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# Articulations of race and genealogies of encounter among former Yugoslav migrants in Britain

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## Abstract

While the question of race has been largely underexplored in the study of postsocialist Europe, the logic of coloniality remains at the heart of Europeanness, complicating the assumption that migrants from the region only encounter racial difference once they arrive in a “multicultural” society. The article contributes to recent debates on racializing Central and East European studies as well as the literature on migrant encounters with difference by examining the articulations of “race” and coloniality among migrants from former Yugoslavia in Britain. On the one hand, interactions with fellow migrants are frequently imbued with racialized hierarchies that equate Europeanness with whiteness and modernity. On the other, the history of Yugoslav solidarity with decolonizing nations provides an alternative archive that refutes claims of British “openness” and recognizes unexpected forms of intimacy, highlighting a genealogy of encounter that extends the spatiotemporal scope of debates about migrants’ responses to racialized difference.

## Keywords

race; migration; former Yugoslavia; Central and Eastern Europe; encounter; coloniality

About a year into my research with former Yugoslav migrants living in Britain, I sat down with Azra<sup>1</sup> in a London-based Bosnian community centre. We had spent many a cup of Nescafé discussing her life in London since she arrived as a refugee in the mid-1990s, and I wasn’t sure quite what to expect from this interview. I did, however, know that I wanted

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to ask her about one thing in particular: how did she view the question of “race” and diversity in Britain? After a thoughtful pause, Azra replied that racism probably still exists, even though things are equal on paper. But she didn’t really know, she continued, whether the colour of her skin had helped her as a migrant: “you might get a better answer from someone with a different skin colour”, she added, pointing to her face.

By appealing to other, more qualified interlocutors, even as her gesture emphasized the visibility of racial difference, Azra’s answer put her squarely outside the question of race save as an external observer. She was not alone: the Bosnians, Serbs, Croats, and other “former Yugoslavs” I spoke to in London and other English locales largely avoided using the terms “black people” (*crni ljudi*), or “blacks” (*crnci*), as if doing so would embroil them in social relations their mother tongue was ill-suited to navigate.<sup>ii</sup> While most could define themselves according to the terms of (post-)Yugoslav ethno-national identities, this was largely deemed to be “ethnicity” without “race”.<sup>iii</sup> And yet I had myself contributed to this unspeakability of race when posing my question to Azra. *Did she think*, I had wondered aloud, *that things are easier here for migrants from, say, Europe, than they are for migrants with darker skin?* Mid-sentence, I was unable to think of a way to identify oneself as white in Bosnian, and thus compounded the problematic association between “white” and “European” (El-Tayeb 2011).

This article examines the articulations of “race” and coloniality among former Yugoslav migrants as they locate themselves within British modes of living together. Its aims are twofold. The first is to challenge the assumption, shared by my interlocutors as well as by much of the literature on Central and East European migrants,<sup>iv</sup> that since the region from whence they come is predominantly white, they are newcomers to the very concept of race. In line with Catherine Baker’s (2018) call to situate the post-Yugoslav region in the context of global racial formations, my purpose is to unpick an enduring conceptual separation that ascribes the question of “ethno-national identity” to Yugoslavia (or Central and Eastern Europe) and the question of “race” to Britain (or the West). The second aim is to examine how race and coloniality thread throughout my interlocutors’ attempts to establish a sense of coevalness, both as migrants living in Britain and as former Yugoslavs who have lost their relatively privileged place in the global hierarchy (Jansen 2009). On the one hand, their encounters with fellow migrants are imbued with racialized hierarchies that equate Europeanness with Christianity, whiteness, and modernity. On the other, the history

of Yugoslav solidarity with decolonizing nations provides another archive from which to speak back to claims of uniquely British liberal values. While whiteness does not disappear in this rhetorical anti-colonialism, it is a European whiteness of a different provenance: that of Yugoslav state socialism, which offers an alternative point of intersection (Veličković 2012) between “postsocialist Europeans” and “postcolonial Africans and Asians”. In other words, contemporary migrant encounters cannot be understood without reference to the “entangled histories” (Mark and Slobodian 2017) that former Yugoslavs have brought with them to Britain. Taking such histories seriously, I suggest, requires us to trace a longer genealogy of encounter that examines past and present engagements with racialized difference within the same frame.

