



Article

# Strangers on the Shore? Racialized Representation, Identity and In/visibilities of Whiteness at the English Seaside

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## Abstract

This article presents an alternative reading of the English seaside – one that centralizes race, specifically the effects of whiteness and racialized notions of belonging and exclusion. It addresses three main issues. First, it provides a theoretical discussion of the racialized production of social space and place, and outlines the implications for minority ethnic groups at the seaside. Second, it offers an examination of the manner in which discourses of whiteness and (neo-)colonial fantasy are reproduced through amusements and other elements of seaside popular culture. Third, it demonstrates the centrality of the seaside to analysing dominant, racialized interpretations of English national identity and demotic responses to contemporary immigration. The article argues that the seaside is an enlightening site for understanding contemporary constructions, manifestations and repercussions of whiteness, and thus provides an important insight into the cultural and spatial politics of race in 21st-century Britain.

## Keywords

ethnicity, identity, immigration, seaside, space, whiteness

## Introduction

Despite the much-heralded demise of the English seaside holiday during the latter part of the 20th century, England's seaside resorts and coastal towns remain important sites for sociological investigation. Perhaps most apparently, they continue to be popular destinations for the leisure and vacation habits of large sections of the British public (McClarence, 2008). From a broader perspective, it is evident that they are also prone to issues,

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problems and developments more traditionally associated with urban (and some rural) environments: a number of resorts suffer from high levels of social exclusion, while others are undergoing substantial regeneration and making notable contributions to the development of new creative and cultural industries (English Heritage/Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment, 2003).

However, despite increasing academic and policy research into these areas, there has been little recognition of the significance of race and ethnicity, particularly the manner in which seaside spaces permit access to, and normalize and privilege the identities of, some ethnic groups, yet simultaneously mark and marginalize others. For example, while a report by the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee (2007) exposed hitherto unacknowledged problems relating to social exclusion and deprivation, poor housing and physical infrastructure, low income levels and increasing numbers of benefit claims, and decaying leisure and tourist industries, explicit acknowledgement of how these intersect with the lived experiences of minority ethnic groups was noticeably absent.

This article presents an alternative reading of the English seaside, i.e. one that centralizes race, specifically the effects of whiteness, and racialized notions of belonging and exclusion. It argues that not only is the English seaside a highly racialized environment, but also that an analysis of the configuration of embodied individuals and social spaces in this setting can extend our understanding of how whiteness manifests itself – primarily in relation to dominant discourses around national identity and immigration. The article is divided into three sections. First, it provides a theoretical analysis of the racialized production of social space, and outlines the implications for minority ethnic groups at the seaside. Second, it offers an examination of the manner in which discourses of whiteness and (neo-)colonial fantasy are reproduced through amusements and other elements of seaside popular culture. Third, it demonstrates the importance of the English seaside in mapping the nexus between whiteness, national identity and contemporary flows of (and opposition to) immigration. In this regard, the article endorses Bonnett's (1993: 175) contention that 'we need to think beyond the deeply disturbing cliché that "White" areas do not have a "race problem"'.

## **Producing Race, Space and Place at the English Seaside**

The populations of English seaside towns are overwhelmingly white. The statistics are influenced by their relative geographical isolation and large number of residents within older age cohorts (House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee, 2007). This situation is further substantiated by the fact that these racial demographics often lead other white people to move to these areas, for they are perceived as an opportunity to 'escape' from the putative problems associated with the multicultural make-up of urban environments (Jay, 1992). Yet the substantial, albeit transient, population changes that seaside towns undergo during the summer season, with the arrival of tourists and seasonal workers, also affect the racial composition of these environments. Minority ethnic communities represent a small, but increasingly significant, presence at the English seaside during these months, while for some it is a permanent place of residence. Nonetheless, they are rarely portrayed as 'natural' occupants of the seaside in the

way that white groups are (Puwar, 2005), and so their potential to move into, and within, its social spaces are restricted in comparison. As Gurinder Chadha's movie *Bhaji on the Beach*<sup>1</sup> playfully portrays it, while the English seaside is popularly perceived as somewhere that minority ethnic groups might visit, it is not somewhere they are seen to belong.

