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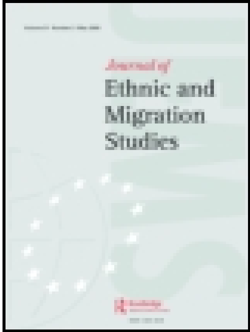

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‘Stop calling me *Murzyn*’ – how Black Lives Matter in Poland

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ABSTRACT
The scholarship on race and racism has tended to focus mostly on countries in Western Europe. It has thereby overlooked racial dynamics taking place in other regions – including Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). This article examines the reverberations of the recent global antiracist mobilisation triggered by the killing of George Floyd in the United States in this underexplored context. Specifically, it considers the significance of the ‘Black Lives Matter’ (BLM) movement for Black people in Poland. Championed by the BLM movement, there have been demands for further reflection on racial inequalities in European societies, where many citizens in Europe’s West are beginning to engage with the impact of colonialism. The effect of George Floyd’s death has also reached unexpected places such as Poland, where Black communities have renewed their calls to reshape their representation in public discourse. We trace these mobilisations via our analysis of an online video discussion that unfolded under the hashtag #DontCallMeMurzyn. This article makes a case for the significance of concepts such as race and racism to our understanding of social relations in Poland; it shows, furthermore, how the BLM mobilisation has revived conversations about everyday racism and the representation of Black people in the public sphere.

KEYWORDS
Black Lives Matter; Central and Eastern Europe; Poland; race; racism

Introduction

The protests condemning the killing of African American George Floyd in the United States triggered one of the largest resistance movements against racism since the Civil Rights era, leading to a juggernaut of radical demands in many parts of the world. For example, in the UK, the removal of the statue of Edward Colston, the eighteenth century Slave Trader, inspired several campaigns to remove similar statues elsewhere in the country. In France, there has been a call to remove colonial-era memorials, and in Belgium, people reignited their active challenge of the country’s bloody colonial past, leading to the removal of King Leopold II’s statue from the city of Antwerp (Beaman 2020). This was in addition to the long-awaited ‘apology’ from the Belgian state for its roles in crimes committed against the people of the Congo during the colonial

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period. Correspondingly, campaigners in Spain had lobbied for the removal of Christopher Columbus's statue in Barcelona following the successful removal of Antonio López y López's statue. Similar coverage of demonstrations emerged with people protesting peacefully in support of BLM in Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland. Also, countries in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) – the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Romania – witnessed the impact of such global protest (Luntumbue 2020).

What was particularly striking about these global events was the significant presence of white people joining the demonstrations. Their involvement was not limited to the countries identified above. The BLM campaign turned into a global movement that also reverberated in places such as Poland (Milman et al. 2021), where issues of race and racism are often assumed to be absent – despite the growing presence of Black communities in the country (Pędziwiatr and Balogun 2018). Indeed, the effects of BLM were noticeable during a demonstration outside the United States Embassy in Warsaw, where a young Mixed Race Polish woman held a poster reading '*Stop Calling Me Murzyn*' – 'Murzyn' is a colloquial Polish expression that approximates earlier, unreflexive uses of the term, 'Negro' in English speaking contexts. Beyond this, the demonstration triggered an online video discussion – #DontCallMeMurzyn[1] – that continues to attract thousands of viewers and had stimulated unprecedented public discussions on race and racism in Poland (Wasilewska 2020).

This article engages with the global impact of race and the implications of BLM mobilisations. It is not our intention here to recount the BLM global campaign, but to examine the effects of the race-based movement in places such as Poland – where critical race perspectives are underdeveloped. Given the absence of thinking about race and racism in mainstream sociological research in CEE, the article addresses two important issues. First, it discusses the highly contested understanding of the term *Murzyn/Murzynka*, which can be compared to the trajectories and transition of 'Negro to Black' in English speaking contexts, brought about by Black Power movements in the United States and later in the United Kingdom. This framing brings into view the ways in which the term *Murzyn/Murzynka* might have shifted from travelling in the guise of neutrality to finally becoming seen as racially charged terminology, especially as those labelled by its means began to mobilise more visibly. Second, the article examines the ways in which the term has been deployed in contemporary Poland and analyses its impact on Black people in the country. To address these two issues, the article turns to what appears to be the first public discussion by Black/Mixed race Polish women (#DontCallMeMurzyn) in order to show 'that without talking race, racism is difficult to name' (Harries 2014, 1119), especially in places where race is presumed to be absent. Relying on individual vignettes of race and racism to advance the understanding of everyday racism (Essed 1991) in Poland, the article demonstrates that racialisation has always been part of the configuration of Polish society (Leszczyński 2020).