### **Researching “race” among former Yugoslav migrants**

Between September 2013 and January 2015 I conducted ethnographic fieldwork, primarily although not exclusively in London, among families and loosely formed communities from the Yugoslav region that centred on Saturday schools, annual picnics, support centres, and dance lessons. Over the course of my research I met over 100 individuals, some regularly through volunteer work or frequent social encounters, and held in-depth or repeat conversations with about 35 to 40. While the nature of ethnographic research means that the distinction between “interview” and “conversation” was often porous, my interlocutors were continuously reminded that they were taking part in a research project.

While most of the people I spoke with came from Bosnia, I also encountered a number who originated from other former Yugoslav republics.<sup>v</sup> My primary aim was to track the memory of socialist Yugoslavia (1945-1992), either as an explicit narrative or an implicit trace, in the intergenerational narratives of those who had left their homelands as adults, as well as younger people who were born or raised in Britain. I was particularly interested in how experiences of migration mediate the memory of a country that is now frequently deemed a “defeated argument” (Goldsworthy 2013) or “failed idea” (Djokić 2003), having painfully disintegrated into seven successor states in the early 1990s.<sup>vi</sup> Given the preponderance of research that links Yugoslavia to war, trauma, and ethnic conflict, I wondered what other histories of the socialist past were circulating in the present, even as

my own Slovenian nationality imbued the spaces of my research with an often unspoken inherent “Yugoslavism”.

Although the question of whiteness has largely been underexplored in the literature on Bosnian (and other former Yugoslav) migrants, some scholars have addressed the racialized dynamics of settlement experiences, ranging from the qualified assimilability afforded to Bosnian refugees in Australia (Colic-Peisker 2005) to a tendency among Bosnians in the US to identify as white migrants in opposition to black Americans (Halilovich 2013, 217–18). In turn, Ana Croegaert (2015) writes about the murder of a Bosnian American, Zemir Begić, in St Louis in 2014, mere days after a jury decision not to indict the white police officer who shot unarmed black teenager Michael Brown led to a wave of Black Lives Matter protests. Analysing Twitter responses to the murder, which included tweets by white supremacists who read Begić as white and his murder as racially motivated, as well as an explicitly anti-racist conversation that coalesced around the hashtag #BiHInSolidarity, Croegaert argues that both responses arose from the indecipherability of Bosnian Americans as racial subjects in relation to Islam and to whiteness. Significantly, the young Bosnian Americans who tweeted their solidarity with Black Lives Matter referenced the two communities’ common experience of structural violence: at the hands of police in the case of black Americans, and of paramilitary forces during the Bosnian War in the case of Bosnian Muslim refugees (Croegaert 2015, 73).

In Britain, recent scholarly attention has mostly centred on Central and East European migration from post-enlargement EU states,<sup>vii</sup> including research on how migrants from this “relatively homogeneous” (Gawlewicz 2016, 257) region perceive their encounters with difference in a “diverse”, multicultural society (Fox 2013; Gawlewicz 2016; McDowell, Batnitzky, and Dyer 2007; Nowicka 2017; Parutis 2011; Ryan 2010). Starting from the assumption that such encounters with difference represent the shock of the new, much of the literature focuses on migrants’ racist responses to black, Asian, and Muslim communities, or their discursive claiming of whiteness as a response to loss of social status, although Gawlewicz (2016) also points to a range of contextual responses that cannot be easily characterized as either positive or negative. However, with the exception of Nowicka, who approaches Polish migrants’ racism as a transnational co-production “in which global racist imaginaries are adapted and re-interpreted” (2017, 2), enabling post-migration encounters to be read against a “cultural repertoire” already imbued with racialized

hierarchies (2017, 3–6), the literature is often silent on how conceptions of difference that migrants bring with them are translated and enacted in the British context.

While the homelands of the Polish, Lithuanian, Romanian, and Hungarian migrants surveyed by the literature above might not be as homogeneous as frequently imagined, two points need to be noted. The first is that my interlocutors, as former citizens of a self-consciously “multi-ethnic state”, have a heightened awareness of their own “capacity to live with difference”. This notion, commonly utilized in the geographies of encounter literature to explore everyday encounters with difference (Gawlewicz 2016, 258), plays an important role in former Yugoslavs’ attempts to resist the exclusivity of British claims to “openness” by translating this multi-ethnic history into British modes of co-existence. Insofar as this strategy relies on claiming European civilizational superiority, it does not necessarily represent an oppositional narrative aligning former Yugoslavs against British whiteness; yet significantly, some interlocutors also draw on half-forgotten histories of solidarity between socialist Yugoslavia and decolonizing nations, which constitute a parallel archive for making sense of migrants’ social locations in Britain. Second, although the “type” of diversity found in Central and Eastern Europe largely differs from that in Britain – since the former largely lacks the longer history of immigration from the decolonized world that exemplifies British conceptions of racialized difference – this does not exempt the region from a global history of race (Baker 2018). To elaborate on these dynamics further, I turn to the question of whiteness, Europeanness, and global coloniality in Central and Eastern Europe.

