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Published online: 11 Jan 2023.

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White enough, not white enough: racism and racialisation among Poles in the UK

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses race, racialisation and whiteness in relation to Eastern European migrants living in Western Europe. Focusing on Poles in the UK, it examines both Polish migrants' experiences of racism as well as their own investment into racial exclusions of other racialised groups. The paper interrogates how migrants navigate their peripheral whiteness in broader racial hierarchies of Eastern European in-betweenness that are both historically rooted and constantly negotiated. Benefitting from relatively easy access to the UK, Polish migrants occupy at once a racially privileged and racially marginal position that echoes historical tensions around the place of Eastern Europe in wider racial hierarchies of Europeanness. While being white enough to engage in racial exclusions Eastern Europeans are at the same time not white enough to escape racialisation. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with Poles in the UK conducted between 2019–2020 the paper offers insight into complex racialising practices of Polish migrants when they are both racialised and able to benefit from their position as 'paler migrants' to distance themselves from other migrants as well as 'darker citizens'. It contributes to scholarship on racialisation of East–West movers within Europe, in-betweenness and whiteness.

Introduction

This paper looks at race, racialisation and whiteness that is experienced, negotiated and performed by Eastern European migrants to the UK. Focusing specifically on Poles that migrated to London, it explores their positionality on the peripheries of whiteness and how this in-betweenness of being 'white but not quite' (Kalmar 2023) allows them to racialise other groups while simultaneously experiencing racial exclusion in the UK. By considering these dual processes of racialisation together, the paper emphasises the significance of shifting positions of Polish migrants as well as those they racialise as 'Others'. As such it points to the changing dynamics in broader struggles for European-ness/whiteness (Krivonos 2012) in which Poles ambivalent position in the UK is entangled with their own often conflicting and changing perception and treatment of

other racialised groups. This paper aims to draw out the in-betweenness of Poles that is on the one hand historically rooted and thus a continuity of Poland's peripheral position in and towards Europe and whiteness (see Kalmar 2023) or 'eurowhiteness' (Böröcz 2021) but on the other hand also something that is constantly (re)negotiated in relation to other groups in the racialised context of the UK (Botterill and Burell 2020).

Whiteness, as a norm and core to the idea of Western modernity, has never been static and historically not afforded to groups including Jews, Irish or Eastern Europeans (Nayak 2007). Whiteness demands those at its margins to strive towards it to become modern deserving subjects within wider intra-European hierarchies (Antonucci and Varriale 2020). This does not mean, however, that Eastern Europeans as a category are always external to whiteness because that would ignore wider global racial hierarchies and those within Eastern Europe itself (Tudor 2018). In this sense, whiteness of Eastern Europeans is fluid, shifting and, as some argue, permeable (McDowell 2009). Consequently, it is something that Eastern Europeans insist on to claim legitimacy to a Europeanness that is precarious to them (Imre 2005; Krivonos 2012; Zarycki 2022). Because of their simultaneous distance to both Blackness and whiteness (see Krivonos in the SI) Eastern European migrants can and do employ racist narratives while at the same time experiencing rejection from whiteness due to their Eastern Europeanness.

Research in the last few years has increasingly focused on the racialisation of Eastern European migrants in the West (Ryan 2010; Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012; Rzepnikowska 2019; Krivonos 2012). Here, whiteness and its shifting character are key in understanding why and how white Eastern Europeans can experience racism when they migrate to Western Europe (McDowell 2009). There have also been explorations into Eastern Europeans own racist attitudes upon migration (Ryan 2010; Gawlewicz 2016; Nowicka 2016). This scholarship has pointed to encounters with difference as something that takes place with migration from racially homogenous post-socialist contexts to the often much more diverse Western Europe, and how these narratives also travel back (Gawlewicz and Narkowicz 2015). Yet beyond the acknowledgement that the circulation of prejudiced ideas between West and East is complex and does not always follow a one-way flow, there has been much less explorations around encounters with racial difference *prior* to migration as part of broader historical global racial systems rather than only forming as a consequence of migration. Instead, racism has been considered as something that Eastern European migrants to Britain 'acquire' and 'learn' as part of the integration process (Fox and Mogilnicka 2019, 5–6). These accounts affirm a reading of Eastern European migrants as blank sheets when it comes to race, whiteness and coloniality based on the assumption that Eastern Europe does not have a racial history (Drnovšek Zorko 2019; Kalmar 2022a). As a concept race is still often ignored in Eastern Europe despite ongoing issues of racism in the region (Jaskułowski 2020). Migration researchers have previously argued that race is not relevant in the study of East–West migrations and that in post-Brexit Britain 'anybody' could be an enemy independent of race (Favell 2008; Nowicka 2016). Others have importantly warned against 'automatized and oversimplified linkages between migration and racism' (Tudor 2018, 22). But as Drnovšek Zorko (2019, 1575) argues, contemporary migrant encounters cannot be understood without reference to the entangled histories of the articulations of race, whiteness and colonial connections *in* Eastern Europe. Similarly, Parvulescu (2016, 27) reminds that Eastern Europe also has colonial history and, at the same time, Eastern Europeans

