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# National belonging post-referendum: Britons living in other EU Member States respond to “Brexit”

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Following the EU Referendum, this paper tracks how pro-Remain British migrants living in other EU Member States expressed a sense of shame and dislocation in relation to their national identity. Developed from a survey of 909 British nationals living in other EU Member States, it hopes to make a timely intervention into wider debates about privileged migration, Britishness, citizenship and belonging. First, it outlines a new articulation of the “bad Britain” discourse among emigrants, who saw the UK as increasingly characterised by xenophobia and insularity. Second, it seeks to understand how their national identity and sense of belonging was being renegotiated post-referendum through a lens attentive to the cultural politics of emotion and innocence as an operation of whiteness.

## KEYWORDS

“Brexit”, British, Europe, migrants, survey, whiteness

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

*The Guardian's* (2017) short video “British ‘expats’ in Spain count the Costa Brexit” starts with a shot of a sun-drenched, precisely levelled bowling green, its later-life occupants dressed in uniform white trousers and red t-shirts.<sup>1</sup> “What is the difference ... between an expat and a foreigner?” opens the narrator. “Well first of all, expats are British. A foreigner is probably someone living from another country living in Britain. They become foreigners. The British are never foreigners wherever they go!” is the provocative response of her first interviewee. Jolly muzak plays over sweeping shots of beaches and what are presumably British residents of Orihuela Costa, Alicante, described as “effectively a British enclave”. Whether imperial retirees living in “expat” bubbles or mass-tourist style, sun-burnt hedonists, this video illustrates some of the common stereotypes of “Brits abroad”, both of whom are classed and tend to fall somewhere on the right of the political spectrum (King et al., 2000; O’Reilly, 2000). The stock image of “Brits abroad”, easily available through a Google image search, usually reflects one or other of these sat in pubs and draped in the Union Jack flag. This paper means to challenge and complicate these stereotypes.

The paper makes two contributions. First, it outlines a new articulation of the “bad Britain” discourse following the referendum, which attributes the decline of Britain to its increasing insularity and xenophobia. Second, through an analysis attentive to the relationship between emotions, nationality and whiteness, it examines the role of innocence as an operation of whiteness in respondents’ widespread expressions of shame and loss following the EU referendum result (Emejulu, 2016).

Although British emigrants are certainly not the most vulnerable nor the largest group to be impacted by this process, at an estimated 900,000 (Office of National Statistics, 2017), their number and new-found circumstances do call for attention, and offer interesting insights into privileged mobilities and shifting landscapes of belonging, citizenship and Britishness. Developed from a survey of 909 British nationals living in continental Europe and undertaken around the one-year

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anniversary of the EU referendum on 23 June 2016, the paper focuses on Britons living in continental Europe who are opposed to the result of the referendum. In what follows, I review broader literature on British emigration and the “bad Britain” discourse and consider the ways in which nationality and whiteness are figured through emotions. A section on methodology then follows. The analysis charts two emotional registers with regards to their UK nationality post-referendum – shame and loss – and the way in which these organised and constructed both a shared national “object of feeling” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 13) and the emoting subject. In the conclusion, I outline a new articulation of the “bad Britain” discourse and consider some of the emotional labour which goes into renegotiating national identity and belonging for white Britons who are opposed to the result of the EU referendum.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Outside of Europe, research with British migrants has centralised the significance of racialised privileges and colonial dis/continuities (e.g., Conway & Leonard, 2014; Cranston, 2017; Higgins, 2017; Knowles & Harper, 2009; Richardson, 2018). This research unpacks “a mobile mosaic of white subject positions” (Leonard, 2008, p. 58) to explore the way in which whiteness acts as a shifting, contextually defined, but persistent, resource for mobile white Britons. While scholarship on contemporary British migration to Europe has addressed issues of class, gender and age (Benson, 2011; King et al., 2000; O’Reilly, 2000; Oliver & O’Reilly, 2010), “race” has not taken centre stage (for an exception, see Lundstrom, 2014, ch. 6). Arguably, one of the consequences of the EU referendum and its fallout has been to somewhat disrupt what political philosopher Mills (1997) calls “an epistemology of ignorance” on issues related to race and racism, for the UK at least. Racism post-referendum was a frequent topic of responses to the survey.

