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ABSTRACT

The European Union expansion in 2004 resulted in a large-scale migration from less ethnically diverse Poland to multicultural societies. Many Polish migrants have become conscious of being white due to contact with people of colour, and at times, not-quite-white through encounters with the local white population. The presumed whiteness has not protected them from racialisation in the UK, especially in the context of Brexit. In contrast, in the Spanish context they have often been privileged by whiteness and Europeanness, although they have also been categorised as Eastern European Others. This paper illustrates how Polish migrants are racialised in relation to their ambiguous position linked to the construction of 'Eastern Europeans'. It does so by drawing on narrative interviews with Polish women in Manchester and Barcelona based on the fieldwork conducted in 2012–2013 and interviews in Manchester in 2017–2018. The central argument is that racialisation of Polish migrants is influenced by the history and present of East–West relations. The peripheral condition shared by Spain and Poland helps to explain the differences in racialisation of Polish migrants in Britain and Spain.

Introduction

My research in Britain and Spain explores the experiences of Polish migrant women in multicultural cities, following the European Union expansion in 2004. The research participants in Manchester became conscious of being white in the presence of people of colour. In some cases, they saw their positioning as white in the new multicultural environment as a form of privilege, allowing them to be unnoticed. Nevertheless, this white privilege fades once their ethnic difference becomes more apparent and they become racialised[1] as not-quite-white (van Riemsdijk 2010; Kalmar 2022) Eastern European Others. In Britain, the Brexit debate in particular has revealed more clearly that Eastern European whiteness in a Western European context carries geopolitical and racial connotations (Botterill and Burrell 2019).[2]

Migrants from the East of the EU are positioned as in-between, on the one hand economically marginalised in the labour market, while on the other racially privileged by their

assumed whiteness combined with their EU national status (Botterill and Burrell 2019; Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012; Parutis 2011; Rzepnikowska 2019b). Racist discourses about the East of Europe, as reflected in my research in the UK and outlined in the introduction to this Special Issue by Kalmar (2023), have penetrated British politics and affected everyday relations between migrants from Poland and the established population.

My research in Spain also revealed racialisation of Polish migrants, although not to such a negative extent as in the UK. Previous research in Spain showed the privileged treatment of Poles due to their whiteness and Europeanness (Nalewajko 2012; Ramírez Goicoechea 2003), although in some media they are often placed in the homogenous category of Eastern European Others (Kressova, José, and Castaño 2011). The privileged treatment of Polish migrants in Spain might also be based on an assumed cultural historical, political and religious proximity (Nalewajko 2012). Both Poland and Spain are perceived as Catholic countries with past dictatorial regimes and the experience of democratic transitions. Also, both guard the external borders of the EU. Both Poland and Spain are part of the European periphery, and therefore are positioned differently in the hierarchies of whiteness in comparison to the UK. The peripheral condition shared by Spain and Poland helps to explain differences in the racialisation of Polish migrants in Spain as opposed to Britain.

In addition, my fieldwork in Spain took place in Barcelona, situated in Catalonia, one of the seventeen *Comunidades Autónomas* and a stateless nation. This is particularly interesting because of its Catalan identity and its local government's emphasis on intercultural mixing. It is important to keep in mind the historical repression and othering of Catalan language and Catalonia, and historical racialisation of Spain by the European core, but at the same time, to be attentive to the racial formation of whiteness in Catalonia and Spain, historically through colonialism and nowadays through various forms of racism (Khan and Gallego-Balsà 2021),

This article expands the geographical scope of current debates on racialisation of migrants from the East of the EU by focusing on both Britain and Spain. It contributes to the literature on racialisation in the two different contexts with attention to the historical, economic, and geopolitical dimensions of Western racial capitalism, and Western constructions of Eastern European Others. It draws on the experiences of Polish migrants in Britain and Spain to illustrate the complexity of multi-dimensional racialisation of these migrants in both contexts.

The processes of racialisation in Britain and Spain – conceptual and contextual considerations

The processes of racialisation are deeply rooted in western colonialism and imperialism which coincided with the formulation of scientific ideas about race in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries associated with inherent physical traits, followed by processes of racialisation as a way of categorising different populations ordered hierarchically with whites at the top and blacks at the bottom (Miles 1982). Racialisation involves unequal power relations, usually with dominant groups ascribing characteristics to subordinate groups. Racism is the outcome of the process of racialisation, and it can be manifested in different ways (Garner 2010). It does not require the focus solely on physical difference but also on other variables, including country of

origin, religion, nationality and language (Garner 2010; Solomos 2003; Yuval-Davies 1997). It should not be reduced to individual attitudes, but rather understood as a complex system of power and domination, including anti-blackness, Islamophobia, antisemitism, as well as stigmatisation and criminalisation of migrant groups (Lentin 2020). In Britain, 'new racism' has been based on 'notion of culture and nation to construct a definition of the British nation that excludes those of different cultural, ethnic or racial background from the national collectivity' (Solomos 2003, 33). Similarly, Gilroy (1987, 43) argued that the new forms of racism have 'the capacity to link discourses of patriotism, nationalism, xenophobia, Englishness, Britishness, militarism and gender difference into a complex situation which gives 'race' its contemporary meaning' (see also Bonnett 2000 and Byrne 2006 on racialisation encompassing class and gender differences).