have got histories as colonial subjects that 'carries into the present and translates into hierarchies and stratifications'. To explore these contradictions in ways that are attentive to local and global specificities, scholarship on Eastern Europe has started to look back and examine our own 'engagements with racialized difference' (Drnovšek Zorko 2019, 1575). Decolonial scholars of Eastern Europe have in the past few years made significant contributions to this literature teasing out the region's distinct genealogy with race and connecting the post-socialist with the postcolonial or the South with the East (Baker 2018; Rexhepi 2018; Karkov 2022b; Mark et al. 2019; Țichindeleanu 2021; Tlostanova 2012). By studying racialisation of Poles and their own racialising practices, the paper contributes to the literature on the racialisation and whiteness of Eastern European migrants in the UK, literature on racism and racialising practices performed by Eastern-West movers and decolonial literature that foregrounds East–West inequalities in the production of racial difference.

The paper draws on interviews conducted between 2019 and 2020 with 20 Polish migrants; 10 women and 10 men, who live and work in the UK, predominantly London. Some interview participants arrived before the 2004 EU accession, many at or around that time and a few more recently. The participants' ages range between early 20s to late 50s, all were white Polish, cisgender and most were heterosexual. All interviewees were in paid employment and their class position varied. Although most of the interviewees could be considered working-class with jobs such as construction worker, cleaner, airport security officer and waiter, a few of the participants worked in skilled jobs including marketing managers, engineers and teachers. It is worth noting that this did not necessarily translate to their educational background as many A8 migrants in the UK are overqualified for the jobs that they undertake (Cook, Dwyer, and Waite 2011). The interviews were recruited and conducted by two Polish speakers, the author and a research assistant, and most interviews took place in cafes and restaurants. Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 min and aside from two interviews that were conducted in English with participants who arrived in the UK as children, all were conducted in Polish. The interviews were then transcribed and coded in NVivo with selected quotes that are included in this paper translated from Polish to English. In some instances when specific, hard to translate and often pejorative words were used, the original Polish word remained in the quote with a translation and explanation offered alongside. All participants have been anonymised and pseudonyms have been used. The aim of this research project was to capture people who lived and worked in a super-diverse urban setting where they would have interactions with many different racialised groups. The focus, however, was on the migrants' perceptions of three groups in particular; Muslims, Jews and the Roma because this mapped on both historical and contemporary racial histories in their home country Poland that the research wanted to connect with.

This paper opens with a discussion of coloniality and intra-European racial hierarchies, focusing on foregrounding histories of the construction and racialisation of Eastern Europe. The next section contextualises Polish presence in the UK stressing the in-betweenness of Polish migrants in the European racial project. This is followed by the empirical discussion that focuses on ways in which Poles experience racialisation in the UK and then turning the spotlight on the Poles themselves as those who racially exclude other racialised groups. By emphasising the in-betweenness, continuities and discontinuities of racial exclusions enacted against and by Poles, the paper contributes to a

call for migration research to be better situated within the racial histories of our region (Drnovšek Zorko 2019).

Histories of in-betweenness

The histories of intra-European hierarchies between the West and the European 'rest' are significant to contemporary explanations of the positionality of the region as an in-between; not fully European and not fully white (Böröcz 2021). Historically, Eastern Europe has been narrated as on the peripheries of Europe, and by extension on the borderlands of its civilisation, modernity and progress, either lacking it altogether or lagging behind in achieving it (Boatcă 2007). As Maria Todorova (2009, 12) has argued, the division of Europe into East and West captured the east of Europe as a space 'unmarked by Western Enlightenment' placing it in the lesser of the civilised/barbarian, rational/irrational, developed/underdeveloped dichotomies defined from the Western core to racially differentiate its Others (Boatcă 2007). Thus, these intra-European hierarchies did the work of stabilising the broader idea of the European core and affirmed its racist projects (Tudor 2018). Still, rather than being presented as the antithesis to the West and thus incompatible with it, Eastern Europe instead served as a bridge occupying a liminal position; contrasted to the Oriental Other but also not properly European (Bakić-Hayden 1995). In its distance and relative proximity there is tension that makes the region's in-betweenness complex and contradictory (Mayblin, Piekut, and Valentine 2019). Polish scholar Maria Janion (2006) conceptualised this ambivalence as 'uncanny Slavdom'. Within the racial hierarchies in Eastern Europe, Slavic people got placed among 'the lower races' and were considered subordinate (Shmidt and Jaworsky 2010; Jaworska 2020). While not all Eastern Europeans were Slavs, the Slavs in Eastern Europe were particularly targeted, not least by Nazi eugenic projects (Kalmar 2022a). In Janion's reading, the simultaneous familiarity and rejection of Slavdom by the Poles underpins the tension imbued in their continued in-betweenness. As Szulc (2010) observes, Janions' idea of uncanny Slavdom teases out the historical ambivalences of Polish identity as torn between East and West that play out throughout its history (see also Kalmar 2023). This tension, according to Janion (2006), was also the reason for the creation of the category of Central Eastern Europe that aimed to stress the region's closeness to the West and distance to the East.

