

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Cue Brexit: Performing Global Britain at the UN Security Council

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Abstract

The role of performance in ontological security seeking is underdeveloped, despite the fact that many elements of such behaviour – narratives, rituals, routinised meetings – carry a distinctive performative quality. Drawing on Butlerian performance theory, this article makes the case that performances are essential to re-establishing coherence and a sense of self following ontologically critical situations. The reproduction of the self, especially while directly addressing fundamental existential questions, is an important way to overcome critical situations. At the state level, this reproduction of self also includes a reproduction of the international system, a task which is best enacted in everyday diplomatic practice. To explore this theory, I use Brexit as an illustrative case study. Brexit was a moment of profound crisis for the United Kingdom (UK) and an ontologically critical situation. It forced the UK to reposition itself on the world stage and confront significant challenges to its self-understanding. In Westminster, these efforts centred on ‘Global Britain’ – a narrative shift that bridged the identity gap and provided a thin framework for foreign policy. At the same time, British diplomats were tasked with international realignment post-Brexit. In this way, everyday diplomatic practice became Brexit performances.

Keywords: Brexit; ontological security; performance theory; UN Security Council

Introduction

The role of ontological security in everyday political practice remains contested. On the one hand, ontological security concerns frame the acceptability of actions, policies, and strategic narratives. On the other, identifying ontological security-seeking behaviour is difficult. There has been work on how states use narrative, ritual, and significant partnerships to manage ontological stress, but the role of performance as an overarching category remains under-researched. In this article, I show that ontological security-seeking behaviours are often rooted in performativity, and that performance can allow actors to reify the outer boundaries of the self and find stability, especially when under stress. Political performances can be used to convince or persuade, to virtue signal, to mark change, to express solidarity. Yet most of the focus on performance within political science has been confined to how performances are made to act upon an audience. If ‘theatricality is at the heart of the state’, there remains a significant gap in understanding what performances provide to the state.¹ By drawing on Judith Butler’s notion of performativity, this article demonstrates that sedimentation of foreign-policy performance can provide ontological security for state actors and the material for resignification following crises.

¹Alexander Sam Jeffrey, *The Improvised State: Sovereignty, Performance and Agency in Dayton Bosnia* (Malden, MA: Wiley & Sons, 2012), p. 20.

To interrogate the linkage between performance and ontological security, Brexit will be used as an illustrative case. Domestic ontological security-management techniques with regards to Brexit have been explored by other authors, but insufficient consideration has been given to how Brexit functioned as an ontological stressor in diplomatic spaces. Moreover, these spaces may carry different weight for British foreign policy, especially given the UK's outsized role in international politics. This article takes one such stage for foreign policy – the UN Security Council (UNSC) – and shows how performances changed during the Brexit process and how these performances reflect fundamental existential anxieties. Drawing on Filip Ejdus's work on critical situations, I argue that Brexit forced central questions about existence, relations, finitude (death), and autobiography into the foreground, and performing the answers to these questions in international fora served to build a subtle but stable bridge between 'before' and 'after'.²

This article will analyse how Brexit performances played out in the UNSC annual meeting on cooperation with the European Union (EU) on matters of peace and security. This meeting provides an ideal stage for Brexit performances, because UK state agents are confronted directly with the loss, trauma, and rebirth associated with Brexit. Using Ejdus's framework on fundamental questions and elements of Butlerian performance theory, this article analyses all speeches made in this annual meeting by UK agents during the 2010–22 period.

This article unfolds as follows. First, I introduce ontological security and how it links with Butler's concept of performativity. I then turn to the notion of 'critical situations' and argue that critical situations are key moments in which performativity and ontological security intersect. Following this, I discuss the methodological challenges of analysing performativity before introducing my case and the narrative performance method. I illustrate this theoretical discussion with the Brexit case. I discuss 'Global Britain' as a post-Brexit foreign-policy script and then show the limits of this script for diplomacy in multilateral fora. Finally, I analyse a set of UK speeches in the UN Security Council using an analytical framework that ties together Filip Ejdus's work on critical situations and the notion of resignification and performativity.

Ontological security and international relations

Ontological Security Studies (OSS) is a growing field in International Relations that draws on insights from sociology, psychoanalysis, and existentialist philosophy. The core argument is that individuals seek to create stable autobiographical narratives and social worlds in order to manage the normal anxieties of being in the world.³ To be ontologically secure is to be secure in one's sense of self, and to have that self recognised and affirmed by others. In doing so, the individual achieves the coherence in life and basic trust that allows for agency.⁴ OSS was adapted into International Relations in the mid-2000s as part of the twin identity and narrative turns. It has since developed into a rich field, with scholars adapting the core theory using sociological,⁵ psychoanalytical,⁶ existential,⁷ and constructivist⁸ lenses. Successful OSS research has explored how ontological

²Filip Ejdus, 'Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:4 (2017), pp. 883–908; Filip Ejdus, *Crisis and Ontological Insecurity: Serbia's Anxiety over Kosovo's Secession* (Cham: Springer, 2020).

³Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

⁴Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

⁵Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity: Habits, capabilities and ontological security', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2 (2006), pp. 270–85; Brent J. Steele, 'Ontological security and the power of self-identity: British neutrality and the American Civil War', *Review of International Studies*, 31:3 (2005), pp. 519–40.

⁶John Cash, 'Psychoanalysis, cultures of anarchy, and ontological insecurity', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 306–21; Catarina Kinnvall, 'Borders and fear: Insecurity, gender and the far right in Europe', *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 23:4 (2015), pp. 514–29.

⁷Christopher S. Browning, "'Je suis en terrasse': Political violence, civilizational politics, and the everyday courage to be", *Political Psychology*, 39:2 (2018), pp. 243–61.

⁸Felix Berenskötter, 'Parameters of a national biography', *European Journal of International Relations*, 20:1 (2014), pp. 262–88; Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12 (2016), pp. 610–27.

security can be found in intersubjective relationships;⁹ how it can be implicated and targeted;¹⁰ how states can experience shame or guilt as a result of insecurity;¹¹ and how ontological insecurity can be a precursor to policy change.¹²

This field has subsequently expanded to include discussions on state-level ontological security and the sources thereof.¹³ State-level analysis has been the subject of some debate, as some scholars argue that states are incapable of the reflexivity and ‘inner life’ necessary for ontological security.¹⁴ Others see the state self from a traditional social constructivist standpoint, in which the self/other dynamic is the primary marker for maintaining ontological security through trust and significant relationships.¹⁵ Still others frame the state self through the concept of national autobiography, where dominant narratives of the state form the basis of acceptable action.¹⁶ As will be demonstrated later, this research takes a perspective rooted in Butler’s theory of performativity, in which narrative, performance, and the self/other distinction all play a role.

Much of the empirical work within OSS deals less with the notion of security and more with that of *insecurity* and how anxiety weaves into daily life for international actors.¹⁷ In short, there is an empirical focus on how ontological security is managed, and the techniques used by actors – including states – to keep the ‘impression of chaos’ at bay.¹⁸ Indeed, there is a growing debate among OSS scholars as to whether an actor can actually be wholly ontologically secure given the pervasiveness of normal anxiety and pressure to ‘maintain consistent self-concepts.’¹⁹ Yet if we follow Mitzen in understanding ontological insecurity as the ‘deep, incapacitating fear of not being able to organize the threat environment, and thus not being able to get by in the world,’²⁰ then this state, too, must be seen as anomalous. The liminal space between security and insecurity, therefore, is where change and motion occur within international politics.

With this in mind, there has been a shift to conceptualise actors not as ontologically secure as such, but as *seeking* ontological security, which makes room for change. A largely ontologically secure actor can ‘find continuity in a reality constantly evolving’ and will act to secure the self by adjusting to cope with anxiety unleashed by change.²¹ Ontological security, therefore, becomes less about maintaining the self and more about how we ‘seek the security our self – spatially, temporally, and relationally – through the performance of routines, the narration of biographies, the embodiment of memories, and the trust we place in, and support we receive

⁹Mitzen, ‘Anchoring Europe’s civilizing identity’.

¹⁰Derek Bolton, ‘Targeting ontological security: Information warfare in the modern age’, *Political Psychology*, 42:1 (2021), pp. 127–42.

¹¹Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (London: Routledge, 2008).

¹²Ejdus, *Crisis and Ontological Security*.

¹³See especially Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, ‘Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47; Thomas Colley and Carolijn van Noort, *Strategic Narratives, Ontological Security and Global Policy: Responses to China’s Belt and Road Initiative* (Cham: Springer, 2022); Hugo von Essen and August Danielson, ‘A typology of ontological insecurity mechanisms: Russia’s military engagement in Syria’, *International Studies Review*, 25:2 (2023), pp. 1–25; Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70.

