

# **The dis/comfort of white British nationhood: Encounters, otherness and postcolonial continuities**

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Recent work on the affective dimensions of nationhood, identity and belonging has often overlooked discomfort in favour of positive experiences of sameness and security. Contrary to this tendency, this paper, based on interview narratives produced with white British middle-class people in the suburbs of London, examines the role of discomfort in experiences of nationhood, as well as the nature and meaning of that discomfort. In the first part of the paper, I demonstrate how nationhood becomes in and through uncomfortable encounters with other people, places and objects. Then, in the second part, I show how, for some, the experience of becoming national in encounters with the “other” is itself experienced uncomfortably in the context of a postcolonial Britain where people are expected to ‘love themselves as different’ (Fortier, 2007). On the one hand, the paper challenges the idea of privileged national belonging as wholly comfortable. Yet, the analysis also exposes the relative comfort of white British people’s nationhood. The paper offers important insight into the uneven and hierarchical nature of contemporary nationhood and highlights the value of attending to the entanglement of comfort *and* discomfort in work on affective nationalism.

**Keywords:** nationhood, discomfort, encounter, affect, Britishness, belonging

## **Introduction**

Despite suggestions that the significance of nation is in decline (e.g. Sassen, 1991; Soysal, 1995), nationhood continues to provide a sense of anchorage, attachment and ontological security, a feeling of belonging in time and place that offers comfort and well-being (Antonsich, 2014; Skey, 2010, 2011). Nations and national identity constitute a persistent

‘object of intimacy and affect’ (Appadurai in Closs Stephens, 2016a, p. 182) and it is the possibility of scattered individuals to *feel* part of an ‘imagined community’ that makes nation possible (Anderson, 1983). Not only is nationhood ‘often – if not mostly – experienced as a feeling’ (Closs Stephens, 2016a, p. 182) but ideas of nation, nationalism, and national belonging are actually produced and sustained through feelings, affects and emotions (Nayak, 2011, 2017).

By attending to the felt dimensions of nationhood, recent work on affective nationalism goes beyond the theorisation of national identity as a discursive process of boundary-making to take seriously the emotional and affective aspects of nationhood and their productive potential (e.g. Closs Stephens, 2013, 2016a; Merriman and Jones, 2016; Militz, 2017; Militz and Schurr, 2016; Sumartojo, 2016; Wetherell, McCreanor, McConville, Moewaka Barnes, & le Grice, 2015; Wood, 2012). Within this body of work, there are plenty of examples of how happy and comfortable, albeit at times banal, feelings of nationhood are produced and felt, for example, the warm feelings of belonging produced by music in Woods’ work (2012), or the “‘happy atmospheres” of being together’ described by Closs Stephens (2016a, p. 181). At times, however, this focus has obscured the role that *discomfort* also plays in the experiencing of nationhood.

Research has evidenced the discomfort, even pain, experienced by minoritised groups, both in cases where an individual’s national *identity* does not match formal nationality (Skrbiš, 2008) and/or where a sense of belonging is challenged or undermined (Isakjee, 2016; Nayak, 2017; Noble, 2005; Tufail and Poynting, 2013). However, as this paper demonstrates, and as is suggested by existing research on and with ethnic majority groups, even among ethnic majorities nationhood is not always or necessarily experienced as positive and comfortable (Condor, 2000, 2011; Fenton and Mann, 2011; Garner, 2016; Hage, 1998; Higgins, 2018; Skey, 2012). Recognising the emotional complexities of nationhood, in this

paper I examine the nature of white middle-class British people's discomfort *as nationals*. In focusing on a relatively privileged group, my intention is not to centre their discomfort or to suggest that it is more important than that of others. Rather, the intention is to acknowledge that discomfort *also* exists among people whose national belonging is more privileged and to think through what this discomfort tells us about the contemporary experience of nationhood. Given that affective nationalism has been criticised for a lack of attention to power and agency (Antonsich and Skey, 2016), a focus on Britain's white middle-classes that brings whiteness and privilege into view, encouraging greater awareness of the inequalities that shape 'affectual economies of nation' (Tolia-Kelly, 2006, p. 126), also provides a useful corrective.

There is renewed interest in the critical study of comfort and discomfort as part of how worlds are 'made and un-made' and as 'substantive concerns for Human Geography' (Price, McNally, & Crang, forthcoming). Like comfort, discomfort weaves together the physical, affective, and symbolic (Noble, 2002) and emerges through the encounter of bodies, objects and spaces (Bissell, 2009; Johnson, 2017; Lobo, 2014). However, discomfort is not merely the absence of the 'seamless' fit of comfort (Ahmed, 2004, p. 148). It is a feeling in itself, characterised by its own mental and physical sensations and articulated in relation to a range of affects (Noble, 2005, p. 114). In this paper, and following Ahmed (2004), I conceive of discomfort as the 'feeling of disorientation' experienced when 'one's body feels out of place, awkward and unsettled' (p. 148). Although the empirics presented focus primarily on discomfort, the paper also attends to the tension between comfort and discomfort, generating important insights into the uneven experience of nationhood and persistence of 'postcolonial continuities' (Fechter and Walsh, 2010, p.1197), in relation to which white British people remain relatively comfortable, even in discomfort (Ahmed, 2004).

