Contesting Brexit Masculinities: Pro-European Activists and Feminist EU Citizenship*

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Abstract
Although Brexit campaigns mobilized discourses of hegemonic masculinity that marginalize women, women seemed to be at the forefront of pro-EU campaigns post-referendum. I explore to what extent pro-EU activists make claims to EU citizenship that contest the masculinities of Brexit. Combining Isin’s approach to citizenship as ‘performed subject positions’ with intersectional feminist theory, I argue that masculinity became a site of EU citizenship contestation, which nevertheless reproduced racialized and class-based exclusions. Drawing on interviews with grassroots pro-EU activists, I argue that activists reject militaristic discourses of British identity by asserting multiple embodied identities, demand rights relating to the intimate sphere, and participate in informal, local and non-hierarchical ways. Yet, they reveal a white cultural European identity, a European exceptionalism in demands for rights, and a failure to break with the whiteness of traditional social movements. These findings demonstrate the need for feminist and intersectional analysis within EU public opinion research.

Keywords: Brexit; EU citizenship; masculinity; feminist theory; social movements

Introduction
In this article I explore the contestation of Brexit masculinities amongst grassroots pro-EU activists. Through an intersectional feminist approach to EU citizenship and a critical feminist methodology, I build upon the growing body of work on gender in EU studies. Feminist scholars have already established the presence of hegemonic masculinity in the 2016 Leave campaigns (e.g. Achilleos-Sarll and Martill, 2019; Higgins, 2020) and Eurosceptic parties more generally (Daddow & Hertner, 2019). Yet, we know very little about masculinity in pro-European campaigns. Hegemonic masculinity as defined by R.W. Connell ‘embodies the currently most respected/honoured way of what it means to be a man’ and is central to upholding the patriarchal order (Connell, 1998, p. 5; Slootmaeckers, 2019, p. 8). The Leave campaigns utilized militaristic language that glorified war as well as ‘tough-talking’ rhetoric of the ‘businessman’s world’ (Slootmaeckers, 2019, p. 23). Constructing Brexit around acceptable notions of the white ‘masculine’ citizen – rational, individualist, aggressive – the campaigns focused primarily on issues of ‘high politics’ – security, economy and immigration – that are traditionally associated with the public sphere (Guerrina et al., 2018a, 2018b).

Such discourses result in exclusions of people deemed ‘other’ – women, immigrants, people of colour, LGBTQ people – from public life (Hozić and True, 2017). They bolster

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gendered hierarchies and racial and class-based exclusions (Achilleos-Sarll and Martill, 2019, p. 32). Rooted in justifications for European colonialism that rest upon the juxtaposition of ‘rational man/irrational woman’ (Connell, 1998, p. 14), these masculinities are, in the British context, associated with the upper-class ‘English gentleman’ who was considered to possess a superior aptitude for self-restraint and thus inherently suited to rule (Gopinath, 2013, p. 28). Despite EU policy-making increasingly extending into the private sphere through, for example, gender equality, social and family policies (Walby, 2004), such issues – those that typically motivate women to participate in politics – were excluded from the public debate (Guerrina et al., 2018a). Qualities typically associated with femininity – care, empathy, dialogue – were derided (Achilleos-Sarll and Martill, 2019, p. 16), and the impact on the most marginalized – migrant and minority women – was overlooked (Hozic & True, 2017, p. 276; Solanke, 2020). As such, the referendum according to Roberta Guerrina et al. failed as a ‘citizenship moment’ for women (Guerrina et al., 2018a, p. 391).

Despite this knowledge of anti-EU campaigns, little is known about the gendered dynamics of the pro-EU movements. As Connell notes, hegemonic masculinities emerge through contestation and can be reconstructed (Connell, 1998, p. 6). While it eschewed the most militaristic metaphors of the Leave campaigns, the official Remain campaign – Stronger In – nevertheless reproduced gendered binaries by prioritizing economic frames (Guerrina et al., 2018a). Although the campaign marginalized the issues that typically mobilize women, women seemed to play a central role in anti-Brexit mobilization following the vote. The businesswoman and campaigner Gina Miller fought a landmark case against the government on the right of Parliament to trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. Several (white) women MPs were at the forefront of the parliamentary campaign for a People’s Vote, including former Labour MP Luciana Berger, former Conservative MPs Anna Soubry and Sarah Wollaston,¹ and Labour MP Jess Phillips. Commentators have drawn attention to the white, middle-class nature of pro-EU protests, despite the likely disproportionate impact of Brexit on people – and especially women – of colour (Frazer-Carroll, 2019, see also Solanke, 2020). While the grassroots campaigns have been explored as ‘acts of citizenship’ (Brändle et al., 2018; Seubert, 2021), they have however not been interrogated as gendered or racialized citizenship practice.

This article is the first to analyse the role of masculinity in pro-European activism. I apply an intersectional feminist lens to understand Birmingham-based grassroots activists’ motivations and strategies in opposing Brexit. Combining Engin Isin’s conception of citizenship as ‘performed subject positions’ (Isin, 2013) with feminist citizenship theory, I argue that during Brexit masculinity became a site of struggle at the European level. Citizenship as subjectivity moves away from citizenship conceptualized through binary categories (such as citizen/migrant and public/private) and starts from the perspective of people who do citizenship who may not otherwise be heard. I thus take up Aida A. Hozić and Jacqui True’s call for critical feminist analysis that unpacks the binaries of ‘global and local, private and public, bottom up and top down – without getting entrapped by institutions of global or national governance’ (2017, p. 281).