¹⁴Richard Ned Lebow, ‘Identity’, in Felix Berensköter (ed.), *Concepts in World Politics* (London: SAGE Publishing, 2016), pp. 73–87.

¹⁵Mitzen, ‘Ontological security in world politics’.

¹⁶Berensköter, ‘Parameters’; Steele, *Ontological Security*.

¹⁷See especially Bolton, ‘Targeting ontological security’; Karl Gustafsson and Nina C. Krickel-Choi, ‘Returning to the roots of ontological security: Insights from the existentialist anxiety literature’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:3 (2020), pp. 875–95; Mitzen, ‘Ontological security in world politics’.

¹⁸Jef Huysmans, ‘Security! What do you mean?: From concept to thick signifier’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:2 (1998), pp. 225–255 (p. 243).

¹⁹Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, ‘Returning to the roots of ontological security’; Mitzen ‘Ontological security in world politics’; Steele, *Ontological Security*, p. 3.

²⁰Mitzen, ‘Ontological security in world politics’, p. 273.

²¹Regina Karp, ‘Identity and anxiety: Germany’s struggle to lead’, *European Security*, 27:1 (2018), pp. 58–81.

from, our significant relationships.²² Where and how actors seek ontological security is a subject of some debate. However, one avenue for understanding this process may be to turn to the notion of performativity.

Performativity: A key source of ontological security?

Butler's theory of performativity is uniquely situated for understanding how ontological security is managed on the international stage. In her work on performativity, Butler argues that 'the body becomes its gender through series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time.'²³ Gender, she argues, emerges as the result of a 'legacy of sedimented acts' rather than some predetermined essence.²⁴ Thus, performativity should be understood not as a simple act of performance, but rather 'as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names.'²⁵ Simply put, performativity deals with understanding the 'manners by which identity is brought to life through discourse.'²⁶

Though Butler's work refers exclusively to gender performance, these deeply sedimented performative regimes can also be reflected elsewhere. Even national identity – a complex and tricky concept at the best of times – could also be conceptualised like gender as a 'temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms.'²⁷ Indeed, David Campbell drew on Butler to make a similar argument: 'Whether we are talking of "the body" or "the state", or of particular bodies and states, the identity of each is performatively constituted. Moreover, the constitution of identity is achieved through the inscription of boundaries that serve to demarcate an "inside" from an "outside", a "self" from an "other", a "domestic" from a "foreign".'²⁸ Campbell was speaking specifically about foreign policy and the nature of the state in the international system, but the same can be argued from any hegemonic understanding of the state. What it means 'to be American' in international spaces goes beyond notions of stereotypes and roles. It is a legacy of interwoven embodied performances, discourse, and narrative that is iterative and in that iteration also constrains action by 'materialising' the boundaries of self in the same way that the legacy of gender performances brings about a hegemonic understanding of gender.²⁹ As Butler notes, the repetition of performances in society as a whole operate in the materialisation of gender: 'Performativity is thus not a singular "act", for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms, and to the extent that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition.'³⁰

State performances, therefore, reflect legacies, and serve to construct an intersubjective understanding of the state: one that gives self-esteem, status, and a sense of one's place in the social world. Moreover, Epstein notes that like Butler's analysis of gender, 'there may in fact be nothing beyond the behaviour' where the state is reproduced.³¹ Drawing a line from this to ontological security

²² Ben Roshier, 'And now we're facing that reality too': Brexit, ontological security, and intergenerational anxiety in the Irish border region', *European Security*, 31:1 (2022), pp. 21–38 (p. 22).

²³ Judith Butler, 'Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory', *Theatre Journal*, 40:4 (1988), pp. 519–33 (p. 523).

²⁴ Butler, 'Performative acts', p. 523.

²⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), p. 2.

²⁶ Rebecca Adler-Nissen, Charlotte Galpin, and Ben Rosamond, 'Performing Brexit: How a post-Brexit world is imagined outside the United Kingdom', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19:3 (2017), pp. 573–91 (p. 575).

²⁷ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 10.

²⁸ David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 9.

²⁹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 2.

³⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 12.

³¹ Charlotte Epstein, 'Constructivism or the eternal return of universals in International Relations: Why returning to language is vital to prolonging the owl's flight', *European Journal of International Relations*, 19:3 (2013), pp. 499–519 (p. 509), emphasis in original.

is rather straightforward. Performativity shores up key pillars of ontological security – routines, rituals, self-narration – and in doing so provides a constant reinforcement of the hegemonic script. This, in turn, imbues others in the system with a sense of trust, because not only does Kenya ‘know’ Ireland on a bilateral level, it also ‘knows’ Ireland as a fellow non-permanent member of the Security Council and as part of the larger EU. As Ku and Mitzen argue, the shorthand way of anthropomorphising states in international politics bleeds into practice as well, with ‘backgrounded “feeling of knowing” that the state is a person in a system of state persons is part of the usually stable backdrop of choices and relations, fostering individual ontological security.’³² At the same time, performativity in this arena can be dangerous, as hegemonic scripts can enact structural violence both on the international system and on individual citizens and can silence non-dominant interpretations of the state.³³

Nonetheless, the concept of performativity is useful for understanding how foreign policy emerges on the world stage. Diplomatic performances are perhaps the most scripted of all, as they are tasked with ‘locating the diplomatic body in an environment with which it is in constant and inevitable interaction.’³⁴ Maintaining a clear and coherent performance of self across hundreds of diplomatic outposts around the world is no easy task. As Neumann argues, creating the illusion of stability within a network of perpetual change ‘has to be done by constantly repeating specific representations of things, actions, and identities, until what one repeats is naturalized to such an extent that it appears doxic.’³⁵ Achieving this coherence in multilateral diplomacy, where every diplomatic performance helps ‘in defining the infrastructure through which world politics is produced and reproduced,’³⁶ is especially challenging.

Yet this is not to say that performativity acts as a straitjacket for states or strips political leaders or diplomats of their agency. There are plenty of instances in which leaders have subverted state performances to make a bigger impact. Former German Chancellor Willy Brandt famously falling to his knees in Warsaw was an inversion of expectation; it did not impact the legacy of remembrance practice for state leaders leaving flowers over time, but it did become an iconic image for the notion of ‘Never Again’ in Germany. Moreover, the sedimentation of acceptability and expectation shift over time can help create changes in diplomatic practice and in foreign policy. At the same time, the knowledge and understanding of what it means to act as a state in specific contexts also grants ontological security, which is a necessary precondition for agency.³⁷ In short, investigating performativity can be a first step in understanding where states seek ontological security.

Critical situations as an analytical window

When the script is suddenly and completely rewritten, as was the case with Brexit, it is worth looking at how actors navigate this new performative space. Giddens defines such a rupture as a critical situation – ‘a set of circumstances which – for whatever reason – disrupt accustomed routines of daily life.’³⁸ This disjointment can lead to ontological stress – not full-blown ontological insecurity, but rather a need to adjust action or narrative to realign and re-establish equilibrium. This back

³²Minseon Ku and Jennifer Mitzen, ‘The dark matter of world politics: System trust, summits, and state personhood,’ *International Organization*, 76:4 (2022), pp. 799–829 (p. 801).

³³Alexandria Innes, ‘Accounting for inequalities: Divided selves and divided states in International Relations,’ *European Journal of International Relations* 29:3 (2023), pp. 1–22.

³⁴Alun Jones and Julian Clark, ‘Performance, emotions, and diplomacy in the United Nations Assemblage in New York,’ *Annals of the American Association of Geographers*, 109:4 (2019), pp. 1262–79 (p. 1264).

³⁵Iver B. Neumann, ‘“A speech that the entire ministry may stand for,” or: Why diplomats never produce anything new,’ *International Political Sociology*, 1:2 (2007), pp. 183–200 (p. 190).

³⁶Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver B. Neumann, *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 6.

³⁷Mitzen, ‘Ontological security in world politics.’

