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Abstract

This paper explores an understudied phenomenon of migrants joining far-right groups in countries of residence and the resulting transnationalization of far-right politics. Our case study focuses on Polish far-right activists in Britain and their ways of reconciling their transnational living and political engagements with nativist, often biologized, notions of the soil and roots of the imagined community. We adopt an anthropological framework on discursive and performative strategies used to navigate this contradiction. We discuss an ideological shift that consists in emphasis being placed increasingly on the transnational dimension of civilizational or cultural affinity, bringing whiteness to the fore. We also explore mythopoeic narratives and ritualized performances which help activists establish an organic connection with symbolically significant locations in the country of residence as well as claim a special place in its ethnic and social hierarchy. We pay special attention to the symbolic embodiments of elements that have always been at the core of far-right ideological thought: the national soil, the dead ancestors, and the heroic past.

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Introduction

Among the core features of nationalism is its deep attachment to a specific place – a socially constructed area of land. Nationalists make claims over a given territory, believing unwaveringly that the territory, and the nation that they see themselves as representing, belong to each other and are mutually constitutive. As Gellner (1983, p. 1) writes, nationalism is a "theory of political legitimacy, which requires that ethnic boundaries should not cut across political ones". The fixation with national territory as the ultimate anchor of national identity, the object of utmost loyalty and the marker separating people *naturally* into discrete cultures and hence, in a nationalist's ideal world, polities[1] has a long history in nationalist thought and a particularly powerful articulation on the far-right [2] of the political spectrum where the exclusionary, nativist variant of nationalism resides (Newth 2021; Pirro 2022). More recently, some currents of nativist nationalism have fused with deep ecology and got imbued with emphasis on deterministic rootedness to produce various forms of so-called far-right ecologism (Forchtner, 2020; Lubarda, 2024; Moore & Roberts, 2022). These ideological hybrids add a "green" twist to a well-established "organic" (Sternhell, 1973) nationalist perspective according to which nations have developed distinctive characteristics through centuries of interactions with their territories establishing biological-like connections between people and places. Nationalism's "sedentary metaphysics" is therefore at odds with migration and cultural diffusion (Malkki, 1995). However, while the equivalence of the territory and the nation has always been more of a normative principle and political objective, rather than a fait-accompli, today it is particularly susceptible to erosion by processes of globalization with increasing numbers of people leading highly mobile, transnational lives (Haas et al., 2020; Sheller, 2017; Vertovec, 2004).

It is not just the committed nationalists themselves who do not appreciate the hybridity and fluidity of nations, or porosity of borders between them, and who tend to treat territorial states as "de facto containers" of nations (Mitchell, 1997). A large share of the literature on far-right interpretations of territory and place continues to focus mainly on single-country case studies and nationally-centred forms of far-right ideology, including far-right interpretations of place and nature (see, for example, contributions to Forchtner, 2020), without paying adequate attention to the increasingly transnational dimension of far-right politics. We think that this "methodological nationalism" (Wimmer & Glick-Schiller, 2003) may leave scholars ill-equipped to understand ideological and organizational transformations on the far-right resulting from increased transnational connectivity of people who articulate these ideas. In particular, the literature tends to omit ideological and strategic adaptations that migrants sympathizing with the far-right make in new political environments and how they engage in new place- and home-making practices. This paper aims to fill this gap by exploring patterns of activism emerging under pressure of the transnational realities within which increasing numbers of far-right activists pursue their political goals.

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[1] Which means that obtaining formal citizenship, or even being born in the country, does not, from a certain nationalist perspective, ensure becoming a full member of the national community, something Ngozi Fulani, the head of a British domestic abuse charity, found out when attending a reception at Buckingham Palace where she was repeatedly questioned where she was *really* from. See: https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/nov/30/buckingham-palace-where-are-you-from-black-british

[2] The far-right is an umbrella concept which comprises both radical and extreme right, where the former – exemplified by so-called national populist currents – broadly accepts a majoritarian form of democracy from an illiberal, "ethnocractic" perspective, while the latter is more or less openly anti-democratic with Nazism as its farthest extreme (Mudde, 2019). The far-right is a useful term to bring the two together as it reflects the reality of ideological overlaps and strategic cooperation between different positions (Pirro, 2022). While due to its ideological thinness (Freeden, 1998) nationalism may have liberal or left-wing articulations, exclusionary nationalism, or nativism, is a core feature of the far-right (Pirro, 2022).

