

# SLEIGHTS OF HAND: BORDERING, FREE PORTS, AND THE RACIAL CAPITALIST ROOTS OF ECONOMIC NATIONALIST STRATEGIES IN THE US AND THE UK

## ABSTRACT

Sleight-of-hand economic nationalist strategies by recent administrations of the US and UK emphasize the ‘freedom’ of those selectively imagined as belonging to the nation while quietly but pivotally discouraging human mobility and encouraging elite capital mobility. The US and UK’s distinct but connected recent policies—Donald Trump’s ‘Make America Great Again’ (MAGA) and Boris Johnson’s Brexit strategies—are not exceptional or unique to those specific administrations of each country, but are embedded within long-term, interconnected transnational racial capitalist projects. The sleights of hand promoting selective national publics’ freedom are not only hypocritical but complex to see, especially with White-impaired lenses. This article examines two interrelated technologies of power on which these economic nationalist strategies have relied, bordering and free zones, contributing to research on the complex, varied, and experience-inflected responses US and UK residents have to these policies.

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Keywords: economic nationalism; racial capitalism; United States; United Kingdom; free ports and trade zones; bordering strategies; labour

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This article focuses on the economic nationalist stances of the recent administrations of the United States (hereafter, US) and the United Kingdom (UK), and the particular, silencing inversions of ‘freedom’ upon which their rhetoric relies: Freedom and well-being for whom? Who constitutes the economic nation to be revived? These seeming totalities always exclude, and are always haunted by exclusions. ‘Get Brexit Done’ and ‘Take Back Control’, slogans associated with the close vote in a 2016 referendum for the UK to leave the European Union and with

Boris Johnson’s becoming the UK’s Prime Minister in 2019 to see Brexit through, and ‘Make America Great Again’, Donald Trump’s ongoing campaign slogan for the US Presidency 2016 through 2020, were both assertions with nostalgic inventions and erasures that have been engaged in complex ways, for diverse reasons, by supporters. But, the economic nationalist strategies of the administrations in the US and the UK, like all capitalist strategies, have involved sleights of hand drawing public attention to the promise of market citizenship

while drawing attention away from the violent inequities, structural racism, and forced immobilities upon which that ‘free’ market in a ‘free’ nation relies.<sup>1</sup> To follow these sleights of hand political strategies and their different iterations in the US and the UK, this article draws on racial capitalist (Robinson 2000) theorisation and archival and ethnographic documentation to discuss spectral borders and unfree zones in the White-centric economic nationalisms promoted in both nations.<sup>2</sup>

My argument here is that the apparent ruptures of Trump’s emphatic attention to building a short section of a very high wall between the US and Mexico and Johnson’s ebullient insistence on the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union were neither exceptional nor new strategies. Economic nationalist rhetoric has often been used as a parallel or indirect vocabulary in which to make promises to protect the livelihoods of a public insinuated as White and deserving from selectively marked immigrant and minoritised workers. This is coupled with exaggerated practices of bordering. One of those bordering technologies is the everyday parsing and policing of belonging in the imagined, deserving economic nation, which can be decoupled both from actual national citizenship and from the border, understood as the physical boundary between nations. Another of those bordering practices is the designation of spaces inside national boundaries as extraterritorial or outside the nation for customs purposes. These are the free ports (in the UK) and the Foreign-Trade Zones (in the US) that represent the hyperglobal mobility necessary for capitalist elites to continue to increase profits but undermine the ostensible fortification of an economic nation. Thus, the reliance on sleight-of-hand strategies by these economic nationalist administrations shifts attention from the persistent structural

racism –responsible for ‘forced exclusion and stigmatised labour’ (Harrison 1995: 48)—upon which capitalism relies. The archival and ethnographic evidence provided for this argument may appear seemingly unrelated—ranging from racial capitalism rendered visible around the base of a statue to interviewees’ alarm over the downplaying of the Irish border issue by Brexiteers—but the purpose here is to follow the traces of redirection, or sleight-of-hand strategies, backwards to the intended policy goals which selectively reduce freedom and equity in the name of freedom and equity.

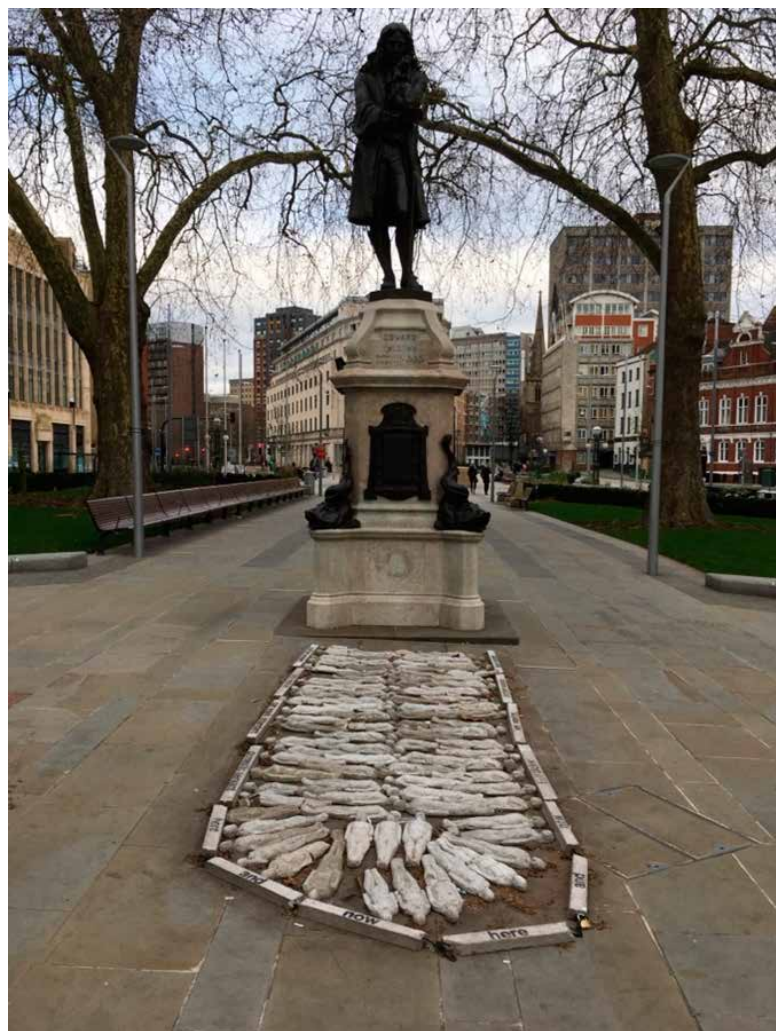
By sleight of hand, throughout, I refer to hegemonic choices in political rhetorical work intended to draw public attention to one strategy, which invites strong media attention and discussion, while distracting from the much more silent project that is the main goal.<sup>3</sup> I do not mean that those most harmed by these projects lack political interpretations or agency (Han 2018; Clarke and Newman 2019: 74), but that there is definitely intentional obfuscation of their core aims and projects by capitalist elites.<sup>4</sup> This analysis assumes there are many intersecting and sometimes contradictory simultaneous political discourses and projects which mostly rub along together in the convenient fog of ‘strategic ambiguity’ (Heller 1988). There are political moments, though, in which sleight-of-hand strategies do not work. Anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies commonly invoked to ‘protect’ the economic wellbeing of the imagined [White] nation (Kingsolver 2001), for example, were challenged when essential workers marginalised through racialisation and precarious immigration status momentarily became both visible and vital during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Sanò 2022). And the powerful, ongoing efforts to doubt or render invisible the *foundational* reliance of capitalism on racism and on the transatlantic

