REFLECTIONS ON POLARISATION AND INEQUALITIES IN BREXIT PANDEMIC TIMES

Fractured Lives in Britain

Edited by Katharine Tyler, Susan Banducci, and Cathrine Degnen

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Chapter 7

ANTI-IMMIGRANT XENOPHOBIA ALONGSIDE NON-ELITE COSMOPOLITANISMS IN BRITAIN'S MOST 'PRO-BREXIT' TOWN

Joshua Blamire, Katharine Tyler, and Cathrine Degnen

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ANTI-IMMIGRANT XENOPHOBIA ALONGSIDE NON-ELITE COSMOPOLITANISMS IN BRITAIN'S MOST 'PRO-BREXIT' TOWN[1]

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7.1

Introduction

Boston, a provincial market town and small port located in the rural county of Lincolnshire, on the east coast of England, stands within media, social scientific, and public intellectual discourse as an icon of Brexit. The town received an extraordinary volume of national and international news media coverage in the wake of the EU Referendum (see Blamire and Jones, in preparation). Many media accounts depict the town as a 'cultural backwater' whose mainly white working-class English residents are described as

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politically ill-informed, parochial, and reactionary, while inferences of xenophobia and racism are never far away. The town has witnessed substantial population growth due to a thriving agricultural and low-wage food production sector and the associated arrival of migrant workers from Central and Eastern Europe since 2004. In 2021, 24.9 per cent of the town's population was born outside of England with the majority of those migrants coming from Lithuania (5.6 per cent), Poland (5.4), and Romania (2.1) (Office for National Statistics, 2022).

These transformations have been accompanied by a narrative of tension and division – white English residents are said to be "angry and disillusioned" (Smith, 2019: n.p) and are "turning against immigrants" (de Freytas-Tamura, 2016: n.p) – leading a centre-right think tank to label Boston the "least integrated town in the country" (Policy Exchange, 2016: n.p). It was supposedly for these reasons that the town returned the highest Leave vote in the country (75.6 per cent). Then, early into the covid-19 pandemic, news media reported of "farmworkers being flown into Lincolnshire from Romania" in response to national coronavirus-imposed travel restrictions which had hindered local farms' ability to recruit sufficient seasonal migrant workers (Lodge, 2020: n.p). This laid bare the town's dependency upon immigration.

While some media narratives focus on white working-class English townspeople's resounding rejection of EU migration, other narratives – no less divisive – sympathise with the plight of white English residents. In this vein, journalist Peter Hitchens, in the *Daily Mail*, a well-known conservative British tabloid (popular) newspaper, set out to investigate "the troubling transformation of a sleepy English town after mass immigration from Eastern Europe", drawing contrasts to older days where "respectability was still strong, and so was the sense of belonging" (Hitchens, 2011: n.p). *The Sun*, another conservative British tabloid newspaper, meanwhile reported Boston as the "town left cash-strapped after huge influx of migrants [so] tells residents it has no money for Christmas lights" (Pattinson, 2016: n.p), adding yet more fuel to this narrative.

Other understandings interpret the town as having been 'left behind' by globalisation, 'left out' of national political debate, and cut adrift by government policies. The political scientist and public intellectual Matthew Goodwin (2016: n.p) supposes that "filled with disadvantaged, working-class Britons who do not feel as though they have been winning from European integration, immigration, and the global market, Boston turned its back firmly on the status quo". Journalist John Harris' *Anywhere but Westminster* is a long-running vox pop video series published in *The Guardian* (a centre-left broadsheet 'quality' daily newspaper) which claims to "go in search of the country's real politics, far away from the chatter of the Westminster village" (*The Guardian*, 2023: n.p). Reporting from Boston, Harris locates white English residents' disgruntlement over immigration within deeper narratives

of distrust towards politics, politicians, and the media, alongside localised frustrations concerning pressures on the labour market, schools, and hospitals (*The Guardian*, 2018).

Such depictions of Boston resonate with broader national popular commentaries that place the vote for Leave amongst a typically older white working class, living in post-industrial, rural areas or 'backwaters' of Britain, depicted as "inward-looking, relatively illiberal, negative about the EU and immigration, nostalgic and more English in its identity" (Jennings and Stoker, 2016: 372). In response, a body of ethnographic work has challenged these portrayals, situating white working-class narratives within a broader context of industrial decline, neoliberalism, austerity, and political disenfranchisement (Koch, 2017; Mahoney and Kearon, 2018; McKenzie, 2017; Telford and Wistow, 2019). Moreover, Dorling (2016) notes that the majority of the Leave vote actually came from an affluent southern middle class (see also Baker, this volume). In turn, Bhambra (2017) considers this undue focus on the white working-class 'left behind' as operating as a heuristic device through which an analysis of racism is demoted by offering an apology for white working-class racism, and ignoring how racism is embedded within the very structures of postcolonial British society (see also Tyler, Banducci, and Degnen; Fagin, this volume). Bhambra contends that white racial privilege is ultimately maintained through this 'left behind' narrative (see also Mondon and Winter, 2019; Virdee and McGeever, 2018). As Mintchev (2021: 126) argues, however, one consequence of these polarising debates is that the frames of 'racism' and 'legitimate concerns' become mutually exclusive, locked in a zero-sum game whereby "an idea, demand or action can either be racist or legitimate, but never both" (see also Tyler et al., 2022).

It is against the backdrop of these racialised and classed media representations of Boston, and wider sociological debates on the 'left behind', that we draw on our residential ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Boston that explored residents' everyday experiences of immigration and belonging in the context of Brexit and covid-19. Whilst fieldwork brought us into conversation with a diverse array of people living in Boston across different age, class, gender, nationality, migration status, and Leave/Remain identities, this chapter focuses upon the views of white English[2] Leave and Remain working- and middle-class participants. We bring these interlocutors' perspectives into conversation with the public political, media, and social scientific frameworks which attempt to explain the racialised and classed constitution of Boston and Brexit. This is because our participants are the very individuals seen to embody those characteristics of white nationalism, xenophobia, racism, and socio-economic disadvantage that are depicted within these narratives. Yet, while this demographic is often invoked and theorised about, its voice is typically only heard through interpretations of large-scale survey and electoral data, or through journalistic-style vox pops, which offer only

a highly superficial reading of what people have to say about their lives and the place that they live.