The contested semantic evolution of *Murzyn*

This study is grounded in three key concepts: race, racialisation, and whiteness, as they emerge from our analysis of #DontCallMeMurzyn. For this reason, it is important to begin with conceptual and theoretical framings that situate Poland within the histories

of racism in Europe. The histories of anti-Semitism as well as the exclusion of Romani population have been the key modalities through which race and racism have been experienced/explained in Poland (Bilewicz, Winiewski, and Radzik 2012; Kapralski 2016). However, studies on anti-black racism, accelerated by the recent securitising of forced migrants (Sobczak-Szelc et al. 2022), are now beginning to emerge. The application of race in the present study rests largely on the erroneous assumption of race as biologically and physiologically grounded concept. This brings into view the ways in which Black people in Poland are still perceived through the long-existing biological differentiation that accounts for their racialisation (Turda 2010; Balogun 2022a). When we take stock of this biological differentiation in Poland, it becomes clear that whiteness and 'Europeanness' play a major role in such operation. As both Kalmar (2023) and Imre (2023) observe in this special issue, both whiteness and 'Europeanness' serve preservation proposes.. Key to this is the visiblity of some immigrants which distinctively exposes them to discrimination and racial violence (see also Lewicki 2023; Krivonos 2023, this special issue). The focus on skin colour thereby has a profound impact on their sense of safety – especially in public spaces (Omeni 2016). For immigrants of colour, the public space is *the site* in which race and racism are overtly (re)produced. This has become particularly notable during and after the humanitarian crisis at Europe's borders in 2015-2016, when the inflow of non-European asylum seekers become securitised on the basis of racial ascription (Legut and Pędziwiatr 2018). Central to this, was the racialisation of migrants from Muslim countries whose 'cultures' are perceived in entirely deterministic and essentialised way, which is often underpinned by a biological reading of race (Bobako 2017). In doing so, Poland and other countries in the EU's West and East insisted on their status as 'bulwarks of Christianity' against the perceived Muslim threat (Boatcă 2010; Pędziwiatr 2019; Lewicki 2021). Indeed, as Omolo (2017) argues, the political landscape in Poland contributed to the negative perception of immigrants as a problem and a risk to Polish culture. This has been particularly visible in the recent racialisation and securitisation of migrants in the Polish-Belarussian border.

Whilst we welcome the range of emerging new studies that are now beginning to recognise the functionalities of race and racism in Poland (Omeni 2016; Omolo 2017; Ohia-Nowak 2020; Jaskulowski and Pawlak 2020; van Lienden and van Sterkenburg 2022; also see Narkowicz 2022), we contend in this article that there is a need to connect the trajectories of race in Poland to the wider global context which significantly shapes them. To this end, it is imperative to recognise the difficulties in using the 'Western theories of race and whiteness in Eastern Europe, since the languages, state policies, and scientific and popular discourse there operate mainly within a notion of ethnicity' (Miskovic 2009, 212). At the same time, it is important to note that the ideas of race and racism developed in the West have been instrumental in the emergence and the understanding of race and racism globally (Imre 2005; Baker 2018; Kalmar 2023). Therefore, as we suggest here, it is equally difficult to decouple the trajectories of Black identity in the West from the contemporary realities in CEE (Mark and Betts 2022).

A decolonial perspective, we propose, is important for conceptualising what blackness signifies in Poland, but also to better understand the resonance of BLM in Poland. Notably, race and racism tend to be considered from an individual perspective, rather than approached and studied as a structural phenomenon. The following account illustrates this:

> The perpetrators are usually young men who are soccer fans or members of skinhead groups. Such things usually happen at stadiums, or nightclubs in the context of rivalry over women, and, less frequently, as incidental occurrences on the streets at night. They are usually committed spontaneously under the influence of alcohol. They are most commonly limited to insults, though of course also include incidents of physical violence. (Ząbek 2009, 73)

When race and racism are read in this way, they lose their collective meanings and exempt the structural processes which enable numerous individual experiences in the first place. In Poland, structural racism is often reduced to concern over inequalities within the labour market and governmental institutions. We propose to extend this account by drawing attention to the ways in which structural racism is also grounded and reproduced in everyday norms, cultural meanings and key colloquialisms and terminologies. In this sense, a focus on structural racism elevates specific behaviours, racially connotated or not, from the micro level to the macro level. A key manifestation of structural racism in Poland, we suggest, are the semantics of the term *Murzyn* and its female counterpart – *Murzynka*, which colloquially describe a Black person. To gain a better understanding of the deeper meanings of these terms, their etymology as well as circulation needs to be situated within a wider global and historical European context.

