



Powellite nostalgia and racialised nationalist narratives: Connecting Global Britain and Little England

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Abstract

This article explores how a Powellite form of nostalgia – named for the anti-immigration politics of former British MP Enoch Powell – connects seemingly contradictory nationalist narratives known as Global Britain and Little England. While the former is typically aligned with an expansive and buccaneering national biography, the latter is held to operate via a more defensive and exclusionary imaginary. This article challenges such a binary distinction by demonstrating how the two discursive strands are intimately connected by nostalgic views about white English racial dominance, cultivated during Britain's pursuit of empire. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of verbal and visual sources from the Brexit referendum, plus 13 interviews with Leave campaigners, the article shows how Powellite nostalgia reproduces gendered and racialised colonial images of the nation amid immigration 'crisis'. Despite the detoxifying effects of much post-referendum Brexit analysis, the article also demonstrates how Powellite nostalgia is shared across the Eurosceptic spectrum and within broader English culture, persisting into the post-Brexit era.

Keywords

authoritarian populism, Brexit, empire, immigration, nationalism, nostalgia, race

Introduction

Extant treatments of nationalist narratives, such as those advanced in Britain's 2016 European Union (EU) Brexit referendum too often suffer from 'methodological whiteness', neglecting the foundational role of race in political discourse (Bhambra, 2017). In tandem, although British Politics and International Relations (IR) literatures have begun to appreciate the political significance of emotions, they have been slow to explore the specific politics of nostalgia, typically understood as the general emotional sense that things were better in the past (Lupovici, 2016: 69). This article contributes towards addressing these dual paucities by using the lens of the Brexit referendum Leave

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campaigns to develop the concept of *Powellite* nostalgia. This novel analytical approach unpacks racialised and emotive intersections of contemporary longing for the British Empire and shows how existing work on the Brexit referendum has betrayed problematic assumptions about race, in part because it has demonstrated an inadequate conceptual grasp of the diversity and interconnectedness of nostalgias for Britain's imperial past.

Much of this existing work has reified an apparent opposition between *Global Britain* and *Little England* Eurosceptic discursive themes. On this view, while the former discourse is concerned with an expansive and buccaneering national biography compatible with Britain's historic imperial exploits (Daddow, 2019), the latter operates via a contradictory imaginary of nationhood premised on insularity and defensiveness (Campanella and Dassù, 2019: 12). Put differently, whereas the term *Global Britain* is generally used to connote the virtues of an outward-looking, free-trading, libertarian spirit (see Daddow, 2019 for a comprehensive review of the discourse's history and components), *Little England* is laden with less favourable nativist and anti-immigrant associations. Much post-referendum analysis has erroneously mapped the diverging normative connotations of these discourses onto the spectrum of Leave campaigns by equating *Global Britain* with the official Vote Leave campaign and *Little England* with its Leave.EU rival. Yet these binaries are problematic, not least because they reveal the extent to which Vote Leave's attempts to detoxify itself have unwittingly but unfortunately seeped into academic commentary on the referendum (see Browning, 2019; Campanella and Dassù, 2019: 16; Gaston and Hilhorst, 2018; Virdee and McGeever, 2017).

In this article, I therefore argue that separating *Global Britain* and *Little England* into competing discourses obscures the extent to which they are intimately connected by a distinctive *Powellite* form of nostalgia – so named for its resemblance to the politics of former British MP Enoch Powell – that draws on ideas about race generated during Britain's pursuit of empire. A focus on *Powellite* nostalgia enables us to investigate the long-standing and widely shared emotional desire to restore white English colonial authority over 'foreign' Others. During the Brexit referendum, this desire was articulated most explicitly in Leave campaigners' calls to 'Take Back Control', but it was also expressed more subtly in gendered imagery of the fragile boundaries of race and nation. By drawing on over 500 written, verbal and visual documents, and interviews with 13 former Brexit campaigners, my analysis therefore challenges existing interpretations of the referendum and demonstrates how Vote Leave and Leave.EU were equally responsible for advancing incendiary *Powellite* themes. My research thus provides further evidence of the operation of a persistent and pervasive English culture in which *Powellite* nostalgia leverages a long-standing 'backward-looking, parochial nationalism' (Kenny, 2016b: 330) to remain the dominant frame of post-imperial political debates about immigration and race (see Gilroy, 2005).

The article unfolds in six sections. I begin by historicising the relationship between Englishness and empire to highlight the deep-rooted, popular appeal of the nostalgic arguments that Brexit campaigners employed. In the second section, I unpack how race and empire intersect in the politics of the most famous proponent of Englishness – Enoch Powell. This enables me, in the third section, to explore the emotive appeal of Powell's politics, defining *Powellite nostalgia* as a post-imperial English desire to reclaim control and authority over racialised Others and showing how Vote Leave's 'Take Back Control' slogan used these themes. In the fourth and fifth sections, I then explore how the campaign also invoked *Powellite* nostalgia in subtler imagery of the vulnerable, feminised boundaries of race and nation. Finally, I discuss how *Powellite* nostalgia connects Vote

Leave and Leave.EU, confounding post-referendum detoxification efforts and pointing to the sedimented, emotive role of race in English politics.

Revisiting Englishness and Empire

We now know that Brexit was ‘made in England’, where 84% of the UK’s population reside, and Leave held a 7-point advantage over Remain (Henderson et al., 2017: 631). Survey research has highlighted that immigration was a core concern among these Leave voters, reflecting a long-standing, strong correlation between feelings of Englishness, Euroscepticism and anti-immigrant sentiment (Henderson et al., 2017: 638–641; Henderson and Wyn Jones, 2021: 5). These patterns also correlate with nostalgic views about ‘the nation’ and its past. Prior to the referendum, scholars identified the mobilisation of a ‘nostalgic cultural nationalism’ or ‘nostalgic conservative Englishness’ (Hayton, 2016: 402, 407; see also Kenny, 2015), most famously exploited by UKIP, though owing a debt to a much longer tradition on the Conservative right – a theme I return to below (Henderson et al., 2017: 638). These nostalgias were generally expressed in ‘restorationist and Anglo-British forms of patriotic discourse’ that presented immigration and EU membership as dual threats to a tacitly English-centred national identity (Kenny, 2015: 35 quoted in Hayton, 2016: 407). Here, the Anglo-British expression of a nostalgic Eurosceptic Englishness also intersects with feelings of pride in Britain’s empire heritage and inclinations towards maintaining parts of its legacy (Henderson and Wyn Jones, 2021: 195).

