

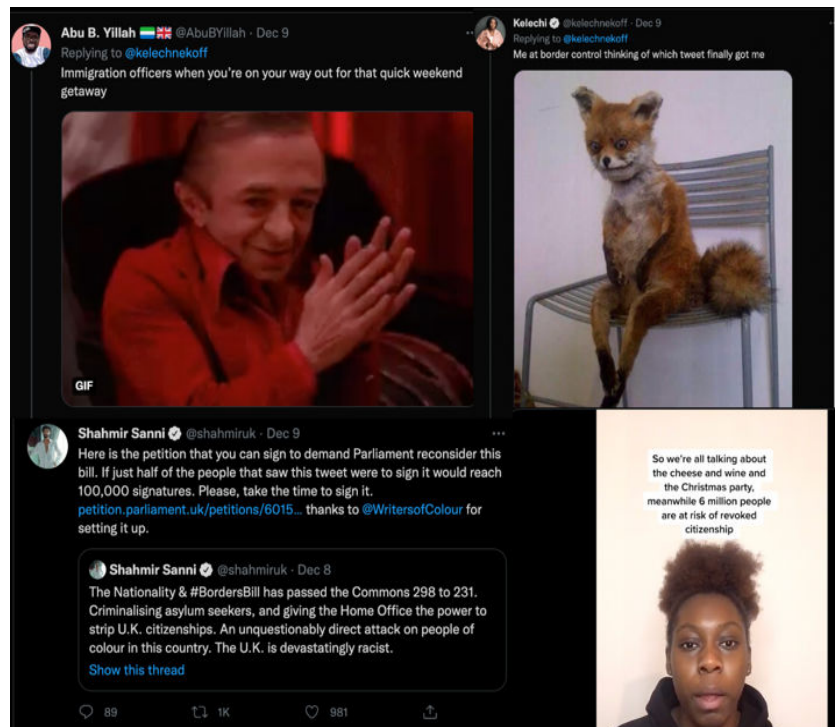
Identity: Betwixt Silence, Choice and Fear

Part I. Conceiving the Project

a) *Preamble*

This essay starts at the end. As, I was putting the finishing touches on my writing, a debate was erupting about the United Kingdom's new *Nationality and Borders* bill in the media. *Open Democracy* reporting on this bill accused the government of creating a racialised three-tiered citizenship stating that "this type of racially tiered citizenship regime usually brings to mind countries such as Myanmar, with its notorious 1928 citizenship rule, not the UK" (Chickera, 2021). Speaking to this tiered citizenship, Unzela Khan writes for *The Mirror* that "as much as we try to cling on to being British Pakistani or British Bangladeshi, British anything, the second part of the title has become a tool to ensure we know we are in fact second class citizens" (2021). *The New Statesman* in a study quantifies just how many people are at risk - finding "that two in every five people from non-white ethnic minorities (41 per cent) are likely to be eligible for deprivation of citizenship, compared with just one in 20 people categorised as white (5 per cent)" (der Merwe, 2021). Khan ends her essay in *The Mirror* asking the question "so this means as long as I am a good immigrant, I can stay in the UK?" (2021) a notion which in her personal essay in *The Independent* Kate Ng disputes writing "I came here believing that if I obeyed all the rules, paid all the money, was the very definition of a 'good immigrant', I would eventually be safe. Now I'm not sure" (2021). Ng highlights the weight of precarity that this bill foists on the shoulder of immigrants; a precarity that Zoe Williams also highlights in her article for *The Guardian* when she says that this bill makes "the condition of Britishness a fragile one in which legitimacy is uncertainty and loyalty must be continually demonstrated" (2021).

It is important to note that while the ability for the UK to strip their citizens of citizenship is not new - for many people the government's enhanced ability to do so reminded them of the precarity of their citizenship. As people grappled with this precarity, I noted two unique forms of coping on social media among people of colour. The first group turned either to activism or

