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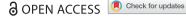
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ABSTRACT

Gender as a concept is essential for understanding British/English national identity. Feminist and queer scholars note that gender and sexuality are central to politics, yet frequently omitted from political analysis. Some scholars have highlighted the hegemonic masculinities that underpinned Brexit campaigns, but the role of gender in the construction of national identity in Europe has not been analyzed in depth. Combining the literature on national and European identities with feminist theories of gender and nationalism, I outline four discourses of Anglo-British exceptionalism: (1) British sovereignty and military power; (2) the British as defenders of liberty; (3) Britain as a global trading nation; and (4) England as a white Protestant "island nation." Constructed in relation the European "Other," these discourses are underpinned by gender-based hierarchies that intersect with class, race, and sexuality. These findings demonstrate the need for feminist and gender analysis not only of the UK's relationship with the European Union (EU) but also more broadly within political science and EU studies.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Gender als Konzept ist essentiell, um britische/englisch Identität zu verstehen. Feministische und queere WissenschaftlerInnen haben beobachtet, dass Gender und Sexualität eine zentrale Rolle in der Politik spielen, sie aber in der politischen Analyse oft nicht berücksichtigt werden. Einige WissenschaftlerInnen haben die hegemonischen Maskulinitäten, die die Brexit-Kampagnen untermauerten, hervorgehoben, aber die Rolle von Gender in der Konstruktion nationaler Identitäten in Europa wurde noch nicht ausführlich untersucht. Indem ich Literatur über nationale und europäische Identitäten mit feministischen Theorien des Nationalismus zusammenbringe, stelle ich vier Bedeutungen des Anglo-Britischen Exzeptionalismus dar: Britische Souveränität als militärische Macht; die Briten als Verteidiger der Freiheit; Großbritannien als globale Handelsnation; und England als weiße, protestantische "Inselnation." Diese Diskurse sind als Gegensatz zum

europäischen Anderen konstruiert und von gender-bezogenen Hierarchien untermauert, die sich auch hinsichtlich Ethnizität, Klasse und Sexualität überschneiden. Diese Ergebnisse belegen die Notwendigkeit einer feministischen und genderbezogenen Analyse nicht nur der britischen Beziehung mit der Europäischen Union (EU), sondern auch allgemein in der Politikwissenschaft und in EU-Studien.

Introduction

In this article, I demonstrate the value of gender as a lens for understanding British/English national identity through an analysis of discourses of Anglo-British exceptionalism. Gender and sexuality are central to the study of politics, yet frequently omitted from mainstream political science analysis (Smith and Lee 2015). Some scholars have highlighted the hegemonic masculinities that underpinned Brexit campaign discourses, which glorified traditionally masculine traits of power and heteronormativity (Achilleos-Sarll and Martill 2019; Galpin 2022a; Higgins 2020), yet the role of gender in the construction of national identity in relation to Europe has not been analyzed in depth. Analysis of gender, however, helps us to understand not only the project of Brexit itself, but also the inequalities embedded within the country's post-Brexit future.

Anglo-British exceptionalism is central to not only Brexit but also the history of the UK's European Union (EU) membership (see for example Crozier 2020; Nedergaard and Henriksen 2018). I conceptualize discourses of Anglo-British exceptionalism as constructions of national identity in which Britain is imagined as not only "singular and radically different from the cultures of other European countries" (Diez Medrano 2003, 214; see also Gamble 2018; Risse 2010) but also as superior in a hierarchy of people and nations (Slootmaeckers 2019, 256; Triandafyllidou 1998; Wodak and Boukala 2015). Such discourses are intricately linked to British colonialism, in which European integration came to symbolize, for supporters, a new means of advancing British power and interests, and for opponents, the nation's imperial decline (Crozier 2020). Discourses of British exceptionalism are, however, primarily English (Wellings 2007). While historically the English referred to "England" when they spoke of Britain, more recently politicians have used "the politically correct 'Britain', but by it they meant

England" (Kumar 2003, 228). I therefore employ the term "Anglo-British exceptionalism" to reflect this conflation of Englishness and Britishness.

I contribute to the literature in two key ways. First, though political science analysis has noted the centrality of Anglo-British exceptionalism to British identity, it has failed to highlight its exclusionary gendered dynamics. Gendered conceptions of national identity are, however, crucial to legitimizing policies that have unequal consequences for women and non-binary people. Feminist scholars have illustrated this through their analysis of the British Empire. Phillipa Levine (2007, 273) has argued that the "construction of gendered ideas of manliness and femininity" was key to Anglo-British exceptionalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while Praseeda Gopinath (2013) has traced the white masculinities of Englishness in the twentieth century and Sikata Banerjee (2006) has explored how the hegemonic masculinity that underpinned British colonialism was reconfigured and resisted through Hindu nationalism in India. These masculinities and their racialized dimensions have, however, been overlooked in the Brexit context. For example, Peter Nedergaard and Maja Henriksen (2018, 134) have claimed that British exceptionalism has "thus far primarily had positive effects on other countries." Such approaches to British exceptionalism overlook the way in which "Englishness, and therefore by extension Britishness, is racially coded" (Parekh 2000, 38). At the same time, postcolonial scholars of Brexit have not analyzed gender within these racialized identity discourses in significant depth (see for example Bhambra 2017; Namusoke 2016; Virdee and McGeever 2018). Through the study of Brexit, I contribute to knowledge of national identity in relation to Europe in a way that highlights both the racial and gender-based hierarchies embedded within contemporary Anglo-British exceptionalism, which can shed light on the likely gendered impact of Brexit (Guerrina and Masselot 2018; Hozić and True 2017).