From this standpoint, our supposition is that the pervasive public portrayal of Boston and its residents outlined above privileges a fixed and static notion of this place that becomes detached from the complexities of people's everyday experiences of immigration as well as how their lives intersect with, and are shaped by, wider political and economic structures. In other words, our argument is that the media's transposition of the 'left behind' narrative onto Boston provides a partial and distorted view of this place – and the people living in it – that suspends, traps, and fixes its residents in place in a particular moment in time.

Racism, Conviviality, and Place as Process

The notion that xenophobia and racism are ruptured by moments of everyday conviviality is scrutinised throughout the convivalities, cosmopolitanism, and everyday multiculturalism literature that explores configurations of living in typically 'super-diverse' cities (Back and Sinha, 2016; Wise and Velayutham, 2014). This work explores ethnographically the ways in which people interact with each other across their perceived racial, ethnic, national, and classed differences in 'fleeting' and 'informal' ways within 'public' and 'semi-public' spaces (Back, 1996; Watson, 2009; Wessendorf, 2013; Wise and Velayutham, 2009, 2014). Crucial to this approach are the ways in which xenophobia and racism become articulated and entwined within convivial multicultural relationships, what Back (1996: 7) calls the "metropolitan paradox". Reflecting on this paradox, Back (2009: 212) concludes that researchers must remain "attentive to the damage racism has done", including the production of moralising and nostalgic ideas of community, whilst simultaneously being attuned to the rhythms of interethnic recognition and coexistence. Our detailed ethnographic attention to the articulation of how discourses and practices of anti-immigrant xenophobia and cosmopolitanism are expressed and experienced in Boston builds upon and develops Tyler's (2015, 2016, 2020) articulation of what she calls the 'suburban paradox' to describe the ways in which everyday expressions and practices of racism and interethnic conviviality and recognition inform interactions in a less-than-superdiverse town (see also Baker, this volume; Neal et al., 2021; Woods, 2018).

In interpreting our interlocutors' experiences of living in Boston through this framework, we also find recent work by Ben Rogaly (2020) particularly instructive. Commenting on Peterborough (a city situated 33 miles south of Boston) – and also set within what he terms 'Brexit-era England' – Rogaly locates a "non-elite", or working-class, cosmopolitanism across ethnic and racial identities that is typified by the presence of "cosmopolitan dispositions,

acts and practices that often sit alongside, and are interrelated with, divisive, nationalist and racist ones. [Yet] even if they are outnumbered by the latter, they provide a progressive politics of possibility" (2020: 5). In this chapter, we examine how this framework resonates with white English Leave voters in Boston. Moreover, our findings compel us to extend the notion of a non-elite cosmopolitanism to include both working-class and middle-class positionalities. In so doing, we challenge the notion that the vote for Brexit was solely the responsibility of a xenophobic, racist, and/or 'left behind' white working class.

In making these arguments, we are like Rogaly inspired by the work of Doreen Massey (2007) in seeing places not as fixed entities but as relational processes which are constantly being reshaped through global flows of people, capital, and ideas. Thinking relationally entails conceiving of place not as 'local' spaces subject to 'global' forces, but as instead configured through multiple and diverse histories and geographies of place interacting with processes of neoliberal globalisation, alongside broader media and political discourses, to produce localised forms of identity and belonging. It is therefore at the intersection of our participants' individual biographies, their local stories, and wider societal structures, discourses, and media narratives that our interlocutors make sense of their place and their lives. Consequently, in considering how residents are coming to terms with rapid change, we see our interlocutors as not simply reactionary but engaging in more complex and outward-looking articulations of what their town should 'stand for' in the Brexit and pandemic era and its aftermath into the future.

Our first contention is that, in Massey's terms, place is not simply the terrain upon which these dynamics take hold. Rather, it is that anti-immigrant discourses are themselves constitutive of this place, sitting alongside appeals against the nature of ongoing socio-economic change, and are interwoven with discourses of conviviality and cosmopolitanism. That is, through these processes, new antagonisms and solidarities are being generated through which arguments about what this place might 'stand for' are invoked. The resulting premise, as we will demonstrate, is to make the town a better place to live for everyone, including migrants. Yet, these representations have not hitherto appeared within public political or social scientific commentaries on either Boston or Brexit. Our second contention is to challenge the tendency within conviviality studies to portray people's simultaneously convivial, xenophobic, and racist engagements across difference as being 'contradictory' or 'paradoxical'. Instead, taken together, we argue that these perspectives hold an inherent logic in the way that Boston's residents are actively working through these changes and working out what they might mean for themselves and the town. Finally, we conclude by considering what potential these emergent non-elite cosmopolitanisms harbour for the generation of more fully-fledged inclusive forms of identity and belonging after Brexit and

the covid-19 pandemic. Ultimately, we aim to make visible all those perspectives which exist but to particularly shine a light on those discourses which lean towards a more progressive politics of possibility.

