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Understanding Encounters for Urban Media Studies: Civic Intercourse, Screen Technologies, and Cultural Difference

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This article argues for the multidimensional relevance of encounters among strangers for urban media studies. Establishing links across media and urban studies, I explore how media practices coconstitute encounters as situations that make up urbanity. The article also analyzes posts that people produced in response to xenoracist assaults in public spaces in UK cities following the 2016 Brexit referendum. My qualitative reading of select posts with an ethnographic component, demonstrates ways in which quick posting capacities of social media via portable devices resonated with the transience of street encounters and thus allowed users to reflect on aspects of street life that typically go unnoticed. At the same time, engaging with social media screens provided users with a space of distancing from the troubled scenes and transferred the contentious events to the networked, and pacifying, surveillance of the mediated city.

Keywords: encounter, media, city, screen, mobility, visibility

Modern and postmodern urbanity has made public space an always–already mediated affair. Constructed by social infrastructures such as language, symbolism, and technology, street life is pervaded by "street etiquette" (Anderson, 1995), but is also layered by competing forms of communication such as holding private mobile phone calls, glancing at flashing advertisements, or catching daily headlines from newsstands. As is increasingly evident from the uses of mobile media in activities such as protests, the role of the citizen in the mediated city has changed from being a witness or participant in public life to also being a networked disseminator of information (Myerson, 2001). In this article, I seek to identify typical communicative forms in people's constructions of conflictual urban encounters in social media and the relevance of such practices for understanding encounters among strangers in the city during tumultuous social events, such as the 2016 Brexit referendum (on the United Kingdom's leaving, or "exiting" from, the European Union).

The outburst of citizens' social media posts about xenoracist, mainly verbal, assaults in public spaces of UK cities against racial and ethnic minorities that followed the victory of the Leave vote ascertained the relevance of what I identify as two essential communicative aspects of (post)modern urbanity: *embodied encounters* among strangers as vital, although transient, moments when difference is established, and *screening* as a key urban sense-making mechanism that stems from the historical connections of cinematic

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coconstruction of built space and mobile perception, increasingly supplemented with networked data flows. Encounters, embodied and screened, remain difficult to arrest for description. Thus, they also tend to be considered trivial nonevents of little relevance for understanding important questions. However, when the news broke in mainstream media that the outcome of the referendum propelled a 57% national average increase of reports of antimigrant hate crimes in comparison to the same week a year earlier,[1] encounters suddenly became the most-cited kind of event.

Despite being underrepresented in popular or academic records of street life, street assaults are a usual ingredient of urban experience. These events normally get silenced by the clutter of mingling in the midst of public life, but they can include an array of flying racist and sexist comments, which bring into people's awareness certain traits of their perceived social position. These brief moments articulate wider pressures as well as providing space to intervene. As one female user posted during the Brexit referendum, "Can't say it's been fun differentiating the 'I want to screw you' stares from the 'I want to kill you' ones these past 2 days." In the postreferendum period, unusual was the civic interest to evacuate the encounters such as the above, via networked handheld devices, from the flow of pedestrian traffic, hence making encounters available for wider scrutiny. Also new was the unprecedented visibility of encounters, which was part of the intense sharing of posts concerning the referendum (e.g., via networking references such as #EURef). In other words, the interest in Brexit underpinned attention to street assaults as the nation questioned what might come next after a significant change of its political system (many users posted about assaults primarily to ask which "direction" the country was "going"). As the attention to the referendum started to fade, assaults too gradually withdrew to the backstage of public attention rather than disappearing from public space altogether. My overall aim here is to understand how screen-assisted responses to conflictual urban encounters partook in such street situations, which remains an underinvestigated area of research. More specifically, I explore how conflictual encounters were constituted through social media during the heightened attention within several days after the referendum, and what this specific form of presentation said about how the temporary collapse of social order in the urban public space was understood and responded to by witnesses and victims. By doing so, I also seek to offer readers some unanticipated connections between urban and media studies literature that might support further research in this area.

My alignment of a concern with mobile media practices with debates about encounters in the city and urban articulations of (trans)national events such as Brexit (i.e., involving diverse scales, modes of communication, and academic disciplines) draws from what I recognize as benefits of a non–media-centric perspective in media studies (Krajina, Moores, & Morley, 2014; Morley, 2017). Rather than treating context as a passive background to media issues, the non–media-centric approach assumes an active role of context in the constitution of media phenomena. To elucidate the significance of context, I first discuss mobile communication practices alongside the culture of urban encounters and certain sociological aspects of Brexit. I move on to reflect on my sampling and methods of analysis. I opted for a qualitative framework. Although limited in scope by convenience sampling and post ante observations, my thematic content analysis of select posts was combined with brief ethnographic visits to some of the public sites so as to provide further depth to the collected data. Finally, demonstrating thematic patterns across the analyzed posts, and going back

[1] In 2013/2014, on average, 130 racist incidents were reported daily in England and Wales (Institute of Race Relations, 2018).

to my concern with the potential of screened encounters to act as mode of intervention in conflictual situations, I identify a dual role of social media practices in the postreferendum crisis, namely, *disclosure* and *distancing*. While extending the sphere of technologically mediated engagement in public life from the home (formerly the primary site of media use) into the street (historically the stage for popular sentiments), social media practices produce the city as a space of heightened visibility and reflection, but also as a space where deeper conditions that led to crisis remain unattended. The handheld screen provided users an opportunity to disclose "unacceptable" events, but also to distance themselves from the perceived threat of the public space and debate issues in safer realms of virtual space (ending posts with "just saying . . ."), thus deferring further confrontation of position.