³⁸Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity*, p. 124.

and forth between inner life and outward presentation is part of what Ciută calls narrative-identity shuttle, which is ‘constant to-ing and fro-ing between lived experience and a projected plot, which results in the sedimentation and continuous transformation of the actors’ knowledge, action design and interactional context’³⁹

In the face of critical situations, actors discursively and politically address fundamental existential questions.⁴⁰ They do so to ‘go on’ – to find a path forward despite ontological stress. These questions deal directly with how an actor exists in the world: autobiography, relations, finitude, and existence.⁴¹ Such situations ‘remove the protective cocoon’ created by routines and autobiography;⁴² they pierce the veil and cause an active recalibration so that the state can avoid negative emotions like shame or guilt. During critical situations, according to Ejodus, actors are forced to ‘verbally express their actions.’⁴³ In other words, state representatives and agents *narrate* the crisis and use linguistic and performative tools to consolidate the image and self-understanding of the state. In doing so, they will also directly address and provide answers to these fundamental existential questions.⁴⁴

Crucial here is also the difference between the domestic space, where narrative contestation is a flexible part of evolving and becoming, and international space, where, for better or for worse, the state must ‘go on’ despite ruptures. Indeed, the clash between self-understanding and international representation can lead to a cocktail of shame, anxiety, and insecurity.⁴⁵ Here, we get to the productive quality of anxiety,⁴⁶ because without this imperative to go on, there would be no incentive to reinvent, to shake away the sedimentation and redefine not only the self, but also the world in which the self exists. Agency, therefore, ‘lies in the resignification, i.e., the reworking of the discourse through which subject effects are produced.’⁴⁷ Performativity is constantly evolving; it is an ‘activity, not an act’ one which sheds old identities while carving out new ones.⁴⁸ In this way, state identity, like gender, must be analysed ‘as a norm that stakes out the possibilities for interacting within that field in the first place, that is to say, within the discourses that regulate that particular field.’⁴⁹

That Brexit unleashed these discussions within the UK has been widely agreed upon among scholars.⁵⁰ The anxiety and uncertainty created by Brexit reopened questions of borders,⁵¹ the role

³⁹Felix Ciută, ‘Narratives of security: Strategy and identity in the European context’, in Richard C. M. Mole (ed.), *Discursive Constructions of Identity in European Politics* (Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 190–207 (p. 200).

⁴⁰Ejodus, ‘Critical situations’, p. 884.

⁴¹Ejodus, ‘Critical situations’, p. 884.

⁴²Ejodus, *Crisis and Ontological Security*, p. 17.

⁴³Ejodus, *Crisis and Ontological Security*, p. 17.

⁴⁴Ejodus, *Crisis and Ontological Security*, p. 20.

⁴⁵See especially Laura Roselle, ‘Strategic narratives and alliances: The cases of intervention in Libya (2011) and economic sanctions against Russia (2014)’, *Politics and Governance*, 5:3 (2017), pp. 99–110; Brent J. Steele, ‘Ontological security and the power of self-identity’, Brent J. Steele, *Defacing Power: The Aesthetics of Insecurity in Global Politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

⁴⁶See especially Felix Berenskötter, ‘Anxiety, time, and agency’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 273–90; Karl Gustafsson, ‘Why is anxiety’s positive potential so rarely realised? Creativity and change in international politics’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1044–9; Bahar Rumelili, ‘Integrating anxiety into international relations theory: Hobbes, existentialism, and ontological security’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 257–72.

⁴⁷Mark Laffey, ‘Locating identity: Performativity, foreign policy and state action’, *Review of International Studies*, 26:3 (2000), pp. 429–44 (p. 432).

⁴⁸Kathi Weeks, *Constituting Feminist Subjects* (La Vergne: Verso, 2018), p. 127.

⁴⁹Epstein, ‘Constructivism’, p. 510.

⁵⁰See Richard Gowan, ‘Separation anxiety: European influence at the UN after Brexit’ (European Council on Foreign Relations, 2018); Steven Kettell and Peter Kerr, ‘From eating cake to crashing out: Constructing the myth of a no-deal Brexit’, *Comparative European Politics*, 18:4 (2020), pp. 590–608; Benjamin Martill, ‘Withdrawal symptoms: Party factions, political change and British foreign policy post-Brexit’, *Journal of European Public Policy* 30:11 (2023), pp. 1–24; Angus McDonald, ‘Our democracy, our identity, our anxiety’, *Law and Critique*, 28:3 (2017), pp. 323–43.

of emotions in Brexit discourse;⁵² island identity and national identity;⁵³ and the consequences of the vote for future divisions.⁵⁴ In everyday discourse in the UK, questions of ‘Europeanness’ and ‘Britishness’ were foregrounded, along with fundamental questions of survival and great power status. At the same time, Britain may be an island, but Brexit is not. The ramifications of Brexit within the international space were significant, and these fundamental existential questions also needed to be redefined for the entire system. Moreover, in processing inner turmoil in such a public way, British diplomats mediated these fundamental existential questions in everyday diplomacy. What UK state agents are therefore doing with Brexit performances is reshaping the ‘infrastructure of performativity’.⁵⁵

In this way, performances are as much for the performer as they are for the audience and therefore are critical tools for states experiencing ontological stress. Absent a consistent thread of action, answering these fundamental questions in a public way can help achieve the perception of consistency by calling forth old narrative threads or offering justification. By incrementally performing change over this period, UK state agents erected a ‘cognitive bridge’ of narratives from one foreign policy stance to another.⁵⁶ Performing Brexit meant in some cases actively and publicly casting off the European ballast, but in other cases meant rebuilding and redefining Britain’s role in the world. Indeed, performance during such crises ‘help[s] manifest and consolidate the state, for crises have a temporal structure – build-up, break, diffusion or protracted conflict – that calls forth a particular type of collective singular’.⁵⁷

This further strengthens the link between performativity and ontological security. What has in the past been termed ‘coping mechanisms’⁵⁸ or ‘ontological security-seeking practices’⁵⁹ often rests of states reworking decades of performative sedimentation in ways that appear natural. However, it can also be violent, as Butler notes: ‘This is not buried identification that is left behind in a forgotten past, but an identification that must be levelled and buried again and again, the compulsive repudiation by which the subject incessantly sustains his/her boundary.’⁶⁰ Above all, performativity is about drawing distinctions, whether through breaking with the past or redefining new boundaries in order to make new positions real and tangible within the international space. In performing Brexit by not engaging with the EU in multilateral fora or by demonstrating distinctiveness in policy and practice, UK diplomats are not only reflecting Brexit, but they also create ‘that which it seems to represent: namely, a post-Brexit Britain and post-Brexit world’.⁶¹

⁵¹ Roshier, “‘And now we’re facing that reality too’”.

⁵² C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki and Anne-Marie Houde, ‘Feeling the heat: Emotions, politicization, and the European Union’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 60:5 (2022), pp. 1470–87.

⁵³ Srdjan Vucetic, *Greatness and Decline: National Identity and British Foreign Policy* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2021); Nick Whittaker, ‘The island race: Ontological security and critical geopolitics in British parliamentary discourse’, *Geopolitics*, 23:4 (2018), pp. 954–85.

⁵⁴ Christopher S. Browning, ‘Brexit, existential anxiety and ontological (in)security’, *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), pp. 336–55.

⁵⁵ Luiza Bialasiewicz, David Campbell, Stuart Elden, et al., ‘Performing security: The imaginative geographies of current US strategy’, *Political Geography*, 26:4 (2007), pp. 405–22.

⁵⁶ Subotić, ‘Narrative’, p. 616.

⁵⁷ Iver B. Neumann and Ole Jacob Sending, ‘Performing statehood through crises: Citizens, strangers, territory’, *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6:1 (2021), pp. 1–16 (p. 5).

⁵⁸ See Marcus Nicolson, ‘Racial microaggressions and ontological security: Exploring the narratives of young adult migrants in Glasgow, UK’, *Social Inclusion*, 11:2 (2023), pp. 37–47.

⁵⁹ See James Brassett, Christopher Browning, and Muireann O’Dwyer, ‘EU’ve got to be kidding: Anxiety, humour and ontological security’, *Global Society: Journal of Interdisciplinary International Relations*, 35:1 (2021), pp. 8–26; Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 240–56; Roshier, “‘And now we’re facing that reality too’”.

⁶⁰ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 114.

⁶¹ Adler-Nissen, Galpin, and Rosamond, ‘Performing Brexit’, p. 575.

Brexit performances and performativity

Methodologically, linking performativity to performance and what that means in international contexts can be challenging, in part because there is difficulty in unpicking which performances matter and what types of actions 'count' as performance. Nonetheless, it is an important methodological tool as it 'provides a means for investigating the specific performances that reinforce [gender] norms or, alternatively, cause [gender] trouble.'⁶² In foreign policy, this means identifying moments that reinforce a hegemonic understanding of the state and those that cause 'trouble' in interpretation. As Taylor notes, in performing a self-identity narrative 'the speaker will almost inevitably be drawing on previous tellings of the same story. A speaker's investment in certain subject positions can be understood as a consequence of some identity work becoming established through repetition and rehearsal.'⁶³ The missing methodological link in analysing performativity, therefore, is narrative, and more specifically how self-identity narratives are performed.