### **Whiteness and coloniality in Central and Eastern Europe**

Starting from the proposition that “whiteness” needs to be viewed as a product of specific situations and interactions rather than an existing object in the world, numerous scholars (cf Painter 2010; Roediger 1991; Ware and Back 2002; Wekker 2016) have highlighted the contingency of whiteness “as that which has been received, or become given, over time” (Ahmed 2007, 150). The habitual invisibility of whiteness arises in part from its embeddedness in imagined geographies.<sup>viii</sup> What David Theo Goldberg (2006, 2009) terms “racial Europeanization” – the territorialized articulation of race that assumes Europeans are de facto white and Christian – reproduces itself through a “logic of Euro-racism [that] ensures that those ‘racially non-European’ are never nor can ever *be*

European” (2006, 354). Furthermore, by making the Holocaust emblematic of racial differentiation, Europe has through the disavowal of its horrors made acknowledging race equivalent to racism, thus concealing the racialized violence and exclusion, including histories of colonialism, that lie at the heart of European identity. This rhetorical movement propagates a “racialized understanding of proper Europeanness that continues to exclude *certain migrants* and their descendants” (El-Tayeb 2011, xii, emphasis mine).

By and large, sustained attention to race has been conspicuously lacking in the study of Central and Eastern Europe. Reflecting on her research on representations of Romani minorities in Hungary, Anikó Imre notes that Hungarian acquaintances frequently accused her of importing American analytical categories to the question of anti-Roma xenophobia, which was deemed to be an entirely different phenomenon to that of “racial” discrimination. Imre suggests that while Central and East European countries may not have engaged in the same kind of overseas colonialism as many of their Western European counterparts, the widespread perception that the concept of race is thus exterior to the geographical and cultural space of the region obscures the fact that racialized hierarchies have been integral to local processes of nation-formation (2012, 83–84). Catherine Baker notes that until recently, the study of the Yugoslav region has been haunted by the assumption that while “the region has *ethnicity*, and has *religion*” – has in fact been viewed almost exclusively through these lenses – it is somehow outside race, despite the fact that throughout its pre-socialist, socialist, and post-socialist formations, “in domains from everyday cultural artefacts to often-forgotten nodes of transnational history, the Yugoslav region has been as entangled in global ‘raciality’ as any other part of the planet” (2018, 1). Rather than assuming that this “peripheral” area of Europe is automatically exempt from global structures of race originating in European colonialism, Baker argues that scholars of the region are well positioned to tease out the racialized dynamics of (post-)Yugoslav identifications with and against Europe, as well as, following Gloria Wekker’s work on the Netherlands, tracing the popular imaginaries of race embedded in the region’s cultural archive.<sup>ix</sup>

There is moreover a well-established, older tradition of drawing on postcolonial theory to analyse the representational hierarchies that maintain “Eastern Europe” in a position of civilizational inferiority (*cf* Bjelić and Savić 2002; Kovačević 2008; Todorova 1997), or to seek the inclusion of regions ruled by the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires and the USSR in the analytical scope of mainstream postcolonial studies

(Pucherová and Gáfrik 2015). While these interventions have largely left intact the assumption that Central and Eastern Europe represents an “unraced” region, “[creating] a postcoloniality without race” (Baker 2018, 186),<sup>x</sup> others have drawn on the broader analytical potential of global coloniality as “a racial, economic, social, existential, gender and epistemic bondage [...] firmly linking imperialism and capitalism” (Tlostanova 2012, 132), which links postcommunist and postcolonial cultures.

