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"The European family? Wouldn't that be the white people?": Brexit and British ethnic minority attitudes towards Europe

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ABSTRACT

Though ethnic minorities were significantly more likely to vote to Remain in the European Union in the 2016 Referendum than the white British, there has been scant analysis of ethnic minority attitudes towards the EU. Using focus group and interview data, this article analyses support for EU membership and Euroscepticism among British ethnic minorities. As the Leave campaigns drew criticism for anti-immigration messages, the article demonstrates how ethnic minority Remain support was more a vote against Brexit. Whilst Remain was framed as the progressive, even anti-racist alternative to Leave, ethnic minority Brexiteers criticized the EU's border politics of free movement for (white) Europeans while borders around Europe are fortified and policed. The article finds weak identification with Europe among ethnic minority Remain and Leave voters, with perceptions of "European" as a white identity, other European countries as more racist and Islamophobic than Britain, and Europe itself a white racial formation.

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Introduction

While some analyses suggest British ethnic minorities are ambivalent towards the European Union (Khan and Weekes-Bernard 2015), little historical data exists on ethnic minority attitudes towards EU membership, compared to white majority views on EU integration (Hooghe and Marks 2005; Hobolt et al. 2011). This represents a significant lacuna in our understanding of ethnic minority political attitudes who were more likely to vote to Remain in the EU compared to white British voters (Martin, Sobolewska, and Begum 2022). Moreover, Brexit has resulted in one of the biggest

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constitutional and political upheavals in recent history. The establishment of policies following Britain's exit from the EU, including the post-Brexit immigration system, have differential and underexplored impacts on Britain's ethnic minorities.

Using interviews and focus groups with British ethnic minority voters, this article analyses ethnic minority attitudes towards EU membership and conceptions of Europe by examining their motivations for voting to Remain or Leave in the 2016 EU Referendum. This article counters assumptions of Remain as the progressive, even anti-racist alternative to Brexit by inserting the views of British ethnic minorities who have tended to be absent from political science explanations of Brexit. This allows us to bring into view the ways in which ethnic minority Britons negotiate different forms of whiteness that they perceived in campaigns for Brexit, but also in evocations of European identity in the Remain campaign.

The article begins by reviewing the existing literature on voting in the Referendum and constructions of the European Union. After outlining the focus group and interview methods, the article examines the qualitative findings through a thematic analysis. The attitudes of those taking part in the research – ethnic minority Britons – are ambiguous, countering the binary between Leave and Remain that is so prominent in other accounts of Brexit. For example, those voting Remain explain that this was more a vote against Leave rather than a positive vote for the EU and its values, in the context of Fortress Europe and the inherent whiteness of European identities. Meanwhile, ethnic minority Leave voters criticized the border politics of the EU and restricted mobility of racialized minorities within the EU. The article finds weak identification with Europe with perceptions of "European" as an exclusive white racial identity which does not include racialized minorities, even as citizens of a European country. The findings also demonstrate that ethnic minorities perceived other European societies to be more racist and Islamophobic compared to Britain, for example, in restricting Muslim women's rights to religious dress. I argue that existing notions of the EU as inclusive and diverse, particularly in explanations of EU Referendum voting patterns, obscures the exclusion of racialized minorities through the EU's border politics and the reproduction of Europe itself as a white (Christian) racial formation. Based on these accounts, the EU's claim of being "united in diversity" refers more to national and linguistic diversity (and Christian denomination), rather than racial or religious diversity.

Methodological whiteness in explanations of leave and remain support

Though national identity, class, age, education and social values (Mycock 2017; Goodwin and Heath 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2019; Cutts et al.

2020) have been analysed in political science explanations for voting behaviour in the Referendum, how race and ethnicity might shape attitudes towards EU membership has received less attention. This is despite ethnic minority voters being significantly less likely to support Leave than the white British, two-thirds of whom voted Remain (Martin, Sobolewska, and Begum 2022).

Race is often elided in accounting for Brexit despite being significant to the Referendum with the Leave campaigns' rhetoric of "taking back control of borders" and associations with white nationalism and postcolonial nostalgia (Virdee and McGeever 2018). Though Eastern Europeans have been especially targeted in criticisms of freedom of movement (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2015), EU membership and increasing racial diversity tended to be conflated in these campaigns. Vote Leave presented Turkey joining the EU as imminent, linking this to the potential for refugees (and possible terrorists) to enter Britain due to Turkey's proximity to other Muslim-majority countries, including war-torn Syria and Iraq (Shaw 2018). Moreover, Nigel Farage of Leave.EU unveiled a poster entitled "Breaking Point", with an image from the 2015 Refugee Crisis, of a continuous line of male, Muslim refugees seeking entry into Europe, which was likened to Nazi propaganda (Stewart and Mason 2016). In this way, freedom of movement was presented as a gateway for migration from outside Europe, particularly Black and/or Muslim migrants from the Middle East and Africa.