Macleod and Morison have taken methodological strides in this discussion by analysing narratives on the basis of 'positioning', 'trouble', and 'repair'.⁶⁴ In their two-stage model, performances are analysed first at the level of performativity, where meta-narratives and identity discourses emerge, and then at the level of performance, where subjects seek to repair ruptures through repositioning and 'acts of repair'.⁶⁵ This type of analysis 'implies a more reflexive speaker, thinking back and planning forward, including across multiple instances of talk, including in relation to trouble and previous versions of identity work'.⁶⁶ Within international relations, Campbell relied on the self/other dynamic that emerges in performative speech acts.⁶⁷ Adler-Nissen, Rosamond, and Galpin, too, focus on the seeking of distinction in illustrative cases of EU and UK discourses post-Brexit.⁶⁸ What is missing from this discussion is an understanding of how these performances have changed over time and how the UK is attempting to shape the space of British foreign-policy performativity in order to find stable ground upon which to act.

The analysis here is meant to offer a way of evaluating performativity using analytical tools from ontological security. By characterising the 'repair of troubles'⁶⁹ as ontological security-seeking behaviour, it becomes easier to see the elements of performativity that have been challenged by Brexit and the work needed to repair this critical situation. Moreover, it provides a missing link for conceptualising what performativity provides an actor – namely, the stability, routines, and sanitised 'script' that gives a sense of ontological security. However, to understand the entire network of British diplomatic performativity is a much larger project and indeed would elucidate many contradictions and shades of grey. Even within the Brexit debate, performing Brexit has come to mean very different things in very different contexts. In London and Brussels, there were many theatrical touches in and around Brexit, beginning with UK Independence Party Members of the European Parliament (UKIP MEPs) insisting on keeping UK flags on their desks in the EU parliament in Strasbourg and ending perhaps with Big Ben's 'bong for Brexit'.⁷⁰ UKIP MEPs even lobbied hard for a symbolic flag-lowering ceremony in Strasbourg. As former MEP Nathan Gill told the

⁶² Tracy Morison and Catriona Macleod, 'A performative-performance analytical approach: Infusing Butlerian theory into the narrative-discursive method', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 19:8 (2013), pp. 566–77 (p. 570).

⁶³ Stephanie Taylor, 'Self-narration as rehearsal: A discursive approach to the narrative formation of identity', *Narrative Inquiry*, 15:1 (2005), pp. 45–50 (p. 48).

⁶⁴ Morison and Macleod, 'A performative-performance analytical approach', pp. 571–2.

⁶⁵ Morison and Macleod, 'A performative-performance analytical approach', p. 572.

⁶⁶ Stephanie Taylor, 'Narrative as construction and discursive resource', in Michael Bamberg (ed.), *Narrative: State of the Art* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), p. 118.

⁶⁷ Campbell, *Writing Security*.

⁶⁸ Adler-Nissen, Galpin, and Rosamond, 'Performing Brexit'.

⁶⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Butler, *Bodies That Matter*; Morison and Macleod, 'A performative-performance analytical approach'.

⁷⁰ Brexit: Big Ben bongs mark moment UK leaves European single market and customs union', *ITVNews*, 1 January 2021, available at: <https://www.itv.com/news/2020-12-31/brexit-big-ben-bongs-mark-moment-uk-leaves-european-single-market-and-customs-union>.

Guardian, ‘It’s like that India moment, isn’t it, or Hong Kong. You know that’s the lasting image.’⁷¹ These attempts to create symbolic images and events around Brexit would have built up the myths of the event, which, for UKIP MEPs at least, meant casting off the shackles of EU imperialism. This gets at a question posed recently by Neumann and Sending, namely, ‘how do actors categorize performances, and how does this lead actors to perform and thus manifest or produce the state in *different* ways for different audiences and in different contexts?’⁷² Moreover, how can the same basic identity and historical elements be used to support a completely new foreign-policy landscape? The answer lies in the ‘interplay between the pre-existing and the performative’ in which actors can explore and adapt constructions for identity performances.⁷³

Methodology and case selection

In order to get at the everydayness of enacting this script, and ways in which positionality, relations, and meta-narratives helped resignify the existing system, I have selected for analysis Brexit performances in the UN Security Council (UNSC). The UNSC provides a particularly visible stage for Brexit performances. By virtue of being a permanent member, the physical UK seat at the Security Council table is also a tangible source of a routinised power. The Council Chamber itself is a room with gravitas; the curved desk opens to rows of seats for both a diplomatic and a public audience, giving it the feeling of a theatre. Ambassadors are positioned around the table facing one other, and the briefer sits at the very last seat at the edge of the table, both physically and metaphorically apart. The image is one of collaboration, despite very real tensions and divisions among members, and the UK’s centrality in this body makes it difficult to make isolationist accusations. In short, this is a space that carries with it a significant amount of what Butler calls the citation of power; merely by performing Brexit in such a space, the UK is speaking to a ‘chain of signification’ whereby it characterises itself as an integral part of world order.⁷⁴

It is from this position of power and citational legacy that UK representatives can perform Brexit in a proactive and clear-eyed way. As noted previously, domestic attempts to define and explain Brexit were still ongoing, and this unleashed a significant amount of ontological insecurity among the British population.⁷⁵ Yet the imperative to go on as an international actor meant answering implicit questions about the new role of the UK while also reworking and resignifying existing discursive material to stabilise the boundary of the self. The four fundamental existential questions identified by Giddens and expanded on by Ejdus therefore form the analytical frame for the analysis of these performances:⁷⁶

- ‘**Existence and being**’ deals with agency, positionality, and the nature of the system;
- ‘**Finitude and human life**’ deals with the potential anxiety of non-being;
- ‘**Experience of others**’ deals with significant partnerships and the mutual recognition thereof;
- ‘**Continuity of self-identity**’ deals with autobiography of the state and establishing coherence in life.

These questions form a useful analytical framework for analysis of these texts. UK representatives grappled with these questions prior to Brexit as well, and in marking how the answers shift over time, a clearer picture forms of how the UK seeks to establish Brexit boundaries. In short, the critical situation that is Brexit forced a rewrite of the script, and in the years that

⁷¹Jennifer Rankin, ‘Brexit: No Union Jack-lowering ceremony in European parliament’, *The Guardian*, 16 January 2020, available at: {<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2020/jan/16/brexit-no-union-jack-lowering-ceremony-in-european-parliament>}.

⁷²Neumann and Sending, ‘Performing statehood’, p. 4.

⁷³Amanda Rogers, ‘Geographies of performing scripted language’, *Cultural Geographies*, 17:1 (2010), pp. 59–61.

⁷⁴Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, p. 219.

⁷⁵Browning, ‘Brexit’.

⁷⁶These questions draw on Ejdus, *Crisis and Ontological Security* and Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

followed, particularly after the official ‘exit’ took place, there is a back and forth between script and performance.

To narrow this discussion further, I will look at a set of narrative performances in the UNSC during the annual meeting on UNSC cooperation with the EU. Since 2010, the UNSC has met annually with the EU High Representative to discuss and evaluate the EU’s role as a peace and security actor. The time frame (2010–22) and the UK’s role as a permanent member allow for an analysis on how the UK worked to resignify this relationship, and therefore the system around it. This case is an opportunity for the UK to present its vision for a post-Brexit world from a seat of power and with the EU High Representative at the table. Even before Brexit, this meeting raised several specific ontological security concerns for the UK. In asking UNSC members to evaluate the role of the EU, the UK was also confronted with its own role in the EU and in the UNSC. These meetings therefore force the UK to foreground all fundamental existential questions. By addressing the role of the EU in the world, UK state agents must also address their own role and their relationship to the EU – or to the concept of ‘Europe’ – post-Brexit.

The dataset contains 11 speeches from 2010–22. In 2012 and 2018, broader meetings were held on regional cooperation, including multiple briefings from other regional organisations. The time period can roughly be divided into pre-Brexit (2010–16), a resignification period (2017–19), and post-Brexit (2020–22). This analysis will follow Macleod and Morison in foregrounding the narrative element of performance. While much could be written about the nature of performances in the UNSC – the use of hand gestures, emotive facial expressions, coming or going during speeches – this article is more concerned with the resignification process that helps in overcoming the critical situation, and how narrative performances make this process possible. The UNSC serves in this case more as a physical site of British power upon which to draw. Moreover, the routinisation of a typical UNSC meeting can itself soothe ontological stress, as it is a secure and safe space for the Permanent Five.

