as the plucky colony seeking independence, reversing the decolonising narratives of Britain’s ex-colonies. This image evokes Britain’s imperial past but reconfigures it to suit present needs. Critical readings that interrogate this particular rendering of the present suggest that its purpose is to reorient repressed national fears around falling prey to the same imperial domination that Britain historically perpetuated.

If fears of bloating and indigestion dominate commentary on Brexit, then the proffered solution is a much-needed diet. In this context, a diet implies a controlled reduction of the source of bloat until a lean body politic is achieved – whether the cuts have to be made to bureaucracy, the EU or Britain’s migrant populations. In Purity and Danger, Mary Douglas looks at the body as a system that reproduces the social body. The body is a microcosm for the body politic. ‘The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious’ ([1966] 2003, p.116). Douglas argues that anxieties about maintaining distinct bodily boundaries (for example, social and cultural rituals involving bodily fluids like excreta and saliva) is most evident in societies whose external boundaries are being threatened. These theorisations that link the body to the social may explain the proliferation of the alimentary rhetoric that underpins discussions of Brexit, and why abject images of digestion are produced again and again in this contemporary moment. The control of borders represents a means of combating the bloat of extraneous bodies, and the associations of those bodies and the excesses they represent. ‘The ideal here is of a body that is absolutely tight, contained, “bolted down,” firm (in other words, body that is protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under control’; writes Susan Bordo (1990, p.90) in her ‘Reading the slender body’. Although Bordo here is looking at the politics of dieting as is inflected by social constructions of gender, the associations between rationality, control and the ideal bodily shape within a neoliberal logic is made clear in her work, and this can also apply to Brexit. The excess bodies that Brexit seeks to neutralise are not female bodies, but they are feminised bodies, insofar as they are cast in the role of irrationality as is associated with the somatic. The popular imagery of Brexit’s conceives the threatening migrant figure as male in most instances, but they are gendered as feminine in so far as the brown or black figure is a creature of the uncontrollable urges and desires of the body. Their received narrative is one of desire – of what has been depleted or failed to materialise in their homeland (resources, civilisation and modernity), and also emotionality (usually anger) at what they perceive as the failure of the West to provide aid out of situations of their own making. Experts and critics often cry for and bemoan the lack of ‘rational debate’ in political discussions around Brexit. An axiomatic rational thought being propounded as the solution to the illogic of Brexit (which is to suggest that politics before Brexit was not animated by emotion, a somewhat dubious assertion) suggests that the excess bodies – who in this instance are migrant and often non-white bodies – contain dangerous and uncontrollable irrationalities. As rational thought is the antidote to emotional and somatic excess, it is no surprise that Brexit has been described as a failure in rational government and society (Bond, 2016).

The racialised excess and otherness described here presents a threat because it counters the apparent rationality of the state, and prefigures a dangerous and chaotic apocalypse for an authentic ‘British way of life’. The excess of the racial other is feminised, overly emotional, savage and chaotic – the antithesis of rationality. The excesses of the body are in turn associated with an orientalised subaltern figure, and the logic of Brexit seeks to expel these superfluous bodies – superfluous in their numbers and in the excesses of their somatic selves. This body is simply ‘too much’, retaining the orientalist connotations of the colonial native. The excesses of the exotic colonial/postcolonial body, or orientalised other, is expressed by the excesses ascribed to the homogeneous thousands of refugees and migrants attempting to enter Britain. Likened to insects, they represent an excess of hunger as well as matter, simultaneously
taking up space with their bodies of excess and consuming resources around them, becoming bigger and bigger, and threatening in large numbers. This of course links to the insect-like language often deployed around immigration into Britain. Former Prime Minister David Cameron used this incendiary language when speaking on the camps in Calais: ‘you have got a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean, seeking a better life, wanting to come to Britain because Britain has got jobs, it’s got a growing economy, it’s an incredible place to live’ (Elgot, 2016). Combining racism and self-promotion, Cameron subtly associates the migrants with an atypical greed, whilst firmly reasserting British sovereignty and shoring up its borders, deepening the divisions between us and them.

This configuration of excess, how it is ascribed, and to whom, is no new phenomenon. At the height of Britain’s empire, the colonies and their ‘excesses’ had long been established as a commodity that might be sampled abroad, but only introduced in a controlled manner into national borders. They signified an overwhelming, almost sublime excess.

Early European writings on India exhibit an ethnographic obsession with customs and traditions that seem taboo, evil, and demonic to the Englishman. India is constructed as a space of bodily, political, and cultural transgression, even though it was obviously rich, fertile, and beautiful. [...] Excess and transgression, therefore, become central themes in the discourse of discovery.

(Nayar, 2012, p.103)

The colonial encounter produced an orientalised colonial subject. These fantasies of excess are transferred to the body of the nativised colonial and then latterly the postcolonial subject, and these bodies became subject to scrutiny and control once on British soil. These anxieties around the excesses of racial others have been expressed in Britain at a number of different historical points, notably around the influx of Afro-Caribbean and South-Asian immigrants from Britain’s colonies after the Second World War. The control of these bodies in and across space (the discrimination these individuals experienced when attempting to find rented accommodation in post-war Britain upon arrival is an example of this) served as a means of limiting their uncontrollable, racialized otherness. Here too, the abjection of the racialized other was expressed by a distaste of their somatic subjectivity, and this is rooted in a colonial discourse that found firm footing in the postcolonial period. Again, this is expressed through food and eating.

In such understandings two stereotypes converged: that of the arrogant, privileged colonial, and that of the unhygienic South Asian peoples and food. The latter perception derived from long-standing notions of the bodily dangers facing Europeans who resided in the ‘tropics,’ the digestive problems spicy food was thought to cause, and unclean ‘natives’ who, nonetheless, might prove pleasurably servile and offer a visually appealing spectacle when dressed in ‘Oriental’ fashion.

(Buettner, 2008, p.874, citation omitted)

Although the context is different, this colonial example represents an antecedent of the brown immigrant as a distasteful and unhygienic source of indigestion that Vote Leave seeks to eject from the nation’s borders. The excesses of the colonies become associated with the colonial body, and although the historical context differs, the native body constructed by the colonial encounter remains a stable trope that the aesthetics of Brexit draw upon. It is clear why food that has become, in large part, a theatre for Brexit anxieties.

Nostalgic responses to Brexit are configured by appropriating the language of key moments in Britain’s history – including reinvigorating imperialist fantasies and imagining a ‘pre-immigration’ Britain. Another of these commonly deployed narratives is the plucky British nationalism of the Second World War. As mentioned above, the antidote to anxieties of racial and postcolonial excess that can be found in the British national consciousness is, put simply, a diet. Examples of this diet can be found in the fetishisation of a specific food culture that valorises lack and simplicity. It too has its roots in a well-worn and oft drawn-upon historical nostalgia – the affective romanticism of rationing during the Second World War, and the sense of national collective pride that this history produces. Rationing presented a paradoxical social context at the time – it was a deprivation that in many ways served to produce a patriotic national identity, and provides one of the most enduring memories of those elements of the Second World War that were fought on the home front. The efforts to ration effectively were organised at a national level by the British government. One now-famous 1941 initiative involved

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2 Although Vote Leave claimed it would police the movement of European (and so mostly white) bodies across UK borders, there was a general conflation of EU migrants with other migratory groups not covered by EU issues at all. This was accomplished by stoking fears about individuals that might enter the UK through European countries with more porous immigration policies than the UK – these unwelcome bodies were coded as uncivilised and imagined as brown and black bodies.
a government campaign to encourage citizens to grow their own food — the ‘Dig for Victory’ campaign. The programme was largely successful (an iconic memory of the time is the image of onions being grown on Buckingham palace’s grounds), and people had a simple diet for practical and patriotic reasons. Seeped in nationalistic discourse and combined with the intense feeling of national pride produce during the war, this mode of consumption became rooted in a fantasy of sovereignty. Britons not only grew their own food, but they also produced a very ‘British’ cuisine with the produce. This romanticised figure of the survivalist is reproduced in the aesthetics of Brexit.

In a Mail Online article, journalist Richard Littlejohn advocates for the revival of the spirit of resilience of the Second World War. ‘Let’s revive the bulldog spirit of World War II, defy the Brexit Jeremiahs and dig for victory as we prepare to leave the EU!’ (2019). The first line to the article reads ‘We’ve been here before. When Britain stood alone in World War II, the threat of hunger and starvation was a genuine possibility’. He goes on to explain in detail the ‘Dig for Victory’ campaign during the war, when the Ministry of Agriculture encouraged populations to grown their own produce due to food shortages caused by the war, and that the ‘population responded magnificently.’ However, Littlejohn is sure to let us know what he thinks of widespread panic about Brexit, particularly from the Remain camp. ‘During World War II, car factories switched to making fighter planes. Post-Brexit they could be converted to manufacture mayonnaise.’ The article sees anxieties about Brexit and food as nonsensical and mockingly describes it as a middle-class hysteria. Littlejohn associates these bourgeois preoccupations with a Europhilia that at best silly, but at worst un-patriotic. ‘To meet modern tastes, instead of planting potatoes and growing onions, public parks could be given over to the production of tricolour quinoa and couscous’ (Littlejohn, 2019). The fight against fascism found in Britain’s modern memory is reimagined here, but folded into the contemporary moment, and coupled with the appropriation of an anti-colonial rhetoric (where Britain is the colony and EU the imperialist aggressor), the resulting discourse is used to articulate fantasies of violence and survivalism. The fantasy of self-sufficiency is a key narrative of pro-Brexit discourses, and here again we see how the ideal of a lean, hardy British independent body is heralded as the solution to European fascist overtures. This is the very opposite of the bloated body and borders. The solution presented here is one of meagre resources but is controlled and efficient. It is Britain on a much-needed diet, and a return to former glory. It is not an overfed Britain, but one that has made much needed room within borders — free of unnecessary people and of unnecessary goods and services.