Analysis of the demographic backgrounds of Remain and Leave voters reveal a significant age and education gap with younger, university-educated voters more likely to support Remain, while older, less-educated voters supported Leave (Hobolt and Vries 2016; Goodwin and Heath 2016). Characterizing Remain support as coming from "cosmopolitan elites" and Brexit support as the protest of the "left-behind" or "losers of globalisation", the dominant explanation to emerge from such analyses was that support for leaving the EU was driven by older, less-educated, white, working-class men who have been "left behind" by rapid social, economic and demographic changes brought about by mass immigration and globalization (Ford 2016; Goodwin and Heath 2016). Thus, Leave support was largely understood as a working-class backlash against rising diversity and labour market competition from migrants.

Whilst race and ethnicity are implicit in many of these class-centric explanations, that white voting may also be driven by racial or ethnic-based motivations is neglected in existing political science analyses. This is what Bhambra refers to as "methodological whiteness", that is "a way of reflecting on the world that fails to acknowledge the role played by race in the very structuring of that world, and of the ways in which knowledge is constructed and legitimated within it" (2017). This methodological whiteness can be seen in constructions of the working class as white. The working class is understood in

terms of white men who were part of the former industrial labourer class (Norris and Inglehart 2019). However, while the "left behind" or "losers of globalisation" theses refer to economic processes such as deindustrialization, globalization and increasing automation, immigration and increasing ethnic diversity are often held responsible for the economic and social malaise of the (white) working-class.

The framing of cosmopolitan elites supporting Remain while the "left-behind" white working-class supported Leave has been countered by Dorling (2016) who points to white, middle-class support for Leave, particularly in the south-east. Moreover, the methodological whiteness of the Brexit literature, in particular, these accounts of the working class as white has been countered by qualitative sociological research on Brexit including Isakjee and Lorne (2019) who argue that uncritically accepted racialized discourses of economic disadvantage and decline as "uniquely affecting" the "white working class" is confounded by evidence that Black and ethnic minority populations have worse economic outcomes including lower wealth, wages and home-ownership (2019, 9). In addition, Patel and Connelly (2019) offer a counter-narrative to the class-centric "left behind" discourse, examining the "post-racial" narratives which underpin the accounts of Leave voters. Their white working-class and middle-class interviewees draw on economic arguments about the negative impact of "uncontrolled" immigration on the "indigenous" white population, while seeking to avoid being labelled as racist (2019).

Another explanation put forward for Brexit was the long-standing Eurosceptic "outsider tradition" in Britain compared to other European countries (Carl, Dennison, and Evans 2019). With weaker identification with Europe and beliefs that European identity is a threat to British identity (Cinnirella 1997), the British population have historically had the lowest levels of support for European integration compared to the mainland (Hewstone 1986). Sentiments of British "exceptionalism" and discourses of difference (Marcussen et al. 1999; Ash 2001) which have underpinned the Eurosceptic tradition is linked to collective beliefs in a distinct history (and future) based on Britain's former empire. Highlighting the centrality of race in the Brexit vote, Virdee and McGeever (2018), argue that Brexit simultaneously represents "deep nostalgia for empire" as well as an "insular, Powellite narrative of retreating from a globalizing world that is no longer recognizably British" (1803). As such, Brexit is the continuation of such sentiments which have historically underpinned British Euroscepticism and prevented the UK from fully integrating with the EU. Such qualitative sociological accounts of Brexit counter the methodological whiteness of the political science Brexit literature bringing into focus underlying imperial longing and white perceptions of ethnic competition.

While Leave voters were represented as seeking to turn the clock back on globalization, decolonization and rising diversity (Virdee and McGeever

2018), supporting Remain was represented by its campaigners as the progressive and inclusive antithesis to Leave, of different nations working together and free movement between European nations (Behr 2016). Drawing on Bhambra's argument that explanations for Brexit can be characterized as "methodologically white" (2017), I argue that a methodological whiteness also pervades constructions of the EU as pro-immigration and even anti-racist, particularly as support for the EU was constructed as the binary opposite of Brexit. Associations of racism and extremism with support for Leave and its campaigns (Patel and Connelly 2019) were utilized by the Remain campaign with one poster reading, "If people like Rupert Murdoch, Nigel Farage, George Galloway, Nick Griffin and Marine Le Pen want Britain to leave the EU, where does that put you?" (Between Bridges 2016). Recognized as representing "fraternity between nations", the EU has even received the Nobel Peace Prize for, "advancing the causes of peace, reconciliation, democracy and human rights in Europe" (European Parliament 2012), with the EU seen as existing to prevent racial violence reoccurring in Europe (Lentin 2008). The Remain campaign drew on such ideas of the EU being founded on humanism and internationalism where diversity and collaboration across borders is celebrated.