trade in enslaved Africans discussed by Cedric Robinson (2000: 112) in his explanation of racial capitalism were exposed even to White-privileged publics with the 2020 racial reckonings in the US and the UK. The attempt to close those curtains again in a White-centric legislative backlash was orchestrated through a wave of ‘anti-Critical Race Theory’ legislation in the US in 2022.

Of course, those who are dispossessed, dislocated, disenfranchised, disregarded, and experience the active extraction of labour, voices, and ideas, see and live the embodied, institutional, and everyday violence of sleight-of-hand strategies like the Brexiteers’ ostensible focus on the public’s wellbeing. As Antoinette Burton (2021: 2) argues, ‘the presumptive Whiteness of “Deep England”’ surfacing in Brexit discussions comes as no rupture or surprise to those who have long seen it celebrated in White-dominated popular culture—Brexit is just a vehicle for its momentary broader legibility. Temporally, there are both these moments of hypervisibility (like overt White supremacist actions on 6 January 2021 in the US to try to maintain Trump’s agenda to ‘Make America Great Again’) and ongoing efforts—by artists (activist artists), for example—to render more widely apprehensible the structural racism *always* there, shoring up capitalist logic and practice whatever political party is in power.

A recent example of work to render racial capitalism visible by artists surrounded the statue of Edward Colston, which has stood in the centre of Bristol, UK, since 1895. Colston built a fortune from his investment in the trade in captive Africans in the seventeenth century through the Royal Africa Company. For at least the past twenty years, there were calls to remove the statue of Colston, which honoured his donations to the city, because of the violent source of that capital. In October 2018, activists

created an installation at the base of Colston’s statue (see Fig. 1) that rendered visible the haunting of the memorial by all those exploited in the past and present through racial capitalism. The anonymous artwork was installed on Anti-Slavery Day, as part of a campaign against human trafficking. Marking only one day of the year, of course, as Anti-Slavery Day, is a temporal sleight of hand, one of many acts of empowered marking and unmarking through White supremacy, which is why organisations like Unseen work on challenging invisibility year-round.



*Amplifying visibility of the legacy of racial capitalism associated with Edward Colston in Bristol, UK. Photo: Ann Kingsolver, 1 January, 2019.*

Passersby glancing at the artists' installation could see the outlined layout of captive Africans in the suffocating belowdecks of the kind of ship in which Colston had invested. A closer look revealed the bordering words 'here and now', and labelled the prone bodies as sex workers, fruit pickers, kitchen workers, nail bar workers, domestic workers, and others upon whose labour the current UK economy relies: workers whose full cultural, market, and/or national citizenship is simultaneously actively rejected by many of those with whom they are in daily contact in intimate ways. This materialisation of the always-there was soon swept away, and in June 2020 (as part of protests around the world in solidarity with Black Lives Matter activists in the US after George Floyd was killed by Minneapolis police officers), protestors physically pulled Colston's bronze statue down from its plinth and rolled it into the harbour. It was replaced by a series of sculptures unauthorised by the Bristol city council, including a statue by Marc Quinn of Black Lives Matter protestor Jen Reid. But, it is not easy to dispense with, or sustain the broad visibility of, the everywhere-ness and currency of racial capitalism and its many violences.

Racial capitalism (Robinson 2000) has always involved the work of erasure and the redirection of the public gaze from the racial contract through which political legitimacy is established on the 'privileging of those individuals designated as white/persons and the exploitation of those individuals designated as non-white/subpersons' (Mills 1997: 32–33), or the dispossessed and unfree (Calvão 2016). Such sleight of hand is at work in the erasure of the unfree in the very inscription of 'freedom' in the founding documents of the US as a nation, distancing itself from its colonisers while silencing its negation of the political legitimacy of indigenous, enslaved, unpropertied, and

gendered-as-female residents. A similar negation of subjugation appears in the strategic reimplementation of 'free' ports and zones in recent economic nationalist narratives that assert freedom, while haunted by the unfree.

Anthropologists have long been analysing nationalisms and their haunting<sup>5</sup> by strategic inclusions and exclusions, advocating for close ethnographic and historical attention (B. Williams 1990: 114; see also Trouillot 1995). Advocating the ongoing work of tracing those specific stories of power, Eric Williams (1964 [1944]) cautioned readers—in 1944, at the very end of *Capitalism and Slavery*—that if we 'do not learn something from history, [our] activities would then be cultural decoration, or a pleasant pastime, equally useless in these troubled times'. Whether for the Frankfurt School in the 1930s or in recent years, trying to sort out the geographical and historical distinctions of nationalisms and populisms and their chimaeric projections as they mushroom is challenging. And while economic nationalist rhetoric can sound similar, the associated policies can differ quite a bit (see Kingsolver et al. 2022). Economic nationalism is not a stable concept or set of policies, but a political discourse that might best be understood as 'the nationalism–economy nexus' (Berger and Fetzer 2019: 2) or as 'a complex set of relationships between nation and economy' (Pickel 2005: 13) in order to encompass the many forms and contexts of economic nationalisms. The economic nationalist concerns of the 2020 Trump and Johnson administrations were both focused on enabling the mobility of capital while immobilising labour, for example, but took different approaches to transnational trade. Trump's policies sounded more isolationist, but his 'Buy American' approach actually relied heavily (and silently) on extremely global production strategies.