Second, I contribute to the wider literature in political science and EU/European studies in particular. Feminist approaches to political science have been proliferating in recent years. Victoria M. Basham and Nick Vaughan-Williams (2013, 510) have highlighted the importance of gender, race, and class "in shaping the political possibility of norm and exception" in bordering practices. They have demonstrated the way in which gender operates through the "gender-dichotomised binaries (masculine/feminine, strong/weak, rational/emotional)" that underpin political and social ideas (Basham and Vaughan-Williams 2013, 524). Gender is, in this sense, "both a material effect of the way in which power takes hold of the body and an ideological effect of the way power 'conditions' the mind" (Squires and Weldes 2007, 187). As Roberta Guerrina et al. (2018, 253) have argued, the absence of gender analysis of Brexit is reflective of the way in which EU studies upholds "structures of power that keep traditionally marginal groups … on the periphery of the EU project." In applying gender analysis to the literature

on national identity in Europe, I demonstrate how, following Nicola J. Smith and Donna Lee (2015, 54), states and bodies are typically "imagined to reside in different realms." Despite the substantial volume of political science research on British/English identity (see for example Henderson et al. 2017; Wellings 2007) and national identity in Europe (see for example Diez Medrano 2003; Wodak and Boukala 2015), we have little understanding of the way in which these gender binaries shape national belonging in Europe.

In the next section, I present my theoretical framework, which brings together the literature on national and European identity with feminist theories of gender and nationalism. I then outline four discourses of Anglo-British exceptionalism in Europe that are based, respectively, on military power, ideas of British liberty, industrial and economic power, and white and Protestant culture, all of which promote gender-based and racial hierarchies in what it means to be British. Using empirical examples from the referendum campaign and from the existing literature on British/English identity, I demonstrate the value of applying a gender lens in the study of Brexit and the UK's relationship with Europe. In the context of Brexit, these discourses of Anglo-British exceptionalism that were integral to colonial violence and gender-based oppression have justified both the UK's departure from the EU as well as calls to remain in the EU on account of its supposed responsibility to "lead" in Europe.

Gender, national identity, and the "Other"

Ideas about Europe and the EU play a key role in constructing national identity in different ways, yet despite the existence of a wide feminist and queer literature on nationalism, many authors of major works on European identity discourses have overlooked the role of gender (see for example Checkel and Katzenstein 2009; Diez Medrano 2003; Risse 2010). The idea of Europe becomes infused with discourses of national identity (Risse 2010). Between and within nation states, the meaning of "Europe" is contested and closely tied to historical memories (Malmborg and Stråth 2002). Europe therefore becomes a "discursive battleground" (Diez 2001) in which some ideas about Europe become dominant and others are marginalized. Through discourse, we gain an understanding of the content of national and European identity, of what "Europe" or "being European" (or "not being European") are taken to mean in different contexts.

Like national identity, gender is discursively constructed, with discourses or "scripts" of gender shaping appropriate behavior and expected social norms for men and women (Butler 1993). These discourses of gender are closely connected with discourses of national identity. For example, Nira Yuval-Davis (1997) has argued that the nation always involves particular ideas about manhood and womanhood in different ways that are also

racialized. I draw on the concept of hegemonic masculinity as developed by R. W. Connell, which "embodies the currently most respected/honoured way of what it means to be a man" (Slootmaeckers 2019, 246). While hegemonic masculinity is dependent on culture and context and is enforced through structural power, it upholds the patriarchal order and male power over women (Connell 2005, 77). Hegemonic masculinity is, as Connell has noted, not something that most men achieve but the ideal to which they are continually compared. Furthermore, because, as Claire Duncanson (2009, 64) has demonstrated, gender is a practice, an active process, there are always "multiple, dynamic and contradictory" masculinities at play, which means that dominant meanings of masculinity can shift according to context. For Connell (2005, 76), hegemonic masculinity is one "that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable."

For masculinity to become hegemonic, it must be connected in some way to institutional or structural power (Connell 2005, 76), reflecting the public/private binary. Within the nation, the interests of the hegemonic masculine figure become attached to the public sphere of citizenship and of military, economic, or political power. The public sphere therefore shapes "the paradigmatic form of hegemonic masculinity for the modern era" (Hooper 2000, 47), typically through the individualist "bourgeois rational actor" (Hooper 2000, 35) and/or "armed defence of the nation" (Jones 1994, 266). Femininity is relegated to the private sphere; women are responsible for, literally, the biological continuation of the nation or, through motherhood, the transfer of expected cultural and social norms and behaviors from one generation to the next (Peterson 1994, 78). Both gender and sexuality are therefore important in the establishment of "the heteropatriarchal family/ household as the basic socio-economic unit" that controls women's sexual behavior and reproductive choices (Peterson 2013, 57).

The public/private binary underpins inclusion in/exclusion from the nation. National and European identity is constructed in relation to an "Other," an outsider that shapes the distinctiveness of the "in-group" (Triandafyllidou 1998; Wodak and Boukala 2015). Othering is not only about constructing difference, but also superiority through a hierarchical order of people and nations, and is therefore closely connected to exceptionalism (Slootmaeckers 2019, 246; Triandafyllidou 1998; Wodak and Boukala 2015). Through the construction of a threat, the Other differentiates between "us" (the Europeans, the British, or the English, for example) and "them" (the outsiders, the "inferior," the non-Europeans, the non-British, or the non-English); it draws the boundaries and determines the values of the community (Wodak and Boukala 2015, 89). The Other can be internal or external. According to Anna Triandafyllidou (1998, 600), internal Others are "those that belong to the same political entity with the in-group" (in this context,

Others within Europe or within the nation), whereas external Others are "those that form a separate political unit." As I show, Europe functions in a variety of ways as the external Other of Britain/England, often with "elites" as internal Others through populist discourses of exclusive national identity.

