

# REFLECTIONS ON POLARISATION AND INEQUALITIES IN BREXIT PANDEMIC TIMES

Fractured Lives in Britain

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## Chapter 1

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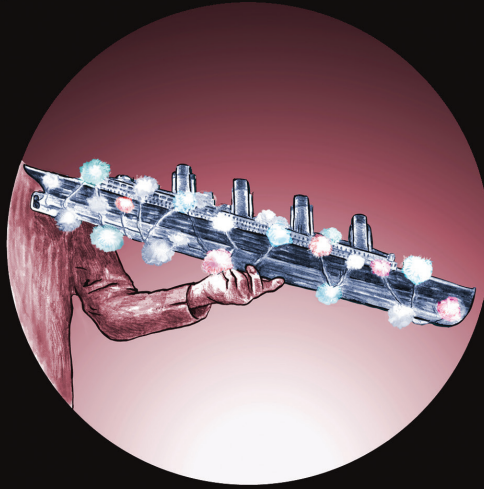
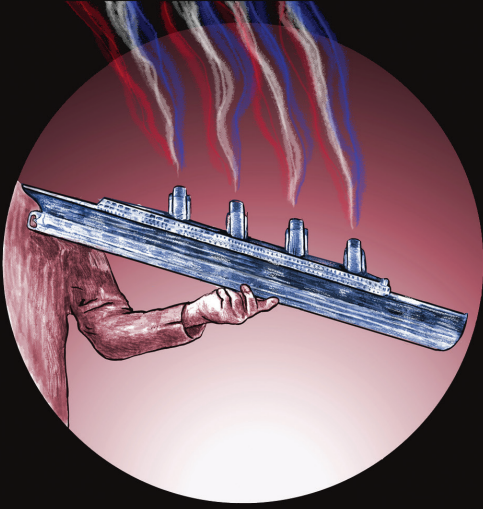
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Blind Faith



# 1

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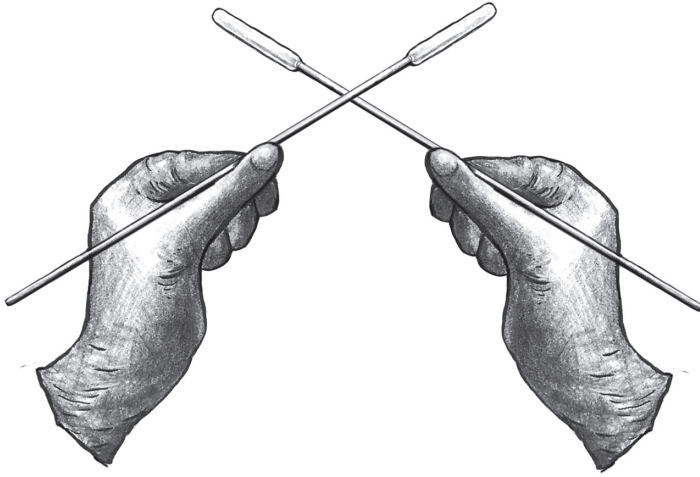


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1.2

In June 2016, the citizens of the UK voted by a slim majority in a national referendum to leave the European Union (EU), instigating a process widely known thereafter as ‘Brexit’. The referendum was followed by years of political debate and negotiation amongst politicians and citizens within the UK, and between representatives of the UK and the EU, concerning the terms and conditions on which Britain should leave the EU. Brexit has significant and complex socio-economic, political, and legal ramifications for the governance and constitution of the UK and Northern Ireland. Brexit has brought personal insecurity and disruption for EU citizens and their families living in Britain, as well as for British citizens living in the EU, whose right to remain in their countries of residence suddenly became uncertain and precarious (Benson et al, 2022). In the wake of Brexit, a pervasive media-led narrative has emerged in public discourse that proposes the UK is a socially and politically polarised nation. This media-led narrative suggests that Britain is divided between Leavers and Remainers. It is argued that this division reflects class, ethnic, racial, and generational differences of opinion on key cultural issues such as national identity, immigration, and multiculturalism (see further Tyler, Degnen and Blamire, 2022 for a detailed discussion of this pervasive public narrative and the sociological critique of it).

On January 31, 2020, the UK officially left the EU. It was on this same day the UK confirmed its first cases of covid-19 (see Ryan, 2021 for a global timeline of the pandemic). On the March 23, 2020, then Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who was also a leading figure in the official Leave campaign, announced the first national lockdown, ordering people to ‘stay at home’. At the end of October 2020, a second lockdown was announced, which lasted

for four weeks, and in January 2021, the nation entered a third lockdown which eased in March 2021, with all restrictions eventually ceasing in 2022. In the early days of the pandemic, it was suggested by some politicians and public figures that this global catastrophe would bring the nation together to ‘fight’ against the shared ‘enemy’ of the virus, and so having the potential to heal some of the social divisions and political frictions caused by Brexit.

Our starting point for this volume is the assertion that it is without doubt that the global and national, social, political, and economic processes of Brexit and the covid-19 pandemic have dramatically fractured and disrupted the stability of public, political, and private life in Britain. Our contention is that these processes have exposed and exasperated the entrenched social and economic inequalities that underpin the fabric of British society. We argue that the impact and consequences of Brexit and the pandemic are ongoing and are often unknown. In other words, we understand Brexit and the pandemic not to be particular and self-contained events. Rather, we understand them to be global and national processes that are shaped by and inform the structure of British society in often unpredictable and unnoticed ways. It is in this era of social, political, and economic turmoil that this edited volume scrutinises the everyday, popular, and political articulations of social inequalities and polarisation in what we are calling ‘the Brexit pandemic era’ in Britain.

Given that Brexit and the pandemic affected every aspect of social life in the UK, our supposition is that the examination of these far-reaching issues requires a broad interdisciplinary approach. Hence, this volume includes chapters written by scholars from across the social sciences, arts, and humanities, including sociologists, political scientists, social anthropologists, human geographers, a sociolinguist, and an English literature scholar. This collection, then, is informed by large-scale surveys; in-depth ethnographic fieldwork including place-based case studies; textual analysis of contemporary British novels; discourse analysis of the political speeches of elite politicians from across the political spectrum; sociolinguistic deconstruction of conversational-style interviews with Leave and Remain voting members of the public; and detailed critical analysis of social and traditional media centred on Brexit and the pandemic. Each chapter is illustrated by artwork by Helen Snell, a contemporary artist. Snell’s artwork crucially adds further layers of meaning to the arguments made in each chapter and the book as a whole.