Ethnographers have looked beyond simple binary or exceptionalist understandings<sup>6</sup> of the votes for Trump's Make America Great Again agenda and for Brexit, noting the heterogeneity of their often-essentialised supporters (Balthazar 2017; Mathur 2020; Rapport 2020), the conjuncture of multiple political strategies (Clarke 2019; Evans 2017), and the political work (Maskovsky 2019) done by seeming to amplify White working-class grievances and racist versus progressive divisions, thereby disguising the overall racial capitalist White benefit from that trope (Ilc 2017; Walley 2017)<sup>7</sup> and the very quiet, very powerful projects of a small capitalist (and fracturing) elite (Gusterson 2017: 210). In the UK case, Hickman and Ryan (2020) call that elite group the 'chumocracy', schooled together and later scuffling over which tack to take (Shore in Green et al. 2016: 490 to maximise and securitise their capital. Those cracks among conservatives (Mulvey and Davidson 2019) could be seen in 2020 as fellow Conservatives and past Prime Ministers made public statements of dismay with Prime Minister Johnson's proposal of a UK law illegal under international law, in a move similar to Trump's assertions of sovereignty from the global (Mayes and Ross 2020). Even Brexit itself has been a distraction, as Hozic and True (2017: 276) argue, 'taking oxygen from public conversations about structural problems... and ensuring that discussions about issues that matter to all... remain in the hands of their technocratic elites'.

As Cris Shore (2021: 17) observed in his discussion of the complexities of understanding the Brexit decision, 'anthropologists and other analysts will need to look more closely at the imaginaries that were attached to votes and how these are grounded in specific life experiences(...)'. This is what I have long tried to do. For the past 35 years, I have been

listening as an ethnographer (drawing on political economic and interpretive theoretical perspectives) to how people make sense of and contest capitalist logic, practices, and policies and the strategic alterities inscribed, embodied, and justified through them. Ethnographically and archivally, the examples I include in this article are from two interwoven projects that stemmed from earlier work on different and specifically positioned transnational imaginings of the agency, and effects on identities and livelihoods, of the North American Free Trade Agreement (Kingsolver 2001). One project has been focused on the tensions and ambiguities between understanding rural US Foreign-Trade Zones (FTZs) as workspaces inside or outside the US and the labour injustices resulting from the potential exploitation of jurisdictional ambiguity (Kingsolver 2021) in these extraterritorial zones.<sup>8</sup> Ironically, Trump's economic nationalist rhetoric of 'American jobs for American workers' depended on a profoundly globalised landscape of production on US territory, raising the question of what an 'American job' might be, along with who he meant to include in that phrase as 'American'. Racial capitalist framing of 'American' workers has underlain multiple national administrations of both major political parties in the US, aided by the complex policy terrain of local, state, and national government appeals to what have been discussed as 'working-class voters', but often signalled as a White working class, especially in regions with failing and waning major industries.

In a one-year, comparative ethnographic project in 2019<sup>9</sup>, I did semi-structured interviews with people variously situated within the UK, by region—Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland, and England—and by other ways of self-identifying (e.g., age, gender, racialisation, national identity, and occupation), and additional interviews in

the Republic of Ireland and in Italy, about what those interviewed might tell a future generation the Brexit debate was really all about. Through both projects, especially in terms of anti-immigrant rhetoric and a renewed promotion of free ports (a central but quiet plank in the Brexit platform), those who agreed to be interviewed illustrated the ways in which US and UK sleight-of-hand economic nationalist policies continue to be shaped by racial capitalism. In order to support the argument made here that sleight-of-hand economic nationalist strategies in the US and the UK have emphasized the freedom and wellbeing of the represented publics while downplaying the racial capitalist inequities upon which those policies rely, in the next sections, I discuss the way bordering is deployed as an essential trope defining the ‘economic nation’ in both the US and the UK, the long racial capitalist roots of the economic nationalism articulated in Brexit, and, finally, how free ports in the UK and Foreign Trade Zones in the US embody the ultimate sleight of hand: obscure spaces within national borders that simultaneously defy and are seen to resuscitate the ‘national economy’.

## BORDERING AS A TECHNOLOGY OF POWER NECESSARY TO ECONOMIC NATIONALISM

In 2020, in the US and the UK, the logic of economic nationalism stood defiantly on its own eroding cliff. Economic nationalists called for withdrawals from transnational circulations and drew attention to ‘hard borders’ through either investing in the construction of an actual wall between the US and Mexico or emphasizing the seas dividing the UK from

the European Union (EU) in the case of all but Northern Ireland. That border (and the ‘backstop’ of not creating a physically enforced international border zone between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, upon which the Brexit negotiations hinged) seemed to be an afterthought by the UK government charged with implementing the 2016 narrow vote for the UK to withdraw from the European Union it had joined—as the European Economic Community—in 1973. While the majority-conservative UK government (led in turn by Prime Ministers Theresa May and Boris Johnson) was in protracted negotiations of a withdrawal agreement for the UK from the EU, immediate arrangements were made by UK leaders for capital to move freely, even as they argued that people—at least those targeted in xenophobic and White-centric rhetoric—would not. London was very quietly declared a financial ‘free port’ in an agreement with the European Security and Markets Authority to buffer British banks from the insecure and possibly ruinous conditions that could come with Brexit (Jenkins 2019). I will return to this key sleight of hand.

