

Openings and Retrospectives

NOSTALGIC NATIONALISM: How a Discourse of Sacrificial Reproduction Helped Fuel Brexit Britain

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Two years ago my partner and I moved to a small rural English village in South Cambridgeshire, close to the Suffolk border. The parish, which dates back to the tenth century, occupies a thin stretch of land along a tributary of the river Stour. It is surrounded by some of the most productive agricultural land in Europe, farmed since Neolithic times. Paths dating back to 3000 BC cross the village green, bordered by the tiny local post office and shop, a disused phone booth, the local reading room, and a bus shelter.

During the Second World War, the village was used as a bomber airfield, and the legacy of the war remains a prominent feature of daily village life. The crumbling remains of air-raid shelters built between 1943 and 1945 dot the local woods, and the local war memorial is signposted from all the nearby main roads.

The main sign for the village is dominated by an image of a heavy bomber from World War II, and this military theme is accentuated by the low-flying military aircraft that regularly pass over the village en route from nearby Royal Air Force bases. Also nearby is the historic airfield at Duxfield, which stages regular



Figure 1. The decaying foundations of air raid shelters remain a common sight in woods near the village, which was used as a bomber base during World War II. Photo by Sarah Franklin.

air shows featuring fly-pasts of iconic World War II aircraft such as Spitfires, Hurricanes, and Lancasters. These vintage planes so regularly fly over our village that most of my neighbors know them individually by name.

The soundscape of air traffic intermingles with the hum and roar of agricultural machinery in this intensively farmed region. The parade of industrial equipment past our house sets an annual rhythm: the frantic clattering of gigantic hayracks in August is succeeded by the race to plow the fields and sow the winter crop throughout September and October. During the winter, as new green shoots of wheat, flax, barley, and sugar beet push steadily upward, the watercourses are dredged and hedgerows cut back. Winter also brings the shooting season, punctuated by the local hunts that feature charging brigades of horses surrounded by packs of braying hounds. We know spring is here when farmers spray rank-smelling fertilizer onto their crops and the ropes of bird-scaring firecrackers are lit, setting off regular, loud explosions beside the early crops to drive away voracious flocks of pigeons. Summer marks a time of long, quiet days, as the crops shoot up in the hot



Figure 2. The village sign features a mill, a farmer plowing a field, and a popular game bird (the ring-necked pheasant) beneath a dramatic image of a Lancaster bomber flying overhead.

Photo by Sarah Franklin.

sun, at first bright green, then a deep golden yellow by July's end. The agricultural cycle grinds back into gear in August when the noisy harvest season returns.

It was a wet and windy day in June of 2016. I stopped for a chat with two of my oldest neighbors while walking my dog. They were discussing the strange weather we had been having and how unpredictable it had become. This, of course, constitutes a quintessential form of British conversation: everybody talks—and generally complains—about the weather. Yet as with the tea that everyone still drinks here all the time, the minor variations—in how you take your cuppa or do weather talk—are all the more important because they form languages of individual and national belonging.

Weather talk, in short, never just concerns the weather. My neighbor William, who is in his eighties and has worked in the village as an agricultural laborer nearly all his life, is a font of weather lore. He is a living repository of extreme seasonality metrics, and can tell you in which year exactly the frost came earliest, latest, or



Figure 3. The fields of wheat planted in November have turned bright green in early summer, but by July they are golden ripe and ready for harvest. Photo by Sarah Franklin.

most frequently, as well as which crops it affected most and how many died. Much of his advice comes in the form of extreme warnings—such as his annual caution not to plant the tomatoes until at least mid-May, since he has known the last frost to come as late as that in some years.

But even William has found the weather ever more disorienting of late, as he was telling his friend George, another of the village's oldest residents, on that windy June day in the run-up to the Brexit vote. "I don't know, I just don't know," William said shaking his head. "I just don't know what to make of the weather anymore. *In all my life I've never known it quite like this.*" A man of even fewer words than William, George nodded his head sagely and stared at the ground. Since it is precisely the unpredictability of the weather that marks one of the most common themes in the quotidian ritual of British weather talk, it took me a while to realize that the weather had taken on a new symbolic role in William and George's conversation as a synecdoche for a wider sense of bewilderment that left them not only confused, but embittered. It wasn't just the weather that was bothering them. Just

below the surface of their bonding over something profound that had been lost and a sense of being lost themselves, I could feel something else. Occasionally breaking through the calm surface of their slow and measured conversation, I noticed, were the bright glints of a steely anger underneath. It was the tone more than the content of their exchange that unmistakably implied that something had not only been lost, but had been *taken away*.