Yet in practice, Central and East Europeans might well eschew the “decolonial option” – an epistemic project whose origins Walter D. Mignolo (2011) traces to the 1955 Bandung Conference – in favour of seeking a “share” (Ahmed 2007, 154) in Western European whiteness. Dace Dzenovska (2013) analyses the desire *to have partaken* in colonialism that appears in attempts to incorporate the colonizing ventures of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Duchy of Courland into Latvia’s national historiography: “on the one hand, postsocialist Eastern Europeans facilitate the erasure of coloniality from Western Europe’s self-narrative by becoming objects of democratization projects [...] On the other hand, postsocialist Eastern Europeans throw that project into disarray when in order to overcome their seemingly permanent ‘not-quite-European’ position they strive to identify with colonialism...” (2013, 411).<sup>xi</sup> In other words, if “East European nations’ unspoken insistence on their whiteness” (Imre 2012, 82) is a key component of their claims to legitimacy as Europeans, such strategies articulate easily with Western European erasures of colonial pasts and the disavowal of racism as a contemporary problem (Wekker 2016).

### **Between racialized Islam and Muslim whiteness**

Precisely who is excluded from Europeanness and on what basis plays a key role in the many migration debates taking place across Europe. In Britain, as in the United States (Rana 2011), Islam has come to denote a racialized shorthand for potentially dangerous cultural difference, reflected in increasingly securitized policies toward British Muslims alongside the placatory language of “community cohesion” (Archer 2009, 330). Here, Bosnian Muslim migrants in Britain occupy an ambivalent position. Dwyer quotes a young South Asian woman on the subject of the Bosnian residents in an English town: “They’re mostly Muslims—but they’re not. [...] If you saw them walking down the street you’d think

they were white” (1999, 65). The invocation of race highlights the extent to which “Muslim” is deemed synonymous with “non-white”.

White Bosnians’ exceptionalism in relation to fellow Muslims was made apparent during one of my conversations with Amela. Amela had been raised in Bosnia and was a practicing Muslim, as I discovered when I visited her home on the fourth day of Ramadan. After escorting me to their flat, her son Mirza sat in front of the television with a *burek*, telling his mother that he no longer felt like fasting. Shaking her head in mock dismay, Amela laughingly told her son he needed to get up earlier if he wanted to fast properly.

Amela and I discussed everything from Bajram, the Bosnian Eid, to daytime reality television, her children’s plans for higher education, and of course, socialist Yugoslavia – “a great country”, Amela said firmly. She told me that she finds “the English”<sup>xii</sup> very tolerant and open, and feels grateful to have been accepted as a foreigner. Still struggling to speak about race in Bosnian, I remarked that things are probably easier if one comes from Europe than from, say, Africa or Asia, especially for people who are white.

Amela hummed sceptically. Sometimes, she said, “people from Africa and Asia” bring it on themselves: “if you come here, you should really follow the rules”.

Mirza cut in: “I’m not racist or anything, but... Some Somalis, they complain that Arabic isn’t taught in schools. But people speak English here, and also it’s a Christian country, you’ve just got to accept that if you move here.”

His mother was nodding along. She then related an anecdote about catching a bus in London with Mirza when he was still a small child. Speaking English, Amela told little Mirza that they were going home; he replied that this was *his* home, but not hers, because her and his daddy came from somewhere else. That was when “a black woman” sitting behind Amela leaned over and interjected: “you should go back home, go back to Italy,” where she apparently thought they were from. And so, Amela told me, she had replied “how about you go back to the jungle?”

What struck me more than Mirza’s rote disclaimer “I’m not racist, but...”, the discomfort of hearing Amela repeat “the jungle”, or even the complex dynamics of the call to “go back”, was the fact that Mirza had taken such a firm stand against British Somali calls for inclusion on the basis of Britain being “a Christian country”. How could he and Amela

make such a claim, not only as Muslims whose family had come from elsewhere, but as Bosnian Muslims who had suffered persecution in the name of expressly Christian nationalist ideologies?

One explanation lies in the specifically Bosnian form of Islam that Amela would have been raised with during the socialist period, which observed a strict separation between religious observance and the public sphere (Bringa 1995) and might well inform her sense of what demands are permissible for a religious community to make on the state. Mother and son's joint stance, however, is clearly also racialized: it presents no contradiction if we read Christian as white, with Amela and Mirza defending their share in whiteness even where this means aligning themselves with an ideal of Christian England. Unlike the Bosnian American Twitter activists described by Croegaert, Amela and Mirza's references to British Somalis lack a sense of solidarity, even as Amela's recounted outburst on the bus shores up a division between those foreigners who are implored to "go home" to Italy and those implored to "go home" to "the jungle".