Polish migrants in the UK become racialised and imagined through the category of race because they are migrants (Gilroy 2006), and they are often represented and perceived as a threat to the established working-class population. Nevertheless, the racialisation of Polish migrants must be distinguished from the racialisation of people of colour colonised by the West and subsequently settling in the West, as the former are generally advantaged by a degree of white privilege. To push Gilroy's assertion above even further, as Kalmar (2023) argues in the introduction to this Special Issue, racialisation of Polish and other Eastern Europeans is embedded in a wider process of Western racial capitalism taking advantage of the cheap labour and new markets in the East of Europe, constructed as a backward (in reference to culture, economy and politics) periphery of the European core, and producing racialised Eastern European Others.

The question of race and racialisation in the Spanish context is very different from the British. Spain has been constructed by North-Western Europe as racially inferior, hindering European ideals of racial purity (Mignolo 2006; Persánch 2018). To overcome its inferiority associated with notions or racial impurity linked to 'oriental and African elements and the mingling of Christians with Jews and Arabs' (Flesler 2008, 20), Spain tried to erase its Moorish past. The erasing of the Jewish and Arab presence following the 'reconquest' of Iberia constituted the historical foundations of racism (Mignolo 2006; see also Kalmar 2023).

The Spanish colonial project helped to whiten Spain's global image, but this struggle was contested by Spain's imperial rival, England (Roca Barea 2017). As Mignolo (2006, 20) points out, England wanted to follow the Spanish example of empire building, and in doing so, Spaniards were racialised, 'for Spaniards were the Moors, Jews, Indians and Blacks'. Persánch (2018) argues that with the gradual loss of control over colonial territories, Spain was increasingly perceived as an exotic, backward and less white Other by the European core, especially since the nineteenth century. The process of racialisation of Spain and Spaniards was part of the wider project of Western racial capitalism and important to the North-western European colonial powers. The political purpose of this racialisation was to remove Spain from its imperial domination. In the meantime, as Mignolo (2006) reminds us, Hegel offered the geopolitical map of Europe asserting the superiority of the heart of Europe, including England, Germany and France, which in the nineteenth century established and expanded Western capitalism and imperialism, while excluding Spain from this group. This heart of Europe was described as pure and clean, not like Spain with its connection to Africa or Poland with its connection to Asia,

drawing on the scientific classification of race developed in the Enlightenment (23). All this is important in the processes of peripheralisation, inferiorisation and racialisation of Southern and Eastern Europe.

Racialisation on the Iberian Peninsula in the sixteenth century was in reference to religion through the classification of people with the wrong (non-Christian) or no religion, namely Moors, Jews and indigenous Americans, in contrast to pseudo-scientific and secular ideas of race developed in the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European North-West (Mignolo 2006, 20). In this tradition, after the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) the Franco regime (1939–1975) focused on reconstructing Spanish racial superiority premised on racial exceptionalism and imperial aspirations, and Christian religion (Persánch 2018). These ideas of race drawing on religion were echoed in the following statement in 1991 by Jordi Pujol, former President of the Catalan Autonomous Government: 'In Catalonia, as in any European country, it is easy to integrate the Polish, Italians or Germans, but it is difficult to achieve that with Arab Muslims, even with those who are not fundamentalists' (Cesari 2006, 236). Catholicism associated with Polish migrants might offer them a privileged position (Ramírez Goicoechea 2003).

In general, migrants perceived as white are rather considered as *extranjeros* (foreigners), a more neutral category in Spanish, than *inmigrantes* (immigrants), a term with negative connotations. The existing literature stresses the invisibility and the privileged treatment of Polish migrants, who are considered *nórdicos* (from the North) (Nalewajko 2012; Ramírez Goicoechea 2003), a term and implying whiteness.

