
Brexit Logics: Myth and Fact – A Black Feminist Analysis

Sweta Rajan-Rankin*

On June 24, 2016, the UK voted to leave the European Union in a landmark referendum result. The 'Brexit' vote along with Trump's presidential election in America, the Turkish referendum, the French election and the rise in far-right groups more globally, have been underpinned by certain populist 'logics'. This comment seeks to agitate these Brexit logics through a Black Feminist perspective that refocuses current debates on power and the intersectional politics of gender, race and class.¹

Several explanations have been put forth by commentators to explain the Brexit result. Primary among them, is the **'new populism' argument**.² In the popular media, the Brexit vote (and Trump's presidency) has been portrayed as a 'whitelash' by the disenfranchised working class against a liberal elite government, and a nostalgia for nationalism and self-governance.³ The new populism argument can be countered on many fronts. A demographic and spatial analysis of the Brexit vote clearly indicates that white, middle-class Southerners, rather than working class Northerners were the most influential in the referendum result.⁴ As Danny Dorling states "Brexit has unfairly been blamed on the poor white working class",⁵ when in fact austerity, inequality and Empire have had a far bigger role to play. As Emejulu notes, the Brexit vote is predicated on a "revanchist politics" and reluctance to give up white privilege.⁶ Whiteness itself needs to be unpacked. The lack of differentiation between white middle class privilege, white working class mobilisation and far-right extremism, can further impede meaningful attempts to examine whiteness, and thus to curb its extremist manifestations.⁷

'Enemy at the gates': immigration, racism(s) and hate crime: Media coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis, notably the 'Breaking Point' picture of UKIP leader Nigel Farage smiling ominously, with hordes of refugees milling in the background, was an important turning point in the Brexit vote.⁸ Right-wing rhetoric around the 'enemy at

* Senior Lecturer in Social Work, School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, University of Kent, UK. S.Rajan-Rankin@kent.ac.uk.

¹ Davis, A. (1983). *Women: Race and Class*. New York: First Vintage Books; hooks, b. (1981). *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. New York: Southend Press.

² Akbaba, Y. & Jeffrey, B. (Eds.). (2017). *The Implications of "New Populism" for Education*. London: Wiley Blackwell.

³ Kellner, D. (2017). "Brexit plus, whitelash, and the ascendancy of Donald J. Trump". *Cultural Politics*, 13(2): 135-149.

⁴ Christys, P. (2016). "Middle class Southerners CAUSED Brexit, not working class Northerners, polls reveal". *The Express*, 29 September 2016.

⁵ Dorling, D. (2016). "Brexit: the decision of a divided country". *BMJ*, 354: i3697. DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.i3697>.

⁶ Emejulu, A. (2017). "Resisting the revanchist state". Plenary session, BSA Annual Conference, 4-6 April 2017, University of Manchester.

⁷ Winter, A. (2000). "The 'new' right: definition, identification, differentiation". *Sociological Research Online*, 5(1). <https://www.socresonline.org.uk/5/1/winter.html>.

⁸ Martinson, J. (2017). "Media painted bleak picture of immigration before Brexit vote, study finds". *The Guardian*, 10 May 2017.

the gates' and the immigration 'crises' was used in the media as an important trigger for the Brexit vote, but this is a crude and over-simplistic argument. The UK has a long history of waves of immigration, each embedded within a specific time, place and context. First wave immigrants who came to the UK in the 1940s have different migrant histories to post-globalisation highly skilled economic immigrants for example. Indeed, there are many BME Leave voters, especially South Asian immigrants from the 1947 resettlement, who perceive the influx of East-European immigrant workers to be a threat to their own hard-won status as British workers.⁹ In this regard, the racialisation of immigration becomes central to Brexit analysis.¹⁰

The swelling of hate crime post-referendum is a case in point. Jo Cox's murder, a white female British MP killed by a white man uttering 'Britain First', could be seen as a racist attack based on race-as-white nationalism. The 'enemy' here is not at the gates, but represents *the borders within*, the divided citizenry of a raced and classed Britain.¹¹ The post-referendum attacks on Poles,¹² acid attacks and other forms of Islamophobia and hate crime, are indicative of both racism and xenoracism,¹³ demonstrating that the 'racialised other' is not a singular entity. The 'enemy at the gates' logic then collapses under fine-grained scrutiny.

'British jobs for British people': On the heels of an economic recession, political instability and flagging trust from the British public, both the Conservative government and the Labour party in the UK popularised this rhetoric. The concept of 'Britishness' obfuscates the significant social divisions in Britain and nationalism becomes a poor proxy for citizenship. Nostalgia, underpinning much of the victimhood narratives of populist nationhood discourse (Britain First, Make America Great Again) are not so much about 'citizen as nation' as 'white nation'. The 'stolen' jobs under question are in reality performed by the racialised 'other', specifically female, BME workers in low status, poorly paid jobs, not sought after by white British (male) workers. Case in point are the feminised and racialised 'dirty work' performed by NHS cleaners, porters, nurses, care workers and social workers which attracts mostly BME workers, as few others want to do these jobs.¹⁴ Rhetoric does not match reality.

To conclude, the Brexit vote has unearthed and reinvigorated the politics of difference and social inequalities which have for long complicated Britain's diversity project. A Black Feminist analysis makes visible these tensions and explodes popular myths of 'us' and 'them', which have long been nurtured within nationhood narratives.

⁹ Begum, N. (2016). "Responses to UKIP and the EU Referendum among Black Asian Minority Ethnic People". BSA Race and Ethnicity Post-Graduate Conference, London, 16 October 2016.

¹⁰ Erel, U., Murji, K., & Nahaboo, Z. (2016). "Understanding the contemporary race-migration nexus". *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 29(8): 1339-1360.

¹¹ Bhabra, G.K. (2017). "Locating Brexit in the pragmatics of race, citizenship and Empire". In Outhwaite, W. (Ed.). *Brexit: Sociological Responses*. London: Anthem Press.

¹² Krupa, J. (2016). "The killing of a Polish man exposes the reality of post-referendum racism". *The Guardian*, 5 September 2016.

¹³ Sivanandan, A. (2002). "The contours of global racism". www.westagainstracismnetwork.org.

¹⁴ Dyer, S., McDowell, L., & Batnitzky, A. (2008). "Emotional labour/ body work: the caring labours of migrants in the UK's National Health Service". *Geoforum*, 39: 2030-2038.