It is also the case that the demographics of migration to England's coastal areas frequently differ from those to its urban locales. For example, the vast majority of migrants to the Sussex and Kent coast are white eastern Europeans, primarily Poles, Lithuanians and Latvians (Gaine, 2007), joining longer-established seaside communities of Italians, Greek-Cypriots and Jews. While the scale and effects of this migration are sometimes underestimated owing to the migrants' whiteness (see p. 12), it nevertheless indicates that any analysis of the English seaside needs to be undertaken through a lens of *ethnicity* as well as one of race (Bonnett, 2008).

In this context it is perhaps unsurprising that academic and policy studies on spatiality and minority ethnic communities – from the Chicago School to contemporary analyses – have focused primarily on *urban* landscapes (Knowles, 2003). Of course the vast majority of Britain's minority ethnic populations do reside in towns and cities, but hegemonic discourses frequently confine them to these areas, as literally 'languishing in multiple deprivation districts; condemned to play out their lives as ghetto dwellers' (Huq, 2006: 305). More insidiously, the tendency to locate minority ethnic communities exclusively within the metropolis also reflects how 'the "inner city" has long been constituted as the key symbolic location for representing racialised criminality, pathologies of black and minority family life and the centre of "corrosive alien cultures"' (Back, 1998: 59). While there has been a gradual shift towards examining the experiences of minority ethnic groups in *rural* environments (e.g. Chakraborti and Garland, 2004b; Neal and Agyeman, 2006), research into how English seaside and coastal landscapes similarly (re)produce structures of racialized exclusion and sustain white privilege has not been forthcoming.

The hegemonic social processes that obfuscate the racialized nature of the seaside are underpinned by the fact that whiteness – the predominant and most visually identifiable subjectivity in this environment – has traditionally gone unmarked. As the possession of a *racial* identity is seen to be the preserve of minority ethnic (i.e. 'non-white') groups (Dyer, 1997), the idea that predominantly white spaces are, by implication, also racialized frequently goes unacknowledged. While one might counter that the historical relationship between the English (and Welsh) seaside and white communities is actually quite pronounced, the overriding whiteness of these sojourners has traditionally been attributed far less significance than has their socio-economic background. As Garner (2007: 35) remarks:

whiteness for the majority of 'white' people is so unmarked that in their eyes, it does not actually function as a *racial* or ethnic identity, at least outside of particular contexts when they might perceive themselves to be in a minority.

The power of whiteness thus lies in the ability of those who embody it to situate it as universal, normal, stable and unbecoming examination. In other words, 'it is precisely this

refusal to name whiteness, to assign it meaning, that frees white people from seeing their complicity in the social, cultural, and historical economy of racism' (Berger, 2001: 55). Nevertheless, while the visibility of whiteness may be obscured by/to those who benefit from the privileges it carries, for others its presence, power and marginalizing repercussions appear ubiquitous (Ahmed, 2004). In this regard, following Clarke and Garner (2010: 3), this article seeks to problematize 'white identity as a raced, privilege-holding location that is part of the social relationship in which structural racism flourishes'.

In addition, well-established associations between the seaside and escapism, hedonistic pleasure, carnivalesque behaviours and transgressions of the dominant social order mean that issues of exclusion and discrimination are consistently obscured. Frequently positioned as the antithesis of both the serious, industrial city and the idyllic, innocent countryside, the seaside has been widely theorized as possessing a liminal status. In its capacity as a leisure space, it is seen to embody cultural meanings as 'a free zone, "betwixt and between" social codes' (Shields, 1991: 108), and as a place where 'the pleasure principle is given freer rein, the certainties of authority are diluted, and the usual constraints on behaviour are suspended' (Walton, 2000: 3). While uses and designations of seaside spaces have changed dramatically over the last two centuries, they are still popularly associated with fun and frivolity, and thus seen to be devoid of the social issues and problems found in urban (and some rural) areas (Agarwal and Brunt, 2006).

The English seaside is subsequently widely perceived as constituting a benign, neutral, monolithic social space – as possessing a 'transparent reality' (Edensor, 1998: 15) – but these assumptions only serve to conceal its role in maintaining the existing racial status quo (Low and Lawrence-Zúniga, 2003). As Rodman (2003: 205) states, 'places are not inert containers. They are politicized, culturally relative, historically specific, local and multiple constructions'. The English seaside must therefore be interpreted as 'a moving landscape' (Knowles, 2003: 96) and, through the idea of 'progressive sense of place', continuously (re)produced by, and (re)producing, the activities that take place there, as opposed to possessing a static, essential identity (Edensor, 1998: 200).

