LIVING IN THE BEAUTIFUL CITY
Everyday Racism in East-Central Europe[1]

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Abstract: ***This paper presents a view of a Central European city as a space where memory processes provide the context for understanding everyday racism. Participatory research gave voice to otherwise muted experiences of constructed "others" living in the Beautiful City as they navigate and experience racism. Their experiences under the disciplinary gazes of those constructed as a hegemonic population and its occasional violent aggressions give account of how the urban space remains an essential part of a mechanism of subjugation for visible "others". The hegemonic population perceives urban space as neutral, considering racism a marginal or an accidental phenomenon. On the contrary; the analysed experiences are only possible to explain under the hidden existence of a racial hierarchy, based on the locals' performed right of belonging to the city. Such a hidden hierarchy constitutes a key element for understanding racism in East-Central Europe.***

Keywords: ***everyday racism; migration; urban space***

Racism, or should we say racisms (Goldberg 1990) persist as a crucial aspect in understanding migration and integration processes. In current ethnographic work within diverse research participants, such as migrants or social minorities living in East-Central Europe, we have often learnt about their experiences and stories of racism[2]. The researcher realised that the consistency and cumulative character of their narratives, often articulated as personal accounts or life stories, slowly become a testimony of what Philomena Essed has come to call

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[2] The author's approach to racism is an expression of interaction on the basis of race "understood as a system of social meanings and cultural classifications, which is created and sustained through relationships of power and hierarchy" (Alexander – Knowles 2005: 11).

everyday racism (Essed 1991). Essed introduces everyday racism as "a *process* in which (1) socialized racist notions are integrated in meanings that make practices immediately definable and manageable, (2) practices with racist implications become in themselves familiar and repetitive, and (3) underlying racial and ethnic relations are actualized and reinforced through these routine or familiar practices in everyday situations" (Essed 2002: 208). This article presents an analysis of the testimonies of everyday racism taking place in a Central European City, and attempts to uncover local relationships of power and hierarchy between the hegemonic population and those recognised as "others", those who are not allowed to belong to the city.

The current study focuses on a concrete local manifestation of racism. A micro-perspective is needed in order to contextualise the social construction of local racism. Urban space and the manifestation of its temporalities will become remarkably significant in the attempt to localise and understand the social scenario where interactions – those which may be considered embodiments of racism – take place. In other words, the current study aims to approach racism as the product of social interaction under hierarchic meanings, which are socially constructed on the basis of race in a concrete place and in a concrete time. Social interactions are fixed and settled in a symbolic space where meanings and significances are modelled through time and memory processes. In doing so, ethnographic efforts together with participants will navigate through the space and daily tempo of a Central European City. Cities have become a predominantly anthropological place. The city is understood as an arena where social interactions take place, reproducing and limiting the social interactions of their inhabitants. The urban plan also configures the concrete order in which interactions are bounded (Augé 1995). The city, in its diachronic existence, is subjected to the processes of memory for recreating and reconstructing its own past in order to endow sense to its own present (Halbwachs 1980; Assmann 1988).

For the purpose of anonymity, the city has been labelled by the metaphoric name of the Beautiful City[3]. The metaphor points to the dominant binarism, which conforms society in opposite terms: "we" and "others", "good" and "evil", "nationals" and "migrants", "Europeans" and "foreigners to integrate". In

[3] To anonymise the city was a crucial compromise between the researcher and the participants, who fear the potential impact of directly opposing the dominant discourses in their everyday lives. The so-called "Beautiful City" counts with nearly 100,000 residents and a floating population of 30,000 university students.

Postcolonial Studies, the authors state: "Perhaps one of the most catastrophic binary systems perpetuated by imperialism is the invention of the concept of race. The reduction of complex physical and cultural differences within and between colonized societies to the simple distinction between black/brown/yellow/white is in fact a strategy to establish a binarism of white/non-white, which asserts a relation of dominance" (Ashcroft – Griffiths – Tiffin 2000: 27). In doing so, the ethnocentric understanding of the Beautiful City through the dominant population is a metaphor of an inexistent homogeneous, "right" and "beautiful" society, which will be confronted through participants' narratives, conveying a reality of oppression and violence against that which is different. The metaphor articulates the tendency in Central European cities to hide their conflictual and violent racialised past and present under the constructed image of a romanticised past. The researcher adopts an "ethnographic attitude" (Clifford 1988: 19) understanding "culture and its norms – beauty, truth, reality – as artificial arrangements susceptible to detached analysis and comparison with other possible dispositions." Even when cultural homogeneity is an illusion, it constitutes the pillars of a strong feeling of belonging for the hegemonic population, creating tensions against those who are considered not to belong to the city. The impact of racism in the European cities and in the racialised lives of European inhabitants has deeply marked social reality. East-Central Europe is not an exception. As many other cities of the region, the Beautiful City has been one of the scenes of the Holocaust, the everlasting marginalisation of Roma, and a consistent exercise of white supremacy often covered by nationalistic discourses.