The framing of their migration as an escape to “the good life” has been documented broadly among British emigrants in Europe, as has their negative depiction of the UK and their former lives there (Ahmed, 2015; Benson, 2011; O’Reilly, 2000; O’Reilly & Benson, 2009). O’Reilly (2000) first documented a “bad Britain” discourse among British migrants in the Costa del Sol, Spain. In contrast to the abundantly positive portrayal of their new lives in Spain, she found that contemporary Britain was often depicted as signifying any, or all, of the following:

Routine, dullness, monotony, greyness, cold, no hope for the future, a miserable old age, misery, modern life, rushing around, no time for pleasure, crime, selfishness, lack of caring, lack of community, lack of trust, poor health, poor education, and a poor welfare state. (p. 99)

For those who participated in the “bad Britain” discourse, she noted that the emphasis on the ills of their home society worked to frame and justify their choice to migrate. The specificity of disillusionment with “modern life” is significant. Some previous articulations of this discourse have been characterised by a sense of the passing of a “Golden Age” and racist melancholy about a beleaguered Britain over-run by too many immigrants, reminiscent of Gilroy’s (2004) postcolonial melancholia. This concept frames the country’s nostalgic harking back to the era post-Second World War, prior to mass migration from the colonies, and a pervasive amnesia about the British Empire as a failure to mourn the loss of imperial prestige.

In contrast, this paper outlines a new articulation of the “bad Britain” discourse, which suggests that Britain’s decline is from a once outward-looking, open, multicultural society to something more insular and xenophobic. This more recent version could be said to mourn the loss of another aspect of Britain – convivial multiculturalism. A concept popularised by Gilroy, conviviality neither denies nor centres difference but conveys the routine, humdrum ways in which people learn to “live with difference” (Hall, 1993). Of course, both melancholic understandings of the decline of contemporary Britain and liberal concerns about the rise of xenophobia and insularity associated with the referendum are at play in the UK more generally (see Clarke et al., 2009; Closs-Stephens, 2016; Fenton, 2008; Orbach, 2016). In this sense, the responses explored below can be understood as part of wider sentiment about citizenship and belonging for Remain supporters following the EU referendum.

As Nayak has argued, “many of our ideas around citizenship, belonging and race are figured through emotions” (2011, p. 555; see also Ahmed, 2014; Hage, 1998, 2003; Wetherell, 2012). As an example of research which has explored the interplay between emotions, nationality and whiteness, Wetherell (2012) highlights the practical emotional work that goes into establishing the position of victimhood for English nationals racialised as white in response to immigration and their perception of a loss of cultural identity. She suggests an “affective discursive loop” occurs where “rhetoric and narratives of unfairness, loss and infringement create and intensify the emotion” (p. 7). In a similar vein, in Australia Hage (1998)

evokes the figure of the White worrier who, through expressions of concern about “too many” migrants, attempts to reassert their monopoly over “worrying” about the shape and future of the nation (p. 10). These examples emphasise the way that “affective registers have to be understood within the context of power geometries that shape our social world” (Tolia-Kelly, 2006, p. 214). The alignments of different people with feelings of national belonging and alienation are shaped by questions of power and difference (Antonsich & Skey, 2017), and by “the political fact of different bodies having different affective capacities” (Tolia-Kelly, 2006, p. 214).

In contrast to the beleaguered mode of national whiteness documented above, this paper explores the perspectives of white Britons who have had their understanding of the nation as tolerant and inclusive challenged by the EU referendum. It draws on Emejulu’s analysis of whiteness and responses to Brexit, in which she argued:

Public ‘shock’ and outrage about increases in racial harassment seem to define racism as an aberration in Britain – that it only exists in relation to extraordinary events such as the Brexit vote (‘This is not who we are’). . . . To only understand racism as localised, reactionary inter-personal violence is to misunderstand what Britain (and indeed Europe) is and the power relations that maintain and legitimise racial hierarchy. (2016, np; for more on innocence as an operation of whiteness, see Accapadi, 2007; DiAngelo, 2011)

In other words, she argues that to understand racism as an extraordinary recent event in the UK and to focus outrage on inter-personal prejudice contains racism *temporally* to recent events and *socially* to individual acts of hostility, rather than considering the longer histories and systemic nature of racism (Gilroy, 1991; Hall, 2000). In the influential paper “White fragility”, DiAngelo argued that when confronted with racism liberals racialised as white “often opt to protect what they perceive as their moral reputations, rather than recognise or change their participation in systems of inequity and domination” (2011, p. 64). Following these interventions, this paper considers how respondents’ declarations of shame and dislocation in the face of the EU referendum works to contain racism temporally and socially and thus to maintain innocence as an operation of whiteness.