So then, our book is the first interdisciplinary collection that draws on multiple perspectives and methodologies from within the humanities, arts, and social sciences to consider in detail the sociopolitical contexts of instability, inequality, and social polarisation in the UK that the Brexit-pandemic era makes explicit. There are a number of monographs (e.g., Latour, 2021 on the pandemic; Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley, 2017 on Brexit) and edited volumes (e.g., Fassin and Fourcade, 2021 on the pandemic; Guderjan, Mackay

and Stedman, 2020 on Brexit) that explore either the issue of Brexit or the pandemic. However, our attention in this volume is uniquely on the broad and wide-ranging implications of both Brexit and covid-19 on contemporary British social and political life. Additionally, recent discussions of the pandemic are often first-response material which whilst valuable, are speculative pieces drawn from diverse global case studies that engage with the big concepts of the pandemic, such as the logics of pandemic capitalism, the morality of lockdown policies, and the science of the pandemic (e.g., Fassin and Fourcade, 2021; Latour, 2021). Moreover, most monographs on Brexit from within the social sciences are based on large-scale surveys that give only an indicative surface view of why people voted for Brexit (e.g., Clarke et al, 2017), or are edited collections that are limited to a single issue such as austerity and Brexit (e.g., Guderjan et al, 2020) or discourse and Brexit (e.g., Koller, Kopf, Miglbauer, 2019). It is also noteworthy that Gohrisch and Stedman (2023) have published an edited volume on ‘affective polarisation’ and ‘social inequality’ in Britain ‘after austerity, Brexit and the pandemic’ that shares some of the aims of our book. However, their collection does not foreground the consequences of Brexit and the pandemic on British social and political life in the focused, sustained, and detailed way that we do.

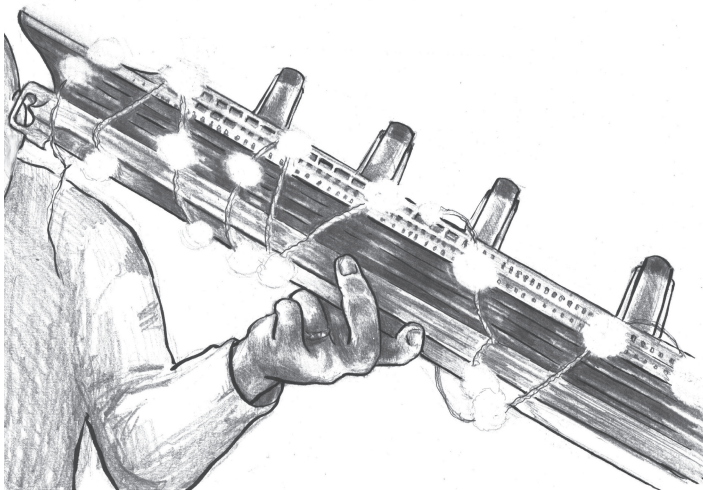
This collection is part of research that has emerged from two interdisciplinary projects entitled ‘Identity, belonging and the role of the media in Brexit covid-19 Britain’ (June 2020–March 2022) and ‘Identity, inequality and the media in Brexit-covid-19 Britain’ (September 2018–March 2022), both funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (see <https://brexit-studies.org/>). These projects examined how the processes of Brexit and the pandemic have impacted and shaped identities, social inequalities, and the media in British society. Katharine Tyler, a social anthropologist, was the Principal Investigator of both projects based at the University of Exeter; political scientists Susan Banducci and Dan Stevens (University of Exeter) and social anthropologist Cathrine Degnen (Newcastle University) were Co-investigators. Joshua Blamire (human geographer, now at the University of Wolverhampton), Laszlo Horvath (political scientist, now at Birkbeck University), Deirdre Patterson (social anthropologist), and Janice Hoang (social scientist, now at the University of Oxford) formed an interdisciplinary team of qualitative and quantitative Research Fellows all based at the University of Exeter (see Blamire et al, Chapter 6; Hoang et al, Chapter 11). The team also included Helen Snell, who was a project artist in residence at the University of Exeter from June 2020 to March 2022. It is Snell’s engaging artwork drawn from these projects that illustrates the chapters in this volume. Some of the chapters also include artwork by Snell that was inspired by the specific chapter’s themes.

In what follows, we shall provide a framework that sets the scene for the ways in which the book approaches questions of social inequality and polarisation. To do this, we shall first describe the co-production of the artwork

that illustrates our arguments and ideas. We begin by taking a step back to explain how the artwork became integral to the research projects that provide the inspiration for this volume.

### Sketching Brexit and Pandemic Times: Red, Amber, Green Britain

The projects that provide the impetus for this book and its artwork began in September 2018, when Brexit was the big news story in the UK. At this time, the research team set out to examine people's experiences of Brexit across identities and places in England. From September 2018 to January 31, 2020, when Britain officially left the EU, Katharine Tyler, Joshua Blamire, and Cathrine Degnen conducted residential ethnographic fieldwork across England exploring people's experiences of Brexit (see Blamire, Tyler and Degnen Chapter 7, this volume; Degnen, Tyler and Blamire, 2023; Tyler et al, 2022; and Tyler and Blamire, Forthcoming). By the time of the first national lockdown in March 2020, we had conducted 180 in-depth conversational-style interviews on the themes of Brexit, identity, belonging, and the media, with residents from across England and across ethnic, racial, class, migrant, national, generational, gender, and place-based identities. We had also each spent considerable time conducting fieldwork on Brexit within diverse community settings. Alongside the fieldwork, Susan Banducci, Dan Stevens, and Laszlo Horvath mapped the traditional and social media on Brexit, including national and local media to the fieldwork sites. This media data provided an invaluable context to situate our fieldwork findings on everyday experiences of Brexit, including people's experiences of the media.

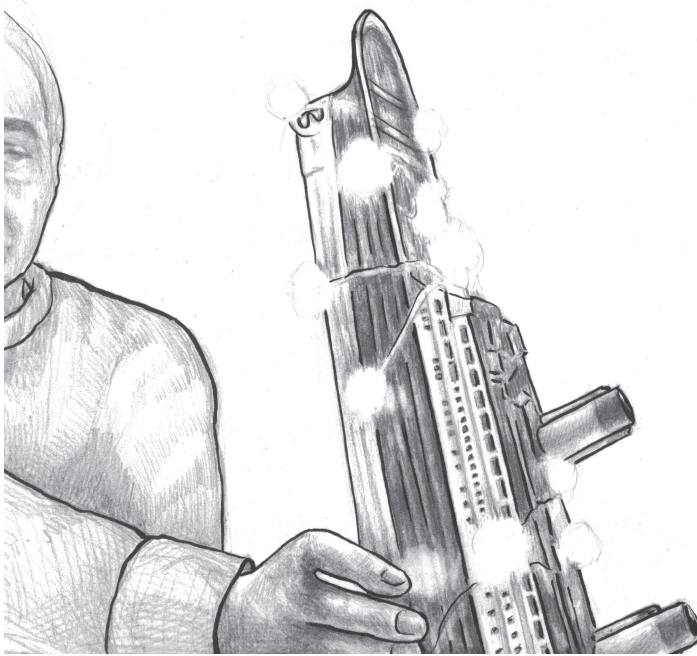


Helen Snell, a contemporary artist, joined our project during the first lockdown. At this time, it seemed like a natural progression to expand our research on Brexit to incorporate people's experiences of the pandemic, including conducting a three-wave panel survey (Hoang et al, Chapter 11). This was because there was an organic synergy between the types of questions that we were posing vis-à-vis Brexit that were also relevant to the pandemic. This comprised questions concerning people's senses of belonging or lack thereof to their local place and the nation, their views on politics and politicians, their experiences of inequalities and how their identities mediate those experiences, as well as their daily media practices. Initially, in working with Snell, our aim was to find creative ways to present our findings to a wider audience beyond academia in a visual form, which we have done and continue to do. However, due to the necessity of having to conduct our fieldwork for the research on Brexit and the pandemic online to conform with lockdown restrictions, we also found that Snell's artistic skills and methodologies became integral to the design of our fieldwork in ways that we could not predict outside of the research process. We shall now turn to some pertinent examples.<sup>1</sup>