The present work is the result of long-term ethnography research focused on social interactions, sometimes conflicting between the hegemonic population of the Beautiful City and those who are perceived as "others". The hegemonic population is characterised by a strong feeling of national belonging, and has historically exercised its white supremacy over other inhabitants of the city, such as Jews, Roma, or the Germans, conceptualised as local minorities. The "others" in the current research are a heterogeneous group formed by the resident and non-resident population (such as temporary students, short-term migrant workers, or visitors) of the Beautiful City, and present certain characteristics that construct them as "foreigners", having a non-hegemonic visual aspects, such as skin colour (different than white) or physical appearance, speaking a different language than the official nation-state language, having international backgrounds, for example, citizens of the United Kingdom whose family origins

are in the former colonies, or having been subjected to a restricted legal status or fragmented citizenship according to policies based on the limited boundaries of the nation-state. Research participants do not fulfil the established criteria to be considered migrants or foreigners according to the confusing legislative framework, within which, always in the strict margins of methodological nationalism (Wimmer – Glick Schiller 2002), the population is divided into nationals, European Union (EU) members, third country nationals, and asylum seekers or holders[4]. The current study engages in an anti-racist anthropological approach (Mullings 2005), and, being aware of the freedom of discourse in academia, the author does not wish to reinforce or perpetuate categories that are neither analytical nor descriptive, which, in fact, serve to divide and limit population rights. Most of the participants were EU citizens; some of them inherited a background from their parents which ties them to former western colonies. Their differentiating mother tongue and visual aspects construct them as foreigners in the eyes of the dominant population, and the growing intolerance in the region transformed the religion of some participants into a problematic element for the hegemonic population. All of them have lived and experienced the Beautiful City because of their studies, careers, or family situations.

The bodies of participants are not only strongly racialised in the context of the Beautiful City, but bodies are also gendered. Intersectionality emphasises the ways in which sexuality intersects with other axes of power and identities (Crenshaw 1989). Recent studies exploring how sexuality intersects with race show the relevancy of such an approach in understanding everyday life still in current societies (Collins 2004).

The subjectivities of the participants are the protagonists of the text at hand, and the author's main role is to act as mediator for the reader. Using the knowledge acquired through participant observation and public engagement in common activities with migrants living in the Beautiful City, several sessions were organised, providing a comfort zone for the participants, allowing them to express and articulate their views on the topic. Participative encounters took place throughout 2016, and interactions were organised in small groups. The compositions of the groups were diverse, not only in terms of the age and gender of the participants, but also in the numbers, varying from two to ten participants. A network of participants was created through contacts shared

[4] Such a division is common in European Union states, and conforms to the basic categories for integration policies.

between academic institutions, civil engagement activities, and social networks related to migrants living in the Beautiful City. The final discussions or sessions with the participants served to fully saturate the sample, and to partially prove the working hypothesis and etic conceptualisations that emerged during the ethnographic process.

Narratives and quotes from these sessions make up the structure of the paper[5]. Our aim is to respect the participants' views, and to let them speak on their own. The references to participants' backgrounds correspond to their emic articulations.

Emic articulations provided by the research participants served as a starting point for deeper analysis. Each articulation, some of them forming solid narratives, was codified and organised into a larger framework of etic concepts, as pieces of a larger puzzle. During the process, a working hypothesis was shared and discussed with colleagues and students. The first drafts found the emic articulations to be exaggerated, as the selection was made giving preference to conflict situations instead of articulating all varieties of interactions in everyday life, and by doing so, created a bias for research. Such a discourse proves how deeply the experiences of "others" are muted. In doing so, dominant discourses reproduce the status of "others" as a contemporary subaltern (Gramsci 1991). The fake neutrality of the urban landscape portrays the disbalance of power as natural and arbitrary. In that way, oppressive forces are normalised, and their articulation becomes taboo. The acceptation of emic discourse, or even its consideration, implies an unmasking and revealation of a taboo, which contradicts the logics of normativity. The discourse emerging from the research became an uneasy rupture in an environment designed to avoid portraying any difference. So it is not surprising that the first readers were shocked when confronted with a radically different point of view, a point of view that is systematically muted.

The aim of this paper is to unmask how such experiences are muted and not exaggerated, in order to show the hidden patterns of a society that allows racism to happen.