¹Luciana Berger, Anna Soubry and Sarah Wollaston left their former parties and founded the pro-European Independent Group, later Change UK, in February 2019. Sarah Wollaston joined the Liberal Democrats later that year.
I find that activists reject the militaristic discourse of British national identity, relate EU citizenship not just to the free movement of labour but to wider intimate citizenship rights, and mobilize in informal and non-hierarchical ways not usually acknowledged as part of masculine citizenship practice. Yet, they nevertheless reproduce the racialized exclusions embedded within Brexit’s white masculinity through ideas about European exceptionalism and an ‘unmarked and unnamed’ whiteness in their practices (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1). In the following, I outline my contribution to EU studies in offering a deeper understanding of gendered engagement with the EU. I then introduce my theoretical and methodological framework.

I. EU Studies, Citizenship and Gender

While feminist citizenship scholars note the historical exclusion of women from citizenship (e.g. Lister, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2007; Volpp, 2017), there are few feminist studies of EU citizenship specifically; Iyola Solanke’s intersectional analysis of EU citizenship law and Brexit’s impact on Black women and children (Solanke, 2020) is one notable exception. This gap can be traced back to a broader gender-blindness within EU studies. Roberta Guerrina et al. (2018b, p. 253) argue that the academic discipline of EU studies integrates biases into our very understanding of the EU, which reproduces gendered hierarchies. Intersectional feminist analysis can, however, according to Muireann O’Dwyer, help to identify ‘who and what is normalised and defined as the default’ (O’Dwyer, 2018, p. 409). The gender blindness or ‘malestream’ (Abels and Mushaben, 2012) within EU citizenship literature makes those outside the ‘default’ – the white male citizen – invisible. Early theorizing of EU citizenship reproduced the public/private binary, proclaimed to be ‘appealing to the rational within us’ in its separation of post-national rights from identity (Weiler, 1999, p. 347; see also Habermas, 1992).

Such approaches assume all genders engage with the EU in the same way. While citizenship traditionally prioritizes formal practices that connect the individual with the state (Bosniak, 2000, p. 476), women are more likely to be excluded from these formal arenas, especially in traditionally masculine domains such as international politics (Lovenduski, 2005, p. 53). Women were indeed more likely to discuss the Brexit referendum in the private sphere, while men typically discussed the referendum at work (Guerrina et al., 2018a). Despite this, work on feminist, sexual or queer citizenship in Europe to date has been located in citizenship studies rather than EU studies per se and primarily focuses on the EU as a site for claiming women’s or sexual rights (Stychin, 2001; Kanci et al., 2010; Krūma and Indāns, 2013). This literature does not, however, explore gendered practices of EU citizenship more broadly. As such, we have an incomplete understanding of the ‘political relevance of gender’ (McEwan, 2005) in EU citizenship.

To remedy this, there is also a greater need to understand EU citizenship outside the context of migration. This would capture gendered EU citizenship practice beyond the dichotomy of citizens/migrants and allow more marginalized voices to be heard. To do this, we need a ‘new vocabulary of citizenship’ (Isin, 2009). As Nora Siklodi notes, formal EU citizenship is a ‘market citizenship’ which places the political and economic rights associated with labour migration at its heart (Siklodi, 2014, p. 132). Scholarship on EU citizenship has focused on the exercise of freedom of movement rights, with scholars
focusing on the experiences of mostly privileged EU mobiles (e.g. Favell, 2008), as well as historically marginalized ‘mobile’ minorities such as Roma or sex workers (e.g. Aradau et al., 2010). Scholars have also investigated the implications of EU citizenship on migrants’ social rights and discriminatory practices by authorities (e.g. Spencer and Price, 2014).

Most recently, EU scholars have addressed ways of ensuring EU citizenship rights primarily for those directly affected by the UK’s withdrawal – EU-27 nationals in the UK and British citizens in the EU-27 (see e.g. Kostakopoulou, 2018; van den Brink and Kochenov, 2019). Yet, as Ludivine Damay and Heidi Mercenier argue, conflating EU citizenship with free movement both ignores ‘EU citizens’ complex realities’ and implies that the “‘stayers” are not European citizens’ (Damay and Mercenier, 2016, p. 1153). Furthermore, women are less likely to exercise freedom of movement rights (Eurobarometer 79.2, 2013) and, when they do, often struggle to evidence the status of a citizen-worker when employed in low-paid work and unpaid care – as demonstrated by Brexit (Shutes and Walker, 2018, p. 149). While studies such as Isabel Shutes and Sarah Walker’s are crucial for exploring gendered implications of EU free movement, extending our conception of EU citizenship beyond migration allows us to explore gendered engagement with the EU also amongst non-mobile populations.