While there is no doubt that many migrants who are racialized as "East European" experience discrimination in Britain (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2012), there is good reason not to conflate racism with "migratism" (Tudor 2017). The continued imbrication of race and migration in the British public imagination, however, is clear when we consider that around the time of the 2016 EU referendum, xenophobic and racist crimes increased not only against "Eastern European migrants", but also against black and Asian British citizens – attesting to the fact that British citizenship remains an implicitly white category that omits the constitutive role of former Commonwealth citizens in the construction of the British nation (Bhambra 2016), despite recurrent claims about migration's essential role in the shaping of Britishness.

### **Good multiculturalists?**

In David Cameron's landmark speech on the EU referendum in 2014, the Coalition government's commitment to reducing immigration was discursively balanced against Britain's historic "openness" (*BBC News* 2014). In my research, the tension of navigating this contradictory climate was evident in attempts by a Bosnian association to represent

itself as a good migrant community that understands the principles of cohabiting with difference. Here the loss of status suffered by Yugoslavs after their country's ignoble collapse (Jansen 2009) intersected with the necessity of proving oneself adequately European, and thus capable of participating in British society.

In January 2014, I was invited by a representative of a Midlands-based Bosnian association to attend a series of local events marking International Holocaust Memorial Day. This included a gathering hosted by the Bosnian centre, whose members had largely arrived as refugees and also included people from other parts of former Yugoslavia. In a meeting several months later, Samir explained to me that the centre worked very closely with the local council, which he credited with their success in securing the association its own premises. He spoke at length about his views on British people and what he labelled their "appropriate behaviour" toward migrant communities. This appeared to be based on a relationship that inspired mutual respect:

I work a great deal with them. And they respect me. [...] And they respect my thinking and what I do. Here, the most important thing is: help yourself and then I can help you.

Valuing self-sufficiency means that "they" – British people – are willing to help as long as migrants are willing to help themselves. For Samir, this willingness is bound up with "openness":

But you have to cooperate, you have to be open. We are a very open organization, we've received a great deal of help. [...] I see help as... [...] [when] somebody somewhere says, yes, they're good. For instance, when [a member] of the City Council says: "Samir, you're the best group." No: "the best-organized group that has come here". It's logical that we are. Because we come from Europe. Those others come either from Asia or from down in Africa somewhere. But we come from Europe. We know the system of organization, we were an organized country.

Samir's definition of British people (embodied in the local city councillors) behaving "appropriately" appears grounded not only in their readiness to help migrant communities, but also in their ability to recognize that Bosnians know how to conduct their affairs *as a community* in a multicultural society. On the level of policy, British multiculturalism "has

been heavily localized, often made voluntary, and linked essentially to issues of managing diversity in areas of immigrant settlement” (Meer and Modood 2009, 479), even as changing political conditions have seen it alternatively embraced and rejected by ruling political elites (Back et al. 2002). Modood and Meer argue that in spite of recurrent claims that British multiculturalism is “dead” or “in retreat”, its multi-layered political history has left an indelible mark on legislature, as well as on national narratives about the importance of “cultural difference”, explaining the enduring discursive saliency of David Cameron’s claims to openness.

Recognition of Bosnians’ efforts to partake in a multicultural society lay at the heart of Samir’s story of successful cohabitation. His claim that Bosnians are “well-organized” was portrayed as only logical due to their Europeanness, while the entire continents of Asia and Africa were lumped into a less rational imagined geography. Yet Samir did not claim Bosnians’ capacity for organization solely as an intrinsic trait: as he repeated to me in a later conversation, the key factor was that Bosnian migrants came from Yugoslavia, “which followed the rule of law”. For Ibrahim, another representative from the same organisation, Bosnians’ successful adaptation was attributable to their past experience of a “multi-ethnic” state, although in his reading this was a historically Bosnian, not specifically Yugoslav mode of co-existence. Although race is implicitly coded within such efforts to position one’s community as credible participants in multicultural Britain, among my interlocutors proving one’s civilizational capabilities also resounded with the notions of an alternative modernity that had been stripped from the Yugoslav region in the 1990s. The desire for recognition evoked by Samir’s imagined cartography thus sits easily beside a Europeanness that denies the existence of racism while fashioning itself as uniquely positioned to recognize illiberal values, and which has its localized echoes in contradictory British claims to openness.

Yet I was not quite sure how to square Samir’s remarks on African and Asian migrants with the Bosnian centre’s routine work with other refugee communities. When I asked whether it was access to funding that had precipitated this work, Samir responded:

No. What is this all about? I told you: openness. Openness is something that... You enable other people to see who you are. I never had any fears about working with this, that, or other religion, working with people from anywhere. At the end of the day, everyone who came here came for the same reasons we did. [...] We’re all

people, it doesn't matter. [...] And when you're open, nobody treats you with suspicion...