Across the Atlantic, Trump asked US citizens to ‘buy American’ while his own businesses imported products from many countries (Gabbatt 2017). This hypocritical sleight of hand was not new, but as old as the nation itself. The leaders of the American Revolution wore homespun suits in public in protest of British imports and taxation, but the homespun linen suits they wore were mostly woven by their enslaved African workers, and they secretly went around the boycott and imported European goods for their own households (Frank 1999: 11–18).<sup>10</sup> Arshad Imtiaz Ali (2017: 386) cautioned against seeing Trump’s economic nationalist

policies as exceptional, arguing that ‘the animus toward non-white bodies was not a rupture in American political and social life but rather the continuation of a society that has not addressed its material gains from genocide, chattel slavery, colonial, and imperial projects, as well as from its racism, discrimination, and violence’. The US administration’s bordering tactics of separating children from parents, deporting citizens, and inciting vigilante violence<sup>11</sup> undergird the racial capitalist economic nation. Again, it becomes important to ask, *whose* nation, and how is that further definition of those whose livelihoods and lives merit ‘protection’ enacted in daily life?

The exaggerated materiality of Trump’s construction of a section of wall between the US and Mexico was a sleight of hand drawing attention from the ongoing selective visibility and permeability, and everywhere, of that wall that racialises national and cultural citizenship in everyday life and regulates the im/mobility invoked in economic nationalist rhetoric. As Robert Chang (1997: 246) wrote, after watching a White person enter the US with a form of credential he was then told was not allowed when he presented his own to the border patrol: ‘Although the border is everywhere, your perspective may render it invisible. It is through this invisibility that the border gains much of its power...the properties of the border change depending on who is trying to get in or out’. In everyday ways, as Sarah Green (2019: 10) points out, people are navigating ‘different and overlapping border regimes’ that are selectively, relationally, and incompletely asserted as traces of historical and nationalist projects. Border ‘protection’ in the US, as Castañeda (2019) and others have documented, is far less about the enforcement of the physical international border than it is about the racial capitalist assertion of belonging to the

US de facto [White] public (Kingsolver 2001). In 2020, for example, during Black Lives Matter demonstrations in Portland, Oregon, the Trump administration dispatched the US Customs and Border Patrol quasi-military tactical unit known as Bortac (Pilkington 2020)—likened to the Navy Seals and sometimes deployed outside the US for anti-smuggling raids—to Portland, bringing the spectre of state power and selective border enforcement into the space of the protests. The wall has feet and is armed. Bortac, as Pilkington (2020) notes, can operate *anywhere* within 100 miles of the US border, a zone which includes the majority of the US population.

The US border, then, is selectively permeable (Fernández-Kelly and Massey 2007) and can move over people and re-inscribe identities through a racial capitalist lens (Molina 2014). Bordering has become an increasingly popular xenophobic technology since the fall of the Berlin Wall, paradoxically, in many countries (Myambo and Frassinelli 2019). One of the sleights of hand here is the loud anti-immigrant rhetoric distracting from the real crisis, bordering itself (Gahman and Hjalmanson 2019: 108). In the context of Brexit, many have reminded those who associate integration of the UK into the EU with ‘free movement’ that the European Union has increasingly walled itself off from immigration in selectively xenophobic and racial capitalist ways, representing no cosmopolitan panacea (Mulvey and Davidson 2019: 286; Sierp 2020). But, bordering technologies have everything to do with economic nationalist strategies. As Orenstein (2018: 650) has documented, the ‘plurality of bordering practices’ used by states are always in the service of capital, and are implemented through the everyday logistics of warehousing and FTZs.

## THE LONG RACIAL CAPITALIST ROOTS OF BREXIT AND 'FREE' PORTS

As Donald Trump and Boris Johnson were busy securitising their selectively imagined national publics in 2020, Paul Gilroy could be seen to have eerily and perhaps wearily predicted many of their statements and actions over 30 years ago when he wrote about the UK: 'The politics of 'race' in this country is fired by conceptions of national belonging and homogeneity which not only blur the distinction between 'race' and nation, but rely on that very ambiguity for their effect' (Gilroy 2002 [1987]: 44). He further argued that the practice of Black exclusion and expulsion associated with the new form of racism 'assists in the process of making Britain great again and restores an ethnic symmetry to a world distorted by imperial adventure and migration' (Gilroy 2002 [1987]: 46).<sup>12</sup> These observations by Gilroy were echoed clearly in Trump's 'MAGA' call to Make America Great Again, with its nostalgia for a Whiteness that never was; in his suggestion that US citizens serving in the House of Representatives 'go back' to their 'broken and crime-infested' countries; in Theresa May's efforts to make the UK a hostile climate for immigrants from Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, and other Caribbean and Commonwealth nations, deporting UK citizens and then saying on Windrush Day<sup>13</sup> in 2019 that the UK would 'always be their home'; in Boris Johnson's willingness to jettison Northern Ireland for a Brexit focused on what he apparently saw as the rightful Britain, England; and in the Biden administration's selective deportation of Haitian immigrants in 2021. Administrations in both the US and the UK have used sleight-of-hand rhetoric to selectively promote isolationism for the many<sup>14</sup> while quietly ensuring global ties for the racial

capitalist elite. Free ports have long figured as a mechanism for that sleight of hand.

The new free port in London and the network of ten new free ports across the UK (especially in deindustrialised areas in the north) figured as key elements in the post-Brexit economic development strategy. As Jack Newman (2021: 319) argues, free ports were promised as part of the Johnson government's post-Brexit 'levelling up' policy to address regional inequalities across the UK, but the tensions hiding behind the rhetoric of 'levelling up' will be revealed when increased economic productivity in free ports placed in marginalised regions do not actually lead to more economic equity within regions.<sup>15</sup> The tensions in imagining full inclusion in the UK's post-Brexit national economic community have centuries of history behind them, ranging from the anti-Irish discrimination voiced by the British administrator Charles Trevelyan's (1846) statement that the 'moral evil of the selfish, perverse, and turbulent character of the people' was worse than the famine they were experiencing to the Brexiteers' unsurprising quite common use of 'England' instead of all the nations of the United Kingdom in speeches about Brexit's advantages and implementation. As Brackette Williams (1989: 422) wrote, 'The process by which Anglo-Saxon came to stand for Englishness, and Englishness to stand for quintessential Britishness has provided fertile ground for a resurgence of subordinated ethnic groups in the United Kingdom', and that has very much applied to Brexit. There is a long history, then, to the astonishing ability of today's Brexiteers to ignore the effects of Brexit along the Irish border, since the economic nation is—in Brexiteers' sleight-of-hand rhetoric—viewed as England anyway, something Scotland has long called the Brexiteers on.<sup>16</sup>