Indeed, Englishness and Britishness are not necessarily opposed. While the inhabitants of the UK’s ‘Celtic periphery’ typically dismiss British identity, the same is not true of those residing in England (Henderson and Wyn Jones, 2021). England and Englishness sit quietly at the heart of narratives that emphasise the nation’s ‘wider categories of belonging’, with both the domestic union of Great Britain and the ‘English-speaking peoples’ in former imperial outposts (Henderson and Wyn Jones, 2021: 206; Wellings, 2019). With its veneer of inclusivity, some have argued that Britishness gives English nationalism an ‘acceptable’ face (see Samuel, 1998: 49; Wellings, 2019). Indeed, England is itself an ‘absent presence’ in the language of Britishness, which tacitly conflates England with Britain and then connects “Great Britain” with greatness and “Little England” with diminutive parochialism’ (Wellings, 2019: 92). Similar dynamics permeate the pro-Brexit Global Britain discourse. Though the term was coined after the referendum to describe a variety of ‘outward-looking’ policies favoured by Theresa May’s government (Daddow, 2019), it also characterises Leave campaigners’ long-standing arguments about an independent Britain’s opportunities for cooperation beyond the EU, most often with a post-imperial group of ‘friendly’ white settler countries known as the Anglosphere. Yet Global Britain’s persistent association with the British empire and race mean that it is not simply English nationalism’s more palatable sibling. Scholars have only recently begun to unpack the racial dimensions of the Global Britain discourse, including its thinly-veiled preference for limited, culturally compatible forms of immigration (Namusoke, 2016, 2019) and its entanglement with imperial and colonial nostalgias, defined, respectively, as a desire to rehabilitate the political economic benefits of Britain’s world role and resurrect comforting relationships with its former white settler colonies (Melhuish, 2022).

English nationalism is, however, most often associated with the ‘Little England’ discourse. Unlike Global Britain, Little England is typically more explicit in its use of

racialised tropes. Nevertheless, at first glance, the Little England discourse suggests a more ambivalent relationship with empire, which may account for why its imperial undercurrents are frequently overlooked. During the Boer war (1899–1902), ‘little Englander’ was an anti-imperial term used to describe someone who ‘supported the idea that Britain should focus on domestic concerns and spurn involvement with foreign adventures’ (Webster, 2005: 129). Later, in the period intervening World War One and Two, similar ideas about the English ‘national character’ abounded in a ‘newly defensive sense of uniqueness’ defined in part against the more ‘expansive’ sense common in the Victorian British empire (Mandler, 2006: 147). As indicated above, while empire was a British construction associated with themes of national ‘greatness’, Englishness was ‘an altogether more introverted term’ (Samuel, 1998: 48). Englishness reflected ‘insularity, aloofness, self-sufficiency and reserve’ (Mandler, 2006: 145). Indeed, Englishness offered a ‘domesticated’ understanding of national identity, most often conveyed in images of home and nature (Mandler, 2006: 164; Samuel, 1998: 48). In one popular cartoon, the English ‘Little Man’ appeared content to be ‘ensconced in his garden or sitting room with his pipe and dog and his nuclear family’ (Mandler, 2006: 165).

Yet images of a blissful ‘little England’, while apparently excised from imperial memory, ‘also co-existed with notions of imperial identity’ (Webster, 2005: 131). The ‘homely’ English residences that white settlers built in Britain’s colonial territories became a ‘symbol of embattled Englishness’ during colonial wars (Webster, 2005: 131). As I explore later on, in the mid-20th century, these images ‘came home’, with the ‘violation of English domestic sanctuaries in empire’ increasingly used to describe the supposed threat that new immigration posed to the English ‘homeland’ (Webster, 2005: 152, 166). Here, Englishness is an ‘ethnic term’, signifying ‘common origin and descent’, a distinguished national inheritance tied to ‘the idea of racial stock’ (Samuel, 1998: 48). As such, the ‘self-enclosed and inward-looking’ Little England vernacular is frequently interpreted as ‘inherently hostile or indifferent’ to immigration (Samuel, 1998: 49), and particularly to those identifying as Muslim (Kenny, 2016b: 331). In Britain, the most notorious proponent of such ideas was the former Conservative and Ulster Unionist MP Enoch Powell, whose political thought I turn to below (Webster, 2005: 180).

Enoch Powell’s racial politics

Enoch Powell’s politics prefigured a broader New Right, which borrowed both from the ‘social authoritarianism of the neo-conservatives’ and the ‘market economics of the neo-liberals’ (Gamble, 1985: 22). Indeed, although he is now known best for his incendiary anti-immigration rhetoric, Powell’s politics were also characterised by notable neoliberal, Eurosceptic and anti-American stances. Powell was a key figure in the National Referendum Campaign, established to advocate for withdrawal from the European Economic Community (EEC) during Britain’s first referendum on the issue in 1975 (see Saunders, 2018). His participation in a campaign otherwise dominated by Labour politicians helped to cement his image as a radical outsider prepared to place country above party loyalty (Wellings, 2013: 46). Powell’s true ‘patriotic’ allegiance was frequently expressed via his distinctive conception of Englishness, which connected the seemingly diverse political positions that he adopted.

As Robbie Shilliam (2021: 246) puts it, ‘Powell’s Euroscepticism was intrinsic to a neoliberal project set upon redeeming English nationhood from imperial and racial contaminants’. Indeed, though sometimes framed in the softer language of national traditions,

every element of Powell's politics returns to a 'highly essentialist' and 'ethno-cultural' understanding of the English race (Aqui et al., 2021: 246). A host of actors, including Commonwealth immigrants, the British empire and 'Europe' could thus be positioned as vivid threats to an England allegedly founded on 'exclusively white (Anglo-Saxon) stock' (Shilliam, 2021: 244). Parliamentary sovereignty was one key way for Powell to articulate these ideas. On this view, an effective parliament required an underlying 'homogeneity of the population it represented' such that majority will could prevail (Aqui et al., 2021: 245). Here, homogeneity was defined by religious, linguistic and/or visual racial markers (Aqui et al., 2021: 245–246). Where parliamentary sovereignty was challenged by racial incoherence, such as where immigration expanded the electorate or where national authority could be superseded by 'foreign' European political institutions, Englishness itself was also under threat (Aqui et al., 2021).

Such views leant heavily on a nostalgic understanding of England's 'unbroken continuity of existence', stretching back to ancient times (Kenny and Pearce, 2018: 92). As Powell memorably observed in a speech to commemorate England's patron saint, it was the 'slow alchemy of centuries' that had delivered national 'unity' and 'homogeneity' (Powell, 1961). The development of parliament was the core institutional hallmark of this distinguished lineage (Aqui et al., 2021: 247), becoming symbolic of a 'civilised' England's long-standing 'orderly independence' (Shilliam, 2021: 244) – a national narrative that also led Powell to reappraise his position on empire. Initially an advocate of empire, over time Powell became increasingly sceptical of its folly, positing that Britain's imperial exploits were superfluous to England's longer and more glorious independent heritage (Kenny and Pearce, 2018: 86–101). In Powell's words, 'we do not need. . .to be tied up with anybody' – a sentiment which characterised his approach both to the British Empire and non-white Commonwealth, and to the perceived imperial project of European integration (1969, quoted in Shilliam, 2021: 246).