The analysis will begin with a short discussion of the post-Brexit diplomatic ‘script’ – Global Britain – and its shortcomings when translated into international spaces. I will then set the stage for Brexit’s ramifications for diplomacy at the UN. Following this, I will turn to the meeting selected for the case study and analyse how existential questions manifested in these speeches over time.

Global Britain: At home and abroad

The first effort to shape the post-Brexit world came with Theresa May’s ‘Global Britain’ speech, which was arguably the initial script for foreign-policy makers. Six months after the Brexit referendum, May told reporters that Britons ‘voted to leave the European Union and embrace the world.’⁷⁷ In this speech, she introduced the new objective to become a ‘Global Britain’ unfettered by EU restrictions. She cautioned the EU against its policy of ‘uniformity’ over flexibility and diversity. Still, she claimed that Brexit was not a rejection of Europe or European values, but rather a necessary step for the UK to regain its full potential.⁷⁸

The Global Britain speech is remarkable in that it served as a starting point for post-Brexit foreign policy and, in the aftermath of the speech, ‘government officials dutifully invested significant resources putting institutional flesh on the rhetorical bones of GlobalBritain™.’⁷⁹ The discursive tug-o-war that followed within the Conservative party and the government has been thoroughly discussed among scholars.⁸⁰ Ultimately, Global Britain brought nothing especially new to the table in terms of policy but instead reworked existing discourses into an ostensibly new direction for

⁷⁷Theresa May, ‘The government’s negotiating objectives for exiting the EU’, London, 17 January 2017.

⁷⁸May, ‘The government’s negotiating objectives.’

⁷⁹Oliver Daddow, ‘GlobalBritain™: The discursive construction of Britain’s post-Brexit world role’, *Global Affairs*, 5:1 (2019), pp. 5–21 (p. 5).

⁸⁰Daddow, ‘GlobalBritain™’; Kai Oppermann, Ryan Beasley, and Juliet Kaarbo, ‘British foreign policy after Brexit: Losing Europe and finding a role’, *International Relations*, 34:2 (2019), pp. 133–56; Oliver Turner, ‘Global Britain and the narrative of empire’, *The Political Quarterly*, 90:4 (2019), pp. 727–34.

the UK. The narrative that emerged ‘extended the “pragmatic” tradition in UK foreign policy’⁸¹ and focused on the UK’s willingness to engage, as well as its self-perceived leadership role. This, Daddow points out, echoes previous foreign-policy shifts and campaigns, including the one to join the European Community in 1973.⁸² Meanwhile, as Oppermann, Beasley, and Kaarbo point out, foreign-policy elites had a primary goal of avoiding this isolationist characterisation. In their ‘role casting’ efforts, UK leaders therefore sought to paint the UK as a great power, a global trading partner, and to revive the Commonwealth network.⁸³

However, as Turner argues in his own Global Britain analysis, the flaw with this narrative is not only that it is mismatched with the rest of the world or that it lacks the necessary detail to be translated into policy, but rather that it is inherently domestic and regressive. With Global Britain, UK leaders drew on memories of empire and glory which, despite the dreams of some policymakers, cannot be regained.⁸⁴ Moreover, the domestic tilt for the Global Britain discussion has led to confusion for the international audience. As Gifkins, Jarvis, and Ralph note, ‘if the UK is seeking to promote “Global Britain” on the international stage, evidence so far suggests it has struggled to convince external actors of either its purpose and meaning or its impact on directing UK foreign policy.’⁸⁵ The ‘if’ here is key, as much of the analysis of Global Britain has suggested that the domestic population was the audience, and that the international took a back seat.

If, as Turner argues, Global Britain can be viewed as ‘a painkiller to ease potential suffering from leaving the European Union,’⁸⁶ then Global Britain can be seen as the first attempt at resignifying the performative landscape of British foreign policy, an attempt that is also implicitly linked to ontological security needs. Global Britain was constructed through the push and pull of policy makers, and elements of the overarching narrative spoke to fundamental existential questions of who ‘Britain’ is and where ‘Britain’ is going. These discussions were certainly meant to shore up ontological security concerns for a domestic audience reeling after the vote, but they left diplomats in the lurch, as several truths converged at once: Brexit was seen by many as part of the populist wave of 2016; ‘Global Britain’ was swiftly gelling into policy; and, in diplomatic weight and legitimacy, renouncing EU membership was a significant *loss* – of identification, status, and direction.⁸⁷ The confluence of these truths meant diplomats needed to translate Global Britain to a ‘largely sceptical’ international audience.⁸⁸

Being ‘Global Britain’ in multilateral diplomatic spaces therefore meant drawing on elements from the Global Britain script while also relying on the citational power of the UK’s legacy in such spaces. Rarely did this mean overtly citing Global Britain – which was fast becoming as much a public diplomacy campaign as a foreign policy – but rather using the spaces, embedded power, and existing discursive frames available in such arena to tell a new story of British foreign policy.⁸⁹ Unlike performances in London, which were as much for a domestic audience as for an international one, Brexit performances at the UN in New York were almost singularly international. They are thus in the truest sense ‘boundary producing.’⁹⁰ In order to confront the mismatch between

⁸¹Daddow, ‘GlobalBritain™’, p. 15.

⁸²Daddow, ‘GlobalBritain™’, p. 16.

⁸³Oppermann, Beasley, and Kaarbo, ‘British foreign policy’.

⁸⁴Turner, ‘Global Britain’.

⁸⁵Jess Gifkins, Samuel Jarvis, and Jason Ralph, *Global Britain in the United Nations* (London: The United Nations Association UK, 2019), p. 9.

⁸⁶Turner, ‘Global Britain’, p. 729.

⁸⁷Jess Gifkins, Samuel Jarvis, and Jason Ralph, ‘Brexit and the UN Security Council: Declining British influence?’, *International Affairs*, 95:6 (2019), pp. 1349–68.

⁸⁸Ryan K. Beasley, Juliet Kaarbo, and Kai Oppermann, ‘Role theory, foreign policy, and the social construction of sovereignty: Brexit stage right’, *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1:1 (2021), pp. 1–14 (p. 11).

⁸⁹Gifkins, Jarvis, and Ralph, ‘Brexit and the UN Security Council’.

⁹⁰Campbell, *Writing Security*, p. 62.

self-understanding and external perception and to ‘control the narrative’ on Brexit, the UK needed to confront the proverbial albatross around its neck: the EU.

Confronting the EU did not mean any sort of adversarial behaviour; rather, this meant confronting the part of the EU that was deeply embedded into the materialisation of British foreign policy. Membership to the EU elevated the UK’s status at the UN, because the dynamics of the UN General Assembly and other subsidiary bodies are such that going it alone is never really an option. Membership of groups, whether regional or ideological, is crucial to achieving forward momentum in UN committees.⁹¹ These geographic groupings also provide space for diplomatic performance, in that they ‘enable states to “fly the flag” as well as support and promote particular worldviews as a means of claim making.’⁹² In short, membership of the EU voting bloc provided heft and legitimacy to UK initiatives in the General Assembly and on the Human Rights Council and gave UK diplomats a script with which it could perform membership to the liberal international order.⁹³

At the same time, the UK was a diplomatic force within the EU bloc and helped to forge compromise on thorny issues.⁹⁴ By all accounts, UK diplomats were constructive leaders behind closed doors in both Geneva and New York.⁹⁵ Indeed, prior to Brexit the UK actively signed on to joint statements, ambassadors took their place next to EU leaders in joint stake-outs, and the UK regularly organised side events under the auspices of the EU. Even in the Security Council, where the UK has institutionalised power, membership of the EU guided strategic thinking and gave the UK clout in certain areas, including humanitarian and human rights issues.⁹⁶ All of these issues were nested into the British diplomatic script, and signalling that could be as simple as reading out a joint statement or including the EU in UNSC speeches. All these micro-performances signal EU membership, thereby implying a set of values and expectations that needed to be consciously uncoupled post-Brexit.

These dynamics also significantly shaped the UK’s role in the Security Council, where it has a permanent seat and therefore played a leading role in pushing EU norms in questions of peace and security. This, Gifkins, Jarvis, and Ralph note, also shaped the UK’s own policies on peace and security.⁹⁷ Post-Brexit, the UK actively removed itself from EU constellations. Joint EU press statements, an almost-weekly occurrence for European members, suddenly went forth without the UK. Post-meeting briefings for EU members were left to France and any other European seat. Coordinated positions, a provision in Article 34 of the Treaty of the European Union, were less diplomatic effort and more happy coincidence. Perhaps the most jarring, however, were the split votes; only 10 days before Brexit, the UK marked its first major split from the EU with an abstention on a German draft resolution on Syria.⁹⁸ In many ways, however, the UK’s Brexit performances were a study in absence; it was only during moments of direct confrontation with the EU that the Global Britain script needed to be reworked and new narratives performed.

