

“Britain First” or White Privilege Reloaded?

Brexit on Screen and Stage

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“Vote Leave, Take Back Control”, was the main slogan of the Leavers in the run-up to the referendum trying to establish if Britain should remain in or leave the European Union. Supposedly about freedom from Brussels and EU regulations, the idea of taking control of the country, the economy but, most importantly, the borders (and the future of migration connected to them) played a much more decisive role in the final outcome of the vote for Brexit. At the heart of this lies a populist resurgence of nationalism, which has its roots in a deep-seated fear of migration and a mourning of the alleged losses with regard to a British culture and a British identity defined as ultimately white. As a result, multiculturalism was declared a failed project by creating a moral panic about migration as well as security and order accompanied by an increasing racism directed against all people not perceived to be part of the illustrious community defined in this manner.

These sentiments are also documented in two recent British productions which aim at making the voices of ‘the people’ audible, *Brexit Shorts*, a series of short clips launched online in two instalments a year after the referendum, and *My Country*, a play beginning its stage life at the National Theatre in London at roughly the same time. After a few introductory remarks on the tenets of populism and racism in Britain, I will show how these are represented in both productions in the (sometimes unconscious) reflection of white privilege in the expressed sentiments of ‘the people’ shown on stage and screen.

Populism, Racism and the Question of White Privilege

A common denominator of right-wing populist movements seems to be their claim to speak for all people

while usually establishing a claim to the moral high road. In a fitting example, Nigel Farage celebrated the outcome of the Brexit referendum as “a victory for real people, a victory for ordinary people, a victory for decent people” (Duffy & Norris 2017, 49). But what about the other 48%? Are they not real? And who are these real people that are, for example, represented in the Leavers’ campaign? Probably for the most part not Black people because, despite Britain’s colonial past (or more probably because of it), Britishness still seems to be predominantly defined as white. Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever have shown that this was clearly reflected in the narrative of the Leave campaign which

was underscored by two contradictory but inter-locking visions. The first was a deep nostalgia for empire, but one secured through an occlusion of the underside of the British imperial project: the corrosive legacies of colonialism and racism, past and present. The second was a more insular, Powellite narrative of retreating from a globalizing world that is no longer recognizably “British”. What gave these visions such traction [...] was that they carefully activated long-standing racialized structures of feeling about immigration and national belonging. (Virdee & McGeever 2017, 2f.)

In her book *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People about Race*, Reni Eddo-Lodge painstakingly analyses the structural racism at the heart of British society, which despite all talk of



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meritocracy hinders equal opportunities and bestows negative stereotypes on Black people. In this context white privilege “is an absence of the negative consequences of racism”, which will “positively impact your life’s trajectory in some way. And you probably won’t even notice it” (Eddo-Lodge 2018, 86f.). Eddo-Lodge goes on to show that discussions about an erosion of Britishness or the preservation of an alleged national identity are usually directed against Black people. She states that “[t]he word multiculturalism has become proxy for a ton of British anxieties about immigration, race, difference, crime and danger. It’s now a dirty word, a front word for fears about black and brown and foreign people posing a danger to white Brits” (Eddo-Lodge 2018, 119). This became especially explicit in the Brexit

campaigns of the Leavers who wanted their country back or were warning about the ‘Islamisation’ of Britain.

Of course, white privilege does not mean exactly the same for all white

and are accused of unjustly benefitting from British achievements (as became visible in the recent Windrush scandal which clearly demonstrated that people from the Caribbean once invited to help rebuilding Britain after the Second World War are still not accepted as British citizens). In a similar vein, Black people are no homogeneous group either. With regard to the Brexit referendum, this is clearly discernible in the paradox of Black votes for the Leave campaign, which will be explored later.

My Country: A Work in Progress – But whose country is it?

My Country by poet laureate Carol Ann Duffy and NT director Rufus Norris is a piece of verbatim theatre interspersed with poetry by Duffy. In the days after the results of the Brexit referendum, interviewers collected testimonials from people aged between 9 and 97 all over the country, resulting in more than 300 hours of tape. The finished play was first staged at the Dorfman auditorium of the National Theatre on 28 February 2017 and went on to be toured nationally. It is dedicated to the memory of Jo Cox, the pro-EU Labour MP who was murdered by a right-wing extremist shouting “Britain first, keep Britain independent, Britain will always come first” (Cobain et al. 2016) while inflicting the deadly knife wounds.