Understanding racism as a performative act is a key element in our methodology. Racism is not understood as a problem of attitudes coming from the

[5] Preference for migrants' articulations simplified the understanding of the local population, who appears as a monolithic agent. Obviously, reality on the "white side" must be more complex and full of nuances then as it appears in a narrative where racism is the main topic. We acknowledge the limits of our study in this aspect, and would like to use this opportunity to remark on the importance of such a research line emphasising whiteness for the future.

dominant population or from some of its members, but instead racism is systemic (Bonilla Silva 2006). It is our effort to describe the systemic structures and mechanisms of everyday racism, approaching it as a social construction through those who are able to see it and recognise it, and the ones who suffer from it. As Mullings stated, "Anthropological research has the potential to uncover the systemic and dynamic nature of racism and to identify the subterranean mechanisms through which racial hegemony is both perpetuated and deconstructed" (2005: 685). Through observation and analysis, the current paper unmasks the fake neutrality of the urban landscape, as racism not only happens, but it happens in a place.

The discussion follows the work of Heath Pearson, who describes how racism matters in a small town (Pearson 2015). Space becomes a landscape for racism to occur in, and that generates what Pearson's work calls a "vibe", "a thing that lingers". The bodies of "others" must be rooted in such landscapes, and are needed in order for racism to materialise. The vibe is not always clearly articulated, and it does not constitute a clear discourse for everyone. Through experience, the "others" feel and learn to recognise the real face of the inhabited landscape. Once the vibe is tangible, the city becomes oppressive, as it is only a matter of time until racism will occur again. It is the recognition of such a constructed landscape – that which allows racism to occur – that the next part of the text tries to describe, attempting to unmask the oppressive face of the Beautiful City.

The Beautiful City is any city located somewhere in the heart of East-Central Europe. Like most of the towns in the region, it has a rich history embodied in an old city centre formed by tiny and winding streets. It is this romantic image of history that gives the city the specific reputation as an "overlooked destination", yet a "real Central European city of beauty" among the locals and occasional tourists. The city is also a favourite destination for domestic university students searching for an atmosphere which is friendly to student life that goes beyond their academic curriculum. Down-town life is characterised by a rich cultural offer, open-air festivals, and street markets. A variety of student pubs, concert halls, cinemas, theatres, and restaurants frame a dynamic social sphere, within which the local and temporary inhabitants meet. Life takes place down-town, surrounded by magnificent scenery as most of the building facades, streets pavements, and square ornamentations are meticulously maintained. The idyllic historic atmosphere seems to be that of a children's fairytale set among the imaginary "clean" ancient buildings. Colourful Baroque facades stand recently

renovated, and one has the impression that the city was formed by a collection of colourful pieces of cake. The pieces of cake are, in reality, the product of a growing market of local shops and tenant properties, whose owners exert an effort to maintain a good image. The beauty of the centre contrasts with the functionality of the surrounding suburbs where most of the population lives.

Historic beauty is performed in a landscape where the romantic creation of a positive image is both the goal and the method. In doing so, any critical episode in the city's history that could constitute a blemish on the innocence of the city is omitted. An acritical attitude towards local history results in a public space created around historic buildings, but without memory. As with many other cities from the region, the ethnic composition of the local population was drastically transformed in the period after World War II. A huge number of the original population was forced to leave the city as part of a European-wide process of post-war ethnic and religious relocation. The result is preserved to the present in a clear ethnic supremacy, created by the logic of a hegemonic nation-state imposing homogeneity. The city erased almost every trace of its previous inhabitants; no trace of their languages or their culture remained, as if they never existed. It is even difficult to find any monument or memorial honouring the local victims of the Holocaust or of other episodes of ethnic violence and religious persecutions which took place in the city. The recent historic episodes are muted, such as the conflicting facts of the local riots burning the old synagogue, the odysseys of Jewish families surviving thanks to the solidarity and complicity of their neighbours, hidden in nearby forests during the war years, or the post-war massacre of several hundreds of ethnic Germans not far from the Beautiful City. The city mutes its darkest times in favour of an empty and acritical past.

A similar process occurred after socialism. With the new democratic regime, any trace of its socialist past disappeared, especially from the city centre. Socialist paraphernalia, monuments, and memorials were dismantled almost in totality. The Russian soldiers who used to serve in the city and who drank beers with the locals in down-town pubs left the city, and no-one talked about them again. Their accommodations were transformed into various public institutions, and even the Russian lettering on the local airport was dismantled. Squares and streets changed their names once again, and the city's appearance was recreated under the combination of modernity in the suburbs and nostalgia for a visually gentle past, which probably never existed, the appearance which became dominant in the down-town area.

Absences and muted passages of the city's history, and the lack of memory embodied in the reformulation of the public space and the city's appearance, are far from being an innocent causality or a neutral occurrence. The neo-liberal transformation of public space cannot be marked as neutral, as it frames and provides the contextualisation for everyday social interactions, while at the same time being ts landscape and a testimony to its past temporalities (Červinková – Golden 2014). The public space constructs and reproduces the prevailing isomorphism orchestrated by the current dominant imaginary. The Beautiful City's construction of a neutral public space is a fallacy, as traces of diversity are cautiously muted in favour of uniformity. It is remarkable that absences and old symbols are mostly supplanted by a vacuum rather than replaced by new relevant motifs. However, silence is a powerful discourse of negation, which serves dominancy. Homogeneity is constructed as a normative landscape, and in doing so, is different, thus forced to constitute a rupture of the seemingly "natural" isomorphism.