The paper is based on interview data produced with white British middle-class adults on the edge of London. While not necessarily privileged in all ways, spaces and times, Britain's white middle-classes generally enjoy 'the homely privilege of automatic [national] belonging' in Britain (Back, 2009; Hage, 1998). They are, broadly speaking, people whose national identity is taken-for-granted and unquestioned (Skey, 2010), whose belonging in Britain is validated in everyday economies of recognition (Ahmed, 2000), and for whom nation is generally experienced as 'a homely place... that is both familiar and comfortable' (Skey, 2011, p. 234). This is not a comfort of which they are necessarily aware since comfort can be hard to notice when one experiences it (Ahmed, 2004, p. 147). In fact, it is precisely the *unreflexive* seamlessness between body and world whereby one's body fits and 'extends' easily into the space inhabited that, according to Ahmed (2007, p. 158), characterises the comfortable body, or body 'at home'. Spaces, she explains, 'are lived as comfortable as they allow bodies to fit in' (ibid.).

I begin the paper with a brief contextual introduction, before reviewing existing literature on affective nationhood and encounter and outlining the research methodology. Then, in two parts, I show some of the ways that discomfort marked participants' narrativised experiences of nationhood. The first part uses the work of Ahmed (2000) to show the ways that nationhood becomes in *uncomfortable* encounters with places, objects and/or bodies. I examine the form of discomfort that marks some white British people's encounters with the culturally and/or racially "other" – adding a specifically national lens to existing work on discomfort and encounter – and begin to explore the relationship between comfort and discomfort. Then, in the second section, I demonstrate how some participants were also uncomfortable about being uncomfortable, examining this second kind of discomfort in relation to work on multiculturalist nationalism (Fortier, 2007) and exploring its role as a performance, concluding with a discussion of the paper's main findings and contributions.

## **Nation and identity in multicultural Britain**

Despite the well-documented disavowal of national pride and distancing from ‘talk about nation’ among white British people in England (Condor, 2000, 2011; Fenton, 2007), national identity appears to have gained renewed potency in recent years. Debates surrounding the 2016 EU referendum clearly revealed the emotional content of nation (Anderson and Wilson, 2017; Closs Stephens, 2016b; Higgins, 2018) and there is also evidence of a relative shift toward identification with Englishness, predominantly, though not exclusively, among white Britons (Kenny, 2014; Skey, 2012). Although more benign and progressive forms exist (Edmunds and Turner, 2001; Perryman, 2008), “Englishness” is typically associated with parochial ethnic nationalism and research consistently finds it to be more exclusive and racialised than Britishness (Byrne, 2007; Garner, 2016; Leddy-Owen, 2012; Parekh, 2000). “Britishness” is more inclusive, partly because people have fought to make it so, but also because it has always been inherently multiple – with separate statuses for overseas territories, as well as specific English, Scottish and Welsh formations – and historically applied to all citizens of the UK and colonies (Bhambra, 2016a). Even so, it is ‘important not to exaggerate the extent to which Britishness and British identities can be characterised as civic or as somehow de-racialised’ (Leddy-Owen, 2014b, p. 1; Modood, 2016). Moreover, in England, it is often ‘impossible to sustain a fixed distinction’ between England and Britain as people tend to move between the two when referring to ‘their country’ (Fenton and Mann, 2011, p. 244).

Britishness was historically defined against the colonial “other” and through its connection to racial whiteness (Lentin, 2008). In various ways, and over time, this has marked the ways that Britishness is understood. The racialisation of Britishness as white has persistently worked to exclude those Britons descended from colonial (and later Commonwealth) citizens, both legally (Hampshire, 2005; Paul, 1997) and normatively

(Fortier, 2005; Gilroy, 1987; Modood, 2010). Today, despite attempts to re-brand Britishness as multicultural (Fortier, 2005; Solomos, 2003), the contemporary politics of belonging in Britain is one in which shared “British values” are promoted, often specifically to migrants and minorities, while racism and discrimination against those same groups are side-lined (Kundnani, 2007; Rashid, 2013). In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that research with ethnically minoritised Britons’ consistently evidences their feelings of discomfort and non-belonging in racialised national space (e.g. Isakjee, 2016; Nayak, 2017; Phoenix, 2011; Tufail and Poynting, 2013).

Meanwhile, research suggests that nation is increasingly experienced as a source of resentment, disillusionment and concern among white British people. Working in south-west England, for example, Garner (2016, p. 157), finds ‘most [white British] people express[ing] some degree of disapproval of what they view as systemic unfairness of outcome in favour of minority groups over the white UK majority’ (see also Fenton and Mann 2011). This beleaguered nationalism is underpinned by a feeling that equality politics and political correctness have gone too far and are now disadvantaging white British people. However, discomfort in relation to nation is not exclusive to beleaguered nationalists. In the aftermath of 2016’s EU referendum, Benson (2017) and Higgins (2018) also find discomfort among liberal and multicultural nationalists, with anger, shame and anxiety articulated in relation to British xenophobia, racism and other British people. Although these examples suggest that nationhood is not only experienced through discomfort by black and brown Britons but also (and perhaps increasingly) among white British people, it is important to note that the latter is a different form of discomfort, one that does not weaken an individual’s sense of belonging and entitlement and in fact often demonstrates it (Hage, 1998).

## **Affective nationhood and encounter**

Ideas of nation, nationalism, and national belonging are sustained through feelings, affects and emotions (Nayak, 2011, 2017) and, as Nayak (2011, p. 556) explains, ‘it is through the enactment and distribution of these intensities of feeling that nationhood is performed and “imagined communities”... brought into being’. Affective nationhood – the quality or experience of being and feeling nation/al – emerges in relation to, and/or ‘congeal[s] around,’ assemblages of bodies, objects and places in particular spaces and times (Closs Stephens, 2016a, p. 181). Affect does not exist in isolation or reside in particular bodies/objects as if ‘possessed by a subject’ (Anderson, 2006, p. 735) but *emerges* from ‘transpersonal relations between bodies and objects’ (Militz and Schurr, 2016, p. 56; see also Merriman and Jones, 2016, pp. 2-3) that are always already socially positioned and historicised (Ahmed, 2004; Tolia-Kelly, 2006). Conceptually, affect allows us to be ‘more attentive to both the embodied and intersubjective dimensions of human feeling’ than emotions, which are more individualised (Conradson, 2005, p. 105). Yet, emotion and affect are not easily divisible (Ahmed, 2004, 2007) and it can also be ‘unhelpful to separate discourse, practice, and embodied experience’ (Walsh, 2012, p. 45; Wetherell, 2012). As Wetherell, et al. (2015, p. 60) explain, ‘affective-discursive practices’ have the power to ‘spatialise, demarcate and place communities and social groups’, determining who and what belongs where and when.