Zapata-Barrero and van Dijk (2007) argue that racism in Spain follows European trends of western racial supremacy. However, in economic and geo-political terms, Spain, just like Poland, is still considered as a European periphery. This has become even more so since the economic downturn between 2008 and 2015. Spain's economic and geopolitical position helps explain the different processes of racialisation of Polish migrants in Spain in contrast to Britain. Furthermore, similarities and alliances between Poland and Spain [see The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) 2012 document titled *Poland and Spain: Partnership for a stronger Europe*] suggest that Spain has found no political utility in racialising Polish migrants as Eastern European Others, although the imaginary of a backward and inferior Eastern European Other is available to its citizens to draw on, as reflected in my interviews discussed later in this paper.

The ambiguous construction of the Eastern European other

Unlike Spain and Britain, Poland has never had any colonies, although it had colonial aspirations (see Narkowicz 2023) and engaged in racial exclusions (Balogun 2018). The views about blacks, Arabs and Muslims have been influenced by the historical imaginaries and colonial narratives transmitted through the literature and the media (Rzepnikowska 2016; Ząbek 2007; Balogun and Pędziwiatr 2023 in this Special Issue). Similarly, the supremacy of whiteness has been reinforced in Poland by Western colonialist racialising discourses on blackness based on images of primitivism, backwardness and inferiority. Racial prejudice against Roma people in Poland has also been prevalent (Winiewski, Witkowska, and Bilewicz 2015). Furthermore, the politics of the current conservative government that came to power in 2015 with divisive nationalistic rhetoric

fuelled anti-immigrant attitudes and attacks on Muslims or 'foreign-looking' people (Narkowicz and Pedziwiatr 2017). The response of the Polish Law and Justice government to the arrival of migrants and refugees from the Middle East, Africa and other parts of the Global South at the Polish-Belarussian border since 2021 has been to push them back to Belarus. It is important to stress the political dimension of the humanitarian crisis at the Polish-Belarussian border. While this migration was used as a tool by the regime of Alexander Lukaschenko, the authoritarian leader of Belarus, to exert pressure on Poland/EU/the West, recent debates highlight racialisation by the Polish state of white Ukrainian refugees at the Polish-Ukrainian border as 'desirable', and black, brown and Muslim arrivals at the Polish-Belarussian border as 'undesirable' and a threat (Amnesty International 2022; Grześkowiak 2022). This racialisation and dehumanisation of Middle Eastern and African refugees serves to position Poland and its citizens as white and European enough, contrary to Western assumptions about Poland and Polish people as 'not quite white' (Kalmar 2022) and 'not quite European' (Sayyid 2018).

The racialisation of Polish people as less than fully white has been influenced by the geo-political and cultural position of Poland between the East and the West. Grzymała-Kazłowska (2007) refers to the historical place of Poland as a cultural borderland. She argues that one of the most important elements shaping Polish identity and attitudes to Others in Poland are, on the one hand, a certain inferiority complex towards Western nations and, on the other, a sense of superiority towards nations of the East. These ideas draw on the image of the East of Europe as a bridge between Orient and Occident contributing to in-betweenness and the perception of 'catching up with the West', with the stigma of the communist past attached to it (Boatcă 2006, 92).

The fall of the Iron Curtain, and subsequently the accession of Poland into the EU in 2004, constituted significant markers of the country's supposed 'return to Europe'. It reinforced Polish claims of belonging to Central rather than Eastern Europe (Boatcă 2006), thus counteracting its proximity to Russia. This process of whitening and Europeanisation also echoes the *Antemurale Christianitatis* mission (bulwark of Christendom), historically used as a label in Renaissance Poland, as in other European countries bordering the Muslim world (Boatcă 2006; Weintraub 1979). This is significant when considering the present Polish government's attempts to build the wall on Poland-Belarus border to stop Muslim Others (and other people of colour) from entering the 'imagined community' of white and Christian Europe.

Contrary to such efforts to solidify the white Europeanness of Poland, the Eastern expansion of the EU led to further dependence on Western European trade and investment and resulted in the exploitation of cheap labour (Shankley 2021; Rzepnikowska and Griffiths 2018). High levels of unemployment after the fall of the communist government meant that upon admission into the EU large numbers of people from Poland and the other new members moved to the West of the EU, which then included the UK. This reinforced the perception of poor and backward Eastern European Other from underdeveloped East of Europe. Young Polish migrants, previously taught at geography lessons in post-socialist Poland that their country was in the centre/heart of Europe, were suddenly told they were Eastern European, and assigned a subordinate class position in the UK by often being employed in low-paying jobs despite some having high levels of education (Drinkwater, Eade, and Garapich 2009; Samaluk 2016). The feelings of dissatisfaction about Poles and other Eastern Europeans by

segments of established population in the UK grew. This was exploited by some media and the British political elites (see Kalmar 2023). Resentment towards Poles culminated at the time of the Brexit referendum in 2016. The wave of post-Brexit vote hostility revealed the extent of racialisation of Polish migrants (Burnett 2017; Komaromi and Singh 2016; Rzepnikowska 2019a).[3]

The racialisation of Polish migrants in the UK not only rests upon racism that existed before and has been embedded in national policy in the decades leading up to it, including the debates over immigrant numbers and media discourse about 'scroungers' (Burnett 2017, 89), but also builds on the 'discursive practices of inferiorization, exoticization, and racial othering' (Boatcă 2006, 91). These complex processes of racialisation affect everyday lives of Polish migrants, as reflected in my research discussed in this paper, particularly in the UK.

