Brexit with a little 'b': navigating belonging, ordinary Brexits, and emotional relations

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This article analyses senses of belonging and belonging disrupted via the lens of Brexit with a little 'b': namely at the level of ordinary experiences in the flow of daily lives. Our interlocutors recount these as deeply emotionally charged experiences. Their accounts supplement and help nuance more widespread popular explanatory models of the referendum vote and its outcomes. Examining brexit through the intersection of belonging and emotion permits new insights into how place became linked in social imaginaries with Leave and Remain. It also permits closer analysis of how senses of belonging are relationally and differentially mediated by other identities, including class, race, ethnicity, and migration status, and how these intersect unevenly with and have a consequence for people's senses of belonging. This includes demonstrating how the privileged sense of belonging of many white middle-class Britons (both Leave- and Remain-supporting) was disrupted and their sense of ontological security jarred, as well as how people navigated the multiple social and cultural outcomes of the referendum in their daily lives, networks of intimate social relations, and local places.

I was over the moon when the result of the referendum came in. I absolutely couldn't believe it … with all the propaganda, you know, Project Fear, and, oh, I honestly didn't think it would happen … And I mean you know, you kind of watched it coming in as well [the televised results] and then it got to a certain stage where it was Huw Edwards, he said, 'We're leaving'. Well, it was like a real physical [*exhale of breath, puts her hands on her chest and pushes them outwards*] wow! It was, it was unbelievable, it really was. It was like a weight being lifted … It was, truly, I was gobsmacked.

 Sue, white woman in her sixties, British,[1] has lived in the North East her entire life, Leave supporter

I am part of the Labour Party and there was an email from our MP to door-knock a few weeks ago. And I say, 'I am coming, I am doing some door-knocking'. And then on [that] day, Priti Patel just said 'Oh, on the 31st October everybody loses their rights', you know? That really hijacked me and [made me physically ill] after she said that – it stressed me out so badly. And I thought, no, I am not going to go door-knocking because I just thought if I knock on the wrong door then I just get hassle and I

didn't want to put myself in a difficult situation. And that was the first time ever since I lived in Britain where I felt I couldn't go out and just talk to people.

    Louisa; white woman in her forties; EU citizen; has lived in the North East for over twenty years; Remain supporter

This article examines the emotional contours of daily life and social relations in light of the 2016 referendum on the United Kingdom's membership of the European Union. Much has been written about the political processes of 'Brexit', and about Brexit referendum voting patterns according to social categories of age, income, class, region, race, and ethnicity (see, e.g., Goodwin & Heath 2016). Many of these accounts are based on large-scale surveys and aggregate electoral data analysis. Such commentaries have lent credence to popular explanatory models of Brexit as being favoured by older, white, working-class people who voted Leave, who are then juxtaposed with younger, more ethnically diverse, middle-class people who voted Remain. While some quantitative work has challenged these depictions (see, e.g., Dorling & Tomlinson 2019), such explanatory models neglect how Brexit manifests within multiple sites of ordinary lives, and often with a profoundly emotional depth. Indeed, Brexit has pervasively marked and reshaped many aspects of daily life across the United Kingdom.

We centre our analysis on these ordinary experiences. We focus on how our interlocutors residing in the North East of England sought to navigate Brexit in the intimate, emotional registers of daily life, the effects it has had on their social relations, and the senses of belonging (and not belonging) that have been engendered. We take 'sense of belonging' to mean feeling comfortable, at ease, and connected across multiple aspects of everyday social relationships – family, friends, colleagues, place – with disrupted belonging linked to feeling uncomfortable, disconnected. Not simply a matter of political processes writ large nor of large-scale voting demographics, Brexit became a permeating presence across multiple realms of our interlocutors' lives, felt at times inescapable, and was rarely a neutral experience.

We argue this material generates new insights into the interconnected workings of emotion, identities, inequalities, and senses of belonging. We explore how highly charged emotional cadences related to Brexit in daily life experienced by participants across Leave and Remain positions are inflected by other aspects of social identities. Specifically, we consider classed, racial, citizenship, and place-based identities, and how these 'mediate' (Cohen 1982; Edwards & Strathern 2000) our interlocutors' senses of belonging in ways that illuminate unequal positions of privilege.[2] Although the larger project from which this material originates included people from all class positions and across a diverse array of ethnic and racial groups, here we focus largely but not exclusively on white middle-class interlocutors in order to examine how Brexit impacted this dominant privileged group, but in differing ways depending on individual positionalities. We demonstrate how, for some, their classed sense of ontological security was disrupted by Brexit, and also how pre-existing 'hierarchies of belonging' (Back, Sinha & Bryan 2012) were at work. As such, we take up the challenge posed by Anderson and Wilson 'to consider Brexit as something that is encountered in innumerable ordinary ways to become part of what Raymond Williams (1977) called the "particular quality" or "sense" of a period', the 'more or less subtle, more or less intense, changes that *are* Brexit as it surfaces across multiple ordinary scenes and situations' (2018: 292, original emphasis). We attend to these ordinary scenes, situations, and subtle qualities that emerged in the fabric of daily life to nuance and

extend popular explanatory models of Brexit. In parallel with Anderson and Wilson, we question how Brexit is understood (What is it? Where is it?) and have set about as ethnographers examining this, borrowing from Anderson and Wilson this powerful concept of 'surfacing'.