Here fellow migrants were not described as being in need of paternalistic help from a “better organized” community, but were recognized on the basis of a shared experience. The “other people” to whom one’s openness must be displayed, however, are those who hold the power to decide whether a community is worthy of support – or whether it is open enough to fit successfully into British society.

### **Anti-colonial solidarities and unexpected intimacies**

On the one hand, proving that one is capable of appropriately multicultural behaviour requires complicity with a representational order that maintains white Europeans in a privileged category. On the other, the (supposed) exceptionalism of the socialist Yugoslav experience offers another resource, which can be used to counter British norms. Samir nodded to this possibility when calling on the legacy of socialist Yugoslavia to provide an alternative model for European rationality. Even more unexpected, however, were those moments in my research when memories of Yugoslavia functioned as another kind of resource: a moral legacy that allowed my interlocutors to resist British assumptions of civilizational superiority by articulating an explicitly *anti-colonial* critique.

This approach works differently to that of the “good multiculturalist”, in that it interrogates the British right to claim true liberalism by highlighting Britain’s colonial history. For migrants from former Yugoslavia, this can be done by invoking the memory of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which developed in the post-Bandung period and solidified across three summits held in Belgrade (1961), Cairo (1964), and Lusaka (1970). Non-alignment was conceived as a “positive, active, and constructive policy seeking to lead to collective peace” (Josip Broz Tito and Jawaharlal Nehru quoted in Životić and Čavoški 2017, 82–83) outside the logic of the two blocs, through which developing and decolonizing nations could play a balancing role. Tito’s key part in the NAM allowed socialist Yugoslavia to claim legitimacy on the world stage, as well as bolstering its domestic image as a country that opposed all forms of exploitation, including systemic racial injustice and imperialism.

Recently, scholars have shown a renewed interest in tracing the alliances between Yugoslavia and other members of the NAM, and between the Second and Third Worlds more generally (*cf* Ghodsee 2014; Nash 2016; Mark and Apor 2015). Analysing socialist Yugoslav travelogues, Nemanja Radonjić finds that “Africa” was frequently held up as a mirror for Yugoslav self-perceptions as both comrades in the global struggle for liberation, and as “larger, more powerful and more ‘European’ than ever” (Radonjić 2016, 65). This reflected self-perception was replicated in some of my interlocutors’ references to colonialism. Speaking to Ibrahim, I commented that “what the British did in other countries” often gets left out of their history textbooks. Ibrahim replied:

The history of Bosnia is very different to English history. Bosnia is a very democratic country and it has been from the very start. This [democracy] is due to one fact and one fact only: [Bosnia] never dismantled the primary foundations of democracy, by which I mean, it never colonized other countries. Certainly we were never powerful enough to do so. But we simply don’t have that same dirty, dark, bloody history in our pasts that some countries do. And they’re still washing their hands of it today. We didn’t colonize anybody, we didn’t have a system of slavery, we didn’t have slaves, we didn’t have racial discrimination. So we don’t have that in our past. Unlike other countries, such as the Netherlands, such as Germany, such as Great Britain. [...] They all had colonies and they colonized smaller powers. Which poses a big moral question. [...] How much is being done today so that those countries will not be underdeveloped?

Just the previous day before, Samir and I had discussed the fact that British people saw the Bosnian refugees who arrived in the 1990s as backward. “They looked at us like people who came out of the jungle, like we had no clue about anything,” he commented. When I asked how he thought this compared with the way migrant communities from Africa or Asia were perceived, Samir replied “probably the same”. As I did with Ibrahim, I noted that Britons often seem to forget their history of colonialism and imperialism, leading Samir to respond:

This colonialism, this imperialism and that, that’s something which... It was what led to the fact that they ruled over so many nations. In all honesty, they crossed the line, it was simply exploitation. Exploitation of resources. And then

at one point, when this couldn't go on any longer, when it was all over, they mentally remained in the same system.