Work on affective nationalism has often focused on national days and events that are affectively charged and emotionally experienced (Closs Stephens, 2016a; Militz and Schurr, 2016; Sumartojo, 2016; Wetherell, et al., 2015). In the UK, this includes studies of the 2012 Olympic Games (Closs Stephens, 2016a) and, more recently, Brexit (Closs Stephens, 2016b; Higgins, 2018; Lulle, Moroşanu, & King, 2018).<sup>1</sup> While these were clearly important moments of affective nationhood, research must also attend to the banal spaces of everyday life ‘within which qualitative determinations over national belonging are experienced,

enacted, ordered, and resisted' (Anderson and Taylor, 2005, p. 13; Billig, 1995; Edensor, 2002; Fox and Miller-Idriss, 2008; Noble, 2002).

The significance of everyday encounters to affective nationhood is something that Miltz and Schurr (2016) draw attention to in their work, where they describe affective nationalism as 'the quotidian affirmation of the national through momentary encounters of bodies and objects' (p. 54). Historically understood as a meeting of opposites, of contact across difference, conflict, or prejudice, Wilson (2016, p. 5) explains that encounters are 'about more than the coming together of different bodies'; encounters make and determine difference (see also Ahmed, 2000). This is pertinent to the study of nation, especially given that nations have been, and continue to be, constructed and maintained in relation to "others" (Colley, 1992; Triandafyllidou, 1998). Encounters with national "others" *produce* national difference and national subjects, reproducing boundaries between nation and its "others". These encounters do not take place in a vacuum but always occur in place and in dialogue with longer histories of contact and representation (Ahmed, 2004; Tolia Kelly, 2006).

Recent work in Geography shows how discomfort is produced, along with other emotions and affects, through embodied encounters in everyday spaces including streets (Jackson, 2014; Wise, 2005, 2010), playgrounds (Wilson, 2013, 2014), and public transport (Bissell, 2009; Lobo, 2014; Wilson, 2011). As well as highlighting the contingency of encounters, this work demonstrates their centrality to the production, reproduction and transformation of affects, identities, spaces and difference. The latter is particularly significant in relation to uncomfortable encounters since, as Wilson (2018) notes, the transformative capacity of encounters is dependent on their ability to unsettle, unease and discomfort. By applying a specifically national lens, this paper extends the existing literature on encounter in a new direction by considering the role of encounters in the reproduction of nationhood.



## **The research**

The paper is based on interview narratives produced with white British people in the suburbs of northeast London. This is where the ethnic diversity of the London Borough of Redbridge meets the predominantly white British district of Epping Forest and where London meets its greenbelt. In all parts of the research area, the ethnic minority population is increasing. However, ethnic diversity is spread unevenly across the research site; the percentage of foreign-born residents drops from 22.1% to 7.9% across the site from London out into Essex as the white British population rises from 62.6% to 89% (ONS, 2011). The area's increasing ethnic diversity and position on the edge of the capital make it an ideal place to examine affective nationhood as it is articulated through a specific local context.

The research took place between March 2015 (after Scotland's independence referendum and during a General Election campaign) and spring 2017 (a period marked by the build-up to the UK vote to leave the EU). This was a period of emotionally charged national politics; yet, the content of interviews was largely located in the everyday lives of participants. Over fifteen months, I conducted multiple interviews with twenty-six people, all of whom had held British citizenship from birth and were broadly recognisable as members of Britain's white middle-classes, characterised by narratives of individual agency (Skeggs, 2004; Taylor, 2012), engagement in processes of class distinction (Benson, 2007; Lawler, 2005; Lawler, 2008), and the ability to establish and maintain their lifestyles and values as normative and implicitly superior (Skeggs, 2004; Valentine and Harris, 2014). Initially, participants were recruited online – through posts in local fora – and offline – using strategically-placed flyers and posters. Although initial participants were largely self-selecting, later participants were purposively recruited to produce a more age and gender balanced sample, in some cases drawing on connections made through participation in local groups and activities.

Over successive interviews, I asked participants about their lives, local change, migration, integration, and ideas of Britishness. The first interview, a subject-oriented oral history, was designed to provide a view of the world ‘from the subjects’ points of view,’ offering insight into ‘the meaning of their lived world’ (Kvale, 2006, p. 481). These largely unstructured interviews allowed me to see what meanings people gave to events, places and people in their lives and laid the groundwork for subsequent conversations (Gill, 2016). A second ‘conceptual’ interview was again designed as a window onto participants’ social and ‘figured worlds’ (Gee, 2010, p. 76). Adapted from Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), conceptual interviews chart the structure of subjects’ conceptions of phenomena – in this case, immigration, integration, nation and belonging – by ‘exploring the meaning and the conceptual dimensions of central terms, as well as their positions and links within a conceptual network’ (p. 151). This meant asking questions that would encourage participants not to simply define concepts but to talk about and around them, and allowing participants to use words in their own way. While they were asked about nation specifically, participants were also asked questions about their lives and neighbourhoods that could evoke national sentiments and help to contextualise their orientation to nation (Fenton and Mann, 2011). Finally, where possible, reflective debriefs provided opportunities for participants to reflect on earlier interviews, having already received a verbatim transcript.