We also seek to unpack some of the saturated symbolic density that the term itself has accreted, for 'Brexit' holds multiple layers of meaning: about technical political and legal processes; about specific moments in time; and, in a generalized way, as a descriptor of a divisive era of contemporary British social life. 'Brexit' thus accordions multiple aspects of political, social, economic, and cultural registers, but all of these have come to be named indiscriminately in popular discourse simply as 'Brexit'. Simultaneously a geopolitical transformation occurring in Westminster, 'Brussels', and the High Court through to moments in the pub, in the supermarket, and when waiting for a bus, Brexit is seemingly both everywhere and nowhere. In this article, we do not explore why people voted the way that they did. Rather, our focus is on the effect their vote had on their social relationships and what is revealed about questions of belonging, emotion, and relative privilege. In so doing, we attend to how debates over the political-legal relationship of the United Kingdom and the EU came to spill over into the flow of people's daily lives in unexpected ways. As a research team, and from Blamire's initial suggestion, we began to describe this spilling over and this omnipresence to each other as 'Brexit with a little "b"', or 'brexit'. We examine here what it has been like to live 'with/in' brexit, and what is encountered, made, and reshaped in turn (see also Anderson & Wilson 2018: 294). We do so not only to document ethnographically a landmark era in modern British life, but also to analyse the dynamics of emotion and belonging it has engendered, ones that required people to navigate social relations put under pressure in new and unfamiliar ways. This permits us to contribute to an ethnographic literature charting emergent global patterns in identity politics and emotion from the perspective of 'everyday folk' themselves (Cramer 2016; Hochschild 2018) but in a way that also responds to critiques of them (Bhambra 2017; Bonilla-Silva 2019) by considering the inequalities inherent in experiences of ethnic and racial minorities, of the white middle classes, and of migrants (Tyler, Degnen & Blamire 2022). This article also adds to a still nascent literature on the everyday and Brexit, including work by Davies (2022) on the tenacity of family relationships despite differing Brexit opinions, by Hall (2022) on time-spaces of 'waiting for' Brexit, and by Koch (2017), who challenges simplistic narratives of Leaver/Remainer dichotomies via everyday moralities of electoral participation.

Emotions, senses of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion

Sue and Louisa, above, open a window into the emotional tenor of the meanings of brexit.[3] Both women's responses to the events they recount are so charged that they generate bodily reactions: illness, relief, silence, exaltation, flight. These are not uncommon responses across our ethnographic fieldsites. Experiencing brexit in ordinary life regularly held a deeply felt emotional charge. Participants also often invoked diverse senses of belonging, and of belonging disrupted, experienced in different ways depending on their pre-existing positionality in British society. Belonging operated on multiple levels of scale, such as in Sue and Louisa's narratives: to a polity (Britain; Europe), to a political party (Labour), to a community of like-minded people (those opposed to 'Project Fear'; those who voted the same as us), to a neighbourhood (feeling safe enough to door-knock), and to a family. But what work did these emotions

'do as forms of sociality and embodied experience' (Lutz 2017: 188) in everyday lives and within the dynamic processes of belonging?

Anthropological attention to questions of belonging is long-standing, beginning with work by anthropologists of Britain in Whalsay (Cohen 1982) and in Elmdon (Strathern 1981). Miller argues that belonging is made from 'senses of connection' to people, place, and pasts which forge 'a relation that makes us feel good about our being and our being-in-the-world; a relation that is fitting, right or correct', and also that belonging 'is a state of being from which wellbeing is derived' (2003: 218). Similarly inflecting on the relational, sociologists and geographers have called attention to the paradox of how belonging can feel deeply consequential and serve as an anchor for some (Bennett 2014a) yet also be ephemeral and hard to pin down (Wright 2015). Experiences of belonging can be 'ambivalent, negotiated, transitional' and are 'not a given, but requir[e] work' over repeated moments in time (Bissell, Bruce, Keane & Tsalapatanis 2019: 1, 4), with the term itself being frustratingly multivalent, 'slippery and axiomatic' (Wright 2015: 391-2). Perhaps this is because explicit reflection on belonging is rare when it is being achieved, and also why not belonging is better represented in critical social science (Bennett 2014b). Belonging is thus both a state of being and a significant social and relational process, one that 'tells us something about a person's connection to themselves and to the surrounding world' (May 2013: 78), offering a sensation of being 'at ease with one's self and one's social, cultural, relational and material contexts' (May 2013: 3). And although the literature has touched on 'the emotions that follow from belonging or not belonging' (May 2013: 82), this has been in a relatively scant way. We therefore draw emotions and senses of belonging together to further the field.

We are inspired by Wright, who argues for 'a need to attend deeply to the ways belonging is constituted by and through emotional attachments … [and] the work belonging-as-emotion does in creating subjectivities, collectivities and places' (2015: 392). We are also inspired by Lutz's retrospective piece on affect in anthropology. As she says, current writing in that field focuses on 'what moves and matters in human life … What affective qualities or frames … shape the tones, the political possibilities, or the harms of everyday life?' (2017: 181-2), arguing for the ways in which close 'attention to the everyday emotional relations of people' (2017: 186) can be 'a route to a grounded understanding of how political and economic changes affect communities of people living together' (2017: 184). In a similar vein, Ahmed asks not what emotions are, but instead 'what do emotions do?' for tracing how emotions move, circulate, and coalesce (2014: 4). We find these to be highly productive starting points for analysing brexit, as is research that has considered emotions and belonging for EU migrants in the United Kingdom. This includes Guma and Jones's (2019) exploration of the affectively charged responses of their interlocutors to the referendum outcome, disordered belonging, and experiences of being 'othered' post-referendum. They demonstrate how senses of belonging build through time – but how Brexit can also undo these (2019: 8). Botterill and Hancock (2019) describe similar emotional registers amongst Polish nationals in Scotland, showing how senses of belonging (and their disruption) can operate simultaneously on different levels: Brexit may break a sense of belonging with the nation, but leave unaltered a sense of belonging to the immediate locality or neighbourhood. Drawing from and building on these scholars, we argue that attending to the emotions the people we worked with described to us in relation to brexit (anger, elation, fear, panic, delight, frustration, embarrassment, grief, shame, boredom, anxiety,

astonishment, guilt), and how they were wound through everyday navigations of social relations and belonging, permits a closer view of the ways in which brexit is lived within and experienced.

We take instructive lessons from the anthropology of Britain on relations of belonging as about both connection *and* distancing. This body of work has explored 'forms of cultural meaning that underpin social relations and everyday life', forms that 'are predicated on "partial connections", on a simultaneous holding together and keeping apart which in turn reproduces parameters of belonging, attachment and identity (Strathern, 1994; Edwards, 2000)', and how a startling array of 'subjects, material objects, places, landmarks and knowledge' are brought into relation with each other to assert belonging in Britain (Degnen & Tyler 2017: 39). These are cultural logics which we suggest provide vital anchors for thinking through other aspects of connection and disconnection in contemporary British life.