In that moment I realized that some of my oldest and wisest neighbors might well vote for Brexit because of the weather.

Not because of the weather per se, in any simple sense, of course. But there is no such thing as a simple sense of the weather in England anyway. And there was no simple cause of Brexit either. The only simple thing about Brexit was the tragically brutal binarism of the mechanism that brought it about: a yes-or-no referendum.

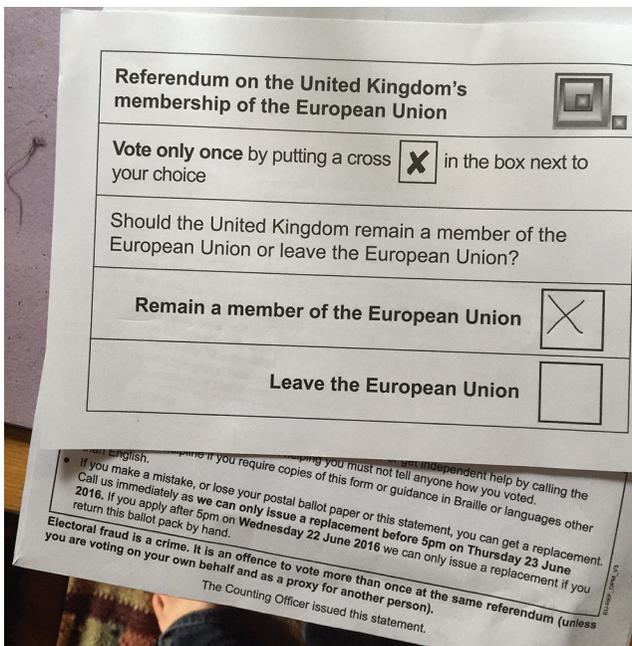


Figure 4. The referendum on membership in the European Union offered only two options: to remain or to leave. Photo by Sarah Franklin.

The vote that delivered a slim majority in favor of Leave reflected widespread feelings of loss, anger, confusion, bewilderment, and disorientation. Brexit was carried on such a great tide of lost-ness, it even encompassed the famously unpredictable British weather.

The result has been the painful fracturing of a contested, but workable consensus about the benefits of belonging to an ever more diverse and inclusive global

community. Brexit marked a rejection of this postwar consensus and a return to a different interpretation of the war as a marker of British distinctiveness and isolation. Like the concrete bunkers looming in the local woods and the familiar drone of propeller-driven bombers overhead, the old narrative that emphasizes Britain's singular triumph in the Second World War has become the new face of Brexit Britain.

Having turned its back on Europe, its largest trading partner, Britain is now facing inward—and nowhere better illustrates its newly solipsistic definition of itself than its age-old village rituals. At the summer village fetes near us, for example, a staple menu of elements attracts hundreds of visitors to the local fairgrounds. These typically include displays of vintage cars and old farming machinery sponsored by local businesses, a fairground and games area for children, a refreshments tent beside a band, stalls selling cakes and jams, a dog show, a falconry exhibit, and a sheep race.



Figure 5. The ritual activities of the rural English country village fayre are reliably reproduced every summer, with military bands playing beside tents where tea and cakes are served.

Photo by Sarah Franklin.

As [Laura Briggs \(2017\)](#) argues, we need to learn to read the reproductive grammars structuring a surge of recent populisms in which race, nation, and migration have become increasingly stark axes of social division. Research following the Brexit vote identified “a strong sense of national identity” as one of the most consistent attributes of Leave voters, more than half of whom described themselves as “very strongly English” ([Goodwin and Heath 2016](#)). Like all national identities, Englishness is defined by its specific means of reproduction, and at the village fayre, we can practice parsing these elements as a kind of rural nationalist primer.