Othering processes here depend on the patriarchal binary between masculinity (the nation) and femininity (the Other) (see for example Banerjee 2006, 64; Fahey 2007; Peterson 1994, 83). According to V. Spike Peterson (2013, 64), the construction of national identity involves the naturalization of sex differences through the denunciation of femininity and marginalized masculinities in "us"/"them" dynamics. In her study of US–French relations during the Iraq War, for example, Anna Cornelia Fahey (2007, 137–138) has argued that France is coded as the "feminized Other" through the idea of "military impotence." The result of this, she has demonstrated, is that "dissent is feminized and devalued, while at the same time military force and prowess are masculinized and highly valued." Femininity, then, is defined in its opposition to "armed masculinity" by "traits such as weakness, non-violence, compassion and a willingness to compromise" (Banerjee 2006, 64).

Yet hegemonic masculinity exists not only in relation to femininity but also other subordinated or marginalized masculinities (Connell 2005, 11). Koen Slootmaeckers (2019, 242) has demonstrated how the superior masculine nation is constructed through homophobia as a "disciplining mechanism of masculinity that operates through the fear of being associated with homosexuality and/or an effeminate type of masculinity." Within the British Empire, hegemonic masculinity was constructed in relation to a "supposedly 'effeminate' colonial other" (Banerjee 2006, 64), reflecting the intersectional feminist argument that gender, race, and class are not separate categories but "reciprocally constructing phenomena" (Collins 2015, 2). In contemporary Europe, whiteness excludes citizens of color as well as the "immigrant Other" from conceptions of Europe and the nation (Ammaturo 2019, 550; Bhambra 2015). As Peo Hansen (2002, 494) has noted, the failure to acknowledge the colonial histories of the EU and its member states has resulted in identities "built on imperial pride, racial superiority and the sense of partaking in a communal European civilizing mission." Hegemonic masculinity therefore cannot be separated from whiteness; it is constructed in relation to the racialized "inferior" masculine Other. Hegemonic femininity, in such discourses, sees white women as "the symbolic markers of the nation and of the group's cultural identity" (Peterson 1994, 79), their bodies representing the motherland that is "ever in danger of violation – by 'foreign' males" (Peterson 1994, 80). As such, women are not "agents in their own right but instruments for realizing male-defined agendas" (Peterson 1994, 80).

In national discourses of Europe, therefore, different ideals of hegemonic masculinity are embedded within constructions of the nation. The process

of constructing Europe, the EU, or other member states as external Others simultaneously imagines them as feminine or an "inferior" or threatening version of masculinity. Anglo-British exceptionalism not only constructs national identity but also reproduces the hierarchical gender-based and racial order (Achilleos-Sarll and Martill 2019, 22). Britain/England is constructed as "exceptional" through the presence of a European Other that, in a variety of ways, threatens the hegemonic white masculinities of the nation. In the following sections, I outline four discourses of Anglo-British exceptionalism in relation to Europe that came to prominence during Brexit: (1) British sovereignty as military power; (2) the British as defenders of liberty; (3) Britain as a global trading nation; and (4) England as a white Protestant "island nation." These four discourses of Anglo-British exceptionalism are not exhaustive but serve to illustrate the way in which constructions of British/English identity in Europe reproduce gender, sexual, and racial inequalities.

British sovereignty as military power

One of the most dominant elements of Britishness/Englishness during Brexit was the defense of British sovereignty, in which the British were imagined as an "island people that stood alone against a succession of (European) enemies" (Gamble 2003, 109). In relation to the EU, the "military" defense of British sovereignty centers on parliamentary rather than territorial sovereignty as the right to make laws "free from external control" (Saunders 2018, 234). Militarized masculinity is embedded here within exceptionalist ideas of Britain not only as separate or different from but also implicitly superior to Europe. The defense of British sovereignty is imagined as a military campaign waged by a nation of war heroes, of valiant soldiers who persevere in a "lonely struggle" in Europe (Gamble 2003, 109). According to Graham Dawson (1994, 1), the idea of heroic, military masculinity has long been connected to "representations of British imperial identity" in which a "real man" was one "prepared to fight … for Queen, Country and Empire." The defense of British sovereignty therefore reproduces gendered hierarchies: masculine superiority, defined as the willingness to be "tough" and "battle-ready." In the defense of national sovereignty, national, military superiority is equated with masculine superiority.

References to British "acts of 'genius', 'courage', and 'heroic resistance'" (Diez Medrano 2003, 228) underpin discourses on European integration that imagine other EU member states – particularly France and Germany – as military enemies and construct British identity through "micro-narratives about the nation's Great Men" (Dawson 1994, 13). Since the early days of membership, British Eurosceptics have criticized the "diktat" of European Economic Community (EEC) rules (Diez Medrano 2003, 136), while France

has been portrayed as the "enemy" in tabloid coverage of the EU/Brexit, with headlines such as "French Plot to 'Wreck' Britain" (Walters 2017). The EU has also long been constructed as a product of Germany's "expansionist ambitions" (Anderson and Weymouth 1999, 65). During the referendum campaign, for example, Boris Johnson compared the EU's aims to those of Hitler and Napoleon "using different methods" and urged British people to once again be "the heroes of Europe" (Ross 2016a). Nigel Farage traveled around the country on a tour bus playing the theme song from the film *The Great Escape*, implicitly comparing Brexit to escaping a Nazi prisoner of war camp (Shirbon 2016). During post-referendum negotiations, pro-Brexit members of Parliament (MPs) drew on similar tropes, with Conservative MP Mark Francois referencing his father, a D-Day veteran, who "never submitted to bullying by any German and neither will his son" (*BBC News* 2019). Constructions of masculinity here "link manliness to violence and domination" in the defense of the nation vis-à-vis the EU (Wright 2020, 655).