Crucially, whilst this cultural logic forges belonging by assembling relations, similar logic is also 'mobilised as a conceptual means of differentiation' to 'screen out … connections' (Edwards 1998: 155). Thus, modes of inclusion, exclusion, distinction, and inequality underpin our discussion here. We shall be arguing that brexit both makes and pierces relations of belonging. What is drawn into focus and what is screened out moves in these deliberations, linked to relative positions of power and privilege. We extend this to thinking about how aspects of identity (class, migration status, ethnicity, race, nationality) interpose links of connection and disconnection that constitute senses of belonging in the face of brexit. We consider identities not as descriptive categories but instead as mediators in chains of inclusion and exclusion that shape senses of belonging (or not). This allows us to illuminate how long-established hierarchies of belonging are accentuated by brexit for those Britons already intimately familiar with existing inequalities (such as everyday racism experienced by racialized minorities) and for whom the exclusions of brexit were 'business as usual' (Benson & Lewis 2019). For others more accustomed to the privilege of a taken-for-granted sense of belonging, such as some of our white middle-class interlocutors, the referendum outcome sharply disrupted, if only partially, this security. To demonstrate this, we examine some granular registers of daily life: place, work, and everyday social relations. Instructive lessons emerge about how senses of belonging were confirmed, unsettled, and remade within these intimate realms during arguably the most tumultuous period in postwar British history.

Methodological considerations

This article is based on multi-sited, residential ethnographic research carried out in three regions of England by three ethnographers over an eighteen-month period. From October 2018 until January 2020, we 'followed Brexit' ethnographically in the North East (Degnen), South West (Tyler), and East Midlands (Blamire) of England as part of a larger project.[4] The research explored individuals' everyday experiences of Brexit, focusing on their senses of belonging or not to their local place, the nation, and Europe; and their views on media coverage and politics. Each ethnographer conducted sixty conversational-style interviews with people across diverse social positions in terms of generation, class, nationality, ethnicity, race, migration status, gender, Leave or Remain affiliation, and decision whether or not to vote. Whilst the research materials we use here are mainly interview-based, the larger analysis from which it draws is grounded in a range of ethnographic interactions, as described below.

This article draws directly from Degnen's research in the North East of England, an area with a pronounced regional identity that valorizes its history of coal-mining, ship-building, and sea-faring as a centre of the Industrial Revolution; its forms of gregarious sociability; and its geographically peripheral position in the far north of England. The region encompasses significant internal distinctions, including rural Northumberland and County Durham; coastal North Sea towns; three university cities (Durham, Newcastle, Sunderland); and former coal-mining villages. This is a region with significant social, economic, and health inequalities, with the costs of post-industrial decline unevenly distributed across these locations and the people living in them. The population of the North East is predominantly white British with growing ethnically and racially diverse populations in urban areas; major regional employers include the National Health Service (NHS), the local council, and higher education, a dynamic reflected in this article as a number of interlocutors worked in these sectors. Newcastle is the only urban area regionally that voted Remain (narrowly), with 49.3 per cent of ballots cast for Leave (BBC 2016); Leave won the majority throughout the rest of the North East with 58 per cent support (Electoral Commission 2016). The region has been significant in national Brexit debates: as home of the largest Nissan car factory in the United Kingdom, which featured prominently in news coverage and in speculation over economic impacts; because of the 'first' Leave vote nationally being declared in Sunderland; and as part of extensive commentary on the 'fall of the Red Wall' in the subsequent 2019 general election, when long-standing Labour-supporting areas elected Conservative MPs for the first time.

The ethnographic team met regularly to discuss fieldwork as it occurred in their respective fieldwork sites. The analysis presented here has thus been shaped via insights generated across the other fieldsites. Degnen worked with participants residing in the North East, including those living in cities, suburbs, and rural villages. She met to talk with them in their homes, living rooms, kitchens, workplaces, and in local cafés to conduct interviews lasting on average two hours. These interviews are complemented by a range of other research materials, including documenting many informal discussions about everyday experiences of brexit where and when they occurred; monitoring news accounts; observing political rallies, business events, government-hosted events, and election hustings; regular attendance at two community centres; and the curation of an Instagram feed which documented brexit visually in found aspects of material culture.

As described above, we draw in part from the anthropology of Britain literature to situate this article. This permits us to contextualize our material within the sociocultural modes of understanding belonging that are particular to our English fieldsites, as theorized by ethnographers of Britain before us, and which we consider to be a strength of our approach here. But this choice of how to frame our analysis has methodological and epistemological implications. As one peer reviewer pointed out, we might instead have positioned our analysis in lively debates within the anthropology of Europe on inclusion, exclusion, and belonging. What, they ask, were the reasons for, and the consequences of, our demarcation of the field? In so choosing, have we inadvertently added to the sense of carving up anthropology 'here' in Britain as being outside of an anthropology of Europe 'over there'? This is not our intention, but the point merits explicit reflection, especially in an article concerned with belonging, relations, and acrimonious debates over EU membership. We take guidance on thinking this through from colleagues who have explored the 'axiomatic ambiguity' of what it means

to talk about an anthropology of Europe, anthropology in Europe, and European anthropology when neither 'the precise geographical location of Europe as a place, nor its meaning as an idea are agreed upon' (Laviolette, Green & Martínez 2019: 245), and when they reflect on 'boundaries and process of exclusion and inclusion within Europe' in tandem with anthropological practice itself in those fieldsites (Eriksen 2019: 213) to unsettle and problematize assumptions about who, what, or where is included in and excluded from these categories. These are shared concerns across the discipline, but are perhaps particularly politically sharp across contemporary Europe and Britain in the face of Brexit. Indeed, we are struck by how the politics of naming 'where' work is located (Britain? England? Europe?) and the politics of discerning how localities are connected (or not) to larger wholes within anthropology mirror the very heart of the matter at stake in this article. That is to say, the issue raised by the reviewer parallels troubling dilemmas our interlocutors were also grappling with: senses of belonging (or not) and how to navigate connection and disconnection in everyday life. We acknowledge the importance of these tensions, and continue in the search for better solutions. One proposal we find heartening is that a future-facing European anthropology seeks to become one that is transnational and troubles boundaries, both disciplinary and epistemological (Martínez 2019); a proposal that strikes us as core to the anthropological project and its attempts to understand meaning-making and human experience, including the issues we are concerned with here.