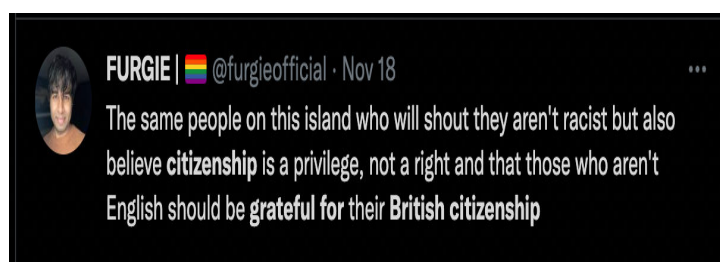


humour to both cope with and assert their agency in the face of this bill. At face value, the posts on the right, are very simple in their intention. They are trying to a) either galvanise action or b) laugh in the face of what seems insurmountable. But this simplistic analysis of the tweets overlooks the essential community building that these tweets are doing. Kugler and Kuhbander (2015) have noted the role that humour plays as both a form of emotional regulation as well as a defence mechanism. This is evidenced in the posts. There are echoes of the fear within the personal essays in the traditional media outlets. That people's right to citizenship have become arbitrary. The posts can be read as people trying to understand their new paradigm and steel themselves with humour. These posts also demonstrate people's use of humour as a galvanizing tool in activism (Gal, 2018; Takovski, 2019; Hart, 2007; Chatto and Feldman, 2020). Chatto and Feldman (2020) speaking to the power of comedy say "comedians who say something serious about the world while they make us laugh are capable of mobilizing the masses, focusing a critical lens on injustices, and injecting hope and optimism into seemingly hopeless problems"; while Waterlow (n.d.) speaking to the power of humour says

because they're inherently social, jokes also help us to feel less alone. Being able to laugh at the same joke fosters a powerful sense of community and intimacy. To get the punchline means to share a point of view – to realize that other people see things the same way and think 'me too!'. The sense of community nurtured by the jokes also reassures us that the world we know hasn't collapsed around us.

While there are multiple definitions of what it means to be black or of colour, and therefore a multiplicity of communities that people who call themselves Black/BAME¹/POC² can belong to, everyone who that bill potentially impacts can find common ground/community within the humour of these posts. They can reside within a digital home/digital community that the humour creates.

While community within digital humour is comforting to some, I also observed that others are retreating. In recent weeks, many people have made their accounts private, seemingly afraid that any political commentary or critique could be deemed 'unpatriotic' and lead to the erosion of their citizenship. Some are afraid that the very humour that has created a home for their peers, for them might lead to a stripping of their citizenship. In making their accounts private, they fortify



the communities they have already built that are 'within the gates' while preventing both potential new community members as well as bad

faith actors from entering. In the anthology *The Good Immigrant*, there is a line that goes as follows, "I do think it's interesting that this idea of being a model minority is tied up with essentially being quiet...just sitting back, not complaining about stuff, and getting on with making money. Being quiet is considered a good quality" (Shukla, 2016). In the face of this bill and the opaqueness of what it defines as good and bad, people locking their social media accounts mirrors the anxieties

¹ Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

² People/Person of Colour

of the personal essays mentioned at the beginning of this reflective piece. People are unsure of how they will be perceived on the metric of good/bad. In a democratic society, citizens are encouraged to exercise their right to free speech and to engage in the political process. However, for many ethnic minorities, the constant refrain of their life is ‘if you don’t like it, you should just go home’. Ethnic minorities are expected to perform perpetual gratefulness – but in the face of the persistent requirement to be grateful, to what extent can one critique? In the face of persistent calls for performances of gratefulness, a performative silence emerges, their voices are still loud within the gates of their community, but everyone outside can’t hear its tenor.

b) The Original Project

I initially applied to be a Dahrendorf Scholar during the fall of 2020, the summer of 2020 had been characterized by lockdowns as well as the Black Lives Matters (BLM) protests that echoed across Europe and North America. When the BLM protests initially started occurring in Europe, many tried to dismiss the protestors as simply misguided individuals misapplying and misappropriating American problems and contexts to the European context. In making these bad faith arguments, the critics ignored the grim picture of the realities of Black British life. Black women are five times more likely to die during pregnancy and childbirth than their white peers (Kasprzak, 2019, Radone, 2020). In response, the NHS has said that they “acknowledge and regret this disparity but have no target to end it” (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 6, 2020). Black Britons are 50% more likely to die from coronavirus compared to their white peers with 19% of Black British people knowing someone who has died of the virus (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2020). In addition to medical disparities, the Black British population is over-policed and over-criminalised. They are 9.5 times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police, and the police are 5 times more likely to use force against them (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2020). Research has found that Black people (especially Black men) are more likely to be detained under the Mental Health Act than both their BAME and white peers (Gajwani, Parson,