Nevertheless, Powell's ostensibly *post*-imperial political thought remained 'deeply rooted in the experience of empire' (Wellings, 2013: 45). One manifestation of this was his commitment to neoliberalism, notably to individual freedom and responsibility as expressed through the market-based logic of 'free enterprise' (Shilliam, 2021: 242). Though sceptical of close Anglo-American relations and America's own imperial tendencies (Aqui et al., 2021: 250), Powell's neoliberalism chimes with that found in much contemporary advocacy of the Anglosphere, as often expressed through the Global Britain discourse. Powell's preference for free trade, for example, subtly adapted many of the 'outward-facing arguments' that old imperialists and modern Anglospherists alike would recognise (Kenny and Pearce, 2018: 101). His neoliberal ethos also betrayed other vestiges of empire. While Powell bemoaned Britain's 'contrived dependency upon the riches garnered from empire' (Shilliam, 2021: 245), his free-market approach also rehearsed ideas about white English racial superiority that had once motivated imperial expansion. Here, Powell argued that the English were the heirs of 'a natural disposition towards the free enterprise system', the only acceptable political economic formation (Shilliam, 2021: 244) that contemporary Anglospherists argue the British empire also bestowed primarily on its white, Anglo-Saxon dominions (Kenny and Pearce, 2018: Chapter 5). Government attempts to control the economy, meanwhile, were tantamount to 'a form of foreign despotism and Anglo-Saxon degeneration', and commonly leveraged by proponents of European integration (Shilliam, 2021: 245).

Powell's imperially-rooted, racialised ideas also clearly animated his interventions on immigration, where his politics are considered to have exerted the most influence

(Wellings, 2013: 49). As I explore further below, Powell refashioned imperial discourses about Englishness to articulate a more defensive, ostensibly post-imperial understanding of the nation (Kenny and Pearce, 2018: 86–101) that nonetheless played on the imperially-inflected Little England imaginaries outlined above. It is this strand of Powell's political thought that informs my definition of *Powellite nostalgia*. For while the racialised, nostalgic veneration of England and the English was a key element in all aspects of Powell's politics, these ideas continue to exert their strongest legacy over the highly politicised terrain of immigration. Despite the 'Anglo-British' framing of the contemporary immigration debate, Powellism continues to resonate predominantly in England, finding little support in other UK nations, particularly Scotland and Northern Ireland (Wellings, 2019: 99). Below, I discuss how these Powellite themes became emotively intertwined with the English contestation of European integration.

Powellite nostalgia as control and colonial authority

Long before immigration became one of its core concerns, English Euroscepticism was characterised by xenophobia. Persistent representations of the EU and its antecedents as a German-led continental conspiracy can be traced back to memories of the Second World War (Forster, 2002: 136). As a late-20th century Eurosceptic, Powell also employed many of these overtones (Saunders, 2018), pointing to what he saw as inescapable cultural incompatibilities between England and the alleged empire of Europe (Shilliam, 2021). As Shilliam (2021: 244, emphasis original) puts it, 'culture, for Powell, was race'. The 20th century debates on Europe were also preoccupied with Britain's imperial legacy, though as noted above, Powell himself steered clear of direct expressions of empire nostalgia. In this period, pro-Europeans used Britain's imperial and colonial past to assert its ability to represent the Commonwealth in Europe's institutions, while the majority of Eurosceptic 'anti-Marketeters' peddled an early version of the imperially-rooted, contemporary Global Britain discourse (Saunders, 2018, 2020). Given the limited nature of European integration at the time, Powellite links between Euroscepticism, empire and immigration were yet to be made. These connections came much later, when concerns about migration first arose during the EU's early 21st century Eastern enlargement. Here, Powell's approach to post-imperial migration to England, as famously expressed in his 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech, provided a resonant roadmap for contemporary English Eurosceptics to follow.

In that speech, Powell cultivated a sense of 'crisis' around new immigration from the non-white British Commonwealth, lamenting the 'white man[']s' perceived loss of status to black immigrants (Powell, 1968) in an emotive manner that immediately and substantially increased his public standing (Gamble, 1974: 121). Powell's public appeal rested on dual strands that highlighted how immigration threatened England's 'native' population not only by depleting essential public services and draining economic opportunities rightfully reserved for 'ordinary' citizens, but by diluting Englishness itself (Powell, 1968). From the EU's 2004 expansion onwards hard-line Eurosceptics like UKIP found that they could also improve their popularity by adopting similar Powellite arguments that stoked fears of immigration 'crisis' at multiple levels (Hayton, 2016: 401–402; Wellings, 2019: 99). Though the new European immigrants were mostly white, they remained culturally and thus racially distinct from the English (Shilliam, 2021: 244). They purportedly also opened a route through which even more diverse 'Others' may easily follow. Indeed, as UKIP's Farage often insisted, 'behind every Pole was a Muslim and/or African waiting to invade the heartlands' (Shilliam, 2018: 163).

Several scholars have already pointed to the central role of emotion in the popularity of Powellite discourse (Gamble, 1974: 121; Kenny and Pearce, 2018: 96–97; Wellings, 2013: 55). As Kenny and Pearce (2018: 96–97) argue, Powell himself addressed a ‘palpable sense of melancholy and loss in working-class communities’, promising ‘redemption, emancipation and renewal’. However, while methodological whiteness has also led us to believe that the Powellite framing of contemporary Eurosceptic politics speaks exclusively to the concerns of a white working-class ‘left behind’ by globalisation (Bhambra, 2017), this was only one group of Brexit voters (Watson, 2018: 19). Like Powell, the Leave campaigns frequently leveraged both material/economic and ‘cultural’ arguments against immigration (Henderson and Wyn Jones, 2021: 198). Given that immigration was a core issue for English Brexit voters, as noted above, and the result was ‘disproportionately delivered’ by England’s relatively affluent and least diverse areas (Bhambra, 2017: 215), we can infer that Powellite anti-immigration language also spoke strongly to those with little material cause for concern by stoking ‘imagined immigration’ fears (see Merriman, 2018: 607). Put differently, Powellite themes did not simply appeal to a working-class ‘left behind’, or more accurately ‘let down’ by governors’ mismanagement of globalisation (Watson, 2018), but also to ‘the propertied, pensioned, well-off, white *middle class* based in southern England’ (Bhambra, 2017: 215, emphasis original). This analysis challenges prevailing class-based interpretations of Brexit and points instead to the central, but frequently ignored, role of emotive ideas about race (and/as culture) in securing the result (Bhambra, 2017).

Powellite language, however, is not generically ‘emotive’. By addressing a widely-shared sense of melancholy and loss, Powellite language draws specifically on the emotion nostalgia. Once diagnosed as a potentially fatal clinical homesickness, nostalgia is now predominantly understood as an emotion characterised by feelings of ‘loss, lack and longing’ (Pickering and Keightley, 2006: 921). Viewed as a common psychological response to periods of ‘crisis’ and change, nostalgia provides its subjects with comfort by journeying into memories of an idealised past (Davis, 1979). Put differently, nostalgia expresses a longing to return to the romanticised properties of a lost time and place, providing an escape from the perceived ‘crisis’ of the present. *Powellite* nostalgia, then, manifests specifically as a desire to restore the racial homogeneity of England and preserve the qualities of white Englishness from the existential threat of a supposed immigration ‘crisis’. Although Powellite nostalgia is rooted in the experiences of empire, it is distinct from the ‘outward-facing’ and superficially ‘anti-nostalgic’ imperial and colonial nostalgias associated with the Global Britain discourse (Melhuish, 2022), finding emotional resonance instead in the ‘inward-looking’ but imperially-inflected imaginaries of a domesticated Little England.