We return now to emotional registers and brexit. We anticipated strong feelings, but we were taken aback by the relentless presence and sheer scale of them during fieldwork, a dynamic that demands critical analytical attention. We begin our analysis with how ordinary brexit 'surfaced' in experiences of belonging in place.

Ordinary brexits and belonging: neighbourhood places

In our opening, Louisa refers to Home Secretary Priti Patel's announcement in 2019 that she intended to effect a noticeably tighter immigration policy in eight weeks' time. This change would immediately end freedom of movement for EU citizens (including Louisa) in contrast to the previously agreed three-year temporary leave to remain (Duffy 2019).[5] Despite having lived in a large town in the North East for many years, Louisa is left feeling exposed by Patel's statement. She no longer feels safe to go door-knocking, something she has done many times before as a Labour member and also in her professional career, which included regular public engagement. Louisa worries about whether it is safe for her to 'go out and just talk to people', or if she is going to get a lot of 'hassle'. She intimates in other parts of the interview that her Western European accent marks her out, saying that fear of getting 'hassle' has increased since the referendum, an experience resonating with EU citizens living in other project fieldsites. Her fear and anxiety, prompted by Patel's words, triggers Louisa's chronic illness, which is made worse by stress. Her British-born 18-year-old son, James, is terrified she will be deported. He no longer trusts the UK government to treat EU citizens fairly. He contextualizes this fear by saying that the referendum outcome and ensuing uncertainty have had a 'mental effect … I've had a spike in depression and anxiety, you know, recently as well'. Emotions are felt so deeply that they transform Louisa's sense of ease with her neighbourhood, truncating her sense of belonging, provoking somatic responses for both her and her son.

A second example comes from Liz, a white British woman in her fifties, recently retired from her medical career. She relates how a street encounter threw into stark relief her sense of belonging to Newcastle itself:

> There was an … absolutely vile … Brexit person… …[at] a rally at the Monument in Newcastle for the Brexiteers … they had a great big banner saying 'Immigrants go home. You are not welcome here!' And I went and stood in front of them and yelled very loudly, 'This is not Newcastle! We don't believe in this, immigrants are very welcome!' And she got really quite violent and nasty, and [my daughter] said, 'What the fuck are you doing Mum?' and grabbed hold of me and pulled me away. But I just felt this is not Newcastle … And [my daughter] was like, 'For God's sake, mother, they will get you, if they get you on the television or on the mobiles or whatever, you will be all over media, they can find you … So be invisible'.

As with Louisa, this excerpt instantiates how ordinary brexit 'surfaced' within everyday public places, with implications for senses of belonging. The Monument is an iconic site in Newcastle city centre. It is a toweringly high column with a statue of Charles Grey erected on a stepped stone plinth to commemorate his authorship of the Reform Act of 1832, a location where people congregate and mingle. Liz is outraged that someone might claim her Newcastle as an intolerant city. In these examples, the Monument for Liz and the neighbourhood for Louisa are transformed from comfortable, regular places of ease into uncomfortable zones where silence and invisibility feel safer, generating deeply emotionally charged experiences. And yet also notable are the differences in how senses of belonging are mediated by Louisa's and Liz's own identities. Louisa's belonging is mediated by her position as a migrant, and is more generalized in her everyday life: her accent indelibly marks her out as 'other'. Post-referendum developments are reshaping where she feels safe, and where she does not, echoing the point Guma and Jones (2019) highlight about ordinary brexits for migrants and the unravelling of belonging. But for Liz, unmarked in this way as 'other' and feeling confident to assert the kind of place she believes Newcastle to be, a political rally she passes by suddenly thrusts belonging into her attention – and she feels able to challenge in a way Louisa does not.

The examples recall other fieldwork experiences, such as a comment overheard by Degnen at a Brexit Party rally in May 2019, where hundreds of Leave supporters chatted whilst waiting for the rally to begin, posters with the Brexit Party logo available on each seat. One man behind her told another that he would like to put a poster in his car window but was worried someone would egg his car if he did. His interlocutor laughed wryly, in acknowledgement and recognition. On the streets, door-knocking, in one's car – everyday actions came to feel risky in ordinary brexit, disrupting a sense of ease and belonging in one's own place, mediated by other elements of one's identity. A permeating sense emerges of brexit shrinking what is sayable, and how relations with others need to be navigated in newly vigilant ways. Connection and sense of belonging occur (like-minded family members at the Monument; like-minded strangers at a rally) alongside their disruption (the Monument; the rally). But this shared experience of disrupted belonging also illuminates key distinctions and inequalities based on citizenship and attitudes to immigration which divide people in deeply personal ways.

The relationship between place and belonging facilitates the 'surfacing' of ordinary brexit in other respects, too. Consider what Ruth, a small-business owner of a popular delicatessen in a wealthy Newcastle-area suburb, tells Degnen about the day after the referendum:

> It was awful, it was like a death had happened and we were like a community centre here. (*Degnen*: In the shop?) Yeah, for people who had voted Remain. And to a person, well there are two of our

customers that we know voted to Leave, two and (*Degnen*: You've got a lot more customers [who voted Remain]?) Yeah. For the whole week after that … our customers were just coming in and just sitting down … It did feel like we were the [local community] centre … because it was an open space where people could say what they felt about it 'cos they knew our views and most of this area were just, like, devastated … So, for that reason we weren't a shop we were a different sort of entity … I think, I mean there was a genuine sense of disbelief.

Ruth's words provide insight into the period immediately following the referendum. For some, a powerful emotional charge was moving through neighbourhood places. Here, a shop selling luxury comestibles, frequented predominantly by white middle-class professionals reflecting a wide range of political views, became a de facto 'community centre' for those brought together by their deep dismay at the Leave result, forging new bonds of connection across previous political divides. Remainers gathered spontaneously in this semi-public space in 'disbelief', feeling 'awful'.