Many I interviewed in 2019 about Brexit brought up anti-immigrant sentiment within the UK and fear about the uncertain status for those living transnationally (either in the UK with citizenship in other nations or with UK citizenship living elsewhere in the EU), but also tensions between the countries constituting the United Kingdom. I did not ask people how they voted, but sometimes people volunteered that information. A retired person from Northern Ireland told me that he voted for Brexit. What interested me was *why*. It was sovereignty-related. He remembered the British army marching into Northern Ireland in 1969, and he feared the possibility of the European Union similarly raising an army to send into the UK. I have heard other supporters of Brexit talk about a fear of the 'United States of Europe' becoming too powerful in governance and employing force against the populations of member nations. Shore and Black (1994) foresaw this possibility over 25 years ago, given some of the ambiguities that were not quite worked out in the European Union's establishment. They argued that conferring EU citizenship to those already citizens of member nations both set the stage for anti-immigrant policies against the newly arrived or those with unresolved national status and for tension between the possible calls in the future for loyalty to Europe as citizens, with accompanying responsibilities, and the existing national citizenship with well-established nationalist narratives. In 2022, this tension could be seen in the varied national responses within the EU to providing material support to Ukraine during Russian challenges to its borders and affinities. It was precisely this issue of military mobilisation that came up in relation to Irish bordering in discussions I had about Brexit in the UK.

For example, a person from Northern Ireland asked, in a 2019 interview:

If there was going to be a hard border in Ireland, who would enforce it? The Irish Army is not big enough, and they couldn't afford it. The British don't want to do it. And the British Army's not big enough either. The British Army's really small. So nobody could really enforce it. It's impossible.

And a businessperson from the Republic of Ireland said:

The backstop was basically that there would never be a deal done without the Irish being consulted and without this border issue being solved first. But you know at the end of the day, Ireland is a member-state [of the EU], but a very small member-state in comparison with the other twenty-five member-states. So I think that, if really, when it comes down to it, I think a lot of people in Europe would say look it, it's an Irish problem and let it be their problem, because we don't have that much clout in Europe anyway, and I think that's the way it will probably fall.

With this uncertainty, several people from both sides of the Irish border told me that they were worried about a return of violence, and that the Brexit discussions were bringing up conversations they had never had with younger generations about the troubles because they had thought they had put that behind them. One person said, 'I would hope that common sense would prevail with all people. Even if the hard border comes back, that peace would prevail. Because that's just the ultimate'.

In the interviews I did with variously situated speakers about Brexit, the fault lines within the UK and histories of scalar discrimination were prominent, as exemplified

by the strong possibility of another Scottish referendum on independence from the UK and the 2020 vote by the Shetland Islands Council to consider independence from Scotland. The same retired person from Northern Ireland who feared repression by a European Union army paralleling his experience of British military occupation talked about the discrimination he encountered when moving from Belfast to London. He and a friend had dragged their suitcases (before wheels, he pointed out) a long way from the bus stop to the house where someone had agreed to rent them a flat.

But when we turned up on the doorstep, she said, 'You're Irish, aren't you?' And we said, 'yes'. And she pointed to a sign on her door: no Irish, no coloured. She said, 'The flat's gone'. And she pointed to the sign. Which meant, you're not coming in here (...) If we'd been Scottish or Welsh we wouldn't have had the same problem.

Of course, it would not have mattered where in the United Kingdom he was from if he had not identified as White. But his views of English colonialism within the UK remained strong seventy years later, even as he supported Brexit because of his fear that the European Union would treat the UK as England had treated Northern Ireland.

A worker from Wales living in another part of the UK asked her mother when she went home to a former coal-mining valley why she thought the vote in the 2016 referendum went for Brexit in Wales, when it would mean the loss of EU support for so many cultural and economic programmes that local residents participated in. Her mother told her:

I don't know, I didn't vote. I didn't go, because I'm bored with this bloody stuff.

It's just a pain in the backside. But have you seen the number of UKIP [United Kingdom Independence Party] people down here? I've never met a UKIP person before. Twice I've been stopped.

On the morning the result of the Brexit referendum was announced in 2016, one interviewee recalled in 2019, a taxi driver told her that earlier in his shift he had heard the news of how the vote went from a client who got in his cab and said, 'Ha ha, you're going to have to leave now'. The driver had been born and lived his whole life in England. Citizenship is impossible to read on bodies, but the language of racism was more overt and empowered after the Brexit vote in a range of violent ways.

A young woman whose parents had both immigrated to the United Kingdom said:

Brexit's vote has led me to believe that I no longer belong here and that my family no longer belong here because, you know, they weren't born here. This idea of belonging is something that I've never particularly considered from a geographical perspective before, and so hearing it from people that I'm allegedly like part of that society almost is very, very weird...

While first- and second-generation immigrants' sense of belonging being questioned or not in the UK may already have been modulated through lenses of class, racialisation, gender, desirability, and 'deportability' (Radziwinowiczówna and Galasińska 2021), Sotkasiira and Gawlewicz (2021) found in a post-Brexit interview study that the 'politics of embedding', or a sense of belonging and the rights immigrants felt in the UK, always complex and fluctuating, were suddenly made more fragile by Brexit-related immigration policies.<sup>17</sup> As I also learned in

my interviews, if a person were in the process of divorcing or losing a job, for example, at the particular moment in which Brexit was going into effect and the EU reciprocal Schengen visa policies no longer applied, their assumptions and evidence of belonging in the UK might feel insecure for the first time if they (not having national citizenship) had not already been denied cultural citizenship (Ong 1996) related to other aspects of their identities.