Survivalist practices have proliferated in the days since the referendum results. Termed ‘Brexit Preppers’, these UK residents are stockpiling foods likely to affected by, in particular, a no-deal outcome. These individual’s paranoias and practices are both mocked and heeded in equal measure, in the media and elsewhere. The tone of the reporting is often apocalyptic. The Sun, a right-wing publication that echoes the mocking tone of Littlejohn above, sees the panic as unnecessary hysteria. ‘In one Facebook group, the Rambo wannabes have discussed what they would do if looters wielding axes and shovels came for them. One of them suggested using specially-trained Akita dog, a large breed with huge jaws that can be deadly to guard their homes and attack intruders on demand’ (Wynarczyk, 2019). In contrast, The Guardian offers a practical how-to guide in response to food anxiety. ‘Then you need bulk and protein: canned and dried pulses (kidney beans, butter beans, black beans, chickpeas) and tinned fish (sardines and tuna). Add to that tinned olives, pickled capers and jarred peppers, and you’ve basically got a cheat’s Ottolenghi’ (Sawa, 2018). Although the two publications represent opposite sides of the political spectrum (and express contrasting views on the referendum), it is interesting to note that The Guardian, too, taps into a sort of survivalist fantasy of self-governance and independence. In an article titled ‘Why Brexit has driven thousands back to their allotments’, Lia Leendertz writes: ‘In times of crises, Britons have always turned to self-sufficiency, and this period of political turmoil is no exception’ (Leendertz, 2019). Despite occupying a very different political position than the Mail Online, and treating food security issues with much more seriousness, The Guardian — like the Mail — taps into a nationalistic history rooted in crisis and war, demonstrating the power of this national mythology, and its ability to structure the affective patterns in the British population with regard to national selfhood and recognition.

Following in the same vein of self-sufficiency, in January 2018, pro-Brexit campaigners delivered a hamper of British-produced food to Brussels. More a political stunt than a genuine attempt at persuasion, campaigners claimed the basket was meant to help Michael Barnier, the chief EU negotiator, ‘fully grasp the powerful position Britain occupies globally’ (Merrick, 2018). The basket contained: Cheddar cheese, Marmite, PG Tips Tea, English wine, a jar of orange marmalade, a bottle of Hendrick’s gin, Fortnum and Mason Piccalilli, a biography of Winston Churchill and the complete works of Shakespeare. The internet was quick to point out, however, that many of the products were not the best choice for the Brexiteer’s purpose. The Anglo-Dutch company
Unilever owns Marmite and PG Tips, and has been a vocal critic of Brexit. Hendrick’s Gin producer has moved its base to Ireland, and Fortnum and Mason has also been critical of Brexit, claiming that it has damaged Britain’s brand. Other products inside the basket are also similarly problematic, hindering instead of helping the pro-Brexit cause. The basket’s contents barely conceal a sort of globalized corporate logic but are deployed in a way that seemingly maintains Britain’s distinct national boundaries. This speaks to the power of national identity – rather than national borders, and how it can be manipulated in a neo-liberal construction of authenticity. National identity is utilized by multinational corporations in order to structure a matrix of desirability that is bound up with romanticized notions of local produce, and it does so by dealing with a rather antiquated system of classification that belongs largely now to a past order, but whose romantic deployment still commands some power over national consumer bases.

The aesthetics of the basket can tell us as much about the national discourses of Brexit as the contents can. The picnic basket (as well as the traditional picnic foods inside the basket) conjure a particular vision of British nationalism that associates itself with the English countryside, an imaginative space that is characterized by an ethnic purity and an elite, legitimized possession of the land. The aesthetics and cultural codes around picnicking itself can provide telling clues about the historic version of nationalism that is being summoned by the basket. Picnicking really came into its own during the Victorian era and appears in the literature of that period. Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope and Jane Austen found ways of introducing this form of social event into their writing (Davidson, 2014, p.621). The usually professional kitchen. The title of the show also betrays a cohesive British food culture, and concurrently, a movement specific to the identity-finding process, Englishness tends to be defined by what it is not – Celtic, European, Catholic and then later, in contrast to the urban world, which is associated with the breakup of community ties, and the invasion of ethnic and national others in particular after the Second World War and the moment of decolonisation. As an instrument for legitimizing membership of a specific nation, representations of the English countryside rely on the symbolic staging of a socially pacified and ethnically pure place, that is a place without class conflict and without non-white populations. Rural scenery is mobilized as a symbol of English national identity; like whiteness or Anglo-Saxon character, they are part of the construction of a legitimate order. Thus, the predominant rural image is one of a place that is white, pacified and unchanging. This unchanging image is, however, subject to social manipulation and is part of a process of reproduction and reinvention, and its supposed timeliness is called up once more in the Brexit basket, as a strategy of evoking a pure, uncontaminated England that is eternal, and essential in its national identity.

The English rural imaginary is mobilized in a number of contemporary popular media and cultural sites that intersect with the alimentary. One example of this is the former BBC and current Channel 4 reality television show *The Great British Bake Off* (Great British Bake Off, 2020). This popular show is currently on its ninth series. The contest format follows individual non-professional cooks and bakers as they compete to win the series and the crown of best baker. The show has proven widely accessible across a range of ages and socio-economic groups. Its migration from BBC to the self-consciously younger and hipper Channel 4 attests to its durability as a concept. The setting of the show is the pristine English countryside, the weather is always perfectly sunny, and the cooking itself takes place in a temporary, large, white marquee This is a conscious departure from a number of other cooking reality television shows that take place exclusively in the sanitary confines of a professional kitchen. The title of the show also betrays its specific brand of nation-building – one that uses the codes of food and cooking in order to formulate a cohesive British food culture, and concurrently, a particular vision of Britain. The show has chosen an obvious signifier – the countryside – as the foundation upon which to build a coherent national alimentary discourse. The show is set in the idyllic grounds of a
stately home, Welford Park in Newbury. The picnic format is also utilized, with the finale of the show incorporating a kind of outdoor high-tea set-up, where friends and family of the bakers are invited to come, watch and cheer on their favourites. The show’s class politics is – consciously or not – encoded around certain notions of twee and/or posh England, seemingly as harmless as the elaborate cupcakes baked by contestants.

The rural imaginary is fundamentally structured – both its logic and its aesthetics – by lack, by an abundance of nothingness. The green rolling hills of the idyllic British countryside is a space that is imagined as unoccupied. It is not to be trespassed upon, nor is it to be developed, if it is to retain the essential Britishness contained within it. It also stands in opposition to the bloated imagery that constitutes the anxieties of Brexiteers, and directly validates the populist narrative that claims – incorrectly – that the UK is full (Farage, 2015) – there is no more space, for European immigrants, or for those refugee swarms that would seek to enter through the free movement facilitated by EU membership. Perhaps it is less a question of lack of space that is being articulated here, but rather an instance that the British countryside remains empty, that the emptiness is somehow essential to some basic quality of Britishness. Here, again, postcolonial anxieties about immigration and invasion are playing out in the language and aesthetics of fullness and satiety.

Moreover, the Brexit basket reminds us that with both bodies and foods – there are good and bad types. The basket contains a sample of ‘good’ foods, foods associated with a romanticized vision of English nationalism, re-packaged as it is here within an idyllic image of the English countryside. These foods (or rather, the signified of the foods because obviously none of the items are ‘authentically’ British) are constructed as nourishing and welcome both inside the authentic British body and within Britain’s national borders. Similarly, bad foods (and the associated ‘bad bodies’) are contaminants that should be hastily ejected from the body politic, to return to a true and pure state of strong, masculine and lean health; a health that is also represented by the firm-but-fair politics associated with Churchill and a kind of food culture produced by the Second World War, fetishizing rationing and the ability to survive on little variety. The glorification of self-reliance – keeping calm and carrying on – in the face of adversity in order to defeat an ultimate evil, is also being summoned by the basket. Foreign foods are seen as luxuries and superfluous. This superfluity is then siphoned off onto not only the bodies of immigrants who contaminate the national boundaries with their exotic smells and unclean kitchens, but also from an impotent, overfed contemporary national identity that has grown fat and weak from an overabundance of food – the wrong type of food. By tapping into a romanticized version of the past, one that encapsulates the moment of decolonization and victory over the Nazis, a masculine, robust and lean image of Britain is co-opted into the contemporary moment. The breaking up of empire is being mourned in the basket, while it simultaneously deploys an eternal and romantic vision of Britain.

The alimentary aesthetics of Brexit are rooted in a nationalistic nostalgia that can be found in a number of different aspects of British culture and rooted deep within its contemporary popular consciousness. This aesthetic is expressed in a number of popular media forms, demonstrating the durability of alimentary metaphors in reference to the national context. These metaphors have their roots in a colonial and postcolonial discourse that is reanimated for contemporary socio-political purposes. This article has traced a discursive pathway through these histories, highlighting the material qualities of Brexit – that is, what does Brexit taste and feel like – exploring the ways in which affective structures of feeling are entangled with a material sense of space and satiety. These social feelings or patterns, provide a useful jumping-off point for an investigation into the origin of these alimentary metaphors and signs, but can also give us an indication of how Brexit might be productively reframed through this alimentary language. Although the alimentary may seem like an innocuous aspect of the myriad Brexit narratives that exist, in actuality it articulates a number of pernicious narratives about Britain, race and its imperial past.
Bibliography


AUTUMN, WINTER, NEVER SPRING: BREXIT SEASON
Eleanor Byrne

Abstract
This essay discusses the depiction of the post-Brexit British landscape in the first three novels in Ali Smith’s season-themed State of the Nation quartet, Autumn (2016), Winter (2017) and Spring (2018). It engages with contemporary ecocritical and feminist conceptualisations of climate change, and debates about the relationship between ecological crisis and the current political landscape to consider the ways in which these subjects are embedded in Smith’s trilogy named for the seasons. It reflects on the potential for the novel form to attempt to bear witness to the present political moment and argues that Smith’s fragmented and polyvocal texts represent an ethical and politically engaged approach to the contemporary crisis, where the novel can seek to enable or rehearse dialogues between groups whose positions are entrenched and at an impasse. It discusses the ways in which the novels dramatise the necessary ways out of seemingly irreconcilable differences through a celebration of empathy, ecological awareness and hospitality.

Keywords: Brexit, queer hospitality, refugees, environment

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Banner image: Rita Duffy, Soften the Border, 2017 (detail). Recycled fabrics, installation on the Belcoo, Blacklion Bridge - Co. Fermanagh / Co. Cavan border, 2.5 x 30m. Image credit: Copyright of the artist, Rita Duffy. Photo credit: Stanislav Nikolov
AUTUMN, WINTER, NEVER SPRING: BREXIT SEASON

Eleanor Byrne, Manchester Metropolitan University

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.

Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 1859

This article will explore the ways in which the first three novels in Ali Smith’s season-themed state-of-the-nation quartet, *Autumn* (2016), *Winter* (2017) and *Spring* (2018), have attempted to articulate in a series of contemporaneous narratives, the experience and meaning of events following the Brexit referendum result in June 2016 up to the present. Smith devotes her attention to each of the seasons in her three published novels of the sequence, weaving multiple literary and cultural sources that have evoked, scripted and eulogized each season from both canonical and marginal literary archives in the English language. She also attends to the ways in which the political and cultural impact of Brexit has been experienced as a sudden shocking ‘event’ – the referendum result but also where ‘hostile environments’ instituted by Theresa May before the Brexit vote, have created a public sphere gorged on populist ethno-nationalist and far right discourses, producing an extended terrible contradiction of interminable frenzy/stasis/repetition that is ‘Brexit Season’. It will explore the ways in which Smith’s novels attempt to address the paradox of the Brexit referendum result, experienced both as a singular and unanticipated event, and as an ‘old new story’, a spectral revenance.