### 3 | METHODS

Nine hundred and nine Britons took part in the survey, which ran from 13 to 20 July 2017.<sup>2</sup> Respondents were predominantly recruited via advocacy groups for citizens’ rights set up in the wake of the referendum, such as *British in Europe* which, as the largest coalition, claims to have 35,000 members, as well as the social media streams of BrExpats, a research project led by Dr Michaela Benson exploring what Brexit means for Britons resident in other EU Member States (<https://brexitbritsabroad.com>). Through its recruitment approach, this survey was more likely to engage with those who were opposed or very opposed to the result of the referendum, who made up 97% of responses, and their experiences are the focus of this paper. Surveys conducted by the popular migrant networking sites Angloinfo and InterNations of their British memberships’ voting intentions have shown a preference for Remain (AngloInfo, 2016; Zeek, 2017), perhaps predictably, so there is reason to believe that this group reflects the majority experience. This paper claims to be neither statistically nor thematically representative of this diverse group. Instead it aims to draw out some of the prominent cultural resources which emerged in the qualitative material generated by the open-ended questions (Wetherell, 2003).

In terms of their characteristics, 65% of respondents were female and 35% male. Although it does not take away from the main arguments of this paper, it is worth noting that women were both more likely to vote Remain and more likely to respond to surveys (Ipsos MORI, 2016; Moore & Tarnai, 2002). British was the most common choice for national identity at 50%, followed by English at 34%, then Scottish at 5%, Welsh at 3% and Northern Irish at 0.5%. Although to opt into the survey respondents were asked to confirm that they identify as from the UK, interestingly, the category Other was chosen by 14% of respondents and 10% of that group were people claiming their “national identity” was European, which points towards some of their strength of feeling. While for reasons of brevity this paper sometimes refers to “the British”, it is important to note that this is not a homogenous national group. As an example of this heterogeneity, several respondents stressed their regional, national and supra-national identities in order to distance themselves from the perceived negative characteristics of being British (or English). The majority at 92% identified as White British for their ethnicity, and their reflections are the focus of this paper. Respondents had lived in their continental European country of residence for between one year or less and 20+ years, with a relatively even spread, but the latter group, at 18%, was the largest. There was a broad range of occupations, but the largest group, at 55%, were retired. The second largest group, at 21%, were in a professional occupation.

Respondents took part from 20 countries across the European Union (EU). However, the largest groups lived in France, at 48%, and Spain, at 34%, which are the second and first most popular destinations for British emigrants in Europe (ONS, 2017). In terms of this study, respondent age groups ranged from 18–24 to 85–89, with the majority between the ages of 50 and 74. Although over-represented in the media, this older demographic is certainly not the majority experience. EuroStat data from 2011 shows that only 21% of British people living in the EU27 are over the age of 65. However, in Spain 33% of the British population are over the age of 65, and in France most Britons are aged 50 or over (Office of National Statistics, 2017). Interestingly, in contrast to surveys which found that those aged 55+ tended to vote Leave in the UK (Ipsos MORI, 2016), these British nationals in a similar age bracket overwhelmingly supported Remain. The survey questions are included at the end of the paper.

The use of an online survey provided low-cost access to a large and geographically dispersed group, and the relative anonymity of a self-administered survey could have aided respondents to comment on what was at times an emotionally charged issue. The number of responses to this survey in a week illustrated a strong desire among many Britons to share their opinions on the referendum. However, it is important to document that a significant minority did not want to make any reflections before they knew what Brexit would look like or felt that the result would have little effect on their lives. As a method to “research and write geographies of Brexit in the midst of turmoil” (Anderson & Wilson, 2017a, p. 2), the questionnaire survey did not engage well with indifference, was unable to further unpack ambiguous or brief responses, or to situate these responses more thoroughly in respondents’ wider biographies; future qualitative research will be better placed to explore these issues in greater depth.

## 4 | A NEW ARTICULATION OF THE “BAD BRITAIN” DISCOURSE

Following Ahmed (2014), this analysis takes specific emotions as its point of entry. Rather than presume the inherent existence of these as “basic emotions”, this approach seeks “to explore how different emotions, once experienced, identified and named as such, involve different orientations towards objects and others” (2014, p. 210). First, I examine declarations of shame and embarrassment by respondents at the perceived xenophobia and insularity of the UK and then their sense of loss and dislocation from a nation that was considered to have changed. Shame and loss do not convey the entire emotional repertoire of their responses. These overlapped with other recognisable emotions, such as anger or disgust and, as mentioned previously, overlook apathy or indifference about the outcome of the vote. Moreover, for reasons of space, this paper excludes a growing sense of affection and attachment to their Europeanness among many respondents. However, the prominence of these two emotional registers does warrant this focused attention.