Bodies are important mediators of our comprehensions of space, providing texture, substance and meaning (Knowles, 2003), and 'once we acknowledge the subject as embodied and tourism as practice it is evident that our body does encounter space in its materiality; concrete components that effectively surround the body are literally "felt"' (Crouch, 2002: 208). Racialized meanings and demarcations of Otherness are mapped and inscribed onto particular seaside spaces which, through their use and (re)imagination, interpellate particular bodies as (in)organic members, and facilitate claims as to who belongs and who does not (Alexander and Knowles, 2005; Puwar, 2005; Sibley, 1995).

Taking this into account, the minority ethnic resident or visitor at the English seaside might therefore be conceptualized as a 'stranger'. As Ahmed (2000) argues, the stranger is not someone who is yet to be encountered. Instead, the fact that they have been recognized as a stranger in the first place, as opposed to going unrecognized, is premised on the reality that they must have already been faced in this setting. In other words, the stranger has been 'here' before, and because of previous engagements and the manner in which this space is delineated and controlled, they are '*already recognised as not belonging*, as being out of place' (Ahmed, 2000: 21). For this to occur, the seaside must be

continually demarcated as a place where those who are 'not strange', i.e. white British communities, *do* belong. These relationships are enacted within the spaces, built environment and leisure facilities of the seaside, as 'encounters between embodied others ... involve *spatial negotiations* with those who are already recognised as either familiar or strange' (Ahmed, 2000: 24).

A return to the liminality frame sheds further light on the idea of the stranger. If one positions the seaside as liminal, in that it provides experiences and states of being not encountered or available elsewhere, then *all* seaside visitors – the family of day trippers, the romantic couple, the 'hen party' – are inexorably strangers, regardless of ethnicity. In other words, a liminal experience cannot be habitual. Yet while certain white groups at the seaside might be perceived as 'not from here', they are still positioned as familiar visitors, rather than strangers, for although they may not reside within the space, they are still regarded as 'at home' here. Unlike minority ethnic groups, they are not *bodies out of place*.

Race and ethnicity are noticeably absent from the literature on liminality and the English seaside, but they may offer a fruitful avenue of enquiry. While it might be argued that the seaside as a whole is no longer (or has never been) truly liminal – the psycho-social contrasts it provided are either no longer available or can be equally accessed through other leisure forms – it may hold a liminal, or perhaps more accurately liminoid (Turner, 1974), status for certain minority ethnic groups. For example, British Muslims celebrating Eid at Blackpool Pleasure Beach (see Walton, 2007) engage in experiences that, in the context of their identities, and the structural relations and normative behaviours of their communities, assume a role perhaps no longer applicable to other ethnic groups. Alternatively one might apply liminality in reference to *people* rather than space or time. In this case it may be migrant groups themselves, especially asylum-seekers and refugees, who represent the threshold, for they are truly 'people on the margin', both geographically and through their 'in-between' status in relation to citizenship and inclusion within the national territory.

Theorizing minority ethnic groups at the seaside as strangers demonstrates how interactions between bodies and space – embedded in a relationship of mutual (re)production – contribute to the racialization of this environment. As Puwar (2005: 32) argues, 'the space and the normative bodies of a specific space can become disturbed by the arrival of black and Asian bodies in occupations [and settings] which are not historically and conceptually marked out as their "natural" domain'. Consequently, informal restrictions are placed on the movement of racialized bodies within seaside spaces, de/legitimizing certain behaviours, activities and forms of mobility (Ahmed, 2000). Leisure spaces are not exempt from this process of territorialization and can become exclusionary zones in which certain forms of identity are protected against outsiders (Preston-Whyte, 2001). For example, Stephenson (2004) argues that the restrictions and control placed on black Britons when trying to enter primarily white tourist sites signify dominant attempts to 'purify' these spaces in response to their perceived 'pollution' by 'blackness'. Similarly, Durrheim and Dixon (2001) demonstrate how perceived transgressions to normative, racialized classifications of space on the post-apartheid beaches of Durban, South Africa, contribute to the positioning of black bodies as out of place.