While Eastern European commitment to hop on the train of modernity and catch-up with the West was present throughout its history and driving much of political activism during Communist rule (Manolova, Katarina, and Lottholz 2019) this was not the only narrative across Eastern Europe even if it is the one that has become the dominant story of post-socialist transformations. Historically, Eastern Europe has both aligned with a critique of imperialism and non-Western alternative forms of globalisation (Mark et al. 2019; Karkov and Valiavicharska 2019) and at the same time, also engaged in racial and colonial projects beyond being either on the receiving end of these or in solidarity with anti-colonial movements (Balogun 2018; Snochowska-Gonzales 2020; Nowak 2016).

During the Partitions of Poland (1772-1918) when the country disappeared from the maps of Europe, narratives of Polishness as uncivilised and unhealthy were frequently employed to justify interventions in the region (Kopp 2012; Ureña Valerio 2019). Still, as Shmidt and Jaworsky (2010) note, while ranking lower than the more civilised

Westerners, Eastern Europeans were considered as civilisationally 'above' Black people because of their relative proximity to the Western world (Shmidt and Jaworsky 2010). This in-betweenness meant that they were on the one hand consistently constructed as less white and thus less civilised but on the other hand also clearly distinguished from other racialised groups. This allowed them to engage in practices that subscribed to global racial hierarchies including anti-Semitism (Sroka 2010; Gross 2001; Bilewicz and Krzemiński 2010), anti-Roma racism (Imre 2005; Trehan and Kóczé 2009), the eugenics movement (Gawin 2011; Turda and Weindling 2007) and ambitions of colonial expansion as a means to lift the country up from the European periphery and establish itself in the global capitalist economy (Snochowska-Gonzales 2020; Grzechnik 2019). White privilege also allowed Poles to get preferential treatment by the British Empire when they as poor refugees arrived in East Africa – even if their liminal whiteness soon became an inconvenience as it posed a threat to white rule in the colonies (Lingelbach 2020). As such, peripheral whiteness that can be traced throughout Polish history informed a sense of in-betweenness, of being white but not quite, which in turn translated to the often ambivalent, shifting and contradictory racialising processes towards other 'Others'. These racial exclusions continue in various forms in today's Poland, perhaps most virulently mobilised in anti-Muslim narratives intertwined with migration and anti-refugee rhetoric (Pędziwiatr 2017; Narkowicz 2018). Only recently has anti-Black racism started to be addressed as well (see Balogun's and Pędziwiatr's in this SI). At the same time, Eastern Europeans continue to be marginalised in wider European racial hierarchies, something further accentuated during Brexit (Winiecka 2021).

Poles in the UK

Three decades after the fall of Communism, much of Eastern Europe is part of the EU which grants privileges sought by many, not least by enabling large-scale migrations from East to West. Since 2004, much of the East–West movements have been between Poland and the UK. Within a few years, Poles became the largest migrant group in the UK (Trevena 2009) reaching a peak of over one million in 2017 and then reversing the trend since, falling below 700,000 in 2021 (ONS 2021). The decline could be partially explained by the impacts of Brexit and then Covid, coupled with a wider context of an increasingly hostile climate for migrants in general in the UK and more favourable social policies in Poland.

In their racial in-betweenness, Eastern Europeans have served a role in upholding the racial hierarchies of the EU and the British immigration system even before their accession to the EU. During the period of labour shortages in Britain following the Second World War movement of darker citizens from former colonies was restricted in favour of opening borders to paler, European, migrants that included Eastern Europeans (Bhambra 2017; McDowell 2009). Since the EU's Enlargement in 2004, large numbers of Poles migrated to the UK under the Workers Registration Scheme (WRS) which allowed people from new accession states to work in the UK without many restrictions that were only later imposed following the accession of Bulgaria and Romania (D'Angelo and Kofman 2018). Positioned on the margins of the European Union, Poland became the buffer zone to Western Europe (Wallace, Chmouliar, and Sidorenko 1996) and served as a convenient hindrance for migration from former colonies, thus upholding Britain's

racialised lines of mobility (Bhambra 2017). But despite that Eastern Europeans were always more desirable because of their whiteness and Europeanness, it was also their peripherality to these (Safuta 2018) that played a considerable role in the public debate leading towards the Brexit referendum resulting in increased hostility (Lumsden, Goode, and Black 2021). The next two sections present empirical data that tease out these tensions and ambiguities. The first focuses on instances where Poles experience being 'not white enough' and the second looks at how they are, simultaneously, 'white enough' to racially exclude other racialised groups.