The research

My initial research conducted in 2012/13 focused on the experiences of Polish migrant women in Manchester and Barcelona, and it included participant observation, focus groups and narrative interviews. The interviews in Manchester included 21 Polish migrant women living in Manchester and 20 in Barcelona, who entered Britain and Spain just before or after Poland joined the EU. I maintained contact with most of the interviewees (15 out of 21) and contacted them in 2017/18 to find out the impact of Brexit on their everyday experiences. The data from the second study illustrates the intensified racialisation of Polish migrants in the context of Brexit and the importance of wider structures in the processes of racialisation, as opposed to racialisation fuelled by the tabloid media and individual stereotypical perceptions of Polish migrants held by the local population. The non-representative sample is varied as it included Polish migrant women with different age, class, education level, family status and length of residence.

Both studies were approved by the University Research Ethics Committees at the University of Manchester. I made sure that my research was based on informed consent where the research participants agreed to take part based on information received from me, after which they could decide to agree to take part or not. Their involvement was entirely voluntary. When potential participants expressed an interest in the research, I discussed the project with them and explained that the strictest confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained. The participants received both the Participant Information Sheet and the Consent Form.

This paper draws on the data from qualitative interviews gathered in both stages of my research which were analysed through narrative analysis, focusing on how the participants tell their stories and what is important to them.

Racialisation through language

According to 2011 census data, the Polish language has become the most commonly spoken non-native language in England and Wales (ONS 2011). This also mirrors the situation in Manchester. Due to negative discourses on Polish migration, the foreign accent of Polish migrants becomes an undesirable symbol of Otherness. For example,

the *Daily Mail* article of May 6, 2016, titled 'A rapist protected by the police and the mining town that turned into little Poland', marks the visual and audible presence of Poles with images of Polish stores, bakeries and beauty salons. It uses a phrase 'Polish invasion' and comments on the lack of integration of Poles within the community, seeing the Polish language 'as a barrier to stay separate'. Over time, the racialised and demonised figure of Eastern European Other has become part of dominant discourses in the UK, contributing to increased anti-immigrant sentiment and xeno-racism (Böröcz and Sarkar 2017; Rzepnikowska 2019a).

The interviews with my research participants reveal the ambivalent construction of Eastern European Others, pointing to the shifting racialised positioning of Polish migrants. The two excerpts below from the interview with Lucyna (an office worker in her thirties), interviewed in Manchester in 2012, show the complexity of this racialisation:

> Once in the beginning, I worked with a colleague who was black … We were together at a bus stop … Only because I was white, I was treated differently. There was a group of teenagers and they started using racist language towards her and they were asking me what I was doing with her … I thought to myself, how wrongly they judged the situation. She was English, born and bred in Manchester. They were asking her why she came to this country while I was standing next to her, and only because I was white, they thought I was alright.
>
> …
>
> It sounds sad but if you don't speak, then everything is alright, because people are not entirely sure if you are Polish, or maybe English, because I'm white. But it is obvious that as soon as I start speaking, you can tell that I have an accent and people straight away know and always ask this question: 'Where are you from?' And it doesn't mean that I am embarrassed of being Polish, but I admit that if I don't have to, I don't start this topic. More importantly, I avoid it because it always brings bad experiences.

Lucyna and several other research participants became conscious of being white in the presence of racialised people of colour. They often realise their positioning as white in the new multicultural environment is a form of privilege of being unnoticed as the Other. Nevertheless, this white privilege fades once their ethnic difference becomes more apparent and they become racialised as not-quite-white Eastern European Others, often as a result of widespread negative discourses about Polish migrants in the public, political and media debates in Britain (Rzepnikowska 2019a), as well as historical underpinnings of whiteness as a shifting category.

Lucyna understood that her positioning as white in the new multicultural environment is a form of privilege of being unnoticed as the Other. Nevertheless, this white privilege only applies until she starts speaking and her ethnic difference becomes more apparent through her accent, illustrating a shifting racialised positioning (Rzepnikowska 2019b). Lucyna told me she felt reluctant to speak Polish and to admit that she comes from Poland because of widespread negative discourses about Polish migrants in Britain. To avoid being perceived as the Other, Lucyna prefers not to speak in public. However, her racialised positioning as white, allowing a certain level of invisibility, is unstable. This confirms Frankenberg's (1993, 21) argument that whiteness is always emplaced and temporary.