My positionality as a young white British/English woman originally from the research area, as well as broader social and political discourses, histories and contexts, are also relevant, affecting the expression and performance of emotion in interviews, as well as my reading of participants’ narratives (Ahmed, 2004; Bondi, 2005; Walsh, 2012). I often had the sense that participants felt able to classify me, not only because of our shared membership of Britain’s middle-classes (Benson, 2007, p. 18) but also because of our shared geography. In some cases, my relative insider status affected participants’ ability to open up, particularly

where they assumed that I would share and/or understand their feelings. However, it is important not to assume that this is the case, or exaggerate its effects, since social proximity can also increase awareness of difference (Ganga and Scott, 2006). In what follows, I draw on my interpretations and analyses of participants' affective experiences and emotions narrated and performed in interviews. In doing so, and following Walsh (2012), 'I rely not only upon people naming or claiming particular emotions in their speech acts... but also my own interpretation of their emotional performances in the reflexive [research] encounter' (p. 47). As such, an awareness of how the participants saw me was also critical to the analysis (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

### **Reproducing nationhood in uncomfortable encounters**

Originally from the north of England, Ian (70s) has lived in northeast London most of his adult life and identifies as both English and British. For Ian, an understanding of himself as national appeared to emerge through encounters with national "others" and it was often a *discomfort* and disorientation in relation to "other" places or languages that brought nationhood forward. While the resulting knowledge of his national identity and belonging as (Anglo-)British was generally comfortable, in the sense of providing what Giddens calls 'ontological security' (Skey, 2010, p. 716), Ian's experience of realising himself as national in encounter with the "other" was not, both in the moment of the encounter and when reflecting back:

I'm discombobulated. Stuff goes on I don't quite understand. You're alien. Even in France, you know. It's not very far away! And they're all just like us but, you know, you don't quite understand what's going on and you don't quite understand what the notices say and what's happening. I needed to buy a ticket on a train, and I'm a perfectly competent human being who can buy a ticket at a ticket machine, even if the ticket machine is in French [...] but I ended up buying a 33 Euro ticket for about a 10 Euro ride. I was furious with myself [...]. The minute you're placed in a different context and

you don't understand you make mistakes or you get wrong-footed or you get discombobulated or you get disconcerted, or something.

In this example, Ian *becomes* national through affective encounter with “other” things (the ticket machines, notices etc.) in France. The encounter is constructive of difference between Ian and ‘French people’ (who Ian otherwise recognises as ‘just like us’) but is also productive of nationhood as Ian is reminded of his relative comfort as national in Britain (Skey, 2011).

The feeling of ‘not knowing what was going on’ was, for Ian, the experience of being ‘a foreigner’. He compared it to his experience of nationhood in England where he claimed to be largely unaware of having a national identity, describing it as being ‘like the air you breathe,’ something you only become aware of abroad in encounters with the “other” (Skey, 2011; Edensor, 2002). These comments imply that national boundary-consciousness is more pronounced away from home, an idea reflected in the literature on migrants’ encounters with cultural difference (Cranston, 2016; Miltz, 2017; Walsh, 2012). However, the fact that affective-emotional responses to difference occur overseas does not negate their occurrence “at home” and Ian’s suggestion that he only becomes national abroad actually obscured the significance of similarly uncomfortable encounters that he and others recounted at home in national space. Talking about the diversity of languages he hears on the London Underground, for example, Ian explained:

It is a bit disorientating sometimes. You sit on the tube and you don't hear anybody speaking English. It's quite strange.

Nation is often discussed through other lines of difference, including language, so even where nation is not mentioned specifically the implication many nevertheless be national. In this case, Ian’s comments invoke national lines of difference, the expectation being that one would hear English in England, that national space has national content, and national bodies and voices – like his – will feel themselves ‘extended’ in national space (Ahmed, 2007, p.

158).

Part of Ian's disorientation was to do with underground travel generally and he expressed concern that people might not understand instructions in an emergency. Yet, there was also a sense that the disorientation involved in 'not knowing what was going on' was *itself* uncomfortable, and arguably more so because of an implicit expectation of being at ease in national space, an expectation that betrays the privileged nature of white British people's belonging. Below, Ian again *becomes* national in relation to that which he recognises as "other"; however, unlike his reaction in France, "at home" in London Ian's frustrations are directed toward the "others":

You're surrounded by people and just somehow... is it a mild claustrophobia... There's just a sense of enclosure and trapped-ness. And then this alien thing going on all the time and everyone speaking Russian or whatever they're speaking, and you think, 'Oh, this is weird [chuckles]. This is slightly weird' and slightly, slightly irritating if I confess it. But then only slightly. [To himself:] 'Shut up, just get a grip!'

The directionality of Ian's comments suggests an underlying 'governmental belonging', a sense of himself as 'legitimately entitled' to make managerial statements about the nation and about who and what belongs (Hage, 1998, p. 46). This mode of belonging is not unique to Ian and, according to Hage (1998), is as common among white multiculturalists as among white supremacists, a symptom of dominant discourses that consistently centre white people within conceptions of nation. However, in Ian's case, the directing outward of his frustration is immediately self-monitored as he tells himself to 'get a grip', revealing an understanding that his not the "right" response to have and/or that he is not entitled to have it (which would suggest a more passive belonging). I return to this kind of self-monitoring and discuss its performative dimensions in the following section.

Although Ian's foreign-speaking "other" may include formal British citizens, his encounters with different languages on the London Underground and associated experience

of disorientation reproduce lines of national difference within the nation's borders.