Not white enough

This section focuses on ways in which Poles talked about feeling Othered and how they made sense of these exclusions in their everyday lives. The interviewees occupied different positions in British society which translated to their different experiences of exclusion and different ways of understanding and dealing with negative experiences. Those who had been in the UK the longest and particularly those that arrived as children and could 'code-switch' more easily, were more vocal about resisting the construction of Polishness as subordinate. Still, without exception, most participants even when they initially denied it, brought up stories of feeling targeted. A strong theme, noted in other research on Eastern European migrants was around language (Ryan 2010; Krivonos 2012; McGhee, Travena, and Heath 2015). Because of their whiteness, however shifty and precarious, speaking their language is one of the main ways in which Eastern European migrants are differentiated and racialised (Rzepnikowska 2019). When asked if they feel comfortable speaking Polish in public, participants suggested there were some tensions:

> It depends. I don't know … I don't think people have positive associations with it, if it's on a train, in the restaurant, or wherever. I think people respond negatively to it. (Krzysztof)

> You know in public places and with my kids we try to speak English … So that people who are around us won't feel uncomfortable with our Polish language … Some of my friends have experiences with people telling them off [for speaking Polish]. (Grażyna)

Patrycja who has lived in the UK since she was 9 years old spoke about how language allows her to switch between being read as Polish and English, something her parents cannot do as easily:

> One of my neighbours is quite hostile and dismissive of the fact that we are migrants. Whenever my parents speak to her, she was quite dismissive because their English is not that great but when I went over there, she was so lovely to me. (Patrycja)

Amelia, another interviewee that arrived in the UK as a child migrant also talked about how she witnessed exclusion through her parents' experiences. She remembers that her parents who worked as a cleaner and factory worker received verbal abuse because their jobs were considered as 'typical' jobs that Poles engaged with. She also recalls having rocks thrown at their house:

> They'd shout at my mom. And I was like, 'she doesn't understand you'. It just made me feel so sorry … like 'we don't like you because you are different to us' … Nobody wanted Polish people to come, so it was very traumatising. (Amelia)

Both Amelia and Patrycja reflected in their narratives on the way that language is a marker of difference that makes their Otherness visible (Rzepnikowska 2019):

> The way they view me really changes once they know I am Polish. (Amelia)

> I was in John Lewis buying a purse and on the phone to my parents, speaking Polish whilst shopping around and there was one employee, middle-aged, English, white lady, who did not appreciate that I was speaking in a different language. She was sighing and very obviously walking around me and making little remarks. I didn't say anything to her because I was having a conversation with my parents and once I stopped speaking to them I picked up whatever item I needed to purchase. I walked up to her because it seemed like she didn't want to serve me. I said to her in English: 'oh sorry, I would like to purchase this' and she looked at me with such confused eyes. And she replied: 'of course darling!' Suddenly, she became so sweet and I thought really … you judged me so much when I was speaking in a different language but as soon as I spoke in English and I spoke well, you were being nice to me … She was quite angry that I was talking in another language and then she switched. (Patrycja)

When she 'switches' from being read as Polish to being read as English Patrycja's whiteness becomes more acceptable; from an unwanted, suspicious presence in the department store to a valued customer. As such, she can travel across the various degrees of whiteness accrued to her (McDowell 2009; Roediger 2018). In this way, both Amelia's and Patrycja's narratives point to an intergenerational possibility of 'passing' for Eastern Europeans that takes place within whiteness (Krivonos 2012) and is not necessarily afforded to other racialised groups (Ahmed 2007).