Another interviewee, Nikola, an office worker in her thirties interviewed in Manchester in 2012, was attacked in a public place because she spoke with a foreign accent:

> Someone attacked me in a public place, most likely because I spoke with an accent and this person did not understand me and he attacked me … I said to this person, go away, and he said, I don't understand what you are saying, in an aggressive way. And when I said that I would call security to help me, he turned around and attacked me. It was terrible, I was in the hospital, I couldn't walk, it was a serious, brutal attack, he was arrested right away.

Nikola also experienced verbal abuse at work over the phone because of her foreign accent and it initially affected her self-esteem, although in time she told me she became more immune to it and more understanding of other people discriminated because of their language, accent and other differences. She suggested that a longstanding discourse about migrants 'stealing jobs' contributes to racialisation of Polish migrants. This racialisation draws on a homogenising idea of Poles desperate for work in the West to better themselves and scapegoating them for taking jobs from Brits. Just like Lucyna, she felt that the media were partly responsible: 'Some people watch TV or listen to the radio, and they become angry. They hear about many Poles coming to Britain and those from lower classes feel threatened that they would lose their jobs and they think that these jobs are taken by Polish migrants'. Nikola's narrative shows the severe consequences of racialisation for Polish migrants. The attack experienced by Nikola should be put in the wider context of racialisation as a result of discourses about migrants from the East of Europe forming part of racial capitalism fuelling competition between migrant and local workers disadvantaged by wider and longstanding socio-economic inequalities in Britain blamed on immigrants.

Aldona, a 34-year-old university graduate, initially considered her neighbourhood in north Manchester as peaceful. She was shocked and scared by an incident which involved a verbal attack by a white British man: 'someone threw a shoe from the second floor and then I hear 'Polish cunt' … and I saw a man at the balcony shouting at me aggressively … I was really scared'. When I asked her how the man knew she was Polish, she suggested that it could have been because of the Polish satellite dish or being heard speaking Polish.

Ideas about language and race are interlinked. Audible difference of Polish migrants plays part in racialisation of this group in the UK. This is not something new, as racialisation of language has been affecting various ethnic groups in the UK in political, media and public discourses, and it has been linked to racist violence (Blackledge 2006). Nevertheless, racism based on language is one of the least acceptable forms of racism and this serves to further subjugate and racialise groups (Hudley 2017). The foreign language and accent of Polish migrants in the UK, along with other markers of difference, 'disturb a certain invisibility of white immigrants' (Nowicka 2012, 116).

In the Spanish/Catalan context, there is a striking difference in relation to language (Rzepnikowska 2018). None of my research participants in Barcelona mentioned Polish language or accent as problematic. One interviewee, Eliza, mentioned that in Spain and Catalonia, Polish migrants are admired for their multi-lingual skills, particularly in the context of the workplace. This is interlinked with the role of social class. She referred to a particular profile of highly educated Polish migrants working for large corporations. Young and educated professional cosmopolitans with diverse backgrounds

and with attitudes of openness to difference 'positively engage with 'the otherness of the other' and the oneness of the world' (Nowicka and Rovisco 2009, 2). This differs a lot from the narratives of the research participants in the UK in the context of deprived neighbourhoods and warehouses marked by class dynamics, fierce competition for jobs and resources, and where large sections of British society have been influenced over time about negative media and political rhetoric about migrant workers from the East of Europe taking jobs, benefits and undercutting wages. It is worth noting that while since the transition period Polish migrants in Spain have been characterised as young, educated and highly skilled (Nalewajko 2012), existing literature shows that Polish migrants arriving in various European countries are from different social classes and work at various levels of the labour market (Lewicki 2016; Pawlak and Goździak 2020; Smoczyński 2018). Nevertheless, Poles along with other East European migrants in the UK, regardless of heterogeneity of this group, have been constructed through a classed notion as 'a parasite that undermines economic prosperity' (Erel, Murji, and Nahaboo 2016).

Nalewajko (2012) argues that favoured treatment of Polish migrants by Spaniards in the workplace, compared to other migrant and ethnic minority groups, is a result of assumed cultural proximity between Polish migrants and Spaniards. The cultural proximity of Polish migrants is distinguished by their way of life perceived as closer to Spanish society, whiteness, Europeanness and Christianity, as discussed earlier. In the Spanish imaginary they are not considered as a problem in contrast to Moroccans, Sub-Saharan Africans, *gitanos* (gypsies), or as Eliza noticed South Americans, who paradoxically are culturally closer to Spaniards, although the colonial nature of this cultural similarity should be kept in mind (Nalewajko 2012; Ramírez Goicoechea 2003; Rzepnikowska 2020). Eliza and several other interviewees noticed that migrants of colour often occupied lower end, low-paid and low-skilled jobs, and were treated less favourably. There were also some interviewees who discussed black and South Asian street-sellers in raced and classed terms (Rzepnikowska 2018). This shows the importance of the intersection of race, ethnicity, class and place in the processes of racialisation.