The increasing presence of the British National Party in coastal locations (BBC TV, 2010), the racist murders of Christopher Alaneme in Sheerness in 2006 and Mohammed

al-Majed in Hastings in 2008, and attacks on foreign students based at language schools in Brighton (Hughes, 2009) are all striking examples of the often precarious position of minority ethnic communities at the English seaside. Notwithstanding this, minority ethnic people are rarely *physically* prevented from accessing this environment by an identifiable group, policy or ideology, as has been the case at certain times in, for instance, Durban, Miami (Lenček and Bosker, 1998) and Sydney (Poynting, 2006). Likewise, it is unlikely that the seaside would be regarded by most observers as especially hazardous. However, negotiating entry into a space is not necessarily based on the fact that it is inherently dangerous or whether a tangible risk can be identified. Instead, 'what is *perceived* to be risky or dangerous is *real* in its consequences' (Seabrook and Green, 2004: 137), and this can manifest itself as a form of physical exclusion. The presence of large groups of white people in open spaces can lead to trepidation among minority ethnic groups, and so the English seaside may represent a landscape of 'exclusion' (Sibley, 1995: ix) or even one of 'fear' (McDowell, 1999: 165). Racialized bodies entering white spaces frequently encounter a discomfiting atmosphere (Knowles, 2008), and are met with a 'look' or 'stare' that marks their presence as abnormal and informs them that they do not belong (Puwar, 2005). Although 'the "white gaze"' may not always be focused on disapproving perceptions and negative images of "black others", but on curiosity and intrigue perhaps, it does have a unifying ability to provoke feelings of isolation and desolation in white areas' (Stephenson and Hughes, 2005: 154).

Seaside towns also 'occupy a special location in the national imaginary ... [and] have become the new frontier for the defenders of exclusive national culture and "rights for whites"' (Back, 2003: 343). Coastal territories have become symbolic markers of contemporary nationhood and anxieties over its multicultural composition. For example, in 2003 campaigns were launched in Saltdean, East Sussex, against plans to temporarily house asylum-seekers in a disused hotel complex (Grillo, 2005). Likewise, their proposed accommodation in the Irish seaside resort of Tramore, Co. Waterford, in 2000 was met with strong public opposition, with Fianna Fáil politician Ben Gavin arguing that holidaymakers did not want to be 'hassled by 15 people on the prom selling Big Issues' (cited in Institute for Race Relations, 2000: 7). Though protesters in such cases rarely acknowledge a racist motivation to their actions, claiming instead concerns over jobs and housing, 'such campaigns of opposition are often intended to maintain the privilege and prestige of *white spaces*' (Hubbard, 2005: 52).

Space is, however, only made meaningful through the embodied individuals that produce and encounter it. In this regard the English seaside's geographical, social and economic variety is matched by its functional heterogeneity and the myriad potential reasons for visiting. It is, after all, a place of hugely varied activities and meanings: play, recreation, leisure, hedonism, work, retirement and transition – of becoming in, if not *of*, the nation. Regular observations at the three case-study sites included in this article recorded minority ethnic visitors and residents encompassing all these categories: British Asian families picnicking on the pebbles; groups of young, multi-ethnic day-trippers enjoying the promenade bars; and white eastern Europeans employed in the service and hospitality sectors. A superficial reading shows their experiences as wholly untypical, but a deeper analysis demonstrates their positioning as inorganic seaside bodies.



## Whiteness, (Neo-)Colonial Fantasy and Commodity Racism in Seaside Amusements

The racialized production of space at the English seaside having been discussed, an examination of leisure practices further elucidates manifestations of whiteness in this environment. The role of seaside amusements and entertainments (and architecture) in embodying and legitimating imperial projects can be traced back to the middle of the 19th century, but the following discussion addresses their contemporary effects. Traditional seaside leisure remains intrinsic to broader coastal leisure geographies and economies, with its recognizable signs and symbols forming an intrinsic part of the tourist gaze (Urry, 2002). It is also the case that, although they are traditionally associated with innocent fun and frivolity, amusements and entertainments are prominent components in the racialization of seaside environments. As this section demonstrates, they recurrently exoticize and appropriate the identities of ‘non-western’ and other minority ethnic communities in ways that have arguably become increasingly residual in other forms of popular culture.

Urry (2002) points out that the tourist gaze continues to be directed towards environments that are seen to differ from mundane, everyday experiences, in anticipation that the activities on offer will generate pleasures distinct from those customarily encountered. This is highlighted by a rudimentary exploration of the seafronts at three relatively proximate, but socially and culturally diverse, locations: Brighton, Eastbourne and Southend-on-Sea. Within them, two themes are particularly prominent. First, the way that contemporary seaside amusements and entertainments promote exoticized, orientalist representations of the ethnic or racial Other. Orientalism is taken here to be ‘a discourse [that] divides the globe unambiguously into Occident and Orient; the latter is essentially strange, exotic and mysterious, but also sensual, irrational and potentially dangerous’ (Turner, 1994: 44). Indeed, Said (2003: 3) argues that Orientalism can be seen as:

the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient.