Encounters that allow the nation to take shape, therefore, not only occur abroad and at borders but also "at home" within national space. In fact, Ahmed (2000, p. 100) explains, it is encountering cultural difference "here" that 'allows the work of nation formation to be sustained' and facilitates on-going negotiation of who "we" are:

The proximity of strangers within the national space – that is, *the proximity of that which cannot be assimilated into a national body* – is a mechanism for the demarcation of the national body, a way of defining borders within it, rather than just between it and an imagined and exterior other (Ahmed, 2000: 100, emphasis in original).

Crucial to Ian's recognition of the foreign-language speaker as "other" was the prior understanding of their sound as *already* "other"; they were not *unrecognisable* but known and/or recognised as "other" (Ahmed, 2000). However, different bodies have different capacities to affect (Ahmed, 2000; Merriman and Jones, 2016; Tolia-Kelly, 2006). As Tolia-Kelly (2006, p. 214) explains, 'affective economies are defined and circulate through and within historical notions of the political, social and cultural', mediated by representations and ideas developed over histories of nation-building, colonialism and orientalism (Fanon, 1952; Said, 1979). Although in Ian's case the reference to Russian speakers implies an "other" that is eastern European, Gilroy (2005) argues that postcolonial migrants and citizens have greatest capacity to affect because they 'carry all the ambivalence of Empire with them' (p. 100). By their very presence, Gilroy (2005) claims, non-white people, and non-white Britons especially, make white British people uncomfortable by referring them to Britain's unacknowledged (and wilfully forgotten) imperial past. In my conversations with participants, it was not clear whether postcolonial migrants and their descendants had greatest capacity to affect, as Gilroy suggests; as in Ian's case, it was often white Europeans that were constructed as nationally "other". It was, nevertheless, clear from comments such as 'now

they're invading us in a way' and 'they're getting their own back' that the presence of black and brown bodies in Britain was widely understood as an effect of British colonialism.

For Paul, a semi-retired man in his sixties, originally from west London who described himself as a 'Native Briton', the increased visibility of racialised "others" was disconcerting. When talking about returning to his primary school, Paul articulated a sense of loss on seeing that none of the children looked "like him", describing the presence of non-white bodies in such a familiar space as dizzying. His comments clearly support Gilroy's (2005) claim that the biggest concerns relate to racially "other" postcolonial migrants but also exemplify the potential for non-white bodies to make familiar spaces feel strange (Ahmed, 2007):

It's really, really weird. You go back there and everything's... The streets, the houses, buildings are all totally familiar - that's where I grew up - and the people have completely changed. I mean obviously it would be different people anyway but they're a different race; different race, different culture. And it... You know I can remember when I went back to my old school, primary school, and was looking in the playground I just-, I felt dizzy. Because you've got this clash [...] on the one hand all this familiar stuff - 'I used to go to school here' - but all the kids are black and Asian. What's going on? I mean my head's going round and round thinking, 'I don't understand this'.

The potential for encounters to produce difference or discomfort therefore depends both on the "other" in question and the spatiotemporal context of the encounter, with affect emerging in the relations between bodies, places and objects. In Paul's case, as with Ian's experiences on the London Underground, it is arguably the capacity for discomfort in a space *assumed* to be comfortable that allows the discomfort to emerge, while the familiarity of the playground space increases its intensity.

In multicultural societies, the assumed comfort of national space is complicated by racialised spatial discourses and imaginaries that reproduce some areas as "ethnic/diverse" (Millington, 2011) and others as "white" (Neal and Agyeman, 2006) so that differently

racialised bodies appear to ‘fit’ in different spaces (Ahmed, 2007, p. 159). In relation to this racialised mapping, difference *in its place* may feel comfortable, even beneficial and enjoyable (Jackson, 2014).<sup>2</sup> This is something Ian highlighted when he explained that, in contrast to his experience on the London Underground, he feels comfortable surrounded by different people and voices in nearby Walthamstow because ‘You know you’re going to a place where all this is happening, and you can almost be semi-detached.’ In Walthamstow, his body’s lack of fit or “extension” is not felt as uncomfortable because the expectation for comfort is different. However, where difference appears out of place, it can become troubling, even threatening (Ahmed, 2000), something that may have more to do with imaginaries of where difference “should” be than the difference *per se*.

While other participants were more ambivalent about Britain’s multicultural future (and many positive), for Paul, racial and ethnic diversity was not only disconcerting but concerning as it appeared to symbolise the decline of white Britain. Paul feared what he saw as the impending loss of white Britain (and Europe) through racial inter-marriage and “miscegenation” explaining: ‘I identify with my race so, you know, I don’t want to see it disappear into a melting-pot.’ That the black and brown bodies in the playground referred to above were children, and therefore represent this future, only compounds his feeling of loss, anxiety and abandonment (Hage, 2003). In articulating and performing such negative emotions, Paul invests in the ‘social norms of whiteness’ (Walsh, 2012, p. 53), elsewhere constructing white subjectivities as those from whom “others” will not only to take something away but whose place they will take (Ahmed, 2004, p. 43). As Ahmed (2004, p. 1) explains, ‘to feel love for the nation... is also to feel injured by these others, who are “taking” what is yours.’

While Ian talked about voices and Paul about human bodies, encounters with material difference could produce similar feelings of discomfort. Below, for example, Rob – a man in



his thirties who had grown up locally and saw nationhood as conferred genetically across generations – draws a line between national and non-national domestic materialities, reproducing the nation and himself as national in the process:

They ['Indians']<sup>3</sup> 're buying a house to then build three storeys high so that there's six bedrooms and they then can invite the granny in, and the kids and the aunts and the uncles [...]. I don't particularly think that's a very British value, which is why I get a little bit annoyed when our neighbours are building a huge house and having a granny flat at the end of the garden. I find that kind of a little bit insulting really because I feel as though it's changing [...] It was all semi-detached houses but now it's all becoming terraced houses, and you've destroyed the look of it and you've now paved over your front garden [...]. I kind of find that quite offensive.