Most interviewees stated that Catalans frequently shared with them humorous anecdotes that Spaniards refer to Catalans as *polacos* [Poles]. During my participant observation, several Catalans also told me about having something in common through the term *polaco*. The most common explanations of the word *polaco,* as a term ascribed to Catalans, refer to the perceived linguistic parallels between Polish and Catalan language, historical parallels between Polish and Catalan histories of oppression, Poles fighting alongside Catalans during the War of Spanish Succession between the years 1700–1714 and in Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). The Francoist troops understood Catalans as little as the Poles. The use of the term was popularised as derogatory, referring to the Catalans and their language, as it was difficult to understand. Despite the derogatory nature of the term, it the context of relations between Poles and Catalans it has been used in a positive way (Rzepnikowska 2018).

Despite reporting pressure to speak Catalan, several narratives show how learning it becomes a way to overcome barriers in communication with Catalans. The socio-political context in Catalonia is very different to that in the UK. After decades of state repression under Franco dictatorship (1939-1975), Catalan was recognised as an official language.

The Catalan immigration strategy has become strategically linked to its language policy which has gone some way towards reducing the 'ethnic closure of Catalan' by making it *llengua comuna*, 'the vehicular language of immigrants' to be commonly used in the public sphere, as part of the national building project (Climent-Ferrando 2012). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge different social classes, gender, linguistic and ethnic backgrounds of migrants with regards to access to language classes and other linguistic possibilities and their relationship with dominant discourses about language, as discussed in my earlier work (Rzepnikowska 2017). Therefore, in terms of learning and speaking Catalan with the locals, the experience of educated and white middle-class Polish women will be different to that of poorer people of colour.

(Gendered)#Eastern European others but still privileged by whiteness

Several interviewees in both Manchester and Barcelona expressed their perceptions about their foreign appearance, associated with whiteness, when they discussed gendered encounters with non-white men (Rzepnikowska 2020):

> I am talking about different beauty … Here you feel you are treated differently … but sometimes, when it comes to those Pakistani men, it can be problematic … You walk on the street … and you hear their opinions about your body … I'm always judged based on the colour of my [blue] eyes and [blond] hair. (Daria, 31)

While Polish migrants can be subjected to racialisation, they also contribute to racialisation of Pakistani men as sexual predators, influenced by a racialised and orientalist schema where black masculinity is seen as inherently more threatening than white masculinity (Bowman 1993). The experiences of gendered street harassment shape ideas about the whole group of black and East-Asian men as dangerous and oppressive to women (Rzepnikowska 2017).

While some research participants asserted whiteness in the context of gender relations with people colour, other interviewees in Barcelona thought that Poland and Polish people were sometimes perceived as stereotypical Eastern European Others by Spaniards and Catalans, often associated with the Soviet bloc, backward East and exoticism, and they felt uncomfortable with this form of othering:

> Catalans think that we are good friends with the Russians. They don't know much about us and they associate us with communism after the Second World War. (Marlena, 58)

> They think that in Poland polar bears run on the streets. I went to a laser hair removal and the beautician asked me if I had it done before and I said 'yes, in my country'. She asked me 'Where are you from?' and I replied 'From Poland'. She said 'Really? You have laser treatment in Poland? … They have no idea about our level of life, what sort of people we are. They think we still have communism, and you have to explain it all to them. (Dominika, 28)

Nalewajko (2012) points out that it seems that in the Spanish imagination, Poland is seen in homogenous terms as poor Eastern Europe. Here, according to the Western construction of Eastern Europe, Poland is imagined as less developed and 'not-quite-European', still associated with Russia and communism.

Zofia (28) told me how in some situations she was treated as the unwanted Eastern European Other:

> When I worked in a restaurant … some clients didn't want to be served by me, a foreigner. Some didn't know where Poland is. Some thought we speak Russian. Others thought that Poland still is under the communist regime … or there were situations when someone would say 'Didn't you come to this country to earn money and send it home?' Or 'You take advantage of our country for your own benefit and that of your family'.

For some time, this racialisation as Eastern European Other made her feel like a stranger, somewhat inferior. As a result, she resisted telling people about her Spanish boyfriend:

> I thought that people would think: a girl from the East came to a developed western country, as if I won a lottery, because at the beginning many people thought that. It is surprising how stereotypes can affect self-esteem. I experienced this myself.