I Brexit season

In Smith’s first novel of the sequence, *Autumn*, her heroine Elisabeth registers the exponentially increasing hostile environment of the post-referendum vote as a new ‘climate’, a change in the terms of exchange and debate in the public sphere. Whilst visiting her dying friend Daniel in his care home, she recalls a fraught discussion that morning on the radio, where both sides of the debate harangues the other. ‘It is the end of dialogue. She tries to think when exactly it changed how long it’s been like this without her noticing’ (2016a, p.112), and later on in the narrative she recoils from a discussion on BBC radio:

> You lot are on the run and we’re coming after you, a right-wing spokesman had shouted at a female MP on a panel on Radio 4 earlier that same Saturday. The chair of the panel didn’t berate, or comment on, or even acknowledge the threat the man had just made. […] Elisabeth had been listening to the programme in the bath. She’d switched the radio off after it and wondered if she’d be able to listen to Radio 4 in any innocence ever again. Her ears had undergone a sea-change. Or the world had.

(pp.197–8, italics in original)

In *Winter*, early on in the novel Charlotte, the disaffected girlfriend of Art, a nature blogger, rages at a seasonal ‘naturalcultural’ shift in Britain, in the post-referendum present.

> When pre-planned theatre is replacing politics, she said, and we’re propelled into shock mode, trained to wait for whatever the next shock will be, served up shock on a 24 hour newsfeed like we’re infants living from nipple to sleep –

[…]

> – from shock to shock and chaos to chaos like its meant to be nourishment, she said.

[…]

[…] Never mind literal climate change, there’s been a whole seasonal shift. It’s like walking in a blizzard all the time just trying to get to what’s really happening beyond the noise and hype.

(2017a, p.57)

The shocking emergence of a ‘Brexit Season’ as depicted in Smith’s fiction, would be understood as a kind of suspension of seasonality itself, as a marker of predictable change and cyclical movement, where repeated calls to action, cross-party talks, deadlines and final ultimatums have consistently resulted in stasis, deferral and a sense of déjà-vu, with the political ramifications of the referendum result extending as an ongoing (non)event since 23 June 2016, past many of its supposed hard deadlines. This dawning realisation of the ways in which the political and cultural ramifications of Brexit might represent an epochal change has become increasingly prevalent in US and UK journalistic assessments, depicting Brexit as the ‘never-ending story’, that cannot be over, no matter what the outcome of any vote or agreement. Brexit is understood here as a dystopic, never-ending ‘season’ of disorientation, disconnection and division: of the UK from the EU, of different factions from inclusive ideas of nation and cosmopolitanism, of families and
communities subjected to a continuous bombardment of factional fantasies and international misinformation by global media. This political and cultural period can be usefully understood as an impasse, or more properly an interregnum, in Antonio Gramsci’s sense (1971, p.276). This captures the sense of an uncertain political moment, along with its morbid symptoms, which ultimately confounds the separation of seasons, weather, climate or environment from the political and cultural activities of humans, positing a ‘natural-cultural’ environment in which the securities associated with seasonal cycle have been lost, replaced by the new ‘now’ of post- (and pre-)referendum hostile ‘climates’, in which as Lindsay Stonebridge notes, ‘the moral obscenities continue to mount up’ (2018, p.10).

In her reading of Autumn in Brexit and Literature, Petra Rau wonders ‘whether this climate was best viewed in hindsight, was the novel up to it? If the pace of political developments exhausted commentariat and electorate alike, how on earth could fiction keep step with, let alone digest the contemporary?’ (2018, p.31). She alights on a phrase from author Claire Messud which captures the sense of this moment as a tangible experience of a ‘storm’: ‘the pace of madness seems so intense. We are all like Linus and Snoopy in front of the TV with our hair blowing back’ (in Adams, 2017). This image echoes Elisabeth’s comments about listening to the radio, as a kind of assault on the senses, where open aggression, intimidation and lies pass as information and news. As an EU citizen teaching in the UK, Rau comments on her response to the referendum result and her reading of Autumn:

I was radically disoriented by the new ‘now’ and impending ‘soon’. Autumn did little to relieve this peculiar feeling of unmoored reality. Certainly my students were still reeling from the referendum result, although in a different way. They felt increasingly determined by elders who could not be trusted with their future while at the same time lumbered with mountains of debt and ever decreasing prospects. The election of Donald Trump in November appeared to continue a surreal trajectory of deeply implausible political nightmares.

(2018, p.32)

In Rau’s description, the unfolding future seems impossible, unreal, and the referendum result deeply connected to the rise of the far right globally. Not a single event, but a trajectory of many piling up. We might fruitfully rephrase Rau’s questioning of the possibility for the novel of narrating the present moment, after Jacques Derrida, as questioning if ‘saying the event’ is possible. He comments:

a certain impossibility of saying the event or a certain impossible possibility of saying the event, forces us to rethink not only what ‘saying’ or what ‘event’ means, but what possible means in the history of philosophy. […]

[…] Saying the event is also what happens, trying to say what is presently, what comes to pass presently, saying what is, what happens, what occurs […].

(2007, p.445, italics in original)

Derrida warns that ‘saying the event’ is always somewhat problematic because the structure of ‘saying’ is such that it comes after and secondly it always misses the singularity of the event. ‘One of the characteristics of the event is that […] not only does it disrupt the ordinary course of history, but it is also absolutely singular’ (p.446). There is only ever ‘event-making’ – which is to say that accounting for an event even in as close to real time as possible, as it unfolds, means to interpret, select, filter. A further difficulty as Derrida sees it, is that an event can only come to pass if it is impossible. ‘[T]he coming of the other overwhelms me […] I insist in the verticality of this coming, because surprise can only come from on high. […] Horizontally,’ ‘there is a horizon of expectation’ (p.451). A predicted event is not actually an event, all events are ‘impossible possibles’ that could not be seen before they happened. However, Derrida also argues, counterintuitively, that ‘the coming of the inaugural event – can only be greeted as a return, a coming back, a spectral revenance’ (p.452). In the context of a cultural ‘saying’ of Brexit this is true of responses on both sides of the political divide around the result – in its most simplified form, it either inaugurates a return of Blitz spirit without the bombs and should be understood as a return to a strong British national identity and a replaying of the victories of the Second World War or, it is a return of fascism and xenophobic nationalism, in a dispersed and populist mode and an assault on British institutions notably the NHS.

This tension between repetition and singularity is also captured in Smith’s reference to Dickens’s A Tale of Two Cities in the opening lines of Autumn: ‘It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times’ (2016a, p.3, emphasis in original); and later in a more sustained gesture to Dickens’s original text: ‘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’ (p.59). A Tale of Two Cities, Dickens’s novel about the French Revolution was, as Sally Ledger notes, one of many efforts by British writers to process and recover from the revolution’s impact on British culture.
in the nineteenth century, where the revolution acted as a generator of cultural trauma and compulsive retelling (2009). ‘The English mob of 1780 is, as is ever the case in Dickens’s historical novels, very much a reflection on the volatility of contemporary British culture: he never regarded the 1850s with the equanimity of subsequent historians’ (2009, p.78). Ledger’s reading here suggests that Dickens’ revisiting of the events of the revolution across the channel are not from a place of geographical and historical safety but, instead, from an apprehension of the volatile political present. For Autumn, Dickens’ earlier novel operates as a point of orientation for Smith’s engagement with another national political turmoil in the present, and a lesson in the ways that past events replay and return in the imaginary lives of the present. Dickens’ presence is everywhere in the seasonal sequence, Winter operates around the structure of A Christmas Carol, as Sophia is haunted at midnight by different incarnations of a floating ghostlike head, in an attempt to prick the conscience of her modern-day Scrooge, and in Spring Smith’s blistering denunciation of immigration detention centres resurrects all of his great prison writing, both fiction such as Little Dorrit (1855–7) and his accounts of Newgate Prison in London and of the evils of solitary confinement in Eastern State Penitentiary outside Philadelphia (1836, 1842).

Smith’s novels illuminate the present crisis with a fresh contemporaneity whilst also trying to slow the present down and make this relation between the present crisis and a longer British and European history more complex, nuanced and coloured by a wider range of antecedents, to ask what has returned, and what continuities and patterns can be excavated in the archives of history, literature and everyday culture. Seasonality addresses the ‘event’ in the present, and in its insistence on a cycle embraces repetition and continuity. Smith comments in an interview that she had been thinking about writing a series of seasonal books for about twenty years. In particular, she speaks of her fascination with time and narrative and her desire to explore ‘how closely to contemporaneity a finished book might be in the world, and yet how it could also be, all through, very much about stratified, cyclic time’ (Smith & Anderson, 2016). Her interest was to explore a tension between consecutive and cyclical models of the human experience of time: ‘we’re time-containers, we hold all our diachrony, our pasts and our futures […] in every one of our consecutive moments/ minutes/days/years, and I wonder if our real energy, our real history, is cyclic in continuance and at core, rather than consecutive’ (Smith & Anderson, 2016). This is reflected in the capacious nature of each of the novels, that combine an environmental documenting of a season moving through its different stages, whilst the narrative ranges widely through time, season and location, incorporating memory and celebrating seasonal repetition as well as the promise of the future.

