

“No, where are you really from?”: Being a UK citizen of colour living in the EU27

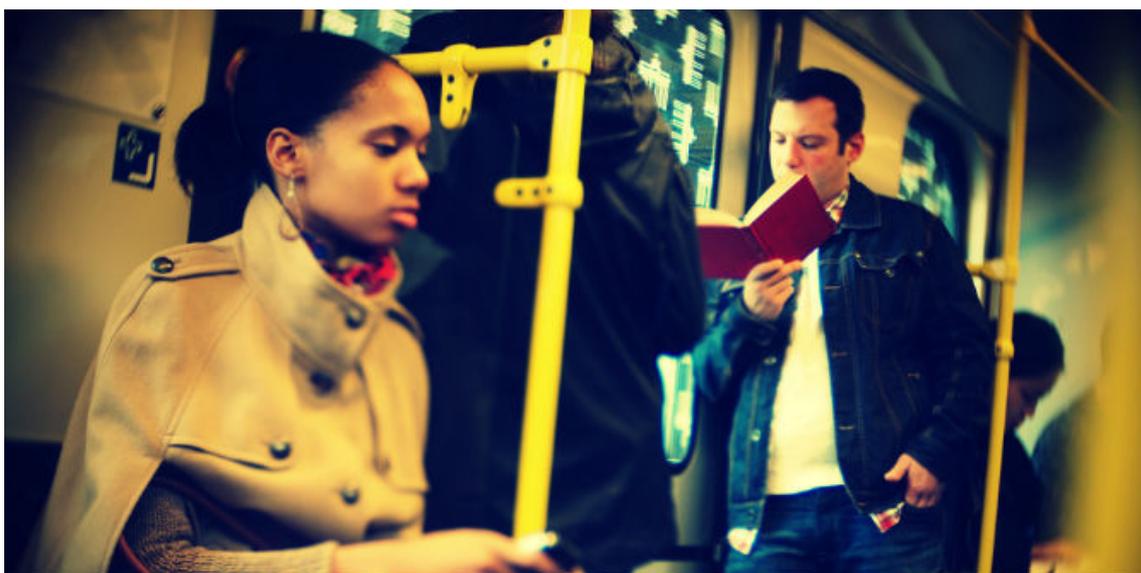


To be recognised as British abroad while also being a person of colour means answering uncomfortable questions about where you are **really** from. Since November 2017, **Chantelle Lewis (Goldsmiths, University of London)** has been interviewing UK citizens of colour who permanently reside within the EU27, as part of the UK in a Changing Europe (ESRC) funded project [Brexit Brits Abroad](#). Brexit as a process brings into sharp relief the question of [who is allowed to be British \(abroad\)](#) and the lack of representation of UK citizens abroad who are not white.

Racism, not ‘race’

What unites the UK citizens of colour living within the EU27 during the Brexit process is not their (mis)recognised ‘race’, but how their experiences are shaped by different expressions of racism.

The process of racialisation where one is seen as ‘racially different’ before they can claim a nationality is important to bring into the light. What is becoming even more evident within the Brexit process is that these instances are all linked to racisms. The exclusion of voices of colour, the misinformation about *who* the U.K citizens are living within the EU27 and the [unbearable whiteness](#) at the forefront of the Brexit debate is all inextricable from racism.



On the U-bahn, Berlin. Photo: [Bjorn Glasenbauer](#) via a [CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0 licence](#)

By undertaking research that seeks to assess how UK citizens of colour living within the EU have experienced Brexit, we risk essentialising these experiences – exactly what we want to avoid. But what we can do is address the fact that the UK citizens of colour we are speaking with regularly discuss their experiences of being racialised, and thus being victims of racisms.

Disputed nationality

In a previous [blogpost](#) I addressed who is allowed to be British abroad, emphasising that unlike their fellow white UK citizens living within the EU27, UK citizens of colour often have to prove their Britishness. Having already faced passive-aggressive questions in the UK, they are still asked, “No, where are you *really* from?”. Though the person asking might not intentionally be questioning their residential status, this is still racism. They are asking because the person is not white. Robyn explained to me that this questioning of Britishness is a daily occurrence for her in Spain –

The amount of times they’ve asked – “where are you from?” Because that’s the standard isn’t it? I’ve met so many people and their main question is where are you from? Which is totally normal, and then I say I’m from London they say ‘oh really’, and then they say but ‘born in London?’. – Robyn, Spain.

This is racism, because the person asking Robyn where she is from does not believe her physical appearance satisfies their [Eurocentric](#) gaze. They *need* her to confirm that she is not ‘originally’ from Europe, but she refuses and asserts her Britishness. Her mother tongue, accent and even giving the answer to their question is not enough– her skin colour is what matters.

This is the problem and is a direct example of how misrepresentations can manifest within conversations about UK citizens living within the EU27. As we have seen in our [Hansard analysis](#), even politicians are quick to create an imagined image of who these populations are – if they can’t reimagine a more equal society and language to convey this, how can we expect ordinary citizens to? This is not to excuse the process of racialisation, but more to assert just how endemic it is.

Whiteness and abandoning racialised essentialism

Of the UK citizens of colour I have spoken with, some appear to experience a type of displaced racism. It is similar to the racism experienced in the UK – where ‘race’ becomes an individual’s defining feature – but it is further emphasised by proximity to whiteness. UK citizens of colour abroad must prove their Britishness because they’re not white and, in some instances, separate themselves from ‘Englishness’. How could a British or ‘English’ ‘expat’ not be white? The lived experiences documented within this research emphasises the strength of racialised hierarchies – migration is not an exception.

It is also important to recognise that not all people of colour will identify these processes of racialisation as racist – this is exactly the point. Even those who are victim to racist tropes will not always recognise them as such. But if some people of colour do not identify their situation as a product of racism, this does not stop it from being a racist circumstance. People of colour are not the spokespeople for injustice, and they are not a homogenised group with the same opinions.

(Mis)recognition as racism

By reclaiming racisms there is a need for a re-evaluation of terms like ‘recognition’. To be recognised as a ‘race’ is racist, and the need to prove you are British is also racist. Though not all interviewees have emphasised these racisms, the majority have. Kaamil, who is an academic in Spain, described a racist incident where he was ‘recognised’ as an outsider because of his appearance–

I’m nearly 40 years old and I have two kids and am fairly established in my own little field and I popped into the university one day and I was followed by security right to the toilet. And they said “What are you doing here?” and the reason, the other thing was, I watched security for a while to see if I was the only one they stopped. And I literally was the only person who got stopped. Things like that, you know. I realise it is because of the way I look. Kaamil – Spain.

Racism is a universal tendency, and for UK citizens of colour like Kaamil it is an inevitability of daily life. When discussing migration status, nationality and borders it cannot be ignored. How UK citizens of colour living in the EU experience Brexit will not be the same because they have not and have never been treated the same.

As we seek to establish how instances like Brexit affect different populations, there is a risk that we comply with racialised narratives about [who is allowed to be outraged and who is most affected](#). It is essential that the stories of people who are not imagined as the British abroad are recognised – and further that we have more conversations about the class of people who are most likely to have their lives disrupted in comparison to others. The politics of migration – and in the case of Brexit- freedom of movement, has always been a matter of ‘race’ and class or who has the power to claim they are an ‘acceptable’ migrant.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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