The etymology of *Murzyn/Murzynka* is traceable to the Latin word *Maurus*, which originated from ancient Rome to differentiate people with dark skin from Italians or the Greeks (Matar 2000). This prevailing representation of dark-skinned people acquired further meaning in the proto-Slavic word '*murin*' and in the old Polish word '*murzyć*' ('to stain' or 'to darken') (Linde 1809, 164–165). Originally, *Maurus* and its derivatives made no distinction between 'dark Arabs' and sub-Saharan Africans (Łaziński 2007). It was not until the sixteenth century that the word 'Negro' appeared in English, derived from the Latin *Niger* ('shiny black') and referring to people settled in the south of the Moors. However, the terminologies that were derived from both *Maurus* and *Niger* were often used interchangeably (Łaziński 2007).

As Black people made their ways to Polish territories through slavery, gift exchange, and warfare, the ancient accounts sketched above were modified to absorb voyaging Polish nobles' emerging fascination with 'exotic servants' (Tazbir 1997, 89). Tapping into the discourse of racial differentiation which at the time became firmly established across the colonial world, Polish elites' exoticisation imported 'the pan-European *moro* heads fashion onto the Polish soil' (Kowalcze-Pawlik 2020, 173). The early Polish theatrical performance, for example, played an important role in the understanding of *Murzyn*; most notably, the 1859 translation of Shakespeare's *Othello: The Moor of Venice,* referred to 'Moor' as *Murzyn* (Kowalcze-Pawlik 2020; Kłoskowska 1996). This would later be exacerbated by the early modern European as well as Polish travelogues with Eurocentric framing of Africa, its people and cultures.

Whilst a range of racial terms were used to describe Black people in English speaking contexts, the term 'Negro', most probably adopted from the Spanish and Portuguese, was coined as standard term in seventeenth to the early twentieth century. Even early twentieth century Black scholars such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington referred to Black people as 'Negroes' (Bennett 1970). From the outset, this had negative implications due to its association with racist variations of the N-word (Litwack 1979). Civil Rights and Black Power movements in the 1960s played an essential role in the

semiotic shift from 'Negro' to 'Black' and pioneering currently prevalent terms such as 'African American' (Smith 1992, 497).

Notwithstanding this history, the semantic evolution of 'Negro' to 'Black' is not without parallels to the use of *Murzyn* in Poland. In contemporary Poland, a society that is relatively white, a majority of people view *Murzyn/Murzynka* as a neutral word. For example, a Polish survey in 2007 showed three quarters of Poles attributed objective and neutral meanings to the term (CBOS 2007). At the same time, the term 'Black' (in Polish '*Czarny*') is viewed by many as more problematic than *Murzyn/Murzynka* – because of the meanings attributed to 'blackness' in Polish culture. In contrast, for many Black people in Poland, the term *Murzyn/Murzynka* invokes direct associations with the English term 'Negro/Negress'. Therefore, to them, it is offensive or inappropriate and they would rather opt for the label '*Czarny'* (Black). Rather than just asserting this point, it is important to map the trajectories and transitions of 'Negro' to 'Black', which allows us to grasp what *Murzyn/Murzynka* might signify in contemporary Poland and how its meanings have evolved over time.

The terminological debate, its relevance to Black identity, and its transitions have only started to emerge in Poland – this has to do with the specific historical trajectories and the small size of Black communities in the country. The absence of these early transitions in Poland, arguably, resulted in the conceptualisation of blackness being trapped within the archaic Polish term *Murzyn/Murzynka*. This was complicated by unfolding debates on European colonial projects and Poland's enduring colonial entanglements, whilst at the same time being partitioned by European empires, which led to its disappearance for over a century. Poland's participation in various imperial projects (Balogun 2022b), and its post-1918 colonial endeavours (Balogun 2018; Grzechnik 2020) are better understood as a way of asserting its 'place in western civilization' in relation to countries in Europe's West (Puchalski 2022, 262); these aspirations, however, connect neatly to the racialisation of Romani, Muslim, and Jewish communities in contemporary Poland.

Currently, Polish sociology seems to hardly engage with the above these colonial legacies, shifting of terminologies, the emergence of black social movements, or the role of new global alliances and political identifications arising from them. Without this global framing, it is difficult to comprehend the significance of a sub-Saharan African racial label beyond its current connotations in Poland. However, the transition from *Murzyn* to *Czarny* in Poland, similar to the changes from 'Negro' to 'Black' in the US and the UK, has been influenced strongly by new generations of Black/Mixed race Poles, born or raised in Poland, who considered the need for change in their social identification and signification. As Kowalcze-Pawlik (2020, 172) explains, the above historical accounts attested 'to the strength of the stereotyped negative representation of Africans in the Polish culture, long mediated through the Bible, medieval hagiographic accounts and readings in ancient history'.