Our understanding of what constitutes xenophobia and racism in the context of Boston requires clarification. While work has pinpointed hostility towards EU migrants within British media and political discourses (Burrell, 2010; Dawney, 2008), and a discernible rise in xenophobic and racist discrimination has been noted following the referendum (Guma and Jones, 2019; Rzepnikowska, 2019), there is still considerable debate as to whether prejudice against white Europeans constitutes xenophobia or, instead, should be conceived as racism. There is a growing body of thought which has shown how, despite relative privileges in terms of legal, cultural, and racial capital compared to racialised minorities and migrants, white Europeans from the Central and Eastern European 'accession' countries[3] are still subject to various processes of racialisation which position them as unable to perform 'whiteness' in the same ways as their white British counterparts, thus rendering them subject to racism (Botterill and Burrell, 2019; Garner, 2012; Moore, 2013). While we acknowledge these arguments, after much debate, we have chosen to refer to the processes of Othering white EU migrants that feature here as 'xenophobia'. This is because we want to reserve the term 'racism' to refer specifically to the Othering of EU migrants and other minorities who are explicitly racialised as 'not white' by others.

Methodological Reflections

This chapter is based first on 24 conversational-style interviews with white English residents across working- and middle-class locations who were either 'born-and-bred' in Boston or who have lived there for some time. These interviews formed part of six months' residential ethnography in the town conducted by Blamire during June 2019 – January 2020, and took place in people's homes, in cafés, and in pubs. The ethnography included participant observation and informal discussions with residents within public and semi-public spaces such as cafés, shops, pubs, the market, public events, and engagement with various neighbourhood and community groups. Blamire additionally conducted informal walking tours of the town and surrounding area with residents. Concurrently, Tyler was conducting fieldwork in the South West and Degnen in the North East as part of multi-sited ethnographies conducted across diverse urban and rural field sites in England. The residential ethnography in Boston captured the prorogation of Parliament and the 2019 UK General Election.

As part of a follow-up study[4] exploring covid-19, Blamire conducted 15 further interviews online between October 2020 and April 2021. Those interviews captured the shifting dynamics of the pandemic, including interlocking

periods of national and local stay-at-home restrictions, or 'lockdowns'. Both the reality of covid-19 and its resulting socio-economic inequalities came relatively late to Boston, with the town initially being described by white English residents as a pleasant place to live under lockdown as its rural location provided opportunities for enjoying green space, and the virus was still seen as being confined to the major cities. However, by late 2020, Boston recorded the second-highest infection rate in the UK with the region experiencing the most stringent local stay-at-home restrictions (Holmes, 2020: n.p).

In order to navigate the restrictions which prevented Blamire from undertaking further residential ethnography, the interviews were supplemented by ongoing informal dialogue through video and telephone calls, in addition to participants narrating their experiences of the pandemic through sharing photographs and news media with Blamire, some of which inspired the artwork included in this chapter and features on the *Red, Amber, Green* exhibition website, both designed by Helen Snell (see Tyler, Banducci, and Degnen, this volume for further details). Many individuals participated in repeat interviews and so the research constituted an ongoing conversation with some participants over the course of nearly two years. Drawn together, the fieldwork explored people's views on Brexit and the pandemic in the context of their sense of belonging, or lack thereof, to the town, the nation, and the EU, as well as their views on politicians, politics, and the media. While Blamire did interview migrants from Central and Eastern Europe, this chapter considers the views of white English working- and middle-class residents aged from early 20s to late 70s. Around three-quarters of these participants voted Leave reflecting the overall referendum vote in Boston.

As mentioned previously, Boston received quite remarkable media attention in the wake of the EU Referendum, a point that angered many of the town's residents. Meanwhile, our ethnographic fieldwork had already uncovered a belief that universities – amongst other institutions and spaces thought to represent the public sector – were seen by many of our Leave voters as Remain-centric sites (see Degnen et al., 2023). These factors generated some uncertainty amongst the research team as to how Blamire's presence in Boston would be received, and his positionality and intentions interpreted. When asked by residents, Blamire responded truthfully that while he voted Remain, he also was critical of much of the ongoing Remain-centred political and media discourse that had followed, and that which was unreflexively negative towards Leave voters. As it transpired, his interlocutors were generally more concerned and eager to discuss Brexit and then covid-19 as it related to their everyday lives and senses of belonging to Boston[5]. Blamire was thus able to adopt an effective and engaged outsider position relative to this place-based identity. As a white British man from a working-class background, in his late twenties, who grew up in a small northern English market town, Blamire drew on shared identities of age, class, gender, nationality, race, and ethnicity

where appropriate in generating rapport. Finally, given the pervasive feeling that most outside social commentators are simply too detached from places like Boston, many residents were genuinely pleased to learn about in-depth residential scholarly engagement of this kind and welcomed Blamire's presence on this basis.

We turn next to the ethnography. Our focus is a rich analysis of place examining Boston through the lens of public Brexit narratives of the racialised and classed discourses of the 'left behind'. We do so, however, not in a totalising or distorted way that renders place-based identities fixed but rather sees place in a relational and processual way. This is the context within which our participants make sense of large-scale in-migration into their town. Importantly, we are not arguing that this thick narrative somehow justifies individual's xenophobic or racist attitudes. Nor are we proposing that this is why people straightforwardly voted for Brexit, as some anthropologists like Balthazar (2017) and Koch (2017) suggest in their respective ethnographies of why working-class people voted for Brexit.

Feeling 'Left Behind' and 'Left Out'

To begin, we need to understand how white EU migrants are positioned within Boston by white English residents, which depends upon juxtaposing today's town with romanticised notions of its past. Many white English residents across class locations depict Boston as once being a traditional, socially conservative English provincial market town held together by a hierarchy of freemasons, farmers, small business owners, and a modest white middle-class intelligentsia, alongside working-class acquiescence. White working-class folk recall Boston as characterised by deep-rooted communities based on familial ties and kinship, and some residents remember working on the land with their family (in 'gangs'[6]). They reminisced about the lucrative nature of piecework[7] that began at 6 a.m. in the summer months; it was physically demanding but was accompanied by a sense of togetherness played out afterwards in the land workers' pubs. Ray, a 48-year-old working-class Leave voter depicts this scene, along with the gendered inequalities and sexism at play:

> People were earning a lot more money back in '80s and '90s than what these people [EU migrants] are earning now, which has hit hard with a lot of folk […] There were generations of families that worked the land. Have you noticed the closed shop in the marketplace? Well, that was a classic land workers' pub: they'd all get what the farmers wanted done, all on piecework, all earning a shed load of money, and they'd finish at one or two o'clock, and they'd be in the [pub] for four hours before they'd go home and insist 'where's me' tea, woman?!'.