In this paper, we adopt a transnational lens to consider home-making practices by Polish migrants active in far-right groups operating in a transnational political field between Poland and Britain. To place this phenomenon in a broader historical and ideological context, we begin by introducing nineteenth-century articulations of organic nationalism (Sternhell, 1973), such as Maurice Barrès' doctrine of "the soil and the dead" (*la terre et les morts*). This helps us identify whether transnational far-right groups have departed ideologically from their more traditional, nationally-bounded predecessors. Exploring discursive strategies used to navigate the contradictory place of far-right activism in transnational spaces we identify an ideological shift which consists in emphasis being placed increasingly on the level of civilizational or cultural affinity, bringing whiteness to the fore. This, we argue, adapts the logic of nativism to new circumstances but does not undermine its attachment to place or its fixation on rootedness and its resultant exclusionary implications. Then, in the main part of the paper, we use an anthropological framework to interpret some ritualized performances by Polish far-right activists residing in Britain. The rituals serve the activists' attempts to establish an organic connection with the new host environment by bringing in a particular interpretation of the past where symbolic ancestors or ideological predecessors of today's migrant nationalists played a special heroic role. We see here some long-established ideological tropes running through the mythopoeic narratives and meaning-making practices: the *soil* and the *dead* continue as major symbolic embodiments of far-right political myths (Flood, 2002) and ideologies and much of their followers' effort goes into transplanting these elements symbolically into the new context. To illustrate this, we focus on Polish migrants' activism within local deathscapes through rituals revolving around the graves of Polish soldiers in Britain and examine their role in Polish activists' attempts to claim a special place on the British soil (Garapich, 2014) and the associated processes of racialization and "whitening" (Kalmar, 2023) of Poles in Britain's multicultural context. Going beyond national containerization characteristic of methodological nationalism, the paper opens new avenues for further research of an increasingly transnational nature of far-right politics today, which to date has not received adequate scholarly attention. In particular, we hope that the paper will help scholars to further explore the complex, transnationally constructed empirical reality on the ground where some migrants adhering to far-right ideologies reinterpret notions of place and rootedness to reconcile their transnational lives and nationalist commitments.

Methodology

By using an anthropological, "internalist" methodology to explore the case study of Polish migrants engaging in diverse forms of far-right activism in Britain we hope to fill a gap in research on the far-right which, as Agnieszka Pasieka notes, "is dominated by quantitatively oriented studies and a presentation of individuals and groups in terms of 'political campaign targets,' 'voters,' and 'recipients of political discourses'" (Pasieka, 2021, p. 997). According to Kathleen Blee, scholars have only recently begun to move away from the "externalist" approach to researching the far-right to acknowledge the need for a closer, anthropological angle (Blee, 2007, p. 120.). Reasons for this rarity of ethnographic approaches to the far-right have been debated in recent literature tackling thorny ethical issues of access, safety, trust, empathy, potential legitimization or reproduction of hate in far-right research (Ashe et al. 2021; Blee, 2007; Pasieka, 2019; Pilkington, 2016; Toscano, 2019). As these authors stress, there are risks – political, ethical, reputational – inherent to it, but we agree with Hilary Pilkington that "to prioritize our own ethical comfort constitutes not the enactment of an active political stance but, on the contrary, a form of political faintheartedness" (Pilkington, 2019, p. 36).

This paper is based on data generated through overt ethnographic immersion into several far-right milieus where the tropes of the soil and the dead are reproduced discursively and through public rituals with various degrees of formality and structure. Participant observation, in-depth

biographical interviews, and observation of online activities are the main tools of data collection.[3] We interviewed far-right leaders and decision-makers as well as rank-and-file members. The formal membership in far-right groups is difficult to determine due to the rhizomatic, fluid nature of some of the organizational forms (Griffin, 2003) but most of the interviewees either had significant periods of involvement in organizing rituals around deathscapes and WW2 commemorative monuments or, at the least, donated funds and were active on far-right social media promoting such events. Five of the activists we interviewed were instrumental in initiating grave cleaning or maintenance activities, making it the core of their organizations' articulation of specific historical memory we will discuss further. We also took part in several rituals around Polish veterans' monuments, informal discussions between activists about the logistical and funding issues and observed people taking part in these rituals. As our broader research project,[4] of which this paper's problematics is merely one part, concerns Polish-British connections on the far-right, the interviews revolved around the development of mutual ties and recruitment strategies probing the exchange of ideas and resources but also tensions and limits of far-right transnational cooperation. The majority of our respondents are male and have a working-class background; they tend to be self-employed in construction, as drivers, delivery-, and handy-men. There are a few activists who hold tertiary education. There are also several second- or even third-generation Polish-British nationals. Interviews were conducted in several locations in England (London, Leeds, Manchester, Liverpool, Cambridge, Southport) but we also interviewed several returnees in Poland. For this paper, we paid special attention to the respondents' understanding of, and attachment to, nationalistically-valorized places – in Britain as well as Poland.

We combine the analysis of far-right ideologies and repertoires of action with the activists' narratives, trajectories of engagement and its relation with migration experience. Crucially, we emphasize that the tactics, strategies, and the "what" of activism also sheds light on its "why". The discussion thus includes the prefigurative (Boggs, 1977/8) aspects of far-right activism where "struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present" (Maeckelbergh, 2011, p. 4). Whereas prefigurative politics of left-wing mobilizations have been given a lot of scholarly attention (for a critical review of this literature in relation to post-2008 progressive activism, see Soborski, 2018 and 2019), prefigurative dimensions of far-right movements have been less thoroughly explored (exceptions include Futrell & Simi, 2004). While focusing on the ideas and practices of far-right activists, our approach also looks at the social and – particularly important for this paper – territorial, physical milieus where they operate. In doing this, we follow calls by Cynthia Miller-Idris to catch up with the fast-moving reality of far-right radicalization on the global stage. As she argues, "In addition to focusing on the why and how of far-right radicalization and growth […] we should be asking where and when radicalization happens […] What are the new spaces and places of contemporary far-right extremism?" (Miller-Idris, 2023, p. 3).