'*Murzyn/Murzynka*' – rejection of a disdained character?

How, then, has the term *Murzyn/Murzynka* evolved in the Polish context? Since its appearance in the Polish parlance in the fourteenth century, *Murzyn/Murzynka* has been in use as label for people with dark skin. This framing as 'neutral', however,

needs to be read against the histories of European imperialism, which also reveal its racial connotations. A key example of its cultural prominence is the work of the Polish novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz's (1846-1916), which has been obligatory part of the curriculum in Polish schools in the twenteith and twenty-first centuries. Sienkiewicz won 1905 Nobel prize for literature and his classic 1911 Polish novel *W pustyni i w puszczy [In Desert and Wilderness*] has had significant influence on the representations of Black people. The novel indorses European colonial projects and reproduces at the time prevalent stereotypes of 'good but wild' black people, but also 'dangerously Other' Arabs and 'fanatical Muslims'. In his representation of non-whites as savages, Sienkiewicz presents whites, Europeans as bearers of civilisation.[2] Accordingly, as Kłoskowska's (1962) research from the 1950s and 1960s shows, Polish children equated blackness with representations such as 'savage, cruel and ugly'. These representations, as Nowicka (2018, 827) argues, do not significantly differ from the images that were circulating in Western Europe at the time. However, in Poland, they were 'perceived, transformed, and reproduced with a certain delay'. The racialised representation of *Murzyn/Murzynka* is also evident in the popular Polish expressions such as '*Murzyn zrobił swoje, murzyn może odejść*' (which is best translated as 'Once the 'Negro' has done his duty, the 'Negro' can go'). Such expression reproduces images of servitude that have become signifiers of blackness in the Polish imagination.

If one keeps the above examples as the reference point, then it is apparent that a status of inferiority is built into the broader racialised concept/identity of blackness that bears on the ambiguity of the term *Murzyn/Murzynka* (Gawlewicz 2016; also see Rzepnikowska 2022). What needs to be emphasised here is that once such perception and stereotypes are built into an understanding of an outsider, it becomes difficult to argue that *Murzyn/Murzynka* is a positive term, or that 'Negro' is not seen through the lens of enslavement. The etymology of *Murzyn/Murzynka* – what it stood for and how it has been expressed before and after its transition into the Polish parlance – points squarely at what Nowicka (2018, 825) describes as 'cultural repertoire' of Poles – an internalised set of knowledge, exposure and symbols shaped by education and formal or informal other discourses in Poland. All of this cannot be decoupled from a larger European context (see also Narkowicz 2022 this special issue).

The racial connotations of *Murzyn/Murzynka,* furthermore, are reinforced by the popular use and circulation of related racial slurs such as *czarnuch (*which can be translated as equivalent to the N-word), *czarna małpa* ('black monkey'), or *bambus* ('bamboo)' which still have considerable traction in everyday talk with reference to Black people (Mogilnicka 2022). All this leads to a suggestion 'that *Murzyn* is not a socially desirable term nowadays' (Średziński 2017, 131), as the term does not only describe someone from sub-Saharan African descent. It has pejorative ways of describing a disdained identity. Indeed, the label *Murzyn/Murzynka* is gradually becoming less acceptable in Poland. The reason for this, as Nowicka (2018) points out, ' … might be a sign of a newly acquired understanding of multiracial society or learning certain "rules of civility"' (Nowicka 2018, 833). Importantly, the rejection of *Murzyn/Murzynka* as a disdained identity is not only an attempt to change the racial label of Black people in

Poland, but mainly an attempt by young Black/Mixed race Poles to redefine themselves and to gain respect in a society that still perceives them through the lens of backwardness.

Methodological considerations

Ouranalysis draws on data obtained from an online video discussion – #DontCallMe-Murzyn – that appeared on YouTube in 2020 with only Black/Mixed race Polish women discussants. The online exchange provoked a larger, to this date unprecedented debate about racism in Poland. Until the emergence of this video, debates about race and racism in Poland were strongly gendered. Commentaries on race and the usage of the term *Murzyn* had been dominated by men of African descent representing the first-generation migrants in Poland with less focus on *Murzynka* – the racialised female equivalent of *Murzyn*. This leaves a cleavage in the active engagement with the issues of racialisation and reconceptualisation of blackness in Poland. Indeed, Black/Mixed race Polish women had been almost invisible in these challenges. The release of #DontCallMe-Murzyn attracked wide media attention and changed this landscape. This was made prominent by mainly the second-generation Poles – born or raised in Poland, mostly women of colour with Polish as their first language – now beginning to challenge the racist assumptions in Polish society (Diouf et al. 2011; Ohia-Nowak 2020; Balogun and Joseph-Salisbury 2021). Although the #DontCallMeMurzyn debate did not specifically focus on gender, we take into account how discussions about race are seamlessly gendered and sexualised (Crenshaw 1989; Collins 1996). These can best be grasped via perspectives on racism that pay attention to its individual, institutional, and macro structural features (Neville and Pieterse 2008).