In the context of the Brexit referendum, nostalgic Powellite sentiments were most clearly invoked in the Vote Leave campaign’s now infamous slogan: ‘Take Back Control’. As others have briefly observed, this slogan is indebted to Powell (Aqui et al., 2021), with the promise of restricting immigration amid ‘crisis’ becoming central to its use (Parnell, 2022: 2) and its meaning (Henderson et al., 2017: 640). Nevertheless, the imperative to ‘Take Back Control’ also had a polysemic appeal, capable of addressing multiple audiences, including those concerned with ostensibly less-toxic themes, such as repatriating a multitude of laws and regulations from the EU (Browning, 2019). The slogan’s polysemy facilitated Vote Leave’s post-referendum detoxification efforts as it could be moulded to symbolise both a ‘high-minded, democratic case’ for Brexit and a ‘highly racialised appeal to fear of ‘the other’” (Kenny, 2016a; see also Black, 2019: 203). Whatever theme

it was attached to, however, the emotional resonance of the phrase was always nostalgic. To advocate taking something ‘back’ immediately puts a statement into a nostalgic register since it indicates a dissatisfaction with the present and a desire to retrieve a prior, superior state of affairs (Browning, 2019). Indeed, Vote Leave’s Campaign Director Dominic Cummings indicated how this framing tapped into the nostalgic psychology of ‘loss aversion’, where people feel strongly about reclaiming something that has been ‘stolen’ from them (Woods, 2022: 33).

‘Control’ is, however, an equally important yet overlooked nostalgic term, with clearer imperial and racial connotations. Extant IR research has highlighted how ‘control’ holds a psychological and emotive appeal, signifying agency and order, especially in times of ‘crisis’ (Browning, 2019: 224–225; Subotic and Steele, 2018: 388–389; Gellwitzki and Houde, 2022). On this view, as some have already observed, Vote Leave’s emphasis on restoring control aligned with a buccaneering view of Britain’s imperial past, embodied in the Global Britain discourse, by speaking to ‘The memory of Britain exercising unfettered sovereignty in its imperial heyday [. . .]’ (Wellings, 2016: 375 cited in Black, 2019: 203). Such observations have, however, been taken up in problematic and persistent binaries in Brexit commentary that interpret Vote Leave’s messaging in a detoxifying manner. Several studies from the think tank (Gaston and Hilhorst, 2018) and academic spheres (Browning, 2019; Campanella and Dassù, 2019; Virdee and McGeever, 2017) have associated Vote Leave with the seemingly more benign ‘Global Britain’ discourse, while locating ‘Little England’s’ distasteful anti-immigration themes primarily within the realms of UKIP, its figurehead Nigel Farage, and the affiliated Leave.EU campaign. These tendencies map unfortunately onto Vote Leave’s own post-referendum attempts to rehabilitate its image, as I discuss further below.

Exploring additional nostalgic meanings of control can, however, provide an overdue corrective to these binaries. The term ‘control’ has long been associated with desires to restrict immigration and migrants’ rights, both in England and continental Europe (Baker-Beall, 2016; Squire, 2008) (Melhuish and Heath-Kelly, 2022). Indeed, references to the ‘loss of control’ frequently characterised high-profile English debates about immigration, race and the state of the nation in the years immediately preceding the Brexit referendum (Cap, 2017: 73; Kenny, 2014: 23). In this article, I argue that such notions of lost control generate nostalgic imaginaries for the reinstatement of colonial forms of authority, premised on views about race cultivated during Britain’s imperial encounters. On this view, the racial logics of the British empire, frequently enforced through violence, have weaved into ‘authoritarian modes’ of discipline, control and belonging with respect to immigration and race in contemporary English politics (see Gilroy, 2005: 31). As such, Vote Leave’s calls to ‘Take Back Control’ spoke not just to themes of national sovereignty synonymous with the Global Britain discourse, but to desires to reinforce traditional racial hierarchies, articulated through images of a Little England.

Theses of internal colonialism suggest that Britain’s colonial assets were ‘laboratories’ (Colley, 1992: 327; Gilroy, 2005: 46) whose experimental findings transmuted into domestic policies on immigration and race, stretching into the present-day (El-Enany, 2020; Shilliam, 2018; Turner, 2018). During empire, while ‘legal and land reform’ trialled in Ireland was later implemented in India (Colley, 1992: 327), methods of racial discipline and control enacted in further colonial territories ‘transformed the exercise of governmental powers at home and configured the institutionalization of imperial knowledge to which the idea of “race” was central’ (Gilroy, 2005: 46). Such knowledge continues to inform the contemporary English approach to immigration, known as the hostile

environment, which works to discipline racialised ‘Others’ by controlling their access to the ‘spoils of empire’ according to their perceived ‘deservingness’ (El-Enany, 2020: Chapter 3; Shilliam, 2018). As such, England remains in the throes of a ‘colonial hangover’, a term used to connote ‘the everyday hidden legacies of Empire’ (Akhter, 2019: 248). In addition to their embodiment in specific policies, such colonial legacies are also more broadly apparent in the racialised nostalgia of authoritarian populism, directed at restoring control amid perceived ‘crises’ in national life (Hall, 1988: Chapter 2). Such narratives of ‘crisis’ or moral panic typically invoke intersecting themes of ‘race, law-and-order, permissiveness and social anarchy’ in order to generate a sense of lost control (Hall, 1988: 151). By seeking the recovery of ‘conformity’ and ‘security’ as a response to such ‘crisis’ (Norris and Inglehart, 2019: 71–74, 76–78) authoritarian discourses, therefore, possess a conventionally nostalgic and comforting desire for ‘the restoration of ‘normal times’’ (Hall, 1988: 143).

Taking these insights together, I argue that Vote Leave’s calls to ‘Take Back Control’ operated within a wider discourse of lost control in national life, inflected with nostalgic, authoritarian themes of racial discipline dating back to Britain’s imperial and colonial past. While the ‘back’ element of the framing acted as a clear marker of a conventionally nostalgic, restorative temporality, the ‘control’ element provided a comforting, and persistently racialised, sense of the order, agency and stability to be reclaimed amid the ‘crisis’ posed by the presence of racialised ‘Others’. This is the essence of Powellite nostalgia. In his ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech, Powell (1968) himself famously objected to black immigrants gaining the ‘whip hand’ over England’s native white population; imagery which called to mind the violent methods of racial control previously employed by white colonial ‘masters’. His quotation of such methods suggested a nostalgic concern for how the ‘natural’ racial hierarchy was about to be upended and must be preserved. By characterising immigration as a national ‘crisis’, Powellite nostalgia, therefore, calls for the restoration of a racially homogeneous nation, enforced via colonially inflected means of authoritarian control, designed to limit immigrants’ entry to, and activities within, England.