As Nira Yuval-Davis (1997, 47) has noted, women, particularly mothers, "often symbolize the collectivity unity, honour and the *raison d'être* of specific national and ethnic projects, like going to war." The patriarchal gender structure is embedded within the idea of Britain as the birthplace of parliamentary democracy (Wellings 2007, 400), which is central to exceptionalist discourses as "the most valuable British export and the one for which we are most famous" (Johnson 2016a). In reference to the tumultuous parliamentary votes over the EU Withdrawal Agreement, for example, Conservative MP Maggie Throup argued that MPs' decisions would "determine the future of this Parliament – the mother of all Parliaments, which has served our nation through war and peace for the best part of 1,000 years" (Hansard 2019). The need to defend the "mother of all Parliaments" reveals the reproductive labor of idealized femininity in supporting the nation in the face of the European "enemy" and the "raison d'être" of the symbolic military struggle against the EU.

The construction of women as "the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honour" (Yuval-Davis 1997, 45) also means that women are often punished when they do not fulfill this supporting role, becoming internal Others judged as traitors of the nation who are "hindering the metaphorical war effort" (Koller 2019; see also Koller, Kopf, and Miglbauer 2019). For example, then Prime Minister Theresa May was accused by pro-Brexit MPs of "betraying the British people" in requesting an extension to the Brexit negotiation period. Images of May as the female figure of Britannia (see for example Goodman 2017) demonstrated the expectations on her as a feminine symbol of national honor. Violent and often sexualized discourse directed primarily but not exclusively toward women politicians was also a key feature of referendum debates. The murder of pro-Remain Labour MP Jo Cox by far-right extremist Thomas Mair, who shouted slogans such as

"Britain first, keep Britain independent" and "Britain always comes first, this is for Britain" and demanded "death to traitors" when he first appeared in court (Lusher 2016), took this discourse to the extreme. Women MPs and public figures reported that they had been called traitors who deserved to be shot or hung (Walker 2017), while others received sexually violent, misogynistic, and racist messages (Galpin 2022b, 165). Such abuse silences women in public life who are perceived to have stepped out of line; in 2019, 18 women MPs resigned, many citing the impact of abuse that they received (Galpin 2022b, 166).

Opponents of Brexit were also feminized, with British masculinity constructed "as antithetical to the political establishment and its effete admiration for Europe" (Higgins 2020, 102). In nationalist discourse, masculinized "willingness to engage in battle" is typically juxtaposed with feminized "inferiority" defined by weakness, willingness to compromise, and readiness to capitulate (Banerjee 2006, 64). The "strong, brave and heroic" nation was thus contrasted with "weak and cowardly" Others. Boris Johnson, for example, proclaimed that Theresa May's negotiation strategy had seen the UK going "into battle with the white flag fluttering over our leading tank" (Stolton 2018). When asked why he would not support the Prime Minister's deal and "bank the win," Mark Francois replied: "Because it's not a win, it's a lose. I'm not going to bank a lose. I was in the army, I wasn't trained to lose" (Steerpike 2019). Francois therefore associated May's Withdrawal Agreement with military defeat. Later on, Johnson and his allies continually referred to the parliamentary act that required the government to seek an extension to the Article 50 negotiation period as the "surrender act." British masculinity was therefore constructed in relation to emasculated internal Others who were not only "surrendering" to the EU but also threatening the masculine nation. This defense of British sovereignty is built on patriarchal hierarchies of male strength, power, and toughness, alongside the idealized, hegemonic femininity that needs to be defended and the feminized Others – external and internal – who must be defeated.

The link between Britain, sovereignty, and masculine power was, however, not exclusive to Eurosceptic discourse. For pro-Europeans, sovereignty was perceived less as formal sovereignty that is gained or lost through EEC/EU membership than as power obtained through European leadership that compensates for the loss of empire (Saunders 2018, 232) and maintains the balance of power in Europe. Such discourse may reflect what Claire Duncanson (2009) has referred to as an alternative "peacekeeper masculinity" in which Britain is imagined as a "force for good" in the world outside of traditional combat. The idea of Britain's destiny as a leading nation was visible in justifications for EEC membership in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, George Brown, the foreign secretary under Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson, argued in 1967 that "we are, and have been for eleven centuries since the reign of King

Alfred, one of the leaders of Europe" (Wellings 2014, 106). As Juan Diez Medrano (2003, 139) has noted, pro-European discourse has long imagined "Europe" as a necessary means to counteract the dominance of the United States, Russia, and more recently China. As such, the risk of being seen as "small" or "weak" is avoided through European integration. Guaranteeing national sovereignty through European integration thus rests on Anglo-British exceptionalism as a "rightful power" that not only underpinned the British Empire and colonial violence but also constructs gendered hierarchies of "strong men" and "weak women." This sense of entitlement to lead and triumph comes, however, from imaginings of the British, or English, as defenders of liberty.

The British as defenders of liberty

Anglo-British exceptionalism involves not only the idea of Britain's superior parliamentary institutions but also the enduring myth of the "freeborn Englishman" (Langlands 1999, 57), the idea that the English are inherently free and staunch defenders of liberty and moderation (Kenny 2014, 35). The supposedly intrinsic desire for liberty is not only about individual rights but also freedom from emotions. Embedded in this idea is the public/private binary that feminist scholars have long shown reinforces the gender-based hierarchies of the Western nation state (see Volpp (2017) for an overview). Rationality, pragmatism, and objectivity are thus associated with masculinity, and irrationality, subjectivity, and emotionality with femininity, granting heterosexual men the status of citizens and relegating women and queer people to the private sphere (Hooper 2000).