These Polish women's accounts of their lived experiences allow us to spotlight counter-narrative as an essential tool in the analysis of race and racism in Poland. With this, we hope to show how dominant ideologies shape knowledge, lived experiences, and essentially how such ideologies are being challenged by Black/Mixed race Polish women. To this end, this study is designed to bring Black people's lived experience in Poland into a dialogue with an understanding of race and racism globally, whilst challenging collective ideologies that 'renders the voices of dispossessed and marginalised group members mute' (Ladson-Billings 1998, 13). In doing so, our study draws collectively on lived experiences of Black people in Poland brought to light through biographical narratives, counter-storytelling, scenarios, and parables (Solorzano 1997, 7). Utilising such a method allows us to reject notions of neutrality and exposes distorts epistemologies of Black people (Solorzano and Yosso 2002, 26).

Given the unconventional research design for this study, we drew on five criteria that structured our coding and analysis. (1) we ensure that #DontCallMeMurzyn attracted wide attention which in turn stimulates adequate discussion about race and racism in Poland; (2) we focus on counter-storytelling technique that challenges the white conventional narratives; (3) the language of the discussion was Polish and the discussants are Poles (born or grew up in Poland); (4) the discussion focused on racism directed toward Black people in Poland; and; (5) the period selected captures the peak of the BLM campaign in Poland and globally. Although the video is in the public domain and could be accessed freely, we contacted the discussants and obtained permission to use the video in our analysis. The video appears in two parts; our analysis focuses on

the first part which gives an account of race and racism in Poland. As we are aware of the limits of this dataset, we additionally draw on published research on race and racism in Poland (Balogun 2018; 2020; Ohia-Nowak 2020; Jaskulowski and Pawlak 2020) and public commentaries (RJP 2020; Bosomtwe 2020) that emerged around the same period as the online discussion.

Familiar and repetitive lifespan of race and racism

In this section, we turn to examining the ways in which people of colour have recently contested their racialised representation, and the wider issues their protest raises for our understanding of race and racism in Poland. In doing so, we draw on key insights from Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Collins 1996) that rearticulate the marginalised lived experiences of the five Black/Mixed race Polish women (Ogi, Noemi, Sara, Aleksandra, and Marta) in the aforementioned video. Critical race scholars such as Goldberg (2009) have highlighted that ideas and practices of racialisation are highly contextual – both in terms of geographic and temporal context. This framing highlights the need to foreground an understanding of racialisation that operates distinctively across time and space. We thereby highlight that a critical race perspective is relevant in Poland as in many countries where experiences of racism are under-theorised (Gillborn 2008).

Specifically, we take inspiration from Solorzano and Yosso's (2002) 'counter-storytelling narrative' that foregrounds people of colour's biographical accounts in order to counter the narratives of the dominant group. This conceptual framing brings into view the racialised assumptions within the cultural heritage and the ways in which such assumptions are later transferred into the public institutions (Johnson 2015, 235). Drawing on this particular aspect of CRT helps to highlight many forms of racism – intentional, unintentional, unconscious, micro, macro, institutional, blatant, and subtle – that run through the lived experience of people of colour (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). This reveals how #DontCallMeMurzyn draws attention to the ways in which racism is structural in Poland – rather than an individual aberration. Hereby, we rely on these women's experiences as 'the voice of people of color' (Ladson-Billings 1998, 14) that sketches out the representation of Black people within the Polish culture.

To sketch the meanings attributed to the term *Murzyn/Murzynka* in contemporary Poland, we present individual vignettes as a tapestry of life experience that spans from a very early age to adult and professional life. In doing so, we build on an understanding of everyday racism (Essed 1991) in the vignettes provided by the five Black/Mixed race Polish women, as familiar and repetitive lifespan of race and racism. It is important not to conflict everyday racism with traditional structural and interpersonal racisms. The logic of everyday racism provides a lens through which we can demonstrate how racism is integrated into 'everyday situations through practices (cognitive and behavioural) that activate underlying power relations' (Essed 1991, 50). The logic allows us to observe racist ideas that are integrated into practices of everyday life and the ways in which they impact people who experience them. As will be demonstrated, 'practices with racist implications become in themselves familiar and repetitive', and 'underlying racial and ethnic relations are actualized and reinforced through these routine or familiar practices in everyday situations' (Essed 1991, 50).

