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The Immigrant Who Voted to Close the Borders: the “Inner Outside” Position of Eurosceptic South Asians in Brexit Britain

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The demographic divide that gave birth to Brexit was not only a conflict between communities, but also a conflict within communities. The dominant narrative of Brexit draws upon a reductive imagination of the archetypal “Leaver” – the provincial white working-class man – and the archetypal “Remainer” – the cosmopolitan elite immigrant. But, the Asian immigrant vote suggests a more complicated story. Despite a “Leave” campaign that drew upon xenophobia and colonial nostalgia, a poll conducted in the aftermath of Brexit suggests that every third Asian immigrant voted “Leave” in the referendum. Why?

This paper explores how hierarchies of immigrant identities have developed in British society, which pit immigrants from the Commonwealth against immigrants from the EU, competing for resources, rights and public goodwill. By

identifying with a campaign for closing the borders, the South Asian origin Brexiteers appear to self-identify with an “inner outside” position in British society, not entirely integrated with the white British, but more integrated than many EU migrants. How do they negotiate with this identity that self-integrates by “othering” other immigrants? Why do they dissociate their identity as British from their identity as European? This paper seeks to answer these questions through interviews and content analysis of the “Leave” campaign material. A minority voting trend suggests potential trends for the future. If British South Asian immigrants are failing to affiliate with being European, is it indicative of a larger shortfall in the EU’s inclusion of the diaspora in its socio-political imaginary? In post-Brexit Europe, these questions deserve contemplation.