Birchowood and Singh, 2016). Even Black children are not free from degradation. They are “over four times more likely than white children to be arrested [and] almost three times more likely to be given a caution or sentence than white children” (Joint Committee on Human Rights, 21, 2020). Finally, the Black British population must contend with Brexit as an event – that has both for many globally exposed the racist / xenophobic underbelly of the UK (Benson and Lewis, 2019) while simultaneously making them more vulnerable to further precarity (Mukasa, 2019; Haque, 2019). Under the law, Black Britons are technically free and equal to their white peers, but the statistics suggest otherwise.

Looking at these statistics, I drew the conclusion that the Black British community was facing a crisis of political freedom. I framed my research using Iris Young’s conception of oppression. Heldke and O’Connor (2004) in their discussion of her concept define oppression as the process of making others “less human [saying that] this could mean treating them in a dehumanizing manner. But it could also mean denying people language, education, and other opportunities that make them fully human in both mind and body” (p.1). Iris Young determines that there are five types of oppression: exploitation, violence, marginalisation, powerlessness and cultural imperialism (1990). The Black British population is facing the confluence of the latter four. Black Britons disproportionately face state violence. They are marginalized and relegated to a lower social standing in society. They are disempowered and “[exposed] to disrespectful treatment because of their lower status” (Heldke and O’Connor, 2004, p. 2). Finally, cultural imperialism both creates and stereotypes the ‘other’ while forcing them to etch an existence within the confines and reactions of those parameters” (Iris Young, 1990).

Despite this oppression, the BLM protests that coursed through the heart of Europe in summer 2020 powerfully demonstrated that young Black European populations are not content with the current status-quo. They do not want to settle for the pretence of freedom while enduring oppression. Social media was used as a powerful tool to demand freedom from the state and much attention has been paid to this use (Mohdin and Campbell, 2020). However, what has been

neglected is the role that social media can play in creating new forms of freedom from outside the state. My intention with my project had been to draw attention to how 'Black Twitter' both creates and debates new forms of freedom. Black Twitter is the name given to the merging of Black people across demographics and national boundaries into new digital communities (Wheeler, 2019; Reid, 2018, Ramsey, 2015). In this space people define and redefine themselves both outside the boundaries of stereotypes and without regard to debunking stereotypes. Mbembe (2005) says that "the calculus of freedom is self-ownership. Indeed, racism is the operation through which one is asked to surrender one's body, one's humanity, and be disowned of oneself" (297). Through Black Twitter, Black Britons take ownership of their lives and communities. He further says that in "Black narratives of freedom, liberty is imagined first and foremost as the recovery of the capacity to once again take of oneself" (296).

My intention with this essay had been to highlight the Black people and communities who had created those spaces of care. Spaces of care whose words, commentary and links had provided me respite that had comforted me in the face of constant racialisation. However, a provocation during a lecture convinced me to change the focus of my research.

c) The Provocation

During a lecture, a lecturer asserted that Black British people felt more British than European and then alluded that this assertion most likely applied to Black Europeans as well. However, it would be difficult to fully qualify this claim because while there were statistics for the Black British community, there was very little information available for the Black European population. As a Black British woman, raised in continental Europe, I remember feeling very uneasy while listening to his words because I had always considered myself as European and felt that many of my friends and family who comprised of various configurations of 'Black and [insert European country]' also shared that same sentiment. In the face of this lecture, I decided to reorient my research to look at how Black Europeans viewed themselves and the extent to which they believed themselves to

be European rather than just French/Dutch/Austrian/German etcetera. I also engaged in conversations with Black British people to understand the extent to which (if at all) their answers differed from their Black European counterparts. Frimpong (2019) in her article looking at Black European identity in the light of Brexit says

Growing up in Italy as a black woman, myself and peers often described ourselves as ‘Afro-Italian’, in the same way my friends and family in the UK would describe themselves as ‘Black British’. I was astounded by the backlash and outright rejection of the term ‘Black European’ when an American described Black Briton as such in a social media post. What is it particularly about this identity that Black British people cannot relate to and outright reject?”

Her observation was reflected in my conversations with some of my friends, where there was a clear hesitancy for Black Britons to describe themselves as Black European, with those that did take an active interest in European identity clearly recognising that they were an exception rather than the norm.