As Phillipa Levine (2007, 274) has explained, this binary of freedom versus emotions underpinned gender relations in the British Empire, in which "neutrality and objectivity were signifiers, in a sense, of a white masculinity that rose above measurement and assessment." This masculinity was juxtaposed with colonized men, historically constructed as weak and effeminate, failing to achieve the standards of English masculinity. The Victorian idea of the "English gentleman" who had an innate self-discipline (Gopinath 2013; Mosse 1985) served as a justification for the British Empire; with his superior aptitude for self-restraint, he was considered inherently capable of "self-government," representing the "markers of autonomy and right to self-determination and, as a consequence, the right to govern others" (Gopinath 2013, 28). It is this image of the Victorian gentleman that pro-Brexit Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg is often said to promote (Fletcher 2018).

The myth of liberty as innate to the English character was constructed in relation to two external Others acting in tandem: the "unfree" colonized peoples (in particular, as Robbie Shilliam (2018) has argued, the Black slave) and Europe as the "unfree continent" (Wallace 1991, 69). First, on

account of their supposed natural inclination for freedom, the English were, Shilliam has explained, juxtaposed with Black slaves in the Caribbean, such that any enslavement of Englishmen would be considered "a distinct injustice, a sullying of the English genus" itself (Shilliam 2018, 24; see also Smith 2020, 107). Enslavement as a threat to national identity was, in turn, reflected in racialized discourses about Europe. For example, Rees-Mogg argued that the UK would be "not so much a vassal state anymore as a slave state" as a result of Theresa May's deal (Berg Olsen 2018). In her maiden speech to the European Parliament, former Conservative MP and then Brexit Party member of the European Parliament (MEP) Ann Widdecombe (2019) later constructed Britain as "enslaved" by the EU, arguing that the country was leaving on account of the "pattern consistent throughout history of oppressed people turning on the oppressors, slaves against their owners, the peasantry against the feudal barons, and colonies … against their empires." In so doing, she appropriated anti-colonial struggles to construct the English as heroic revolutionaries who fight for their liberty. While at first glance not explicitly gendered, such arguments reproduce the idea, used to justify British colonialism, that the Englishman is inherently free.

Second, Europe as an "unfree continent" underpins the idea that Britain "liberated" occupied Europe from the totalitarian threat during the Second World War that is central to British EU discourse (Saunders 2018, 258; Wallace 1991, 71). This discourse again reflects the idea of a "peacekeeper masculinity," whereby the British military is imagined as acting heroically with restraint and discipline (Duncanson 2009). Britain is constructed as "the home of pragmatic moderation, in contrast to the utopianism and totalitarianism which the ideological politics of Continental Europe encouraged" (Kenny 2014, 36). By contrast, "Europeans" are implicitly feminized, understood to be "emotional, given to grand gestures and ideas, qualities which can easily make for instability" (Haseler 1996, 60). For example, in her 1988 speech in Bruges, then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher expressed her "pride" in Britain's "special contribution" to Europe:

> Had it not been for that willingness to fight and to die, Europe would have been united long before now – but not in liberty, not in justice. It was British support to resistance movements throughout the last War that helped to keep alive the flame of liberty in so many countries until the day of liberation. (Thatcher 1988)

In 2016, Europe was constructed as once again in the throes of extremism against which Britain must stand alone. For example, Boris Johnson described the EU referendum as an opportunity for the British to "act as a voice of moderation and common sense, and to stop something getting in my view out of control" (Ross 2016a). Conservative MP Michael Gove also used Britain's

commitment to liberty as a reason to leave the EU, which, he argued, jeopardized European stability and freedom:

> The high-handedness and undemocratic nature of EU institutions, the ongoing failure of the euro and the economic misery it has brought have all contributed to a weakening of liberal and democratic forces across Europe. Extremist and populist forces have grown in strength … Our ability to present a united front across the West in defence of liberalism and democracy is currently vitiated and undermined by the operation of the EU and its institutions. (Vote Leave 2016)

The idea of commitment to liberty as essential to British/English identity was also evident on the pro-Remain side. For example, in his call for a renegotiated EU membership, David Cameron (2013) argued that "in Europe's darkest hour, we helped keep the flame of liberty alight." In a Stronger In campaign video, former Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown (2016) also argued that a peaceful Europe had been secured "because of what Britain did to establish freedom across the whole of the continent." In pro-European discourses, the UK's membership has been consistently constructed as the "rational" or "practical" option. Cameron stated in his 2013 speech that, because of the "British sensibility," "we come to the European Union with a frame of mind that is more practical than emotional" (Cameron 2013). In 2016, the Stronger In campaign also continually constructed EU membership as a rational and practical option over one based on emotional attachment to Europe (Galpin 2022a).

The construction of Britain/England as a civilizing, progressive, or rational force for good in the world erases its history of colonial rule that was achieved through subjugation and violence and, by extension, excludes Black and Asian citizens from conceptions of Britishness/Englishness. The binary of the (white) rational man/irrational woman is, however, not only embedded within notions of Britain/England as a great civilizing nation, a symbol of objectivity in defense against the "emotionality" of Europe, but also within discourses of Britain as a global trading nation.

Britain as a global trading nation

Related to discourses of Anglo-British exceptionalism as both military power and commitment to liberty is a discourse of Britain as a global trading nation in which economic masculinity and male workers were front and center of its industrial power. This version of exceptionalism stems from the idea that British global economic supremacy was achieved through its nineteenth-century policy of "open seas" to ensure free trade (Baker, Gamble, and Seawright 2002, 422). Reflecting an oft-cited statement from Winston Churchill that "each time we must choose between Europe and the open

seas, we shall always choose the open seas," "Europe" is constructed as a threat to the global, masculine, trading nation.