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Brits as you have to take class, gender and other factors into account, which affect access to it in complex ways, but it remains a fact that at the heart of the campaign of those supporting to leave the European Union, a monocultural form of identity politics can be discerned that constructs the ‘real’ British people as a homogenous group united by the fantasy of a common language, a shared history and, at least just as important, of having the same skin colour, i.e. being racialized as white. Those who do not belong to the ‘we’ constructed in this manner fall prey to populist propaganda

My Country opens to the arrival of Britannia, a bureaucrat soon adorned with Union Jack shield, plumed helmet and trident, who has called for a meeting of her people represented by personified Caledonia, Cymru, East Midlands, North East, Northern Ireland and the South West. In the mundane setting of a plain room with lined-up desks and ballot boxes at the rear of the stage, the spectators are introduced to the different parts of the United Kingdom, which appear to be far from united as their squabbles about sports or their specific use of regional language show.

But despite all these visible differences, Britannia tries to construct them as one nation so that all join in the naming of important dates like the Declaration of Arbroath in 1320, the Inclosure Act of 1801 or the start of the Second World War in 1939. Along with these events, 1975, the year when Britain joined the Common Market, is given prominence by being placed in the genealogy of monumental historical watersheds. But instead of proceeding in the collective voices of the regions, the play cleverly shows these to be comprised of numerous separate voices who will utter their perspectives on the European Union and what it means to them. This also makes for some humorous moments as the actors representing the respective regions, who are, in turn, represented by the people's collected voices, hold

up a photograph of the person whose testimonial they render, which often runs counter to their own gender, race or age. Britannia, on the other hand, represents the voices of Westminster like those of Nigel Farage, David Cameron or Boris Johnson. To overcome their divisions, Britannia and the regions decide to engage in "The Sacrament of Listening" (Duffy & Norris 2017, 11), as opposed to an analysis, postulating this to be the only way for productive change.

The increasingly fragmented, verbatim voices thus make up the eleven parts following the opening scene of arrival. The first of these, "The Six Arias", provides an overview of the state of the various regions through the eyes of their inhabitants, which shows the country to be separated by class, gender, race and sexuality. It becomes clear that the United Kingdom is decidedly "not a land of milk and honey" (14), especially with regard to the lives of migrants. The next five parts are dedicated to the voices, which go on to speak about Europe, patriotism, hardship, immigration, listening and leadership. During these parts many topics are touched upon and it becomes clear that the widening gap between rich and poor as well as the overall insecurity the people feel is not necessarily directly related to the European Union but rather to the effects of neoliberal capitalism and the aftermath of the financial crisis. But the

voices don't realise this as it seems to be much easier to put all the blame on membership in the European Union. This is eerily summarised in Farage's words who "wants to put our own people first" (21), worded not dissimilarly from the sentiment exclaimed by Cox's murderer.



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Immigration, one of the key topics during the campaigns of Leavers and Remainers, is also the title of one part of the play, but is tellingly also touched upon in all the other parts. It starts off with Britannia speaking in Nigel Farage's voice who proclaims that "people are very upset, they're very unhappy" (23) about the perceived impact that migrants have on British society, in this instance especially on the education and health systems. While there are also dissenting voices, the by now perpetually evoked stereotypes of migrants as "murders and rapists" (24), benefit scroungers (24),

terrorists - even in Wiltshire (24), women with burkas who visibly do not want to integrate because it is "not a burka, it's a balaclava" (27) are repeated. A telling example is Julie's voice who relates how she wanted to claim benefits and was denied help, only to witness accommodation and money being granted to a migrant from Somalia, leaving her "there in tears on crutches" (23). In these voices, a wide consent seems to be that migrants ruined an Arcadian Britain, which needs to be defended to honour the forefathers (all male, of course) who gave their lives for building it in the first place. At this point, it is happily forgotten that many people from the former colonies fought in the World Wars as well and were later encouraged to move to the 'Motherland' in order to help rebuilding it.

Still, the voices quoted here would deny any accusation of racism. Thus, South West muses that "[w]e grew up thinking we were the best country in the world, you know, were tolerant of gay, we're tolerant of um um race..." (19), while Northern Ireland (Niamh) ponders about the worst insults in society and comes to the conclusion that the prize won't go to slut anymore but "the worst insult that you can say to someone is you're a racist" (29), implying that tolerance has gone too far but also denying the structural racism at the heart of British society which is the unacknowledged foundation of white privilege.

After venting their anger at all problems beseeching the country, the voices are briefly silenced by Britannia’s attempt to emphasise the unity of the people in diversity by taking on her role



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as mother of the nation. Her grief is beautifully rendered in Duffy’s poetry:

I am your memory, your dialects, your cathedrals, // your mosques and markets, schools and pubs, // your woods, mountains, rivers... // your motorways and railway lines, your hospitals, // your cenotaphs with paper poppies fading in the rain. // [...] We are far more united... // We are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us (39).