While still reliant on a hierarchical world order of more and less “civilized” behaviour, Ibrahim and Samir’s indictment of colonial powers opens the door to inverting the hierarchy by casting the British as capable of barbarism and oppression. Such references stake out a space where “we” can critique “their” self-image as liberal and civilized, even if acknowledging, as Samir does, the “appropriate behaviour” of British people toward migrant communities. This alternative schema permits the possibility of discursively allying with those who are otherwise excluded or marginalized, while Ibrahim’s question (“How much is being done today so that those countries will not be underdeveloped?”) and Samir’s reference to “mentality” both recognize the multiple ongoing effects of coloniality. Inevitably, my own position as a young “post-Yugoslav” played a role in the availability of such discourses. Just as my questions about Europeanness provoked conversations about race that were otherwise missing from my research encounters, it was my references to British colonialism that unwittingly opened the door to memories of Yugoslav exceptionalism, particularly since it was often assumed that coming from the postsocialist generation, I had little knowledge of such histories.

There is, of course, an irony here. By placing Yugoslavia (or a historically continuous Bosnia) outside the logic of colonialism, both Samir and Ibrahim absented themselves from the question of racism and the active reproduction of racialized hierarchies. Their repudiation also glosses over the historical marginalization of particular groups, such as the treatment of the Roma during the socialist Yugoslav era (Sardelić 2015). Moreover, as Samir’s reliance on idioms such as “coming out of the jungle” demonstrates, these rhetorical alignments do not erase the representational hierarchies that centre white Europeanness.

More unequivocal expressions of solidarity emerged during a conversation I had with Jasmina, who came from the Serbian-Bosnian borderlands, in the autumn of 2015. Discussing the British response to the “refugee crisis”, Jasmina shook her head and said that she feels increasingly proud to have been raised in Yugoslavia, a country that stood for “just values” and that educated her in the politics of anti-fascism and the solidarity of non-alignment. By enumerating Britain’s failings toward refugees with reference to a parallel, ghostly Yugoslavia, Jasmina rhetorically linked the history of non-alignment to the refusal of refuge to thousands of displaced people encountering Europe’s borders. As

with Samir and Ibrahim, it is this present-ing of the socialist past that is central to a genealogy of encounter between Yugoslavia and the formerly colonized world, mediating how some migrants from the region locate themselves vis-à-vis British claims to openness.

Yet such genealogies did not appear only in the form of discursive strategies. To other interlocutors, they made themselves visible – or audible – as chance encounters with strangers that revealed unexpected cultural intimacies. The very same afternoon that she told me about her long-ago altercation on a London bus, Amela related the story of seeing another “black woman” outside a local shop. When the woman failed to immediately clean up after her dog, Amela muttered something insulting in Bosnian. “Luckily I didn’t say anything about her being black!” she said laughingly. The dog owner was accompanied by a man – also black, clarified Amela – who smilingly replied in the same language, whereupon it turned out that he had once studied in Belgrade along with a number of other students from non-aligned African and Asian nations. While Amela’s account of meeting “a black man” who spoke her language was narrated in the distinct register of surprise, it was also an unambiguously positive encounter: she told me that the man lives on the same council estate and that they still wave hello.

This was not the first time I had heard a version of this story. Not long previously I lunched with Marina, who had left her hometown in Croatia as a teenager. We talked about language: how in London you never know when you’ll be understood by a passing stranger, even when speaking your mother tongue. Marina related her own tale of meeting “a black man” in London, who had also studied in Belgrade and who also addressed her in her own language. Marina confided that although she had been raised in Yugoslavia to think of everyone as equal, and had been taught at school that black people were systematically oppressed, her attitude changed somewhat when she came to Britain: she’d had some experiences, she added mysteriously, that made her wonder whether that was true...

Like the tension that arises when Amela’s friendly relationship with her neighbour is balanced against her racist outburst on the bus, Marina’s addendum complicates a narrative of positive encounter. And yet both Marina’s and Amela’s accounts of unexpected intimacy in the form of a racialized stranger necessitate a re-thinking of where and how familiarity might be embodied, as well as conjuring up the various histories of journeys (Brah 1996) that placed both the nameless “black man” and the speaker on the same London street.

## **Conclusion: tracing genealogies of encounter**

What is the significance, if any, of such anti-colonial narratives and moments of convivial convergence? Reflecting on the laments of Bosnians and Serbs newly “entrapped” by EU visa regimes, Stef Jansen (2012) wonders whether the memory of forced immobility, combined with the suppressed history of non-alignment, could in future provide a source of solidarity with non-European border-crossers. Such solidarity is by no means a given, much as my interlocutors’ recollections of non-alignment were not exempt from continued attachments to Europeanness. If Yugoslav non-alignment itself represented an ambivalent form of solidarity, rife with Eurocentric assumptions and a reluctance to link imperialism to race (Subotic and Vucetic 2017, 9–13), then its legacy can be easily discerned in the narratives of encounter that simultaneously align my interlocutors with and against racialized migrants. Such articulations are testament to the “shifting, ambiguous identifications” (Baker 2018, 1) and inherent “tensions” (Kilibarda 2010, 38–39) that arise when accounting for race in the Yugoslav region, and when considering how former Yugoslav migrants position themselves vis-à-vis local conceptions of cultural difference.