### 4.1 | Shame and embarrassment

Responses to the first open question of the survey, “Has the referendum caused you to reflect on your national identity, and in what way?”, repeatedly told of a shift from a feeling of pride in being British to shame and embarrassment in the lead up to and following the referendum.

Yes. My feelings of love for – and pride in – my British origin gave way to a feeling of deep shame, and I decided I could identify better with the values of my German country of residence than with what was going on in the UK. (British, female, 65–69, semi-retired translator and interpreter. Germany for 20+ years)

I’m ashamed of being British given the xenophobia and racism that has been unleashed by the referendum. This is not who ‘I’ am. (English, female, 55–59, retired. Greece for 11 years)

There was a sense among respondents that the UK had failed to live up to ideals of an open and tolerant society, which reflected poorly on nationals of the UK. Through their expressions of shame and embarrassment, respondents aligned themselves with these ideals and against their perception of a xenophobic and insular UK. The two quotes above sought to distance the speaker from negative characteristics, “this is not who I am”. Another, albeit minority, position reflected a desire to rehabilitate both the speaker and the UK,

at times, I feel embarrassed by some of the xenophobic and racist comments that seem to be more prevalent since the vote. I feel that they don’t belong in the England that I love. (English, male, 70–74, retired. Spain for 11 years)

As Ahmed (2014) has argued, declarations of shared feelings of shame in the face of national wrongdoings can work to rehabilitate the nation through understanding it as an aberration from its ideals. A minority of respondents sought to distance both themselves and their idea of the UK as open and tolerant from increased instances of xenophobia associated with the referendum.

During periods when racism becomes more visible, scholars have tracked how a racist, white, working-class figure has historically served to shore up the moral legitimacy of more affluent, “colour-blind”, white subjects (e.g., Skeggs, 2005; Taylor, 2015). Through their transgressions, this guilty white figure enables the inverse position of white racial innocence. To give an example, following the race riots in the north of England in 2001, Skeggs noted the portrayal of the white working class as “racist, useless, pointless and a blockage to global modernity” provided a functional role “that allow[ed] the middle class to position themselves as [alternately] the vanguard of cosmopolitan modernity” (2005, p. 972). A minority of respondents attributed the rise in racism in the UK to explicitly classed figures.

I’m embarrassed to be British! We’ve become the laughing stock of the EU. I feel the uneducated small-minded citizens have taken control of the island & are dragging it backwards. (British, female, 45–49, not working through ill health. France for one year or less)

Yes, it has made me realise how racist Britain has become and when I go to the coast in Spain I am ashamed to see how drunk and abusive brits get: it is so sad. (British, female, 70–74, retired. Spain for 20+ years)

A more common pattern was to draw on implicitly classed terms to describe their compatriots, such as “ignorant”, “uneducated” and “small-minded”. These responses can be related to a common narrative to have emerged from Brexit that the vote was an expression of frustration by the white working class, which has now been challenged by several publications (Dorling, 2016; Khan & Shaheen, 2017; Swales, 2016). While exit polls confirmed that around two-thirds of those who voted in the lowest socio-economic brackets (D and E) voted to leave the EU (Ashcroft, 2016), it should also be noted that as a proportion of Leave voters this group accounted for just 24% of the vote (Dorling, 2016). Of all those who voted Leave, 59% were among the elite and middle classes (A, B or C1) (Dorling, 2016). The intersection of whiteness with class, narratives of white racial innocence and transgression, and of cosmopolitanism and parochialism, mark important points of focus for future research on national identity and belonging for UK nationals following the EU referendum.

## 4.2 | Loss and dislocation

Aside from shame and embarrassment, another common register of emotion among respondents was a profound sense of loss and dislocation. There was a common sense of no longer being able to recognise the UK. Many respondents used dramatic language to convey a visceral pulling away of their Britishness.

I find it difficult to recognise my own country now ... the attitude and the racism is so difficult to comprehend. (English, female, 60–64, professional occupation. France for three years)

I feel like the country I belong to has gone. Call me dramatic but the referendum vote was a real kick in the gut, I feel as though mean-spirited people have robbed me of my country and my future. England isn’t the country I always thought it was. (English, male, 25–29, teacher. Spain for one year or less)

I feel I no longer have a national identity. It has been robbed from me. I do not recognise my former country which I feel has betrayed me. I am grieving. (British, female, 40–44, professional occupations. France for one year or less)

This sense of dislocation spoke to participants’ ideas of both what Britishness was and what it had become. The shock expressed at the result and the associated rise in hate crime can be contrasted with Lewis’ research with British people of colour living in continental Europe, some of whom suggested that “Brexit and its aftermath [was] a continuation of the racisms they felt growing up and in adult life” (2018, np).