Case study: Brexit in the UNSC

The following sections analyse the speeches in this dataset using the framework of fundamental existential questions. These narratives were performed by diplomats, all nominated by Conservative governments and all following the rules and protocols demanded on the Security

⁹¹Megan Dee and Karen E. Smith, ‘UK diplomacy at the UN after Brexit: Challenges and opportunities’, *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 19:3 (2017), pp. 527–42.

⁹²Jones and Clark, ‘Performance, emotions, and diplomacy’, p. 1262.

⁹³Dee and Smith, ‘UK diplomacy’; Gifkins, Jarvis, and Ralph, ‘Brexit and the UN Security Council’; Gowan, ‘Separation anxiety’.

⁹⁴Gowan, ‘Separation anxiety’.

⁹⁵Gifkins, Jarvis, and Ralph, ‘Brexit and the UN Security Council’; Gowan, ‘Separation anxiety’.

⁹⁶Gifkins, Jarvis, and Ralph, ‘Brexit and the UN Security Council’.

⁹⁷Gifkins, Jarvis, and Ralph, ‘Brexit and the UN Security Council’.

⁹⁸Will Brexit see European division at the UN Security Council?, *Euractiv News*, available at: {<https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/will-brexit-see-european-division-at-the-un-security-council/>}.

Council. There is not an enormous amount of tone or affectation in their performance, nor is there an effort to distance themselves from the subject at hand. While other elements of the performances could be analysed, the UN setting in many ways subsumes the individual. As Pouliot notes, UN permanent representatives represent their home country but are also ‘implicated in the conduct of global governance itself’.⁹⁹ This embodiment of the state has methodological implications, as the person sitting behind the ‘United Kingdom’ placard at the UN is empowered to speak for the UK, and therefore *is* the UK, ‘because they have the moral burden of making policy choices and the capacity to implement those decisions.’¹⁰⁰

In this set of speeches, there are clear shifts in the ways in which UK representatives characterise the EU and the international system. There are efforts to reframe history, to redefine the UK’s position, and to characterise the post-Brexit world as a renewal or rebirth. Many of these discursive shifts are not surprising, but taken together they demonstrate the way UK representatives had to cope with the loss of the EU despite the continuing turmoil at home. I do not argue that this effort achieved a demonstrable sense of ontological security, but in the iteration and reproduction of new narratives, and, in the subtle resignification over time, UK leaders shape the performative space of British diplomacy. Doing so in a place of power makes these efforts even more effective.

Questions of coherence in life: Past, present, and future

Narrative contestation was a core part of the Brexit debate. Questions of who or what Britain was in the 20th century were part of both the Leave and Remain campaigns. Whether empire or decline, both campaigns used biographical elements and future constructs to create the illusion of logic and consistency within identity. Perhaps the most visible of these biographical girders were stories and notions of empire, which have been highlighted by scholars analysing Brexit discourse.¹⁰¹ Indeed, what Brexit discourses and Global Britain have in common is a concerted effort to ‘create a useable history of British greatness, anchored not in vanished imperial structures, but in a set of timeless national characteristics that require only liberation from Brussels to burst once more into bloom.’¹⁰² Yet, much like ‘America First’, the Global Britain slogan came nested in a historical and political context which leaked into the international sphere, reminding audiences of negative experiences of empire and the Anglo-American world order.¹⁰³ Putting this script into practice at the UN therefore meant balancing the need to activate this autobiography with the need to also appear as a contributing and active member of the international system. Moreover, this meeting explicitly demanded from UK state agents an *evaluation* of the EU, which gave the UK a chance for differentiation or benevolence.

It is useful, therefore, to begin with how the UK characterised itself prior to Brexit. From 2010 to 2022, there was a clear shift in the way these representatives characterise the UK and define its role within the international system. Prior to Brexit, the UK walked a thin line between its privileged position as permanent UNSC member and its role as constructive EU member. These meetings presented a particular challenge, as the UK needed to support the EU while still justifying its privileged role. That challenge is reflected in this dataset, where the role of the UK and how it fits in the world is almost constantly under revision. Even the names – European Union, United Kingdom, United Nations – seemed to be troubling for UK representatives. In 2010, Ambassador Grant left the UK completely out of this discussion and instead spoke from an almost-omniscient

⁹⁹Vincent Pouliot, ‘The practice of permanent representation to international organizations’, in Ole Jacob Sending, Vincent Pouliot, and Iver B. Neumann (eds), *Diplomacy and the Making of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 80–108 (p. 82).

¹⁰⁰Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security*, p. 21.

¹⁰¹Adrian Rogstad and Benjamin Martill, ‘How to be great (Britain)? Discourses of greatness in the United Kingdom’s referendums on Europe’, *European Review of International Studies*, 9 (2022), pp. 210–239; Robert Saunders, ‘Myths from a small island’, *New Statesman* (October 2019), pp. 22–5; Turner, ‘Global Britain’.

¹⁰²Saunders, ‘Myths’, p. 24.

¹⁰³Turner, ‘Global Britain’.

position, where he described the EU as a capable actor in the international system. He praised EU sanctions regimes and highlighted how the EU works alongside the UN in ‘eight major crisis theatres’ across the world.¹⁰⁴

The following year, Grant reintroduced the UK immediately after welcoming Baroness Catherine Ashton: ‘As a member of the European Union and a permanent member of the Security Council, the United Kingdom has a strong interest in ensuring that the partnership of the European Union and its member states with the United Nations becomes increasingly effective in addressing the many challenges to international peace and security.’¹⁰⁵ A year later, Deputy Permanent Representative (DPR) Parham referred to the ‘United Kingdom and the European Union’ working together in Syria and on humanitarian assistance, and for several years thereafter representatives referred to the European Union ‘and its individual member states.’¹⁰⁶ In short, from 2010–17 there was a clear progression that slowly brings the UK back into the foreground. This also reflects political rumblings of the time, which set the stage for the Brexit debate. Shortly after the European External Action Service (EEAS) began operations in 2011, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) expressed concern over perceived ‘competence creep’ in multilateral fora.¹⁰⁷ This culminated in a public spat in 2011 when the UK took issue with the wording of EU statements. The UK insisted that all EU statements be delivered ‘on behalf of the EU and its member states’ rather than on behalf of the EU. While this linguistic kerfuffle was negotiated, the UK blocked every EU joint statement – more than 80 – at the UN and its subsidiary bodies.¹⁰⁸

What is missing in the pre-Brexit speeches, however, are any references to the role of the UK as a historical actor. Instead, the UK seems to be concentrating on the biography and origin stories of the EU. This holds true post-Brexit as well; the elements of Global Britain that spoke to reclaiming greatness were not explicitly activated. While the UK does assert its agency in the intervening years, any allusions to a historic place in the world – or indeed any historic references at all – were neatly stripped away. Instead, and in some ways in line with Global Britain, UK state agents present a projection into the future, where Brexit forms a new and fresh start. As DPR Allen says in 2020: ‘We continue to work closely with our European partners, and our outlook will always be global. We recognize the mutual benefits of international cooperation across all areas of the United Nations cross-cutting work to promote international peace and security, sustainable development, and human rights.’¹⁰⁹ This draws directly on Global Britain but also speaks to the story of the UK and where it will fit in the future.

Questions of existence and being: Action, power, and agency

‘Existence and Being’ questions draw on ideas of power, agency, and action, and these, too, were common themes for both camps in the Brexit debate. Indeed, the question of British agency in the international system was at the forefront of much of the conversation and served as the primary frame for Global Britain, as the name suggests. Leavers framed these questions in 2016 as addressing a loss and the fear of being subsumed by the European Union. Remainers argued that the UK can only be strong and have agency as part of something larger. Post-Brexit, Global Britain clearly tilted towards carving out a greater role for the UK but for these speeches at the UN also emphasised multilateralism – but in the right fora and with the right power balance.

Putting this script into practice at the UN therefore meant asserting British agency all while defining the hierarchy of the international system in such a way that includes a powerful, but still

¹⁰⁴ Mark Lyall Grant, ‘Statement in the 6306th meeting of the UN Security Council’, New York, 4 May 2010.

¹⁰⁵ Mark Lyall Grant, ‘Statement at the 6477th meeting of the UN Security Council’, New York, 8 February 2011.