II. Citizenship as Subjectivity through an Intersectional Feminist Lens

An intersectional feminist approach to EU citizenship has several key elements: first, citizenship as subjectivity; second, sites and scales instead of public/private; and third, intersectionality. Firstly, I consider EU citizenship not a question of rights or formal membership but as ‘performed subject positions’ (Isin, 2013, p. 26). Following Engin Isin, people constitute themselves as EU/European citizens independent of legal status by ‘enacting’ their political subjectivity through acts of citizenship. This means that people who are not legally EU citizens (such as, for example, Turkish citizens engaged in European activism) can nevertheless constitute themselves as such through claims to rights and representation. In the case of Brexit, pro-EU activism involves acts of citizenship in which people – faced with losing their formal EU citizenship – constitute themselves as EU citizens through claims about injustice (Brändle et al., 2018). From a feminist perspective, a focus on agency has the effect of ‘recasting women as active citizens’ (Lister, 2003, p. 38). It is this agency which is integral to one’s political subjectivity as a citizen – acting as a citizen ‘requires first a sense of agency, the belief that one can act; acting as a citizen, especially collectively, in turn fosters that sense of agency’ (Lister, 2003, p. 39). In terms of EU citizenship, such an approach conceptualizes women as active participants in the European integration project rather than simply objects of EU law.

Secondly, I start with the dynamic notions of ‘sites’ and ‘scales’ of citizenship instead of the traditional binary of public/private. Citizenship as subjectivity involves a process of contestation, struggle, negotiation, and identification in relation to others. This takes place through sites – not solely physical spaces but ‘fields of contestation’ (Isin, 2009, p. 370) – and scales – the spatial scope of the contestation (Isin, 2013, p. 27) that form acts. Hegemonic masculinity emerges through these processes of contestation; masculinities are not ‘fixed categories’ but are shaped through social relations (Connell, 2005, p. 37–8). As Kathleen Jones notes, traditional definitions of citizenship have helped to
‘demarcate the “masculine” from the “feminine”, marking off the boundaries of the public domain from the private domains of economics, sexuality, intimacy, and kinship’ (Jones, 1994, p. 265). The public sphere thus shapes a hegemonic (white) masculinity through the individualist ‘bourgeois rational actor’ (Hooper, 2000, p. 35) whose decisions are assumed to be underpinned by reason rather than emotions (Volpp, 2017, p. 157). Central to an act of citizenship, however, is the idea of rupture, in which people ‘break away’ from the existing script (Isin, 2013, p. 24). Using acts of citizenship makes visible claims to rights and representation that challenge these dominant binary categories. Conceptualizing EU citizenship as acts means that instead of imposing a priori meanings we can explore contestation or subversion of the national scale of citizenship as well as hegemonic masculinity as a site of (EU) citizenship.

Thirdly, I highlight the embodied nature of the citizen through intersectionality. Originating in Black feminist thought, intersectionality highlights the multiple oppressions faced by Black women through both gender and race (Crenshaw, 1989; Hill Collins, 2015). Applied to Brexit, such analysis highlights how race, class and gender shape people’s connections to the nation and Europe, highlighting ‘commitments to multiple, intersecting communities’ (Mookherjee, 2005, p. 37). Race, gender and class – and national and European identities – are therefore not separate, pre-existing categories but instead ‘come into existence in and through relation to each other – if in contradictory and conflictual ways’ (McCintock, 1995, p. 5). These identities reflect intersecting structures of power inherent to citizenship; unpacking them can help to understand how citizenship ‘can be both domination and empowerment separately or simultaneously’ (Isin, 2009, p. 369).

In this sense, hegemonic masculinity is ‘fundamentally linked to power’ (Connell, 2005, p. 42), structured as a white and upper or middle-class position. Intersectional analysis is, therefore, not limited to the study of minoritized individuals; rather, as Inderpal Grewal observes, ‘everybody is intersectional, but what that intersection is is different’ (in Roy, 2017, p. 258). In her analysis of white women’s lives, Ruth Frankenberg finds that ‘whiteness and Westernness’ were integral to white women’s self-understanding (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 17). For Frankenberg, whiteness is simultaneously a ‘location of structural advantage, of race privilege’, a ““standpoint”, a place from which white people look at ourselves, at others, and at society’, and a ‘set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed’ (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1). While intersectionality has traditionally been used to understand the complexities of social inequality (Hill Collins, 2015), through the study of whiteness it can also unpack layers of relative racial and gendered privilege.

Through the case of pro-EU activism, I show how masculinity became a site of struggle in EU citizenship, and how it was classed, racialized and embedded in European colonial histories. In this way, we can explore the question of ‘who speaks for whom’ in claims to EU citizenship (Isin and Saward, 2013, p. 13), a question which applies not just to research subjects, but also to the researcher.

III. Pro-EU Activism and Feminist Methodology

This article draws on findings from in-depth semi-structured interviews with eleven core activists in one of the many grassroots pro-EU groups that were set up across the UK
post-referendum, this one in Birmingham. The UK’s second city located in the West Midlands, Birmingham’s referendum result broadly mirrored the narrow national vote. These local groups, many of them originally under the banner of the national umbrella organization Britain for Europe, are distinct from – although in some cases have links to – groups associated with the long-running organization European Movement. They are also separate from local political parties, although individual activists often have links with them. Membership is fluid, with little formal structure, and activists tend to float in and out of active participation.

Participants were recruited via an email to the group’s committee email list, with the group convenors’ permission. The interviews took place in spring 2019 and each lasted between 1 h. 15 min. and 1 h. 30 min. All my interviewees were white (there were no people of colour active within the group), including five men and six women. The majority were British-born, while three were born in the EU-27 and had lived in the UK for many years. Although some activists belonged to other marginalized groups, most were highly educated and worked in or had retired from middle-class professions. The demographic make-up of the group broadly reflected that observed in the wider pro-European movement (Frazer-Carroll, 2019). Some interview questions explicitly asked about identity, citizenship, or gender, and some did not, to harness people’s spontaneous motivations and underlying beliefs. Rather than adhering rigidly to the prepared questions, I used them primarily as a guide and allowed participants’ responses to guide the conversation.