The relationship is thus one of power and domination, with the West engaged in a number of potential relationships with the Orient, but without ever relinquishing its hegemony (Said, 2003: 7).

The second theme relates to the manner in which seaside amusements reproduce the dominance of whiteness, and subsequently normalize and privilege white identities, yet mark and marginalize others. Following Hartigan (2005: 1), whiteness is employed here both descriptively and analytically, in a way that ‘both names and critiques hegemonic beliefs and practices that designate white people as “normal” and racially “unmarked”’.

### *Vignette 1: Brighton*

Although Brighton’s seafront leisure spaces have undergone substantive gentrification in recent years, remnants of traditional entertainments remain, encompassing practices and symbols that reproduce notions of the mystical, eastern Other as a means of creating

escapist fantasies. Immediately east of Brighton (formerly Palace) Pier is one of the city's last remaining amusement arcades: Aladdin's. Having once been in plentiful existence, such attractions have gradually been demolished, and have been replaced by the bars and apartments that characterize Brighton's bourgeoisification of cultural values and shifting designations of urban space (Meethan, 1996). Despite, or perhaps because of, its dilapidated exterior, the visitor is encouraged to step inside the dark, intriguing space of Aladdin's, traversing the line from the quotidian to the fantastic. With the flashing lights of the arcade games and fruit machines glinting like precious jewels, the delights and treasures to be found in this mysterious enclave are deemed analogous to those found in the Arabian caves and grottos of the fairy tale.

Flanking the other side of the pier, the recesses under the promenade arches which were once home to Victorian arcades now house bars, nightclubs, and boutiques selling art and jewellery. As with many other resorts on England's seaboard, here also can be found the premises of clairvoyants and fortune-tellers. Amid the stereotypical conceptions of eastern mysticism and/or Traveller lifestyles, punters can have their fortunes read by Professor Mirza – the 'great mystic of the east', according to the sign above his door – or Eva Petulengro. Widely associated with fortune-tellers, the name Petulengro is thought to be of Egyptian origin and mean 'blacksmith' (Williams, 2006: 166). This may reflect the fact that, historically, European Roma were often referred to as 'Egyptians', as epitomized by the English corruption 'Gypsy' (Overy, 2005). Strolling out onto the pier, visitors also encounter the mock Gypsy caravan of Ivor the Tarot Consultant. These representations are not only derived from outdated, romanticized images but, more specifically, simultaneously position Gypsies and Travellers as external to the lived experience of the city, and obscure the everyday racism they endure there.

### *Vignette 2: Eastbourne*

The dilapidated wooden structure of Long John's Shipwreck signifies the visitor has arrived at Treasure Island play park on Eastbourne seafront. As hooks (1992: 27) points out, the West has historically maintained 'a romantic fantasy of the "primitive" and the concrete search for a primitive paradise, whether that location be a country or a body, a dark continent or dark flesh, perceived as the perfect embodiment of that possibility'. The frequent inclusion of symbols and narratives of piracy and colonizing unfamiliar landscapes, especially 'treasure islands', is thus an unsurprising feature of modern theme parks (Philips, 1999). This has achieved greater currency in recent years following the blockbuster *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie trilogy, as epitomized by the depiction of the movie's swashbuckling Captain Jack Sparrow (played by Johnny Depp) in the mural on the main building in Eastbourne. However, the metaphors encapsulated in other aspects of the venue possess more historically grounded, and problematic, referents.

The images of pirates at Treasure Island reinforce the tendency for fictional depictions to 'whiten' what were actually often multiracial communities (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000), a process that undoubtedly underpins their heroic and romanticized status in western popular culture. Two women accompany the pirates in the mural, both embodying normative models of beauty – blonde, pale-skinned, buxom – further perpetuating dominant representations of white women in western fairy tale. The women



(and their sexuality) appear to be under the protection of the pirates, reinforcing historical western fears around miscegenation and, in particular, the pervasive colonial discourse that white women (and the status of the race in general) needed to be saved by white men from the virulent sexual threat posed by black masculinity (Ware, 1992).