To examine the familiarity and repetitiveness of race and racism, we start with Ogi, one of the online video discussants, who was brought up in Poland but now lives elsewhere in Europe. Whenever Ogi comes back to Poland, the familiar and repetitive racist encounters experienced by her family remind Ogi of her kindergarten experiences as a Black child growing up in Gdansk:

> I remember when I was a kid, I loved it in Poland, but other kids didn't want to play with me in the playground. Some kids used to come and touch me and checked if there is anything on their hands after touching me … because of *Murzynek Bambo*[3] – they thought it's a dirt. What has this rhyme thought us?

Often considered a mere poem that neutrally introduces Polish children to non-white populations, in Ogi's view, *Murzynek Bambo* (a popular nursery rhyme) serves as a lens through which Ogi was racialised and stigmatised from a very early age. For non-Polish readers, it is worth bringing into view the character of '*Murzynek Bambo*' to gain a better understanding of Ogi's counter-narrative and her rejection of *Murzyn* and *Murzynka* as disdained characters. In Julian Tuwim's 1930s popular poem, *Bambo*, an equivalent representation of *Sambo*, is presented as delighted savage-kid in Africa. As a kid, *Bambo* is often afraid of bathing as he is concerned that his black skin might turn white. Whilst the specificities and peculiarities of Tuwim's intention may never be known, what remains striking is the similarity between the Polish '*Bambo*' and its English/American equivalent '*Sambo*', the classic racialised black character that emerged within Helen Bannerman's *The Story of Little Black Sambo* in 1899 in the United States. The book was circulated widely in Britain, France, Germany, and Spain in the 1800s, prepared to capture the attention of many white children during storytelling. This would later be appealing in Poland, especially at elementary schools, where people of sub-Saharan African descent are reduced to the image of *Bambo* (Moskalewicz 2005).

In Western Europe, race and racism are often discussed through colonial experiences (see Bhambra 2022; Benson 2021), in CEE, including Poland, this remains a blind spot (Nowicka 2018, 825). Ogi explains that *Murzynek Bambo* has never been problematised as part of the larger colonial – immigration – modernisation reductionist experience, but often celebrated as a nursey rhyme with neutral or even 'positive' connotations which mask its racialised logics.

During the discussion, Sara, another participant, also recalled early experiences of exclusion based on skin colour differentiation and the characterisation of *Murzynek Bambo*:

> I was five years old and in the kindergarten I wanted to play in the doll's house to which one could also enter. There was a girl from my group … I wanted to enter this house and she closed the door and said: 'We do not let *Murzyneks* in'. She was five years old! Where did she get that from?

Contrary to Kłoskowska's (1962) positive view of *Murzynek Bambo* that is assumed to help breaking down negative attitudes towards Black people in Poland, Sara's lived experience shows the poem is not at all innocuous. In her view, the poem introduced the negative category of *Murzyn/Murzynka* to children's everyday literature which eventually exacerbated racial stereotypes in the absence of frequent contact with Black people in Poland. Sara builds on the above racialisation through another lived experience as a teenage girl growing up in Torun:

> I remember when I was 14–15 years old and I was walking on the street in Torun listening to the music, a guy approached me and said: 'So what, you black pig?' I didn't know what to do, whether I should run away or answer him back but I remember I just looked at him and walked away, as I didn't stand any chance in case if he wanted to do something to me. But I remember when I got home, I started crying as I was so terrified.

Sara describes the above scenario as having to deal with aggression, but her teenage experience is best understood when read through racial microaggression – a phenomenon often played down in Poland. To grasp the weight of the above scenario, one needs to understand how racial microaggressions operate and what they do to a racialised teenage body. It is important to view racial microaggressions as verbalised and un-verbalised assaults directed towards Black people. Often subtle, automatic or unconscious, microaggressions are loaded with racial codes that interconnect gender, language, immigration status, and phenotype. As evident in Sara's reactions, racial microaggressions cumulatively take a psychological and physiological toll on the people identified as non-white (Kohli, Solorzano, and Solorzano 2012). For many white Poles, these forms of aggression are unnoticeable because they appear micro and therefore end up being positioned as insignificant. The reality is, as Sara demonstrates, racial microaggressions are part of the 'structural and systemic forms of racism that operate in everyday racist acts' (Perez Huber and Solorzano 2015, 301–302) and often historical, hence, the comment directed towards Sara elsewhere – '*Oh! In Africa you don't have things like this*'. According to Nowicka (2018), Sara's experience is common in Poland, it is a part of the 'Polish' community of knowledge for which it is self-evident that verbal assaults are not racism and a racist is a person who is violent in direct encounters with people of other races (which are thus constructed as a feat), a view which is anchored in the Polish cultural repertoire (Nowicka 2018, 834). To be clear, Sara is a Black/white mixed-race Pole who perhaps never visited Africa. However, her non-white skin automatically makes Sara a racialised subject. It is the unmarked and unnamed everyday racial microaggressions that created the social path through which 'black bodies', such as Sara's, are perceived as 'space invaders' when they do not represent the 'racial somatic norm' within a society. It is important to pay attention to how the culture of exclusion operates within Polish society here. Quite often it is through the naturalisation and recognition of white bodies as belonging within these spaces, 'while others are marked out as trespassers, who are, in accordance with how both spaces and bodies are imagined (politically, historically and conceptually), circumscribed as being "out of place"' (Puwar 2004, 8; Yancy 2017; Narkowicz and Pędziwiatr 2018; Balogun 2019).