The interview transcripts were coded using qualitative data analysis software QSR NVivo. I began with broad theoretical themes drawn from the literature outlined above – identity, rights and participation, while the remaining subcodes were developed deductively through close reading of the material. In line with the theoretical rejection of binary categories, text could be assigned to multiple codes to capture key relational dimensions. Following a first round of coding, I initiated a second full reading of the transcripts to refine the coding and ensure consistency. I then conducted a final review of each subcode. This iterative analytical process allowed for a rigorous, reflexive analysis of the data.

I adopt a critical feminist epistemological position based upon the objective of transforming rather than explaining social dynamics (Ackerly and True, 2010b, p. 2). I utilize the notion of ‘strong objectivity’ within feminist standpoint theory, which calls for critical examination of the values and power dynamics underpinning research (Harding, 1991). Reflexivity is particularly important in intersectional feminism, which can be employed ‘by any (feminist) scholar willing to use her own social location […] as an analytic resource’ (Davis, 2008, p. 72). As a white British citizen who was, at the time, exercising her EU citizenship rights working in Denmark, I felt the result of the UK’s referendum on EU membership deeply. Claiming a ‘neutral’ position in the study of anti-Brexit campaigns would be impossible because of the importance of EU citizenship to my life and because I have personally been involved in pro-EU activism.

Having returned to the UK in 2017, I felt that my EU citizenship rights were being removed without my consent – promised only for those currently exercising freedom of movement (see Solanke, 2020 for the implications of this for Black British children of Zambrano carers). I started attending meetings of the local group in Birmingham, attended anti-Brexit marches, and helped on street stalls. Feminist research has historically had a close relationship with social movements (Ackerly and True, 2010a, p. 465) and it was because of this engagement in the group that I became interested in
pro-EU activism from a feminist perspective: firstly, having noted the ways in which the
loss of EU citizenship was being experienced on a personal level, and secondly, having
observed that many of the most active members of the group were women, often
mobilizing politically for the first time. I only later realised that I had failed to notice
whiteness in my own motivations and within the wider movement.

My prior involvement however raised the issue of remaining critical when researching
activists whom I know and with whom I sympathize. To ensure I meet my academic
responsibility to critique, I aim to act as a ‘critical friend’ that can challenge assumptions
constructively (Chappell and Mackay, 2020). As a white academic conducting research
involving primarily white activists, I risk amplifying voices that are already privileged,
further marginalizing people of colour in relation to Brexit and EU citizenship. There
are few studies of EU attitudes that disaggregate based on race and even fewer that
explicitly amplify the voices and experiences of people of colour (with the notable
exception of Benson and Lewis, 2019). Yet, this also offers an opportunity to consider
why the movement has failed to engage a more diverse group of people. As I will
demonstrate, whiteness was embedded in activists’ conceptions of Europe, the analysis
of which has necessitated unpacking the whiteness and unconscious bias embedded in
my own European identity.

My connection with the group also complicated the already complex power dynamics
associated with interviews (Shepherd, 2017). One concern related to the issue of informed
consent. I was explicit that there was no obligation to participate and provided an
information sheet detailing the nature of their participation. Another concern was ano-
mymity, as participants revealed details about themselves that would identify them to other
members. In addition to anonymizing transcripts, I removed identifying details where this
would not affect the overall findings. Regarding relevant personal details, I also shared
with participants their transcript and checked for details they were comfortable revealing.
In the process of writing, I realised, however, that quotes from interviews could be pieced
together via interview codes in ways that might identify individuals. Removing obvious
identifiers cannot prevent the continued presence of ‘contextual identifiers in individuals’
life stories’ that facilitate ‘deductive disclosure’ (Kaiser, 2009, p. 1635). To address this, I
have therefore paraphrased some data by building it into the narrative and made a
conscious decision not to cite excerpts with a code. I cite or summarise data from all
eleven individuals interviewed and provide quotes illustrative of the identified themes. I
intend that my rigorous reflective methodology instead generates sufficient confidence
in my analysis.

Finally, feminist methodology also emphasizes the contingent nature of social science
data. As Nicola J. Smith argues, acknowledging the partiality and incompleteness of ac-
ademic research does not forgo academic rigour, but rather ‘to embrace specificity can
be an act of politicization’ in feminist research (Smith, 2020, p. 8). The rich data obtained
provides a detailed snapshot into the practices of core activists and is intended to demon-
strate the added value of a feminist approach to EU citizenship – to be used therefore in
the process of theory-building and in highlighting the gendered silences embedded within
EU citizenship literature (Ackerly and True, 2010a, p. 465). Indeed, findings will show
that EU citizenship is experienced in deeply private and local ways and intimately linked
to people’s personal circumstances and histories. To conduct such research in such a way
as to be representative of the whole movement or Remain population would be
impossible. In the following sections, I present my findings in relation to three key themes: identities, rights, and participation.