The EU is believed to espouse values that are central to European societies including, "rationalism, democracy, the rule of law, equality, inclusion, human rights [and] social justice" (Nelsen and Guth 2015, 333). European citizenship and the rights it confers being based more on residence than birth (Delanty 1997, 296) is seen as emblematic of the EU's openness, universal values and promotion of cultural diversity (Schlenker 2013, 34). Instead, race (and racism) is understood to be invoked by the Eurosceptic and anti-immigrant, white nationalist far right against the European project (Boomgaarden and Freire 2009, 1241). Whilst anti-immigration attitudes predict Euroscepticism (for example, perceptions that freedom of movement is an open door for uncontrolled migration), European integration is positioned as denoting support for cooperation and inclusion (Guerra 2020, 50). European integration is said to be "based on a willingness to 'put up with' religious, cultural and ethnic diversity through closer economic and political cooperation of nations and peoples in Europe" (Hobolt et al. 2011, 363). Similarly for Vreese and Boomgaarden, European integration "brings together people from different countries, regions and cultures, and arguably with different religions and ethnicities" (2005, 64), and is argued by Hooghe and Marks as "reinforc[ing] multiculturalism [through] erod[ing] exclusionary norms of 'us' and 'them'" (2005, 423). Such conceptions of what European integration represents contributes to constructions of Remain and Leave as binary opposites; Leave as a retreat to national identity and postcolonial nostalgia while the EU is conceptualized as open and pro-immigration. Eliding the colonial past and neo-colonial present of Europe, methodological whiteness can be seen not only in

explanations for Brexit but also in such contemporary understandings of the EU, which "evad[e] acknowledging European domination over much of the world through colonialism [and] dispossession, appropriation, and enslavement as significant to that history" (Bhambra and Narayan 2016, 2). Understandings of the EU as representing individual rights, freedoms and humanism are based on attributing "Enlightenment values" of democracy, human rights, equality, and inclusion (Nelsen and Guth 2015, 333) as European. Such values as distinctly European underpinned the "European image of itself as a civilizing project" (Stråth 2002, 392) and are based on racial and cultural chauvinism where "references are made to Europe"s heritage of classical Graeco-Roman civilization, Christianity, and the ideas of the Enlightenment – Science, Reason, Progress and Democracy – as the core elements of this claimed European Legacy" (Stråth 2002, 388). Simultaneously, contemporary conceptualizations of Europe were constructed around the foundations of Europe as white Christendom "while the 'other' was perceived as being Muslim, oriental and Black" (Ballard 1996). Indeed, whiteness developed as "a racialized, fetishized and exclusively European attribute" (Bonnett 1998).

Post-war European integration culminating in the EU represented European empires consolidating economic and political power following the losses of World War II and Europeans colonies beginning to gain independence: "the European project was established by the coming together of colonial states and constituted itself in colonial terms, yet, colonialism is rarely mentioned in discussions of this project" (Bhambra and Narayan 2016). Current "threats" to Europe and their construction can be seen in the positioning of Islam as the uncivilized, illiberal "other" against which Europe is defined (Stråth 2002). Europe, particularly western Europe, is constructed as the seat of civilization while the growing number of racialized minorities within Europe, particularly Muslims, are seen as threatening the very essence of Europe.

While there is free movement within Europe, borders around Europe are heavily fortified and policed to the exclusion of former colonial subjects. The rejection of Turkey's membership of the EU (Benhabib and Eich 2019, 558) as well as the dehumanization of Middle Eastern and African refugees who are seen as undeserving of European residence or citizenship are attempts to "Keep Europe European", that is white Christian, "creating, securing and protecting a crystallized form of European identity" (Ammaturo 2019, 550). This can be seen in the treatment of Ukrainian refugees compared to Afghan refugees, the former perceived as civilized, "culturally European" and thus more deserving of aid and refuge, while the latter are perceived as a symbolic threat to Europe (De Coninck 2022).

Where theories of social identity, psychology of group membership or cultural threat (Vreese and Boomgaarden 2005) have been used to explain

Euroscepticism and support for European integration, the concepts of "diversity" and "multiculturalism" tend to be loosely defined. The national, cultural, Christian denomination and linguistic diversity of the EU is conflated with racial and religious diversity, despite the EU being made up of majority white nation-states. Whiteness and Christianity are still the norm in the majority of European states (although there is, of course, Christian religious sectarianism and internal hierarchies of whiteness [Garner 2007, 63]). The EU's motto of being "united in diversity" refers to specific types of difference, that of national, cultural, and linguistic diversity, while racialized minorities and Islam are consistently constructed as the antithesis to white (Christian) Europe (Sharma and Nijjar 2018).

With this understanding, the Brexit project and the EU project, rather than being each other's antithesis, coexist and reinforce one another. Through testimonies of British people of colour living and working in EU countries, Benson and Lewis (2019) draw attention to their experiences as "racialised others" "out of place in the whiteness of Europe's institutions" (2019, 2223). Rather than being exceptional to Europe, Benson and Lewis (2019) "locate Brexit within the longstanding marginalization of the multi-ethnic polities of Britain [and] the normative whiteness of the European Union – its institutions, structures and politics – in longer European histories of racialization and racism" (2212). Methodological whiteness entails immigrants and ethnic minorities tending to be "talked about" rather than "talked to". Recognizing the coloniality of the European project as well as that of Brexit, as Benson and Lewis (2019) demonstrate, bringing in the experiences of racialized minorities complicates the simplified binary of Brexit as being anti-immigration and isolationist and the EU as representing free movement and inclusivity.

Through focusing on the views of British ethnic minorities and their evaluations of what Leave and Remain represented in the EU Referendum, this article counters methodological whiteness, not only in understandings of Brexit, but also in constructions of Europe and the EU. As research on Brexit and attitudes to European integration largely focuses on white majority attitudes, this article examines (i) British ethnic minorities' motivations for voting to Remain or Leave the European Union; (ii) how ethnic minorities construct European identity and their strength of identification with Europe; and (iii) drivers of support for EU membership or Euroscepticism among ethnic minorities.