These representations not only elevate white bodies, but simultaneously erase black ones, both figuratively from historical maritime narratives and literally from the park itself. There are no depictions of black bodies at Treasure Island, yet their presence is implied through the Caribbean Coffee Company refreshment kiosk and the reggae rhythms played over the sound system. This unquestioning appropriation, objectification and commodification of blackness reflects how the Caribbean is valued in western popular culture purely as a site/source of consumption – for its climate, food, music, sex tourism and capacity to indulge white fantasies of exotica (hooks, 1992; Sheller, 2003). As Root (1996: 72) points out, such appropriation is premised upon a belief within white groups that they already possess access to, or even ownership of, desired bodies and images. She adds that ‘the source of all the fascination can have no say in the terms of the exchange. If we think we already own something, why would we ask anybody’s permission to take it?’ Cultural appropriation is therefore not the natural right assumed by its proponents, but arises from, and reinforces, the position of power and privilege in which dominant social groups are situated (Tierney, 2006).

### *Vignette 3: Southend-on-Sea*

Rides and amusements based on tales of exploration and adventure are popular pursuits at theme parks, but they also contain some of the most problematic referents, as epitomized by Adventure Island at Southend-on-Sea. As has been argued in relation to Disney’s parks, such discourses reflect the tendency to remodel local histories and geographies by marginalizing or obliterating ‘non-western’ identities, replacing them with dominant western world-views. Subsequently, through their adoption of colonial imagery, theme parks recreate the very placelessness – the erasure of indigenous identities and voices, and the dominance of generic western motivations – that was a central tenet of the colonial project (Warren, 1999).

At Southend the visitor embarks on a Eurocentric and historically myopic adventure, from the totem poles that flank the park’s entrance – at the bottom of which sit strangely depicted brown-skinned characters – to the Jungle Safari ride. At the centre of the site, visitors are dared to risk the Pharaoh’s Fury. The juxtaposition of the pleasures to be enjoyed on the exhilarating ride with the trepidation induced by the menacing sphinx looming above reflects the reward–risk dialectic encountered by western explorers over centuries of plundering Egyptian treasures. Elsewhere, moving cars take visitors around the 19th-century American-frontier setting of The Goldmine. Enacting the mythologized notion of Manifest Destiny widely reproduced in popular movies and literature, as well as the projection of violence and barbarism as a characteristic of autochthonous groups (Root, 1996), the models of white, male explorers are constructed and contextualized as dominant, civilized and progressive, while, with his grimacing face and body contorted in axe-wielding fury, the Native American character is positioned as bloodthirsty, savage and primitive.

The antiquated themes that characterize the amusements and entertainments at English seaside resorts correspond with the traditional – one might argue outdated – nature of these environments that provides the attraction for many visitors. A colonial hangover looms large over coastal areas and, in many locations, shows little sign of abating. Yet while ‘the cultural production of the past few centuries still provides much of the vocabulary of the present’ (Dyer, 1997: 18), Knowles (2008) posits that this surely occurs in novel social forms and argues that the social mechanisms that link contemporary manifestations of whiteness with empire are rarely clarified. It might be argued then that the wider impact of these amusements on popular understandings of race at the seaside is tenuous, as it is likely few visitors would identify the historical links between fortune-tellers, shipwrecks, goldmines and racialized notions of belonging.

The signs, images and physical structures of the seaside are polysemic, and subject to multiple interpretations and readings, and visitors respond to, and consume, seaside leisure in a multitude of ways. Indeed, aspects of ostensibly excluding environments can actually generate positive emotional connections, such as those between the English countryside and aspects of rural Indian and/or east African landscapes reported by British Asian women (Tolia-Kelly, 2006). Yet the ‘foregrounded functional dimensions’ of seemingly innocuous seaside facilities ‘should not blind us to their signifying ones’ (Fiske, 1989: 43). For example, the discourse of protecting white women from racialized sexuality found within the pirate narratives discussed above is similarly articulated by contemporary far-right groups and in demotic anti-immigration rhetoric (Byrne, 2006). As Edensor (1998: 15) points out, the historical images found in tourist spaces cannot be ignored and, rather than conceptualizing all interpretations as equivalent, ‘it is essential to identify which representations are inscribed with dominant ideologies’.