The restriction of our ethnographic fieldwork to online interviews was a new way of working for us. The ethnographers each spoke to 30 out of the original 60 people that they had interviewed for their initial fieldworks on Brexit, totalling 90 interviews drawn from three fieldwork sites across England. To get these conversations going, we asked participants to bring along to the interview an object, media image, or photograph (anything really) that captured for them the current situation. Snell mobilised some of these artefacts and images to generate drawings and GIFs that evoked aspects of our findings, and that feature on a project exhibition website entitled 'Red, Amber, Green Britain' (<https://www.redambergreenbritain.com/>).

As Snell reflects, the invitation to our interlocutors to bring objects and images to online interviews that were particularly symbolic to them provided an important space for them 'to communicate in a non-verbal and non-categorical way the ambiguities that defined this moment in time' (Tyler and Snell, 2023). Snell then worked with these visuals to articulate this space and to 'give form to feelings, memories, and experiences in fluid ways'. The resulting drawings and GIF animations reference for Snell the 'circularity of news headlines, government statements, information, and disinformation' during the lockdowns (Tyler and Snell, 2023). In this regard, Snell observes, 'the looping, pulsing GIF animations are designed to invoke the prevailing climate of confusion, a culture of distrust, denial, mixed messaging, and political U turns'. The colour plate introducing this chapter is based on a screenshot taken by Snell during a Zoom interview of a model Titanic that a couple from the South-West of England shared with Tyler in December 2020. This couple felt that this model symbolised what they perceived to be the social and political collapse and decline of Britain, as well as the reproduction of

imperial arrogance on the part of the British government and the general public, in the face of Brexit and the pandemic. The Christmas lights signalled what they understood to be the nation's blind determination to have Christmas as usual in the face of the pandemic and Brexit. These men related the dangers of the pandemic to their lived experiences of the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s and early 1990s. Snell's GIF of this image entitled 'Blind faith' captures and conveys these sentiments.



#### 1.4

The colours Red, Amber, Green run throughout the visuals and articulate what Snell identifies as the pandemic's 'stop start' culture. During the lockdowns, Snell reflects how 'the traffic light colours of Red, Amber, Green were everywhere in government, media, and social messaging: denoting which countries one could travel to; whether or not to enter a supermarket or wait for one's turn outside; whether a hospital ward was for covid or non-covid patients' (Tyler and Snell, 2023).

These colours also capture the feeling of waiting and uncertainty surrounding Brexit. When we were conducting our fieldwork and media analysis on Brexit in 2019, it felt as though the nation was frozen and stuck on Red – waiting in a frantic and intense atmosphere of political debate, social division,



emotional angst, and disagreement over what it meant to be a Leaver or Remainder, with each side passionately believing they had the moral and social high ground and the nation's best interests at heart. For some Leavers the lights went Green, so to speak, when Britain left the EU on January 31, 2020, to return to Red in the face of the lockdowns. However, for some Remainders, this period stayed Red, signalling a time of danger, uncertainty, and high alert.

For Snell, Amber becomes 'the colour of confusion, the unknown and non-binary space' (Tyler and Snell, 2023). Indeed, many of the implications of Brexit and the pandemic are still unpredictable, invisible, and unknown. Thinking of the pandemic in this way, Snell highlights how the colour of Amber symbolises the many 'internal dialogues around decision-making, weighing up risk versus benefit, dithering: should I have a vaccination? Should I wear a mask? Should I travel abroad? Should I "eat out to help out"?' (Tyler and Snell, 2023).

In a similar vein, Brexit for many of our interlocutors also opened up a space of confusion and internal dialogue: What are the implications of Brexit for my job, my business, my family, my community, and my ability to travel abroad? Will me and my family have the right to live in the UK anymore? Do we want to stay in the UK now that the nation has left the EU? Are my neighbours racist for supporting Brexit? Is it safe for me to travel on the buses alone as a black migrant woman in the face of Brexit? Was I right or wrong to vote as I did in the referendum? Will Brexit be implemented properly and appropriately by the government or not?

Importantly for our interdisciplinary project, collaboration with Snell offered us new and innovative ways to bring together the quantitative political science-driven and ethnographic-orientated aspects of our research. This was achieved by working with Laszlo Horvath, project Research Fellow and political scientist, and research software engineers, Freddy Worthingham and James Allen, based at the University of Exeter. Together they developed an interactive app that asks users to answer a series of survey questions on technologies of surveillance and the pandemic. The survey is accompanied by 20 of Snell's GIFS and images drawn from the fieldwork and the media on Brexit and the pandemic. The app uses the animations as visual provocations to encourage participants to consider various scenarios that relate to protecting privacy or consenting to surveillance during the pandemic. An important consideration for Snell in the design process was for players of the app to be randomly assigned an avatar, more often with different gender, ethnicity, health, and economic profiles to their own. This promoted a more considered and empathetic response to the scenarios. A deconstructed version of the app was featured at the Science Gallery in Detroit in the exhibition 'Tracked and Traced' in 2020. At this time, Detroit was in the grip of the pandemic, and so team members Snell, Horvath, and Tyler worked remotely with the design team at Michigan State University to factor in health and

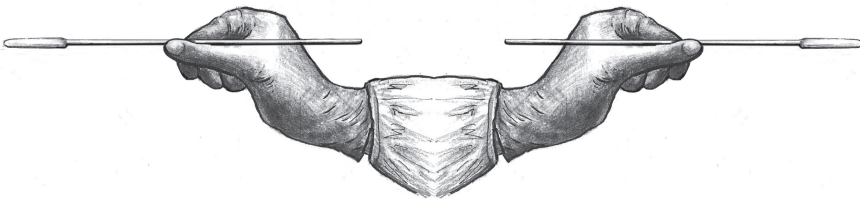
safety considerations, which added more resonance and dimension to the content of the exhibit.

Towards the end of the funded period of this programme of research, the ethnographers invited their interlocutors to choose one of Snell's drawings that was meaningful to them. These images were printed, signed by Snell, and posted to them as a physical mark of their involvement in the process. After the lockdowns, Snell also created tangible and physical legacy objects based on the artwork, with the technical support of architectural glass artist Fabrizia Bazzo. This included the optical lenses featured in the opening images of this chapter.