Focus groups and interviews with ethnic minority remain and leave voters

This research challenges the methodological whiteness that pervades the literature on Brexit and in constructions of the EU project, by bringing into focus the perspectives of racialized minorities in Britain. Semi-structured

focus groups and interviews with British Black and Asian voters were conducted across England following the EU Referendum. The group dynamic allowed observation of the joint construction of meaning and collective identity (Bryman 2008, 488) to investigate how race and ethnicity influenced conceptions of Brexit and Europe. The study underwent an extensive and thorough ethical review through the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies at the University of Bristol.

Recruitment took place using leaflets and posters asking for participants who self-identified as ethnic minority at sites in areas of high ethnic minority population and frequented by members of the local ethnic minority community including libraries, churches, mosques, temples, gurdwaras, and community centres. Five focus groups (Groups 1–5 in Table 1) were conducted face-to-face, lasting on average one hour to an hour and a half. The focus groups were supplemented with five individual interviews (Interviews 1–5 in Table 1) as it had been relatively difficult to recruit ethnic minority Leave voters, perhaps due to perceptions that supporting Brexit was less socially acceptable than supporting Remain (Taylor 2017). To understand differences between Leave and Remain voters, participants were divided into Leave focus groups and Remain focus groups. This was to minimize conflict after

Table 1. Research participants.

Focus group or Interview	No. of participants	Ethnicity	Gender	Religion	Age	Location	Vote choice
G1	3	2 Black African 1 Asian Bangladeshi	2F, 1M	2 Christian 1 Muslim	18–24	Walsall	Remain
G2	3	Asian Bangladeshi	3M	Muslim	45-54, 60+	Kent	Leave
G3	2	Asian Pakistani	2F	Muslim	35–44	Birmingham	Leave
G4	4	3 Asian Indian 1 Asian Pakistani	2F, 2M	1 Muslim, 1 Sikh, 2 None	25–34	London	Remain
G5	3	1 Asian Bangladeshi 2 Mixed White and Black Caribbean	2F, 1M	1 Muslim, 2 None	18-24, 25–34	Bristol	Remain
I1	1	Black Caribbean	M	Christian	45–54	Birmingham	Remain
I2	1	Asian Indian	M	Sikh	25–34	Birmingham	Remain
I3	1	Asian Indian	M	Sikh	25–34	London	Leave
I4	1	Mixed White and Black Caribbean	F	None	65–74	Bristol	Remain
I5	1	Asian Indian	M	Muslim	25–34	London	Leave

what had been a highly politically-charged Referendum, particularly on race issues, and that were still contentious as the fieldwork was conducted shortly after the 2017 General Election, between May and September 2017. The participants were recruited from a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds (see Table 1). Ethnically homogenous focus groups who all voted the same way in the Referendum proved difficult to recruit, thus, participants in each focus group were of different ethnic minority backgrounds. Though ethnically heterogenous, there was overlap in their experiences of being racialized minorities, particularly for ethnic minorities who discussed similar experiences of racism and discrimination. I sought to establish trust and be reflexive about my identity and how being female, of South Asian Bangladeshi descent and Muslim might shape how the participants responded to me. The participants appeared to be more forthcoming about experiences of racism and discrimination which they felt I could relate to. Though not generalizable beyond the sample, as the sample sizes are relatively small, the in-depth focus groups and interviews elicited rich, qualitative insights which offer a counter-narrative to the methodological whiteness identified in the Brexit literature and in representations of the EU.

Participants were shown campaign material from the Remain and Leave side to gauge their responses to messages put out by the opposing campaigns, which messages had appealed to them and which had not. Participants were then asked why they voted to Remain or Leave the EU and the key issues which had motivated them. All focus groups and interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically, with the assistance of Audio Notetaker software. Thematic Analysis was used to identify and interpret patterns in conceptualizations of Brexit and Europe for ethnic minority Remain and Leave voters, as well as how ethnic identity affected meaning-making in the Referendum. I drew on Ryan and Bernard's (2003) techniques for identifying themes including looking for repetitions in the data; systematic comparison of similarities and differences in how participants discuss or view a topic; and searching for meaning in the participant(s) experience of the focus group or interview. I now consider the key themes in motivations behind voting Remain or Leave in the Referendum, as well as perceptions of Europe and European identity among British ethnic minorities (see Table 2). Pseudonyms are used throughout to preserve anonymity.

Findings and discussion

A vote against Brexit

Ethnic minority Remain-voting participants were generally motivated by perceived advantages of EU membership, including economic security, travelling, living and working in other EU countries and transnational

Table 2. Overview of themes from the thematic analysis.