The Beautiful City did not escape the impact of globalisation, which is pushing it to a certain type of transnational diversity. In its malls and streets, new stores with international brands open, and shops and restaurants convey English names or serve ethnic menus. This tolerated otherness serves different goals, often related to market pragmatics – marketing, social prestige for consumers, or the exoticisation of certain products. These minimal traces of diversity do not challenge the homogeneity of the city, as they serve as "ornamental dissenters" (Nandy 1983: xiv). Instead, their presence reinforces the illusion of the space being neutral, and covers hegemonic homogeneity. In such a way, the logic of dominancy is not challenged by those elements, but is rather reproduced and even reinforced by them.

Life takes place in this settled scenario, and constructed others are forced to disrupt the normative landscape, their mere existence breaking into the imposed isomorphism that was described earlier. In the next section, the participants' experiences and subjectivities will come to the fore. The analysis will follow the participants' experiences in navigating the city, which means entering an urban landscape where dominancy will be exercised by a hegemonic population that manifests its belonging and its own identity in relation to the explicit control of space. The "others" are at first identified on the basis of visual markers, such as skin colour or language. When recognised as an alterity, they are exposed to strict social pressures exercised in a disciplining gaze, in hate speech manifestations, or even physical violence. At the same time, the gendered bodies of

the "others" turn into both a trigger and a target for the occurrence of racism. A classic coping strategy could be the selection of safe paths, but the experiences of movement cited by participants point to the idea that the hazards spread throughout the whole city.

Navigating the city, using public transport, or just walking in the street are activities that create a specific urban landscape, where numerous encounters take place under the normative gaze (Foucault 1973). Participants stressed how their visible difference constantly attracts the attention of locals. Their difference is observed and their presence is constructed from this simple act. During the interviews, experiences in the street or in public transport often were framed in sentences with "*people stop and stare*", referring to a continuous feeling of being observed and pointed at as a disrupting element to normality. On occasions, the difference understood by the hegemonic population is a manifestation of curiosity: "*Kids approach me asking – Can we take a picture? – Because I am black.*" But, the perception of the difference also leads to aggressive and violent reactions. On the micro level, this means that being continuously the target of looks is a type of pressure that is difficult to get accustomed to.

> [The] first days when I was walking through town, I realised that everyone was looking at me. I asked myself what is going on. I went to the restroom to check my face.
>
> *Female university student, 23 years old, African background*

> [One of the international students] was wearing these specific Muslim clothes. [...] The guy was waiting for the tram. We were also waiting at the other end. And next to us was a group of six or five males [locals]. They didn't look like skinheads, but as regular workers, they had on these work clothes, work trousers. They were in their forties or fifties. They were very rude. They were looking at this guy... directly looking at him. It was obvious that they were speaking about him. We did not understand them. When the tram came, they did not get on the same train. The men tried to get into the same one, but the young boy went to the other, passing each other on the way. So they were trying to go after him and he was trying to avoid them. So it was very nasty.
>
> *Female university student, 20 years old*

The second narrative shows how the vibe, acting as a pressure on difference, is noticed by participants even when others are the target of the looks. Alexander

and Knowles clearly state how race not only constitutes the landscapes in which we navigate, but it also "*features the calculations involved in the balancing of tolerance and terror and the connections drawn between places by bodies crossing borders"* (2005: 16). As a paradigmatic example, the fact of simply wearing different clothes motivates a persecutory reaction in the dominant population. Probably motivated by their inability to accept the difference and feeling empowered by an identity of belonging, they do not hesitate to perform their self-proclaimed superiority.

Visible differences may also be interpreted by the dominant population as a suspicious indicator related to theft or criminality. Participants described numerous experiences where they were considered suspicious in the eyes of security personnel in shops and supermarkets. Experiences narrate how activities, such as shopping at the mall, became a stressful situation, as they were constantly followed by shop personnel. To be treated and considered as a potential thief is also enforced by the behaviour of certain older people, who hide their bags or cross to the other side when meeting participants in the street.

So far, we have considered racism on the basis of visible bodily differences, such as a different skin colour or other visual aspects. One participant helped us understand how bodily difference materialises in everyday life, determining one's possibilities in life, or transforming a common activity into a situation where your difference is placed into the spotlight. Exposing bodily differences to dominant gazes becomes a key factor in everyday life. As participants cannot become invisible, their lives must try to be outside of the gaze, so that their interference in the public space is dramatically restricted.