Rob's comments, which explicitly invoke national values, express discomfort through well-established affective discourses of (white) victimhood and invasion (Emejulu, 2016; Wetherell, 2012), both underpinned by a 'governmental' sense of belonging (Hage, 1998, p. 46). The proximity of the "other" close to home establishes, for Rob, the necessity of protecting local space and landscapes from foreign influences (Fortier, 2007; Hage, 2003). What usually passed unrecognised, however – revealing an entitled expectation for comfort – was the possibility that the source of *their* discomfort could be a source of comfort for others, that the presence of "other" voices, faces, and materialities could be making some people *more* comfortable (Isakjee, 2016; cf. Watson and Saha, 2013).

In highlighting the discomfort that marked participants' narratives of encounter with the culturally and/or racially "other", this section has added a specifically national lens to existing work on discomfort and encounter. The examples show how nationhood becomes in *uncomfortable* encounters with "other" places, bodies and materialities as people come to recognise themselves as national against that which is recognised as non-national. These uncomfortable encounters occur not only outside and at the borders of the nation but also "at home" within national space in relation to internal "others". Future work on affective

nationalism must, therefore, avoid reproducing a dichotomous “comfortable-nation”/“uncomfortable-foreign” and try to push past assumptions and binaries that obscure the complexities of contemporary nationhood.

The language used to articulate discomfort in encounters with “others” – ‘discombobulated’, ‘disoriented’, ‘dizzy’, ‘my head's going round and round’ – is embodied. Yet, in referring to heads and minds, participants often implied a cognitive dimension that distinguished their discomfort from the more visceral discomfort of racialised minorities (Ahmed, 2004). It is also notable that participants tended to express discomfort in response to the out-of-placeness of “others” rather than the out-of-placeness of selves, again in contrast to the experiences of racialised minorities (Ahmed, 2004; Noble, 2005). Thus, while the discomfort documented may appear to reflect minoritised people’s experiences of not being extended in space (Ahmed, 2007), there are significant differences between them, not least the different expectations for comfort in national space. Participants’ underlying expectations for comfort suggest their relative comfort in most spaces and times, as well as a latent comfort and security in their sense of national belonging. Even when confronted with “others” and/or by the non-extension of their bodies in space, participants’ sense of themselves as British was not shaken.

Discomfort is an integral part of defining and producing nation, telling us when, where, and with whom its limits lie (Ahmed, 2000) and the experience of nationhood is, at least in part, characterised by a concern for the nation (Hage, 1998, 2003). However, being overly concerned, anxious or angry in encounters with “others” was usually recognised as socially unacceptable, and evidently so as the majority of participants tended to play down concerns and anxieties, apologise, and/or justify them. Experiences of nationhood could, therefore, be uncomfortable in themselves. It is this second form of discomfort to which I now turn.

## **Trying (and failing) to ‘love ourselves as different’**

Through the state-led multiculturalist nationalism of the late 1990s and early 2000s, Britain was reworked as inherently multicultural (Fortier, 2005) and “we”, in Britain, were encouraged to not only conceive of difference as part of British identity but to ‘love ourselves as different’ (Fortier, 2007, p. 108). Yet, many white British people evidently still find themselves failing to be wholly comfortable with “others” internal to national space. For those who have absorbed the normative will to embrace the “other”, any discomfort in encounter with him/her may feel like failure, and failure of a particularly problematic sort that risks implicating “us” as racists and xenophobes (DiAngelo, 2011). It is, therefore, not merely that white British people are uncomfortable with the “other’s” presence; “we” are also guilty, ashamed and uncomfortable about *being* uncomfortable and feeling the “other” *as* different (Gilroy, 2005).

In one conversation with Dani – a teacher and mother of two in her 40s – we talked about nearby Ilford, an area with a large minority ethnic population and high levels of deprivation. Between our first and second meeting Dani had been to Ilford and reflected on the discomfort she felt there:

[Ilford’s] changed a lot in my life-time. Like, in terms of the make-up of people there. Nobody there is... You know, you don't hear any English voices at all. You hear a lot of Polish voices and, and all sorts of other languages, which doesn't bother me in the slightest. But everyone looks miserable, and that was what bothered me. Because as I was walking around I was thinking 'Is it because everybody is not, like me?' 'Is it because everybody's foreign?' 'Is it because...?' Why do I feel uncomfortable? And I just thought... it's just because everybody looks really sad. [...] It made me feel uncomfortable because it was... depressing. Not because, not because it's changed... in that there're lots of other people around.

Dani’s discomfort had prompted her to question her feelings about racialised others. She was uncomfortable about feeling uncomfortable in multi-racial space and felt the need to ask

herself if she was racist:

Where I've lived has changed so much in terms of-, and it is other cultures coming in, and other types of people from everywhere moving in and that kind of change. And it does make me think, am I...? Because I don't... I, I feel uncomfortable with that, is that, am I being racist by, because I feel uncomfortable? And I always question myself like that, because I like to think I'm not but maybe I am. Do you know what I mean it's that kind of... [Amy: Yeah, yeah]. Erm, but I think it's just... I think anyone, living anywhere, when it changes and it's completely unrecognisable is going to feel uncomfortable aren't they [...]. It's not a race thing or a gender thing, or a whatever; it's just change.