White middle-class English incomers who arrived from across the UK throughout the 1970s–1990s noted Boston as being a 'quirky' town characterised by stability and a slow pace of change, where the inability to obtain key symbols of local belonging – such as accent or ancestral ties – invited suspicion and exclusion from some locals. These depictions of Boston's recent past each hinge upon a dichotomous view of a once 'sleepy market town' that since EU migration has undergone sudden change; consequently, in this narrative view, many white English residents no longer have pride in and sometimes no longer feel a sense of belonging towards this town. As we will show, EU migrants, then, are described by many interlocutors as disrupting the very fabric of what once constituted this place.

Boston often feels to some white English residents 'left behind' and 'left out' of the wider political, socio-economic, and cultural transformations that have come to define contemporary Britain. Boston ranks the 85th (of 317) most deprived local authority in England and Wales, suffering from multiple poor socio-economic and health outcomes, and the area has the lowest levels of education, skills, and training in the country (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019). There is a profound sense of socio-economic decline and loss, prompting Susan to state: "this place has just gone, I don't recognise it now at all" (early 70s, working class, Leave). This decline is physically manifest in boarded-up shops, the disappearance of traditional pubs, and the gradual shrinkage of the town market. In short, the region's agricultural riches are not translated into visible socio-economic gains or shared prosperity within the town.

7.2

While Boston retains its large agricultural base, other people recall the decline of the manufacturing sector in the 1980s as the beginning of this demise, with semi-skilled industry replaced now by a low-wage service sector. Some white English working-class participants are worried about what this will mean for their children; a disconnection from agriculture (because the work does not pay as well as it did in the past) and the lack of well-paid semi-skilled work, alongside rising house prices, mortgages, and rents, prompts fears that younger generations will be unable to carve out similar life trajectories to their parents. White English middle-class interviewees fear that following university studies their children will be discouraged from returning to a local job market which is unlikely to match their graduate qualifications. They also note that Boston does not provide the wider social and cultural opportunities offered by the larger cities to which some of their children have moved.

We meanwhile noted a pervasive concern amongst residents that the covid-19 restrictions would serve to accelerate the town's ongoing socio-economic decline. Some highlighted the recent closure of an iconic local family-run department store which had served Boston for over 200 years, supposedly due to reduced footfall as a consequence of the lockdowns. Ray portrays this feeling of geographical and political marginalisation interwoven with fears for his children's future:

> Like I said on many other issues: we just feel like we're going to be last in the line, you know? […] It's alright Boris [Johnson] saying 'oh, everyone's got to work from home'; not in Lincolnshire! It's alright for desk dwellers and, you know, city types and stuff! […] I've got two kids who're like, you know, 20 and 17, who've got an awful challenging future ahead of them.
> *(48-year-old, working class, Leave)*

In this way, the pandemic exacerbated already existing fears our interlocutors had about their futures, their families, and their town, providing another lens through which notions of being 'left behind' took hold within local public discourse.

Another key issue that emphasises the feeling of Boston as being 'left behind' is that of the town's peripheral location, cut adrift on the east coast, with limited transport infrastructure. The area is poorly served by a small network of rural buses, and a single-line railway, both of which operate on seasonal timetables. The area is also blighted by an underdeveloped rural road network and relies upon an overwhelmed dual carriageway – which cuts the town in two – and which carries a staggering amount of heavy lorry traffic due to the agricultural industry. As a result, Boston is poorly connected to itself, the region, and the nation.

There is a deep-seated cognisance that Boston is considered unfavourably within Lincolnshire and that it has been historically viewed as a 'pariah town' due to its working-class agricultural heritage, juxtaposed with the increasingly prosperous regional capital, Lincoln, and its growing knowledge economy. A concurrent perspective holds that Lincolnshire itself is ignored for infrastructure spending at the national scale due to perceived national investment privileges for London and the South East. Blamire also encountered a pervasive feeling that continuous national governments have been obtuse towards residents' concerns about socio-economic decline and the local impacts of immigration. Political elites are seen as being too distant and insulated from these problems.

White English interviewees also articulated grievances about how population growth and socio-economic decline have been managed locally, blaming the perceived careerism and/or vested interest of local politicians, the intransigence of successive borough councils, and the absence of effective political leadership to promote a wider vision for the town in the face of migration, as contributory factors to Boston's demise. These grievances concern the perceived (mis)allocation of certain funds, ineptitude in the promotion of the town's heritage, and lack of strategies and will to diversify the local economy. Irrespective of the credibility of these charges, what is significant is the common perception that things could have been different given more effective local political leadership.

We have examined here important factors to consider necessary to understand residents' sense and experience of socio-economic decline and political disenchantment and their lack of hope for the future. Importantly, many of these grievances preceded EU migration to the town. Our white English interlocutors experience a lack of voice and control, and feel neglected by political decision-making processes, which have contributed to a dislodging of local identities and the perceived worsening of life outcomes. It is against this backdrop that residents discussed their views on immigration as well as their hopes, fears, and expectations for the future.

Emplacing Xenophobia and Racism

Let us now consider how white English residents, across class and Leave/Remain identities, speak about how they experience immigration in their everyday lives, with a focus on how they articulate xenophobic views towards white EU migrants. First is the dichotomous view of a once 'sleepy market town' that has undergone significant and observable change across local housing and labour markets, and public services, as a result of EU migration. Many white English participants narrate how some previously English households have been replaced by migrant workers living in shared rental

properties, which some feel has unsettled the social order through the form of transient neighbourhoods, excessive noise disturbance, and deterioration of the built environment. These objections resonate with historic and contemporary forms of neighbourhood racisms in the UK towards postcolonial migrants and racialised minorities (Back, 1996; Tyler, 2020; Watson, 2009; Watt, 2009). It is also believed that migrant workers prioritise sending home remittances or saving money with the effect that they lack the disposable income to furnish town centre businesses, contributing to the decline of the high street and market. This informs a view that EU migrants are not properly invested in the town's past, present, or future.