When seeking to identify where their European identity had emerged from, one of the oft repeated themes in my conversations with Black Europeans was the amount of travel they had done in Europe as well as educational opportunities they had been able to partake in within Europe. A Black Austrian, describing her European identity referred to how growing up she was able to travel frequently and cheaply to a variety of different European countries. A typical bus ticket from Vienna to Venice costs around roughly 25 pounds. This experience allowed her to frequently partake in a multiplicity of European cultures as well as to draw parallels between her life and cultural experiences in Austria and the lives and cultures of people in other European countries. This narrative was repeated by the other Black- [insert European country] hyphenates that I spoke to. They had all frequently travelled throughout Europe and many of them had received a significant portion of their higher education in European countries that they were not citizens of. Their narratives are reflected in the statistics which show that “1.3 million students from abroad were undertaking tertiary level studies across the EU-27 in 2018... [with] two fifths

(44%) of the students from abroad who were undertaking tertiary level studies across the Eu-27 [being from] Europe” (Eurostat, 2020). This is in direct contrast to the 2017 British Council report that found that 82% of British students were uninterested in studying abroad and that the 18% who were interested in studying abroad placed the United States as their first choice. The Black European experience mirrors the overall European experience of Europe which is that of a population engaged with the different nations of Europe at different levels of their life, whereas Black British people like most British people are less engaged with continental Europe. This leads to less opportunity to create a sense of European identity because most of their engagement with other Europeans is only happening either during vacation or within the United Kingdom, rather than the immersive experience that many Black Europeans are having.

d) Reframing/Rewriting

In the initial writing of this essay, I simply presented the different ways in which Black-Europeans qualified their Europeanness and the similarities and differences of how Black-Britons spoke about their Europeanness. However, the advent of the *Nationality and Borders* bill forced me to reconsider how I framed this essay. It made me reconsider the conversations I had and the way I read the academic literature. Instead in my reframing, I have chosen to highlight the themes of choice, persistent silencing/justification and oppression. In this ‘accidental’³ reframing of this essay, I found myself being able to bridge the orientation of the first iteration of this essay with the second iteration. The rest of this essay will be a meditation on two recurrent ideas that emerged during my conversations and readings: a) National Identity as a Precondition for European Identity and b) How Black Europeans Locate Themselves Between Growing Populist Nationalism and European Identity.

³ By accidental I mean I could not have predicted the advent of this bill nor people’s reactions to it

Part II. National Identity as a Precondition for European Identity

a) European Perspective

A running thread throughout the conversations was the belief that for Black people, European identity was predicated on national identity. There was the belief that while white people's 'Europeanness' was granted or assumed automatically, for Black people this identity could only be qualified through nationality. We can hypothesise that the reason for this has a lot to do with Europe's historical amnesia when it comes to Africa/Black people. While the colonial history and therefore presence of Africans/Black people in countries such as the UK and France is oft acknowledged and very evident (although not without tensions) this is not the case for all European countries. The Moors were essential to the linguistic and cultural formation of Spain (Erwin, 2002; Rorabaugh, 2010; Marin, 2004; Devereux, 2012). However, as Aidi (2015) notes Spain is "[ambivalent] about its Islamic past and proximity to Africa". The historian Olivette Otele in her interview with Agnes Bardou (2021) speaking to this amnesia says

When we talk about the migration of people from Africa to Europe, we tend to trace it back to the slave trade. But it is much older. People from the African continent have been present in the Roman Empire since antiquity...So there is a shared history between Africa and Europe, much older and richer than one might imagine. But part of this history has not been considered relevant enough to be taught in schools. We have become accustomed to viewing history through the prism of the slave trade. This historic moment has somehow eclipsed, or masked, what came before. As a result, this history has been struck by a partial amnesia.

Black Europeans are caught in a situation in which despite the fact that they have always been present since antiquity and have been present in recent European history such as fighting in the

World Wars (Eyssen, 2018; Olusoga, 2018; Headrick, 1978, Brown, 2020) with an estimated 2 million African dying during World War I (Eyssen, 2018) they are forced to qualify their identity and presence through their national identity rather than their historical presence. This forced difference to national identity creates the false idea that the Black presence in Europe is recent, when in fact that this is not the reality for many Black peoples.