IV. From Exclusive to Multiple Identities

Citizenship as subjectivity involves struggles over identity, negotiations over ‘who belongs’ as well as who is ‘outside’ (Isin, 2013, p. 28). I find that pro-EU activists ‘break’ from dominant militaristic constructions of exclusive national identity and shift the scale of belonging to the European level. In claiming European identities, they contest the masculinities embedded within these conceptions of the nation. At the same time, they reproduce racialized exclusions of masculinity through white notions of Europeanness.

Many participants highlighted their embodied multiple identities and rejected an exclusive and singular national identity. Dominant discourses of national identity have constructed the British or English as an ‘island people that stood alone against a succession of (European) enemies’ (Gamble, 2003, p. 109). Firstly, this discourse of Europe as the enemy is dependent on a construction of Britain as a separate, non-European ‘land apart’ (Gamble, 2003, p. 111). Activists strongly contest this. One participant challenged the idea that being British is mutually exclusive with being European, ‘just because you like the fact of being in Europe doesn’t make you any less British [...] you can be a Brit AND you can be European’. Some also included their substate or local identities too, such as an activist originally from Wales who says, ‘I consider myself Welsh, I consider myself British, and I consider myself European’. Yet, some interviewees expressed not just multiple territorial identities but also brought European identity into connection with other identities they hold, as one states, ‘I’m Jewish, I’m gay, I see the benefits of Europe, I’m fully European’. Some activists reject nationalism altogether, claiming cosmopolitan identities as ‘citizens of the world’.

Secondly, by claiming multiple identities that included the European ‘Other’, activists destabilised the militaristic discourse of national identity that mobilizes ‘collective action against the machinations of an enemy EU’ (Higgins, 2020, p. 100) instead of European cooperation and peace. In Brexit campaigns, Michael Higgins finds, pro-Brexit ‘men of war’ feminized support for Europe (Higgins, 2020, p. 102). Activists transformed this into their positive European identity: one interviewee explicitly connected Brexit nostalgia with masculinity, suggesting that ‘you tend to think of it as more of a male kind of like, we won type, we won the war, that macho, militaristic thing’, while another suggested that they encounter more women Remainers who ‘must see something in the EU, in that community spirit maybe’. Many activists emphasized the importance of the EU for peace, for example, one participant places his motivation for voting for EEC membership in 1975 in the post-war and Cold War context, ‘why wouldn’t we want to be united with some other people with a joint vision to work together?’ Some mention their family experiences of the war or own personal experiences travelling in European countries under dictatorship. As such, in claiming European identities they place themselves in opposition to the ‘military men’ of Brexit (Higgins, 2020).

Thirdly, however, in contesting masculine national identity activists nevertheless reproduce the ‘unmarked and unnamed’ whiteness within the EU’s peace narrative which involves a collective forgetting of European colonial conflicts (Hansen, 2002). As Peo Hansen notes, European elites have failed to acknowledge member states’ colonial...
histories, resulting in discourses of national and European identity ‘built on imperial pride, racial superiority and the sense of partaking in a communal European civilizing mission’ (Hansen, 2002, p. 494). The cosmopolitanism and European identities expressed by activists prioritize the ‘diversity between states and not the diversity within states’ that has developed in Europe through colonialism (Bhambra, 2015, p. 192). Although some activists describe international environments that also include non-EU citizens, Europeanness for most activists relates to a love of national languages, cultures and travel between EU member states. Few activists explicitly mention multicultural diversity within European states. An exception is an activist conscious of ethnic and racial divisions in Birmingham. Arguing that Birmingham had become a more open city, he notes that ‘I still think that we’re a modern European city now instead of a grummy old industrial city that we used to be’. In this sense, he connects the multicultural city to European modernity.

Whiteness in activists’ European identity can partly be explained by the fact that it is not an explicitly political EU identity — indeed, some participants say that they were not very aware of the EU in a political sense until the referendum. For some, it rests on a cultural sense of Europeanness that reproduces discourses of European exceptionalism and constructs Europe as inherently white and neocolonial (Ammaturo, 2018, p. 3). For example, when asked what Europeans have in common, one participant explains

I think we are different in a way from people who are, sort of tribal, say, living in Africa, or people who are so far away from us that they are very different, maybe the Far East. But people from Europe, we are not all that different from each other, I do not think, in terms of our values, the way we have always done things, the way we treat men and women and the culture […] And I guess with all the invasions in medieval times and stuff, we all kind of come from the same batch of people’.

Participants explicitly reject British exceptionalism, racism and what they perceive as a loss of British values of ‘openness, welcoming nature, tolerance, fairness’, a view that Michaela Benson and Chantelle Lewis describe as the ‘normative whiteness of Britishness’ that contrasts with the lifelong experiences of racism for British people of colour (Benson and Lewis, 2019, p. 2212). Yet, there also is a ‘normative whiteness of Europeanness’ underlying the above reference to gender equality and references to the EU as the ‘the current bastion of Western enlightened social values’. Sometimes there is an explicit civilizing narrative: one participant worried what impact a declining NHS would have on ‘our message to Zambia, or Congo or somewhere like that?’ in providing a ‘model’ of a successful public health service. This European exceptionalism therefore reveals the exclusions and domination embedded in activists’ political subjectivity that also becomes visible in participants’ claims to EU citizenship rights.