This People on this Land: A Look at Organic Nationalism

To evaluate the extent of continuity and change caused within far-right nationalism by its increasingly transnational ideational themes and organizational dynamics, we need to look at the importance of territorial place in its more traditional articulations. Topophilia (Tuan, 1974), or love of place, has always been one of the distinctive features of nationalism. Edmund Burke, put this sentiment in evocatively poetic terms when speaking to English Parliament in 1794, "We all know that the natal soil has a sweetness in it beyond the harmony of verse. This instinct, I say, that

[3] Between September 2023 and August 2024, we have conducted over 50 interviews.

[4] Everyday transnationalism of the far-right: An interdisciplinary study of Polish immigrants' participation in far-right groups in Britain (ES/W010151/2) https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=ES%2FW010151%2F2

binds all creatures to their country, never becomes inert in us" (in Deudney, 1996, p. 132). Burke's words bring to mind an idyllic organic community conceivable only in a society that remains relatively closed and immobile. This way of thinking and its sense of deep emotional attachment to place runs also through romantic, anti-universalist counter-Enlightenment narratives in continental Europe (Biehl & Staudenmaier, 2011; Rueda, 2020) where emphasis is placed on nations as organically bound to particular places, having evolved as political communities within them as their dwellings, both natural and cultural, physical as well as ideational. Through naturalization of historical process, nationalism renders this bond between people and territories both organic and deterministic (Anderson, 1991; Gellner, 1983).

This organic nationalism (Sternhell, 1973) culminated in the thought of Maurice Barrès (1862–1923) who opposed what he saw as an inevitable offspring of universalism: *déracinement* or rootlessness in his organic, botanical vocabulary. Barrès' nationalism is an extreme exemplification of the ideal of biological rootedness in the place, and hence of a categorically localist attachment. In other words, it is localism centred on *la terre et les morts*:

> The soil speaks to us and works with the nation's consciousness quite as much as it cooperates with the dead. The soil gives the active life of the dead its efficacy. Our ancestors pass on as a whole the heritage accumulated in their souls only by the immutable vital activity of the soil (in Steiner, 1970, p. 192).

A crucial conceptual concomitant of this radical form of organic nationalism is a particular conception of inequality, and associated exclusion, which does not need to imply innately different levels of intelligence or talent. A devoted anti-Semite for most of his life, Barrès did not advocate the idea of a racial inferiority of the French Jews. Instead, his uncompromising hostility towards the Jews was based purely on their alleged lack of roots in the French soil – a characteristic that, Barrès believed, necessarily implied their disloyalty to France (Steiner, 1970, p. 181). The notion of fundamental inequality between those who belong and those who do not has been passed on from Barrès, and other nineteenth-century thinkers of a radically nationalist orientation, to the contemporary far-right where, as we shall see, a new form of racism, one which does not refer to biology but to culture, now prevails.

Similar to French nationalists, German thinkers also conceptualized the national community as an organic *Volk* attached to a particular place and expressing itself through distinctive habits, traditions, mythology, and folklore. Accordingly, "people who are the product of the same geographical environment, the same climate, and who heard the same tales and legends at their mother's knee possess a mentality which is unique of its kind" (Sternhell, 2000, p. 144). From this angle, nationality is a matter of nature rather than a civic or political fact. For Romantic philosophers such as Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), nations are separated by virtue of natural features and individuals *naturally* belong to, and are constituted by, their particular nationalities. The nation is not a mere collection of individuals but a *Volkstum* (or folkhood), an organic, indivisible, and unique being that generates particular ways of thinking and living. A later, and especially sinister, articulation of this idea was Blood and Soil (*Blut und Boden*) and back-to-the-land Nazi movement associated with the Artaman League and Richard Walther Darré who acted as the Third Reich's Minister of Food and Agriculture. The movement revolved around the ideal of absolute and exclusive unity between a racially defined national body and a specific territory (Bramwell, 1985). It is widely cited by contemporary writers on the Polish far-right scene who have endorsed its eco-fascist, blood and soil, discourse (for example, Obodrzycki, 2019).

The far-right today thus draws on a long intellectual tradition to posit a vision which centres on rootedness and history, emphasizes incomparability of different local perspectives and is uncompromising in the rejection of what it sees as a "view from nowhere", an abstract cosmopolitan perspective detached from local beliefs and practices and thus devoid of meaning. As one far-right ideologist puts it, "territory is to a people what air is to lungs" (Krebs, 2012, p. 85),

and so any society that detaches itself from its roots and transgresses borders between cultures – for example, by allowing "alien" cultural elements to enter its realm – represents a deviation from the natural, territorially bounded and determined mode of human existence.[5] Lech Obodrzycki, a publicist writing in a Polish far-right outlet *Szturm* associated with the *Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny* (ONR, National Radical Camp), connects members of the national body through shared land and bonds of biological nature. He calls them "peasants" and contrasts their rooted status with that of the "nomads" who, similar to Barrès' Jews, are presented as disloyal individuals who do not belong anywhere, parasites, disruptors of stable, traditional, and morally just ways of living. The question is what would happen if these mythical peasants were *uprooted* and moved. By migrating a former peasant is in danger of "becoming a nomad", so this problematic and threatening creature. There is a potential for strong moral and conceptual dissonance here – if you are nationalist, why migrate? And if you migrate, how do you retain connection with your land? How not to become a nomad?