In these opening photographs, Tyler and one of her interlocutors wear their selection of optician's lenses, featuring still frames from the animations. For Tyler, this image evokes her shifting working relationship with Snell. Tyler first went to Snell's house to interview her for her fieldwork on Brexit in 2019 at the time when the British parliament was fiercely debating the terms and conditions on which Britain should leave the EU. On this occasion, Tyler was the ethnographer and Snell was the participant. After the lockdowns had lifted, Tyler visited Snell's house to be interviewed and photographed by her, resulting in the opening image. This time Snell was the researcher and Tyler was the participant. In wearing these lenses, Tyler quite literally saw the world through her interlocutors' worldviews as well as through the media representations of Brexit and the pandemic. The wearing of these lenses also represents for Tyler the way in which the ethnographer is the embodied instrument of fieldwork – we are the collector, transcriber, and interpreter of our partial, fluid, and deeply positioned ethnographic material.

In sum, it is these artistic images drawn from this collaboration between Snell, the interdisciplinary project team, and our interlocutors that we deploy to illustrate this book, and in so doing, they offer further possibilities for interpretation of our arguments. It is to the specific details of these arguments that we now turn our attention.

### Writing on Social Inequalities and Polarisation in Brexit-pandemic Times





Read collectively, the chapters in this book provide critical analysis of the structural and systematic reproduction of inequalities within everyday social relations, political, and popular discourses in the face of Brexit and the pandemic. Putting this another way, each chapter illustrates how the social and political processes of Brexit and/or the pandemic explicate a fractured society of inequality that was in evidence before Brexit and the pandemic. In so doing, the chapters in this volume provide an interdisciplinary framework to exemplify how existing and entrenched social inequalities become crystallised, exaggerated, and amplified in the Brexit-pandemic era, an era that also represents a continuation of ‘business as usual’ (see also Benson and Lewis, 2019).

Furthermore, this volume examines what constitutes the simplistic and deeply problematic narratives of social polarisation proposed to explain these times advocated by some social scientists, the media, intellectual commentators, think tanks, and politicians. The chapters provide interdisciplinary perspectives and empirically grounded critiques of these overly simplified public narratives. To advance these arguments, the chapters trace the public and everyday articulations of inequalities and polarisation across three interconnected sites: (a) the nation; (b) the community; and (c) the media, each of which we shall now discuss in turn.

*Part I: The Nation: Porous and Closed Boundaries*



The nation has an iconic place in popular, media, and political representations of Brexit and the pandemic. Turning first to examples from the pandemic, it was argued by then Prime Minister Boris Johnson at the beginning of the lockdowns ‘that we are in this together’ (Farris, Yuval-Davis and Rottenberg, 2021). This same sentiment of national unity was also expressed by Trump in his assertion that the pandemic was ‘a great equalizer’ of Americans (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). Moreover, as we noted briefly above, in the UK, the pandemic was thought by some politicians to offer a remedy and solution to the social and political divisions that had crystallised in the face of Brexit. In this vein, some think tanks and other social commentators found evidence to suggest the pandemic brought neighbours and local communities together, including around volunteering (Siddique, 2021). However, these same think tanks also noted that during the lockdowns there was plenty of evidence that the breaking of lockdown rules created more animosity and division between people than Brexit (Booth, 2020).

Reflecting on the early weeks of the pandemic in Britain, Farris et al (2021) argue that the UK government mobilised war metaphors to evoke a British-centric Second World War time spirit in an attempt to bring the nation together. For example, Johnson argued that the nation had to come together to ‘fight’ the virus, that was defined as a ‘deadly’ but also ‘beatable enemy’ (Johnson March 17, 2020, cited in Farris et al, 2021: 284). Thinking back to this time, we are reminded how this wartime structure of feeling was also conveyed by Queen Elizabeth II in her exceptional televised address to the nation on April 5, 2022. In her speech, the Queen described how some 80 years prior she and her sister addressed the nation’s children that had been evacuated during the Second World War. She said:

We, as children, spoke from here at Windsor [e.g. the Royal residence of Windsor Castle] to children who had been evacuated from their homes and sent away for their own safety. Today once again many will feel a painful sense of separation from their loved ones, but now as then we know deep down that it is the right thing to do. We should take comfort that while we may have more still to endure, better days will return. We will be with our friends again: we will be with our families again; we will meet again.

*(BBC, April 5, 2020)*

The phrase ‘we will meet again’ echoed the title of the song ‘We’ll Meet Again’ that was one of the most popular and well-known songs of the Second World War in the UK. The song comforted servicemen going off to fight and their families and friends left behind. During the pandemic, two versions of this song were released, and proceeds went towards National Health Service charities to help NHS staff and volunteers caring for covid-19 patients (Rusk, 2020).

This Second World War atmosphere of feeling was supported by media-led encouragement for the public to hold small, socially distanced, street parties during the lockdown to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Victory in Europe (VE) day. This day marks when German troops surrendered to the allies on May 8, 1945, which was the end of the Second World War in Europe. In May 2020, Katharine Tyler and her family attended a socially distanced VE day party in the street where she lives in the South-West of England. Some of her neighbours decorated the street in bunting and dressed in 1940s-style clothes. At the party that afternoon, Tyler and her family sat socially distanced from their neighbours listening to a radio broadcast of extracts of the original version of Winston Churchill's VE day address to the nation, which was broadcast both times by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) at 3 pm. In his original speech being re-broadcast, Churchill poignantly told the nation: 'We may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing, but let us not forget for a moment the toils and efforts that lie ahead' (History of the BBC, May 8, 2020).

Such collective events call to our attention Farris et al's (2021: 285) argument that central to the cultivation of the feeling of national solidarity was the media-led encouragement of support for those people identified in military terminology as 'frontline' workers. This nationwide support was fostered by the weekly 'clap for carers' in Britain, whereby people were encouraged to stand on their doorsteps and clap for 'frontline' National Health Service (NHS) staff, who were risking their own lives treating covid patients (see Read, Chapter 5, this volume). There was also a nationwide display of rainbow posters that honoured the NHS 'frontline' workers, which were mostly drawn by children. Rainbow posters adorned the windows of homes, shop fronts, and doors. Indeed, it was remarkable how rainbow posters came to quickly replace the 'Bollocks to Brexit', 'Brexit is Bonkers', 'Get Brexit done', and 'Leave means Leave' stickers and posters that were stuck on lamp posts, cars, pavements, bikes, park benches, windows, and pelican crossings across England in the years after the referendum. This politicalised flagging of shared public spaces is a process that project team members observed and documented on our projects' Instagram pages curated by Cathrine Degnen. It was startling how the Brexit stickers captured and conveyed an atmosphere of national division and political discord over Brexit, while the rainbow posters and stickers were visible symbols of a feeling of national unity informing a sense of community and civic pride for frontline workers. The rainbow posters were sparked initially by schools – closed due to the pandemic – encouraging their pupils to make and display rainbows to 'spread hope' (BBC, March 21, 2020).