In response to Knowles’s (2008) pertinent request for clarification, while the social mechanisms that link historical and contemporary manifestations of whiteness are multiple, Gilroy’s (2004) concept of ‘post-imperial melancholia’ provides a useful tool. In analysing the ‘ambiguities and defects of past colonial relations’ (Gilroy, 2004: 2) that continue to haunt contemporary Britain, he argues that, as a perceived solution to a post-colonial condition in which they are duped by far-right propaganda and sections of the media into believing that they are becoming a minority in their own country, certain white communities engage in a melancholia that promotes a magical re-homogenization of the nation. In such a climate people strengthen their attachments to things that provide an illusion of tradition, stability, innocence, security and dominance. Consequently the (re)production of forms of whiteness at the seaside that celebrate an England of yore can be seen to represent a cultural ‘security blanket’ in a time of perceived challenges to previous exclusionary, racialized notions of nation.

## **Racial Formation, National Identity and Contingent Hierarchies of Whiteness**

Having argued that the social spaces of the English seaside represent racialized environments, the analysis now shifts towards a discussion on what a focus on coastal environments can offer the existing corpus of scholarship on whiteness. Two main issues are addressed, namely the relationship between whiteness and national identity, and the notion of whiteness as a contingent hierarchy.

In outlining the heterogeneity of English seaside resorts, Walton (2000: 22) states that ‘we are dealing with a recognisable and distinctive kind of town, but with as many variations as a hawkweed or a burnet moth’.<sup>2</sup> Yet while social, cultural and economic characteristics must be taken into account in any comparative analysis, a key source of commonality lies in seaside resorts’ centrality to dominant interpretations of national identity, and feelings of belonging, defence and security (see Museums and Heritage Online, 2010). Although the countryside may be more readily associated with (racialized) constructions of nation, due both to its common reference in colonial assertions of cultural superiority and its contemporary capacity to invoke nationalistic sentiments (Chakraborti and Garland, 2004a; Darby, 2000; Prieto Arranz, 2006), the English seaside is equally implicated. Like the countryside, it ‘stands for more than it is: it produces, embodies and sustains whiteness on behalf of the nation’ (Knowles, 2008: 173).

Hassan (2003: 1) argues that ‘within the last twenty years the fascination with the encircling coast and how it has distinguished and formed the character of [Britain’s] peoples, particularly the English, has if anything intensified’. Coasts represent finite boundaries and (almost) indisputable designations of territory, and as such these ‘natural’ borders are easily transferred onto social ones (Fiske, 1989). In particular, their frequent associations with invasion and defence (Selwyn and Boissevain, 2004) mean that coasts are intrinsic to popular narratives of inclusion and exclusion. This operates both in terms of the physical terrain on which notions of belonging and perceived threats to national identity are established and contested, and in a symbolic sense in the way the coast is imagined. As Allen (1999: 257) points out, ‘spatialities are neither real nor imagined, but are always both “real-and-imagined”, and *more*’. Consequently, seaside spaces are ‘simultaneously places of the *physical environment, embodiment, sociality, memory, and image*’ (Bærenholdt et al., 2004: 32). Conceptions of whiteness and national identity at the seaside are therefore constructed through a combination of both ‘land’ and ‘landscape’, in that ‘whilst the former normally applies to the tangible and physical, the latter applies pre-eminently to *ideas* about the land as these are manifested in images, myths, values and other products of the human imagination’ (Selwyn and Boissevain, 2004: 12).

Given that the reproduction of national identities occurs via ‘the *narrative of the nation*, as it is told and retold in national histories, literatures, the media and popular culture’ (Hall, 1992: 293) and through the creation of boundaries – nationhood as cartography (Ahmed, 2000: 98) – the exclusion of a group from landscapes that are intrinsic to articulations of national identity frequently accentuates its exclusion from the national collectivity as a whole (Kinsman, 1995). Artistic and literary representations of landscape can therefore contribute to a process of ‘ideological mystification’ and become a mechanism of cultural power. Memories and representations, together with *a priori* conceptions, of particular leisure spaces combine with lived experiences to form ‘cultures of landscape’, which have a significant impact in determining spatial manifestations of being, belonging and desire (Tolia-Kelly, 2006: 343). The exclusion of minority ethnic groups from the English seaside is thus maintained not only through their spatial marginalization, but also through exclusionary discourses and narratives that permeate a ‘white nation fantasy’ (Hage, 1998). Gilroy (1993), in particular, has traced how the fusing of notions of race, nation and culture created a dominant narrative of national identity that was racially exclusive, and despite partial subversions – primarily within the fields of

popular culture – this relationship remains entrenched (Burdsey, 2008). These racialized landscapes of nation are configured at the English seaside through the neo-colonial fantasy of amusements, the irrepressible (working-class) whiteness of leisure spaces, and the social construction of a (white) nostalgia for yesteryear that revolves around anxieties about immigration and perceived threats to national identity.