During the referendum, these themes were facilitated by the urgent invocation of an immediately threatening refugee ‘crisis’, with migrants fleeing war in Syria and Iraq in the months preceding the referendum feeding into a longer-standing perceived migration ‘crisis’ in which England had already been overrun by ‘foreigners’. Such imaginaries owed much to the country’s territorial constitution as an island and long-standing militarised narratives of the threat of invasion (see Gilroy, 2005: 23). This defensive and insular imaginary of a Little England, however, also drew on racial knowledge gleaned through the country’s former imperial encounters as an expansive Global Britain. On this view, ‘Take Back Control’ acted as a nostalgic invitation to restore a colonially-inflected form of military-masculine agency and heroism. As I discuss further below, gender plays a subtle but important role in the articulation of this form of nostalgia, reproducing the Little England discourse’s core colonial tropes of a domesticated (national) ‘home’ under threat of siege and invasion by masculinised ‘Others’ (see Smith, 1994).

Control, migration ‘crisis’ and the aesthetic representation of racialised boundaries

Vote Leave’s campaign materials frequently drew on representations of ‘Anglo-Britain’s’ island geography to convey the impression of a finite space about to be

overwhelmed by mass migration (Cap, 2017: 79). In the twilight of the British Empire, such representations were imbued with racial connotations, as 'imagery of boundaries and frontiers often signalled fears and insecurities about collapsing and permeable boundaries – between colonizers and colonized, black and white' (Webster, 2005: 18). This was the case in the campaign's frequent use of map-style graphics of the British Isles, which conveyed the threat of invasion allegedly posed by migrants from Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Such graphics appeared, for example, in campaign leaflets (Vote Leave, 2016o, 2016p, 2016q, 2016s, 2016u) and a host of organic and monetised social media materials (e.g. Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2019a: 15–19, 20–21, 25, 32–34, 72–73, 84, 88–89; Vote Leave, 2016, 2016t). As part of a four-page leaflet titled 'The European Union and Your Family: The Facts', Vote Leave suggested the imminent danger posed by entire populations of potential EU accession countries, and refugees from 'neighbouring' Syria and Iraq, moving to Britain (Vote Leave, 2016o). The sense of 'crisis' implied in these images was codified at the bottom of the page in direct references to 'the Euro crisis, the migration crisis, and new countries like Turkey and Serbia being lined up as new member states' (Vote Leave, 2016o). Elsewhere, the visual message was also rendered more explicit, such as in social media images that depicted arrows extending from Turkey, Syria, or Iraq towards Britain, alongside population statistics or icons suggesting the potential scale of migration (e.g. Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2019a: 20–21, 25, 32–34, 72–73).

Indeed, in some cases, the visuals were accompanied by labels pointing directly to 'Britain's new border [. . .] with Syria and Iraq' (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2019a: 34). Vote Leave's chief representatives also made similarly incendiary claims, misrepresenting a limited reciprocal migration deal struck between the EU and Turkey shortly before the referendum in the context of the ongoing refugee 'crisis'. Here, Vote Leave's leading spokespersons, Conservative MPs Michael Gove and Boris Johnson both referred to the creation of 'visa-free travel' between Turkey and the EU as a scheme that would effectively create a border between Britain, Syria and Iraq (Gove, 2016; Johnson, 2016; Vote Leave, 2016i).

Such claims were repeated in open letters released by Vote Leave towards the end of the referendum, co-signed by the MPs Gove, Johnson, Gisela Stuart and, in one case, Priti Patel (Vote Leave, 2016l, 2016n). Similar phrasing was also apparent in further campaign email communications, some of which referred notably to the movement of the Syrian border to the 'English Channel' (Vote Leave, 2016e, 2016f). Such references to the English Channel subtly invoked the island boundaries of the White Cliffs of Dover, the primary defences in shared histories of prior attempted invasions, such as in the Second World War. While these connotations contributed to the nostalgia of the imagery, however, further aspects of its content and historical context spoke to a more specifically racialised, colonially-inflected Powellite nostalgic form. In the mid-20th century, with Britain's imperial dominion fading, imagery of fragile boundaries pervaded nationalist narratives to mirror similar concerns about the porous boundaries between races (Webster, 2005: 18). In this light, Vote Leave's use of aesthetics of England's island boundaries being breached by invading 'Others' was redolent of similarly-racialised themes, implying a nostalgic desire to preserve the integrity not just of the territory but of its native population, through the re-instatement of colonial forms of authority. As Webster (2005: 17–18) outlines, colonially-inflected imagery of boundaries can take on many forms, including the 'geographical and territorial, national and

domestic, sexual and racial'. Indeed, several of these themes often coincide in one image. On this view, the territorial visuals discussed above are suggestive of a vulnerable, and thus feminised, territory under threat of violation from a marauding, and thus masculinised, invader (Smith, 1994: 159).

The gender dynamics of this imagery thus act as an implicit metaphor for the vulnerability of feminised, sexually enforced racial boundaries. Indeed, in mid-20th century narratives of imperial Britain, white women were often represented as the vulnerable 'internal frontier', the pre-emptive guardians of the sexual boundaries of the English race, responsible for protecting a racialised Englishness against miscegenation, or racial pollution (Webster, 2005: 10). In their most explicit form, Vote Leave's messages thus pointed directly to migrants as 'dangerous criminals who came to the UK to commit serious offences including murder and rape' (Vote Leave, 2016g, see 2016h, 2016m), claims that operated within a broader context of high-profile media reports alleging a series of sexual assaults perpetrated in Germany by recent Muslim refugees (Virdee and McGeever, 2017: 6). These links are significant since, in popular representations of Britain's imperial history, 'powerful images of white female vulnerability set against black male sexual aggression' were used as a common means through which the exertion of paternal colonial authority, with its methods of racial domination and control, could be legitimated (Ware, 2015: 220). In this light, the imagery discussed above, situated in the broader context of Vote Leave's calls to 'Take Back Control' over borders and migration, invoked a gendered and racialised Powellite nostalgia, expressing a colonially-rooted authoritarian desire to reassert territorial and racial boundaries. I explore these contentions further below, by discussing how intersecting themes of gender, race and coloniality featured in further examples of the campaign's communications.