The paradox at the centre of this paper's argument is that while roots and attachment to place – the national territory and specific locations within it – are core concepts for the far-right, not all followers of far-right ideologies lead such rooted and localized lives. Given nationalism's attachment to place, as a socially constructed area of land, the question is how it articulates its core ideas in transnational spaces. This is not just a theoretical or speculative question. The unprecedented rise in human migration in the last half-century is an integral part of globalization and modernity (Bauman, 2016; Triandafyllidou, 2018) with tens of millions on the move and figures rising. As research on social remittances indicates, ideas, norms and values travel with people (Grabowska et al., 2017; Levitt, 1998) and this includes far-right ideas carried by activists who declare uncompromising loyalty and attachment to place.

A vital challenge for nationalism operating transnationally is the potential loss of biological connection with the "land", "soil", "blood", "national environment" which the "sedentary metaphysics" (Malkki, 1999) embeds in nationalist discourse. One discursive response from the far-right consists in emphasis being shifted onto alternative, transnational or supranational, spaces. Alongside national loyalties, far-right discourses today feature more extensive frames to anchor a sense of loyalty and attachment. The ideas of white racialism provide one example of the shift from the national to a supranational orientation. By choosing "race" as the point of reference, the white supremacy movements have backed off from nationality as the main criterion of identification (Beirich, 2022). Elsewhere, in far-right theory today, the notion of rootedness (2000) is employed to articulate a type of prejudice which is as exclusionary as biological racism and yet can be put forward as a discourse that seems less offensive within the parameters of liberal democracy. Even though it downplays biological racism, the discourse of rootedness leads to the same preference for segregation and rejection of multiculturalism as allegedly jeopardizing separate cultural identities. In practical terms, this position translates into a fierce opposition to immigration, and hence to any global connections that may be held responsible for international flows of people. Other arguments ostensibly reject biological racism and focus instead on large civilizational units to essentialize *cultural* differences. The civilizational focus has been foregrounded through a theoretical discourse within the New Right movement, a pan-European network with the most significant base in France, where the *Nouvelle Droite* emerged in the 1970s

[5] Relatedly, the far-right often declares itself the main ally of the natural world and mobilizes ecological concerns to reinforce its longstanding opposition to globalism. There is now a large body of literature on eco-fascism or, more broadly, far-right ecologism and especially the use of ecologist tropes in constructing the far-right's anti-immigration stance (Campion, 2023; Moore & Roberts, 2022). Again, however, while this literature is valuable, it tends to explore ecological threads within traditional – i.e., nationally-focused, forms of far-right ideology and produce single-country case studies (Forchtner, 2020) or, at most, comparative analyses of a limited number of countries (Lubarda, 2024).

(for an insider overview, see de Benoist, 2017, 2018, 2019). Evident here is also the "clash of civilizations" thesis (Huntington, 1996) which has resonated in New Right circles.

The strategy of reframing the concept of belonging by elevating it to a higher, supranational level, defined either by culture or "race" is employed, in exoteric forms in everyday political contestation by Polish activists in far-right circles in Britain when asserting their claim to a special position in the country's social hierarchy, in contrast to groups deemed culturally alien and hostile, especially Muslims. The race factor may form an element in the strategy that we call integration-through-racism (Garapich, Jochymek, & Soborski, 2024) and others described as "pathological integration" (Fox & Mogilnicka, 2017). This discourse of whiteness emerged on particular occasions, such as during Black Lives Matter demonstrations, which some Polish far-right activists opposed by taking part in the largest counter-demonstration in London with thousands of British far-right supporters or organizing their own counter-demonstrations. But racism may also emerge in more nuanced forms, for example in references in far-right activists' online posts to "Christian Europe" which in Polish discourse always assumes whiteness. This process of "becoming white" within a new host country (Kalmar, 2023) is not without precedence as similar efforts were made in other contexts by the Italians, the Irish and the Jews (Brodkin, 1998; Ignatiev, 1995; Jacobson, 1998). What differs in our case is that, as we will see, Poles in Britain draw also on various symbolic resources that strongly resonate with the British context, positioning them as special "kind of whites", the ones who are symbolically associated with armed struggle, defence of the British soil, and spilled blood.

Notwithstanding discursive attempts to circumvent this, far-right nationalists leading transnational lives represent a contradiction in terms. But this tension reflects the broader paradox of nationalism which, according to Zygmunt Bauman, posits, in a deterministic fashion, a primordial fixed collective identity – nationhood – while at the same time urging an agentic drive to achieve or sustain it. As Bauman writes, quoting Barrès, the soil and the dead "cannot be chosen freely. Before any choice can be as much as contemplated, one has been already born onto this soil here and now and into this succession of ancestors and their posterity" (Bauman, 1992, p. 684). At the same time, Bauman continues, nationalism "makes the nationhood into a task always to be struggled for and never to be fulfilled in the degree justifying the complacency that comes with victory" (p. 684). As a result,

> nations can never stay still; complacency and fading vigilance is their worst sin – a mortal (suicidal) sin, to be sure. The order that sustains them and which they sustain by their 'daily plebiscite' is after all artificial (even though 'natural' because of reflecting what the soil and blood dictate), and hence precarious from stem to stern (Bauman, 1992, p. 687).