Some white English residents consider EU migrants to be poorly educated and to lack sufficient English-speaking skills, as Sam (51-year-old, middle class, Remain) attests: "I personally think we've got a lot of the dregs of the society from Poland […] and it's because you don't need high qualifications to do the jobs that are available in Boston". Meanwhile, national discourses pertaining to immigration become enmeshed with everyday lived experience; for instance, it is unanimously agreed that EU migration has put increased pressure on local services:

> Well, immigration: it wasn't controlled, was it?! […] Boston has *always* suffered with infrastructure […] I mean, the doctors situation is *appalling* at the moment. It's so difficult to get appointments now, and it's not just that: the schools are struggling to cope.
>
> *(Ray, 48-year-old, working class, Leave, original emphasis)*

The Othering of EU migrants is further informed by white English townspeople's everyday interactions, including neighbourhood gossip between members of the local community. In this sense, anti-immigrant discourses in Boston are grounded in people's engagements with and observations of migrants and have their own place-based rhythm relating to how EU migrants are considered to disrupt everyday conviviality and erode the social order in this town. So, white English residents focus primarily on what they call 'anti-social behaviour', for which the mostly white EU migrants are perceived to be disproportionately responsible. This discourse, while having individual inflections, is not the preserve of minority extremists but is widely articulated and accepted amongst white English working- and middle-class residents. It depends in part on the widespread adoption of the label 'Eastern Europeans' which serves to homogenise national differences between white EU migrants.

Furthermore, EU migrants are considered to lack basic British cultural pleasantries, such as smiling and saying hello, and are interpreted as behaving rudely and aggressively, such as by blocking pavements and shouting.

This perceived antisocial behaviour is observed by white English residents throughout the public spaces of the town such as parks, streets, and the marketplace, those very areas previously regarded as dominant everyday spaces of white English conviviality. In particular West Street, a major town artery which is disparagingly known as 'East Street' by some white English residents owing to the presence of many European shops, is identified as a 'no-go' zone by some residents who perceive the area to be unsafe and menacing. Janice draws on this overt homogenising language in recalling how:

> There was a group of Eastern Europeans chattering away and I walked past and one of them just spat straight in front of me and said something rude, but because my daughter has picked up a few Polish words; he called me a whore! […] I've got friends that won't go into Boston 'cos you could be walking on the pavement and they certainly won't step back and let you past; you have to go onto the road to walk around them. So you don't feel safe, especially if there's a large group of them.
>
> *(mid-60s, working class, Leave)*

This xenophobic Othering is also distinctly gendered in that it draws specifically on the perceived behaviours of young men who are usually white migrant agricultural workers. Meanwhile, it is white English children, women, and older people who are thought of as being most vulnerable to this behaviour on the grounds of intimidation and public safety. As Bill explains:

> Sometimes [my wife] will walk into town on her own, and you encounter a group of five people all with beer cans in their hand blocking the pavement. You know, for a five-foot two inch near seventy-year-old frail lady it's frightening!
>
> *(71-year-old, middle class, Leave)*

These gendered and generational discourses also promote stereotypes that associate young white EU migrant men with littering, heavy drinking, and even urinating and defecating in the public spaces of the town. White English townspeople also accuse EU migrants of various crimes ranging from flouting vehicle laws to drink driving, the sale of counterfeit cigarettes and vodka, and violent crime. In response to national newspaper headlines depicting Boston as "the most murderous place" in England (Mortimer, 2016: n.p), Sam asserted "it was the Eastern Europeans murdering the Eastern Europeans!" (51-year-old, middle class, Remain), while Tim invoked ideas about "Russian mafia in the town that collect protection money" (57-year-old, middle class, Leave). The notion that EU migrants are 'corrupt', 'dangerous', and 'taking over' is solidified through isolated incidents – such as the death

of five Lithuanian men following an explosion at an illegal vodka factory (*BBC News*, 2012) – which serve to homogenise all EU migrant men as being a threat to Boston. These discourses echo those classic tropes of British racism aimed at postcolonial migrants as well as Black and Asian Britons, including the association of the Other with dirt, violence, and not belonging to local places and the nation (Gilroy, 1987). They also demonstrate how, like white Jewish and Irish migrants before them, post-accession migrants experience complex processes of Othering – informed through white English discourses of respectability and belonging – which view them as being 'not white enough' (Moore, 2013).

7.3

Finally, the pandemic provided a new mechanism for the Othering of EU migrants. Some of our white English interlocutors accused EU migrants

of flouting covid-19 restrictions, for instance, by loitering in public spaces in large groups, not wearing masks, and committing other forms of anti-social behaviour such as spitting. These claims informed their blaming EU migrants for the sudden increase in infection rates. These discourses then re-frame pre-existing stereotypes about EU migrants and consolidate the view that 'Eastern Europeans' do not care about, and so do not properly belong to, the town.

We have painted a picture of a divided town characterised by a place-based xenophobia that becomes entwined with people's everyday experiences of socio-economic change and decline. Yet, stopping here offers only a partial and distorted reading of what our participants wanted to place on record about their experiences of living in Boston. We now turn to consider some of those alternative perspectives through which our participants can be understood as coming to terms with the arrival of EU migrants and the socio-economic transformations that have followed. These discourses have, hitherto, been screened out of intellectual, media, and political commentaries of Brexit and Boston, ones that instead produce a static and fixed depiction of this place that forecloses the possibilities for alternative futures.