First, this discourse of "open seas" during Brexit often centered on the defense of international trade and the corporate world or financial industry. Here, Europe is imagined as a feminized constraint on the country's "exceptional" global vocation through its presumed protectionist economic ethos. Columba Achilleos-Sarll and Benjamin Martill (2019, 23) have shown that the Brexit campaign utilized, alongside militarism, a form of masculinity linked to values of the "business*man*'s world" where the "spatial domain of the market and the corporate world represents distinctly masculinised spaces." Back in 1988, Margaret Thatcher (1988) argued against a "centralised bureaucracy" in Brussels that sought to limit the position of the City of London as "the biggest and most successful financial centre in Europe." Britain was constructed as a global economic power with a historically "outward-looking" approach – glossing over, for example, the British Empire's decimation of the Indian economy and the fact that this trade was far from "free" for the colonies (Tharoor 2017). Similarly, Boris Johnson (2016b) argued during the referendum campaign that it was "absurd that Britain – historically a great free-trading nation – has been unable for 42 years to do a free trade deal with Australia, New Zealand, China, India and America." The emphasis on "deal making" and the need for a "hard-line negotiating strategy" in the post-referendum period applied the masculine logics of the business world to the country's national economic interests (Achilleos-Sarll and Martill 2019, 35).

The EU as a constraint on Britain's economic power was sometimes explicitly equated with a threat to male sexuality. UK politicians were, for example, described as "impotent" under EU regulations (Johnson 2016a). The notion of a threat to British economic supremacy as masculinity was made particularly explicit by Johnson while visiting a factory in Derbyshire that makes high-end "classic" womenswear and whose managing director, Christopher Nieper, was a vocal Brexit supporter:

> [The EU] makes me think of some badly designed undergarment that has now become too tight in some places … and dangerously loose in other places. Now, is that the kind of undergarment we make here at David Nieper? Absolutely not. That's why you're continuing to do so well and according to both David and Christopher Nieper continuing to export around the world. What a fantastic achievement by a British company … Let's say knickers to the pessimists, knickers to all those who talk Britain down. (*Belfast Telegraph* 2016)

His comparison of the EU with what is obviously men's underwear constructs the EU as an emasculating force for Britain, while the British firm ensures the survival of this masculinity that enables the country's trading success. His use of the term "knickers" in denigrating supporters of Britain's EU membership

feminizes his opponents, as does his characterization of the EU as the "Nanny in Brussels" (Johnson 2016a). Such constructions of British identity emphasize British supremacy in the global economy, and in so doing equate national interests with masculine interests, and, indeed, economic power with sexual power.

Second, Anglo-British exceptionalism as a global trading nation also manifests in the defense of traditionally working-class (and primarily male) workers such as farmers, fishermen, shipbuilders, dockers, and miners in a form of "nostalgia for Britain's industrial past" (Bromley-Davenport, MacLeavy, and Manley 2019, 804). As Anthony Smith (2006, 439) has noted, attachment to English dominance in Europe is historically linked to control of ports. The north-eastern English port of Sunderland, a historic ship-building town, was, in post-referendum analyses, presented as the epicenter of the Leave vote, with two-thirds of voters preferring to leave the EU (*Independent* 2016). Sunderland became a symbol of disillusionment with the EU and of a dream of a return to the "good old days" in which the town was visibly packed with "working-class lads" not only from the local shipbuilding but also fishing and mining industries (Bromley-Davenport, MacLeavy, and Manley 2019, 804). These male workers are also racialized as part of the "white working class." Historically, informal color bars kept Black and Asian citizens in the worst and lowest-paid positions in these industries (Shilliam 2018, 82), while the trope of the "Polish plumber" who invariably took jobs from or worked harder than the local population also "ethnicised" "Eastern European" workers in this discourse (Drzewiecka, Hoops, and Thomas 2014, 417).

The EU here is blamed for the decline of traditional industries and the suffering of working-class men who were once central to Britain's maritime power. A well-known UK Independence Party (UKIP) poster from 2014 that featured a white male construction worker begging on the street with the slogan "EU policy at work. British workers are hit hard by unlimited cheap labour" (*Euractiv* 2014) symbolized this threat to white working-class masculinity. The focus on Sunderland was not new; it was prominent in the 2000s when Sunderland greengrocer Steve Thoburn – dubbed the "Metric Martyr" – challenged his court conviction for selling fruit and vegetables in imperial rather than metric measurements and came to represent Britain's struggle against the European Court of Justice (Drewry 2007, 101; Wellings 2007, 404). Like the issue of metric measurements, the fishing issue, as a result of EU regulations and the presence of European fishermen in British waters, had also long symbolized the EU's erosion of British sovereignty and the need for Britain to "stand on its own two feet" (Bromley-Davenport, MacLeavy, and Manley 2019, 806; Diez Medrano 2003, 52; Drewry 2007, 107) – put in characteristically blunt terms by Boris Johnson when he accused the EU of "pinching our fish" (Hughes 2016).

Finally, discourses of British identity that rest on the "exceptional" nature of traditional British/English industries reflect what Nicola J. Smith (2020, 102) has demonstrated is the strict sexual division of labor on which industrialization depended and in which women's reproductive labor was harnessed to support the nation's economic power. This was visible in the 1975 referendum campaign, when arguments for and against EEC membership generally focused on the interests of the "British housewife" (Saunders 2018, 197). In 2016, the sexual division of labor was evident, albeit less explicit. Most notably, Conservative leadership frontrunner Andrea Leadsom MP was forced to withdraw after suggesting that, because she had children, she had a bigger stake in the country's future and was thus more capable of delivering Brexit than Theresa May, who did not (Coates 2016). Though these comments were followed by outrage, Leadsom's status as a mother was also invoked by colleagues such as Conservative minister Owen Paterson (2016), who described her "as a mother who wanted the best chance for her children and their children to thrive in a sovereign nation." May (2016) also defined herself in the context of the traditional family, reminding people of her commitment to public service that resulted from growing up "the daughter of a local vicar and the granddaughter of a regimental sergeant major" (see also Eckert and Galpin 2022).