This fundamental "paradox of man-made collective identities which may hold fast only when perceived as beyond human power" (Bauman, 1992, p. 696) derives from the fact that although nationalism centres on biological determinism, it has to deal with reality which is far from being neatly arranged into distinct *Volks*, states, or cultures. This contradiction is felt particularly acutely in the conditions of super-diversity (Vertovec, 2023) brought about by globalization processes. To cope with it, nationalists draw from a vast and fluctuating pool of cultural and ideational resources transmitted through political narratives, often of mythopoeic character, as well as engaging in ritualized meaning-making practices. In subsequent sections we look at how a particularly acute instance of this contradiction, aggravated by its transnational dimension, is dealt with by Polish far-right groups operating between Britain and Poland. We pay special attention to meaning-making activities of far-right organizations within deathscapes around WW2 commemoration events foregrounding the established nationalist tropes of the dead and the soil.

Polish Transnational Nationalism

The post-1989 far-right scene in Poland has been complex, with a plethora of various organizations taking a wide variety of sometimes conflicting positions on different issues (for useful overviews of the Polish far-right scene, see Kajta, 2020; McManus-Czubińska et al., 2003; Pankowski, 2010; Witkowski, 2023). The variation includes a broad spectrum of religious alignments ranging from pre-Vatican II integrist Catholicism (*Narodowe Odrodzenie Polski*) to a rejection of Christianity in favour of various neopagan beliefs (*Zadruga*). Another line of division concerns attitudes towards Russia and its invasion of Ukraine. A particularly consequential cleavage separates supporters of a strong and proactive state, including in its role as welfare-provider (ONR) from advocates of the "free market", extending to right-wing libertarianism represented by *Konfederacja*. However, regardless of their political differences, all of these positions assume a moral imperative, similar to Barrès', that the "land and the dead" need to be defended against external forces, epitomized by the EU, NATO, US, left-wing ideologies, and other "globalist" forces (see, for example, Braun & Sommer 2020; Doboszyński, Gmurczyk, & Holland, 2013). These fears underpin ideological arguments and narratives that hark back to pre-WW2 Polish fascism.

How is this nationalism inflected on a transnational level? As in case of other emigration countries, Polish nationalism has always had a strong diasporic angle (Garapich, 2016; Erdmans, 1992, 1998; Garbacia et al., 2007; Jaroszyńska-Kirchmann, 2004) and this is an important cultural resource that contemporary Polish activists benefit from. Far-right nationalist groups have emerged in destinations of large waves of Polish immigration since Poland's accession to the EU which granted Polish citizens full rights to move, work, and settle in all countries of the bloc. Over the course of almost two decades, more than two million Poles have emigrated to other European countries (Kaczmarczyk & Okólski, 2008) with the UK emerging as a key destination. Although Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic have reduced these flows, and the number of Polish nationals living in the UK has come down from over 1 million in 2017 to over 700.000 in 2021 (Office for National Statistics, 2021), this is still a significant population. As documented by the media, anti-racist activists and NGOs (Lowles & Collins, 2018) and some rare research on the subject (Garapich, Jochymek, & Soborski, 2024) Polish far-right groups in the UK are particularly active and assertive, and several Polish individuals have been convicted under British anti-terror legislation.[6] Notably, there has also been an active and public effort by British far-right organizations – such as British National Party, EDL, Britain First or UKIP – to engage on various levels with Polish politics, network with Polish far-right parties, and even attempts to recruit Poles as members.

Polish far-right groups active in Britain offer an opportunity to explore how their ideological output and activist repertoires reproduce organic nationalism's discourses on the soil and the dead in new settings. Focusing our lens on what ideas, symbols, and themes are being omitted, redefined, or amplified once they have migrated with their proponents is key to understanding the appeal as well as limits of the far-right and demonstrates its flexibility and adaptability. Compared with Polish context, our data reveals a lack of emotive tropes related to their new places of residence. They are generally silent on the issue of nature and place-bound identity when it comes to the British land. We did not hear praise or nostalgia or affectively phrased passages about the Welsh countryside or Scottish Highlands or English villages in Polish far-right discourses produced abroad. In fact, some of our respondents went as far as to declare their alienation from and dislike of the British climate and landscape: *this weather, which was 80% cloudy, depressing. I didn't like the flora there at all. I didn't like the landscapes at all I hated those landscapes from*

[6] See for example: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-beds-bucks-herts-55063243; https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-48672929; https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/jan/12/britain-first-fan-who-drove-van-at-london-restaurant-owner-walks-free?CMP=share_btn_url

the beginning (Aleksander).[7] Where the "land" or "soil" are invoked in symbolic connection to nationalism they refer to Polish land and soil. In light of migration scholarship, this is hardly surprising. Migrants' incorporation into various domains of the host country is a long, sometimes multigenerational process, involving complex "anchoring" (Grzymała-Kazłowska, 2020) into the local labour market and even more complex processes of learning and acquiring new skills, knowledge and familiarity with local cultural codes, norms, and values. However, considering the strength of territorial, "topophilic" (Tuan, 1974) sentiments on the far-right, one can expect some other ways through which biological connection with places is established. We turn to one such case below where the dead buried in the foreign soil become a powerful medium for sustaining the sense of national identity among the activists who claim their assumed ideological ancestors' symbolic lineage.