While Dani justified her discomfort in relation to social deprivation, Jane – a woman in her forties who had grown up locally and identified as English more than British – became noticeably uncomfortable as she reflected on the racialised nature of her national imaginary, seemingly for the first time:

I know that being English or being British isn't about being white, or... Oh gosh that's, that's interesting. Because I wonder if you can be British... [Pauses] Again, I hope this doesn't sound, it's not meaning to sound at all racist or anything... Sort of, you have British people of different colours, as it were. But do you have English people of other colours? [...] Part of me feels quite horrible to be-... and this is why I keep saying the sort of caveats I'm saying, that I wonder if you have to be white to be English... but you can be any colour to be English? And I, I'm not comfortable saying that... But I'm not sure if that's how I think or feel. And I'm not sure that that's right. Erm, if you know what I mean? I mean I'm obviously not going to go out and sort of... I mean I'd sooner die than join the British National Party or anything like that. I'm not against migration, but it's, um... It's actually a really uncomfortable thing to say. And I don't like it but I think that's what I think.

Jane was visibly uncomfortable in realising (and articulating) her racially exclusive view of Englishness and, like Dani, made effort to distance herself from racism, specifically that of the far-right. After the exchange, I felt the need to reassure Jane, explaining that she was not the only person to think that way. While in line with relational research ethics (Ellis, 2007;

Josselson, 2007), this reassurance worked to normalise her discomfort, allowing her to retain innocence (Emejulu, 2018) and potentially dissipating any transformative capacity (Boler and Zembylas, 2003).<sup>4</sup>

Other participants appeared uncomfortable in admitting that their friends are mostly white – something participants often felt the need to justify – or that they struggled to pronounce people’s names. Ian, for example, said it was ‘to his shame and embarrassment’ that he was sometimes unable to pronounce the names of his grandchildren’s friends. Kate – who had grown up in the area and returned in late twenties with her young family – talked about ethnic divisions that developed in her late teenage years:

I went out on a Friday night and was drinking with a load of people, who were mostly white, not entirely but mostly, and going to clubs in Ilford or whatever... and that was quite a white world. And it felt... I noticed it at the time, it felt like... people who had [...] really completely grown up sort of side-by-side were, sort of, dividing off slightly.

Kate seemed uncomfortable telling me about this memory and went on to say, ‘I hate saying that to myself because it makes me sound really racist, and I don't recognise that in myself but... I don't know there's obviously something real that's happening there.’ She explained that she found it especially hard to talk about “race” in relation to her own experiences because it meant ‘admitting something that she’s been part of.’ Yet, Kate was aware of her whiteness in a way that white people are usually assumed not to be (Byrne, 2006; Garner, 2007) and, unlike other participants, she articulated discomfort in all-white environments:

When we were looking at nurseries, we went to look at one in Buckhurst Hill which was entirely white, like all the kids were white. The other one we went to wasn't like that at all and, you know, we commented on it afterwards and we were like how strange it would be to take her there [to the all-white nursery] when actually that's not going to be his experience at school or in the rest of her life, yeah. [...] for a tiny little kid of her age it's not really relevant but for a secondary school or for junior school well it would be very, very strange, especially given that we live in East London.

I went to this pop-up bar area [in South London] [...]. It was very hipster, very white, very middle-class and you couldn't get served at the bar because it was so busy. So, I went downstairs with a friend and we went to McDonalds to get something to eat. And you go into the street and it's all black and I kind of... I found it really strange that the reason this bar was where it was was because it's kind of an 'edgy' area, very 'urban', so you know very black basically. That's what gave it the kind of 'cool factor', so... That you could put this bar in this place but it was not in any way designed for the people who really lived in the area, I found that quite offensive, because I think the logic behind that is 'Oh yeah we're really', you know, 'embracing urban multicultural, or da, da, da, da, dah', but you're not really. You're just kind of using it. And I don't like that; that doesn't sit comfortably with me.

Kate's discomfort in these all-white spaces does not result from a perceived non-extension of her body in the space, as depicted in the first part of the article. Instead, she expressed discomfort in precisely those spaces that *most* extended her body because of the way they extended hers to the exclusion of racialised others. Unlike the discomfort of people of colour, Kate's discomfort was not because of whiteness per se but because of what all-white spaces meant in the context of multicultural London (and perhaps because of what occupying such spaces might say about her), showing the entanglement of affect and discourse (Wetherell et al., 2015). The spatial limiting of her examples to London also suggests that Kate's discomfort is mediated by a racialised spatial imaginary so that similar levels of whiteness in spaces *already known or imagined as white* would not produce the same discomfort.

Building on the examples of nationhood becoming in uncomfortable encounters provided in the first section, this section has identified a second kind of discomfort, evident among participants who consider themselves anti-racist and/or have internalised a normative desire to embrace the other (Fortier, 2007). The examples show how nationhood is experienced uncomfortably in the context of a postcolonial Britain where people have been expected (and expect themselves) to 'love themselves as different'. Unlike the discomfort

outlined in the first section, this discomfort is not about a perceived non-extension of bodies in space but the often uncomfortable process of ‘learning about ourselves’ through our relationships with and responses to “others” (Gilroy, 2004, p. 102). Where participants articulated or implied discomfort with non-national “others”, they were often uncomfortable about doing so, usually because of what it might say about them and/or reveal about their failure to ‘love as different’. Where the “other” in question was a specifically racial “other”, such failure carried the risk of implicating the speaker in racism. Thus, while the greater capacity of encounters with postcolonial bodies to affect was not always clear, black and brown bodies certainly had greater capacity to induce this secondary, more self-reflective discomfort among white Britons than other “others”.