Themes	Sub-themes	Examples
Voting against Brexit	Anti-immigration sentiments/ xenophobia in Leave campaigns and support for Brexit	Associations with white nationalism, English Defence League and Britain First
European as a white identity	Weak identification as European as racialized minorities	Ambivalence and weak sense of belonging in Europe
European as a white fortress	Border politics of EU	Punitive treatment of refugees from Africa and the Middle East
Europe as Islamophobic	European countries as more Islamophobic than the UK	Hijab and minaret bans
Europe as a white racial formation	Economic protectionism	Common Agricultural Policy
	Colonial foundations of Europe	European "Enlightenment" values founded on white European supremacy

cooperation on issues including climate change. However, despite higher levels of support for Remain among ethnic minority voters, there was weak identification with Europe among the ethnic minority participants in this study. This may not be surprising given weak support for European integration among the British population at large (Cinnirella 1997). Instead, what drove ethnic minority participants' support for Remain were perceptions of anti-immigrant sentiment within the Leave campaigns and a rise in white nationalism associated with Brexit support. For example, Zane felt anti-immigration discourses associated with Leave targeted him too:

> I was sort of voting against "make Britain great again" … against the ideology that we should push out anyone who's brown or Black … voting against the propaganda that 'Europeans have come to our country, they're taking our jobs' …
>
> Although we were voting on the EU only, even though I'm not from the EU, it still feels like it's aimed at me a bit as well. I'm trying to prevent the ideology that immigration is a problem.
>
> (British Black African Remain male focus group participant [G1])

Even though Eastern European immigration was particularly problematized in the Referendum, the ethnic minority participants felt the anti-immigration discourse or "ideology" around the Leave campaigns also targeted them as racialized minorities, even if they were British-born or naturalized British citizens. This is consistent with existing research that ethnic minorities tend to feel negatively impacted by anti-immigrant language, which they feel is (still) targeted at them, including those who are British-born (Khan and Weekes-Bernard 2015). This is not to suggest that ethnic minorities do not engage in anti-migrant discourse, for example, that which has been directed against Eastern Europeans among some Black and Asian Brexit supporters (Begum 2018).

While being generally ambivalent towards the EU, associating support for Leave with right-wing movements and political parties with a history of hostility towards ethnic minorities appeared to influence some participants to support Remain:

> [one] factor is also the sort of people who were involved with the Leave campaign, and the way that UKIP, Britain First, some of these groups, jumped on board the Leave campaign and it became ground for sort of ultra-patriotism …
>
> British Indian remain male interviewee (I2)

Similarly, participants in a Remain-voting focus group included "racism towards ethnic minorities" as a key motivation in their support for Remain, associating support for Leave with white nationalism, who one British Bangladeshi female participant referred to as "really racist … EDL-type people". While hostility to immigration has been found to mobilize white British support for Brexit (Goodwin and Milazzo 2017), this suggests anti-immigration messages on the Leave side influenced support for Remain among ethnic minority voters. This is consistent with ethnic minority voters being less likely to support right-wing parties that stand on anti-immigration platforms (Martin 2023).

As Virdee and McGeever (2018) argue, "what often gets elided in discussions of Brexit is the presence of what we might term 'internal others' against whom the nation has often defined itself: racialized minorities and migrants" (1803). The testimonies of ethnic minority participants voting Remain in opposition to Leave reveal how ethnic minorities feel the immigration debate targets them (Khan and Weekes-Bernard 2015), perceiving the white nation as being defined against them as racialized minorities in anti-immigration sentiments underlying support for Brexit.

We are the European family?

Deterred by the anti-immigration sentiments of the Brexit campaigns, support for Remain has been represented as embracing diversity and reflecting tolerant attitudes to perceived outsiders (Behr 2016; Norris and Inglehart 2019). The Remain poster campaign appealed to a sense of belonging in the EU with one poster reading, "It's also a question of where one belongs. We are the European family" (Between Bridges 2016).

However, in a similar manner to the white British population, the ethnic minority participants were largely ambivalent about EU membership. One British Indian Remain-voting male participant referred to the "uncertainty and fear" around white nationalist associations with Brexit as a key reason why ethnic minorities had voted Remain, rather than "out of a particular love for the European Union". Identification with the "European Family"

and perceptions of "European" as an inclusive identity were rare among the ethnic minority participants who, when shown Remain campaign material, were generally less engaged by the "European Family" message. Again, British voters' ambivalence to EU integration is well-documented. However, the British ethnic minority participants expressed distinctive attitudes, suggesting even weaker European identity than the white British population as they perceived "European" to be an exclusive white racial identity, excluding ethnic minorities, even as citizens of a European country. "European" was generally seen as a phenotypical white identity, with a participant of one focus group remarking:

> with 'European', you automatically think European features so white skin, thin nose, blue eyes, it kind of creates that kind of image.
>
> (British Indian Male Remain focus group participant [I2])

While having distinct national identities, "Europeans", as bearers of whiteness, were thought to look the same:

> You don't actually know somebody's [East] European until they speak … if I see a Welsh person, Irish person, Scottish person, German, Polish … you'd think they're all the same people until perhaps they pulled out their passport … and you're like, 'oh crap, you're East European'.
>
> (British Black African Male Remain Voter [G1])

This demonstrates that, "European" was understood as synonymous with white (Bonnett 1998, 1036), though there was some disagreement within one ethnic minority focus group about who could be considered European:

> Shona: 'The European Family'? Wouldn't that be the white people type of thing?
>
> Jasmine: No, because there's brown people in Europe.
>
> Shona: But then, do they really count them?
>
> Jasmine: … I thought you meant it excludes people who are outside of Europe.
>
> Zane: As soon as someone says European family, you think of a white person, do you not?
>
> Shona: Caucasian.
>
> Zane: You don't think of us or whatever, so that's what I got from it.