Through the Dead to Ownership of the Soil: Polish Deathscapes in the UK

Under modernity, "[t]he ostensibly firmest foundations of identity (such as territory or racial stock) have been exposed […] as irreparably fluid, ambivalent and otherwise unreliable" (Bauman, 1992, p. 696). This fluidity has made reconstructions and reaffirmations of symbolic power by imagined national communities (Anderson, 1991) especially important. In particular, this concerns migrant nationalists engaged in "home-making" away from "home". Until they find abroad a worthy way to enact their nationalist beliefs, such migrants experience a feeling of living in a contradiction. As we read in the blog of one of the activists who spent considerable time and resources on maintaining graves of WW2 Polish veterans:

> *Leaving my homeland, I felt like a traitor, but only until the day when I realized that it was not a betrayal but a mission. Over the years, I have met many distinguished Poles here and a completely different part of history than that I had known so far. First, I met a Home Army medic and participant in the Warsaw Uprising, who quickly became my mentor. It was thanks to this exceptional woman that I understood that I was not here without a reason. Today, I prefer to think that I am here to loudly speak up for our Heroes […] Leaving Poland showed me how much there is to do in Great Britain so that the memory of the Poles who once lived here – the Heroes – does not disappear and that the next generations of the Polish Diaspora* [Polonia] *remember them as well.*[8]

Polish far-right activists we spoke to see themselves as forming a community of values (see Anderson, 2013) which revolves around ethnically essentialized Polishness and Catholicism and, as evident in the quote above, is carried through particular symbols of Polish military history, mainly associated with the WW2 and Polish participation in the Battle of Britain. Polish nationalist organizations in Britain invest significant time and resources to promote the idea of Polish combatants as the soul of Polishness. Most of our respondents were adamant that this history must be remembered and honoured:

> *Wherever Poles appear over the years, in terms of wars etc. we have always taken the lead. - bravery, honour.... And remembering, being able […] to pay tribute to the people who lie there, who are forgotten, is something beautiful* (Stefan).

One of the key spaces where they are able to do that are numerous cemeteries with graves of Polish veterans, monuments which can be found across England. As one of the activists told us:

[7] Names of the activists quoted in this paper have been changed.
[8] https://karolkamilperuta.com/o-mnie/

> *We went to the graveyard, graves… graves of insurgents etc. Somewhere we managed to find some names, find insurgents who rest here somewhere, something like this. And I guess it started from that, just like this, we started cleaning* (Zbigniew).

From the interviews we conducted there emerges a sense of obligation to protect the reconstructed memory these deathscapes embody: *Cleaning graves is more a question of self-respect, respect for history and the people who fought for my freedom. It is my duty. That's what I believe, personally* (Zbigniew). At the same time, as another respondent (Olgierd) explains, the fulfilment of that obligation brings migrant activists closer to their country of origin:

> Researcher: *And why did you clean those graves?*
>
> Olgierd: *Because it's our patriotic duty […] It's probably a form of expressing some kind of longing for the country, you know?*
>
> Researcher: *Longing for the country?*
>
> Olgierd: *[…] I don't know how to phrase it, but let's say something like that. Maybe not even that so much, but more of a desire to stay in touch with the country.*

Other activists emphasize the affinity that connects them to earlier generations of Poles who lived and died in Britain: *I feel an attachment to these people, that it is like... that we are connected by blood* (Witek).

In reality, few of the activists concerned, who mostly arrived after 2004, are related in terms of family bonds to post-war refugees. Although some family connections existed (Burrell, 2003; Garapich, 2016) these two groups belong, by and large, to very different migratory cohorts, generations, and social realms – one involves British Poles living in Britain for perhaps eight decades as well as their descendants, who are British, the other recent economic migrants taking advantage of the freedom of movement in the EU. Nevertheless, since late 2000s, there has been a significant increase in the interest from various Polish groups in Britain in the local history of their place of settlement, and this refers to the *Polish* history of a particular town or area. Here a local cemetery plays a very prominent role, and new groups have come out with the idea of grave search, maintenance, and symbolic events such as grave cleaning ritual (Garapich, 2014). Interestingly, groups and individuals who maintain graves usually do not request permission from family members. Sometimes, when we ask them "do you ask the family if you can do this [maintain, clean graves]?" we are met with a surprised look, or an outright denial that this is needed. In this sense, activists are making a collective claim to what is essentially a private, intimate space. They perceive what is private and personal as public and communal – asking for permission would undermine this. Sometimes the initiative is met with protest from the families involved, but at other times with appreciation. The labelling of the graves as "forgotten" also implies that the British descendants of the Polish veterans do not care. One group calls itself "Defenders of Polish Graves" [9] and now compete in attending, cleaning, and "claiming" particular graves as "their own" to protect. This development is also fuelled by Polish state own policies towards the diaspora (Nowosielski & Nowak, 2022), and the focus on history and politics of memory employed by the previous Polish right-wing government of Law and Justice (Jaskułowski & Majewski, 2023a). This involved, in particular, the development of the cult of so-called Cursed Soldiers, members of post-1945 underground guerrilla units (Jaskułowski & Majewski, 2023b).