Furthermore, when looking at national identity as a building block for Black European identity we also must address how European countries view Europe and the EU. There was a marked difference between Black [insert European country] hyphenates who came from European states in which European identity was placed at the centre of the national zeitgeist and those that did not. Consequently, for example, Black-French people and Black-Belgians were more inclined to identify as European because being European was a central part of their national conversation. This is congruent with the findings of Agirdag, Phalet and Van Houtte (2016) who found that immigrant populations in Belgium were even more inclined than ‘native’ Belgians to identify as European. Speaking to this, they say “European identity is more conceptualized as a civic identity, one which is less determined by ethnic characteristics such as language, religion, or common descent. As such, for immigrant minorities, European identification might be a more realistic common identity than national identities are” (286). They further expand upon this saying that the multiculturalism in Europe allows immigrants to still retain parts of their ethnic identity by allowing immigrants to belong to a ‘common European value system’ while still retaining the positive aspects of their cultures of origins (291). The conversations I had as well as this academic assessment are reflective of my own experience as a Black British person growing up in continental Europe. As many European nationalist projects, including the UK, started to frame themselves in exclusionary ways often defined by ‘whiteness’ – the European Union’s framing of itself as a multicultural political project allowed me to feel like I could claim a stake in it, contribute to it and belong to it. I think this belief also shows the importance of rhetoric when it comes to creating the feeling of belonging. The European Union has been plagued by accusations of racism and

exclusionary practices (Adam, 2021; Singh, 2020). Yet many ethnic minorities felt a sense of despondence, fear, and anxiety in the face of the Brexit (Einashe, 2017; Gopalakrishnan, 2021) even though on minority/black representation in public life the UK mirrors the failings of the EU (Uberoi and Tunnicliffe, 2021). The former British Prime Minister Theresa May infamously said that if ‘you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere’; this version of citizenship rather than the EU’s civic model makes it feel like there is a limitation to the progress of inclusion in the United Kingdom compared to the European Union. The statement ‘if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere’ is not about how people with hyphenated identities view themselves; it is a statement about how people who do not have hyphenated identities view those that do. In my conversations with people, one of the recurring ideas was the thought that they had use their national identity to justify their ‘Europeanness’ because no matter how much they civically engage or are civically a ‘good’ citizen they are still asked to justify their presence. Simon (2012) in his research for the Transatlantic Council on Migration discusses how Black-French people are constantly asked to justify their ‘Frenchness’. Speaking to this he says

if only 10 percent of the white (European) group immigrants and their descendants feel the denial of their Frenchness, all other minorities experience the same level of rejection four times more. Blacks and Arabs report significantly more discrimination and racism, meaning that their sense of belonging matches the way they are perceived. Conversely, immigrants and descendants from North Africa, Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa report a substantial mismatch between their feeling French and the perception of their otherness.

Often the ability to claim citizenship, identity or nationality is not about what you perceive or believe to be true of yourself but rather about your ability to persist and insist in the face of constant questioning.

b) Obroní /Mzungu/Oyinbo⁴

In this debate, there is a tendency to perpetuate Eurocentric thinking. We consider how Black Europeans are viewed by white Europeans without considering how they are viewed by Africans⁵. Thus, perpetuating the modernist idea that all thinking originates from a ‘Western’ perspective. Throughout my conversations, people often described how in their countries of heritage they were frequently called ‘white’ in the various local languages. This is because it was understood that despite their skin colour – the way they dressed, spoke, and presented themselves marked them as ‘foreign’. This is something that is not often understood or well-articulated in conversations about Black Europeans from a Western perspective. The conversation often centres around skin colour without considering the cultural attributes of people. People also referenced the realisation that despite growing up in the diaspora within homes in which their African cultural heritage was present and taught, they did not understand many of the references and cultural markers of their countries of heritage. There is an implicit idea in the *Nationality and Borders* bill that Black people (and other people of immigrant descent) are foreign within the UK or Europe but would instantly be at home in their countries of heritage. Cultural hybridity used to argue that they are foreign. This assumption ignores the fact that their cultural hybridity is a by-product of their Europeaness. Thus, the bill fails to consider that you can be a foreigner in your country of heritage. Thus, Black-hyphenate Europeans face a dual crisis: forced to justify their Europeaness because of their colour/heritage, and potentially dismissed/alienated in their countries of heritage because of the Europeaness.