Meghji and Niang (2022) poignantly argue that both Brexit and the pandemic inspired popular and political discourses focused on the nation and nationhood that reproduced the idea that Britain is an 'exceptional' nation, distinct from other European nations and the rest of the world. For example,

central to the Leave campaigns was the notion that Britain must reclaim its national ‘sovereignty’, and thus governance of its laws, borders, and finances (Virdee and McGeever, 2018). In this vein, Leave campaigners evoked an image of Britain as a small island with ‘a big personality’ illustrated by its ‘exceptional’ history as a ‘world-leader’ (see Saunders, 2020). This included glorifying the British empire, screening out its violent and exploitative histories and legacies, and emphasising the nation’s supposedly leading role in global politics, evidenced by the defeat of the Nazis in the Second World War (see Saunders, 2020).

According to Meghji and Niang (2022), a similar image of British ‘exceptionalism’ was also articulated in public discourse during the pandemic. For example, as they suggest, the British government did not position the nation as working ‘alongside’ other European nations in combating the virus but rather saw itself as ‘exceptional’ in its unique ability to ‘beat’ covid-19. This was evident in the UK government working independently of the EU to develop its own vaccine, a pledge that Johnson argued would be ‘world beating’.

It is in the face of this simplified and problematic public imaginary of Britain as both a cohesive and exceptional nation that the chapters in Part I of this volume provide a much more nuanced account of social and political articulations of nationhood and belonging in these Brexit-pandemic times. Their starting point is not the cohesion and exceptionalism of Britishness but rather the internal fracturing and instability of the boundaries and identities of Britishness. What emerges in this part of the book is an image of the United Kingdom as an internally divided nation, whose identities, boundaries, and values are continually contested and that take meaning in relation to those positioned outside of the nation and its values. Significantly, some of the chapters illustrate that it is precisely the contested constitution of the nation’s boundaries that facilitates pathways for some people to find connections across their perceived differences, including with people designated as national outsiders.

In Chapter 2, Sarah Heinz analyses lockdown novels to trace the contours and complexities of the idea of the British nation as a ‘home’ and ‘homeland’. The conceptual and substantive focus of Heinz’s chapter is encapsulated by Snell’s drawings of a book, the cover of which is the front door of a house and a home. In her chapter, Heinz mobilises the political concept of ‘domopolitics’ to explain some of the ways in which cosy, warm, and bounded ideas of home have become deployed in political discourse to support exclusionary notions of the nation as a ‘home’ and a ‘homeland’ for its citizens. Here, Heinz recalls the Leave campaign’s infamous ‘breaking point’ poster that propagated xenophobic and racist messages about immigration to Britain. She parallels this poster to the naive positioning of ‘the home’ in public and political discourse as a ‘safe place’ to ‘shield’ (another military metaphor) from the virus, while the British government, in line with most of the rest of the world, closed the nation’s borders to outsiders.

It is in these scalar national and familial evocations of ‘home’ and ‘homeland’ as fixed, safe, static, and bounded sites of belonging for those positioned on the inside that Heinz expertly shows how lockdown novels enable the reader to ‘experience’ the ‘porosity’ and ‘openness’ of ‘home’ and ‘homelands’. In so doing, she shows how these novels invite the reader to rethink home as multiple sites of ‘becoming’ facilitating diverse pathways for relations of connectedness to strangers and so illuminating the futility of trying to ‘take back control’ of Britain and its borders in the Brexit-pandemic era.

In Chapter 3, Lauren Brown provides a textual analysis of the speeches and interviews of political party leaders in the face of Brexit to reflect on the thorny issue of who constitutes the nation’s English, Scottish, and British homelands. In light of Heinz’s emphasis on the porous and permeable constitution of the boundaries of home and homeland, it is perhaps not surprising that the political leaders that feature in Brown’s chapter had to do a lot of ideological work to position migrants as outsiders to the nation. On the one hand, Brown shows how party leaders across the political spectrum of the left (e.g. Corbyn, the former leader of the Labour Party) and the right (e.g. Farage, now leader of the right-wing populist party Reform, UK) unreflexively collapsed Scotland into Britain in their narratives on nationhood. In so doing, these politicians positioned Britain as the national homeland for ‘ordinary’ Britons, that was thought to require defence from ‘immigration’ and ‘immigrants’. In contrast, the leader of the Scottish National Party positioned both migrants and Britain as ‘the Other’ to Scotland.

Importantly, this sense of division between the so-called ‘home nations’ of the UK, comprising England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, also became explicit during the pandemic. During the lockdowns, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland set their own national social distancing protocols and laws distinct from England, whose measures were set by the Conservative government in Westminster. It is precisely this process of demarcating the boundaries that constitute the thresholds of belonging of the so-called ‘home’ nations, that Snell’s drawings of individuals in hazmat suits staking flags into the ground conjures-up.

In Chapter 4, Tamsin Parnell draws our attention away from the discourses of political elites towards the discourses of ‘ordinary’ Leave and Remain voting residents of Nottingham, a city in the Midlands area of England. In her chapter, Parnell develops sociological discussions of how Leavers and Remainers depict each other as particular ‘kinds of people’ (Tyler et al, 2022) by drawing on and contributing sociolinguistic perspectives to this sociological discussion. In this way, she focuses on how Leavers and Remainers Other each other through deploying racialised and classed metaphors, ventriloquising techniques, pitch, tone, and hypothetical stories based on stereotypical British and English national qualities and characteristics.

It is noteworthy that some of Parnell's interlocutors suggested that the pandemic offered opportunities for them to overcome these Brexit-induced divisions at the 'personal' level, a phenomenon that we have already noted some social commentators and think tanks also observed during the pandemic (see for example, Siddique, 2021). However, Parnell's interlocutors were also clear that this was not the case at the wider national and societal level, whereby it was felt that pre-existing social divisions and inequalities became exasperated in the face of covid-19 (see also Booth, 2020).

This experience of the firming-up of entrenched national inequalities alongside a feeling of local connectedness is captured by Snell's drawings of a socially distanced group of people gathering in a garden during the easing of the lockdown restrictions. This image is inspired by a photograph taken by one of Degnen's white middle-class interlocutors from the North East of England. The photograph is of a group of white middle-class women very belatedly celebrating a 50th birthday. In this regard, this image tells a story about people coming together and celebrating significant personal events in new ways in unexpected times and places during the pandemic. But it also highlights the classed and racialised social privilege that emerged during the lockdowns: not everyone had access to private outside space where friends could gather to celebrate together.

In Chapter 5, like Parnell, Hannah Bunting et al are also concerned with the processes of social polarisation dividing Leavers and Remainers. They draw on their large-scale survey to examine the ways in which Leavers and Remainers think about their political differences. Sharing some resonances with Parnell's account, these scholars contend that Remainers construct their identities in relation to those they know see and think about things in the same way as them, which takes meaning in relation to those who do not share their worldview. While they contend that Leavers place greater emphasis on identifying with people who share their identity characteristics. These contrasts and complexities are captured by Snell's drawings of people coming together and remaining apart across diverse and overlapping identities. Bunting and her colleagues argue that this way of constructing 'the self' in relation to 'the Other' represents a polarised politics and has an impact on the diverse ways and extent to which Leavers and Remainers engaged and related with their neighbours and communities, or not, during the lockdowns. However, in agreement with Heinz's observations that boundaries are porous, these scholars also contend that their survey illustrates evidence to suggest that individuals actively resist these divisions in the Brexit-pandemic era, and in so doing they provide a unique insight into how social identities mediate political beliefs, attitudes, and social interactions.