Not all participants felt equally comfortable claiming agency, especially one that had left London recently. Viktoria recently moved to an English seaside town because it was more affordable. This has had a huge impact on her sense of belonging as a Polish person. The town she lives in voted in favour of Brexit which shaped her perceptions of what she can and cannot say and do. Viktoria has an English-sounding surname which helps her 'hide her Polish identity':

> Sometimes I have to hide it. Especially with my work. I'm an English teacher in a very middle-class school. And I don't like to tell my students that I'm Polish because they could judge your ability to teach English you know. It's not English as a second language, I'm teaching core English subject in a secondary school here. (Viktoria)

As part of not being comfortable claiming Polishness in her new town, Viktoria also talked about how she 'doesn't have friends', 'doesn't answer the phone in public' if a Polish family member or friend calls her and only sticks to 'really superficial chats with people from work'. Changing one's behaviour in public, such as not speaking one's language, serves to detach oneself from the stigma that accompanies Eastern European bodies (Botterill and Burell 2020). While many of the Poles interviewed have Polish and international friends and some spoke of having formed meaningful relationships with English people, they struggled at times to navigate those relationships at work. Some of them, like Viktoria, kept things superficial, while others choose not to comment when their names kept on being misspelled, mispronounced or forgotten, with some of the participants actively changing their 'unpronounceable names' (Lulle 2021). As Krivonos (2012) notes in the context of Russian-speaking migrants, changing one's Eastern European name helps in gaining capital and moving up in the racialised

hierarchies of value. Thus, the 'new' names didn't necessarily have to be English names, rather it was more important that they were not Eastern European sounding names. For some of the Poles interviewed, distancing themselves from being identified as Eastern European also offered some relief from the barrage of stereotypical comments. As Lulle (2021) points out in her research with Latvian and Irish migrants to the UK, their names reflected the in-betweenness that is tied to their ambiguous whiteness.

At work, Mariusz said that he stopped telling people that he was from Poland because he got tired of hearing that Poles 'work in construction, are hardworking and can handle their drink'. Amelia also expressed frustration that every time she tells people that she is Polish 'they'd say something funny about a stereotype', for example, that all Poles are cleaners or that they eat swans:

> There was like a whole stereotype that Polish people eat swans. And it was like so huge for years … I'd be like – oh yeah, I need to go home, my mom's making dinner. And he'd be like 'is it swan for tea tonight?' (Amelia)

The trope of swan eating has been attached to various racialised groups, more recently Eastern Europeans, who were being accused in British tabloid media of eating swans (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012). It does the work of portraying Eastern Europeans as inherently civilisationally different to the Brits, who don't eat swans.

> They used to think of us savages, I still think they do. They recognise that we work hard … but I still think that they see us as some kind of lower sort of humans. (Janusz)

Janusz has worked in construction since his arrival and now has his own construction company. He recalls that when he first arrived, English workers would make derogatory comments about Poles stealing jobs, something Maja and Patrycja also remember:

> They used to say that the English are unemployed because Poles have been stealing their jobs and there are too many of us here. (Maja)

> The whole narrative around 'oh the Poles are here to steal our jobs'. We are being described as people who migrate to the UK just to take jobs from others. (Patrycja)

In the context surrounding Brexit, anti-Eastern European public discourses, hate crimes and racism intensified (Lumsden, Goode, and Black 2021; Sime 2017). Some interviewees reported not having had bad experiences in the UK because of their Polishness. However, for some of these interviewees this was almost immediately contradicted with a story of exclusion, suggesting this was not something they had thought about before:

> Honestly, I haven't had any negative experiences … Actually, once a neighbour asked my children why they are here and told them to return to Poland (Maja)

> You know, no [I don't feel prejudice], only once straight after the referendum when I was sitting on the bus going to work and a man came on and asked me if I had bought suitcases yet. (Agata)

Most of the interviewees recall feeling some form of discomfort around Brexit. Marek who has his own company and employs many Poles talked about everyone being 'terrified' and 'shocked' at work, and worried about deportations. Ignacy worried about whether his children would get 'teased at school'. For him, Brexit has meant that friendly relationships with British people became strained:

> I was a football coach here and several times after Brexit we had some experiences … maybe it wasn't outright hostility towards us but when the English lost a game then the guys would go 'oh its Brexit boys, soon you'll be packing your bags.' (Ignacy)

> My colleagues started talking about Brexit, telling me they voted Leave. Suddenly this person who I've been sitting next to at work for the past five years tells me that he is proud that he voted Brexit because his son couldn't get a job. My manager also told me that he voted for Brexit because his daughter didn't get a place in their chosen school. Because of us, the migrants. We are to blame for the schools, we are to blame for NHS crumbling. This isn't true, we were clearly invited here! (Grażyna)

> I felt a little bit disappointed that people voted for Brexit. It hurt me that we were blamed for everything. It wasn't very fair. I heard this in the media. There was an English woman talking about how she's unable to find work because there are too many of us here. (Maja)

In Grażyna's and Maja's narratives there is a sense of surprise and disappointment surrounding Brexit, as well as a form self-positioning as migrants who were at once invited and thus deserving and at the same time unwanted. While this potentially opens up spaces for solidarity with other groups targeted by British hostile migration policies, these narratives are fragile and often unstable. At the same time as there is a sense of common discrimination there are also instances when interviewees pushed back against being racially excluded with a sense of superiority and claim to whiteness that others who experienced racism couldn't afford.