After a feast, the vote is cast which exposes the fear of the other

expressed through racism and the division surfaces again – and not only between the regions but equally between the people living in them. The play just about ends with the stereotypical rallying call to “get on with it” (51) and a very quaint definition of Britishness:

Last night I felt more British than I’d ever felt. We were in a damp shed, brewing tea, pouring down rain, freezing cold. Committed to a project that is far too complicated for wa. That, that to me is Britishness (55f.).

After this testimonial the regions start to leave with a strangely united, resigned reaction to Brexit and a move back to the very beginning of the play. The overall sentiment now is rather one of defeat as expressed by Britannia’s last lines asking an empty room to listen.

While the idea of representing all these voices as a document of popular sentiments is very laudable, the effect is rather a cacophony of different complaints and contradictions that are only given voice in a fragmented way without trying to render the arguments more comprehensible or placing them in a context allowing for an ideological critique.

***Brexit Shorts: Dramas from a Divided Nation* – Different perspectives on change**

In July 2016, right before Article 50 was triggered, *The Guardian* had already commissioned one of the first plays to deal with the political implications of Brexit, James Graham's *A Strong Exit* (Graham 2016) set in the Department for Exiting the European Union. In June 2017, the paper collaborated with touring company Headlong Theatre and leading British dramatists to come up with *Brexit Shorts*, a series of nine short monologues directed by Jeremy Herrin, Amy Hodge, Maxine Peake and Elen Bowman. They deal with various issues prominent in the discussions about Brexit, but are above all aiming at giving voice to a divided nation. The first five of these were aired on 19th June 2017 to be followed by a second instalment on 26th June.

In a fashion not dissimilar to the efforts of the National Theatre's *My Country*, the *Brexit Shorts* also place a special emphasis on the way Brexit was discussed in the regions by Remainers as well as Leavers, while at the same time putting a focus on the need for further dialogue and listening to each other by means of addressing the past with regard to the causes as well as the future in terms of the consequences of the referendum. Amy Hodge, associate director at Headlong, stated that they

are all struck by how polarised opinions are over this issue and, particularly in the fallout of the referendum, how the artistic community seemed so surprised by the result. It seemed to me that people in the UK, for a myriad of reasons, simply stopped listening to each other (Wiegand, 2017).

Despite the different scenarios chosen by the individual playwrights, all of the short videos start with a shot defining the setting, which gives the regions a well-known, stereotypical face. Thus Scotland is represented by the dark alleyways behind George Square in Glasgow, Northern Ireland by the peace lines or the Home Counties by a well-kept English garden. The short monologues, spoken directly to the camera, try to represent different gender, race and class perspectives while a multitude of Brexit-related issues is pondered. Just like in the verbatim theatre of *My Country*, in the scripted plays white privilege also comes across strongly.

In three monologues, female characters were chosen as protagonists who are a mix of Remainers and Leavers. Thus in David Hare's "Time to Leave", Eleanor, a white middle-class woman, mourns the loss of her country. While using the typical disclaimer that she is no racist, she still believes that the EU was "bound to fail once the Mediterraneans flocked in" (Hare 2017) because they changed the quality of the union of allegedly white northern European countries. In

the same vein, she opts for a resurrection of the Irish border, as "good fences make good neighbours" (Hare 2017). Hare tries to make visible that even middle-class people like Eleanor blame the EU for inner-British problems while not reflecting on the fact that they still partake of white privilege. But the basically unchanged situation after the Brexit vote only leaves disillusionment behind.

Helen, the protagonist in Abi Morgan's "The End", perceives the state of the nation quite differently. Using the metaphor of a marriage which has failed after 43 years, we learn that Helen's door "is always open. You'd just let anyone in" (Morgan 2017), putting her in stark contrast to her husband who strongly objected to this and made it the main reason for leaving. By means of this metaphor, there is a clear indication that migrants (or people perceived as such) are to blame, even if this is done indirectly, for the increasingly stress- and harmful relationship between Britain and Europe. Unhappy about being left behind, Helen decides to make the divorce as costly as possible – just as the looming divorce bill of the EU is perceived in Britain.

James Graham's "Burn" takes a slightly different tack by exploring the role of the social media. Geraldine, a Mansfield mum, sets Remainers and Leavers against each other as an internet troll. She sees this kind of action as part of a larger genealogy, which is linked to her

mother's commitment during the miner's strike as well as to the activities of her grandmother during the Second World War. Her self-declared interest is to produce chaos, but she does this from a position of white privilege, which allows her to set NF followers against migrants without being accountable for her actions.