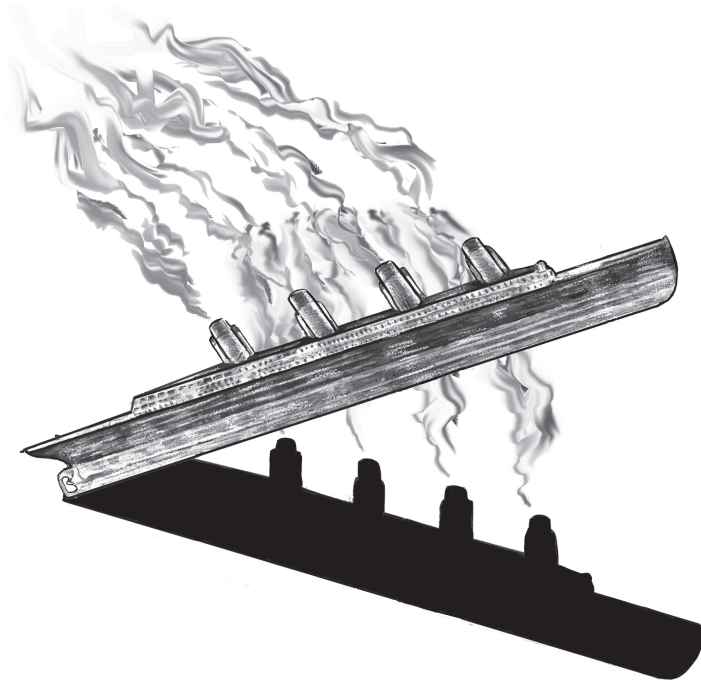
To briefly summarise, the chapters in Part I of this volume draw on critical analysis of lockdown novels, the discourses of political leaders, and 'ordinary people' to show the hard work that politicians and citizens put into defining



‘the self’ in relation to political, national, and migrant others. These chapters also begin to explicate the social inequalities that are screened out by media and political conceptions that the pandemic would bring the nation together, a theme that we shall explore in further detail in Part II of the book.

***Part II: Communities and Workplaces: Racial, Migrant, Class, and Gender Inequalities***

Part II of the volume, focusing on communities, continues the book’s critical attention to the instability of national identities by drawing on fieldwork conducted in rural towns, suburban neighbourhoods, and workplaces that have experienced differing degrees of rupture in the face of Brexit and the pandemic. This section of the book specifically illustrates how public narratives of national unity and exceptionalism conceal the racialised, migrant, classed, and gendered inequalities that are intrinsic to British society. Like the public narrative of the nation, discussion and debate of social inequalities framed public narratives of Brexit and the pandemic. We shall now turn our attention to aspects of these debates to contextualise the chapters in the Part II of this book.

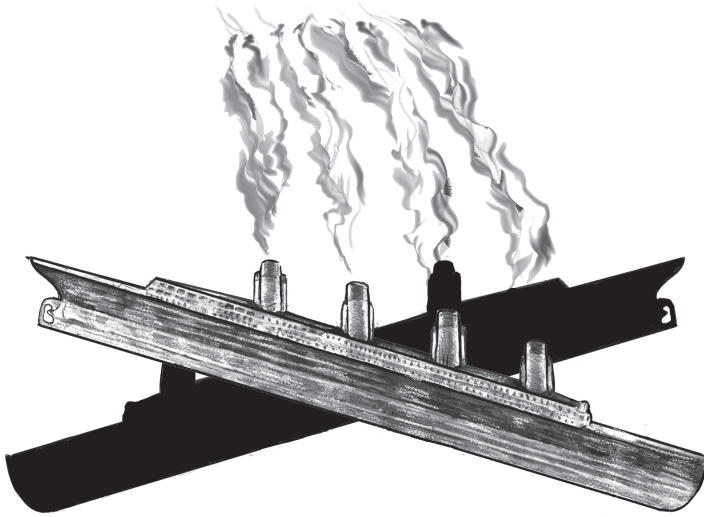


First, it is important to highlight, how in the aftermath of the EU referendum in June 2016 and the onset of the pandemic in 2020, there was a spike in racist and xenophobic hate crimes across the UK. In the context of Brexit, racism and xenophobia were directed at European and non-European migrants and racialised minorities (England, 2017). While in the face of the pandemic, there is evidence of widespread sinophobic racism, comprising of verbal and physical attacks on Chinese students and other Chinese migrants, as well as British people of Chinese and Japanese descent (Xun and Gilman, 2021; see also Gover, Harper and Langton, 2020 for an analysis of the US context).

It is also widely recognised that during the height of the lockdowns racialised minorities experienced disproportionately high death rates compared to the white majority population (Lander, Kay and Holloman, 2023; Meghji and Niang, 2022; Nazroo and Becares, 2020). To account for and explain this phenomenon, the media and politicians mobilised cultural and biological ‘post-racial’ and ‘colour-blind’ explanations (Meghji and Niang, 2022). For example, it was argued in the media and wider public discourse that racialised minorities’ specific ‘cultural practices’ and their ‘genetic dispositions’ were responsible for higher mortality rates. As scholars in critical race and ethnicity studies have argued, such explanations deflect questions of structural racism (see Lander et al, 2023; Meghji and Niang, 2022).

These scholars contend that cultural and biological explanations ignore the extent to which racialised minorities were over-represented in ‘frontline’ jobs that meant they were more likely to be infected by the virus (Lander et al, 2023). Moreover, these scholars remind us that racialised minorities are more likely than the white majority to live in smaller houses, and with more people, making social distancing more difficult (Meghji and Niang, 2022). While it was conveniently assumed in mainstream discourse that racialised minorities were more likely to live in extended families for so-called ‘cultural reasons’. This explanation neatly sidestepped the reality that racialised minorities are less likely to be able to afford to buy bigger houses to accommodate their families, be they extended families or not (Meghji and Niang, 2022). Racialised minorities are also less likely compared to the white majority to have savings that could help them manage financial difficulties during the pandemic (Meghji and Niang, 2022). Additionally, racialised minorities are more likely to live in areas with higher pollution that contributed to their physical vulnerability to covid-19. Clearly, this account of the structural inequalities shaping racialised minorities lives in Britain is also deeply classed, as it is always the poorest who are hit hardest by national and global disasters (Meghji and Niang, 2022).