The point that these five Black/Mixed race Polish women were reacting against is that of a 'standpoint' – a place from which white people look at themselves, others, and the society (Frankenberg 1993, 1). It is a standpoint that perceives *Murzyn/Murzynka* as someone with disdained characteristics. There is no shortage of such positioning in everyday Polish popular expressions:

> Soap won't help a Murzyn
>
> It's a waste to try to whiten a Murzyn
>
> Even after a hundred washes, a Murzyn stays a Murzyn

To employ someone as if he was a Murzyn

To work like a Murzyn

To do something like a Murzyn …

Dumb as a Murzyn

All these everyday expressions linked with the metaphoric of dirt and backwardness (Ohia-Nowak 2020) are part of a larger 'cultural repertoire' of Poles (Nowicka 2018). They mark the colour-line and form an indication that the assumed position of servitude assigned to Black people by default often has universal effects.

In her account, Aleksandra shares experiences of racism as an adult in Poland:

> … it was difficult for me to speak about it and it's still hard because some people are saying 'why are you talking about this? There are people who have more problems than you'. So I am happy that we can talk about it today and … showing people that this is a real problem and real people can experience it.

The issue that Aleksandra finds difficult to talk about is not about being Black and Polish. Like many mixed-race Poles, Aleksandra is aware of the importance of Polishness to her Black identity (Balogun 2020). What Aleksandra is particularly reacting against is the everyday racist name-calling that is attached to such identity, and the denial of racism that attempts to erase such experience. According to Aleksandra, such denials are often experienced through many white Poles that play down the impact of racism on the lives of non-white Poles. As Aleksandra puts it, issues of race and racism are never seen as serious problems in Poland. Contrary to the societal assumptions that racism is perpetrated by soccer fans, skinheads or committed in the night under the influence of alcohol (Ząbek 2009), Aleksandra points out a counter-narrative to this assumption. She recalls a particular situation during the day when she was approached by a white boy on a bike and without any interaction or engagement with the boy, he felt that he had to call Aleksandra a *Murzynek* just for the satisfaction of it. It was a situation that made Aleksandra to appear like a 'stray' black body who has entered a 'White Space' – a white neighbourhood – where, 'stray' blacks always have to deal with unreceptive audience (Anderson 2015). In this scenario, it becomes obvious to Aleksandra that *Murzyn/Murzynka* carries a belittling meaning that leaves her upset. For her, '*it was a proof that racism still exists in Europe*' and often grounded in 'a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed' (Frankenberg 1993, 1).

It is all too easy to assume that older generations serve as agents of race and racism. In another account provided by Aleksandra, she explains how issues of race and racism are fluid and often move from one generation to another, as she shares her son's experience at a playground with white Polish children:

> My son was playing with sand and there was a boy who said: 'oh look at him – Murzynek Bambo let's not play with him', but there was another boy who came over and said: 'hey you can't call somebody like that he's got darker skin because of pigment. You know what pigment is?'

Although Aleksandra welcomes the timely intervention by the other Polish child, nonetheless, the occlusion of race (Lentin 2014; Nowicka 2018) often results in the

denial of existence of racism and has meant that many white Polish pupils are not prepared for education about racial differentiation 'because their textbooks reinforce the innocence of whiteness' (Leonardo 2004, 140). The lack of attention given to race and a failure to engage with the traces left behind by acts of racism underpin the lived experience of racism in Poland. What Aleksandra is trying to counter is an explicit system of elision, neglecting and denial that accounts for the erasure of lived experiences of racism (Joseph-Salisbury 2018).

Lastly, Marta connects all the above experiences to a broader issue that is bound to have significant effect on professional adult life:

> Where I live now, I haven't experienced racism, but I know that in my career, as a lawyer, it may be more difficult for me to progress because of the colour of my skin.