Uncertainty about the future was something that young people told me in 2019 was shaping many of their life decisions in the shadow of Brexit (uncertainty only unimaginably amplified during the COVID-19 crisis). One member of a young couple interviewed said, ‘people are postponing decisions about moving to the next stage of your life.... We don’t know how the cards are going to fall. So, there’s uncertainty for the future, which in turn definitely affects the action that you take in the present’.

One young interviewee, who—like many in the UK—was facing more overt racism than ever before in 2019, said that the Brexit debate made her realise that there had been people who had felt uncomfortable going into the EU years before. She had had no idea that there had been such tension about that at the time:

People who didn’t feel too comfortable with it were not given the space to say I’m not all right with this without being vilified. So, putting a lid on a situation for so long eventually without a pressure point, no way of it coming up, I feel like Brexit has allowed for that to come out, but I thought we lived in a system whereby you could express your viewpoints, so it was a smack in the face. It was like this idealised version of this liberal progressive government. Well, that didn’t really exist, did it, because these people were left out of the debate for so long.

The Brexit vote was haunted by the decision to go into the EU, and many overlapping and sometimes contradictory experiences of bordering and marginalisation,<sup>18</sup> even as the racial capitalist project ploughed on.

## FREE PORTS AND FOREIGN-TRADE ZONES IN THE UK AND US: SLEIGHT-OF-HAND ECONOMIC NATIONALISM

So, why the resurrection of the free port strategy by Brexiteers? I argue that, while throwing attention elsewhere, free ports are central to their vision of limiting the flow of people (racialising ‘belonging’ and amplifying bordering technologies) while ‘freeing’ the movement of elite capital and reducing expectations of its contributions to ‘the welfare state’. While free ports moved as a strategy from Europe to the US, historically, the Johnson government looked to the US’ FTZs as a model for re-implementing free ports as the UK was exiting the EU. Free ports represent an excellent way to argue that one is ‘bringing home’ jobs, appealing to the imagined White working-class industrial nostalgia that did not actually characterise what came to be represented as electoral mandates for Trump’s MAGA vision and for Brexit.<sup>19</sup> Simultaneously, and more discretely, free ports allow for the creation of extraterritorial spaces within the nation that free corporations operating within them from accountability to localities, increase totalising control (suppressing labour organisation and protections) of the workforce, and facilitate connections to global trade and low-wage labour without having to pay as many tariffs to the state. This reduces investments in state support (like the NHS) for workers for whom jobs are being ‘brought home’ or ‘protected’. Thus, not only those xenophobically marked in Brexit rhetoric as not belonging to the nation

lose out, but also ‘those who count as citizens’ (Sheppard 2020) for Brexiteers. The freedom in ‘free ports’ using selective, racial capitalist bordering technologies, as I see their strategy, is the freedom to exploit through labour-value chains (Seigel 2018: 24), drawing attention—through a sleight of hand—from the entailed unfree (Calvão 2016).

Just as with racial capitalism, I think it is the disciplining of workers (through disorientation in space and from customary protections, and through hierarchies of surveillance) that is of interest to Johnson’s Brexiteers about the free ports. Aihwa Ong (1991: 285) described the new techniques of power available to corporations in FTZs (capitalising on low-cost, low-tax industrial property with reduced-tariff special spatial status), as operating ‘through controlling a series of spaces—the body, the shop floor, the state, and the public sphere’. I have seen all of these in practice in rural FTZs in the southeastern US, which serve as models for the free ports proposed for the post-Brexit UK. In South Carolina, for example, a labour organiser described the fear that had prevented workers from speaking up when a fellow worker in the zone was killed on the job, and, in 2019, a worker in an automobile manufacturing company told me, ‘you’re entering a different country without a passport’. It is made clear to workers that they are in a zone controlled by US Customs and Border Protection (there’s that rolling wall far from the border again), with 10 years in prison or a US\$250,000 fine looming over them if they were to walk from the FTZ section of the plant to another part with an inventoried bolt in their pocket. The signage conveying those threats is prominent in most FTZs, but jurisdictional ambiguity is exploited by corporations operating in the zone. I have interviewed local officials and workers alike who had been told by zone operators that local,

state, and federal laws (especially about labour protections) did not apply within the zones, although the legal framework governing the zones only applies to the commodities moving through them—for customs purposes—and does not negate the rights of the people moving through the zones, as long as they keep all the parts within the razor-wire fencing or taped-off section of floor marking the FTZ space (Kingsolver 2021).

As Neveling (2017: 187, 2020a: 228) has argued, FTZs are not exceptional but are integral to national strategies of the superexploitation of workers. They limit the rights of workers (Neveling 2018: 4)—the same workers Brexiteers claim to be improving conditions for as they promote FTZs as part of Brexit policies.<sup>20</sup> Ong (2006: 8) explains that strategy as creating ‘latitudinal spaces’ mixing ‘regulatory and carceral labor regimes that can operate with little regard for labour rights’. Ong (2006: 103) further observes that the deployment of ‘zoning strategies’ by sovereign states allows them to ‘create or accommodate islands of distinct governing regimes within the broader landscape of normalized rule. The political outcome is an archipelago of enclaves, the sum of which is a form of variegated sovereignty’.

FTZs in the US can be ‘hidden in plain view’, as Orenstein (2011: 38) says. Hundreds of them have been authorised by the US Congress across the country (at ports of entry or, now, in subzones within 90 driving minutes of those sea or airports—often in very rural areas) since the Foreign-Trade Zones Act of 1934 was passed. I see this hidden archipelago of FTZs across the rural US as a related strategy to what Story (2019: 167) describes as the use of prisons by the US as ‘spaces of disappearance’, disappearing both ‘the people inside them’ and disappearing into the often-rural landscape,

‘commonly mistaken for warehouses or logistics compounds’. FTZs also appear in the middle of fields as huge warehouse complexes, surrounded by barbed wire, like the US Customs and Border Protection detention facilities with which they have sometimes been twinned (Kingsolver 2016).