Siege narratives and nostalgic small-scale representations of the English national 'home'

Vote Leave's suggestive visuals of a threatened, feminised English territory were not the only vessels of a gendered, racialised and colonially-inflected Powellite nostalgia. Further campaign communications made more specific use of classic nostalgic tropes, such as the white woman and the nuclear family. As noted above, such imagery operated within a discursive tradition, particularly cultivated during the colonial wars of the British empire, of using representations of 'the small-scale and familiar – hearths, homes, families, streets, neighbourhoods' to construct a racially homogeneous 'Little England' in opposition to a foreign 'Other' (Webster, 2005: 8). Indeed, from the 1950s onwards, representations of the English 'white woman guarding the boundaries of her home against invasion became a common image of a nation under siege by immigrants' (Webster, 2005: 10). In such imagery, white women stood as rather literal guardians of the English race, vulnerable to exploitation and violation due to their role in enforcing internal sexual boundaries. Similarly gendered and racialised themes have traditionally also been conveyed in representations of broader constructs, such as the nuclear family and domesticated home, used as 'emblems of white life' (Webster, 2005: 170) and a racially coherent 'cornerstone of the nation' (Ware, 2015: 13–14). Here, the nuclear family structure of a man, a woman and two children represents a natural, 'biological unit' – the most appropriate means for rearing children – which precludes the depiction of more diverse compositions of family and household common in different ethnic, class and generational settings (Barrett and

McIntosh, 1982: 49). Within the domesticated imaginary of racial coherence that is the nuclear family, the white woman continues to stand for feminine characteristics, such as ‘vulnerability, sensitivity, passion, security, danger [and] dependence’, while her husband conveys masculine authority and her children epitomise the future (Ware, 2015: 13–14).

The Powellite nostalgia embodied in such small-scale representations of the English nation and race has several facets. First, while men have overwhelmingly been used to represent the ‘progressive, forward-looking project of nationhood’ – a theme that characterised Vote Leave’s broader narratives of military-masculine heroism (e.g. Vote Leave, 2015) – women have traditionally personified the nation’s ‘continuous’ past (McClintock, 1993: 66; Radcliffe, 1996: 6). Like for Powell, here such continuity is a code for a racially homogeneous, white, English past to be conserved and defended. Basic feminised representations of the nation then acquire an additional nostalgic dimension thanks to their association with notions of home and domesticity. As noted above, nostalgia was originally conceived as a clinical homesickness but has since been diluted to refer to a diffuse longing for a lost home (Davis, 1979: Chapter 1). Such spatio-temporal notions of home are highly gendered, with the comforting features of the domestic small-scale frequently conferred on the nation (McClintock, 1993). On this view, the physical and emotional safety embodied in gendered imagery of the small-scale (Barrett and McIntosh, 1982: 38–43) translates to a nostalgic image of the national ‘home’ as a ‘haven’ (Duyvendak, 2011: 38), imbued with the comforting connotations of ‘a warm, safe ‘inside’ that is free of ‘harm’” (Hutchison, 2016: 105). Once this elision between the domesticated and the national home occurs, ‘little room is left for minorities’ (Duyvendak, 2011: 85). Immigration can then be constructed as a threat to the feminised and racially homogeneous small-scale, domesticated version of home and, in turn, to the national ‘home’ (or, as in the territorial examples of the preceding section, vice versa). Once such a ‘crisis’ has been invoked, a nostalgic longing for the authoritarian reassertion of the security of the home ensues. Given that the preferred imagery of the threatened home emanates from Britain’s colonial past, as I noted above, the nostalgic solution is also necessarily colonial-inflected, inviting the restoration of masculinised heroism and colonial authority.

These dual racialised and gendered dimensions of Powellite nostalgia were conveyed in further Vote Leave campaign materials which made notable use of imagery of the English small-scale as a metaphor for race and nation. Powellite nostalgia was implied through historically-rooted visuals of white women and the nuclear family that insinuated the fragile boundaries of the English race. These connotations were most striking in a social media image (Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2019a: 98) of a white mother holding a newborn baby, accompanied (within the image) by text warning of the closure of maternity units, and (alongside the image) by further text arguing that ‘We can’t cope with pressures like immigration’ (see Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 2019b: 263).

This image, I argue, was particularly suggestive of the racialised menaces that the EU’s so-called ‘open-door migration policy’ (see Gove, 2016; Vote Leave, 2016r) posed to the white woman, and by extension, to a racialised view of the English nation. Ostensibly at least, the image spoke to the alleged impact of immigration on the diminishing capacity of public services like the NHS – a common theme within Vote Leave’s campaign materials. Given the gendered, racialised and ‘eugenicist’ history of the welfare-state and its core public institution, this was far from a neutral proposition in itself (see Shilliam, 2018: 74). New welfare institutions such as the NHS were facilitated in part through the financial rewards of the British empire, and were explicitly designed to serve

the continued 'quality' and reproduction of the 'British race' (El-Enany, 2020: 69–72; Hunter, 2017: 169). Vestiges of these origins remain in contemporary debates about access to the NHS, which rely on colonially-rooted imaginaries of 'deservingness' that privilege the native population and work to exclude immigrant 'Others' from the benefits of Britain's imperial 'spoils' (El-Enany, 2020: 69–72; Shilliam, 2018). As such, in Vote Leave's campaign materials, white English women appeared as the prime deserving beneficiaries of the NHS. Indeed, in addition to the image considered above, white women starred as NHS patients in the campaign's televised referendum broadcasts, which followed nostalgic sepia-toned imagery of the early health service with a tale of competing British hospital scenarios before and after Brexit (Vote Leave, 2016c, 2016d). Elsewhere in the campaign's communications, similarly vulnerable, feminised, familial subjectivities, such as children and the elderly, were also proffered as an endangered health service's implicitly deserving recipients (e.g. Digital, Media, Culture and Sport Committee, 2019a: 40–41, 72, 93–94; Vote Leave, 2016j, 2016k).

Themes of feminised vulnerability and deservingness had also animated Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech where he declaimed how, thanks to excess Commonwealth immigration, England's native citizens 'found their wives unable to obtain hospital beds in childbirth' (Powell, 1968). Indeed, the statement that immediately preceded these claims was particularly telling of the operation of a racialised nostalgia for the national 'home', as Powell lamented how the extant population had 'found themselves made strangers in their own country' (Powell, 1968). Powell further illustrated this alienation by recounting the story of one elderly white woman's fears about her neighbourhood becoming dominated by 'threatening' black immigrants (Powell, 1968). By highlighting the woman's 'powerlessness and vulnerability at home in a quiet English street' the story reflected popular imperially rooted mid-century tropes about the racial 'violation of domestic sanctuaries' (Webster, 2005: 180). Given this context, and the historic metaphorical meaning attached to imagery of the small-scale considered above, I argue that Vote Leave's suggestive use of small-scale aesthetics of white women and other familial subjectivities implied that immigration was not only a threat to the (already racialised) capacity of the NHS, but to the racial fabric of the English nation itself. Indeed, similar themes were also conveyed in the campaign's prominent depiction of the nuclear family under the banner 'Vote Leave is the safer choice' in both versions of one of its major pieces of canvassing literature (Vote Leave, 2016a, 2016b).