The point that Marta is signalling here is that of institutional racism or systemic racism (Feagin and Elias 2013; Murji 2007) that draws on an assumption about Black people's capacities. Considering everything that had happened to Marta in relation to experiences of racism, she is concerned that systemic racism could be foundational to and factored into major institutions in Poland. This speaks directly to the argument that racism witnessed on the streets of Poland cannot be decoupled from the mechanisms of exclusion that Marta may face as a lawyer with black skin in Poland. For Marta, this means that she is faced with the continuation of the old assumptions and stereotypes that are bound to affect Black people within major institutions. In fundamental terms, Marta is presenting a broader picture in which 'systemic racism has routinely reproduced major societal institutions and networks that uphold asymmetrically structured material and social-psychological relations among racial groups' (Feagin and Elias 2013, 936).

Conclusion

Collectively, the racialised experiences recounted by Ogi, Noemi, Sara, Aleksandra, and Marta may appear as individual vignettes, this article has shown that they can be better understood through the recent global circulation of BLM mobilisation. We cannot grasp these lived experiences without drawing attention to the depth of whiteness – a conceptual framework that needs to be developed more for the analysis of race and racism in Poland. It is the consequences of being normal that commonly mark 'white' as unproblematic where blackness emerges as the 'priori object for debate where 'race' and racism are concerned' (Hylton 2009, 65). In this sense, the omnipresence of 'white = normal' becomes the 'default, unmarked, normative position' (Carrington 2008, 427). There is a particularity of whiteness in the Polish context, and it is through the understanding of the particularity of Polishness and whiteness that one comes to see the lens through which terms such as *Murzyn/Murzynka* need to be understood, and which account for the rejection of these terms by many Black people in Poland. Whiteness, in the Polish context, takes for granted and codifies a sense of non/belonging for Black Polish people. This article has highlighted how their bodies are stripped of their Polishness and simultaneously rendered invisible 'as Polish'. From this standpoint, the dominant discourse which constructs whiteness and white people as normal concurrently represents the Other as abnormal, strange, and out of place. This also exacerbates the racialisation of migrants and stirs moral panics about migration

in Poland, particularly visible during 2015-2016 migration crisis and in the current Polish-Belarussian border crisis.

Beyond this, the article has drawn on articulations of the lived experiences of Black/ Mixed race Polish women who refused to be invisibilised, and instead draw public attention to racial microaggressions that Black people experience in Polish society. In addition, the fact that the discussion in the video was communicated in fluent Polish language – the native tongue of the Black/Mixed race women – is very important here. In this way, their testimonies cannot be categorised as 'the problem of immigrants' and individual issues that could be dismissed, but as part of their politics of resistance and an attempt to assert their Polishness. Beyond its empirical contribution, the article foregrounds the conceptual framing of the term *Murzyn/Murzynka*. This particular aspect of the discussion has drawn further public attention to the perception and the ways in which the word *Murzyn/Murzynka* could be deployed. It has also prompted reaction from one of the leading Polish linguists, Prof. Jerzy Bralczyk, who once defended the neutrality of *Murzyn/Murzynka* but recently recognised that 'In the past, Poland did not have too many dark-skinned citizens, and we didn't encounter them so often, so I guess there was also no one who might feel offended, but the situation has changed, which is why it should be taken into account in our dictionary' (Bralczyk cited in Wądołowska 2020; Łaziński 2020).[4] Importantly, the weight of the public interest in the discussion has also encouraged Rada Jezyka Polskiego (RJP), the Polish Council responsible for the evaluations and assessments of Polish language in public communication, to hold a deliberation on the usage of the word *Murzyn/Murzynka* (RJP 2020). In March 2021, the Council officially announced that the word *Murzyn/Murzynka*, used to refer to Black people is no longer neutral, but 'burdened with negative connotations' and as such 'should be avoided in the media, official administration and at schools' (Ferfecki 2021). This new political gesture has attracted interest among academics and activists in Poland and marked an important advancement on racial discourses in the country.

Notes

1. The video discussion #DontCallMeMurzyn is in two parts. We focus mainly on #DontCall-MeMurzyn CZ.1 (Part One) which is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xwIfFRmJM0c.
2. It is worth noting that before 2020 the presence of Sienkiewicz's novel in the Polish schools' curriculum has been questioned and challenged. This demand was revived during the BLM protests by a White Polish teacher, Katarzyna Fiołek, who took a decolonial initiative by asking for the removal of the novel from the compulsory reading list for primary school pupils. Nonetheless, the teacher was forced to withdraw her petition following the wave of hate e-mails sent to her from some members of the public (see Bosomtwe 2020).
3. For recent dramatisation of the character of 'Murzynek Bambo', see the following video – https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L6hiy4396iE.
4. Also see Interview with Prof. Bralczyk – BezMaskiVideo. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8aovH3UwPWE&ab_channel=BezMaskiVideo.

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