(Ethnic Minority Remain Focus Group [G1])

Although one ethnic minority participant of Bangladeshi background expressed the argument that living in Europe makes one European, this was a minority view. The other participants, who were of Black African background, disagreed and felt that "European" was a white identity that excluded "us", that is, Black and brown people. For another participant, "European" was "excluding" whereas Britishness was conceived as an open, acquirable civic identity that he felt ethnic minorities were more able to identify with regardless of ethnic background:

> You don't get the term 'European Asian', you don't get the term sort of 'European Pakistani' or anything like that but you do get 'British Pakistani', 'British Asian', British whatever, so even when people from minority groups are describing themselves, European is never a word that comes into it so … European is quite excluding I feel.

(British Indian male Remain interviewee [I1])

Britishness was considered to be a more inclusive identity, with British national identity seen as compatible with a racially minoritized identity. As well as seeing European as a white identity, some ethnic minority participants also held perceptions of racism and xenophobia being more prevalent in other European societies compared to the UK. A British Indian male Remain-voting interviewee felt, "The UK stands apart from some of its European neighbours", where there is "more of an openness", and as "an example of how multiculturalism can work". Britain was seen as a diverse, multicultural society which was exceptional in Europe in being more tolerant towards ethnic and religious minorities. Such sentiments co-existed with concerns about the rise in racism and xenophobia in the UK, which they associated with support for Brexit, and voted Remain to counter what they felt was a rejection of multiculturalism in Britain.

The participants' perceptions of Europeanness denoting whiteness are consistent with Benson and Lewis' (2019) work on people of colour living in European countries outside the UK and their experiences of working in the predominantly white EU institutions. Benson and Lewis' participants describe their encounters with the whiteness of the EU, racial slurs in their workplace and "levels of everyday racism in Europe that are equal or more pronounced than what they had experienced in the United Kingdom" (2019, 2221). Experiences such as this have even spawned their own hashtag #BrusselsSoWhite, an example including Black British former MEP Magid Magid feeling he "stuck out like a sore thumb" after being asked if he was lost, then asked to leave on his first day in the European Parliament (Parveen 2019). Such accounts of feeling out of place as well as Benson and Lewis' research on everyday racism experienced by people of colour in

EU countries was also expressed by my participants, particularly in their views that other European societies were more racist than Britain. This challenges the methodologically white representations of the EU as pro-diversity and immigration.

Europe as a white fortress

Freedom of movement and the relative ease with which EU citizens can travel to, live and work in other EU member states has been linked to conceptions of Europe as open and inclusive in allowing greater mobility across national borders (Behr 2016). However, in discussions of freedom of movement, the mobility of white (Western) Europeans is rarely problematized compared to that of racialized minorities. In ethnic minority accounts of navigating the borders of Europe, some participants expressed criticism of Europe as being less welcoming towards racialized minorities. For one British Indian Muslim participant, his experiences of the EU's border practices led to scepticism about slogans of freedom of movement and the extent to which the principle is equally applied:

> when we talk about … having no borders, I think people might be a bit naive to the realities of what it's like for non-white people in the EU … a lot of EU people they don't need any passport or ID really to fly from one place to another whereas if you're not white that is a bit more difficult, you often do need to have that passport on you.
>
> (British Indian Male Leave voter [I5])

Freedom of movement is perceived to be more accessible to white Europeans while racialized minorities who don't "look European" are more likely to be asked to present their passport at border control and checkpoints. Participants consistently raised the EU's handling of the Refugee Crisis beginning in 2015 as an example of Europe closing its borders to non-Europeans:

> it is important to recognise that [the] principle [of freedom of movement] comes at the expense of the rest of the world [and] not letting anybody else come in … that is a racist policy in itself.
>
> At the time of European migration crisis, we saw a number of countries putting up borders within the EU … the whole idea of the EU as this bastion of free movement and respects immigrants or whatever was a bit shallow.
>
> (British Indian Muslim male Leave voter [I5])

This challenges the openness and progressiveness of EU freedom of movement, which largely entails greater mobility for white (Western) Europeans. This participant's criticism of the EU extended to its handling of the refugee

crisis, with refugees experiencing border closures, heavy-handed treatment, punitive measures and violence (Isakjee et al. 2020). Frontex, the EU's border agency has also been accused of pushing refugees back to sea in dangerous and illegal operations (Fallon 2020). Though some EU member states have also accepted large numbers of refugees, the institution's handling of the Refugee Crisis, "test[s] the EU's self-image as a bastion of humanitarian reason and a beacon of democracy" (Benhabib and Eich 2019, 568). While earlier meanings of Fortress Europe concerned western Europe fortifying against the eastern Soviet Bloc (Hall 2002, 60), this has taken on a new definition whereby Europe's boundaries are represented by the EU's (now) 27 member states. While opening up the internal space within, Europe's external boundaries are fortified to restrict immigration from outside the EU (Schlenker 2013; Delanty 2006). This is not to omit the problematization of east to west migration within the EU. While ethnic minority participants were put off by the Leave campaigns which they interpreted as anti-immigrant, EU member states' treatment of refugees arriving at its borders highlighted for some ethnic minority participants hostility towards racialized minorities within Europe. The testimonies of British ethnic minorities and their perceptions of the regressive nature of the EU's border politics complicates the binary of Brexit representing anti-immigration and Remain representing free movement. Instead, the Brexit project to fortify the UK's borders against perceived outsiders co-exists with the EU's reinforcement of European borders against non-European, largely non-white outsiders.