Although often now referred to as the first post-Brexit novel, Autumn was not initially envisaged as such, but was being written as the events leading to the referendum unfolded. Smith had laughingly discussed the possibility of an EU referendum on New Year’s Eve, on the cusp of 2016, with a Scottish friend, as highly unlikely: ‘we laughed, because we knew that referendums take whole lives to happen. Scotland had been thrumming with an astonishing level of analysis and vitality for years leading to the [Scottish independence referendum] in 2014’ (in Armitstead, 2019). That Smith could adapt the manuscript to write in the earliest post-referendum moment reflects her writing style: deploying a collage and montage effect, where a number of narrative strands interweave with one another, each claiming equal weight, voicing different characters at different points in their lives. Her non-linear approach to time enables her to move backwards and forward across different time frames in her characters’ memories and their present situations, the narrative also sometimes jumps spatially to different incidents happening simultaneously, reflecting her fascination with the narrative challenge of depicting events not distanced by time but by space. She comments: ‘the concept was always to do what the Victorian novelists did at a time when the novel was meant to be new. Dickens published as he was writing Oliver Twist. He was still making his mind up about the story halfway through. That’s why it’s called the novel – what it can do, what it’s for, what it does’ (in Armitstead, 2019). It also reflects her thematic preoccupations: ‘I found, as Brexit started to happen round us all, that what I’d been writing was already about divisions and borders and identities and, yes, slightly more historic parliamentary lies’ (Smith & Anderson, 2016). For Smith, the writing of Spring also presented another level of challenge in terms of her ambitions of writing simultaneously with events, as the two ‘failed dates’ for Britain leaving the EU were 29 March and 12 April 2019. The speed at which entrenched positions and expectations in British politics have unravelled in the face of continued deadlock, with a ‘final deadline’ from the EU as 31 October 2019 followed by a December general election, has created such radical unpredictability as to deter any contemporary novelist from writing the present. If Brexit had happened on Halloween, it would surely have been the most fitting date for an event that threatens to perpetually haunt the next generations for decades to come and one whose ghoulish presence can be traced back to the
Second World War, and then back to imperialist and colonialist versions of national identity from centuries earlier in British history.

Smith’s final version of Autumn reflects her experience of writing as events happened, causing her to request a month’s extension from her publisher so that she could fully address the historical events overtaking her writing. For some readers Winter might be seen to dramatise the immediate fallout of the Brexit result more comprehensively, where Autumn registers a country in shock, struggling to recognise its multiple selves. Winter, with its central plot of a split family, and the difficulty of healing its longstanding political rifts and estrangements, captures a division at the heart of the nation and traces some of its histories as felt in the lives of sisters Iris and Sophia. For the third novel in the sequence, Spring, instead of tying herself to specific events, Smith bears witness to an intensely hostile environment, voicing the hate speech and violent headlines of a manic anthropomorphised social media, whose vitriol intrudes into sections of the narrative. It focuses on the fate of the refugee and migrant in these conditions, through its creation of the miraculous character of Florence, in a narrative that insistently pushes back against a Europe-wide political abdication of responsibility for others, and a media onslaught of dehumanising and exterminatory discourses. Spring conjures Florence, daughter of a refugee on the run from a detention centre, who has magical powers that let her walk into locked spaces, get on trains without a ticket and convince those in power to help her. She is a miraculous Marina, referencing Shakespeare’s Pericles, but something of a ‘Jedi’ too, who can coax authorities to open doors and one can imagine her coining the famous Star Wars line: ‘These are not the droids you are looking for’ (1977). Like the heroes of the famous ‘A New Hope’ episode, she emerges as a miracle out of hopelessness. Her sheer unbelievability does not stop her being an almost perfect rendering of Zeitgeist writing by Smith, who manages to imagine eco-protester Greta Thunberg herself to specific events, Smith bears witness to an intense hostility, the extended cultural winter spreading its tentacles globally, and bears witness to the hidden world of the migrant and refugee detainee centre, showing its ‘lessons’ to those who administer and accept it; how the material structure creates behaviours and bodily effects, a culture and a climate (2018). As she voices this hidden world, Smith seeks narrative strategies that can speak differently, imbue an English novel with radical hospitality: hopeful in the face of hopelessness.

II Hospitality

In the face of a rising public discourse of hostility to the ‘Other’ and the increasing evidence of xenophobic ethnonationalism, this article argues that a radical hospitality is at work in Smith’s project, both as theme in all three novels, and in terms of form, which means that even as a number of characters appear deeply locked into a trajectory of their own demise, their interiority and isolation is broken open by an insistence on connection and care. As the novels seek to parse current events, they insist on dialogue as a source of understanding and learning: dialogue between estranged family members, in the case of Sophia and Iris in Winter, between generations in the case of Daniel and Elisabeth in Autumn, host and stranger between Lux and Sophia in Winter, guard and prisoner between Brittany and Florence in Spring.

The sequence of novels shares openings, each introducing a confusing landscape where a single character is deep in an interior monologue or hallucination that confuses the real with imagined. Alone with their dreams, their altered perceptions and visions disorient and require the reader to seek ways of interpreting each narrative, sharing the confusion of the characters. In Autumn, Daniel, a dying man, is dreaming, swimming through memories of his life making associations between disparate objects and thoughts. In Winter, Sophia is struggling to distinguish between real and imagined experience; living alone and deteriorating, she begins to hallucinate a disembodied head that follows her from room to room. In Spring, Richard, a film director, grief-stricken following the death of a beloved friend, has walked out of his life, thrown his phone in a bin and is contemplating suicide.
on a railway platform in Scotland whilst hallucinating a conversation with an imagined version of his estranged daughter. All three characters are in crisis and in extreme states of mental distress, the texts hold or ‘host’ them and provide routes out of their current suffering.

One way that Smith does this, in all three novels, involves the insistence on modes of kinship beyond blood relations and normative nuclear families, as well as a radical openness to strangers, all held within an exploration of the importance of storying, memory and forgetfulness to ethical and meaningful models of identity, community and society. Her seasonal quartet shares with her other works a sense of the novel as performing a kind of radical ‘queer’ hosting of guest, stranger, other, opponent or outcast, focusing on forms of ‘forgotten kinship’ and relations that were hidden or unknown, lost family members, connections never understood. This is enacted formally as each novel hosts its characters, in apparent defiance of Derrida’s discussion of the limits of hospitality, unconditionally. Smith pushes at the limits of hospitality through a radical overturning of the conventionally understood guest-and-host dynamic, where the migrant or outsider figure in each novel, who might be constructed as a guest/intruder/alien by the establishment, Daniel (Autumn), Lux (Winter) and Florence (Spring), each host and provide refuge to the other more established characters in the novels, whose claims to national belonging are not under question by the state as their own might be. The novels’ mix of free indirect discourse and extended dialogues where characters attempt to talk and struggle to persuade each other of their world views, whilst Smith insists on threads that connect the most dispersed of lives. Despite entrenched positions and hardening hearts between neighbours, family members and lovers, Smith insists on these dialogues, on placing conflicting positions adjacent to one another in order to see the bigger picture. Smith’s writing is a plea for an understanding of all truths as partial and positional; in Autumn Elisabeth receives a lesson on semiotics from Daniel, she says: ‘There is no point in making up a world, […] when there’s already a real world. There’s just the world, and there’s the truth about the world’, to which he replies: ‘You mean, there’s the truth, and there’s the made-up version of it that we get told about the world’ (2016a, p.119).

Like her earlier writing Smith’s seasonal novels are marked by a radical polyvocality, where multiple narrative voices and modes proliferate in a sophisticated juxtaposition of ekphrasis, the retelling of film plots, popular song, social media, historical fragments, newspaper and television snippets, whilst she holds on to two or three key characters and a story. This also speaks to her own sense of the arts as themselves a kind of family:

‘all the arts are family, related, and I tend to think at their best when they meet up or cross over into each other […].

[...]

And because the novel is, like the language that goes to make it, naturally rhythmic, it can sing anything and everything from the three-minutes-of-happiness pop song to the opera cycle, or both at once, and because every story tells a picture and every word paints a thousand of them, and because the novel’s footwork, its choreography with its partner in the dance, the reader, is why and how it moves us, there are the novels, […].’

(Smith, 2017b).

As Smith manages these many strands, they move between dispersal and a sense of their breaking down into unrelated parts, to at other moments, something approaching symphony where Smith conducts with a light touch or sometimes intervenes more heavily, lumbering into the narrative to drive it in a particular direction. This narrative openness, which involves calling up of old stories, entering and rummaging through the archive, is radically democratic, conjuring Shakespeare and Dickens, alongside Charlie Chaplin and Elvis Presley and Christine Keeler, also carefully ethical and political, involving the retrieval and inclusion of female artists, Pauline Boty, Barbara Hepworth and Tacita Dean in Autumn, Winter and Spring respectively. Whilst each artist is very different, their aesthetic colours events in each of the novels they occupy, producing a continuity of form across the novels.

Just as received notions of host and guest are undone, so the novels also each implicitly question simplistic notions of place as it might be used to prop up discourses of Britishness, or its reduction to Englishness. In Autumn, Daniel embodies a cosmopolitan identity, his memories point to how much of British history and culture is to be found in continental Europe. In Winter, Sophia and Iris celebrate Christmas in their family home in Cornwall, a region with its own national claims for independence and its own language, the house’s name, Chei Bres, is Cornish. When Sophia’s son, Art, visits with his pretend girlfriend, Lux, a Croatian refugee arrived in the UK via Canada, she asks what it means, he replies: ‘No idea’, somewhat ironically as the name means ‘House of the Mind’ (2017a, p.80). Cornish (Kernewek) is a Celtic language sharing some mutual intelligibility with Breton, and some common roots with Welsh, pointing to national histories that exceed and...
III Weathering

Weather is the totality of our environments – natural cultural, all the way down. 

(Keim, 2018, p.81)

In any weather conversation, one of you is going to mention global warming at some point. [...] The failure of the normal rhetorical routine, the [...] remnants of shattered conversation lying around like broken hammers [...], is a symptom of a much larger and deeper ontological shift in human awareness.

(Morton, 2013, p.85)

Elisabeth was crying [...]. Crying came out of her like weather.

(Ali Smith, 2016a, p.210)

Weather is everywhere in Smith’s seasonal novels, not only in reference to the changing weather associated with seasons, but, as one might expect, it is an uncanny and anxious preoccupation with weather, when writing about seasons during an era when the popular understanding is transforming around the climate as in crisis. Smith’s work has been written alongside environmental protesters calling for declarations of climate emergency on a global level, as much as it has been a reflection of the bleak political ‘climate’ globally. One of the ways in which Smith’s novels seek to go beyond a national agenda is through attention to the imbrication of the local event, or events, within a global context, to think beyond the event as such, as it is experienced in the political sphere, but as part of multiple inter/intra-actions.

As Namara Smith notes: ‘One of Autumn’s recurring themes is our willed blindness to the anomalies that threaten our sense of order. Signs of ecological disturbance are everywhere, but [...] Smith’s [...] characters acknowledge these deviations from the norm only in passing and without admitting to their larger significance’ (2017). In Autumn, Elisabeth’s mother takes on this role. She has recently moved to a small coastal village and has found an older map of the local area which she sticks on her wall, outlining in red with a marker pen, the new coastline, over the top of the printed one, indicating how much land has been lost to the sea. There is no discussion of melting glaciers or rising sea levels, just a kind of mute witnessing, a marking of change and loss. Later her mother reminisces about watching outdoor cinema with Daniel in his back garden, commenting ‘[t]hat was back in the years when we still had summers. When we still had seasons, not just the monoseason we have now’ (2016a, p.215).