Here, Zofia is aware of the gendered and orientalising gaze stereotyping and homogenising women from the East of Europe perceived as desperate and poor opportunists from an underdeveloped region. It highlights the divide between the East and the West, ignoring the similarities between Poland and Spain discussed earlier. Spain is here constructed as the developed West where Polish migrants are perceived as Eastern European Others.

Nevertheless, several interviewees were aware that they were treated better than non-European racialised migrants and minorities. Justyna's narrative about her Catalan friends and their attitude to migrants is a good example of how Polish migrants may be seen as 'us' in contrast to less desirable migrants:

> Recently I noticed anti-immigrant attitudes among people. They think that Barcelona is more favourable to immigrants, that a native person coming from this city gets lost here. For example, recently I heard this from friends … but sometimes it makes me feel sad, they don't realize that I sit next to them and I can hear it, and then they say: 'we forget that you are not from here, you are ours'. But obviously they just don't get it, because they talk about immigrants and, hello, I am also [an immigrant], I'm not from here.

Despite seeing herself as a migrant, the perception of Justyna by her friends as 'one of us' confirms the claims discussed previously about the Spanish perception of cultural proximity between Polish migrants and the Spaniards, especially when compared to systematically racialised migrants of colour. Justyna becomes aware these migrant groups are stigmatised, while her presence is not perceived as a 'problem'. Nevertheless, her privileged position ascribed to her by her Catalan friends does not stop her from saying 'I am not from here', 'I'm an immigrant too'. The preferential treatment of Justyna, who as a white and European migrant does not constitute 'a problem' is embedded in a wider process of racialisation of non-European and non-white Others.

Racialisation of Polish migrants in the context of Brexit

My research participants were aware of anti-migrant sentiment in the run up to and the aftermath of the EU referendum. Some experienced post-Brexit xeno-racism, while others were fearful of anti-Polish sentiment they heard about in the media or from family and friends. Renia (62) was very keen to tell me about her experiences after the EU Referendum in June 2016. Renia experienced both conviviality and xeno-racism in her neighbourhood before and after Brexit in Ashton, Tameside, Greater Manchester. In Tameside, 61.1% voted to leave. All the wards in Tameside had a majority leave vote. It was reported that the leave vote was associated with a longstanding frustration

over immigration in more deprived parts of Greater Manchester (BBC News, 24 June 2016).

In the first interview in 2013, Renia told me that despite having experienced racial harassment by white British youth, she had good relations with her immediate white British neighbours of similar age. After the EU referendum, the local white British youth resumed harassing both Renia and her husband: 'It started happening just after the referendum and it stopped about six months ago.' Even though the harassment stopped, Renia noticed that her relations with other neighbours were not the same after the Brexit vote in 2016 because of anti-immigrant sentiment. Ford and Goodwin (2018, 21) point out that negative sentiment towards migrants in the UK is not new:

> British immigration debates have long been intertwined with public anxieties over race and identity, with public hostility in earlier decades directed at black and South Asian migrants from former imperial territories in the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent, who began arriving in large numbers from the 1950s onward. Yet starting in 2004, the focus of anxiety moved to the large new flow of migrants from EU states in Central and Eastern Europe. As a result, anti-immigration voters came to see migration (and the social changes that it brought) as an issue closely bound up with Britain's EU membership.

The physical presence and visibility of Polish migrants became the issue in the run up to the EU referendum. The perceptions of a 'Polish invasion' have been reinforced by the populist tabloid press, fuelling anxieties about the perceived effects of migration on public services, welfare, and identity (Ford and Goodwin 2018; Rzepnikowska 2019a).

Renia told me about an incident at her husband's workplace (a meat-processing plant) the day after the EU referendum, when several white British workers celebrated the Brexit vote victory and verbally assaulted migrant workers from the East of Europe. Renia told me about 'No more Polish vermin' chants which seem to originate from Huntingdon, Cambridgeshire, where laminated cards in English and Polish with the words 'Leave the EU / No more Polish vermin' were left outside primary schools and posted through the letterboxes (Cambridge News, 25 June 2016). Even though xeno-racism was not new to Renia and her husband, they had not experienced it on such a scale before the Brexit vote. This reflects how the imagined British 'we' during and after Brexit excludes Polish and other East European migrants from post-accession countries who were, initially, seen as potentially able to belong to the British 'we' (Rzepnikowska 2019a). Non-UK EU workers in more general were homogenised and considered as non-belonging, even though they still had the right to remain in the UK. This reflects the 'Leave' campaign's implicit discourses on race and migration, on who belongs and has rights and who does not. Anti-migrant sentiment in the context of Brexit illustrates 'a more complicated racial stratification than is sometimes acknowledged (…) Eastern European whiteness in a Western European context carries with it further, emplaced, geopolitical racial connotations' (Burrell and Hopkins 2019, 4).