Europe as Islamophobic

The "religious heterogeneity" of the EU, according to Hobolt et al. is "a very visible by-product of European integration" (2011, 363). This religious diversity, however, applies to Christian denominations. Meanwhile, Islam has often been presented as the antithesis to (white) Christian Europe, with the problematization of Muslims in Europe as incompatible and being unwilling to integrate into European societies.

As some of the ethnic minority participants viewed European societies on the continent as more racist than Britain, for the British Muslim Leave-voting participants, perceptions of the EU as illiberal towards racialized minorities extended to criticisms of the "EU's counterterrorism strategy" which some participants criticized as "Islamophobic and anti-refugee":

> the counterextremism policies … we have Prevent which have been horrendous and working to alienate the Muslim population and in countries like France they have even worse policies, you see very systematic discrimination against the Algerian[s], and across Europe from hijab bans to minaret bans.
>
> (British Indian Muslim Male Leave interviewee [I5])

Thus, for some ethnic minority participants, discrimination against Muslims in Europe, including what they perceived as targeting Muslims through counter-extremism policies and the banning of symbols of Islam was a motivation to support Leave.

The EU's commitment to address gender inequality has informed conceptions of the EU as liberal and progressive (Pető and Manners 2006). EU legislation institutionalizes "a fairly comprehensive safety-net for women's rights across Europe" (Guerrina and Masselot 2018, 3), including access to pregnancy and maternity rights. However, this came as a stark contrast for one focus group with Muslim women of Pakistani background, who voted to leave the EU to "protect" their rights as Muslim women, which they felt were undermined in other parts of Europe:

> Asma: the way France were with banning the hijab … a few of those countries … over here we're mostly free to do what we want but over there there's the banning of the hijab.
>
> Sehrish: But then they're in, we're all in the EU but we're still much better [off] and this country is much more tolerant.
>
> Asma: It's not just individuals, it's different government or you know what the higher people, you know they ban the hijab or they do things, it's really scary. You think 'how do these [Muslims] live there?'
>
> (British Pakistani women Leave Focus Group [G3])

The Muslim women participants expressed concerns about living in other European countries, which they felt were more hostile towards Muslims compared to Britain, and that gendered Islamophobia was often reproduced at an elite level, where hijab and nikab bans were in force. The policing of Muslim female bodies has characterized debates around Muslims in European societies with bans on the hijab, nikab and burkini justified on the basis that veiling "symbolizes the repression of women and a lack of individualism and self-determination, which contrast sharply with [European] gender-egalitarian norms" (Ponce 2017, 2). The tolerance of Europe and celebration of religious diversity as well as the idea that the EU protected women's rights was refuted as the participants criticized the EU for allowing active discrimination against Muslim women in several member states in restricting their rights to religious dress. Perceptions of Europe representing white Christendom while Muslims have been constructed as Europe's Other (Sharma and Nijjar 2018) manifested in British Muslim opposition to EU membership.

Europe as a white racial formation

Some of the participants were Eurosceptic on account of their heritage being from outside of Europe. Europe as a "white Fortress' was also conceived of in perceptions of the EU protecting itself economically while its policies put the developing world at a disadvantage. The EU as a trading bloc and its protectionist economic policies, for example, providing agricultural subsidies for European farmers, was criticized by some participants as having adverse effects on developing countries in Africa and Asia:

> I was born and raised in Kenya, I've seen first-hand the effects of things like the Common Agricultural policy and other investment policies that the EU upholds in Africa and Asia and the really detrimental effects it has on our economies.
>
> (British Indian Male Leave voter [I5])

Another interviewee who was of Black Caribbean background felt that trade with the EU was being unfairly prioritized at the cost of the Commonwealth:

> [Britain] used to buy bananas from Dominica, they got their sugar from Barbados, they got pineapples from another place, they got something else from Kenya, they got things from India but … that stopped because the EU dictated … where to purchase things from.
>
> (British Black Caribbean Female Leave voter [I4])

The participant felt Britain being part of the EU trading bloc was preventing trade with Commonwealth countries and held the institution responsible for the economies of Caribbean islands being adversely affected. This type of argument also featured in the Vote Leave campaign in their appeals to ethnic minority voters. The protectionism of the EU and the institution looking after its own economic interests was raised by another interviewee. Although a Remain voter, he expressed ambivalence towards the EU, but criticized an advert put out by the EU in 2012, which depicted a white European woman facing down Chinese, Indian and Brazilian fighters who represented the threat posed to the EU by rising economies:

> The European Union doesn't represent much to me … except when I look at the [EU] flag I'm reminded of this terrible advert [they] once put out … this lady she's dressed in yellow and she's about to be attacked by two other figures, one is supposed to represent Asia and one is supposed to represent perhaps Africa … and she's about to be attacked by them … it's an incredibly poor representation.
>
> (Interview with British Indian Male Remain voter [I2])