The lessons here are those that feminist anthropologists have been teaching for years: about nature, gender, and culture; race, nation, and empire; death, sacrifice, and the social order; and the politics of genealogy. In the generic vocabulary of the village fayre, subtle but consistent hierarchies are reproduced as the order



Figure 6. Birds of prey trained to hunt on command express the intimate hierarchies of nature and culture, wild and domestic, and human and animal that define the English value system. These are the same values that inform longstanding institutions of aristocratic land ownership, agricultural stewardship, and the conventions of rural English village life.

Photo by Sarah Franklin.



Figure 7. In the sheep race at the country fayre, ewes pass as race horses carrying small teddy bear jockeys. Photo by Sarah Franklin.

of things. The falconry show demonstrates the ability to control a powerful bird of prey while celebrating its natural wildness through the shared activity of hunting.

The famously wayward sheep is similarly enrolled into an elaborate masquerade of horse-racing, in a cross-species double entendre of animal amusement.

At the dog show the blurring of boundaries between animal and human disappears completely in the award categories of Prettiest Bitch and Handsomest Dog.

Through all of these fayre activities, an ordering of value is reproduced, reliably displaying the firm foundations of Englishness, including a somewhat parodic image of itself. But while the cultured natures of birds, animals, and people become blurred, hybrid, and ironic, their proscribed relations are disciplined by a code as strict as any army's. This strict code of convention and conduct hardly surprises, given the roots of many English traditions in the imperial past.

Reproducing a tradition of local dance troupes that has seen a revival in the twentieth century, Morris dancers are a common sight at village fayres, including groups that continue to use black face paint as part of their attire, in spite of many protests against this practice. Their costumes and headgear, often explicitly imitating African dress, reproduce the legacies of British colonialism while being paradoxically defended as expressions of autochthonous rural primitivism. As Paul Gilroy (1992, 339) has argued, the entirely nonironic use of black and Commonwealth cultural markers to reproduce white English nationalism remains one of "the most volatile political forces in Britain today."

The complex integration of the English national flag—the red cross of St. George against a white background—into a Morris dancer's headdress and lapel

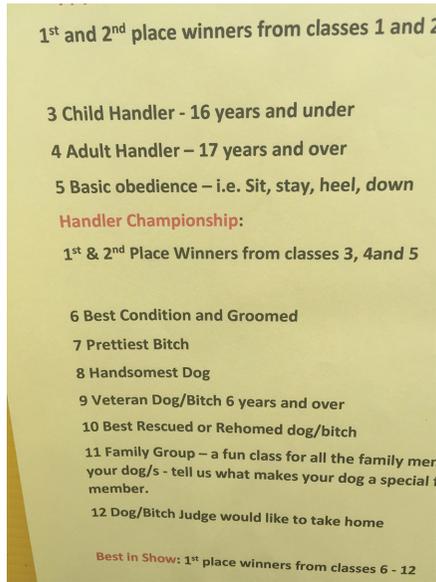


Figure 8. No English country fayre is complete without an elaborate slate of dog show competitions. Photo by Sarah Franklin.



Figure 9. Morris dancer in traditional blackface and feather headdress at the local village fayre. The extent to which blacking up is a reproduction of whiteness and white privilege becomes especially apparent in the defense of blackface as mere local history. Photo by Sarah Franklin.

pins typifies the kinds of inward-focused mixtures that are premised on the denial of external histories. Neither the complex overlaps between imperialism, Orientalism, and “blacking up,” nor the objections to this practice regularly expressed by many nonwhite British citizens, are taken into account by those Morris troupes who continue to insist on their right to reproduce what they refer to as local traditions.



Figure 10. In the popular history tent at the fayre, the lives of villagers and their ancestors are used to celebrate local connections to Britain’s colonial and military pasts.
Photo by Sarah Franklin.

History features differently in another tent at our local summer fayre, full of exhibits created by villagers and curated by members of the local parish church. Unsurprisingly, the major activity of the local history society is the tracing of historic family lineages, often foregrounding the roles that local villagers have played in Britain’s colonial and military history. In the local history tent, brochures for trips to France to visit war memorial sites confirm the extent to which national sacrifice still drums through the everyday life of the village. But if nostalgic English nationalism was always a subtext to the village fayre, the new enthusiasm for leaving Europe has greatly amplified the significance of this idiom. In the wake of Brexit, war commemoration has—almost inevitably—become the most prominent source of national celebration to fill the vacuum left by the idea of being either global citizens or European. The arrival of big-budget feature films such as *Dunkirk* and *Darkest Hour* have only reinforced the surge of Leave nostalgia.