Several participants demonstrated agency in managing and performing their discomfort, often appearing to resist affective-discursive circuits and/or responding reflexively to them (Walsh, 2012; Butcher, 2017). They were not simply affected but appeared to ‘actively respond’ and ‘engage with’ the affective situations in which they found themselves (Antonsich and Skey, 2016, p. 844). In the context of the research interview, discomfort was also managed both through its discursive connection to less explicitly racialised questions of socioeconomic disadvantage, and through innocence-maintaining performances of self-control and reflexivity (Emejulu, 2016; Higgins, 2018). This management meant white middle-class discomfort was rarely, if ever, generative of change. Participants were not only able to live through their discomfort but, in acknowledging and reflecting on it, were usually able to excuse themselves from working toward a resolution (Ahmed, 2004, 2012). Self-reflexive articulations of discomfort provided opportunities for participants to demonstrate their liberal credentials and support for multiculturalism (Jackson, 2014), even while reproducing the nation in their own image and maintaining ‘postcolonial continuities’ (Fechter and Walsh, 2010). Thus, in some cases, the management of discomfort

itself appeared to be part of a liberal experience of multiculturalism and, where successful, could produce its own kind of comfort as participants created and performed white middle-class selves that were anti-racist and supportive of multiculturalism.

## **Conclusion**

Using data produced in interviews with white British people in the suburbs of London, this paper has examined the role of discomfort in white middle-class British people's experiences of nationhood, as well as the nature and meaning of that discomfort. In doing so, it offers an important corrective to the emergent literature on affective nationalism, which has tended to assert the comfort and security of nationhood and national atmospheres, at least for people whose belonging is relatively privileged, while overlooking the more uncomfortable dimensions of nationhood. Despite the widespread idea of the nation as a 'homely' space within which nationals are, by definition, secure and comfortable (Noble, 2002; Skey, 2011), it is clear that nationals can, and often do, experience nationhood *uncomfortably* even "at home" in national space, whether in their encounters with other people, places and objects – as discussed in the paper's first empirical section – or in the reflexive experience and narration of postcolonial nationhood – discussed in the second. This is not to say that there is no expectation of comfort – in fact, an expectation of comfort in national space often gave discomfort intensity and meaning – but to suggest that work on affective nationalism open itself to the complexities of nationhood. This means developing new attentiveness to the discomfort of people for whom nationhood is assumed to be, and is usually experienced as, easy and comfortable, as well as experiences of comfort among those for whom nationhood is more ambiguous.

While research with white British/English people has increasingly recognised the discomfort embedded in anxious or paranoid nationalisms (e.g. Fenton and Mann, 2011;



Garner, 2016), this article adds crucial complexity and nuance to the literature on ethnic majority discomfort, most significantly through examination of its nature and directionality. In particular, I shed light on two features of ethnic majority discomfort: (1) its focus on the out-of-placeness of “others” rather than of the self, and (2) its ability to be managed through discursive and social performance. The first of these features clearly distinguishes ethnic majority discomfort from that of racialised minorities.

While racially minoritised Britons’ experiences of discomfort are typically characterised by a visceral out-of-placeness (Ahmed, 2004, p. 148), even in their discomfort, the white British participants’ identities and belongings went unquestioned. It may, therefore, be more appropriate to think of ethnic majority discomfort as a ‘less comforting form of comfort’ rather than a discomfort per se (Ahmed, 2004, p. 147). This is an important and timely contribution given that recent calls to take the suffering of “beleaguered” white British people more seriously (e.g. Goodhart, 2017), with increasing emphasis placed on the ‘ontological insecurities’ of white nationalisms (Kinnvall, 2018), have largely failed to attend to the privileged ontological belonging that underlies white British discomfort. Drawing attention to the latent comfort of white British nationhood, as I have done in this article, can therefore help to expose the continued privilege of white British belonging – evidenced in participants’ focus on the out-of-placeness of “others” and expectations for comfort.

The differential nature of white and ethnically minoritised Britons’ discomfort, and relative comfort of the former, is indicative of these groups’ different positioning within ‘relational frameworks of power’ (Lobo, 2014, p. 723). The postcolonial continuities of these hierarchical relations are routinely masked by narratives of white discomfort that divert attention from the discomfort of people of colour while also failing to attend to white British comfort, as well as by the management and performance of discomfort. Not only did participants remain comfortable in their belonging and identification as British/English but,

where their discomfort led them to question their relationships with others, they were also able to discursively manage, dissipate and/or normalise their discomfort. So, fifteen years after Gilroy (2004) diagnosed the postcolonial melancholia of white Britain, it is clear that Britain's white middle-classes are still not working through their discomfort. Instead, "we" have learnt to manage and reconfigure any discomfort with the "other" and, in doing so, have become somewhat complicit in the perpetuation of racialised hierarchies of belonging.

If affect is crucial for understanding how and why nations and nationalism endure (Closs Stephens, 2013, 2016a), the nature, experience and management of discomfort must be part of the picture. It is not, however, a question of merely adding discomfort but rather of attending to the entanglement of comfort *and* discomfort and reconceptualising affective nationhood through their entangled experience. Doing so, has the potential to provide critical insights into the postcolonial continuities of nationhood, in terms of inequalities and power geometries, producing better understandings of its contemporary experience, as this paper has shown.

## Notes

1. Although often treated as an event, Brexit is also conceived as a 'collection of attachments, affects and ideas' (Anderson and Wilson, 2017, p. 4) and 'social process' (Benson, 2018).
2. For a critique of multicultural consumption, see Ahmed (2000) and hooks (1992).
3. This was the term Rob used. However, given the area's demographics, it is likely that he is including within this British-born people of south Asian heritage.
4. On the methodological implications of discussing 'race' with white British people see Garner (2016) and Byrne (2006).

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