⁴ These are different words for white/foreigner in African languages

⁵ Most of the people I had conversations with were of African descent

Part III. How Black Europeans Locate Themselves Between Growing Populist Nationalism and European Identity

a) Obscured Geography

Of the Black British people I spoke to who expressed a reluctance to define themselves as European they often said that their hesitancy was because they felt that Europe was synonymous with the EU, and the United Kingdom did not belong to that political project anymore. Their thoughts are reflective of the current political reality in the UK, which both appears to insist upon the UK's historical/geographic place in Europe (Rifkind,2019) while also treating the EU as synonymous to Europe and obscuring this truth (Garton-Ash, 2001). While their viewpoints are reflective of the current British political zeitgeist, they are paradoxical when one considers that the majority of BAME voters voted remain during Brexit (Einasse,2017); there have been many theories as to why that was, but I believe that the discrepancy between voting and identity can also be understood within the context of Iris Young's work.

Iris Young (1988) in her work *Five Faces of Oppression* locates Black people within all her categories of oppression. In this section I am only going to focus on her fourth and fifth category (Cultural Imperialism and Violence). Defining cultural imperialism, she says that “cultural imperialism consists in the universalization of one group's experience and culture, and its establishment as the norm...[and] since the dominant group's cultural expressions are the only expressions that receive wide dissemination, the dominant groups construct the difference which some groups exhibit as lack and negation in relation to the norms, and the groups become marked out as the Other” (285). Interestingly though, she notes that within this cultural imperialism, the dominant groups are allowed to be considered as, and act as individuals whereas those marked as ‘other’ are judged if they showcase individuality. She says that “many groups suffer the oppression of systematic and legitimate violence” (287) and that that “rule use [repressive power] as a coercive

tool to maintain their power... [and that] fear of violence functions to help keep these oppressed group subordinate” (287). In both forms of oppression, there is a very implicit/explicit silencing of ethnic minorities. This recalls the beginning of this essay in which we discussed the new bill and the precarity of citizenship and the forced performance of gratitude. Operating within the paradigm that your claim to citizenship is precarious, and yet the standard of good is measured by the degree by which the dominant group feels you are grateful can be said to be a kind of violence. This is coupled with cultural imperialism that necessitates that for Black Britons to avoid repressive violence they must subordinate their individuality. Within this paradigm it could be hypothesised that some ethnic minorities downplay any affinity to European identity lest it leads to hostility that they are not performing gratefulness the right way.

b) Opting Out

In the face of this national oppression, I also witnessed the converse in my conversations; while for some this oppression led to them emphasising their national identity, for others European identity (as a political/civic concept) and the freedom of movement was emancipatory. While in some countries European and national identity are entangled e.g., Macron’s recent European Council presidency speech which also acted as a campaign speech for the French presidency (Momtaz, 2021). In other European countries we have seen the disentangling of European and national identity. Post-communist countries have increasingly seen a rise of nationalist populism in which (like the UK) opposition to the EU has been integral. This rise of nationalism has been linked to the rise of racism and oppression of minorities – which while present before has become more overt and explicit (Kakissis, 2018; Sieradzka, 2016). Returning to Iris Young, in these populist contexts the ‘European’ once cast as ‘same’ becomes ‘other’ alongside ethnic minorities. In my conversations, I found that this othering allowed black hyphenates from these countries to ground themselves in their European identity because while they might be excluded from their national identity they can still freely participate in European civic citizenship.

This led to them using their freedom of movement to move to a different European country and view themselves through European rather than nationalistic lenses.

Part IV. Conclusion

Whenever I go home to my European country of birth to visit my family, when border control sees that I was born there – I am enthusiastically welcomed home. Over the years, knowing that I am about to be welcomed means that as the plane approaches the airport my smile starts to grow larger. As the plane touches ground, and I start to hear the national language in the airport a sense of relief washes over my body. I am home. I am safe. I am welcomed. This is not the case for all Black Europeans. Nations with a strong European identity might imbue Black Europeans raised there with a strong sense of European identity, while simultaneously forcing them to justify their presence on a national level. For other Black Europeans, populist nationalistic rejection strengthens their sense of European identity. However, all Black Europeans, like all Europeans, are grappling with what being European means to them and how they locate themselves within it.

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