This intersection of belonging and emotion points to the hegemonic ontological security of these white middle-class Remainers being shaken to its core, in a way that is deeply unfamiliar to them. In so claiming, we draw from Giddens's use of the term 'ontological security' as 'a sense of continuity and order in events' (1991: 243). He links this to other 'existential dimensions', such as 'feelings of self-identity' (1991: 54-5), whereby habit, routine, and everyday tacit knowledge operate within our socially shared 'framework of reality', permitting everyday life to be a liveable one where humans can 'keep on' in the flow of social interaction (1991: 35-7). As Croft elaborates, it is this ability to 'keep on' without 'worry about the meaning of life … [or] about the social world collapsing' that is the marker of the ontologically secure (2012: 21). We extend these insights to the routines of classed and racialized relations and senses of belonging that are unequally distributed in Britain, whereby white, professional middle classes accustomed to the norm of seldom being challenged hegemonically come to experience disruptions to their security as they are Remainers in both a nation and a region that voted Leave, and in a city which only marginally voted Remain. The referendum outcome prompts disruption to the routine rhythm of their lives – a sense of disrupted belonging on a scale they have not felt before and that is so stark that they seek mutual support in a microcosm of belonging at the deli. But, as with all senses and sites of belonging, no matter how fleeting, there are also sharp indications of boundary making: despite Ruth describing the deli as 'open' and tolerant, it is clear that some did not fit and that there were some customers – 'we know two who are Leavers' – who were not using the delicatessen as a community centre for what the shopkeeper calls later an impromptu 'wake'. Instead, like Sue, who with Louisa opens this article, some customers and other residents were not grieving. They were celebrating and, like Sue, felt physically elated ('like a weight being lifted') with the result. To close this section, we turn to Tom. He helps reveal how this atmosphere in one neighbourhood echoed for some more widely in the North East as a region.

Tom is a white British man in his twenties who voted Remain, did not attend university, started his working life in hospitality, and currently works in the public sector. He has lived in Newcastle for eight years, and was born and raised in a former coal-mining town about 15 miles away. When asked what it is like to live in the region, Tom responds that it is 'a really welcoming, friendly place', mirroring a widely shared belief in its clichéd conviviality. But he then goes on to say that since 'all the referendum stuff started happening', now 'a lot of stuff that I thought I knew about this place and this region' is shifting. In contrast to an area known for being 'notoriously friendly'

and 'tolerant', Tom feels that since the referendum, this 'generally isn't the sense that I get' from Leave supporters. Instead, he perceives them as being 'more closed-off, less inclined to want to, like, embrace someone from the outside or, like, to welcome someone in or, like, make them feel part of, like, a community'. Here we see how Tom's ordinary brexit 'surfaces' via his eroding sense of a defining characteristic of the region, leading him to re-evaluate his own sense of belonging. Both Liz and Tom experience disrupted senses of belonging to and of this place when these ordinary brexit moments occur, and when counter-narratives emerge that do not match their own idea of who this place is for and how people 'should' behave in it.

What the juxtaposition of door-knocking, the Monument, the delicatessen, and the region brings into view is two-fold. First, it entangles ordinary brexit experiences with experiences of place, emotional registers, and aspects of identity such as classed ontological security and migration status mediating senses of belonging. Second, it demonstrates how a sense of belonging to place is built up via aspects drawn into relation with each other (Edwards & Strathern 2000). In the examples here, senses of belonging are difficult to sustain for Tom, Liz, Louisa, and the delicatessen customers when they interpret others' votes and actions as not aligned with their perceived qualities of that place, which in turn instantiates for them a weakening of connection and a sense of unease, all of which is mediated and experienced in diverse ways depending on their positionalities in terms of class, migrant status, and Leave or Remain support.

Ordinary brexits and belonging: the workplace

The workplace is a second site where brexit often came into view. Here we focus on two employers, the NHS and the university sector, to examine how brexit 'surfaced' via senses of belonging and exclusion within the workplace, rendered more complex by classed and racialized distinctions. Arabella and Lori are two senior NHS employees in different parts of the North East. Arabella is a white British woman in her fifties. She identifies as middle to upper middle class, voted Leave, and is a Conservative Party member. She recounts how she cannot share her political views at work, which irks her. She describes how people assume she 'must be a Remainer' because she is an NHS employee and that they in turn say 'the most ghastly things about Leavers'. As with the university sector discussed below, there is a pervasive belief within the NHS that its workforce are generally Remainers. Arabella feels censured for her Leave vote and feels that Remainers do not have good reasons for supporting their position, telling Degnen the story of the brandy to illustrate her points: during the referendum, she put a bottle in the staff room at work. She then emailed all the employees in her unit and said that she would give the bottle to whoever could convincingly explain to her their reasons for supporting Remain. She was met with a wall of silence, with no replies to her email, and felt bruised by this.

Lori is a middle-class black woman in her early forties who has lived in the North East for fifteen years. She is a dual citizen in the United Kingdom and an African nation[6] and says that 'most of my friends and family probably assumed that I'd vote because a lot of black people, a lot of Africans, would have voted to – if they had a vote – to Remain because they think that it's the haters that voted to Leave'. She explains her vote was deeply influenced by experiences as an NHS employee and by 'what I've seen' at work. She feels the NHS needs the best highly skilled employees, wherever in the world they come from. In direct contrast to Arabella, Lori has started feeling

'guilty' about voting Leave. This is because of generalized animosity in her social circles towards Leave voters, but also because of unintended consequences people around her are experiencing, such as her friend who is having trouble selling his house, something he attributes to the referendum outcome.