[9] There is a class element in that name too, as one activist sarcastically commented: "they are called Defenders of Polish Graves, since it sounds better than Cleaners of Polish Graves"…

These policies mean that funding for Poles abroad and support for such activities from the Polish state is available and numerous organizations benefit from it. Unsurprisingly, conflicts and tensions between groups thus occur, as grave maintenance becomes a source of prestige, funding, and identity.[10]

Apart from grave-cleaning rituals, a number of events attended or organized by Polish far-right groups in Britain take place around commemoration dates and locations. These include gatherings of activists and officials for anniversaries of the start of the WW2, Warsaw Uprising, or the Katyń massacre. While these events are attended by the broader public, far-right activists are particularly involved in organizing, publicizing, and ritualizing these events, with flags, flares, and public speeches voicing nationalistic stances. We must stress that the far-right groups that organize these events are not numerous in terms of membership albeit very vocal in public spaces and, as mentioned, have caught attention of the British media and authorities. Sometimes this resulted in controversies as some groups were refused entry to the cemetery due to their association with the far-right. One group organized a commemoration event in front of a monument, without seeking formal permission, which later drew condemnation from the official carers of that particular monument. Again, asking for permission would be akin to accepting local hierarchies of power, and the group involved made a direct claim to that monument as Polish, hence theirs to organize an event around it, which included flares, and a nationalist hip-hop song by a well-known Polish far-right rapper who appeared on a large mobile screen streamed from Poland.

Polish activists also post pictures of various Polish soldiers' graves on their social media platforms. The dimension of "home-making" is evident here, especially as the figure, of a Polish WW2 combatant corresponds on various levels with Britain's own obsession with the war and resonates in debates on postcolonialism, legacy of the Empire and search of a new, post-Brexit sense of identity. There is certainly hope on the part of our interviewees that their actions can contribute towards greater British appreciation of Polish merits and heroism:

> Stefan: *Maybe some Englishman passing by, looking at what is happening there – "well, there are some people in the cemetery, they are lighting flares, some march is going by, Polish flags, why are they doing this etc." – maybe it will open someone's eyes.*
>
> Researcher: *What for?*
>
> Stefan: *To appreciate what* [Polish] *people did for them. So that next year he might read about these people who lie in this grave, in this cemetery. Maybe next year he might take, if he has one, his son, his grandson or he himself might come to this cemetery, might say: "look, here lies someone who lost his life for this, for us to live in a free country".*

While the transnational dimension of the Polish-British far-right is evident here, both symbolically – Polish bodies buried in the British soil – and organizationally, with increasing recognition from British activists and groups,[11] there are limits to how far this transnationalism can go. Several activists showed awareness of their contradictory position in being a "nationalist abroad" and that in principle a true nationalist should stay put. Some, for example, declared "we don't want to move the furniture in a house where we are guests" – a phrase conveying that in essence they will never

[10] To describe this activity, some activists use a vernacular term "grobbing" - a neologism made of Polish noun "grób" (grave) and English ending -ing, creating a specific hybrid term denoting commemorative activities around graves. It is rather unofficial, there is a tone of sarcasm and humour in that word, people do not use it on formal occasions.

[11] There is no space here to discuss the British involvement, but we explored it in another article (Garapich, Jochymek, & Soborski, 2024).

be “home”. That is why some Polish activists recognize some political issues and debates as a British “business”: *I don't want to be a hypocrite, so I'm certainly not going to organize Piccadilly protests on the main promenade in Manchester to convince the English to some anti-Muslim views or whatever...* (Witek). In this context, celebration of a particular interpretation of Polish history – militaristic, heroic, value-driven – and efforts to protect its material legacy – Polish graves – becomes one of the directions that Polish far-right activism in Britain can deem appropriate and relevant:

> *I have something to do here, that there is also some work for people with my views and that it is not completely pointless to be a nationalist abroad, because there are people here who can be helped in some way, or let's say places that are worth taking care of.* (Witek)

Cemeteries – in Witek’s words, places that are worth taking care of – are spaces of liminality par excellence. They bind different worlds and ontological categories – the living and the dead, nature and culture, the biological and the social, past and present. Their liminality, as described in van Gennep’s classic work (1962), allows us to move from one domain to the other and to deal with the inevitable, by socially accepting and turning it into a norm whereby the biological act of death becomes also a social one. Deathscapes are “the material expression in the landscape of practices relating to death” (Teather, 2001, p. 185), but in the migratory context they gain particular importance due to evoking notions of home, belonging, and place-making. Their home-making function makes deathscapes a contested terrain of different power dynamics, narratives and counternarratives (Kong, 1999). From our perspective, they become important ritual spaces precisely because they epitomize the vital connection with the imaginary ancestors – and ideological predecessors – and the physical soil which may, in the case discussed here, be notionally foreign, but which represents Polish history, *the kind of history* – as Marek, one of the activists, told us – *which is marked by graves.*

Literature on migration and funerary culture among diasporic communities points to an important factor of place-making in decisions concerning what to do with the dead – send them back to the “homeland” or bury them in their new “home”? – and immigrant cemeteries emerge as important substitutes for the nostalgically imagined “home”. But cemeteries of migrants or members of diasporas are also a form of making a claim to a piece of land from host country because, as Hunter (2016) argues, “[d]eath in diaspora may be the occasion to lay what are perhaps the deepest and most permanent foundations for settlement and belonging of migrants and subsequent generations, through burial and other funerary practices in the adopted homeland” (p. 249). In other words, cemeteries that are the locus of power articulation, and of re-enactment of far-right myths as performed by Polish activists, are spatial and symbolic units that allow to connect “here” with “there” in the context of immigrant status and reconcile the root element of the soil, with a vision of heroic military history, through the bodies of real or imagined soldiers buried abroad. In the process strongly masculine and heteronormative undertones of this discourse are reinforced as the figure of the Polish soldier evokes manhood embodied in a heterosexual male warrior – physically fit, able to defend the land, the soil and the vulnerable, especially women and children.