Although the non-white appearance of the father in this leaflet complicated the nuclear family's conventional meaning as an exclusively white institution, the very portrayal of the socially conservative nuclear family structure was automatically exclusionary to the full diversity of contemporary British families and households that prevail in different cultural settings. Here, a racialised undercurrent of cultural exclusivity was implied as the threatened nuclear family – the cornerstone of 'Little England' – appeared as the deserving beneficiary of accompanying calls to restore the 'ultimate authority' of British laws (see Vote Leave 2016a, 2016b). As such, the image of this 'average' family alongside appeals to its 'safety' further suggested that the nuclear family was a traditional marker of English culture that needed to be defended. Below I explore how such expressions of Powellite nostalgia combine with further empirical evidence to confound post-referendum attempts to detoxify Vote Leave, which have falsely distanced the campaign from the nationalist and racist connotations of its Eurosceptic referendum rivals, the UKIP-Leave. EU campaigns.

Powellite nostalgia and the post-referendum de-toxification of Vote Leave

In autumn 2015, Vote Leave emerged from a Conservative-dominated quarter of the Eurosceptic ecosystem which, led by seasoned campaigner Dominic Cummings, had historically distinguished itself by positioning EU withdrawal as a lofty and ‘forward-looking’ attempt to reorient Britain towards ‘national priorities’, such as public health, science and technology (Melhuish, 2022). Vote Leave perpetuated similar arguments throughout the referendum, with interviewees also emphasising the campaign’s ‘forward-looking’, and thus ‘positive’ and ‘optimistic’ orientation (e.g. Anonymous 1, 2018; Anonymous 6, 2018). Despite such a purportedly high-minded ethos, however, Vote Leave soon ran into trouble with authorities charged with scrutinising the referendum, facing repeated accusations of lying and campaign misconduct, including the misuse of funds and the mishandling of personal social media data (see Cadwalladr, 2019).

This fractious context surrounded my post-referendum interviews with 13 former associates of Vote Leave between May 2018 and February 2019. Given this environment, it is perhaps unsurprising that efforts to detoxify the campaign abounded in the interview responses. Many campaigners found questions about the role of nostalgia in the referendum specifically contentious (Anonymous 1, 2018; Anonymous 6, 2018; Anonymous 9, 2018; Anonymous 10, 2018). Such responses reflect the long-standing cultural appeal of a forward-looking orientation and suggest nostalgia’s persistent unfavourable association with connotations of weakness and backwardness, derived from its historic origins as a medical disease (Robinson, 2012). Importantly, Vote Leave campaigners’ professed rejection of nostalgia also became a significant way in which it could distinguish itself from its Eurosceptic referendum rivals, UKIP-Leave.EU, which were presented as the unappealingly nostalgic campaigns (Anonymous 7, 2018; Anonymous 9, 2018; Anonymous 10, 2018; Anonymous 11, 2018). Similar distinctions carried over into interview testimony about the ownership of Global Britain and Little England imaginaries. While interviewees characterised UKIP-Leave.EU as ‘nationalist’ (Anonymous 6, 2018; similar implied by Anonymous 9, 2018; Anonymous 10, 2018) several felt that Vote Leave was more moderate on Little England’s core issues of immigration and race, and thus spoke to a different audience (Anonymous 2, 2018; Anonymous 3, 2018; Anonymous 10, 2018; Anonymous 13, 2019). Whereas the Leave.EU voter base was described as ‘nativist’, Vote Leave was thought to appeal ‘more to liberal, out-facing sort of people’ (Anonymous 2, 2018). Indeed, one interviewee argued that Vote Leave campaigners were themselves also ‘genuinely internationalists’, reflecting a ‘peculiar trait of internationalism in British history, looking not just to Europe but to other parts of the world’ (Anonymous 6, 2018).

Furthermore, Vote Leave was reportedly concerned that any discussion of immigration in the referendum would be interpreted as racist. Such concerns reflected broader understandings in the contemporary Conservative party that immigration (Wellings, 2013: 58) and explicit associations with the politics of Enoch Powell (Aqui et al., 2021: 258) were ‘toxic’ themes. As one respondent stated, campaign director Cummings felt that ‘if we did push it [immigration] too hard we would get into trouble as being racist, even though it wasn’t racist, it would sound as if it was’ (Anonymous 13, 2019). Another interviewee reflected that: ‘there’s an extent to which you need to grab people and to motivate them, and an extent to which you then become subject to criticism on the other side because you’re essentially doing dog-whistle’ (Anonymous 1, 2018). While some of Vote Leave’s messaging indeed cultivated a post-racial appearance through weak promises to facilitate the entry of Commonwealth citizens to Britain (Namusoke, 2016), as we

already have seen, many of the campaign's materials also advanced highly racialised and anti-immigrant content. This was particularly acute towards the end of the referendum, in Vote Leave's insistence that the Muslim-majority Turkey was poised to join the EU. One image was especially striking in this regard, depicting muddy footsteps traipsing through a British passport fashioned to represent the EU's 'open-door migration policy' (Gove, 2016) alongside the caption: 'Turkey (population 76 million) is joining the EU' (Vote Leave, 2016r). With the open door invoking a vulnerable, domesticated imaginary of the nation, the muddiness of the invading footsteps was redolent of the threat of contamination that marauding Turks posed to race and nation, represented by the British passport.

This image is reminiscent of a racialised representational practice known as the 'racial gothic', which has historically been used to portray Muslims as uncivilised and threatening through 'Gothic tropes of the monster or monstrous, hauntings and the spectral, and abjected states' (Abbas, 2019: 2451). Indeed, there is something ghostly and haunting about these footsteps in their disembodiment, which conjures fears of a mysterious 'Other'. Such mysteriousness is central to Gothicised imagery, which plays on fears of the indeterminacy and thus potential ubiquity of the 'Other', and invokes associations of menace and revulsion connected to anxieties about imminent racial contamination (Abbas, 2019). Put differently, '[i]nability to see the Other undermines the authority of the white nationalist, inciting an angered desire to regain power and control considered rightfully theirs' (Abbas, 2019: 2463). While Abbas connects Gothicised representations to anger, however, I suggest that they are also intrinsically connected to Powellite nostalgia, which responds to a racialised sense of 'crisis' by advocating the comforting restoration of colonially-inflected racial order and control. On this view, Vote Leave's Gothicised, ghostly portrayal of disembodied and dirty footsteps traipsing through an emblem of Britishness suggests a racial 'crisis' to be remedied by reasserting historical racial hierarchies. Such striking representations challenge claims made by both interviewees and academics that the Vote Leave campaign was distinct from the racist, nationalist and nostalgic associations of fellow Eurosceptics, UKIP-Leave.EU.

This was briefly recognised during the referendum itself when Vote Leave's imagery of muddy footsteps drew particular public criticism, with one newspaper using it as evidence that the campaign was 'embroiled in [a] race row' (Boffey and Helm, 2016). Will Straw, the leader of the Remain campaign, later also pointed to the racialised similarities between this image and an infamous poster that UKIP released shortly before polling titled 'Breaking Point', which showed a long queue of migrants at a border. (Shipman, 2016: 302; UKIP, 2016). Yet it is the *Breaking Point* image that has captured the attention of most Brexit research (e.g. Abbas, 2019: 2459–2461; Browning, 2019: 231; Miah, 2018: 635; Virdee and McGeever, 2017: 5–6), enabling Vote Leave's 'footsteps' image to pass with little further comment. Of course, this pattern was also facilitated by Vote Leave's own open criticism of UKIP's famous intervention (Browning, 2019: 231).