## 1.8

Public narratives that set out to explain the referendum outcome also deflect the racialised and classed inequalities that shape the fabric of British society. To illustrate this, we recall a process that Bhambra (2017) has referred to as ‘methodological whiteness’ (see also Fagin’s Chapter 8, in this volume). This term refers to the ways in which media-led discourses on Brexit were quick to identify the white working-classes as responsible for the reactionary anti-immigration and racist nationalist politics that underpinned aspects of the Leave vote. As sociologists have argued, this analysis reduces racism to a characteristic of white working-class people and so ignores the systematic reproduction of white privilege and power in British societies. This includes displacing the ways in which discourses of coloniality inform the reproduction of racism in Britain in the postcolonial present (see Mondon and Winter, 2019; Tyler et al, 2022; Valluvan and Kalra, 2019; Virdee and McGeever, 2018 for examples of this critique). It is in the face of this critical analysis that the chapters in Part II of this book show how inequalities became mobilised and reproduced in often unpredictable ways. Our contention is that this reality defies any easy shorthand explanation for the reproduction of inequalities centred on narratives of working-class racism and racialised ‘cultural’ and ‘genetic’ differences.

Part II of the volume opens with Chapter 6 written by Rosie Read. She explores the gendered and classed inequalities that shape the working lives of women who were employed by private agencies to deliver individual health-care to older people in their homes during the lockdowns. On the one hand,

Read highlights how the pandemic rendered visible the importance of these women's labour to the functioning of society. However, on the other hand, Read also illustrates how her interlocutors felt the national focus on support for NHS 'frontline' workers meant that their contribution was not recognised by their neighbours and wider society. Consequently, the gendered and classed inequalities shaping these women's working lives were ignored during the pandemic, including their poor pay, long working hours, and job precarity.

The predicament of Read's interlocutors and other essential workers during the pandemic is suggested by Snell's drawings of healthcare workers in PPE hugging each other. This drawing was inspired by a media photograph of Chinese healthcare workers hugging. This photograph was given to Tyler by one of her participants who was working in a factory making medical supplies during the pandemic. In contrast to Read's interlocutors, Tyler's participant experienced his designation as an 'essential worker' to offer him a feeling of social purpose, value, and pride in his factory job that he did not feel before the pandemic.

Read also considers that many care workers are migrants from the EU to the UK. This means their right to continue living and working in the UK has been truncated by Brexit-motivated immigration laws. Here, Read touches on the systematic processes of xenophobia, classism, and racism that became explicit in the face of Brexit and the pandemic, themes that we take up and explore in further detail in the following chapters of the book.

In Chapter 7, Joshua Blamire, Katharine Tyler, and Cathrine Degnen explore the racialised and classed place-based narratives of white middle- and working-class residents living in Boston in Lincolnshire, a town (in)famous nationally for having the highest Leave vote in the UK. Boston is dependent upon migrant workers from Poland, Romania, and more recently Bulgaria to keep its agricultural economy alive. In Chapter 8, Jessica Fagin demonstrates how the white working-class slaughtermen with whom she worked knew all too well that their livelihoods were dependent upon racialised minorities and migrant Muslims' demand for halal meat. However, these socio-economic processes of intercultural interdependence do not mean that the white working-class slaughtermen, in Fagin's study, and the white middle- and working-class residents of Boston, in Blamire et al's work, are not xenophobic and/or racist in their attitudes.

In Chapter 7, Blamire et al demonstrate how the white residents of Boston across class locations articulate a place-based narrative of xenophobia towards white Eastern European migrants that have settled in the town. These everyday expressions of xenophobia become intermingled with feelings and sentiments of empathy and solidarity for white Eastern Europeans' experiences of migration and settlement. These scholars argue that it is this

narrative of xenophobia and intercultural conviviality that helps to explain why the residents voted to Leave the EU. It also provides the context for their expressions of hostility and empathy towards migrants in the face of Brexit and the covid-19 pandemic. These mixed sentiments are illustrated by Snell's interpretations of some of Blamire's interlocutors' photographs of Boston and its people during the Brexit pandemic era.

In contrast to Blamire et al's emphasis on intercultural relations and moments of solidarity, Fagin illustrates the racism intrinsic to the supposedly 'harmless banter' expressed by white working-class British and Eastern European slaughtermen towards their British Asian Muslim and Pakistani co-workers. Like the working-class women in Read's study, slaughtermen became designated as 'essential workers' during the pandemic. However, this did not eclipse and override their knowledge that in wider public discourse their work is considered 'unskilled', 'violent', and 'cruel'. It is in the face of these derisory public narratives, that the white slaughtermen asserted their skill by Othering British and Pakistani Muslim Asian workers who they considered to be 'unskilled'. The white slaughtermen also blamed Asian workers for the spread of the covid-19 virus. For Fagin, this racist banter and discourse reproduce racist hierarchies of distinction between the white British and European co-workers, on the one hand, and the racially marked British Asian and Pakistani Muslim workers, on the other. The reproduction of these racial hierarchies is evoked by Snell's powerful images of one or two black sheep in fields of white sheep.

Moreover, Fagin's ethnographic focus on racist classed narratives of difference raises the following questions with regards to Blamire et al's ethnography in Boston: is it the case that the white British residents of Boston showed some empathy to Eastern European migrants because they are white? How would both the white Eastern European and British residents of Boston relate to migrants who are not white Europeans, including those from former British colonies, settling into the town?

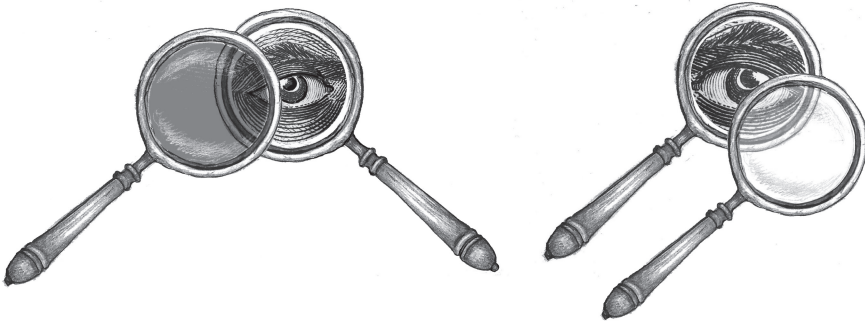
Continuing these insights into the everyday and situational reproduction of xenophobia and racism in the UK, Julius Baker in Chapter 9 argues that the parochial white anti-immigrant English nationalisms identified with the Leave vote are reproduced by both his white and black British middle-class interlocutors. The latter participated in his ethnographic study of Epsom, a wealthy suburban town in the South-East of England. In his chapter, Baker pays critical attention to two of his interlocutors' contrasting racialised biographies and worldviews. In this vein, he describes his white interlocutor's racialised discourses as 'power-evasive' and his black interlocutor's worldview as 'power-aware'. However, Baker also draws out the similarities in his interlocutors' racialised discourses when they think about who and what constitutes the values of respectability and neighbourliness in their suburban

town. Here, we see the emergence of shared middle-class national values articulated by individuals across minority and majority racialised positionalities that take meaning in relation to the exclusion of working-class migrants and racialised minorities.