The use of free ports and FTZs is an archipelago strategy of *racial* capitalism, not simply capitalism or the strategy of economic nationalists hiding engagement with global capitalism embedded throughout the landscape in spectral zones. An excellent example of FTZs as techniques of racial capitalism is given by Alves and Ravindran (2020: 193) in their description of the FTZ in Buenaventura, Colombia (central to the Pacific Alliance trading bloc) as ‘producing social death’ for the port city’s Black residents while ‘extracting value from its population and territory’. They explain that Buenaventura has been a free port since 1827—an extraterritorial status which allowed the trade in captive Africans to continue beyond its being outlawed in Colombia—and that that accumulation by Black dispossession continues in the FTZ, as new hotels and roads built to connect White FTZ users with the port literally cross over dispossessed Black Buenaventurans.

Boris Johnson’s Brexiteer administration was ready to remove state protections for workers from *inside* the UK who it claimed to protect from workers from *outside* the UK with the free port strategy that had made its racial capitalist roundtrip from British colonial ports to the Americas and now back to the UK. In the fall of 2019, Liz Truss, the UK’s Trade Secretary (who then became Prime Minister briefly in 2022), proposed ten new free ports, saying ‘Freedoms transformed London’s Docklands in the 1980s, and free ports will do the same for towns and cities across the UK. They will onshore enterprise and manufacturing as the gateway

to our future prosperity, creating thousands of jobs’ (Mason 2019). In plans, they were even called ‘supercharged free ports’, promising up to 150 000 new jobs in northern England and Scotland, based on projections from the US’s experience with them (Smith, 2018). Free ports and their promises have appeared on and disappeared from the UK landscape. Most recently eliminated in 2012 and now proposed again, they have a very long history in England (Lavissière and Rodrigue 2017).<sup>21</sup>

‘Free’ ports were established in the Caribbean between 1675 and 1766 in British, Danish, Dutch, and French colonies. As Hunt (2013: 8) explains, ‘the growing movement within the Caribbean colonies to introduce free ports is an indicator of liberal and free trade policies introduced to allow for merchants to trade beyond colonial boundaries’. At times, more of that cargo through the colonial free ports was enslaved people than the products of their labour (Orenstein 2019: 110). The ‘free’ in free ports was always haunted by the unfree, then, even with the sleight-of-hand strategy of ‘cleaning’ capital and making the financial centre of London appear morally removed from the trade in captive Africans (Kish and Leroy 2015). The UK’s free port strategy (embodied in its Free Port Act) was historically more about politics—extending protection for the Empire and the slave trade—than economics (Kleiser 2021). The Brexiteers’ quiet re-invocation of free ports may very well have aligned with other facets of imperial nostalgia for a ‘Great’ Britain.

Sleight-of-hand strategies of control invoking freedom, like Colston’s monument to his beneficence, are cacophonously polyvocal. There is not a united hegemonic racial capitalist elite at the helm of the economic nationalist ghost ships of either the UK or the US, but ‘flex nets’ (Wedel 2011). Dent (2020) reports that a majority of business owners in the UK

have not favoured Brexit (and the tremendous restructuring of the supply chain it requires, including the free ports), and, as mentioned, there are notorious rifts among Conservatives about Brexit. Similarly, there are rifts among the capitalist elite in the US over trade policies and whether ‘making America great again’ really does need to involve quite so many walls and withdrawals from transnational entities. An economic development recruiter for FTZs in South Carolina, for example, who told me he had voted for Trump, also told me that he wrote to President Trump to ask him to rethink his tariff policies, and testified before Congress to say a trade war with China would be a bad idea based on his experience with (what I would call) the oligarchic textile mill model. He went on to read to me from the letter he had written to Trump, saying ‘We’ve lived the other life for, you know, a hundred years—from 1880 to 1985. We’ve learned how *not* to do it. For a hundred years, we lived the—it’s not a dream, it’s a nightmare. Of keeping people out that don’t look like us, don’t talk like us. You know, you can’t draw or build a wall around the United States just like we did in South Carolina’.

That direct appeal to Trump reflected the majority reliance of capitalist elites—including Trump’s own businesses—on transnational circulations. But, the isolationist economic nationalist rhetoric had little to do with economic practices and everything to do with a White supremacist political project of consolidating a ‘deserving’ nation within a nation. Returning to Liz Truss’ statement about free ports as onshoring enterprise as a gateway to prosperity, she neglected to mention for whom. The principal sleight of hand is that while Brexiteers—similarly to Trump—promised the protection of citizens of the economic nation from strategically othered outsiders, they were very busy bringing home the offshored working

conditions and labour arrangements that would undermine that ostensible economic security for the selfsame select public.

In conclusion, I argue that recent economic nationalist projects in the US and the UK, while not identical or homogeneous, rely on multiple sleight-of-hand strategies. One is to claim that the national public (read through a racial capitalist lens as narrower, and Whiter, than national citizenship) will benefit from ‘harder’ borders, protecting jobs, while at the same time using bordering technologies ranging far from national boundaries to selectively police belonging in that national public and national economy. Those bordering technologies may be used by economic nationalism’s proponents to advantage capital mobility and quietly create ‘free’ ports and trade zones that can limit secure employment, public revenues, and transparent labour rights for residents working in them. Workers in free zones are often hired with temporary contracts through staffing agencies, for example, and are thereby more easily controlled and silenced. Free ports have long been a racial capitalist strategy to increase freedom for capital and reduce freedom for workers, amplifying the social and economic precarity<sup>22</sup> supposedly addressed by economic nationalism. What I have tried to draw attention to here is the reliance on an inherently global, border-suspending financial and spatial strategy of free ports or FTZs by economic nationalists vigorously and ironically indicating walls and gangplanks need to be raised to protect the nation: for example, the London free port created quietly to buffer Brexiteers’ own capital from the uncertainties of Brexit. I have attempted to demonstrate that, when an administration is promoting one policy to benefit the presumed national public, with the amplification social media affords, it is possible to explore ethnographically the simultaneous