> I am used to going swimming once a week, but I cannot do it here. Definitely in the locker room I am always the only brown person and the only foreigner there. Once, there was a bunch of kids. They were all laughing and playing, but when they saw me, they just stopped laughing and playing, and just stared at me. They froze up.
>
> *Male student, 18 years old, Asian background*

This is how race matters in the Beautiful City. There is no need for a sign proclaiming "only for whites", or for official apartheid policies. The normativity of whiteness lingers in the landscape, in which restrictions of the movement of racialised bodies occurs through the "natural" behaviour of "ordinary" people, who are constructed in this landscape as being privileged. Their right to access the public space will never be questioned.

Similarly to how racism finds correlation in the body's difference in appearance, the fact that bodies are gendered should also be clearly stressed. In doing so, we may better understand how racial prejudices and local deviant interpretations of gendered bodies operate, giving the dominant population a feeling of legitimate supremacy in imposing dominancy also through their sexuality.

> We went to [a local gay pub]. As soon as we crossed the door, a lady saw C.'s husband, and she was so interested in him. She wanted to buy him champagne: – *Please come with me. My brother is going to love you*. -The lady was all the time, come, come. C. was angry: – *Come on, he is my husband*. She did not want him for herself, but for her brother: – *Because my brother is going to like you since you are black*.
>
> *Female biologist, 35 years old, Afro-American*

> It happens everywhere, like in the tram. Sometimes it is more direct, like someone tells you: – *You are unique* – which could be fine. Another time, I was with some friends in the tram. The boys were there also. Some guys started looking at me. One of them approached me. He was coming up to me as if he wanted to pass by, so I moved back, but he said to me: – *You single?* I was really scared. He had kind of creepy eyes. I said: – *No, I am sorry*. And I went in front with the boys. It is too scary. [...] The thing with black women in [the Beautiful City] is that we are kind of fetishised sexually. Sometimes, it is innocent, some of them, let's say, have a preference, but sometimes is more in the way of jungle fever, like "I want to have that girl." [...] It happens to me also walking in the street, and once a guy came up and said to me: – *I want to go to bed with you*. [...] Also, we were a group of friends, and a guy came speaking in [local language], and we couldn't understand so he made this gesture [oral sex].
>
> *Female university student, 23 years old, African background*

The male body is exotified in an eroticisation formed on the basis of stereotypes. The exotic body brings the attention of the lady in the first narrative, who saw the participant's body as a desirable object for her brother to possess. These bodies are constructed as objects of desire, subjected to racial hierarchy. The objectification of bodies also leads to the extreme expression of patriarchal hierarchy in situations where male desires of possession materialise in aggressive situations, as in the encounters narrated in the second narrative. Patriarchy and racism unite in performing the oppression of the constructed others in

an example of the intersectional character of sexuality. According to Collins, sexuality and violence are not only part of representations of Blackness, but global representations circulate through mass media in a climate of "sexualized violence" (Collins 2004: 120).

Power exercised over difference is not only motivated by bodily differences, but it is also identified through the mastering, or lack thereof, of the national language. Speaking another language constitutes a clear marker of alterity, providing a reference to distinguish a "we" (meaning the normative and deserving citizens) and a "they" (the constructed others). It is not only language which acts as the marker, but language proficiency within very strict boundaries that limits tolerance to other accents or phonetics. So, the isomorphism is also ruptured by the simple fact of speaking a different language or of not being able to speak the national language correctly. "People shout at us when we talk: Speak [national language]!" A similar manifestation is the negation of services in shops and businesses. Participants related how shop assistants even turned their backs to them when they politely asked if they speak English, or the telephone is hung up when they order a taxi at night, or, even while speaking the local language at a good communicative level, one of the participants could not manage to make an appointment with a mechanic.

Obviously, such situations generate long-term frustration in participants, and their perception of the host society rapidly deteriorates. For them, life in the Beautiful City becomes a chain of unpleasant events, where their condition as the "other" continuously locates them in a lower hierarchical level in comparison to the hegemonic population, whose dominant behaviour is muted – in that it is neither perceived, nor experienced, by the non-foreign population.

Navigating through public space has become an even more unpleasant activity ever since politicians found a profitable magnet for votes in practising hate speech and in demonstrating their intolerance. Since the "war against terrorism" and "the need to protect our country from the migrant invasion" became common mottos for almost every political actor, the public space has been infected by xenophobic billboards and even xenophobic public demonstrations and acts. Several demonstrations against migration took place in the down-town area, orchestrating anti-migrant mottos and applying clearly Nazi-inspired paraphernalia, including marches and fascist parades. It is difficult to understand the lenience of the city authorities – who permit and facilitate hate events – allowing such demonstrations of hate against a specific part of the city's inhabitants.