The participant refers to an advert released by the European Commission to promote EU enlargement in the face of competition posed by the rising economies of China, India, and Brazil, which came under fire for being racist (Watt 2012). The advert featured a white European woman, dressed in the yellow of the EU stars, facing down a Chinese Man doing kung fu in the style of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon; an Indian man in a turban wielding a knife in the style of Kalari, the ancient Indian martial art; and a Black Brazilian man doing capoeira. She then multiplies to form a circle around them before the men put down their weapons and the woman's yellow outfit turns into the stars of the EU. The video ends with the slogan, "The more we are, the stronger we are. Click here to learn more about EU enlargement" (Watt 2012). The ostensible message of the advert was for white European countries to become further integrated and that EU enlargement would counteract the growing power of non-European economies. Though the figures supposedly represented the economies of India, China and Brazil, the participant recollects the Indian man as representing Asia and the Black man in the advert as representing Africa. The use of racial tropes to depict the competition posed by the rise of the non-European economies India, China and Brazil as a group of non-white men preparing to attack a white woman who represents Europe reinforces the neo-colonial siege mentality of preserving a white Europe under threat from non-Europeans (Kinnvall 2017, 3). The advert also draws on gendered orientalist notions of non-white men as a threat to white femininity, and the white (supra)nation as a woman in need of protection from 'dangerous' Black and brown men (Bhattacharyya 2008).

As Brexit had been framed as representing anti-immigrant sentiments and nostalgia for the British Empire, the Remain campaign focussed on European universalism and liberal cosmopolitanism (Sloam and Henn 2019). However, some participants felt representations of the EU as liberal and progressive meant that Europe's colonial past was being obfuscated. When shown Remain campaign material as a visual prompt, one Remain-voting participant expressed deep opposition to ideas of a "European family" and "European values':

> the one that irks me is 'we are the European family' … European democracy is founded on the idea that Black savages can't be democratic … that is playing on 'Europe is civilised, we're white, we're Christian' and the other is Muslim or Black, a threat, uncivil, violent. It's steeped in 5-600 years of racism.
>
> As a person with brown skin, I don't feel very included in that, I may have a British passport, but my origins lie in India … And how are they European values? And are we, are countries like India, Pakistan, and stuff backwards because they don't have European values?! There's just so much wrong with it.
>
> (British Indian Male Remain Voter [G4])

Positioning democracy, peace and human rights as "European values", the Remain campaign's representation alienated this participant who felt this insinuated that countries outside of Europe were less civilized and backward. The participant read colonial undertones in the use of "European values" to promote European integration and criticized the fundamentally white nature of Europe and the claims to (western) "civilisation" and enlightenment values that are used to represent Europe (and the EU). As Lentin has argued, "European" values of freedom, democracy, equality and rule of law, as expressed on the European Parliament Website (2012) are based on representations of nations outside of Europe as primitive and undemocratic (Lentin 2008, 493). In such ways, distinct forms of Euroscepticism emerge among ethnic minorities that disrupt the binarized construction of Brexit as representing isolationist, postcolonial nostalgia, and support for Remain as signifying cross-border cooperation and progressive values. There is explicit rejection of democracy and inclusivity as "European values" given the "significance of colonialism to the production of modern European nation-states" (Benson and Lewis 2019, 5).

Conclusion

This article fills a significant gap in our understandings of British ethnic minority attitudes towards Brexit and the EU. Methodological whiteness has pervaded not only existing research on Brexit, but in constructions of the EU as representing free movement, inclusivity, and even multiculturalism. The limits of this characterization are brought to bear in the testimonies of British ethnic minorities. Through original empirical research, I find British ethnic minorities hold distinctive attitudes towards the EU on account of their experiences of being racialized as ethnic minorities in Britain and Europe. Despite the universalism espoused by the EU, the British ethnic minority participants were largely ambivalent towards the EU. While perceptions of racism and xenophobia on the Leave side influenced ethnic minority participants to vote Remain, this coexists with the participants' recognition of the whiteness of Europe, and evaluations of European societies being more racist (and Islamophobic) than the UK. The focus that emerges through many of these accounts of Europeanness as an exclusionary identity on the grounds of whiteness and the religious dimensions of this exclusionary practice have been side-lined in accounts of Brexit. The progressive and open nature of EU freedom of movement was called into question by ethnic minority Leave-voting participants which was perceived as privileging white European mobility while a neo-colonial siege mentality could be seen in the EU's punitive border politics towards racialized minorities, particularly during the Refugee Crisis. For some, Europe itself was a white racial formation, protecting white European economic interests while perpetuating

disadvantages of the Global South. Delineating democracy and liberalism as "European values" was seen as invoking white European supremacist claims to "civilisation", the historical basis of Europe's colonial expansion.

This has significant implications in complicating the existing picture of the modern EU as progressive and embracing diversity. British ethnic minority participants' evaluations of Europe and the EU spoke to the insecure position of racialized minorities in Europe, and weak sense of belonging to Europe due to perceptions of racism and religious intolerance, not dissimilar to discourses they felt were utilized by the Leave campaigns during the Referendum, which motivated many to vote against Brexit.

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