Arabella's and Lori's decisions to vote Leave render visible a series of assumptions others have about how they 'should' vote, and to whom and what Arabella and Lori 'belong', in turn entangled with their classed and racialized positionalities. These assumptions do not align with the women's own feelings of belonging. Both are perceived by others as 'natural' Remain voters. This chain of association assumes a connection between the NHS and voting Remain, and 'screens out' (Edwards & Strathern 2000) the ways in which Leave voters might also be connected to the NHS. Such a misinterpretation highlights Arabella's and Lori's feelings of fractured belonging as in other regards both enjoy a strong sense of ease within their workplace. As senior NHS employees, they have accrued significant social and cultural capital that permits them to exert a privileged sense of belonging within and to British society more widely. But Arabella's bottle of brandy invitation to debate is met by silence. She does not experience this as an 'act of care', as described by Davies in her work on brexit within families whereby silences are a mechanism to 'preserve relationships' (2022: 108), but rather as an exclusionary shutting down of her attempts to engage. And Lori feels increasingly guilty about her vote, hiding it from close friends, family, colleagues, and neighbours for fear of what she anticipates will be a negative reaction. Powerful emotions once again complement disrupted senses of belonging.

It is crucial, however, to note that although both women share a feeling of disrupted belonging, and occupy powerful social professional positions, they are also simultaneously differently positioned, revealing the inequalities that divide them. For Lori, assumptions made by others about her referendum vote are also linked to her identities as a black woman and as a migrant, and she recounts painful experiences of racism both at work and outside of it. Senses of belonging and privilege are deeply cross-cut by racial, national, and migrant identities. Both women are positioned in socially powerful roles through their occupations and their age. But as a black woman with dual citizenship working in a predominantly white English region, Lori has a different relationship to the power structures and hierarchies of both the NHS and British society than does Arabella, a white middle- to upper-middle-class British woman. Back *et al.* identify this dynamic as a hierarchy of belonging, calling our attention to how British society is one 'whose modes of belonging are imbued with racism' (2012: 144). This hierarchy helps account for the differing ways in which these women live within brexit, as other social identities are critical for mediating everyday brexit experiences, emotion, and belonging.

Higher and further education institutions also emerge in our fieldwork as predominantly Remain-centric sites that are difficult workplaces for some Leavers. Many people who voted Leave across a number of our project fieldsites told us they felt worried to speak openly about their position; that they feel under attack if they do mention it and they generally do not want other colleagues to know how they voted. Social relations are navigated cautiously and belonging to the workplace is partially interrupted by the sense of universities being 'Remainer-type' places. Sue is one of those people. She keeps 'a very low profile' at work and is 'very careful' with what she says and to whom, explaining that she feels 'out on a limb' as a Leaver at a university whose leaders during the referendum publicly said that 'anybody who was

interested in research should vote Remain … and anybody who voted Leave would be mad'.

It might be tempting to interpret these examples from Sue, Lori, and Arabella as middle-class professional Leavers being excluded in Remain-centric workplaces, and to juxtapose them with assumptions of 'white working-class' Leavers finding brexit largely unproblematic in their workplaces. But this is not the case. A number of examples from our fieldsites complicate such a narrative, including that of Sean, a white English man in his sixties who has always lived in the region. He is a foreman at an engineering firm where he started working nearly fifty years ago as a 16-year-old apprentice, in one of the traditionally masculine industrial sectors for which the North East has been internationally famous. He voted Remain but now supports Leave. He says that at work 'most of them were definitely Remainers. But I think they're changing their mind. But again, it's [just] what I think – it's hard for them to talk about it'. This is partly because of the ethos of his workplace, where people are not encouraged to talk about politics, but also because, as he says, 'I think the odd one that stands out, if you wanted to leave Europe, you would be quite ridiculed by the guys'. Here, then, we have an example which challenges narrow assumptions around vote preference and classed workplaces. It also flags up the ordinary everydayness of brexit experiences, such that workspaces became sites of contestation and 'ridicule' over opposing views on the United Kingdom's EU membership, as well as disrupting stereotyped depictions of northern, working-class white men voting Leave in the face of post-industrial decline. Whilst people experienced varying degrees of alignment and discord in terms of the outcome of the referendum, taken together the examples in this section demonstrate the ways in which belonging is attributed, by whom, and how it can fracture under the social weight of assumptions. The examples also show how belonging is also unevenly distributed by class, race, migration status, and nationality, identities which mediate the lived experiences of brexit.

Ordinary brexits and belonging: 'sussing' others out

In this final section, we consider the ways in which people who feel they do not fully belong in Remainer workplaces and social groups describe navigating what they can say, and to whom. Rachel, for instance, a white English woman in her fifties, is a middle-class medical professional who voted Leave. She describes working in the NHS as a 'very left-leaning' place where the tone is highly 'patronizing' towards those who do not agree, with 'lots of judging going on and, I mean, you just get a bit sick of that'. Arabella describes this judging in harsher terms, saying that Remainers cast Leavers as 'swivel-eyed loon[s]' and as 'uneducated, unthinking, probably fat, lazy, blah de blah'. In the context of such social approbation, Rachel describes discovering that a work colleague had also voted Leave when sharing a lift one night. She says they did 'this little bit of fencing' with each other, 'laughing … that we were coming out to each other' as Leave supporters, saying that it was 'kind of covert almost because I don't think we could have had the same conversation in work hours because people would be overhearing . . . And why should you have to feel that way?' When Degnen asks whether any other experience compares to this in Rachel's adult life, she replies, 'No, nothing.'

Norma, a white British woman in her seventies, echoes Rachel when describing her own experiences. Now retired, Norma enjoys attending amateur science conventions, but has begun declining to discuss Brexit with Remainers, feeling tired of having to 'tiptoe' around them when she feels that the same courtesy is never extended to her. She

says she thinks interpersonal tensions have deteriorated since the referendum, using the example of the conventions:

> The nearest I can put it is to, it must be much the same as when you were gay in the fifties and it was illegal. And you kind of have little signs to say, 'Yeah? Am I safe in saying … ?' I mean I've been to conferences and sit down and have a coffee with someone and they kind of, you kind of, and then listen and you make little … [*pushes with her finger*] (*Degnen*: Probe, gently probing, yeah?) And then you go [*exhales deeply in relief*] 'Oh my goodness, you're one of us!' [*laughs*].

Rachel describes the 'fencing' that she and her colleague used, her relief at finding another Leaver at work, and how it was akin to them 'coming out to each other'. And Norma draws a direct parallel with the experience of being gay in the 1950s (when sexual activity between men was punishable by imprisonment) to identifying other Leave supporters.