Articulations of hate do not take place only during radical events; instead, they find a way to enter into *a priori* neutral activities, such as garden festivals or cultural events taking place in the parks of the city. Their presence in the public space lowers their perception as a radical discourse, and normalises hate mottos and arguments.

> It was the beginning of spring, and the local garden festival was taking place in the park. I went there with my family because we had planned to buy some seeds for our two-year-old kid. He would plant the seeds at home and experience how a plant grows. But at the entrance of the festival, we couldn't believe what we saw. One of the growing nationalist parties had a booth at the main entrance showing a huge banner: No Immigrants. I felt annoyed, and I could not understand how the town could allow something like that. The xenophobic militants of the party were collecting signatures against migration and to my surprise common people stopped by the stand and openly signed it. Then I saw that one of the mums I met every day at the playground was also signing. I felt depressed and disappointed. I felt embarrassed in front of my son. They are not extremists, they are our neighbours, the parents of the kids that are supposed to play with our children or attend daycare together. Somehow, at that point, we decided not to stay here. I know we will be leaving from here.
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> *Male industrial engineer, 39 years old*

Two considerations expressed by the participants were significant for current research. Public expressions against migrants are tolerated and, up to a certain extent, legitimised by authorities as they take place under their auspices and occupy meaningful spaces in the everyday life of the city. Xenophobic discourse has been normalised to the point that hate acts are performed by families with prams and not only by skinheads. In the context of similar political booths promoting xenophobic positions and propagating hate messages, several conflicting encounters occurred in the Beautiful City. Conflicting encounters led to an increasing atmosphere of hate, encouraged by the local media and rapidly spread through social networks, aligning migrants with "radical Islamists," and them with terrorists. As a result, every "darker skinned" person was perceived as a dangerous terrorist, which soon became manifested in street insults and several incidents. Respondents narrated numerous episodes where they were just walking down the street and someone called them "terrorists", or an unknown person made a joke in public: "Hey, you look like you're from Syria. Where are your bombs?"

Tolerance is subjected to very limited boundaries, and any small incident could rapidly escalate into a violent situation. Triggers may arise in any casual situation or encounter, when the background of participants suddenly becomes the main motive for conflict. For example, one of the respondents articulated his difficulties playing football normally in a non-professional, local team. Anytime he was involved in a foul, the adversary immediately reacted by calling him "illegal immigrant" or claiming with sarcasm that he is going to "lose his papers". Another example of how a common situation is reframed in xenophobic terms is presented in the following narrative:

> I just parked my car in the mall when this guy, who looked completely normal, approached and asked me something. I just said to him: – Sorry, I do not speak [national language]. He spit and called me "migrant".
>
> *Male student, 21 years old*

Both situations demonstrate how racism is latent in the host society, waiting for a minimal trigger to become articulated. The vibe is always there, even when it is not apparently visible, just small conflicts and tensions rise to the surface and racism turns into the dominant framework, reconfiguring the situation.

An urban landscape which has turned into an oppressive arena forces the "others" to try to answer to the following question: how to safely navigate the city? Their only coping strategy is to try to not be visible or to be as little visible as possible. An unarticulated reaction to the constant pressure on them is to avoid navigating the city alone and to fix "secure" itineraries. Stories narrating racist episodes on the basis of their individual difference being exposed in public, wearing different clothing than the locals or an afro haircut, tend to occur at the beginning of their stay in the new country. Rapidly, locals make it clear that certain boundaries should not be crossed and the newcomers learn that navigating the city alone is a risky activity. Participants are not only aware of the existent segregation marked by the "vibe" in an abstract way, but the urban map becomes a mosaic of "safe areas" and "forbidden areas" (Back, 2005). The Beautiful City does not count on any ethnic enclave or any neighbourhood where the ethnic or religious composition could challenge the logic of dominancy as other European cities do. The oppressive pressure spreads through the whole city, and normativity is performed everywhere. As is described below, the limits between safe and unsafe itineraries are relativised according to the time of day

and night, and other circumstances. If the Beautiful City is not a really friendly place for foreigners during the day, it transforms into a dangerous nightmare during the night, when insults and racist behaviour turn into explicit physical aggressions. The urban map turns out to have two faces, as the unsafe areas spread through the city at nightfall.

> I was heading back home after the cinema. I was already in my street, and a young couple was walking behind me. They were in their twenties, and it was obvious that they also came from a pub or an event. They started to say something in [national language] about my dark hair. I did not really understand, and did not even look back. Then, they started to call me gypsy and shout at me. They just looked young and normal to me… I do not understand…
>
> *Female language teacher, 45 years old*

Eventually, symbolic aggressions escalate into physical ones, sometimes propelled by a generally increasing anti-migrant discourse in the media, or connected to the utilitarian use of anti-migrant moods by local politicians.