Some Vote Leave interviewees also offered the *Breaking Point* poster as a specific example of how the UKIP-Leave.EU campaign was more extreme than Vote Leave (Anonymous 3, 2018; Anonymous 7, 2018; Anonymous 9, 2018). Nevertheless, in its rather explicit representation of an imminent Muslim invasion, which echoed Second World War Nazi imagery of Jewish refugees, the *Breaking Point* poster was, like Straw suggested, rather close to Vote Leave's own aesthetics. Such visuals were not, however, the only discursive similarities between Vote Leave and UKIP-Leave.EU. The phrase 'breaking point' had already appeared in a 2015 UKIP manifesto describing the pressures of immigration on the NHS (UKIP, 2015: 15). It is in such terms that Vote Leave also

employed the phrase, several weeks prior to the release of UKIP's *Breaking Point* poster, in televised referendum broadcasts that highlighted how 'Our NHS is at breaking point' (Vote Leave, 2016c, 2016d) and in a media interview that invoked similar pressures on schools (see Doyle, 2016).

There was also a significant overlap between the campaigns' use of the phrase 'Take Back Control'. Vote Leave interviewees credit campaign director Cummings with developing the slogan from prior research into Eurosceptic public opinion (Anonymous 6, 2018; Anonymous 13, 2019). Cummings had indeed utilised the motto 'keep control' in previous campaigns against the proposed EU currency (No Euro, 2004a, 2004b) and constitution (No Campaign, 2005a, 2005b) and later identified the public resonance of 'let's take back control' in research he conducted for Vote Leave's precursor campaign, Business for Britain (Cummings, 2014a, 2014b). Nevertheless, 'control' had been part of the Eurosceptic vernacular since at least the Maastricht era (e.g. Conservatives Against a Federal Europe, 1998) and had long characterised the immigration debate in Britain, as noted above. References to 'control' in the context of immigration and borders were a key feature of the UKIP discourse from at least 2010 and appeared to replace the party's prior nostalgic calls of 'We want our country back' (UKIP, 2005). Later UKIP campaign materials combined the two sentiments in the phrase 'Take back control of our country' (see Haggerty, 2014). It is such connotations that later imbued UKIP's *Breaking Point* poster, which also featured the nostalgic 'take back control' in its accompanying tagline (see UKIP, 2016). Given the overlaps in imagery and phrasing highlighted in this section, Vote Leave's post-referendum claims that the campaign's approach (particularly with respect to the NHS) was the 'right' and 'unifying' way to talk about immigration, different from the 'divisive' UKIP language of 'we want our country back' (Cummings, 2017) appear increasingly spurious.

As one Vote Leave interviewee observed, 'Taking control was a very strong rallying cry for the whole Leave campaign [. . .] there was, you know, quite a big overlap between the objectives or the objections to the EU, that was certainly true' (Anonymous 2, 2018). The substantial overlap in the Powellite discourses of Vote Leave and UKIP-Leave.EU, explored throughout this article, have important implications for our understanding of the intersection of Powellite nostalgia and British Euroscepticism. As Paul Gilroy observed in the early 21st century, the discussion of immigration and race in contemporary England occupies a peculiar emotional register:

[A]n obsessive repetition of key themes – invasion, war, contamination, loss of identity – and the resulting mixture suggests that an anxious, melancholic mood has become part of the cultural infrastructure of the place, an immovable ontological counterpart to the nation-defining ramparts of the white cliffs of Dover (Gilroy, 2005: 23).

My analysis complements this insight, suggesting that discourses of Powellite nostalgia act as comforting and persistent frames for contemporary immigration 'crisis' across the spectrum of elite British Euroscepticism, reflecting the perpetuation of a broader English cultural environment characterised by racialised feelings of post-imperial loss and longing.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how Powellite nostalgia connects seemingly contradictory Global Britain and Little England nationalist discourses. On this view, Vote Leave's core

slogan ‘Take Back Control’ reflects not just an expansive imperial nostalgia for the hegemonic trappings of the British empire but an exclusionary, racialised form of nostalgia for the dominance of white Englishness that draws on understandings of race cultivated during Britain’s imperial and colonial encounters. Here, the global and the nativist meet in narratives of a contemporary immigration ‘crisis’, articulated via a distinctive racialised and gendered spatio-temporal nostalgic register. While Vote Leave’s calls to take ‘back’ control offered a classically nostalgic invitation to reclaim a lost English past, its preference for ‘control’ over ‘foreign’ Others appeared equally nostalgic, and was expressed both explicitly and more subtly, in gendered imagery of the fragile boundaries of race and nation.

This analysis contributes primarily to British Politics and IR literatures on the Brexit referendum, which have often suffered from ‘methodological whiteness’, disguising the uncomfortable role of race (Bhambra, 2017). The article has further shown how an inadequate conceptual grasp of the diversity and interconnectedness of racialised nostalgias for the British Empire has contributed not only to mistaken claims of Global Britain and Little England’s opposition, but also to the reproduction of campaigners’ post-referendum detoxification efforts. While much academic literature has attributed the sanitised Global Britain discourse to Vote Leave and the more brazen Little England discourse to UKIP-Leave.EU, the article has demonstrated how both campaigns appeared equally ready to employ the highly racialised tropes of Powellite nostalgia, typically associated with the latter formation. This is an important insight as it provides further evidence for the perpetuation of a deep-rooted and widely shared English culture that favours emotive treatments of immigration and race, haunted by imperial and colonial ghosts (Hirsch, 2018: 270).

Indeed, Powellite nostalgia continues to occupy a central position in post-Brexit English politics, with the successive Conservative governments of Boris Johnson, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak all fanning the flames of an emotive culture war. As for the Leave campaigns, and Conservative politicians long before them, explicitly acknowledging Powell himself remains ‘toxic’ (Aqui et al., 2021: 258). Yet the toxic themes of Powell’s politics live on, disguised for the white majority in the soothing nostalgic tones and common-sense appeal of authoritarian populism. From the controversial ‘Rwanda policy’, which promises to restore control over immigration numbers by deporting refugees awaiting asylum, to Home Secretary Suella Braverman’s striking assertion in the House of Commons that England is suffering an ‘invasion’ of migrants arriving on small boats across the Channel (Macaskill, 2022), Powell’s legacy is inescapable. Given what we already know about the dire consequences of such language, for the immediate safety of minorities and migrants (Miah, 2018: 635–636), as well as for the long-term ability of education to engender a more inclusive national culture (Akhter and Watson, 2022), it is incumbent on future research to continue to expose the operation and impact of Powellite nostalgia.

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