¹⁰⁶ Phillip Parham, ‘Statement in the 6919th meeting of the UN Security Council’, New York, 13 February 2013.

¹⁰⁷ Daniel Fiott, ‘“Our man in Brussels”: The UK and the EEAS: Ambivalence and influence’, in Rosa Balfour, Krista Raik, and Caterina Carta (eds), *The European External Action Service and National Foreign Ministries: Convergence or Divergence?* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), pp. 75–88.

¹⁰⁸ Fiott, ‘“Our man in Brussels”’.

¹⁰⁹ Jonathan Allen, ‘Statement in the VTC meeting on cooperation between the United Nations and regional and subregional organizations’, New York, 3 June 2020.

subordinate, EU. Post-Brexit, when the UK was regularly lumped together with other states in the throes of populist waves, the UK sought to prove its mettle as a global player and not as an isolationist. As then-Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said in the UN press pool in 2016: ‘We are going to be more committed than ever before to cooperation and participation and support for other European countries ... The UK is going to be more visible, more active, more energetic than ever before.’¹¹⁰

Rhetorically, at least, Johnson’s prediction came true. Indeed, it is only after Brexit that UK representatives, when put in direct confrontation with the EU in a third-party setting, were able to assert agency. In decoupling from the EU, the UK is no longer confronted with this balancing act. The change is particularly striking in from 2020–2, when the UK positioned itself as the main character in a meeting that was ostensibly about EU–UN relations. For the first time, UK representatives used personal pronouns to describe action within the international system. Indeed, in 2020 and 2021 the tenor of the speeches changed significantly, and both representatives used ‘we’ to refer primarily to the UK, but also to the collective UNSC and EU – of which the UK firmly belongs to one wing and not the other. This fits in well with a new vision of Global Britain. In 2021, Roscoe ends with a more self-assured, forward-looking statement: ‘when we work together, we are a force for good in the world.’¹¹¹

Another key change post-Brexit is the role of individual UK leaders, including Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab and Prime Minister Boris Johnson. Prior to 2016, UK leaders were completely absent from the discussion. As the Brexit process unfolded, there was an increased reflex to call on UK leaders. This could be a question of vanity, but there is no denying the shift towards presenting the UK as an agent of change within the international system. In the early speeches, the UK is always embedded alongside the EU.¹¹² From 2019–21, however, UK speakers directly highlighted the UK as an individual, global actor, whether as G7 chair,¹¹³ as the host of COP26,¹¹⁴ or as the largest humanitarian aid donor.¹¹⁵

Similarly, instead of working alongside the EU, the UK *welcomed* work done by the EU. In 2022, Woodward ‘welcomes’ EU efforts in four areas: ‘supporting Ukraine’; ‘contributing to the Council’s work’; ‘promoting diplomacy’; and on ‘global systemic challenges.’¹¹⁶ This is a clear power shift; the UK had the agency to both authorise and evaluate the role of the EU, which subtly but firmly places the latter in a subordinate role. Finally, the UK positioned itself, independently of any organisation, as a key player in bringing about a positive future. In 2022, Woodward notes that ‘we [the UK] are coordinating to support the region in order to secure progress.’¹¹⁷ In 2019, DPR Hickey reminded the others that the UK was the first state to recognise Kosovo in 2008, and in 2021 the UK is described as playing a ‘significant role in the NATO presence in the Western Balkans.’¹¹⁸ These small narrative shifts are significant in that they also limit the space for EU action in this and other areas. If NATO is responsible for European defence, and the UK coordinates these efforts, then the EU is limited to a financing role. This is echoed in the other cooperation stories told, especially post-Brexit: the EU is one of many financial guarantors for peace and security, but the political will – and the values upon which they rest – comes from the UN.

¹¹⁰UK Mission to UN, ‘LIVE on #Periscope: U.K. Foreign Secretary @BorisJohnson speaks to media @UN’, Twitter, 22 July 2016, available at: {https://twitter.com/UKUN_NewYork/status/756583544655405056?s=20}.

¹¹¹James Roscoe, ‘Statement in the 8792nd meeting of the UN Security Council’, New York, 10 June 2021.

¹¹²Grant, ‘Statement in the 6306th meeting’; Grant, ‘Statement in the 6306th meeting’; Parham, ‘Statement in the 6919th meeting’; Peter Wilson, ‘Statement in the 7112th meeting of the UN Security Council’, New York, 14 February 2014.

¹¹³Roscoe, ‘Statement in the 8792nd meeting’.

¹¹⁴Allen, ‘Statement in the VTC meeting’; Dame Barbara Woodward, ‘Statement in the 9065th meeting of the UN Security Council’, New York, 16 June 2022.

¹¹⁵Allen, ‘Statement in the VTC meeting’; Stephen Hickey, ‘Statement in the 8482nd meeting of the UN Security Council’, New York, 12 March 2019.

¹¹⁶Woodward, ‘Statement in the 9065th meeting’.

¹¹⁷Woodward, ‘Statement in the 9065th meeting’.

¹¹⁸Roscoe, ‘Statement in the 8792nd meeting’.

Questions of finitude: Death, birth, and rebirth

Themes of loss, death, and rebirth were prevalent in the Brexit debate as well. Membership of the EU was characterised by the Leave campaign as a loss of sovereignty and a slow march towards federalism. This was coupled with fears of the death of culture or exceptionalism. Post-Brexit, there was a foreboding among the Remainers of the beginning of the end of Britain.¹¹⁹ However, as both Browning and Berenskötter note, one way to overcome this anxiety of fate and death is by ‘establishing the illusion of immortality by proxy’.¹²⁰ Managing these questions for the UK meant crafting a remarkably forward-looking vision of an infinite Britain,¹²¹ even if elements of nostalgia remained intrinsically embedded in the story.¹²²

Interestingly, nostalgia played a big role in the pre-Brexit discourse at the UN, as did metaphors of death and rebirth. From 2010–16, UK representatives harkened back to the founding of the UN and EU to establish a common history. In 2010, Ambassador Grant noted that the EU, like the UN, ‘emerged from the shadow of conflict in the 20th century’.¹²³ Year after year, UK representatives linked this shared past to shared values. Both organisations, Ambassador Rycroft said in 2016, ‘were born of the scourge of war, so it is unsurprising that we share so many values, such as peace, human rights, and development, to name but three’.¹²⁴ By creating a common birthplace, these representatives made cooperation between the UN and EU not only desirable, but ‘natural’.¹²⁵ In doing so, the UK made the *deepening* of cooperation natural as well. In other words, shifting the temporal frame in this way created an expectation for further cooperation, which in turn soothed any ontological stress arising from the growing EU role.

This common birth also echoes both foundational myths of the EU and UN. The EU especially has constructed its own origin story around the idea of rebirth.¹²⁶ Moreover, this rebirth is tied to the rejection of nationalism and isolationism, and to the idea that peace in Europe is not only desirable, but inevitable.¹²⁷ The UN foundational myth, too, is anchored in this idea of overcoming separation and embracing multilateralism and strong liberal values. As an active member of both organisations, it comes as no surprise that the UK would *subscribe to* both these myths, but that the *activation* of these narratives within this performance positions it as one of the narrators. Considering how late the UK joined the EU, this is particularly striking.

The weaving of this shared birth narrative into UK performances had consequences post-Brexit. After all, if UN–EU partnership is natural because of their shared origin story, then the UK leaving one of these organisations could logically be implicated as unnatural. The inclusion of such an origin story was therefore no longer acceptable. Post-Brexit, UK state agents did not seek to erase the EU or diminish its importance, but rather to redefine how the UK fits between and alongside both organisations. Cooperation was no longer sold as the natural effect of two siblings born of the same trauma, but rather something more functional and indeed more forward-looking.

But in the immediate post-Brexit years, UK state agents went further than just stripping away their shared genesis; they also shifted the temporal frame of cooperation forward by defining a new rebirth: Brexit Day. This is evident from 2019–21, when references to the past were limited to direct references to the referendum. In 2019, the EU–UNSC meeting was held just days before the first Brexit deadline. DPR Hickey began his remarks by noting that ‘today happens to be an important

¹¹⁹Browning, ‘Brexit’.

¹²⁰Browning, ‘Brexit’, p. 339.

¹²¹Daddow, ‘Global Britain™’, p. 14.

¹²²Turner, ‘Global Britain’.

¹²³Grant, ‘Statement in the 6306th meeting’.

¹²⁴Matthew Rycroft, ‘Statement in the 7705th meeting of the UN Security Council’, New York, 6 June 2016.

¹²⁵Grant, ‘Statement in the 6306th meeting’.