What constitutes these shared English suburban values is illustrated by Snell's drawings of a row of neatly ordered and identical suburban houses. These drawings are inspired by a photograph taken by one of Tyler's interlocutors. The house is decorated with traditionally English bunting and a Union Jack flag to celebrate VE day during the lockdown. We also include in this chapter Snell's drawings of Rushi Sunak, the UK's first British Asian Prime Minister, who is known for his sizeable personal wealth and privileged schooling. Sunak has controversially led the introduction of immigration laws that defy international human rights law. From this standpoint, Snell's drawings of Sunak complements Baker's discussion of the 'power evasive' ways in which his black and white British middle-class interlocutors reproduce nationalistic, racist, and xenophobic attitudes towards migrants in their concern to retain what they perceive to be stability, respectability, and normality in their neighbourhood.

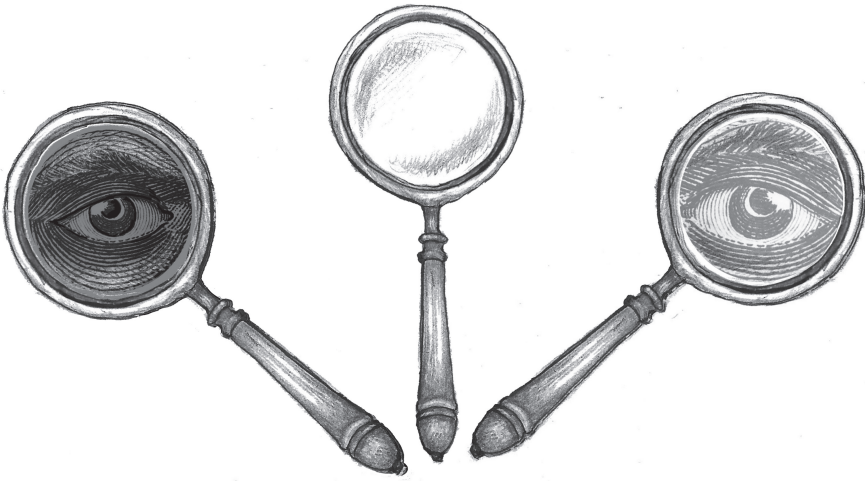
To summarise, the chapters in Part II of this volume illuminate how nationalist, racist, and xenophobic discourses become articulated in differing ways by British individuals across minority and majority ethnic, racial, classed, and national identities. From this standpoint, it is clear that everyday expressions of racism and xenophobia in the Brexit-pandemic era cannot be easily and neatly explained away by blaming the white working-class for racism or by focusing on racialised minorities supposedly 'cultural' and 'genetic' distinctions to the white majority.

### *Part III: The Media: Online and Offline Practices and the Everyday Politics of Polarisation*



In the final section of this book, we bring to the surface a theme running throughout the chapters of the volume. We look head-on at the extent to which social (Hall, Chapter 10) and traditional (Hoang et al, Chapter 11) media support the everyday production of social polarisation, racism, and nationalism during these Brexit-pandemic times. In Chapter 10, Hall provides an account of how individuals come to appropriate and disseminate on social media populist far-right discourse, and transnational conspiracy theories that fuel racism, nationalism, transphobia, misogyny, and homophobia. In contrast, to Hall's focus on social media as the site of social polarisation and division, Hoang, Patterson et al draw on their mixed-methods study to explore the similar and distinct ways in which Leavers and Remainers engage with and trust the BBC during the pandemic. The contrasts between these chapters are rendered apparent by how, on the one hand, Hall notes that the right-wing activists in her account agree that the 'BBC is the virus', supposedly evidenced by the BBC's 'silencing' in a 'sinister' way those who understand the 'truth' that the pandemic is not 'real'. While on the other hand, Hoang, Patterson et al illustrate how both Leavers and Remainers turned to the BBC for information during the lockdowns even if they did not wholeheartedly trust it.

So then, in Chapter 10, Hall deploys her ethnography with individuals who encountered far-right online discourses in the face of Brexit, to reflect on social media's role in the dissemination of far-right conspiracy theories that emerged during the pandemic. Hall argues that in both contexts social media has become a 'tool of action' for people who feel marginalised by mainstream society, allowing them to connect with others who feel and think the same as them. This online 'counter-politics' is centred around the populist 'fight' for 'freedom' and 'democracy' – values that are thought to be under attack in the face of the public backlash against Brexit, and the government's implementation of lockdowns, mask wearing, and vaccination programmes. Moreover, advocates of these beliefs position themselves as 'victims' who are 'silenced' by mainstream 'woke' society and media for speaking 'truth' to power. While these users think that they are sharing and finding 'factual' and 'truthful' information, Hall illustrates how it is social media's transnational reach and algorithms that are actually in control. We attempt to convey and capture some of the conviction expressed by the people who feature in Hall's chapter by mobilising Snell's drawings of anti-vax protestors during and after the lockdowns.



## 1.10

In Chapter 11, Janice Hoang, Deirdre Patterson, and other project team members draw on Leave and Remain supporting individuals' diverse engagements with the BBC in the context of their wider media practices in the face of Brexit and the pandemic. Like the NHS, the BBC is a national institution. However, the BBC has increasingly become the site of national scrutiny and controversy concerning its claim to represent 'unbiased', 'non-partisan', and 'factually' accurate news. It is against the backdrop of these public debates and controversies, that Chapter 11 illustrates how during the lockdowns people across Leave and Remain identities engaged with the BBC in both similar and distinct ways. The chapter achieves a layered and multidimensional portrait of Leavers' and Remainers' diverse media practices and levels of trust in the BBC by combining ethnographic in-depth interviews, ethnographic case studies, and quantitative survey methodologies.

The themes of this chapter resonate particularly well with the images on the book's front cover. The cover image is composed of red, white, and blue drawings of Clive Myrie, a black Briton, who is one of the BBC's leading news presenters and correspondents. In this chapter, the authors analyse a case study that examines how some of Tyler's Leave and Remain interlocutors from the South-West of England reflect on the representation of black people on the BBC in the face of the Black Lives Matter protests that swept across the UK during the pandemic.

The chapters in this final section of the volume encapsulate a core theme running throughout this book: there is no neat, simple narrative, theory, or

metaphor that can be deployed to explain the complex reproduction of social polarisations and inequalities that have become explicit in the Brexit pandemic era in Britain. Rather, it takes hard interdisciplinary online and offline empirical work combined with critically reflexive theoretical and analytical insight to account for and explain the articulation of social inequalities and polarisations in these fractured Brexit-pandemic times.

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### Notes

- 1 Some of these thoughts and reflections are drawn from the following presentations: Tyler and Snell 'Extraordinary moments of coronavirus crisis and Brexit seen through the lens of a new interactive art exhibition', to Egenis, the Centre for the Study of the Life Sciences at University of Exeter January 23, 2023; and Tyler and Snell 'Sketching Brexit and the Pandemic', Presidential Address for Sociology, to the British Festival of Science, September 2023. Some of the ideas reported here are taken directly from Snell's contribution to these presentations, and they use Snell's words, when this is the case we indicate this in the text.
- 2 'Eat out to Help Out' was a government-subsidised scheme that offered a 50% discount on meals in restaurants and pubs on Mondays to Wednesdays in August 2020. The aim was to help protect jobs in the hospitality sector that was reopening after the first lockdown.

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