In terms of the last open question asked in the survey, “Can you think of an occasion when it was difficult or when you were uncertain as a result of the 23 June referendum, and if so what happened?”, a handful of respondents were deeply upset about abusive comments directed towards non-British Europeans in the UK that they had witnessed or heard about

from friends. In addition, a small minority of respondents had themselves experienced animosity, which they attributed to their being viewed as non-British Europeans while in the UK.

Initially we were nervous driving a European registered car in UK and on our first trip back the car was keyed in a car park. (British, female, 75–79, retired from a professional occupation.<sup>3</sup> France for five years)

Being racially abused for speaking German in the UK on the phone after the referendum. No longer visit the UK. (English, male, 40–44, professional occupation. Germany for 17 years)

The responses to the survey frequently confirmed Emejulu's (2016) concern that racism and xenophobia only became a matter of great concern in the public sphere when it started to affect certain white Europeans, and in this case white Britons. In contrast, neighbours and colleagues in their host country were overwhelmingly reported as being supportive, bar a few jokes along the lines of "I suppose you'll have to leave now?" Just one respondent reported a more aggressive response after being told to "eff off back to the UK" (British, male, 55–59, retired. France for 10 years).

As much as the expressions of shame and loss by respondents distanced them from the UK, arguably the intensity of their responses showed their ongoing investment in the country. For this final quote, I return to the first open-ended question about national identity to highlight the significant minority of respondents whose shame and dislocation was associated with a new sense of humility about their previous understandings of social divisions in Britain.

I reflect that some of my feelings of being born into a reasonably fair-minded, tolerant & charitable society have been rocked: perhaps those feelings were based on myths & the truth is that UK society is no better than many others & it is necessary to understand each other's positions, to listen with some humility & to work & fight for the future of the young of the UK & EU & the rest of the world. (British, female, 65–69, retired. France for 15 years)

A substantial minority, perhaps unsurprisingly given the approach to recruitment, also expressed a desire to act and to participate politically in a more profound way.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

This paper hopes to offer a timely intervention into wider debates about privileged mobilities and shifting landscapes of belonging, citizenship and Britishness following the results of the EU referendum in June 2016. First, it outlined a new articulation of the "bad Britain" discourse among British emigrants, which mourns the decline of an open, liberal and multi-cultural UK following the referendum to a country characterised by xenophobia and insularity. In exploring such viewpoints, the paper aims to complicate the common stereotype of Britons abroad seeking to isolate themselves from difference by living in enclaves with their compatriots, outlined in the introduction. In the UK at least, this survey found that respondents valued open, culturally and ethnically diverse societies.

Anderson and Wilson (2017b) tracked widespread grievance at a perceived loss of innocence attached to Britain and Britishness among Remain supporters. In the wake of the emotions provoked by the EU referendum, it is worth considering what emotional displays are valued or convey "distinction" for those who perform them (Wetherell, 2012). Second, the paper explored some of the emotional work at present which goes into renegotiating national identity and belonging among white Britons following the referendum. We should take the ethical stance of respondents seriously and their responses were by no means a straightforward defence of white privilege. The responses to the survey rejected xenophobic modes of national belonging and inter-personal racism. They were committed to the ideals of an inclusive and open national society. However, insofar as the expressions of shame and loss explored contained racism both temporally, to an extraordinary recent event, and socially, to ignorant, uneducated individuals, so ignoring longer histories and issues of systemic racism, following Emejulu, we should consider how they maintain "another operation of whiteness – that of innocence" (2016, np).

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The video had been watched over 48,000 times at the time of publication.

- <sup>2</sup>
- How would you describe your national identity?
  - What is your age?
  - What is your gender?
  - What is your occupation?
  - How would you describe your ethnic identity?
  - Where in Europe do you reside for most of the year?
  - How long have you lived in this EU country of residence?
  - How do you feel about the results of the EU referendum on the 23rd of June 2016?
  - Has the 23rd June referendum caused you to reflect on your national identity, and if so in what way?
  - Has the 23rd June referendum caused you to change your plans for the future, and if so in what way?
  - Can you think of an occasion when it was difficult or when you were uncertain as a result of the June 23rd referendum, and if so what happened?

<sup>3</sup> If survey respondents were retired, they were asked to select this occupation and the description which best fit their previous occupation. However, not everyone provided the latter information. I have included this detail when it was provided.

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