Both women are white, middle class, and heterosexual. They do not belong to highly persecuted social groups, but as Leave voters in Remain places (particularly in England), they feel censured as if they are part of a minority group that is stigmatized by the majority. Although this is a problematic analogy when Leave won and the UK government committed to effecting the outcome of the referendum, and when these women are not subjected to violence for their views, their stories capture the intensity of feeling of ordinary brexits, invoking powerful tropes of belonging, not belonging, judgement, caution, inclusion, and exclusion at the intimate everyday level of social relationships. Rachel and Norma feel as though they do not fully belong and are not 'safe' to express their views, employing strategies to carefully identify others with whom they are aligned within those sites of non-belonging. With a sense of palpable relief, they can then re-establish a micro-climate of ease and belonging.

The subtle classed inflections here are again noteworthy. They point to something significant about the privileges that come with being white and middle class in British society. For although Rachel is offended when others talk patronizingly about Leavers, she does 'not go to bed upset' about it, as she says later – she has a great deal of social, cultural, and economic capital that generally inure her against social censure. So, too, does Norma. But, on the other hand, neither woman is accustomed to inhabiting a diminished social position nor being labelled in such negative terms as 'uneducated', 'fat', or 'lazy'. Suddenly, in some settings, they find their social insulation from such accusations evaporates. They experience, possibly for the first time, what the white working-class women Skeggs (1997) writes about experience daily: being judged as not respectable enough. For the women Skeggs worked with, this is a form of 'systematic disempowerment' (1997: 10) reproduced by unequal structures of social and cultural capital they cannot evade: the violence of middle-class identity-making described by Lawler (2005) predicated on representations of working-class people as 'disgusting' and 'repellent'. Rachel and Norma exert considerable social capital and privilege, yet their Leave vote in Remain places undermines their usual feeling of ontological security. Their sense of belonging becomes partially diminished, positioning them as repellent, which they describe in turn as feeling akin to a persecuted minority. Significantly, but in different ways, this disruption to middle-class ontological security is paralleled in our material earlier on in the delicatessen. There, too, our interlocutors recount the unfamiliar discomfort of one's sense of entitlement to belonging being disrupted, prompting a shock so pronounced that it requires grieving in an impromptu community centre – the delicatessen. When the 'sussing out' and delicatessen examples

are considered together, they point to a shared middle-class experience across Leave and Remain in this context of ordinary brexits. With different geneses and in different ways, both illustrate deeply felt and unfamiliar challenges to the classed status quo.

These insights into how ordinary brexits shed light on the white middle classes' experience of entitlement is evocative of other recent writing on the outcomes of the referendum, such as Benson's (2020) reflections on British citizens living in France. She, too, describes new, unfamiliar experiences for her participants in terms of navigating their legal right to live in France, the politics of borders, and of belonging through the lens of citizenship rights – and how 'the privilege of staying put' (2020: 508) is not equally distributed. Instead, it hinges on 'existing inequalities and vulnerabilities of some Britons living in France, while also destabilising the taken-for-granted claims to belonging of others' (2020: 506). In Benson's analysis, both cultural capital (French language skills) and economic capital (income levels; costs of French citizenship) are key considerations in these experiences.

Tempting as it might be to stop here with a tidy class-based analysis, things are never as simple as that in Britain with classed relations. Norma, for instance, describes growing up in the 'slum areas behind the docks', herself as 'a strong working-class girl' who is 'nice middle class now', and as someone who moves in diametrically opposed social circles in terms of both class and referendum vote: her middle-class adult education classes are dominated by Remain voters, yet her outdoor club is both predominantly white working class and largely Leave-supporting. Moreover, as research from our wider project demonstrates, white middle-class Leave voters living in parts of the country where many people voted Leave are unlikely to experience jarring discomfort or feel positioned as a minority. One of our project fieldsites was Boston, Lincolnshire, with the highest Leave vote nationally (75.6 per cent). In Boston, there is widespread consensus internally about the referendum result across various identities, including class, with discomfort being perceived instead from external threats, such as the 'national liberal Remain press', which depicts white Boston residents as 'racists' (Blamire, Tyler & Degnen forthcoming). The ruptures we describe here do not map onto this locale in the same way.

Conclusions

We have examined belonging and belonging disrupted via the lens of Brexit with a little 'b'. We have been guided by our interlocutors' accounts of how brexit 'surfaced' in the close registers of daily life: their emotionally charged senses of connection, disconnection, inclusion, and exclusion within neighbourhoods, place, work, and social relations. Our analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of how ordinary brexit 'becomes part of the scenes and sites that compose people's everyday lives', by zooming in 'on people's ordinary ways of encountering, relating to, and living with, Brexit' (Anderson & Wilson 2018: 294). With our anthropological focus on emotion and belonging, we develop the current literature on how the everyday significance of Brexit is understood and experienced. Our analysis renders more nuanced the explanatory models about Brexit used widely in popular discourse. Such models assert that Leavers and Remainers are easily identifiable by a combination of social characteristics such as generation, class, region, education, race, and ethnicity (see also Tyler *et al.* 2022). We call attention to the ways in which navigating intimate social relations, place, and working lives was much more contradictory, unevenly distributed, and unpredictable in ordinary brexit than is usually given credence in these explanatory models. In so

doing, we add to the literature on belonging in anthropology by exploring how social identities mediate senses of belonging and belonging disrupted. This dynamic played out in the intimacy of our interlocutors' everyday lives, both pulling people together and pushing them apart in new and not always straightforward ways. We have argued that power and privilege circulate unevenly in regard to inclusion and exclusion, with aspects of identities such as race, nationality, and class mediating senses of belonging and not belonging. What is at stake in ordinary brexits shifts and moves depending on these. In highlighting this, we contribute to a richer understanding of processes of connecting and distancing in the anthropology of Britain by examining the hierarchies of belonging already operating within them. Conversely, we also contribute to work on senses of belonging in sociology and geography by highlighting to those cognate disciplines insights that will enrich their own work, drawing as we do from well-established perspectives on belonging in the anthropology of Britain regarding cultural logics of chains of relatedness, connection, and disconnection.