> "During those days that [the] media got crazy [about] refugees and local politicians insisted [on] calling us terrorists, things got very bad. I was walking in the centre when a guy chased me with a knife. I do not have much to say. I just ran away."
>
> *Male student, 19 years old, Asian background*

For the dominant population, skin colour is a visible component for detecting diversity. Shielded by the night, they felt legitimated to articulate and exercise violence towards any other alterity. Again, a patriarchal hierarchy based on the perceptions of belonging or not belonging to the territory creates a map of confrontation where the hegemonic population turns into aggressors. It is remarkable that the violent episodes were performed by "normal" people. The participants' descriptions insisted on remarking on the normality of the aggressor's appearance. It was a disturbing fact to them, as they could not differentiate the potential aggressors from common people. They became afraid of everyone at night, or at least suspicious. According to participants, even when you are not afraid, you learn to avoid certain streets in the city; you always walk with friends if you go down-town, a taxi is better than public transport to come back late at night, and sometimes, you stop talking and keep silent when you pass by a group of people, so that they will not hear you speaking in another

language. In other words, they are aware of the risks of walking in the dark side of the Beautiful City, and they know that the best camouflage is to mute their alterity. There is no lack of reasons that evoke their fear. In addition to general hostility, participants were also victims of extremist attacks. Several right-wing radical groups are active in the Beautiful City. Radicals performed racist incidents in buses and in the streets of the city centre, and even chased some students all the way to their dormitories. Participants reported the various aggressions to the police, such as getting insulted by white power mottos or being kicked out of buses by skinheads; participants were also chased and persecuted by skinheads with baseball bats and knifes. Communication with the police is poor, and participants have the impression that they do not put big pressure on these groups.

> The police came. We told them the entire story [a group of foreigners had been chased by skinheads with knifes and baseball bats until they got into their dormitories]. And they said. – *Ok, so go to sleep now.* They just asked if they were still there. They arrived late. Obviously they were not there any longer. And all they say is that. – *Ok, now go to sleep.*
>
> *Male student, 19 years old, Asian background*

A significant number of the international population living in the Beautiful City is concentrated in the university dormitories. Racism is constructed socially, and materialises in the space of everyday, common activities. For a number of foreigners living in the Beautiful City, the experience of racism starts early in the morning, when they pull up the blinds of their dormitory windows and read "Fuck Islam" sprayed on the wall in front of their college. It not only reminds them that they are not welcome in the Beautiful City, but the presence of the hate message under their windows tells them that not even the university dormitories are a safe area for them. Spraying fascist sniper signs and other xenophobic symbols is a common practice used by skinheads to mark "their territory" as they increase the symbolic pressure on their target population. To a certain extent, the institution did not alleviate the situation, as formal complaints demanding the hate message to be erased from the area had to wait a long time for a positive response.

At this point, the presence of hate messages sprayed on walls belonging *a priori* to "safe areas", such as the international dormitories, turned into symbolic aggressions. The vibe was materialised and its embodiments spread

through the city, blurring the division between safe and unsafe areas. Now the aggressions had reached the last frontier, the place where they live. To put it in participants' words:

> Skinheads crossed the line, and they made it [to] the place where we are living, where we sleep, or hang out at nights.
>
> *Male student, 22 years old, Asian background*

The pressure on "otherness" is omnipresent, and symbolic violence also materialises in the common domestic tasks taking place in the common areas of the dormitories. As a previous narrative proves, international students avoid encounters with local students, but sometimes sharing common spaces is inevitable. In such encounters, the vibe transforms into face-to-face domination and violence.

> [..] I took my laundry. There is a laundry place in the [dormitories area]. I opened the door and then... this guy sitting in a chair. I think he was a skinhead. He gets up, shouts something in [national language], and smashes the door... It was really bad. I was so scared. He gives me the devil look. A guy living in the dormitory!
>
> *Female university student, 21 years old, Asian background*

Segregated space and symbolic pressure became relatively naturalised through everyday experience, but its significance emerges when contrasting with previous life experiences or with other reference frameworks. For example, the unacceptability of everyday acceptance of local racism is manifested in the fact that international students try to avoid parent visits.

> What if your parents come to visit you and they see this [hate message sprayed] in front of the place you live in. They will tell you: We do not want you to study here.
>
> *Male university student, 22 years old*

Conclusions

For a different understanding of racism, the current paper opted for its articulation through the performance of everyday situations. Racism happens in a place (Pearson 2015), and cities have a long tradition of being understood as anthropological places. For the study at hand, this concrete East-Central

European city was a setting where racism could happen. The city is identified only by the metaphoric name of The Beautiful City. The name refers to a paradoxical dichotomy between the ideal image of the city, which promotes it as the perfect place for living, and the reality of oppression for "others" living under the described dominancy. The analysis focused on how the urban landscape has been formed through a strict selection of its physical aspects: making some visible while removing others. The logic of such a selection process partially resides on the economic pragmatism of the current neo-liberal era. Such logic is not openly articulated, but is hidden in the image of beauty. The beauty of the city is not a neutral value – it is a powerful mechanism of subjugation under a fundamentalist regime of mandatory white male neo-liberal supremacy. The fake neutrality of public space is covered by exercised power and mutes any critical voice.