There were also more explicit images of motherhood. For example, a Leave.EU campaign advertisement pictured a pregnant woman in red lipstick smoking, ashtray on her belly, with the slogan "Some things in the 1970s seemed like a good idea at the time. The EU: An Outdated Idea"?[1] Such images reflected "ideas of national honor being expressed by female bodies" (Banerjee 2006, 75) and implied that leaving the EU was a question of good motherhood. As such, traditional (white) femininity was constructed as key to women's commitment to the nation. Yet the defense of this femininity became more explicit in the final facet of Anglo-British exceptionalism, that of England as a white Protestant island nation.

England as a white Protestant island nation

Anglo-British exceptionalism also involves the longstanding idea of England as a culturally, religiously, and ethnically homogeneous "island nation" (Gilroy 2002, 44). According to V. Spike Peterson (1994, 80), one dimension of gendered nationalism lies in the construction of the nation through a "spatial, embodied femaleness" in which "the land's fecundity, on which the people depend, must be protected by defending the body/nation's boundaries against invasion and violation." As Wendy Webster (2001, 584) has demonstrated, imaginings of a typically rural, domestic order construct an "intimate, private, exclusive, white-Englishness" that was, in post-war immigration discourse, perceived to be under threat from Black male sexuality. In Brexit

discourses, it is the EU that facilitates the predominantly, but not exclusively, Muslim immigration that threatens this English way of life.

First, Christianity, and more specifically Protestantism – though it is not always named as such – is at the core of this English identity in EU discourse in the emphasis on rural or village life and traditional families. The construction of a Protestant nation fighting the illiberal tendencies of Catholic France was historically a key driver of the British sense of superiority in Europe (Colley 2003). Britain's Christian identity has been explicitly reaffirmed by successive prime ministers, though UKIP politicians have drawn the clearest connection between national identity and Christianity. Nigel Farage, for example, wrote that UKIP is the only party in Britain "that still cherishes our Judeo-Christian heritage" (Duffy 2016). As David Tollerton (2017) has argued, the idea of "Christianity under siege" is connected in public discourse with "Britishness under siege." Protestantism is embedded within discourses of English culture through the idyllic image of the English countryside and villages, of which the Church of England lies at the heart. The "English countryside" has become an increasingly politicized identity (McCormack 2005, 76), including in EU debates. In the early 1990s, then Prime Minister John Major sought to reassure Eurosceptic Conservative MPs of his commitment, despite his support of the Maastricht Treaty, to the preservation of British identity: "Britain will still be the country of long shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers and – as George Orwell said – 'old maids cycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist'" (Kumar 2003, 227). Here we see that British identity is defined not by Britain being a Protestant state per se, but by a rural way of life and traditional gender norms that center on the Church. As Ethan Doyle White (2019, 387) has shown, Farage articulated Christianity first and foremost as part of his English identity, once stating that he is "Christian in the normal English way – I love communing with my ancestors who built the mighty English church and who lie in its churchyard." During the referendum campaign, English villages and green spaces were constructed as under threat from EU immigration. For example, Conservative MP Liam Fox (2016) argued that communities across the country were overwhelmed by the pressure for house building resulting from immigration. Concern about loss of green spaces, farmland, and wetland evokes nostalgia for rural England, while references to a lack of school places, oversubscribed doctors' surgeries, and the struggles of "young families" recall the idea of a "violation of domestic sanctuaries" that was central to post-war immigration discourse (Webster 2001, 557).

Second, then, this rural and domestic life in Protestant England is imagined to be under threat from a foreign Other through immigration, implicitly Catholic and more explicitly Muslim. This is revealed in Fox's reference to immigrants from "Southern Europe" and potential "future" EU member

states – the possibility of Turkish membership having been central to the Leave campaigns. In one sense, England/Britain is placed within Europe as an implicitly white Protestant continent. David Cameron (2013), for example, cited the Reformation as a key shared moment in European history. In early debates about European integration, according to Robbie Shilliam (2018, 96), support for the EEC as representative of a "white" continent grew as the Commonwealth became increasingly multiracial through decolonization. Settlement by Black and Asian citizens was at the time described as an "unarmed invasion" or "new commonwealth occupation" (Gilroy 2002, 66). In Brexit discourses, however, the EU is perceived to be becoming less white and less Christian, while the Commonwealth "family of nations" is primarily imagined as the majority-white English-speaking nations (Namusoke 2016). Conservative MP and then Justice Minister Dominic Raab, for example, reminded voters in June 2016 that "a million arrived in Europe from the Middle East, North Africa and beyond" who had "swept across the continent" (Vote Leave 2016), constructing a sense of an uncontrollable force threatening Europe. Such discourses rely on the historical Othering of Muslims and Islam as antithetical to European identity (Asad 2002, 217).

At the same time, it is understood to be the EU that facilitates the traffic of especially Black, Asian, or Muslim immigrants to Britain through freedom of movement, Schengen, and Turkish membership that are imagined to create a security risk posed by "radical Islam." The EU then becomes an external Other from which British/English people have to defend not only their political sovereignty but also their white Christian culture. For example, Nigel Farage (2015) warned about Islamic State "infiltrating" Europe through the "failed policy of the EU's open borders, supported by the establishment politicians to the detriment of our nation." In warning of "Islamist rule" in Turkey, Michael Gove focused explicitly on political freedoms rather than cultural difference, but in speaking of "extremists" and Turkey's borders with Iraq, Iran, and Syria, he raised the specter of a dangerous Islam that Turkey's EU membership would supposedly bring (Vote Leave 2016). In this sense, Brexit represents the combined "radical demarcation from both 'the European other' and 'the non-European other'" (Ammaturo 2019, 561).