As Van Gennep (1962) reminds us, one of main functions of rituals are “restorative”, aimed to respond to social crises (due to deaths, but also changes in collective status) and subsequent shifts in social structure. In the context of funerary rituals, we have a ritual of commemoration which is directed at the crisis of identity and status of Poles in Britain which, through a nationalist lens, brings an uneasy contradiction and tension. The literature on necropolitics and removal or retention of dead bodies for current political purposes in this context points to how in turbulent times of crisis and social upheaval, the necropolitical becomes *the* political (Verdery, 1999; Young & Light, 2013). An ideologically committed far-right activist who leaves their homeland behind has

their value system put in doubt and enters a space marred by social crisis. This moment of liminal disruption demands restoration and reinstalling of order and ideological coherence. With its rich transnational military history and Catholic patriarchal discourse, Polish nationalism offers perfect spaces for rituals to restore and regain ideological balance. For far-right immigrant activists the potential for conceptual dissonance is significant, hence the answer is the increased use of cultural, religious, and symbolic resources to ease the tension inherent in the potentiality of becoming a nomad. This is dealt through finding new and reinventing old symbolic spaces where the power of the dead and soil can be reestablished. The paradox of determinism versus agentic meaning-making practices discussed by Bauman is dealt with through placing ever stronger emphasis on the latter.

As perceived by Polish migrant far-right activists, the military history of the Polish diaspora evokes several symbolic tropes simultaneously – heroism, sacrifice, whiteness, freedom from tyranny, Europeanness, Christianity, hetero-normativity – all materialized in the physical presence of Polish graves in Britain. Although engaged in different networks, and sometimes not knowing each other, Polish activists we interviewed nevertheless seem to share similar conservative, nativist, civilizationist worldview, and occupy similar symbolic space related to Poland and its history, in particular in its articulation of white, European or cultural supremacy, class position, unique historical mission and place in a hierarchy of belonging in the UK which generate similar tropes, meanings and practices. Through its connation of military history, the "defence" of Polish graves campaign is also able to root the group in a new soil within a recognizable imaginary community of values and attributes – namely, as white, Christian, European, "patriotic" defenders of Europe which is under attack.

This reproduction of military symbolism does not happen in a void. It is also a message to British people who interpret it in their own way, but likely with intended connotations intact. The role of Polish nationalist mythology, with its emphasis on defence – never of attack – of Christianity, Europe, and Western civilization has a mutually reinforcing functionality for both the British and the Polish far-right. For the former it is set as a norm, an ideal model; for the latter it is used as a discursive tool to privilege Poles on the racial hierarchy in the UK. The sense of belonging is (re)produced through discourses of white supremacy – whether more covert (as with our respondents' references to "cultural proximity" of Poles to Brits) or overt (as with assertions to the need to defend "the white Europe"). In any case, this is also a response to a demand from sections of British society as Polish nationalist mythology offers British politics a rich repertoire of symbolic capital and tropes that can be evoked to reactivate nostalgia for Britain's own dominant past, the by-gone era of an ordered, hierarchical, and ultimately white Britain. Employed keenly by the British right, these ideas are inherent to what Francesca Melhuish (2024) calls anti-immigrant "*Powelite* nostalgia" based on "the long-standing and widely shared emotional desire to restore white English colonial authority over 'foreign' Others" (Melhuish, 2024, p. 2). In that sense, Polish individuals who engage in far-right politics in deathscapes are not only claiming a piece of physical soil, but also making politically meaningful claims to a particular vision of Britain and Britishness in its white and Christian incarnation, with a masculine, military symbolism around it.

Conclusion

Political philosophy revolving around "the dead and the soil" is an important component of the far-right ideological repertoire. But while the far-right draws on the long tradition of political thought centred around rootedness and naturalized notions of national identity, in today's global context with its compression of time and space along with the increase and diversification of transnational mobility, far-right nationalism looks increasingly unfeasible, incompatible with the world on the move. Still, political imagination and practice are always in flux and fluctuate in ways that do not

necessarily conform to logic but can be very effective in mobilizing followers. Of course, the far-right groups and activists engaging in abovementioned activities may have also had other institutional and personal reasons to conceive and carry them out. However, based on our study of relevant political discourses and rituals, it is clear that what we are dealing with here is a unique way through which far-right ideology and activism adapt and realign with a changing reality and transnational context. Given that organic nationalism celebrates a primordial, organic bond between "this people" and "this land", migrant nationalists seem to represent a major contradiction in terms. Due to the disconnection between migrants – in our case, Poles – and their countries of residence, the deep affinity with the soil – in our case, the British soil – would seem to be lacking. And yet, an organic sentiment underpinning their nationalist beliefs is clearly identifiable; in fact, there is a special effort on their part to sustain and cultivate it through intense political myth-making and ritualized meaning-making practices that claim parts of Britain as Polish, or "colonize" it through a particular interpretation of history and its protagonists, the dead. While the British land may not, as such, be evoking loyalty or pride, specific places may become *polonized* through symbolic engagements with deathscapes and activities that centre around the soil as a core concept of far-right ideologies and the dead as their main actors. This happens also due to the demand from the British side expressing its post-imperial nostalgia. The symbolic claim to pieces of British soil in sacred spaces of the cemetery connects Polish and British far-right ideological tropes and symbols, turning the ostensible contradiction of nationalism abroad into a functional, relevant, and politically effective force on a transnational scale.

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