In a similar way, the city selectively remembers or forgets the very different cities that preceded it. Memory is constructed also by selecting concrete moments of history and completely muting others, which become almost taboo. Acritical memory reconstructions and imperative economic logic rule the configuration of the current city. The urban landscape is now constituted on the basis of two fallacies: fake neutrality and unreal homogeneity. The result of such a process is an imperative isomorphism constituting a set of normative patterns. Normativity sets the scenario where the lives, experiences, and possibilities of the inhabitants of the Beautiful City take place. A strong discourse of fake neutrality covers subjacent normative patterns, and the dominant population seems to be blind to them. But the "others", as is the case of the research participants, feel the oppression of non-articulated normativity, of what Pearson calls the vibe of the city, the "thing that lingers". The vibe is, in Foucault's terms, the prison of the "others".

Simply the presence of the "other" constitutes a rupture in the normative isomorphism. The mere existence of the constructed others in the Beautiful City challenges its normative homogeneity. Any rupture or any challenge acts as a trigger for racism to occur. A different skin colour, exotic clothing, some ethnic haircut, a different accent or different language, or any other sign of difference will be disciplined and punished, as the prisoners were for Foucault (1979). The body of the "other" will suffer the embodiment of violence. Bodies of the "other" are turned into the markers of difference and into targets: to punish in racial aggressions, to point and stare at under the gaze of locals, who have become the guards of normativity, to possess as exotic objects of desire, eroticising them,

or to discriminate them under the legitimacy of double standards, discerning between deserving and non-deserving citizens.

Inhabitants of the Beautiful City are subjected to a normalised hierarchy on the basis of their belonging, or non-belonging, to the normative homogeneity. This hidden hierarchy is exercised through power and has become manifested in interactions. The "other" becomes a subaltern under the local dominancy. A clear ethnic supremacy exists under the logic of the hegemonic nation-state imposed homogeneity. Power is held in the agency of the privileged locals, and resistance or options to subvert the logic of power are strongly restricted.

Similarly to other European cities, radicals exercised violence in the city by performing xenophobic attacks and aggressions. Often, they hide their actions in the darkness of the night. But violence in the Beautiful City is neither limited to the night hours nor to extremist aggressors. Participants narrated how tolerance for difference is put under very limited boundaries and any small incident could rapidly escalate into a violent situation. Racism happens during the day in open public spaces, such as squares or parks, in public transport, at the mall, or in small cafes, bars, or pubs. Racism happens everywhere and at any time in the Beautiful City. One aspect present in the participant narratives and analysed in the text should be clearly stressed in the conclusions: not only race matters. Gender matters. As Spivak put it, to be a female subaltern is to be twice a subaltern (Young 2004: 357). The hidden hierarchy of power is still more imbalanced when the other is a female and the aggressor is a man, as patriarchal imperatives unite with xenophobic approaches.

A parallel could be established between the research participants and racist aggressors. Participants were not radical "others", being neither religious fundamentalists nor extreme cases of cultural distance. As a methodological decision, the researchers did not reproduce or reinforce the state categories of alterity, being under the legal status of third country national or refugee condition. Instead, the majority were EU citizens, working or studying in respectable positions in the Beautiful City. In parallel, the majority of aggressors were not skinheads or members of xenophobic radical groups. According to participants, the aggressors were common people among the locals who did not correspond to any concrete pattern. They were male and female, young and old, from the upper class strata all the way to the lower ones. Actually, this fact reinforced the insecurity among foreigners and the perceived "others" living in the Beautiful City. To anticipate and recognise an aggressor is an impossible task. The aggressor could be any local. The perceived "normality" of locals who exhibited

racism confirms that racism is not a marginal or accidental phenomenon; on the contrary – all described emergences can only be explained under the normalised existence of a racial hierarchy, based on the locals' performed right of belonging to the city. Such a hidden hierarchy creates a scale of power which is exercised in everyday contexts, constituting a key framework for understanding the life experience of constructed others in East-Central Europe.

The Beautiful City has a vibe that turned the life of "others" into a living nightmare. For them, the everyday experience of racism is a continuous suffering. It is something present everywhere in the city, in its streets, in its inhabitants. Something from which they cannot escape. Living there and being different means that it is merely a question of time before racism will be encountered.

> Every time I leave [the Beautiful City] I can feel the difference. When I arrive to the train station in [home country] and I see so many different people and no one stares at me, and I am not afraid to talk to someone or to walk in the streets – then I finally breathe.
>
> *Female student, 24 years old*

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