Always a major focus of national attention, the annual ceremonies of Remembrance Day, somberly commemorating the war dead, are now more powerful than

at any time this century. Noticeably, they increasingly articulate a logic of *sacrificial reproduction* through which many Britons are once again defining themselves and their national future. This nostalgic logic from the past has garnered new significance in the face of the enormously costly act of voting to leave the European Union to take back control and save the country from ruin. Indeed, the new logic of sacrificial reproduction recombines elements familiar from war narratives, of *having had something taken away that should be given back*. Identifying this logic of sacrificial reproduction is essential, because it is not only acquisitive and retaliatory but also zero-sum: if you got something, it must have been at my expense.

The connection between narratives of wartime sacrifice and resurgent white ethnic nativisms in both the United Kingdom and Europe is the epoxy resin cementing a recommitment of lost British soldiers to a reforgetting of how British imperialism, Orientalism, and racism set the stage for the globally catastrophic losses of the two world wars. Reinforcing the exclusionary logics of what counts as national sacrifice, nostalgic white European and British nativisms are structured by logics of substitution that displace the violent legacies of enforced racial hierarchy,

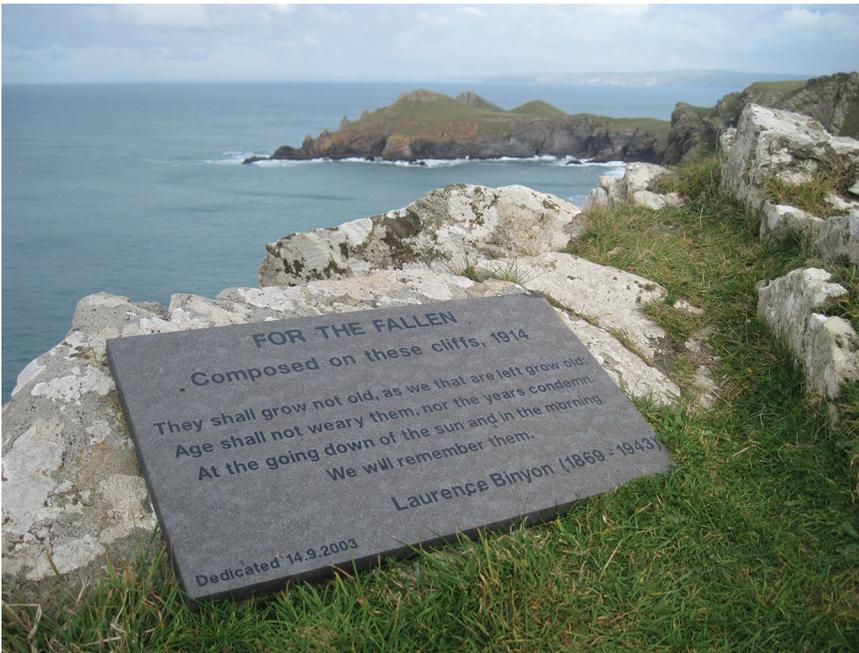


Figure 11. The intergenerational injustice of the world wars, in which the greatest sacrifices were made by the young, has ironically been repeated by the Brexit referendum, which will burden younger—mainly Remain—voters with the enormous cost imposed by their older compatriots, who were largely responsible for the Leave vote. Photo by William Bartlett,

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military subjugation, and theft of resources from colonized peoples around the globe for more than a century.

Until these legacies are remembered—and taught in schools and universities—the threat posed by injured white nationalism will remain at red-alert levels. The elegiac paean to lost soldiers penned by Laurence Binyon in his 1914 poem “For the Fallen,” which has become an internationally recognized call to remember the sacrifices of war, has today become an anthem to an injured British pride ubiquitously racialized. Parsing this sacrificial reproductive logic will prove critical in the effort to exchange for angry bewilderment a renewed popular belief in the possibility of more inclusive unions.

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