But even where “recognition” does not necessarily equal “solidarity”, these memories remain important. For one, they contribute to an archive of resistance to British narratives of “openness” in the midst of the “hostile environment”. For another, in spite of important contextual differences between parts of Central and Eastern Europe, they undermine the assumption that migrants from this region have no prior encounter with the concepts of race and coloniality before their arrival in Britain and their attempts to locate themselves in a multicultural society. They “know” race, first of all, by virtue of being imbricated in unstable but always-racialized hierarchies of Europeanness, in relation to their places of origin as much as to British society. Furthermore, as in the example of my former Yugoslav interlocutors, moments of unexpected street-level intimacy and memories of socialist solidarity, however ambivalent, prove that the former colonial metropole is not the only point of convergence between the postsocialist and postcolonial worlds, which have too frequently been viewed as distinct regions with exceptional concerns (Chari and Verdery 2009). By historicizing migrants’ encounters with race and coloniality, we can instead trace

a genealogy of encounter that extends the spatiotemporal scope of our debates about “living with difference” in Britain.

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<sup>i</sup> All names used are pseudonyms.

<sup>ii</sup> Given the difficulty of naming the language(s) formerly known as Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian, I refer to this as “Bosnian” when speaking of self-identified Bosnians, “Serbian” when speaking of self-identified Serbs, etc.

<sup>iii</sup> Only one person in my research ever referred to themselves as “white”. While not all former Yugoslavs (within the region or in diaspora) are in fact white, whiteness remains the de facto assumption.

<sup>iv</sup> I use the broader term “Central and Eastern Europe” rather than “South-East Europe”, which is more specific to former Yugoslavia. I view the two as overlapping imagined cartographies speaking to similar issues around the invisibility of “race”, although some remain specific to the Yugoslav region (Baker 2018, 29).

<sup>v</sup> While in-depth analysis of my interlocutors’ diverse ethno-national and other positionalities, and their reasons for migrating, is beyond the scope of this article, researching “former Yugoslav migrants” across self-identified ethno-national groups can reveal a number of commonalities as well as differences (Munro 2016).

<sup>vi</sup> The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) was proclaimed in the midst of the Second World War under Partisan leader Marshall Broz Tito, who remained its president until his death in 1980. SFRY, which was officially based on the principles of “brotherhood and unity” between six constituent republics, the socialist concept of “workers’ self-management”, and an internationalist policy of non-alignment, disintegrated in the early 1990s. The wars that unfolded in Croatia and Bosnia (and later Kosovo) became traumatic emblems of Yugoslavia’s collapse and were frequently ascribed to reductive notions of “ancient ethnic hatreds”. For a detailed account of the conflicts, see Glenny (1996); for a review of factors contributing to Yugoslavia’s demise, see Dragovic-Soso (2007).

<sup>vii</sup> With the exception of Slovenia and Croatia, the post-Yugoslav states are not (yet) part of the European Union.

<sup>viii</sup> While the insight that whiteness eludes the analytic gaze has been crucial to “critical whiteness studies”, Sara Ahmed (2007) reminds us that for people of colour living in white-dominated spaces, whiteness has never quite been imperceptible.

<sup>ix</sup> Although Nowicka (2017) uses the term “cultural repertoire” rather than “cultural archive” to describe transnational constructions of Polish racisms, her usage appears broadly similar to Wekker’s.

<sup>x</sup> See however Mayblin, Piekut, and Valentine (2016), who note that “through the postcolonial epistemological optic racial hierarchies [...] go hand in hand with ideas of civilisation” even in “racially homogenous Polish society” (2016, 72).

<sup>xi</sup> See also Balogun (2017) on the historical exploits of the Polish Maritime and Colonial League.

<sup>xii</sup> The terms for “English” and “British” were largely used interchangeably. A striking exception occurred on two separate occasions when interlocutors used “British people” to indicate a racially inclusive term as opposed to the presumed whiteness of “English people”. Whiteness, however, is not enough to confer Englishness: none of my interlocutors considered themselves English, while some did speak of being “British” by virtue of citizenship.

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