However, in Winter there is a shift in Smith’s approach. What was a troubling background to the previous novel becomes foregrounded. But as this movement happens a new uncanny intimacy occurs that collapses the distinction between the two. The novel opens with something strange coming into view, a distant speck in the eye that gradually becomes a disembodied floating head in Sophia’s line of vision. Sophia first notices something in the corner of her vision and searches Google, ‘she types in blue green dot in eye then, to be more precise, blue green dot at side of vision getting bigger. [...] Then she googles, seeing a little green-blue sphere off to the side of my vision’ (2017a, p.12–13, italics in original). In Smith’s Winter, an ecological Christmas Carol plays itself out, earth appears as a ghost, a blue green dot, that transforms into a child’s face and then a kind of ‘green man’ that silently implores Sophia during midnight visits. This ‘earth haunting’ offers a narrative place and form for the world to make its presence felt. For Timothy Morton, one of the effects of this perceptual shift caused by increasing anxieties about global warming is an uncanny awareness of climate change as a ‘hyperobject’ – something so large and dispersed that it
is too big to grasp, only ever partially visible. It changes human encounters with and understandings of nature:

When massive entities such as the human species and global warming become thinkable, they grow near. They are so massively distributed that we can’t directly grasp them empirically. We vaguely sense them out of the corner of our eye while seeing the data in the centre of our vision. These ‘hyperobjects’ remind us that the local is in fact the uncanny.

(2015, p.113, italics in original)

Sophia’s ‘vision’ appears as an assault on an anthropomyporic state, a term that might usefully characterise the difficulty of conceiving of the human relationship to ‘earth’ (a speck in Sophia’s eye) where global warming and apprehensions of a climate in crisis can only be ‘felt’ in uncanny and anxious ways, not seen head on.

We have gone from having ‘the whole world in our hands’ […] to realizing that the whole world, including ‘little’ us, is in the vicelike death grip of a gigantic entity –ourselves as the human species. This uncanny sense of existing on more than one scale at once has nothing to do with the pathos of cradling a beautiful blue ball in the void.

(Morton, 2016, p.25)

Morton rejects the sublime image of Earth from space, for this uncanny sense ‘of being caught in hyperobjects is precisely a feeling of strange familiarity and familiar strangeness’ (2013, p.49)

Early on in the novel as part of their breaking up, Charlotte angrily takes issue with Sophia’s son and her boyfriend Art’s approach to his nature blog, ‘Art in Nature’, in which he makes up accounts of walks and other encounters that he has never actually done. Art’s new hobby is Googling to see what can be ‘killed off’ by the internet search engine:

**God was dead:** to begin with. And romance was dead. Chivalry was dead. Poetry, the novel, painting, they were all dead, and art was dead. Theatre and cinema were both dead. Literature was dead. The book was dead. […] Thought was dead. Hope was dead. Truth and Fiction were both dead. The media was dead. The internet was dead. Twitter, instagram, facebook, google dead.

(2017a, p.2, emphasis in original)

He types in nature is. It’s one of the ones that need the extra d. When he adds it, up come these suggestions: *nature is dangerous* *nature is dying* *nature is divine* *nature is dead* Nature writers, however, doesn’t come up as dead. When you type it in, a row of thumbnails comes up, little pictures of the healthy looking faces of all the greats, past and present.

(2017a, p.47, italics in original)

Art, like his mother Sophia, has killed his relationship with ‘nature’, it is without ethics or politics. Charlotte rages against the complacency of nature writing and refuses Art’s claims for his blog:

I’m just not a politico, he said. What I do is by its nature not political. Politics is transitory. What I do is the opposite of transitory. I watch the progress of the year in the fields, I look closely at the structure of hedgerows. Hedgerows are, well, they’re hedgerows. They just aren’t political.

She laughed in his face. She shouted about how very political hedgerows in fact were. Then furious rage came out of her, plus the word narcissist several times.

Art in Nature my arse, she said.

(2017a, p.59)

Whilst Art wants to prepare his blog about the upcoming solstice, Charlotte refuses his political quietism:

Solstice, she said. You said it. Darkest days ever. There’s never been a time like this.

Yes there has, he said. The solstices are cyclic and they happen every year.

(2017a, p.58)

Charlotte’s argument with Art is about the urgency of the present, and the politics of nature. It dramatizes a transformation in human accounts of ‘nature’, away from being stable backdrop, outside of politics and culture, to an entangled, natural-cultural presence. Later in the novel, as Art visits his mother and tries help her to recover from her breakdown, he, too, has a visitation that performs the same uncanny work. Earth comes calling in the form of a large floating rock that appears above his head in the dining room. ‘The underside of it is the colour that happens when black meets green. The size of it throws into shadow everyone at the table, him too – when he looks at his own hands in front of him their backs and the backs of his wrists are black-green’ (2017a, p.216). Art who has constructed elaborate fabricated accounts of his relationship to nature, finally, ‘sees’ earth, an event
that happens vertically (floats above his head) as Derrida notes, because it appears from no horizon. As Morton suggests, the experience is profoundly uncanny: ‘The proximity of an alien presence that is also our innermost essence is very much’ [... the] structure of feeling’ of the hyperobject that is an apprehension of the anthropocene (Morton, 2013, p.113).

In Winter, as Smith notes, tthere can be Epiphany (2017a), but ‘Spring’s gifts are different’ (2018, p.336). By the time that Smith gets to writing Spring, the seasons are anthropomorphised, Brittany, the security guard, playing Winter and Florence, the refugee, playing Spring:

If we were seasons, I would be following you. You'd be the end of me, Brit said. You'd kill me off.
No, you'd make me be possible, the girl now leaning against her fast asleep had said.

(p.201)

However, seasonality itself is at risk, as they exchange stories on the train to Scotland Florence comments:

If the force of just five more nuclear bombs going off anywhere in the world happens, she said, an eternal nuclear autumn will set in and there'll be no more seasons.
[...]
[...] It’s a bona fide warning for the future, the girl said. Don’t you know about how hot the seas are? If you don’t you can find it on the net.

(p.184)

Seasonality is derailed, by climate change as much as by world political events. Even as Florence embodies the sheer life force of Spring, what Smith calls, ‘the buzz of the engine’ (p.336) inside any tree or flower, she only temporarily hypnotizes Brit, the novel ends with a cruel scene of defeat as Brit calls the authorities about Florence and she and her mother are taken away by security services north of the border on the Culloden battlefield touriste site. Smith’s move to Scotland links the current national crisis of Brexit to ‘the last battle fought on British soil’, where the battle visitor centre shows a CGI re-renactment that ‘really brings the battle to life’ (p.334). Smith is quite aware of the ghosts she is conjuring and the ways they might speak to the present as it unfolds into the future post-Brexit political life of Scotland.

Brit is left with her book – a collections of fragments, scraps and quotations (a microcosmic mirror of Smith’s own working practices), juxtaposed to create a narrative, the ‘Hot Air’ book. This work she attempts to decipher, and which sends her thinking spiralling off in new directions and wakes her up. Ultimately, it is a book of hope, a kind of resource that Brit dips into even as it catalogues the many violent and abusive discourses of the present, as it refuses to submit to hopelessness. Just as Art produces his ‘fake’ nature blog and Florence her ‘real’ political scrap book, so Smith herself attempts to render the natural/cultural shocks of the present into art. Just as Art learns he can’t write about nature in an apolitical way, and that to attempt to do so betrays the urgent questions of the present, Brit learns how to turn events and texts over in her mind to reveal their multiple resonances and meanings and Smith’s seasonal works persist in seeking out the culture of nature and the nature of culture.

In C.S. Lewis’ The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe ([1950] 1988), Narnia suffers in the depths of a perpetual winter that will not give way to spring. Imposed by the White Witch, it is symbolic of the climate of fear, the privations of war and the ascendancy of fascism that her occupation of Narnia represents. ‘[I]t is she that has got all Narnia under her thumb. It’s she that makes it always winter. Always winter but never Christmas; think of that!’ (p.23). The joys of Christmas through a child’s eyes are fully realised in the narrative when Father Christmas finally does arrive on a sleigh to give gifts and signal that a great thaw will soon arrive. His visit restores seasonal change putting winter into its rightful place. Nature and culture work together, with the symbolic rebirth of Christmas inaugurating the rebirth of spring which also represents the overcoming of the fascist grip over Narnia.

In Winter, Smith ends her book with a passing reference to the 2017 July Scout Jamboree in West Virginia, addressed by Donald Trump in which he also promises to ‘bring Christmas back’. ‘And by the way, under the Trump administration’, he says, ‘you’ll be saying “Merry Christmas” again when you go shopping, believe me’ (in Regan, 2017). In the middle of summer it is winter. ‘White Christmas, God help us every one’ (Smith, 2018, p.322). In his notoriously rambling and offensive speech, Trump mobilises far-right discourses that operate around a politics of white supremacism, where whiteness is depicted as under duress, understood through a poetics of loss characterised as multicultural and multi-faith assaults on Christian festivals. The premise of his statement, a spurious claim, the idea that it has no longer become acceptable to say Christmas in the United States produces a discourse of whiteness as a minoritized culture, besieged by immigration and globalization, and the target in his sights: Muslims and other religions minority communities. Smith’s novel ends on this jarring note of Winter in July, with the tyrant shaking his bloody robe as Slavoj Žižek would have it (2009, pp.1–7).
As the promise of Christmas is transformed into deeply reactionary white supremacist posturing, it insists on producing a permanently hostile climate, what critical race theorist Christina Sharpe calls the ‘total climate’ of racism in the Unites States, or simply, ‘the weather’. ‘In what I am calling the weather, anti-blackness is pervasive as climate’ one that produces premature black death as normative (Sharpe, 2016, p.106, italics in original). Understanding how to move through and survive this environment, one that openly seeks the destruction of black life, the weather or climate is not simply a metaphor for human experiences, it is a way of capturing the scale and scope of the afterlives of slavery. For Sharpe this necessitates the production of new ecologies by those most endangered by such a climate, ‘the weather necessitates changeability and improvisation; it is the atmospheric condition of time and place; it produces new ecologies’ (p.106).

