

'Anyone Foreign?' Passing in the White City from 7/7 to Brexit

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As part of a series of racist incidents in the wake of the EU referendum, a white man queuing at the checkout of a Tesco supermarket in Gloucester was reported to have shouted, "This is England now, foreigners have 48 hours to fuck right off. Who is foreign here? Anyone foreign?" (Lyons 2016). The reiterated enquiry on which the man's exclamation ends betrays the unstable foundations of the white nationalism that his dubious ultimatum is built on. This post-referendum, unofficial form of racial policing depends on the willingness of the interpellated 'foreigners' to recognise the hail and identify as such. Their lack of belonging to white British society cannot always be "read off the surface" (Ahmed 2004, 63), but is nevertheless called upon and rendered visible in hate speech acts.

This paper interrogates the performative construction of an exclusive white national identity in the aftermath of the 2005 London bombings and the 2016 EU referendum. While both cultural moments are characterised by the implementation of an "infrastructural whiteness" (Pugliese 2006) which regulates (urban) access and mobility, I will argue that the operation and naturalisation of whiteness functions differently in the two cases. Drawing on instances of racial profiling and commuter paranoia, I will examine how, after 7/7, the fearful citizen constituted itself as a white subject primarily by means of an affective relationship to the racialised Other in urban space. Many of the xenophobic incidents after the referendum, by contrast, can be read as performative speech acts that naturalise the speaker's whiteness against an amorphous foreigner whose Otherness stubbornly refuses to manifest – hence the desperate call on 'anyone foreign' to come forward.

Beyond analysing the infrastructural formation of whiteness in contemporary British society, the paper also seeks to explore strategies of passing in or revolting against the white city and – from a methodological angle – to assess the contributions of Critical Whiteness Studies to an anti-racist politics at this historical juncture.