Renia's account also shows how migration, race, class and place are interconnected in the context of Brexit (see also Burrell and Hopkins 2019). While the so-called white (English) working class has often been labelled as racist and xenophobic, both in the context of Brexit and beyond, it is important to acknowledge that it is often working-class people, including ethnic minorities, who are amongst those the most affected by exclusionary politics such as austerity and anti-immigrant right-wing populism.

Renia told me her husband's employers responded to the above-mentioned incident by organising a staff meeting and explaining that similar behaviour would not be tolerated. However, her husband told her that 'although everything is ok, nothing is the same as it was before the referendum', and that there is a noticeable division between Polish and British workers:

> Now he feels some discomfort because he feels that he works the way he did before, but they don't want him anymore. He returned to the 'Polish side'. They no longer sit together at the canteen. The relations changed completely. Everything changes.

The workplace in the context of Brexit becomes one of the most hostile environments, particularly for those in lower-paid jobs (Burrell and Schweyher 2019). This example shows a strong racialised division and the working of racial capitalism taking advantage of cheap labour of unwanted but still needed Eastern European Others for the sole purpose of economic value.

Renia, as other interviewees, was aware of the political dimension of racialisation of Polish migrants in the UK:

> I think politicians for their own or party interests, for these unfortunate bars of popularity, are able to do everything. For example, to tell British people that the only remedy for Britain's return to the nineteenth century super-power is the expulsion of immigrants. And then it will be a land flowing with milk and honey.

This reflects Skeggs (2009) argument about how the interests of the British white working class are often pitched by the media and politicians against those of ethnic minorities and migrants, while larger social and economic inequalities are overlooked. Furthermore, the racialising discourses, merging the Western ideas about impoverished Eastern European Others with older forms of racism with origins in Western racial capitalism, influence politics, economics, media and individual perceptions. This, in turn, affects everyday relations between Polish migrants and the long-settled population in the UK.

Conclusions

Whereas literature on racialisation tends to focus on relations between host society and postcolonial/non-European/non-white ethnic minorities, this paper concentrated on racialisation of post-2004 Polish migrants. The empirical examples discussed in this paper showed how whiteness and Eastern European Otherness are produced and reproduced through various encounters with white and non-white population in both Manchester and Barcelona, and how whiteness is conditional and temporary. In some situations, as a result of long-standing racialisation, Polish migrants become victims of xeno-racism, while in other contexts, privileged white Europeans. Social class also plays part in the processes of racialisation (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993; Erel, Murji, and Nahaboo 2016). The narratives of the interviewees showed how migration, race, class and place intersect.

Several narratives illustrated that even though whiteness does not protect Polish migrants from xeno-racism and stereotyping in both cities, they are often in a better position than more visible migrants and ethnic minorities, especially in Spain. In the context of Brexit, Polish migrants find themselves in a more precarious situation than Poles in Spain. As Erel, Murji, and Nahaboo (2016, 1349) argue, the racialisation of European

citizens from predominantly white societies 'create co-citizens as foreigners' in the context of Brexit. Racist violence followed by the EU referendum in 2016 clearly shows that the perpetrators 'made little attempt to distinguish black and brown citizens and white European migrants – in their eyes, they were all outsiders' (Virdee and McGeever 2018, 1808). As I argued in this paper, there is a need for the recognition of the long-standing construction of Eastern European Otherness to better understand racialisation of Polish migrants both before and after Brexit. Furthermore, considering the historical, geopolitical and economic differences and similarities between Spain, Britain and Poland helps explain differences in racialisation of Polish migrants in Britain and Spain.

Notes

1. Racism against migrants from Eastern Europe has been described as xeno-racism (Sivanandan 2001). Race is not an essential characteristic of migrants, 'but rather the socially constructed contingent outcome of processes and practices of exclusion. Racialization does not require putative phenotypical or biological difference … the nominal absence of somatic difference does not get in the way of xenophobic racism; it turns out racialized difference can be invented in situ' (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012, 681).
2. The existing research also refers to prejudiced attitudes of Polish migrants towards other ethnic minorities (Fox and Mogilnicka 2019; Nowicka and Krzyżowski 2016; Rzepnikowska 2016, 2017, 2018).
3. The markers of difference contributing to racialisation of Polish migrants are often the language (foreign accent and pronunciation – explored in this article), as well as visual markers such as clothing (Dawney 2008; Nowicka 2012; Rzepnikowska 2019a).

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