**Conclusion**

In their work on the politics of climate change, feminist, materialist ecocritics Astrida Neimanis and Jennifer Mae Hamilton deploy a concept of ‘weathering’, that shares some aspects with Sharpe’s proposal, as a way of acknowledging ‘how bodies, places and the weather are all inter-implicated in our climate-changing world’ (2018, p.118). Elsewhere, they insist that we apprehend the ‘totality of our environments’ as ‘naturalcultural, all the way down’ (p.118). Both of these critical approaches propose strategies of weathering, or the production of new ecologies, as a form of survival, a way of living in a hostile climate. It is with both of these propositions in mind that a reading of weather and climate in Smith’s novels can be deployed as a way of approaching her own narrative strategies in the face of the unforgiving relentlessness of a Brexit Season, as critical apprehensions of the long-term impact of Brexit move increasingly to seeing the referendum as less about reclamation of political or economic autonomy and more, as Lea Ypi argues influenced by a transnational cabal of ‘ethnic nationalism doing the dirty work of capitalism’ (2018). As ‘weathering’ texts, *Autumn*, *Winter* and *Spring* engage with the multiple crises of the present, a change in the political weather and present strategies for living and thinking together, for dialogue and for becoming alert to the ways histories are imbricated with geostories.
Bibliography


‘WALKING WOUNDED’ – THE PEACE PROCESS AND OTHER COLLATERAL BREXIT DAMAGES

Sara Dybris McQuaid

Abstract

The difficult transition from war to peace which has been ongoing in Northern Ireland at least since the peace agreement in 1998, is now further complicated by the indeterminate status of Brexit. Drawing on three conceptualizations from first aid, triage and psychology, the paper uses the metaphor of the ‘walking wounded’ to explore how Brexit interacts with the political culture of the staggering peace process in Northern Ireland. First, understanding ‘walking wounded’ as injured persons of relatively low priority allows us to discuss Northern Ireland as a place apart in the British body politic. Second, determining the ‘walking wounded’ by requesting those on the scene who may self-evacuate to do so immediately to a designated refuge, affords ways in which to understand the Republic of Ireland as a foreign policy actor and ongoing attempts to assign Northern Ireland a form of special status in relation to the EU. Third, psychologizing the ‘walking wounded’ as those who long for closure but do not think they can find it, directs our attention to the plight of those who wanted an undiluted version of the nation state rather than the more multidirectional hybrid that is emerging into view as a result of the peace agreement and European cooperation.

Keywords: Northern Ireland, peace process, Brexit, unionism, nationalism, metaphor

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Biographical note

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Banner image: Rita Duffy, Soften the Border, 2017 (detail). Recycled fabrics, installation on the Belcoo, Blacklion Bridge - Co. Fermanagh / Co. Cavan border, 2.5 x 30m. Image credit: Copyright of the artist, Rita Duffy. Photo credit: Stanislav Nikolov
‘WALKING WOUNDED’ – THE PEACE PROCESS AND OTHER COLLATERAL BREXIT DAMAGES
Sara Dybris McQuaid, Aarhus University

Out amongst the walking wounded, every face on every bus
Is you and me and him and her and nothing can replace the us I knew

Everything but the Girl, ‘Walking wounded’, 1996

Introduction
In significant ways, the protracted violent conflict that lasted from 1968–98 in Northern Ireland has been succeeded by what we might call a protracted peace process. Northern Ireland has somehow been stuck, if not lost, in transition, where ethno-national conflict is managed, but not necessarily transformed. The title of the recent conference, Brexit Wounds, inspired this article to explore the term ‘walking wounded’ as a metaphor for a peace process that is staggering on amidst the debris of Brexit, with the injured parties seeking evacuation or closure, while they can still stand up and walk. The overriding motifs of Brexit are those of leaving and remaining, of continuity and change. What the metaphor of the walking wounded does is include both motions at once, rather than making them mutually exclusive. The walking wounded are on the move yet held back by incurred trauma; they want to leave but remain marked. Therefore, the metaphor of the walking wounded provides a different register in which to think about Brexit and its consequences in Northern Ireland. The article uses the metaphor to explore how Brexit interacts with the political economy of the peace process for a variety of actors, in an increasingly fluid political landscape across Britain and Ireland, where nationalisms of all hues are raised or reawakened. With a twist on Lakoff and Johnson’s (2003) classic work Metaphors We Live By (where conceptual metaphors are understood to shape action as well as communication), we might think of this as metaphors we leave by.

Pushing beyond the metaphor, it is important to note that there are many in Northern Ireland who are walking wounded in a more literal sense. Dealing with the violent past is obviously one of the main areas of contention that the peace agreement of 1998 failed to deal adequately with, and which is now being dealt with – or rather delayed – in the context of Brexit. Thus, Brexit also works to marginalise those who were seriously injured in the conflict and are still awaiting recognition and compensation.

This is not a matter of the economy taking a hit, wounded feelings or national sensibilities. Instead it is about unexamined violent deaths and actual life-defining injuries sustained in conflict. Victims and survivors are still waiting for the Northern Ireland Assembly to agree and implement mechanisms to deal with the past in progressive ways. The difficulty in reaching political agreement around such issues predates Brexit, but is now made almost impossible because of it.

Background
While the peace agreement in Northern Ireland critically rests on British and Irish cooperation, this cooperation itself has been nested within European cooperation in important ways. Accordingly, the article opens with a brief consideration of how joint membership of the European community since 1973 has provided a critical context for developing the core principles and practices of the political culture of the peace process. It then considers three different understandings of the term ‘walking wounded’ to show how a variety of actors have positioned themselves and been positioned in negotiating the space of Brexit and the Northern Irish peace process. In lieu of a conclusion, the article finally considers what ‘Brexit Wounds’ have been sustained.

‘The (Peace) Agreement’ of 1998 was reached at the end of painstaking negotiations between most of the political parties in Northern Ireland and the British and Irish Governments. It is widely considered a success, and it has worked not least because it has conceptualized national identities, loyalties and
institutions in the plural. However, post-nationalism is also a challenge in political, cultural and emotional terms.

In the following, the article outlines some of the ways the EU and its predecessors (EEC, EC) have framed and driven this peacebuilding project, and how Brexit now threatens to upset the delicate balancing of nationalism and unionism across the Isles.

A shared political space
Before Britain and Ireland joined the European community in 1973, little shared institutional political space existed for their respective parliamentarians and governments to engage. This meant that when violent conflict broke out in Northern Ireland in 1968/69, there were few established and stable political relationships which could be comfortably built upon to discuss responses and solutions. One of the most important indirect contributions of European cooperation was to provide this shared political space for British, Irish and Northern Irish politicians and government officials (Phinnemore et al., 2012, p.569). As fellow members of the European Parliament, they could meet regularly and informally across national and party lines exchanging ideas, exploring alliances and building trust over numerous issues. This trust and familiarity could then be transplanted into working together on solving the conflict in and over Northern Ireland. In this sense, the EU provided a framework for the political work of peacebuilding performed by British and Irish politicians.

Removing borders
The break-up of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and the subsequent partition of Ireland during the period 1920 to 1922 saw the two parts of the island grow steadily apart over the twentieth century. For example, the south developed into a professed Catholic country and remained neutral in the Second World War, where Northern Ireland became a country dominated by Protestant unionism which proudly participated in the war effort on the British side (Kennedy, 1988). Public and official values, ideals and power were differently conceived and distributed on either side of the border. Common British and Irish membership of European cooperation from 1973 onwards, began to bring the two parts of the island on a more converging trajectory. However, the border remained firmly in place since violent conflict raged throughout the 1970s, 1980s and into the 1990s. During this period, the British army sealed off border crossings and removed cross-border infrastructure, reducing hundreds of access points, to a couple of dozen (Nash, Reid & Graham, 2013). The experience of conflict has been particularly fractured in the border region, borne out in experiences of militarization, harassment, executed victims dumped on border roads, deteriorating relationships between neighbours and communities and heightened fear and insecurity among those living on isolated farms (Dawson, 2007). During this period, the Protestant population in the border area was drastically reduced (Murtagh, 1998).

This changed significantly in the early 1990s. The European Single Market was introduced in 1993. A year later, the paramilitary ceasefires were announced in Northern Ireland and the political peace process got under way. Together, these two developments allowed for the demilitarization of the border in Ireland and the free flow of goods and services in what became one ‘EU territory’ across the member states. The functional integration of the EU became the functional integration of Ireland, not primarily as a result of political ideology, but as pragmatic business. The national border question, over which so many battles had been fought, could to some extent be defused in this context. Here then, the EU could be used as a motor for peacebuilding, through its focus on breaking down borders for the free flow of goods.

Regional investment
In one of the more direct European contributions, Northern Ireland was identified as an ‘Objective 1’ region in 1989. An objective 1 region is a region singled out for economic regeneration because of otherwise low investment, long-term patterns of unemployment and poor infrastructure and services for businesses and people alike. On top of this targeted funding, Northern Ireland, with its large agri-food sector, has also benefitted immensely from regular European common agricultural policy (CAP) funding.

However, the most direct material link between the EU and peacebuilding in Northern Ireland began in 1995 after the introduction of the Single Market. Following the paramilitary ceasefires in 1994, the European Community has very actively underpinned the political peace process, by delivering a special funding programme for ‘Peace and Reconciliation’. This programme has poured around €2 billion into Northern Irish civil society, in an effort to rebuild psycho-social, economic, cultural and political relationships (European Parliament, 2020). Thousands of projects have dealt with the legacy of conflict by providing trauma counselling, investing in local start-ups, building not just metaphorical but actual bridges as physical symbols of change and eradicating
sectarianism in football. A large number of these initiatives have been specifically endowed to repair, restore and regenerate the border region between Ireland and Northern Ireland. To some extent, these borderlands have gone from being the absolute periphery of respectively the UK and Ireland, to much more dynamic spaces, filled with positive exchanges and co-mingling (Hayward, 2018a).

Sharing power in a Europe of the regions
One of the main obstacles to solving conflict in Northern Ireland, has been the conceptualization of national sovereignty as absolute and borders as exclusion zones, instead of contact zones. In the 1990s, ideas about a ‘Europe of the Regions’ flourished. This involved rethinking the centrality of the nation state and refocusing on the supranational and regional level as dynamic protagonists in political, cultural and social arenas (Loughlin, 1996). Importantly, this also reduced the significance of national borders in recasting them as inter-regional zones for development. During the same period, power relationships within the UK state were also reconfigured in the shape of devolution to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in 1999. While, these new ideas of ‘post-sovereignty’ were certainly contested they still provided a ‘post-national’ imagination for solving ethno-national conflicts (Kearney, 1997). Since the conflict in and over Northern Ireland can very much be conceived as a conflict over national identity, the move to more regional and stratified thinking within the EU and UK meant that Northern Ireland could better be conceived as a place with overlapping identities and interests open at once towards the United Kingdom and Ireland. Despite successive British governments’ resistance to ‘pooling sovereignty’ at the European level, they began to ‘do’ sovereignty differently in relation to Northern Ireland (Meehan, 2014).