White enough

This section shifts the lens from the interviewees experiences of being targeted due to their peripheral whiteness to showing how they perpetuate racist discourses themselves. Here their whiteness, even if liminal, allows them to exclude other racialised groups in narratives that are often contradictory and displays continuously shifting positions towards who and what is to be racially Othered.

In his narrative, Janusz talked about his position as a Polish person in Brexit Britain. He compared his situation to immigrants from the Caribbean who were invited to the UK and then, in the Windrush scandal, deported:

> They were the ones to invite us to work, it's not like we were begging them … I think it's hypocritical they invited us here and now apparently we have no right to treat this country as our home. So, we have to be like the Blacks, work our asses off and then return all of a sudden? It's demoralising. (Janusz)

While Janusz talked with a sense of understanding and solidarity at the injustice that the Windrush generation faced, his narrative also pointed to a sense of entitlement that, in his eyes, distinguishes him from those immigrants who were also invited but not equally wanted. In his words, Janusz felt 'demoralised' about being treated similarly to people who are not white and not European and with that he resisted a 'racial downgrading' (Böröcz and Sarkar 2017). Other research has similarly noted a sense of anger among Poles when their assumed racial position in the UK was questioned and rejected (Botterill and Burell 2020). Their relative proximity to whiteness/Europeanness and the 'implicit promise of the possibility of advancement in the racial hierarchy' (Zarycki 2022, 5) allows them to simultaneously critique racial exclusions when they are targeted by it and, in the next instance and perhaps as an antidote, engage in racist behaviour to distance themselves from those less white than them.

During our interview, Karolina's positioned herself at a distance to 'white England' and spoke enthusiastically about how much she appreciated the diversity of London which was so lacking in Poland:

> London seems nicer than anywhere else in the UK. Essex for example, is so white and full of the English. I would feel weird there. (Karolina)

This was almost immediately contrasted when she spoke about the London neighbourhood she used to live in.

> My local area in Croydon was pretty rough … there'd always be police sirens, or you'd walk past a crime scene … I wanted to move because there was nothing which made up for its terribleness. Then I lived in Balham, which I think was my favourite … It was a little whiter too, but not completely. [It] had more culture. I felt like there was a lesser chance of something happening to me, or when it was the summer, I didn't feel awkward about showing my arms and legs. I felt more comfortable and didn't stick out. I think subconsciously, I feel less comfortable around people who look differently to me, and you hear a lot about it on the news, about stabbings and so forth, it is mainly Black people that do it, and their gangs … As a woman, I felt a lot more comfortable there and getting home late at night in a whiter neighbourhood. (Karolina)

Karolina is clear about limits to how comfortable she feels in areas that are not mostly white. Here she draws on racialised tropes around Black gang culture (Williams 2015), the threat to white women posed by brown and black men (Bhattacharyya 2008) as well as suggesting that the way she dresses is more white (Krivonos and Diatlova 2020). Many of the interviewees, like Karolina, praised the diversity in the UK. Yet often these narratives would be qualified by a more exclusionary view, as in the case of Edyta who said that she doesn't like the whiteness of Poland and loves London for its diversity yet to a point, because some ethnic minorities 'take advantage of the fact that they are minorities to get ahead'. Agata appreciated London's multiculturalism but when she spoke about aspects of London that she did not like she, similarly to Karolina, spoke of gang culture and knife crime and contrasted it to Poland:

> In London there are gangs and knife crime. There is no way that would ever happen in Poland. Those are people who were brought up in those kinds of cultures and walked around with machetes and, for them, that's normal. (Agata)

The narratives around gang culture and knife crime evoked the association of Black people with crime reproducing the 'myth of Black criminality' (Gilroy 2015). The suggestion that this would never happen in Poland bracketed the country from 'cultures' considered external to it, where people walk around with machetes. Karolina's and Agata's narratives were specifically exhibiting anti-Black racism. Yet most racially prejudiced narratives from the Polish interviewees targeted Jews, Roma and Muslims. This maps on to the racial histories of Poland[1] and thus suggests that contrary to claims about migrants from Eastern Europe only 'taking on' existing racial discourses after arriving to a super-diverse context (Fox and Mogilnicka 2019), there is a continuity of racial exclusions interwoven with Polish history. Several people spoke of Jewish presence in Poland recalling family stories about how their town had 'many Jews'. Often the historical memories of genocide did not necessarily lead to more favourable views towards Jews. In a candid way, Ignacy spoke of local experiences of anti-Semitism during the Holocaust and after:

> My grandma would tell me things like that the Jews in our town were put in a local camp and then they were taken from there to other camps, maybe Auschwitz, or that they died in that camp, but I never asked about details, it did not interest me really. And by the time that I was growing up during Communism, there were no Jews left. (Ignacy)