Emplaced Empathies and Solidarities across Differences

We now explore the moments of empathy and solidarity which white English people are forging with mostly white EU migrants, through which the potential for new place-based identities emerges. Crucially, like the xenophobic views about migrants, these views do not come from a minority of white working- or middle-class residents, or Leave or Remain voters, but are instead interwoven throughout our participants' narratives, articulated across the local community.

We can see in our participants' accounts the homogenising language and stereotyping of white EU migrants working alongside everyday convivial relations. Take how Lisa, a 23-year-old working-class mother with a young child living in social housing, who voted Remain, negotiates her family's everyday experiences of noise disturbance:

> Our next-door neighbours, who were actually lovely – I mean, massive alcohol problems, but they were lovely, Eastern European – but their house was so full! It was a three-bedroomed house and they had eight or nine people next door, and they all used to just stay out in the garden all night with just sofas in their garden, 'cos I don't think there was room inside. But obviously when you're living in a terraced street like that there was a lot of noise and drinking, and you kind of empathise with it, but it has its problems.

While Lisa evokes stereotypical ideas about the number and behaviour of migrants living next door, this is accompanied by empathy for their cramped living conditions and difficult situations.

Residents also empathise with migrants' working lifestyles. There is widespread recognition of the physically demanding agricultural work which migrants undertake, respect for their perceived work ethic, and empathy for their work patterns:

> I knew somebody who lived next door to – I'm not sure if they were Polish – and they used to do anti-social things like doing DIY at 12 o'clock at night, and it was probably because they were so busy working during the day so that's the only time they had […] my impression of immigrants is that they work hard, and they definitely do jobs that British people wouldn't want to do like go out on the cabbage field at 6 o'clock in the morning and work there for 12 hours.
>
> *(Mandy, mid-70s, working class, Remain)*

Like Lisa, Mandy draws upon circuits of neighbourhood gossip about the supposed antisocial behaviour of migrants, contextualising them in a commonplace local and broader national mantra that migrants work harder than British people. While Mandy evokes popular stereotypes in British society about economic migrants, she is eager to humanise these stereotypes to show empathy for her neighbours.

Our interlocutors also drew upon their own life experiences to understand the lives of migrants; for example, reflecting on their earlier years living in student accommodation or army barracks, or time spent visiting the accession countries. This helped them to empathise with a perceived 'culture shock' thought to be experienced by migrants. The latter became an important lens through which residents imagined the difficulties for migrants of settling in Boston owing to the shortage of appropriate social and cultural facilities, the absence of a family support network, language barriers, and an unfamiliarity with bureaucratic procedures. Similarly, during the pandemic, some residents imagined the troubles faced by migrant workers in following the stay-at-home restrictions given these same challenges. They further reasoned that migrant workers were likely not able to socially distance when travelling to work on buses organised by their employers, within the workplace itself (e.g., in farms and factories), or in their shared accommodation. This informed a view that migrant workers – typically operating as key workers in food production – were being disproportionately exposed to the virus and were therefore 'victims', a point to which we now turn.

7.4

Accompanying this feeling of empathy is a deeper feeling of solidarity emerging that has a distinct emotional tenor and structure of feeling entwined with a politicised tone. This solidarity focuses upon the particular structural arrangements which underpin the socio-economic constitution of this place and are perceived to immiserate white European migrant workers. This includes shame at the way migrants are seen to have been treated by employers, gangmasters,[8] and landlords, as well as the UK government, in the denial of work and housing-based rights, exploitation, and modern-day slavery. Jake is a 43-year-old working-class white English Leave voter who

is married to a white Crimean woman. Blamire spoke with Jake and Maria at their home, where Jake shared a photograph of himself with Nigel Farage that was placed proudly on their mantelpiece. He had met the then-leader of the Brexit Party at a pro-Brexit rally. In conversation with Blamire, Jake reflected on his work in a nearby food production factory sharing his alarm at what he sees as the exploitative aspects of EU freedom of movement rules:

> I'm part of the furniture really, so I get treated alright and I always get pay rises when due, but they [the factory] do have a lot of Polish employees, and they're treated completely different. It's not nice to see. I get on really well with most of them. They're on a thing where they get paid forty hours no matter how many hours they work, on Minimum Wage, and they haven't done less than a 12-hour day for months, and that's five, six days a week. […] They exploit them! If they were all English there would be a union or something in place.

These solidarities are also informed by some participants' discomfort at learning that many migrant workers are overqualified for farm and factory work, and are encouraged to migrate because low-paid farm work in Britain is more lucrative than practicing their professions in their home countries. This gives rise to imaginaries of empty towns and villages in Central and Eastern Europe being plundered for their steady supply of exploitable labour. As Trevor (mid-60s, middle class, Leave) argues: "the Latvians and Lithuanians that I speak to, they say there's nobody there anymore! […] It's ruining their countries!". This view demonstrates a transnational solidarity recognising that EU-legislated freedom of movement is a geographically uneven process that exploits Europe's peripheries, which does not square with Trevor's own sensibilities of justice and fairness. It is also noteworthy how, in these examples, white English townspeople reflect on their personal engagements with migrants in the generation of these solidarities, and the homogenising discourse of 'Eastern Europeans' breaks down in favour of specific nationalities such as Poles, Latvians, and Lithuanians.

In addition, there is recognition that there are 'winners' and 'losers' arising out of the changes which have occurred in Boston. In their accounts, long-standing white English working- and middle-class residents are considered to be the 'losers', although some privileged actors such as large-scale farmers and rental landlords are seen as 'winners'. White EU migrants are at times seen to benefit as a consequence of their transnational mobility and entry into the UK labour market, but in other reasonings are depicted as 'pawns' in wider processes of free trade which only serve to enrich farmers, landlords, large employers, and chain supermarkets, who extract value from the region. This time Trevor speaks of "factories and packhouses, which used to be locally owned, [are] now owned by Icelandic companies […] they don't have their roots here at all".