V. From the Economic to the Intimate Sphere of Rights

Acts of citizenship involve claims to rights at particular sites of struggle (Isin, 2009). Activists contest the location of EU citizenship within the masculine space of the market, although they stop short of opposing the overarching racialized capitalist order. This latter finding likely stems from the activists’ primarily middle-class positions. On the one hand, socio-economic rights that are intended to support economic market integration (Stychin, 2001, p. 292) are a primary concern for activists, who place the loss of EU
protections in the context of neoliberalism and Conservative-led austerity. The EU is constructed as a symbol of ‘caring capitalism’ and juxtaposed against the perceived cruelty of neoliberalism. One participant mentioned staunchly pro-Brexit Conservative MP Jacob Rees-Mogg, musing that ‘if he had his way, children would be going up the chimneys and down the mines’. Comparing the US and Europe, the same participant explained that ‘you’ve got caring and nurturing and you’ve got authoritarian and capitalism’, placing Europe in the middle. The EU is perceived as a way to re-correct inequality, as a protector through laws on, for example, clean beaches, which another interviewee considered to be ‘things the EU are doing to help us, to protect us’. While some interviewees did not think Brexit affected them differently as women, others, however, felt that ‘it’s ultimately worse for women, it’s an equality thing’. According a role for the EU in market-related rights, the calls for ‘caring capitalism’ show an idealising of the EU as a (white) protective force.

On the other hand, activists also bring EU rights into the intimate sphere, perceiving freedom of movement as the right to home, family, and love rather than labour migration. These claims are nevertheless shaped by the ‘structural advantages’ of class and race privilege (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 1). One activist from an EU-27 country worries about obtaining settled status and the potential impact on her child if refused, as it ‘would mean the whole family would have to go’. Another participant who met her husband while working on an EU-related project, which she explained was a common experience, noted the proliferation of ‘Erasmus babies’ – babies born to parents who met through Erasmus. Another participant expresses her support for EU-27 citizens, ‘because as you deserve to be with your soulmates, so do these people, my EU brothers and sisters’. Others make claims to free movement that reveal their middle-class status, for example, to fulfil ‘our dream to go and live in France and be part of the French culture’. The intimate sphere thus becomes a site of struggle for EU freedom of movement rights. This is however a rose-tinted view of free movement that is shaped by class privilege and overlooks the limitations imposed on the travel of non-white and non-heterosexual bodies.

Claims to EU citizenship rights are mostly relational and exclusive of non-white and non-European Others. One participant objects to having to apply for visas as ‘it means that we’re like China and we’ve got to apply […] to go to France’. Another participant explains her feelings about settled status for those who have spent their lives in Britain, ‘it’s all very well waiving the bloody £60 fee, it’s about making them feel like they’re second-class citizens’. While one or two participants mention the wider UK immigration law context and their fears of another Windrush scandal, there is little acknowledgement of non-EU citizens’ experiences which involve not just thousands of pounds in visa fees but brutal detention centres and deportations. Activists also imagine EU migrants as white, for example, noting that ‘there’s just gonna be more immigration coming from India or China, so they’re not going to be happy are they?’ As such, contesting the masculine site of the market as the domain of EU citizenship rights nevertheless reproduces the white exceptionalism inherent to these rights.

Claims to intimate citizenship rights at a European scale also extend beyond freedom of movement. For example, the rational/emotional divide has traditionally served to exclude LGBTQ people from full citizenship rights ‘on account of their presumed subjection to their desires’ (Stychin, 2001, p. 288). In response to the EU’s promotion of LGBTQ rights, populist radical right movements have constructed an EU identity based on conservative
family values (Slootmaeckers, 2020, p. 12, Krūma and Indāns, 2013). In the UK, voting leave was associated with opposition to feminism, social liberalism, and LGBT rights (Ashcroft, 2016). Some activists connect Brexit with populist radical-right leaders elsewhere, particularly former US President Donald Trump. One participant links his pro-EU activism to his previous LGBTQ-rights activism, stating that ‘I used to wave a rainbow flag everywhere, but now it’s an EU flag’. He sees Brexit as part of a backlash, ‘Pride has become a celebration of what we’ve got, and I don’t want to lose our rights’. Another interviewee considered his current campaigning in connection with his participation in the early gay rights movement, later worrying that ‘we’re going to turn the clock back 40 years in a few weeks maybe aren’t we?’. Another activist explained that the very first protest she went on was one of the anti-Trump women’s marches. She believes that traditionalists like Mogg are probably going to try and limit things like birth control like Trump is trying to do, professional women’s rights in the workplace, LGBTQ rights, ok fine we are going to annul marriages, turn the clock back for civil rights, look what Trump has been doing, taking it out on transgender people’.

Another participant related Brexit to the homophobia and transphobia he had witnessed in the workplace and observed that ‘there’s this underlying anti-PC culture that’s going on underground somewhere […] it’s not even pro-EU/anti-EU is it, the right-wing nutcases are on the one side and it’s everybody else’. These findings confirm Koen Slootmaeckers’ argument that LGBTQ rights have become an ‘identity marker’ for the EU (Slootmaeckers, 2020, p. 8).

The association between the EU and the protection of individual rights does, however, risk reproducing a racialized civilizing narrative, for example, one participant connects contemporary battles over LGBTQ-inclusive education in Birmingham to post-war migration. The concern about professional women’s rights also reveals a white middle-class feminism typical of the anti-Trump women’s marches (Emejulu, 2018, p. 270). This whiteness also comes to the fore in activists’ approaches to political participation.