We have analysed the intertwining of senses of belonging and emotions, and are struck by the range and depth of emotions our participants described to us, often in somatic terms. In response to both Lutz's and Ahmed's questions about what work these emotions do, we argue that one effect of the emotional cadences of ordinary brexit has been to carve up place. These insights contribute to the literatures both on senses of belonging and on Brexit studies, revealing how there is a spatialization at work, with belonging and exclusion shaped by the emotionally charged landscape of brexit. Some places become imagined as Leave or Remain: universities and the NHS as difficult workplaces for Leavers; the delicatessen as an oasis for Remainers to mourn in. What's more, places also come to stand in for claims to belonging in ordinary brexit, such as Newcastle as a city for Liz in her impassioned rejection of anti-immigrant sentiments. Places also index how views on the referendum outcome can alter one's formerly secure sense of belonging, such as the emblematic conviviality of the region for Tom, and neighbourhood door-knocking for Louisa.

What is also evident is flux: senses of belonging can become undone and be remade; the prominence of Brexit debates can ebb and flow in everyday life; chains of relations have pasts, presents, and futures. Thus, a question that emerges from the materials presented here is how belonging unfolds prospectively, as a basis of future-facing practices that may reshape inclusion and exclusion going forward. May writes that when we seek to build senses of belonging, we 'experience a complex interweaving of "past futures" (the future as it was anticipated in the past), "present futures" (the future as it is seen now) and the present, which creates a continuously changing horizon of possible anticipation' (2019: 76). So, too, with ordinary brexits and belonging: Brexit generated deeply inscribed legacies that will be lasting in public culture and in personal lives; senses of order and ontological security (Giddens) have shifted, with new dilemmas and ruptures emerging; but, despite a sense of uncertainty, people can also be pulled together in new ways. That is to say, the emotions, in their enunciation, forge belonging, as well as render it tenuous, or no longer possible: ordinary brexits surface in emotional registers that do relational work in bringing people together, but also in pushing them apart. This may come as no surprise since, as May argues, in addition to indexing connection, belonging can also act as a 'barometer for social change' (2013: 3), measuring significant change and flux in social worlds, such as in contemporary Britain. We are aligned with Lutz when she argues that thinking about 'emotional life as social life' (2017: 183) permits us 'to see the politics and moralities of everyday life as powerfully organized

(and disorganized) through emotion discourse' (2017: 189). In applying this to ordinary brexits, we extend this point, and suggest that emotion discourse employed by our interlocutors offers insights into the politics and moralities of how people navigated the multiple social and cultural outcomes of the Brexit referendum in their daily lives, social relations, and senses of belonging.

Acknowledgements

NOTES

[1] We asked participants how they self-identify in terms of national identity and class and use these throughout.

[2] While gender is inflected by brexit (see below regarding styling), we chose materials here that would best illustrate classed, racialized, migrant, and place-based identities. In so doing, gender is not as obvious in this article as it could be. Where gender is in evidence, we flag it (Lori, Sean), but a fuller account of the gendered experiences of brexit deserves closer attention than we deliver here.

[3] We recognize that insisting on an unconventional styling will irritate some readers. But we persist as it underlines our interrogation of a multivalent term that has become so commonplace that it is otherwise difficult to gain critical purchase on; we use this interchangeably with the phrase 'ordinary brexits' (Anderson & Wilson 2018), described below. When we use 'Brexit', we refer to generalized political debates and media coverage of them.

[4] This research forms part of a larger project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council entitled 'Identity, Belonging and the Role of the Media in Brexit Britain' (*https://brexit-studies.org/belonging/*). The project's Principal Investigator was Katharine Tyler (University of Exeter) and Co-Investigators were Cathrine Degnen (Newcastle University), Susan Banducci, and Daniel Stevens (both at the University of Exeter). The Postdoctoral Researchers at the University of Exeter were Joshua Blamire (now at the University of Wolverhampton), Laszlo Horvath (now at Birkbeck College, University of London), Janice Hoang (now at the University of Oxford), Andrew Jones (now at University College London), and DeDe Patterson (now at Plymouth University). The project data have been submitted to the UK Data Archive at the University of Essex (October 2023 release date). Ethical approval was granted by Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, Newcastle University, and by the College of Social Sciences and International Studies at the University of Exeter (201718-154). Steps have been taken to protect the identities of interlocutors including using pseudonyms throughout this article with some highly identifying characteristics changed or removed.

[5] At the time, 31 October 2019 was the planned Brexit date. Patel reverted in September 2019 to the original government policy after the outcry warning against the legality of her proposal (Warrell 2019).

[6] The specific name of Lori's country of birth is removed; including it risks compromising her anonymity since there are few black women in positions of seniority in the region's NHS.

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Le brexit, avec un « b » minuscule : négociations d'appartenance, « brexits » ordinaires et relations émotionnelles

Résumé

Le présent article analyse le sens de l'appartenance et ses perturbations à travers le prisme du « brexit » avec un « b » minuscule, autrement dit au niveau de l'expérience quotidienne ordinaire. Les personnes rencontrées décrivent des expériences porteuses d'une forte charge émotionnelle. Leurs récits complètent et nuancent les modèles d'explication les plus répandus du référendum et de ses résultats. L'examen du « brexit » comme d'une intersection entre appartenance et émotion éclaire d'un jour nouveau la manière dont la notion de lieu s'est trouvée liée au *Leave* (quitter l'Union européenne) et au *Remain* (rester) dans les imaginaires sociaux. Il permet aussi d'analyser plus précisément la façon dont le sens de l'appartenance est diversement médié, du point de vue relationnel, par d'autres identités telles que la classe, la race, l'appartenance ethnique et le statut migratoire, et dont celles-ci se recoupent inégalement, avec des conséquences pour le sens d'appartenance de chacun et chacune. Il s'agit notamment de démontrer comment le sentiment privilégié d'appartenance de nombreux Britanniques blancs de la classe moyenne (partisans du *Leave* aussi bien que du *Remain*) a été perturbé et leur sécurité ontologique ébranlée. L'article montre aussi comment les citoyens ont géré les multiples répercussion sociales et culturelles du référendum dans leur vie quotidienne, dans leurs réseaux de relations sociales intimes et à l'échelle locale.

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