While Ignacy had a neutral view of Jews rooted mainly in memories and not actual contact, Agata who works as a cleaner was often employed by Jews in London. One of her first jobs was cleaning a house of an older Jewish woman who asked Agata where she was from and was instantly withdrawn, cold and suspicious of her:

> I suspect that this woman had some experiences of the war, there must have been something in her past during the war that Poles did to her and she now has this trauma. I knew something was wrong. (Agata)

Despite this acknowledgement of violence towards the Jewish community in Poland, Agata generally spoke about Jews as people who 'consider themselves better than us'. This echoes findings in Anna Sosnowska's (2017, 126) research with Polish cleaners in New York that spoke about their Jewish employers 'display of superiority' and interpreted their cultural difference as more troublesome, suggesting the possibility of pre-employment anti-Semitic attitudes. Similarly in this study interviewees spoke about their Jewish employers through anti-Semitic tropes, stressing that they were 'money-oriented' and 'cunning' and only nice when they 'want to do business with you'.

> My boss is Jewish, and he is so stingy. I didn't meet any other Jews before him but in Poland they are stereotyped to be cheap and count their pennies, and he is exactly like that … it is likely that the rest of them are like this too. (Konrad)

> In recent news you might have seen Jewish people trying to reclaim properties, which is quite self-righteous and financially motivated. (Karolina)

What Karolina mentions relates to ongoing debates around properties belonging to Jewish families in Poland that were nationalised after the war. Recently the Polish government has made steps to make claims to these properties harder for Jews (Sherwood 2021). Filip said that he didn't have explicitly negative views on Jews or the Roma but he remembered how back in Poland some stereotypes were part of the daily language:

> In Poland, we even say someone can 'ocyganić' you, which has the word cygan in it, meaning gypsy. The same goes for 'wyżydzić'.[2] I guess we shouldn't really use those terms, but that's how our language has evolved and we don't mean to say these things maliciously. (Filip)

When it comes to Roma/Gypsy[3] people, the interviewees shared mostly negative, highly racialised and stereotypical views – again often drawing on their memories from Poland that they claim got reinforced once they met Roma people in the UK:

> It might sound a bit racist but they … they were illiterate, I don't think they went to school in Poland. In my hometown, we had the Roma there … there'd be this one woman at the market, doing palm reading. Often, they lived in barracks which were social housing. (Janusz)

Throughout his interview, Ignacy shared neutral or favourable views around difference, other faiths and ethnicities, until asked about Roma people. Hesitating he said:

> Well … with them, I don't have a great opinion. Because I remember whenever there were things going on in our neighbourhood, theft and burglaries, it was always the Gypsies. I remember later the youth wouldn't leave them alone and so they ended up leaving the neighbourhood. (Ignacy)

These memories, despite involving memories of Polish Roma people leaving their homes because they were harassed by the locals, do not seem to impact Ignacy's negative attitudes towards them. He works in a hotel and blames any issue of theft on the Roma working there. Other interviewees employed similar narratives about Irish Gypsies:

> I'll admit, you could probably say I am a hater of them. I'll tell you a story, I was at B&Q with a Polish friend of mine. Outside the store a Gypsy tried to sell a camera to us for about £200 which cost about five times that in Argos. They shook on a price of £100. When he got in the car and opened the camera box, there was a bag of flour in it. What could he have done – you can't go to the police and say help me, a bunch of Irish gypsies conned me into buying a bag of flour for £100. My opinion of all gypsies is really bad, no matter where they are from – you see it in the media all the time. (Janusz)

Janusz was comfortable buying stolen products and clearly did not have an issue with people stealing goods until it turned out that he got fooled himself. The perception of Roma/Gypsy people, whether they are Irish or Eastern European as engaging in criminal activity was prominent throughout many narratives:

> Let me put it this way, if I know that I am around Roma gypsies, I will check for my bag. I do it so they know and if they are offended by it, so be it, I would rather know my bag is safe. (Filip)

The Roma people that the Polish interviewees encountered would often be Polish Roma families who rented out rooms to Poles. The rooms would get advertised in Polish newspapers and in Polish cultural venues. Both Janusz and Konrad lived with Roma families when they first arrived in the UK:

> I ended up renting from a Polish Roma family … who lived in social housing … They are 'cwaniaki' [tricksters]. The council would give them a house to live in … I shared my room with three other people. (Janusz)

> They were Polish Roma gypsies … They all drove Mercedes cars – just really stereotypical Roma behaviour … (Konrad)