**Beyond Traditional Politics: Emotions, Consensus and Creativity**

Citizenship as subjectivity comes into being through ‘acts’ that break with the ‘habitual’ (Isin, 2009). The public/private divide results in dominant understandings of what constitutes political participation. Some activists follow the script of traditional political participation, by engaging with formal (white masculine) political spaces through political party membership or contact with their MPs. Yet, there are also elements of rupture, of trying to do politics differently (Isin, 2013, p. 25). Activists call for more authenticity and emotions in politics, contesting what they describe as a culture of self-interest and dishonesty. Some activists explicitly connect Brexit to traditional forms of masculinity. One woman interviewee describes Jacob Rees-Mogg as the ‘Victorian British gentleman’ and juxtaposes him with the

21st century British gentleman [...] somebody who can cry, be much more in tune with nature, with the environment, with people, a good communicator, somebody who listens, not somebody who thinks it’s their sort of purpose to just be macho and just be all blokish and never show their emotion.
In contrast, almost all mention white women MPs they trust to fight Brexit, mostly Jess Phillips and Anna Soubry. The same activist describes Phillips as someone who cares more about doing the right thing than keeping her seat, explaining that ‘maybe it’s because she’s a local gal and I can really relate to that, but she just puts it very straightforwardly, very emotionally’. Activists also express discontent with the national pro-EU campaigns which are criticised for not being ‘emotional enough’ or not adopting a pure ‘we love the EU’ message. Activists thus do not just contest the neoliberal, rational masculinity of ‘deal-making’ in Leave campaigns but also the rational, economic frames of the elite pro-EU movements (Guerrina et al., 2018a).

Activists do not, however, address or contest the whiteness of traditional social movements (Emejulu and Bassel, 2015). Activists reject what they describe as the ‘nastiness’ – racism and abusiveness in public discourse – that they believe Brexit has facilitated. Most of the women interviewees described being labelled ‘traitors’, one even describing a physical assault, but also demonstrated resilience. Several participants mentioned an activist who pursued and jumped on a male Leave supporter who had taken their EU flag. That activist explained that ‘you can’t let it get you down permanently because it won’t change if you don’t make it change’. All those who experienced street abuse nevertheless benefit from white privilege in that the abuse they face is not racialized. Two mentioned that there are often ‘racist undertones’ to the angry tirades they witness, and fear of abuse also intersects with other marginalizations. Nevertheless, activists are comforted by the presence of police, as one explained, ‘the police are on our side, they know that the Remain side usually is the peaceful one’. While white EU-27 citizens are understandably anxious about the xenophobic climate, they also benefit from the ability to hide their ‘Otherness’ in public, as one noted, ‘I’m hiding behind my accent, they cannot work out where I’m from’. Activists resist this toxic form of masculinity, but they are aided by their privilege as white activists.

Within the group, they see themselves as pursuing a different style of politics that is more consensual and inclusive than traditional politics which is seen as hierarchical or conflictual. This objective can be interpreted as a response to the political context of Brexit, in which hyper-masculine leadership styles dominate. While some activists express a need for a clearer leadership structure, many activists praise the group’s grassroots and consensus-based decision-making, contrasted with the national umbrella group’s ‘top-down model’. One woman activist states that ‘I’m not a leader, not by nature […] there are many other voices who deserve to be heard much more’. Another participant notes that women have become the ‘backbone’ of the group, as, unlike male-dominated political parties, ‘there is no precedent in such a new group for men to have certain roles or established way of doing things […] it’s more about who has the skills to organize it’.

A couple of activists are aware that the group is all white. While one interviewee had endeavoured to engage people of colour in his local area, he explains the group’s whiteness primarily resulting from “problems” within Birmingham’s diverse communities, such as a general disengagement with politics, a lack of language skills, or women being kept in the home. Thus, the lack of ethnic diversity is understood as a problem lying with those constructed as immigrant ‘Others’, rather than resulting from racial exclusions embedded within the pro-European movement. This speaks to Akwugo Emejulu and Leah Bassel’s finding that minority women are excluded from political organization except when they are cast in the victim role (Emejulu and Bassel, 2015, p. 90).
Feminist citizenship scholars argue that concepts of active citizenship have to ‘embody a broad notion of ‘the political’ (Lister, 2003, p. 29). It is important to recognize the community level, where women are more likely to participate (Jones, 1994, p. 266; Lister, 2003, p. 28). EU citizenship is commonly understood as the act of moving across borders, while political participation is conceptualized at the EU or transnational level. I find however that, while the scale of identity and claims to rights is shifted from the national to the EU level, the scale of acts becomes local, or even within the home. Campaign activity was not purely ‘local’ in that it took place outside London, rather, activists have also embedded themselves in their local neighbourhoods. They considered this important for engaging with people on a personal level because, as one interviewee noted, it shows them that ‘we care enough to be on the street, inform them, in a calm and collected manner, in a very safe environment’. She suspects her voice would not be heard in city-wide meetings, feeling safer contributing in her own way through running a blog and organizing meetings in her home for local community members. Others engage in online activism at home; one explains that, because her job prevented her from participating in many activities, ‘I call myself a keyboard warrior’, sharing information with friends on social media.