Given the demographic patterns outlined earlier in this article, an examination of contemporary immigration at the English seaside also highlights the ‘plural trajectories of whiteness’ (Garner, 2007: 72), as it distinguishes individuals who may be regarded as ‘marginal whites’, i.e. those that inhabit the intermediate zone of ‘inbetweenness’. These groups do not experience the same type of marginality as those designated as neither white nor ‘inbetween’, for they always have the option to identify as white when racial borders are most salient (Garner, 2007: 99). Yet, in other instances, they are positioned as ‘not quite white’ (Gabriel, 1998). Distinctions within the category of whiteness place white minorities in a hierarchy based on notions of cultural acceptability and economic value (McDowell, 2009), rendering them unable to achieve some of the ‘wages of whiteness’ (Roediger, 2007) on offer to those of white British background.

At its extreme this state of affairs manifests itself through the phenomenon of ‘xenoracism’, a form of discrimination that is ‘racism in substance but xeno in form – a racism that is meted out to impoverished strangers even if they are white’ (Sivanandan, 2001: 2; see also Fekete, 2009). This highlights the lack of solidity and stability in whiteness, for ‘even the taken-for-granted visible signs can be misleading, or be irrelevant to those wielding power in precise situations. Cultural and political ones can override the phenotypical ones’ (Garner, 2007: 72). For example, the ‘wildcat’ strikes at oil refineries and construction sites in January 2009 under the banner ‘British jobs for British workers’ demonstrate how national identity, class and related notions of entitlement (among others) stratify and hierarchize embodiments of whiteness. This cements the relationship between Englishness/Britishness and whiteness by creating a scenario where, although all whites are privileged, the rights of some to inhabit the national space are seen to be greater than others.

## Conclusion

*Top Spot* (2004), Tracey Emin’s semi-autobiographical film portrayal of growing up in Margate, Boris Mikhailov’s (2005) *Postcards from the Seafront* and Martin Parr’s photographs of Brighton in his *British Cities* collection (*Guardian*, 2008) all reproduce dominant portrayals of the English seaside as a white environment in which racialized bodies are literally out of place. This obscures the fact that increasing numbers of people from minority ethnic backgrounds are visitors and residents at seaside resorts, representing a more substantial challenge to the status quo than has occurred in rural landscapes, which arguably remain more overtly alienating environments.

The meanings attached to landscapes are neither static nor fixed (McDowell, 1999), and ‘space simultaneously sustains the existing racial order and offers the prospect of its subversion and reordering’ (Alexander and Knowles, 2005: 5). Yet, as this article has demonstrated, while a given subjectivity may be physically present in a particular space, this does not automatically translate into a sense of acceptance by the dominant group, nor inspire feelings of inclusion from the minority. Thus, although it may not be accurate to talk of *de*

*jure* racial exclusion, there are aspects of the seaside experience that continue to dictate and control which subjectivities are permitted access and belonging, and which ones are not.

In conclusion, the English seaside is an important site for analysing the shifting cultural and spatial politics of race and ethnicity in 21st-century Britain. On one hand, the increasing presence of racialized bodies, whether they be British visitors or new migrants, offers a partial disruption of the hegemonic whiteness that permeates this environment. On the other, whiteness continues to be solidified through the recurrent Othering of minority groups and the centrality – both spatially and figuratively – of the seaside in backlashes against immigration. Furthermore, while contemporary transnational migration to the seaside helps to uncover the multifaceted and stratified nature of whiteness, it also demonstrates how, in response, the relationship between whiteness and national identity is, in turn, further substantiated through the establishment of a contingent hierarchy where being *white and English/British* becomes the most important marker of privilege and belonging. Following the theoretical mapping outlined in this article, research must now address the manner in which the activities and spaces of the English seaside are used, controlled, surveilled, resisted, avoided and transgressed by different ethnic groups, in order to explore how notions of hegemonic whiteness (and its corollary attributes) are actually experienced by those residents and visitors who continue to be regarded as ‘strangers on the shore’.

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### Notes

1. The film tells the story of a group of British Asian women from Birmingham on a day trip to Blackpool.
2. See Smith (2004) for a typology of English seaside resorts.

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