While most of the participants talked about theft and dishonestly when it came to Roma people, both in Poland and the UK, Filip more bluntly linked Roma with being less civilised and 'darker' – placing them between whites and Blacks. His use of the term 'normal' carries with it racial connotation as he slots the Roma in between 'Africans in tribes' and who he considers 'normal people':

> I don't think I have ever met a Roma Gypsy. I think it's an interesting culture, but they need to become more civilised … There are tribes in Africa who don't have access to the internet, and there are normal people who are working, and the Roma are somewhere in between that. They are darker skinned and more hairy, both the men and the women. That's how I imagine them. (Filip)

When it came to Muslims, the interviewees expressed Islamophobic views that were less rooted in historical experiences from Poland. Participants sometimes automatically

responded that they did not have any prejudice to Muslims only to almost 'remember' and correct themselves echoing familiar tropes around terrorism and women's rights:

> Generally, I don't have a problem with Muslims. When I see a woman in a scarf with only small slits for the eyes, it just looks a bit funny. I feel a bit unsafe. At the same time if they decide to live in Western culture then they should respect our norms and our culture. (Ryszard)

Ryszard believed that Muslims were more 'culturally distanced' from 'us' and positioned himself within the category of unquestionable white Europeanness. Others also focused disproportionate attention on Muslim women and their dress (Narkowicz and Pędzi-wiatr 2017). In Marek's narrative, he also initially responds positively when asked about Muslims only to, similarly to Ryszard, shift his narrative:

> I really enjoy observing the strength in their communities. Everyone knows and helps each other. I don't like it when they impose their culture on us. Even in London, you might go to a high street and see that most of the shops have signs in Arabic. I don't like it when people from another culture enter a society and create an enclave for themselves, and live life as if they are still in their home country. (Marek)

While admiring Muslim community spirit, Marek is also critical of ways in which the community is upheld, for example through Arabic signs. He is not critical of the very same way that the Polish community has established themselves in the UK, with signs like 'Polski sklep' [Polish shop] visible in most London neighbourhoods.

Agata has a boyfriend who is Muslim. However, because he is 'normal' and does not fit with a stereotype Agata has of Muslims, she initially says no when asked if she knows any Muslims. Despite an intimate relationship with a Muslim, she refuses to work with Muslims because of ideas she has around them being aggressive:

> I: Do you have any contact with Muslims?
> A: No, I don't, never, I don't have anything against them but no. Well, I have a boyfriend who is Muslim though. He is Muslim. But he is normal, not really that practicing. Otherwise, once I had Muslim clients and when the woman told me what she expected of me then I quit straight away. It was too demanding, I felt like soon they will demand of me to convert as well. It was also after the London attacks and maybe that is why I was terrified of them. I don't know why but I have this feeling inside that I just don't want to work for Muslims and that's it.

The Islamophobic narratives circulated mainly around orientalised concerns about a Muslim 'take-over' or women's rights that have little grounding in their actual experiences with Muslims from Poland or in the UK. It seemed that claiming cultural distance to Muslims assisted the Polish participants in making claims to their allegiance with European culture and values and thus assert themselves as deserving and modern Europeans.

Conclusion

Eastern Europe has historically occupied a complex in-between position within broader European racial hierarchies. As Europe's 'Other within' (Boatcă 2007, 373) the region has both benefitted from relative proximity to the European project and simultaneously been placed in its vestibule. Situated within these genealogies, this paper has examined how Polish migrants to the UK navigate being both racially excluded as Eastern Europeans and themselves engaging in exclusions of other racialised groups, particularly Jews,

Muslims and the Roma. Drawing on empirical data gathered from interviews with Poles in London, the paper has argued that their in-betweenness as 'white but not quite' reflects distinct racial histories in Eastern Europe and intra-European hierarchies and, at the same time, is continuously renegotiated in everyday encounters with Others in the UK.

Departing from a reoccurring theme in migration literature where racialisation and racism among Eastern European migrants is divorced from racial histories in Eastern Europe, as well as globally, this paper stressed that histories of racial exclusions should be taken into consideration for a better understanding of racism, racialisation and whiteness as experienced and enacted by Eastern European migrants. As such, the paper contributed to calls among decolonial and race scholars from Eastern Europe to not treat race as insignificant or detached from the broader European racial project of which it is part and to not treat Eastern European migrants as blank sheets when it comes to race, whiteness and coloniality.

Notes

1. This is not to suggest that anti-Black racism is not part of Polish racial history as research by Bolaji Balogun has shown (2020).
2. 'Ocyganić' and 'wyżydzić' are both pejorative verbs drawing on the words 'Cygan' [Gypsy] and 'Żyd' [Jew']. When converted to a verb it is meant to suggest that someone can cheat you.
3. The participants predominantly used the Polish words 'cygan' [Gypsy] as well as 'Roma' [Roma] so in this text both terms will be used interchangeably.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

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