A pivotal part of the peace agreement was precisely to give the people of Northern Ireland the right to identify as both British and Irish, not necessarily either or. That is, the softening and layering of sovereignty and identities inherent in the European project enabled the conceptualisation of Northern Ireland as British and Irish. We might say that becoming partners and joining forces in Europe made it possible for Britain to move beyond Northern Ireland as an ‘internal problem’, to one in which Ireland could stake a legitimate claim in being part of governing a solution. At the same time, it made it possible for Ireland to transform the traditional nationalist claim to self-determination into an aspiration, with the peace agreement an instrument to handle at once the political status quo and a future constitutional swing. This is the context in which the peace agreement could be negotiated and make sense.

It is true that the peace agreement itself makes little reference to the EU, but what was agreed is made possible through the common British and Irish membership. This was clearly set out in the preamble to the peace agreement of 1998 where it says that the British and Irish Governments wish to ‘develop still further the unique relationship between their peoples and the close co-operation between their countries as friendly neighbours and as partners in the European Union’ (The Agreement, 1998).

Maintaining this framework should not be low priority. While the peace process looks like it is capable of staggering on, the internal injuries are severe. Brexit has effectively reintroduced the question of sovereignty as a live political wire in British-Irish relationships across the isles.

Metaphorically speaking 1: Injured persons of a relatively low priority
In first aid and triage, the walking wounded are injured persons of a relatively low priority.

That Northern Ireland has been a comparatively low priority in the public hive of British politics, is an understatement. Being considered as ‘a place apart’, as less integral to the Union than England, Wales and Scotland, has gone with the territory, particularly since the Home Rule movement developed in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The recognition of the ‘Irish dimension’ of Northern Ireland in successive attempts to solve the more recent conflict is a crucial part of the current peace agreement and marks out Northern Ireland as different in terms of territorial and political governance. Being on the edge of the union has fuelled abandonment issues, a sense of being under siege on the island and betrayal by the British government amongst the unionist population. It means that unionists in Northern Ireland have to find ways of existing after mainstream UK unionism has waned (cf. Coulter, 2001). Similarly, situations of discrimination and neglect have, both in historical and contemporary terms, encouraged the Irish nationalist community in Northern Ireland to seek their grievances addressed from elsewhere, notably by the Irish government and state. These points will be developed further below, however, at this stage it is enough to flag up how the low priority of Northern Ireland, does not simply reflect its size (at present constituting roughly 3% of the UK population), but is part of a more complex peripheral political economy.

For most people who were already conversant in
the politics of conflict and peace in Northern Ireland, it was pretty shocking that the potential consequences of Brexit for the peace process were hardly discussed by the British public during the referendum debate. The low priority given to this, not only reveals how marginal Northern Ireland has been to mainstream British politics, but also reflects the decreasing interest of Conservative governments in Northern Ireland since coming back into power in 2010, after thirteen years in opposition. A new guard of politicians do not seem to have the same grasp of the stakes in the peace process and the role of European cooperation underpinning it. In general, the Conservative Party has been less interested in appreciating the European dimension of the peace process, because European cooperation has been a toxic issue for party unity since the late Eighties. In Northern Ireland this has been compounded by consecutive Secretaries of State (whose job it is to ‘represent Northern Ireland interest in the cabinet’) emerging as prominent Brexiteers – for example Owen Patterson (2010–12) and Theresa Villiers (2012–16).

In the referendum, Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU, but this outcome has not exactly resonated in the actions of the Conservative government since. In a stark demonstration of its poor understanding of the political economy of the peace process, the Conservative government stayed in power after losing their majority in the General Election of 2017, by entering into a ‘confidence and supply’ agreement with the Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland (DUP) (Cabinet Office, [2017] 2019). Not only was the DUP the only major party in Northern Ireland advocating a leave position, and did not as such represent the majority position in Northern Ireland, but the peace agreement stipulates that ‘the power of the sovereign government […] shall be exercised with rigorous impartiality’ (The Agreement, 1998, Art.I(v)) which is of course difficult if your position of power is based on one of the conflict parties. Paradoxically, on the one hand this development means that Northern Ireland cannot easily be ignored and on the other, these governmental choices arguably reflect the broader cognitive disconnect from the tenets of the peace process and the fact that relying on the DUP is a means to one end: Brexit.

This ties in with the argument that the Conservative Party has ceased to think about the UK in unionist terms (Gamble, 2016). To underscore the low priority given to Northern Ireland and UK unionism, a recent YouGov poll found that a large majority of conservative party members would rather have Brexit than preserve the union (Smith, 2019). The overall negligence by the British government of course also stands in striking contrast to the importance that Ireland and the EU have attached throughout to the importance of protecting the peace process and representing the majority position in Northern Ireland.

Metaphorically speaking 2: Self-evacuate to a designated refuge

In this use of the metaphor, the walking wounded are determined by requesting those on the scene who may self-evacuate to do so immediately to a designated refuge. Here, the agency and ability of the walking wounded are flagged up, as well as the sense that there is some space of refuge. There are some immediate ways to translate this into discernible action since the referendum:

The first is about Ireland as an extraordinarily well-prepared national and foreign policy actor. Here, Ireland, ‘the country’, is cast as one of the walking wounded, because it is generally accepted that Ireland is the remaining EU member state that will potentially suffer most from Brexit, in economic terms and in terms of the political damage it might wreak on the peace process and wider British Irish relations. This allows for an interpretation of the actions of the Irish state pre- and post-Brexit as one of self-evacuation and to discuss an EU special status for Northern Ireland or indeed a United Ireland as forms of ‘designated refuge’.

When the history of Brexit is written, a key narrative thread will be the role of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Irish diplomats in propelling Ireland to the top of the negotiating agenda. A year ahead of the referendum itself, in June of 2015, the Irish Oireachtas published a report discussing the potential consequences of Brexit and set out for the Irish Government to have a voice in relation to the future of Northern Ireland and the necessity for Ireland to feature centrally in EU negotiations with the UK (Connolly, 2017; Hayward, 2018b). As became evident, the detailed preparation before the referendum and the non-stop lobbying of Irish diplomats in Europe after the referendum were instrumental in making Ireland one of three key issues in phase one of the negotiations – the so called ‘divorce settlement’, which had to be brought to a conclusion ahead of charting the future relationship in phase two – ‘the future relationship’. In April 2017, the leader of the European Council, Donald Tusk, had stated that ‘people, money, Ireland must come first in the Brexit negotiations’ (Staunton, 2017) and
in September 2017, the EU guiding principles for the ‘Dialogue on Ireland/Northern Ireland’ were published, making it one of three key priorities in the negotiations. These guidelines followed a particularly volatile period in which the executive in Northern Ireland had collapsed and local government went into limbo (January 2017); the new Prime Minister, Theresa May, triggered article 50 (March 2017) and a disastrous (for the Conservative Party) general election where the government had become reliant on the MPs from the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland (May 2017). The political economy of Brexit had now become firmly tied up with the political economy of the peace process, in ways that made compromises hard to come by.

In early December 2017, the joint report from the negotiators of the EU and the UK government was launched (European Commission, 2017). In it the progress of negotiations was detailed, making it clear for all to see that a hundred years later ‘The Irish Question’ was not about to go away. In many ways, the joint report mirrored the contradictions in the peace agreement of 1998, which at once worked to ‘copper fasten’ the union, in recognizing the legitimate status of Northern Ireland as British, whilst also providing a ‘stepping stone’ to a united Ireland by making provisions for a change in the constitutional status to happen in the future, if a democratic majority in Northern Ireland wished to make that change.

The joint report set out a number of propositions that could hardly be possible at the same time: There was to be no hard border on the island of Ireland and no border in the Irish sea – at the same time the UK would leave the Customs Union and the Single Market. Immediately after the publication of the joint report, it became clear that the parties disagreed on the legal status of it – whether it was binding or simply a statement of intent (Stone, 2017). In February 2018, the EU published a legal draft of the withdrawal agreement, which was rejected as unacceptable by the UK government (Boffey & Rankin, 2018; Tolhurst & Clark, 2018). This was because the way in which the EU made sense of the Joint Report was to make Northern Ireland part of the EU customs territory, if no other solution had been reached through trade negotiations. This is what has since been developed further into the so-called ‘backstop’ of the withdrawal agreement. Here special status works to enforce fears and indeed hopes about Northern Ireland being recognizably a place apart – and special status or not - is used to identify possible designated refuges in the future.

The UK government joined forces with the DUP to reject the EU definition of the backstop as attacking the constitutional integrity of the UK, with Downing Street suggesting that the EU was effectively annexing Northern Ireland (Boffey & Rankin, 2018). This recovered sense of unionism on the part of the Conservative government was of course to do with their reliance on the DUP for a parliamentary majority. In order to understand why the Democratic Unionist Party was so set against having a bespoke arrangement which might work very well in Northern Ireland’s interest, we return to the question of sovereignty. The DUP was the only party that did not sign up to the peace agreement in 1998. They were also the only major party in Northern Ireland campaigning to leave the EU. In Northern Ireland, the question of immigration was not really a live wire, as it was in England – but the question of sovereignty can still be. Taking back control, particularly of borders, means something specific in Ireland and Northern Ireland, which will be returned to below.

Conversely, for nationalists (and some unionists) in Northern Ireland, it seems to have become more and more clear that the state that holds their best interests at heart – their designated refuge – is not the UK state, but the Irish state. This is not just evident from the incredible spike in Irish passport applications (another instance of the walking wounded self-evacuating) but also in recent polls that show public support for a united Ireland radically increase depending on the shape of Brexit (Devenport 2018; Garry et al, 2018). So, some kind of special status for Northern Ireland, or a United Ireland is to become a designated refuge for the walking wounded, albeit, a very contested one.

As part of preparing for Brexit, the Irish government launched an ongoing ‘All-Island civic dialogue’ in 2016. The all-island dialogue is not political in the sense that it deals with very pragmatic questions for pig farmers, academics, tourists and young people. But it is of course taking place in a completely new strategic environment and political economy – in the context of Brexit. Also, precisely because it is framed as an all-island dialogue, initiated by the Irish government, unionists are boycotting it – in this respect it mirrors the New Ireland Forum of the 1980s that sought to put an end to violence and chart a course for the future of the Island, but

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1 It is worth mentioning that in the Belfast Agreement or the Good Friday Agreement, the parties could not agree on this form of language and so cooperation between North and South is described both as ‘all-island’ and ‘cross-border’ cooperation, with unionists insisting on the latter to emphasise the border.
remained a dialogue mainly amongst what would be recognised as nationalists.