While "terrorists" or "Islamists" are not always directly referred to as male, they do nevertheless evoke "the normativity of the connection between (racialized) masculinity and violence" (Gray and Franck 2019, 284). Indeed, it is hard to imagine that this is not the connection made, for example, when Dominic Raab referred to the "Paris and Brussels terrorists"; he even mentioned one suspect by name (Vote Leave 2016). That threatening masculinity underpins anti-immigration discourse often becomes clear in visual representations. The *Daily Mail*, for example, placed the headline "We're from

Europe – let us in!" alongside images of mostly men of Middle Eastern appearance who had arrived in a lorry to seek asylum (Slack and Groves 2016).[2] In Leave.EU's now infamous "Breaking Point" poster depicting mostly non-white male migrants, threatening male masculinity was, according to Cathrine Thorleifsson (2021, 194), "structured according to a nativist logic of a pure and innocent nation and civilization in danger." Media coverage of the sexual assaults in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015, however, more explicitly constructed an image of male Muslim sexuality as a threat to English femininity, reproducing the longstanding racist trope of the "black rapist of white women" (Yuval-Davis 1997, 51). Nigel Farage, for example, claimed that "[w]omen could be at risk of mass sex attacks carried out by gangs of migrant men if Britain stays in the EU" (Ross 2016b), elsewhere linking this to the risk of a "Turkish-dominated EU" (Bennett 2016). Allowed into England because of EU membership, the "Muslim" or "immigrant" man is therefore constructed as the threatening Other of the idealized femininity of a pure white Protestant nation.

While historically France – and by extension Europe – was constructed as a Catholic threat, the present-day EU is represented as facilitating the "Islamification" of Europe, and consequently of Britain/England. Nevertheless, the "migrants" are not understood to be European; rather, Europe is white and Christian, but host to Muslim Others using Europe as a transit space to reach Britain. Boris Johnson argued that the UK was not "leaving Europe" (Ammaturo 2019, 562). In claiming a European cultural identity by rejecting an EU one, however, Englishness, as well as Europeanness, are constructed as white, while the EU brings "Blackness" to the European continent. Following Francesca Romana Ammaturo (2019, 561), such constructions of English and European identity can be understood as "an attempt to stop, alter or escape that process of decolonization" currently taking place. To withdraw from the EU was to restore Britain, but also Europe, to its constructed whiteness at the same time as protecting England's "domestic order" – that is, white women and the traditional family imagined to be at the heart of rural Protestant life.

Conclusion

In this article, I have demonstrated the centrality of ideas about gender, sexuality, and race within discourses of British/English identity in relation to Europe. Through different understandings of Anglo-British exceptionalism, white masculinities are embedded within dominant conceptions of the nation and juxtaposed with ideas about Europe that represent "inferior" femininities or subjugated masculinities. I have identified four discourses that reproduce different ideas of white masculinity: British sovereignty as military power; the British as defenders of liberty; Britain as a global trading nation; and England as a white Protestant island nation.

These findings demonstrate the need for a gender lens regarding Britain's relations with Europe and the wider world. Though the UK formally left the EU in January 2020, Britain's post-Brexit role continues to be renegotiated. The government's 2021 report *Global Britain in a Competitive Age* utilizes the discourses outlined here, resting on the idea of Britain as a "maritime trading nation" while eschewing the EU as a key foreign policy partner (HM Government 2021; see also Shapiro and Witney 2021). Feminist security studies scholars have already demonstrated the masculinist logics reproduced in the review that channel resources away from projects that might improve the safety of women in the UK and across the world (Eschle and Duncanson 2021). National identity continued to be renegotiated through the 2022 Nationality and Borders Act, widely criticized for placing British dual citizens – predominantly people of color – in a more precarious position within the national community and putting women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ+) refugees at particular risk (Women for Refugee Women 2021). These latest policy agendas only confirm what feminist scholars have already identified as the likely outcomes of Brexit (Guerrina and Masselot 2018). Only by putting gender front and center of our analysis of national identity can we fully understand the implications of Brexit and post-Brexit discourse for gender, sexual, and racial inequalities.

I have also demonstrated a need for further feminist and gender analysis within political science and EU studies more broadly. This has wider relevance beyond the Brexit context. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, Anglo-British exceptionalism positioning the British as defenders of liberty underpinned reluctance to implement restrictive measures to limit the spread of the virus. Such discourses have material effects on the most marginalized, with men and women of color having faced greater risks from COVID-19 due to, among other things, health inequalities and greater likelihood of employment in "key worker" occupations (Women and Equalities Select Committee 2020). Anglo-British exceptionalism also underpins contemporary debates about LGBTQ+ and especially trans rights that have focused on "freedom of speech" as central to British liberty (see for example Braverman 2022). By claiming that Britain is a global leader in LGBTQ+ equality, the UK government has prevented recognition of the current reality of Britain as a transphobic space, as widely acknowledged internationally (Chikha 2021). Understanding the way in which gender shapes national identity therefore has relevance far beyond issues of international cooperation, immigration, and citizenship.

Notes

1. Many thanks to Roberta Guerrina for alerting me to this image.
2. The *Daily Mail* later published a correction to the story and clarified that the individuals were from Iraq and Kuwait (Khomami 2016).

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Disclosure statement

Notes on contributor

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