and possibly central policy from which all the touting is intended to distract.<sup>23</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Such discursive sleight of hand in economic policy has been noted by others. See Isobel Frye’s (2007) discussion of the ‘two economies’ rhetoric of the South African government as a sleight of hand distracting from ongoing racialised economic marginalisation practices.
- 2 This journal uses APA style, capitalizing White along with Black (already capitalized throughout). I have decided to follow the guidance of the National Association of Black Journalists (US) and capitalize both.
- 3 Political messaging in the 2016 US presidential election and UK’s Brexit vote was considerably amplified and polarised by social media use and the role of bots (Gorodnichenko, Pham, and Talavera 2021) and was ‘reshaped around issues largely unthreatening to the interests of economic and political elites’ (Milstein 2021).
- 4 The term ‘flex nets’ (Wedel 2011) is useful in conceptualising, more than just ‘capitalist elites’, small groups of powerful actors who rotate between state and non-state roles to promote ideological and financial projects, simultaneously using governmentality and reducing its accountability. Feldmann and Morgan (2021) have documented the increasing fragmentation of ‘the business elite’, so that, in these ‘quiet politics’ of influence, there is not a unified voice.
- 5 I draw here on Gordon’s (2008: 200) definition of haunting as ‘the tangled exchange of noisy silences and seething absences’.
- 6 Cris Shore (2021: 3) cautions against single explanations ‘that try to explain Brexit as a result of anti-European xenophobia, English exceptionalism, a fixation with borders, the triumph of fake news or demagogic populist nationalism, or imperial nostalgia’. But, it is also vital to acknowledge the connection between such policies and ongoing colonial and racist histories and White amnesia (Ali 2017: 386; Harrison 2018a: 553; Rosa and Bonilla 2017).
- 7 Definitions and applications of the term racism may vary widely and have different specific histories and valences (Mintchev 2021), but Abranches, Theuerkauf, Scott, and White (2021) document xenophobic physical violence as racist in association with the Brexit referendum, and there was also a spike in religious hate crimes (Devine 2021). Pickup et al. (2021) suggest that there may be another spike of anti-immigrant hate crimes in the UK associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 8 2019 interviews are used here from that longer project.
- 9 This was made possible by living for a year in the UK as a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at the University of Bristol in 2018/2019, and through a sabbatical grant from the University of Kentucky’s College of Arts and Sciences. In both of the ethnographic projects drawn on in this article, interviews were done with anthropological ethics review and approval in each nation, and critical discourse analysis was used with interview, archival, and media sources.
- 10 Ilc (2017) describes the contradictory epistemological frameworks mixed by the founding fathers, and Walker (2002) discusses the Black intellectuals who spoke out countering their hypocrisies.

- As Pem Buck (2019:234) put it, for those authors of the US Constitution, 'Freedom meant the right to dispossess'.
- 11 Such vigilante violence was most visibly encouraged by Trump on 6 January 2021, but strong records of deportation have been associated with the Obama and Biden administrations of the US as well as the Trump administration.
  - 12 I appreciate a reviewer's pointing out that Gilroy (2002), in a new introduction written for the Routledge Classics Edition of the book, cautioned against a simplistic or continuous reading of racialised politics in the UK, as recent immigrants, global social movements, and forms of racist exclusions have formed new constellations of relationships between racism and nationalism.
  - 13 Windrush Day, instituted in 2018, marks the docking of the ship the *Empire Windrush* in 1948, filled with Caribbean immigrants recruited to the UK as workers to fill much-needed positions after World War II. Called the 'Windrush generation', they assumed that their (colonised) British Commonwealth status and their having been invited legalised their and their descendants' immigration. But, many were threatened with deportation in 2018 in an official display of xenophobia, which led to protests and eventually a government apology.
  - 14 Trump's economic nationalism (though not that of most of his capitalist elite allies) was rhetorically isolationist while Johnson's was not (McCorrison and Sheldon 2020).
  - 15 Philip McCann and Raquel Ortega-Argilés (2021) also argue that the 'politics of discontent' propelling the Brexit vote based on regional inequities—documented as well by Osuna, Kiefel, and Katsouyanni (2021)—will be exacerbated rather than allayed by the UK's withdrawal from the EU and implementation of post-Brexit 'Levelling Up' policies, although Neal et al. (2021) remind readers to recognise in discussions of Brexit's regional divides the economic and social diversity within the rural UK that makes neither views of Brexit nor its effects uniform in marginalised zones.
  - 16 As Hickman and Ryan (2020: 96) described the power relations between them, 'Ireland is invisible to England in a way Britain/England can never be invisible to Ireland'.
  - 17 Compounding the uncertainties immigrants to the EU might suddenly feel related to family, employment, and belonging were the sudden ambiguities about relevant jurisdictional venues precipitated by the UK's leaving the EU (Merrett 2021).
  - 18 Sredanovic and Della Puppa (2021) point out that rights accessed through EU 'citizenship' differ greatly for variously positioned immigrants due to other processes of minoritisation.
  - 19 See Clarke and Newman (2019), Evans (2017), Ilc (2017), Maskovsky (2019), and Rapport (2020). Dawson and Goodwin-Hawkins (2020) argue that Brexiteers appealed to those living in the absence of former single-industry employers, which shaped social as well as economic life for those 'left behind' (Isakjee and Lorne 2020).
  - 20 Neveling, who has written extensively about the global history of special economic zones, notes that the zones are often touted as 'engines of growth' by neoliberal regimes, disregarding 'the short-lived nature of SEZ booms and the damaging effects of deindustrialisation at the end of such booms' (2020b: 191). Neveling (2021) agrees with those of us using racial capitalism as a lens for analysing FTZs that it can provide a useful perspective.
  - 21 This history has been neither seamless nor advocated by just one political pole, as Wetherell (2016) illustrates. The Enterprise Zones of Thatcher's neoliberal government, different from the free ports being reintroduced now in their void, sprang from the Non-Plan movement to free localities from government regulation. But, 'while the Non-Plan zone was tailored to optimize individual and personal freedom of expression, the enterprise zone was designed to encourage the freedom and growth of the market' (Wetherell 2016: 276). Brexiteers' free ports pick up on that latter aim, and the flex net's enrichment, and reduce local governance even further.
  - 22 Harrison (2018b) encourages 'intersectional understanding of racializing processes' as anthropologists construct critical global analyses of multiple alterities. There are shifting ways in which constellations of power work; the racial capitalist context of economic nationalism is a complex set of projects and logics.
  - 23 In the case of Brexit, Shore (in Green et al. 2016: 490) referred to this as the 'dog-whistle politics of fear' and what lies beyond them.



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