¹²⁶Vincent Della Sala, ‘Europe’s Odyssey? Political myth and the European Union’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 22:3 (2016), pp. 524–41.

¹²⁷Della Sala, ‘Europe’s Odyssey’; Ian Manners, ‘Global Europa: Mythology of the European Union in world politics’, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 48:1 (2010), pp. 67–87.

day for the United Kingdom's own relationship with the European Union.¹²⁸ He went on to note that 'notwithstanding the United Kingdom's forthcoming departure from the European Union, it will of course be mutually beneficial for the United Kingdom and the European Union to continue to cooperate closely across three pillars of work at the United Nations.'¹²⁹ Functionality is the name of cooperation in Hickey's remarks, not any natural partnership. The following year, DPR Jonathan Allen began his remarks in a similar way, reminding those present that 'the United Kingdom left the European Union on 31 January.'¹³⁰

All the post-Brexit speakers agreed that greater UN–EU cooperation is desirable, but by shifting the temporal frame away from the shared past and towards the future, UK ambassadors define the terms of cooperation, as it is no longer a 'natural' occurrence. What is left is a functional and more hierarchical understanding of the system. DPR Roscoe defines this quite clearly in 2021: 'The United Nations-centred, international rules-based system provides a foundation for coordinated and collective action, including through regional organizations, in order to address our biggest challenges.'¹³¹

This temporal shift also follows the Global Britain script to some degree by projecting a more forward-looking vision of UN–EU partnership. Stripped of the need to justify the UK's support of greater EU–UN cooperation on security, UK representatives offer more constructive suggestions for future cooperation. While the EU's role is limited and the UNSC remains supreme in matters of security, at least in the UK's reading, representatives call for greater EU involvement in matters of climate and in certain policy areas, such as cooperation with Iran.¹³² This is most clearly evidenced in Woodward's 2022 address, when she welcomes the 'positive role played by the European Union and other regional organizations in promoting diplomacy and multilateralism and supporting the Security Council on international peace and security.'¹³³ In this way, Brexit performances soothe ontological stress created by fear of loss.

Questions of the experience of others: Ritual, socialisation, and cooperation

Perhaps the most fundamental existential question raised by Brexit is one of relationships. For nearly 50 years, the most fundamental routines were defined by EU membership and reinforced by regular meetings in Brussels and the inclusion of the European perspective in foreign-policy doctrine. Even in New York, UK representatives participated in rituals associated with EU membership, including regular coordination meetings between ambassadors, briefing responsibilities, and, most publicly, regular joint press statements. All of this was stripped away on 31 January 2020.

Over this decade of speeches, certain stories are repeated over and over to prove that EU–UN cooperation is strong. These include cooperation on the Iran Nuclear Deal, on anti-piracy in Somalia, and on the Libyan political dialogue. The repetition of such stories reinforces the need for cooperation, but here, too, is evidence of post-Brexit narrative reshuffling. This is especially obvious in the UK's narration of peace-building efforts in the Balkans and recognition of Kosovo.

The UN Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) has been in operation since 1999 and has worked in tandem with the EU peacekeeping mission Operation Althea since 2004. On the surface, this seems to be one of the most successful instances of cooperation between the EU and the UN. UK representatives early on praised the EU for its central role in facilitating dialogue, and this praise does not diminish following Brexit. Indeed, in 2022 Woodward notes that the UK

¹²⁸Hickey, 'Statement in the 8482nd meeting'.

¹²⁹Hickey, 'Statement in the 8482nd meeting'.

¹³⁰Allen, 'Statement in the VTC meeting'.

¹³¹Roscoe, 'Statement in the 8792nd meeting'.

¹³²Allen, 'Statement in the VTC meeting'; Roscoe, 'Statement in the 8792nd meeting'; Woodward, 'Statement in the 9065th meeting'.

¹³³Woodward, 'Statement in the 9065th meeting'.

‘strongly supports’ the EU’s efforts in the region, and she and her predecessors characterise this cooperation as a clear success.¹³⁴

There is a change, however, in the vision of the future for the region and the position and role of the EU. First, this imagery of moving towards peace and ‘break[ing] from the divisions of the past’ is present in all texts.¹³⁵ From 2010–17, the UK depicts the Western Balkan states as ‘striving towards’¹³⁶ or ‘realizing their aspirations to join’¹³⁷ the European Union. The future, it seems, is Europe. While this is not entirely absent post-Brexit, the real horizon for true peace rests in the region’s ‘progress towards Euro-Atlantic integration.’¹³⁸ This is a remarkable shift, as it not only decentralises the EU as the main actor in Europe, but it also calls on the greater anglosphere, as Euro-Atlantic ostensibly includes both the United States and Canada.

Moreover, in 2021 the UK co-opts the concept of European integration to refer both to this ‘Euro-Atlantic’ hybrid and, crucially, to NATO. The inclusion of NATO reshuffles the security question: the EU is responsible for dialogue, whereas NATO is responsible for security. Allen makes this quite clear: ‘NATO remains the cornerstone of Europe’s collective defence.’¹³⁹ This does not necessarily lessen the importance of the EU as a player in the region, but it is relativised as one of many. This effort to recast the structure and meaning of the EU is a direct response to loss; it is a need to redefine the EU in opposition to the UK after several decades of defining it as part of the UK.

Conclusion

The speeches and statements made at the UNSC, especially in this meeting, are not meant to persuade or convince, but to manifest. Speaking at the UNSC, especially as a permanent member, means speaking from a position of power, and resignifying that power with each iteration. This analysis demonstrates the incremental nature of these changes, despite the fanfare of Global Britain, and the myriad ways in which normal diplomatic practice and routines become part of the performative framework of Brexit. In uncoupling from the imperial and nationalist tropes embedded in the Global Britain script, diplomats at the UN worked to counteract a global narrative of populism and nationalism. In her 2016 UN General Assembly speech, Prime Minister Theresa May highlighted the ‘community of nations’ that was the cornerstone of the world and assured partners that ‘when the British people voted to leave the EU, they did not vote to turn inwards or walk away from any of our partners in the world.’¹⁴⁰ But such assurances needed to be reinforced regularly, which left UK diplomats stranded on a tightrope, desperate to construct a logical path from ‘before’ to ‘after’.

Some of the changes in this set of speeches are not unexpected. The UK had to take centre stage in its own telling, even if doing so put it at risk of being lumped together with other populist countries. Yet in these speeches in particular, the UK seized an opportunity to recalibrate its narrative in a more subtle and nuanced way. Yes, there was a clear effort to highlight the UK above all else, but this is to be expected; its loyalties within the context of this meeting were no longer divided. In fact, by casting off the EU, the UK’s language became more self-assured, unfettered by the ‘infrastructure of performativity’ that came with EU membership.¹⁴¹ With no strings attached, the UK could also welcome the EU benevolently to the Council Chamber and thank it for its continued support and engagement, all while asserting itself as a global player. The setting for these performances facilitated this shift most effectively. Visually, the UK sits at one of the coveted permanent seats,

¹³⁴ Woodward, ‘Statement in the 9065th meeting’.

¹³⁵ Grant, ‘Statement in the 6306th meeting’.

¹³⁶ Wilson, ‘Statement in the 7112th meeting’.

¹³⁷ Grant, ‘Statement in the 6306th meeting’.

¹³⁸ Allen, ‘Statement in the VTC meeting’; Roscoe, ‘Statement in the 8792nd meeting’.

¹³⁹ Allen, ‘Statement in the VTC meeting’.

¹⁴⁰ Theresa May, ‘Speech at the 2016 UN General Assembly’, New York, 20 September 2016.

¹⁴¹ Bialasiewicz, Campbell, Elden, et al., ‘Performing security’, p. 408.

just steps away from its own private P5 office. The President of the Council – a rotating honour – invites the EU to take a seat, but not before ensuring no UNSC members have objections. The UK is the host, the EU the guest, on the stage of peace and security. In this way, these performances are of particular importance to overcoming ontological stress. Outside this chamber, pundits spoke about the UK's path to isolationism. Inside this chamber, the UK is still an apparent great power, and its role demands engagement with EU and other partners.

In analysing Brexit performances, this article also demonstrates how central performativity is to maintaining and seeking ontological security. As actors seek ontological security, they turn to the performative landscape for what it means to act as a state and build changes into these rituals, narratives, and identity performances over time. This pool of performativity provides the framework for what we understand as 'the state' in International Relations. Moments of crisis are a good starting place for such analysis, as it is here where the interplay between script and performance is most clear. But even in the everyday, states cannot escape performativity.

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