It is within these loose class terms that some white English interlocutors consider both themselves and migrants as being exploited by the same core tenets of EU neoliberal integrationist policy – that is, the free movement of people, goods, and capital – albeit in somewhat different ways, leading to the feeling that 'we are all victims together'. The ways in which our interviewees articulate and express a view of social and political responsibility reaching across space connecting townspeople and migrants invoke Massey's (2007) very provocation of 'what does this place stand for?' in relation to a questioning of the wider ethical duties of the town and the nation. Meanwhile, the arguments concerning transnational corporations' and landlords' lack of rootedness or commitment to place also confront Massey's conundrum of 'to whom does this place belong?' in asking broader questions about the global political economy of place and who has the power to shape this place. In contrast to depictions of a people and place 'left behind' by neoliberal globalisation, this town is directly implicated within these processes, and its residents are actively critiquing on whose terms change is taking place, with new antagonisms being formed against farmers, large corporations, supermarkets, and politicians across the political spectrum.

7.5

Similarly, the pandemic was interpreted by some residents as a moment to come together against politicians. We observed shared feelings of discontentment, frustration, and anger at the individual behaviour of certain local and national politicians who did not conform to lockdown rules, as well as towards the local and national restrictions imposed by the government and the impact this had upon residents' everyday lives. These feelings gave rise to a continued sense of political malaise towards a system that is thought to not speak up for Boston and is too detached from people's everyday experiences of living in the town. However, on a more optimistic note, some people argued that the pandemic may offer an opportunity to create new socio-economic futures for the town and its people, a point we shall return to in the following section.

So then, our contention is that these empathies and solidarities constitute the discursive rationale for the beginnings of acceptance and inclusion of white EU migrants on the part of white English residents. While xenophobic and racist views exist, they are not totalising; in Rogaly's terms, they do not necessarily obstruct more progressive tendencies from emerging, however embryonic. They may also form the basis for developing notions of social justice across nationality, and the possibility of constructing new inclusive identities, to which we now turn.

Towards Non-Elite Cosmopolitan Futures

Contra to depictions of the town's residents as being solely nostalgic for an idealised past, many white English participants accept change and are instead concerned with looking forward to asking how Bostonians can better take charge of these changes and how they can be made to work for everyone. For instance, it was mentioned how the town and its people needed to reduce reliance on agriculture, to grow diverse economies, and to take seriously the effects of climate change. Others imagined what Boston could be like given meaningful investment in its port and marina, and questioned whether work should take place to better encouraging the town's tourism appeal to both domestic and international markets. The pandemic was also thought to have encouraged migration of people from the South East of England attracted to the cheaper property prices amid possibilities for remote working, providing further opportunities to boost the local economy. Irrespective of the workability of these proposals, they show that rather than lingering on what has been lost, many people are instead searching for something new and better.

Moreover, white English residents across class positions recalled their experiences of travelling or living in other parts of the country and drew on these experiences to envisage an alternative identity for Boston that incorporates migrants. Some incomers to Boston from the South East of England, for instance, invoked the notion of London being a 'cultural melting pot' and the

desire for migrants to bring more national 'diversity' to the town by opening more shops and restaurants, thus providing a wider 'cultural' offering, and becoming involved in civic matters such as the local council, signalling migrants' deeper investment in place. For example, consider the thoughts of Susan, who moved to Boston, from the South East of England:

> Growing up in London […] it's a huge melting pot. So it's really difficult for me not to enjoy the sort of cosmopolitan feel of the different shops and restaurants we have now, and the different culture […] Mostly as well they're young people coming here, and this town was ageing […] We just need that young, vibrant population to regenerate the town.
>
> *(early 70s, working class, Leave)*

These views are also echoed by some participants who have lived in Boston all their lives, such as Tim (57-year-old, middle class, Leave): "let's make Boston this cosmopolitan town! […] I would love to see Boston develop […] let's embrace the culture!".

This suggests that rather than simply wanting migrants to leave, there is genuine openness to exploring national and cultural diversity, and to what Susan and Tim see as a 'cosmopolitan' future. There is a view, then, that migration can, and should, enhance Boston. Indeed, many participants' grievances centre upon a frustration at how those opportunities brought about by immigration (such as the arrival of a "young, vibrant [migrant] population") have not been fully harnessed by various political bodies for the good of Boston as a whole. This includes the council's failure to better mediate between long-term residents and migrants in managing this rapid change, and a lack of financial support from central government to help facilitate migrants' settlement into the town. Consequently, some of our participants regret that a politics of 'them' and 'us' has emerged.

As the once seasonal agricultural economy has shifted to being a more all-year-round affair, many migrant workers have now opted to settle in the area and, over time, have also begun to engage in service-sector work and setting up their own businesses, as well as finding romantic partners and having children. This offers further opportunities and spaces for developing international and intercultural conviviality, while amongst our interlocutors there is a growing sense that in becoming more rooted in the town the interests of white EU migrants are slowly aligning with their own. Similarly, the pandemic prompted novel forms of neighbourhood and community action, which produced new spaces of conviviality between residents. Some white English residents described helping out the EU migrant family next door (and vice versa), for instance, in collecting groceries and medical supplies, and taking the bins out, which helped to challenge anti-immigrant prejudices and to form new understandings across nationality. For Pete, this suggests

that meaningful national and cultural convivial relations and new place-based identities – which may be constitutive of alternative post-Brexit and post-pandemic futures for the town – will arise over time:

> The biggest thing is the next generation: watching them growing up together, watching them play together […] watching them go to school together. They're not going to have the same kinds of viewpoints as their parents are going to have about 'them' and 'us'. So that's going to help Boston in the future as well.
>
> *(late 50s, working class, Leave)*

While Garner (2012) warns that such perspectives tend towards an idea of 'integration' that involves the removal of difference (e.g., customs, clothes, accents) and therefore cannot form the basis for a genuinely multicultural identity, we nonetheless perceive an openness and acceptance of some new, forward-facing identity – however fledgling – which is simply written out of dominant media and social scientific portrayals of this place. Here, our white English participants essentially remind us that places are not static and their identities are not fixed; rather, there is an acceptance, and even appetite for, as well as the active constitution of, the remoulding of local identities along more inclusive national and cultural lines.