Even if the civic dialogue is meant to be civic – not political, debates around what unification might look like have also intensified. Such discussions were initiated not least because Brexit had clearly flagged up how important it would be to engage more than a structure of feeling before voting on something that would radically change the future constitution of any country. In the event of a border poll on unification, people would need to know what that was more exactly. The main point here is, when Britain and Ireland are not working together on a common trajectory, there are crucial sensitivities around which national frame should work to find future solutions. In this context, the walking wounded of the peace process may still see their designated refuge in different directions. This leads to a third understanding of the walking wounded.

**Metaphorically speaking 3: Longing for closure**

This final understanding of ‘walking wounded’ draws on psychological approaches that see the walking wounded as those who long for closure but do not think that they can find it. Here, the relations of the walking wounded to closure may be conceived in at least three different ways:

1. They may never find what they consider closure but continue to seek it.
2. They may go on to ‘find closure’ through creative processes or redefining closure.
3. They may decide they do not need what others have defined as closure.

In these three uses of the metaphor, we may think of the walking wounded as British and Irish nationalists. Those who wanted the undiluted version of a nation state rather than the more multidirectional hybrid that is emerging into view as a result of the peace agreement. Those who want their singular national identities to be protected and demarcated by exclusive territorial and mental borders. As the sister of the Irish Republican Hunger Striker Bobby Sands, Bernadette Sands McKevitt, said in 1998: ‘Bobby did not die for cross-Border bodies with executive powers. He did not die for nationalists to be equal British citizens within the Northern Ireland state.’ (Breen, 1998).

However, it is fair to say that the population in Northern Ireland before Brexit was stratified across the three definitions of closure set out above.

To begin with those who may go on to ‘find closure’ through creative processes or decide they do not need what others have defined as closure: for many people, the peace agreement offered a creative way of redefining closure – they gradually found that Northern Ireland did not need to be exclusively British or Irish, but could be both, and the main political challenges and preoccupations could shift from constitutional questions to wider socio-cultural ones concerning equality, like gay marriage and abortion. Sovereignty and self-determination could remain on the long finger. This is the positive, pluralist, plus-sum-game version of the peace agreement, where nobody loses, and everybody wins. An understanding of Northern Ireland and the people in it as both British and Irish, not either British or Irish.

But the agreement can also be worked to entrench differences and be used to facilitate a cultural war beyond constitutional conflict (McCall, 2006). Nested in the peace agreement is a key sectarian device for reproducing conflict parties. Power-sharing between unionists and nationalists was a measure of inclusion and a way of ensuring that no one community would dominate the other, as had been the case during unionist one-party rule between 1921 and 1972. However, it also means that all politicians must designate as either unionists, nationalists or ‘other’ in the local assembly (and those designating as ‘others’ have an inferior status in weighted cross-community votes). Having power shared, or split, along differences of constitutional preference obviously keeps the zero-sum constitutional issue alive – if for nothing else, as a source of electoral mobilization to maintain power. Furthermore, the politico-constitutional battle has continued as clashes of identity politics around the questions of flags and language, marking Northern Ireland in cultural terms as more British than Irish, or vice versa.

Even if many people have accepted the agreement as a creative way of ending violence – if not actually resolving conflict – the electorate was further polarized by Brexit in two snap elections (one for the local assembly in March 2017 and one for Westminster in May 2017) which were both fought on Brexit and the border question. In political terms, we cannot be sure that the centre will hold – things may indeed be falling apart and there seems to be a return to the politics of antagonism and nationalism. This was of course compounded by the DUP underwriting the conservative government between 2017 and 2019, through which they enjoy a main line to power, even in the absence of functioning political institutions in Northern Ireland. Being the only major party which advocated leaving the EU in Northern Ireland, and elected predominantly in the north east (and therefore
not representing any border communities), they could not speak comprehensively for Northern Ireland as a whole at this critical juncture.

Indeed, the increasing polarisation of unionist and nationalist parties in Northern Ireland prevented them from forming a power-sharing government between January 2017 and January 2020. At the same time, those parties that designate as 'other' have surged in recent local and European elections. The Green Party doubled its representation at the council elections in May 2019 and the Alliance Party historically took one of the three MEP seats later the same month. A centre ground different from simply moderate unionism and nationalism is taking shape, but with precious little political infrastructure to launch alternatives from in the absence of a functioning local assembly in Northern Ireland.

So, here the exploration returns to those that may never find what they consider closure but continue to seek it. In certain ways, the peace agreement did not transcend nationalism but offered a holding pattern for transcendence to maybe happen in the future. Exclusive and separate nation states continue to be the ultimate end goal for some. The ongoing transition since 1998 from war to peace has also been about gaining the interpretive upper hand of what happened during those thirty years of conflict and what the future should look like. In this narrative struggle, unionists feel like they are losing the argument; they feel as if they are in a double bind of low priority walking wounded. That the transition is working to marginalize them, their history, their future (McQuaid, 2017). This feeling is reinforced by their new status as another minority in Northern Ireland since their demography has fallen below 50% of the population (NILT, 2018). Consecutive peace monitoring reports reveal how particularly working-class unionists are increasingly alienated from the peace process and the state in Northern Ireland (Nolan, 2014). Support for Brexit should also be read in this context. For some, Brexit offers ultimate unionist closure.

At the other end of the same scale, Brexit finally offers the ultimate opportunity to push for a united Ireland, and for those who did not die for cross-border bodies. Sinn Féin was quick to identify this. Right after the referendum the Deputy First Minister Martin McGuiness said:

The British government has no democratic mandate to represent the views of the North in any future negotiations with the European Union and I think there is a democratic imperative for a border poll. […] I think the fact that we have seen a situation where 56% of the people of the North – who are unionists and nationalists and republicans – voted together to stay in Europe, further strengthens the case for a border poll.

(BBC News, 2016)

But Sinn Féin were not the only ones making overtures about Irish unity. The leader of Fianna Fáil Michael Martin said Brexit was a defining moment that could lead to unity (Press Association, 2016), and later, as reported by the Irish News the Minister for Foreign Affairs Simon Coveney from Fine Gael said that he would like to see a united Ireland in his political lifetime (Manley, 2017).

In the UK, the tabloid press has made big noises about how the Irish border is used politically to impact negotiations, and that the parties in the Republic are engaging in a form of nationalist outbidding because of the growing force of Sinn Féin as a political power there. The old school imperial approach to Ireland is at play in some of this news coverage – right down to The Sun suggesting the ‘naive young Prime Minister’ Taoiseach Leo Varadkar should ‘shut his gob’ (2017) and The Telegraph referring to ‘little Ireland’ (Arnold, 2019). National identity politics have been raised not just between unionists and nationalists in Northern Ireland, but between Britain and Ireland, and the creative processes of closure that had been established beyond the nation are challenged.

**Conclusion: Beyond the metaphor**

In this article, I have used the metaphor of the ‘walking wounded’ to complicate the common, mutually exclusive binary of leaving or remaining when thinking about Brexit and the Northern Ireland peace process. I have done so in order to open up a wider variety of perspectives on the issues, showing how Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and indeed British nationalists each may be conceived as ‘walking wounded’ in the aftermath of conflict. The first line of the Everything but the Girl song ‘Walking wounded’, which I have used as an epigraph, brings to mind the injury and sacrifice of the conflict and the temporal weight of ongoing Brexit negotiations. It speaks to the squared relationship between ‘you and me and him and her’ (which we could think of as Britain, Ireland, Northern Ireland and the EU) and the sense of loss connected to knowing you will never comfortably abode in a nation state of ‘us’ again, or the sense of losing part of the us that is the European Union. It is clear then that Brexit has wounded more than a few political subjects across Great Britain and
Ireland in ways that are specific to their local contexts, as I have argued here. It may be useful to summarize these ‘Brexit wounds’:

British-Irish relations have deteriorated over the past three years, as the governments have been locked on opposite sides of the Brexit negotiating table. Since the 1980s, official British-Irish cooperation has been key in undergirding the peace process. When parties in Northern Ireland have been dragging their feet or engaging in destructive brink politics, the joint engagement of the two governments has paved the way for solutions. During the first phase of the Brexit negotiations, the communication between Britain and Ireland was more often reduced to megaphone diplomacy, which spiralled into toxic allegations, taunts and ridicule on numerous occasions, where historical tensions and mistrust became airborne again. Brexit further polarized the two main political parties in Northern Ireland, who abandoned a power-sharing government in Northern Ireland and instead turned towards what they perceive as their respective nation states for exclusive solutions. Sinn Féin has become a major party in the Republic of Ireland, and continue to focus on consolidating power there while abstaining from taking their seats in Westminster. The Democratic Unionist Party, on the other hand, was effectively thrown under the bus when Boris Johnson renegotiated Theresa May’s withdrawal agreement to accept border checks in the Irish Sea. The split focus does not bode well for relations, even if the Northern Ireland assembly was constituted in January 2020.

The peace agreement operated on a Principle of Consent, that is, that any constitutional change in the status of Northern Ireland, could only be decided by a majority in Northern Ireland. The change that was envisaged in 1998, was whether Northern Ireland would go from being constitutionally part of the UK to being constitutionally part of a United Ireland. While this would be an important change, it would still be in the context of common membership of the EU. Nobody in 1998 had imagined that the constitutional change would be the UK leaving the EU and taking Northern Ireland, where a majority voted to remain, with it in the process.

The success of the peace agreement in 1998 rested on addressing British-Irish relations at three levels: 1. an internal political solution in Northern Ireland (devolution with power sharing), 2. institutionalised North-South cooperation (Ministerial Councils) and 3. institutionalised cooperation between Britain and Ireland (The British Irish Council and the British Irish Intergovernmental Conference). By applying a wider appreciation of the historical and structural relationships that needed to be transformed it was possible to accommodate contested national, political and cultural identities.

In the case of a hard Brexit (i.e., the UK leaving both the Single Market and the Customs Union without a deal in place), we would not just have the prospect of a hard border as a lightning rod for violence, or the severance of conscientiously (re)built relationships within Northern Ireland and across the island of Ireland. It would also mean that the United Kingdom and Ireland would grow apart again, no longer in a common market, or on a common journey.

The ambition to ‘develop still further the unique relationship between their peoples and the close co-operation between their countries as friendly neighbours and as partners in the European Union’ set out by the two governments in the peace agreement (1998), seems to be thwarted in the context of Brexit.

Twenty-two years after the peace agreement, all these relationships are now in peril, as the walking wounded, injured both in a protracted conflict and by the unfolding process of Brexit, stagger on.
Bibliography