Many activists therefore also participate in informal ways beyond traditional campaigning activities. Such practices contribute to empowering those normally ignored in institutional citizenship spaces (McEwan, 2005, pp. 979–80). One activist explained that she mostly contributed creative ideas for campaign actions, describing a time when she practiced the social-media-organized #ShineALight4Europe initiative by lighting tealights outside a pub. She explained that young people came to join her and signed up for the upcoming march. Another activist had sewn his own ‘beautiful’ EU flag, had his own leaflets printed, and constructed his own banner, spending many hours in Birmingham city centre for pro-EU visibility. Such practices involve claiming local spaces in their expression of European identity in creative ways. Finally, several interviewees, primarily but not exclusively women, often describe their role in terms of supporting activities behind the scenes. As one male member of the group explained, ‘I would never lead the march, but I’d help to make it happen’.

While these activists are expanding the traditional understanding of citizenship practice, most interviewees were not simultaneously engaged in the radical anti-austerity movements that have also been dominant in Birmingham in recent years, nor building radical spaces of solidarity across Birmingham’s diverse communities (Emejulu and Bassel, 2015). Building such spaces of solidarity would allow pro-EU activists to realise their commitment to anti-racism in a tangible way, which has otherwise manifested only on a superficial rhetorical level. Nevertheless, extending our conceptualization of the sites, scales and acts of EU citizenship allows for a more inclusive model that recognizes the multi-level nature of the EU polity, reveals how people, and especially women, can gain a sense of their own agency in the EU through making connections between the local, national and EU level and challenging the public/private binary. At the same time, we can observe the exclusions embedded within such practices by a white and middle-class group of activists.

Conclusion

This article makes a theoretical and methodological contribution to EU studies. I have called for an intersectional feminist theory of EU citizenship that conceptualizes
citizenship as subjectivity, deconstructs the public/private divide through sites and scales, and makes visible the ‘unnamed and unmarked’ whiteness in traditional masculine conceptions of EU citizenship. I show how, at a moment when it is being taken away, EU citizenship for pro-EU activists is not ‘elsewhere than where they live’ (Guild, 2014, p. 422), but embedded in their complex identities, homes, and communities. The intersectional feminist lens highlights the way in which claims to EU citizenship are made through the contestation of hegemonic masculinities associated with Euroscepticism. I found that activists emphasized the multiple and embodied nature of their European identities. They also extended claims to free movement beyond ‘market citizenship’ into the intimate sphere of family, also connecting Brexit to transnational moves to roll back LGBTQ rights. They call also for a more inclusive political culture, pursuing an informal and non-hierarchical style of politics. EU citizenship practice during Brexit is not transnational or supranational, but highly localized. An intersectional feminist approach demonstrates the gendered dimensions of EU identification and engagement that are overlooked in traditional EU citizenship theory.

I have also contributed a critical feminist methodology to EU studies literature. This research has captured the perspectives of a small group of grassroots activists in the year before Brexit, and does not represent the whole pro-EU movement. The critical feminist lens has, however, demonstrated the value of asking questions about gender and race, providing a deeper understanding of citizens’ relationships with the EU. While activists expressed cosmopolitan identities, opposed racism and eschewed British exceptionalism, they revealed white cultural conceptions of Europe and appeared committed to a European exceptionalism dislocated from its colonial past. Activists were (rightly) shocked at the treatment of EU-27 citizens and defended their own privileged right to free movement, but in so doing prioritized, as Akwugo Emejulu notes, a sense of white victimhood over the experiences of people of colour (Emejulu, 2016, 28 June).

These findings highlight the need for intersectional and critical race approaches to EU public opinion. Existing literature demonstrates the link between cosmopolitanism and EU support (see e.g. Hooghe and Marks, 2005). Yet, research from the UK shows that while Remainers are more supportive of immigration than Leavers, they still prefer immigration from Australia and France over Pakistan, Nigeria and Romania (Blinder and Richards, 2020). The binary of cosmopolitanism/communitarianism therefore does not capture the way in which gender and race shape citizens’ EU attitudes. Through a reflexive approach, we can use our own social positions to interrogate the biases that embed gendered and racialized hierarchies within EU studies scholarship.

Finally, the findings also have practical implications. For those at the elite level wanting to engage citizens in EU-related activism, this research demonstrates the need to ensure diverse styles and forms of inclusive participation in European politics are possible. Citizens engage in EU politicization not just at the supranational, transnational, and national levels, but also in local communities, at home and within the family. They are concerned about rights, laws and policies that affect their lives and communities. These sites and scales of EU citizenship are deeply structured by gender and race, with marginalized groups less likely to engage with the traditional spaces and topics of EU deliberation.

Without reflection on individual and collective biases, however, pro-EU movements in particular will continue to reproduce racialized and class-based exclusions. Many grassroots groups continue to be active locally alongside the national organizations.
Grassroots for Europe and European Movement UK. Challenging the hegemonic masculinity of Euroscepticism cannot be effective without interrogating its whiteness. Black Lives Matter has brought public attention to the persistence of structural racism in the UK, EU member states and the EU itself. We need to ‘decolonize’ support for the EU by interrogating the colonial histories that shape contemporary Europe. Activists should also focus on building coalitions that challenge, for example, the EU’s and EU member states’ racist immigration policies and unequally distributed austerity measures. Such actions are vital if we want to create a genuinely inclusive and anti-racist British – and European – society.

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