Conclusion: Re-Imagining Place through Time and Space

Boston is an iconic place embroiled in public political, media, and social scientific commentaries about Brexit, the white English working class, the 'left behind', and their perceived attitudes towards immigration. This chapter has set out to scrutinise these debates through the perspectives of white English residents living in Boston. In contrast to discourses that portray some white working-class communities as 'racist' and 'cultural backwaters' in the face of globalisation and Brexit, a body of ethnographic work instead locates people's grievances within local manifestations of deindustrialisation, neoliberalism, and political disillusionment (Koch, 2017; Mahoney and Kearon, 2018; McKenzie, 2017). Yet, while important interventions, we have argued elsewhere that these studies have tended to take at face value their interlocutors' claims that they are not 'racist' (Tyler et al., 2022). In this chapter, we have instead addressed questions of xenophobia and racism head-on. In so doing, we have identified the deep and complex interplay between anti-immigrant sentiments intersecting with people's ongoing experiences of the socio-economic decline of their place, which intensified and evolved in response to large-scale EU migration. Against this backdrop, we also find a layered experience of interpersonal empathy as well as the deeper political feeling of solidarity with EU migrants that is interlaced with everyday non-elite cosmopolitan dispositions and alternative visions for the town which are

inclusive of EU migrants. As a result, the public supposition that so-called 'left behind' places are straightforwardly xenophobic and/or racist towards migrants becomes more fragmented and complex when held up against the realities of people's everyday lived experiences.

Contrary to much of the urban-based literature on convivialities and lived experiences of everyday multiculturalisms, we see the reproduction of anti-immigrant sentiment alongside the potentiality of cosmopolitan futures not as a seamless paradox, but rather as holding an inherent and coherent logic. The latter is constituted through the nuanced ways in which some of our participants approach change; coming to terms with what this means, on whose terms it takes place, and asking themselves and others what sort of town they would like Boston to be. We also problematise the ongoing tendency within media, political, and intellectual discourse to fixate on seeking to either blame or absolve the white working class of racism, instead showing how these discourses cut across white English place-based class locations.

To what extent might these everyday embryonic cosmopolitanisms form the basis for a more fully-fledged inclusive place-based politics? Certainly, caution should be warned in overplaying any existing sense of harmony or the extent to which people are meaningfully coming together at this stage. That would simply not stand up to competing interpretations of a town that is observably divided across nationality. These everyday sentiments of empathy and solidarity may not necessarily prove a sufficient basis for the generation of new inclusive local identities. Yet the notion that long-term white English residents and their EU neighbours are each negatively impacted by these changes – albeit in different ways – is clearly something around which effective and meaningful community action could cohere. This could, for instance, take the form of securing improvements to the town's transport infrastructure as well as working to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour across all nationalities, thus making Boston a better place to live.

Finally, let us state that our intention was never to 'rescue' our white English participants – or Boston as a whole – by digging beyond xenophobia and racism until we found something palatable. Rather, this analysis arises out of an ethical commitment to making visible all that we have learned to know exists through in-depth ethnographic fieldwork, and to thereafter foster the growth of these progressive tendencies. Indeed, in conceptualising multiculturalism and place as a *process* – rather than as a fixed destination or an intended goal – we are able to shine light on those very possibilities for movement. In other words, the future is all to play for.

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Notes

1 Blamire led in the writing of this chapter in close collaboration with Tyler. Degnen contributed to key drafts of the work, making significant comments and suggestions. Blamire led the fieldwork in Boston, while Tyler and Degnen contributed through ongoing discussions and input from the standpoint of their own fieldwork for this project as well as through their participation in workshops and field visits to Boston.

2 In Boston, national identities of 'English' and 'British' are used interchangeably within everyday discourse to refer to people who come from England and self-identify as 'English'. In our analysis, we use the terms 'English' and 'British' interchangeably in this way. Furthermore, we shall use the terms 'British' and 'the UK' to refer to and include people from England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland.

3 Migration from Central and Eastern Europe to the UK increased substantially following the ten post-Communist 'accession' states joining the EU. These were Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia (in 2004) and then Bulgaria and Romania (in 2007).

4 The first project was entitled "Identity, Belonging and the Role of the Media in Brexit Britain" and the second "Identity, Inequality and the Media in Brexit-Covid-19-Britain"; both funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC). The Principal Investigator for both projects was Tyler (University of Exeter); Blamire was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow (University of Exeter), and Degnen was a Co-Investigator (Newcastle University).

5 We acknowledge that these narratives do form part of wider diverse perspectives and we do not wish to frame our participants as parochial. Nevertheless, we were struck by the strength of the place-based narratives that were adopted by many of our interlocutors, as discussed in this chapter, particularly in comparison to our other field sites.

6 Agricultural gangs are groups of farm labourers who are organised and supervised by an independent gangmaster who negotiates the work and rates of pay directly with the landowner. Historically, whole families were employed as part of this seasonal agricultural labour force in Lincolnshire.

7 Piecework was a common form of employment in the agricultural industry whereby the worker received a fixed piece rate for each unit produced irrespective of actual hours worked.

8 Gangmasters provide workers for agricultural work (see endnote 6). While gangmasters must be officially licensed, migrant workers are often susceptible to financial exploitation, poor and unsafe working conditions, unsuitable accommodation where it is provided, and the withholding of identity documents and wages by gangmasters.

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