Another three of the short monologues look to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland as those regions who constitute, together with England, the United Kingdom. "Three Pines", which was performed in Welsh with English subtitles, alludes to the role of British farmers who apparently voted against the EU despite the fact that they get their subsidies from Brussels. The nameless dairy farmer in the video points out that people in his situation were not stupid when voting to leave the European Union, but are losers in the fight for a decent livelihood despite all subsidies.

The question of class is also prominent in A. L. Kennedy's "Permanent Sunshine", in which we listen to Chummy ranting in a broad Scottish accent about joblessness and the lack of opportunities, which killed his father, only to have our prejudices revealed when Chummy turns out to be a sociology student. The short play highlights the divisions between Scotland and the rest of the UK but also takes a broader view in analysing social ills. Thus, Chummy, who feels not represented by Westminster, claims

that “Poverty makes you a refugee” (Kennedy 2017). While it cannot be denied that the gap between rich and poor is on the increase, being a refugee is quite different from being poor and white because white privilege still allows for a different place in British society.

becomes a strong symbol for a kind of unity that has been fought for with immense violence, while refugees remain the other who have to be denied entrance.

Finally, three monologues focus on Black British people and migrants, all



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Stacy Gregg’s “Your Ma’s a Hard Brexit” deals with the specific situation in Northern Ireland. A nameless protestant mother walking along the peace lines separating Catholics and Protestants is faced with the outcome of the referendum dividing her family. Her husband is applying for an Irish passport as he wants to go where the work is, while her Unionist father still clings to his Britishness. The border in Northern Ireland is an extremely sensitive issue and with Brexit looming it might reappear despite all negotiations because otherwise it might become “the only land border for immigration and terrorists (Gregg 2017). The absence of a hard border

those who do not conform to notions of white Britishness. People who do not own British passports, are at the centre of Maxine Peake’s “Shattered”. Dalir, an immigration lawyer in Manchester’s Moss Side, tries hard to protect people’s rights after the Brexit vote especially in the face of an exploding racism. The vulnerability of people like Ayesha from Pakistan is demonstrated clearly but despite her hopeless situation, the play ends on a note of hopefulness with the choir of *Women Asylum Seekers Together* showing that solidarity and unity do exist after all. This is nonetheless a very stereotypical representation as the all-black choir indulges happily in African song.

Solidarity is at the heart of Meera Syal’s “Just a T-Shirt”, too, while it also explores the paradox of Black and minority ethnic British people voting Leave. The eponymous T-Shirt bears the slogan “Send Them All Back”, an eerie manifestation of the all-pervasive racism erupting after the referendum. Priri, a British-born Indian woman from the West Midlands played by Syal herself, voted “Leave” because she regarded herself as one of the well-integrated, good immigrants right down to the point at which she repeats the common stereotypes against Romanians and other EU migrants. She feels to have a special standing in British society by virtue of having “been here first” (Syal 2017). But the Nazi wearing the T-Shirt does not attack her Polish neighbour who has the privilege of being white-skinned, but instead calls her a “Paki bitch” (Syal 2017) and spits her in the face. In the wake of this, she is left disillusioned and with the feeling of not really belonging, while realising that she will always be othered because of her skin colour.

Charlene James’s “Go Home” gives a voice to the former industrial cities of the North where the feeling to be the losers of the globalised world of the 21st century is very strong. Reece, a young Black man from Wigan who went to study in London, claims that “52% of the country can’t all be scum. They can’t all be idiots, racists or xenophobes” (James

2017) and pleads for a dialogue in which all British people try and understand each other in order to overcome the strong dividing lines. This monologue definitely further complicates the issue of reducing the Leave campaign to racist arguments. The question remains, though, who is to be included in this dialogue and who will be left out as the unappreciated “other”.

The *Brexit Shorts* show the strong desire to understand why so many people voted to leave the European Union without really trying to give answers. Still, Leavers and Remainers alike stop to be an anonymous mass and become individual characters with an understandable story, which might just turn into a first step to commence with a dialogue in a divided nation. It remains, however, questionable if this dialogue would include the question of white privilege or the exploding instances of racism, which don’t seem to be foremost on the agenda of most people dealing with the aftermath of Brexit.

Both, *My Country* and *Brexit Shorts*, capture the disillusionment within a British society divided by a multitude of rifts created by neo-liberal capitalism and an urgent desire for change. While membership in the European Union serves as a scapegoat for internal problems and divisions, the exploding racism witnessed not only in the campaign of the Leavers but also in the aftermath of the referendum shows that white

privilege has never been overcome and othering is still present in many guises, not least in targeting British people who just don't happen to be racialized as white. This is not likely to change, either by leaving or staying in the EU.

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