Tracing the Urban, the National, and the European in Brexit

It is in city streets that one can observe how national or global issues matter empirically: This is where they materialize and where their ideological contradictions are articulated. The nation's dominant versions of history are staged through urban toponyms and monuments that provide a taken-for-granted semiotic background to people's daily rounds (Vretenar & Krajina, 2017). The underlying selective logics of order, pertaining chiefly to national(istic) distinctions between insiders and outsiders, become particularly explicit during exceptional events such as riots and protests, when usual services are interrupted, behavior is more carefully monitored, and trespassers are sought. In the United Kingdom, after a period of a right populist campaign, national media bias for Leave (during a "highly polarized" coverage, which "in aggregate terms . . . produced a 'coverage gap' of 60%:40% in favour of OUT campaigners"; Centre for Research in Communication and Culture, 2016, para. 6), along with the public image (not widely supported by different empirical studies; see Bhambra, 2017) of "protest" voting of the long neglected inland White working class (see Fishwick, 2016), on June 23, 2016, the Leave camp won, by a margin of 1.9%. The Leave victory scandalized the country internationally (e.g., Zaschke, 2017), as well as causing global concerns for neoliberal ("borderless") trade.

Major UK cities took a contrasting role in the Brexit referendum. They predominantly (all but Birmingham) voted Remain, but they had the lowest voter turnout as well as witnessing unusually large amounts of xenoracist harassment among citizens. Examples of disobedient cities, which rise above the national sentiment, can be found in Istanbul's vote in the 2017 referendum against the proposed changes of the Turkish Constitution or San Francisco's and New York's professed opposition to President Trump's antimigrant policies in 2016. Such cases testify to the vitality of the conception of the city where conviviality may lead to progressive impulses. At the same time, cities remain sites of unprecedented social inequalities, both within and compared with other cities in the same nations. This working contradiction—the city as both oppressive and disobedient—was particularly visible in the postreferendum social media posts in UK cities.

The Brexit referendum brought together a variety of mobilities, reminding us that urban encounters are meetings of entities on certain paths: geopolitical, cultural, and technological. Post-1989 Europe saw extensive enlargement of the European Union toward the East of this forever incomplete continent to include countries from the former Soviet bloc and former Yugoslavia into the space of shared market and governance. Yet Eastern countries saw only partial (reluctant) democratization and modest economic development (people in the East still earning only half of what their fellow Western citizens make). This

systemic inequality within the European Union drew workers from the European Union's East to supply services for demanding global businesses in the European Union's West. When they arrived, the historical, centuries-old notion of the East as backward and threatening was reactivated. The East (especially the Balkans) is traditionally dubbed the non-Catholic "backyard" of Europe (White but not quite; Todorova, 1997; see below on "gradations of Whiteness") whose European identity is seen in the West as forever aspirational and never foundational (Krajina, 2016).

Meanwhile, the social group arguably most discussed in this context (although certainly not the only one to consider), the United Kingdom's unemployed within the White working class, developed deep disappointment with its decades-long invisibility in the national agenda, at least since Margaret Thatcher's wide-ranging policies of privatization (Hall, 2011). Moreover, the working class was invited to rehearse a version of "neoliberal cosmopolitanism" as an unreflective celebration of ethnic diversity (benefiting those who can afford mobility and flee crowded cities for vacation), as opposed to "democratic cosmopolitanism" in which consequences of migration for those without recourse to mobility could be deliberated (Gilbert, 2017). Right populism managed to persuade segments of the population, as they became poorer and thus more defensive (Morley in Drakulić, Morley, Krajina, & Blanuša, 2016, p. 223), that the source of their problems was Eastern European laboring migrants, whose presence allegedly exerted pressure on limited public resources, rather than the United Kingdom's political elites, who had been cutting public spending for decades.[2] The uneasy intersectionality of race and class offers itself as a trait of historical continuity particularly when the Brexit assaults are read against Hall's important comments about the simultaneous confluence and irreducibility of race to class. Writing about 1970s moral panics in UK cities concerning "Black muggers," Hall (1978/2017) argues that "instead of confronting the conditions and problems which indeed do face white and black in the urban areas, in an economy in recession, they can be projected through race" (p. 156). As Back and Sinha's (2016) empirical research suggests, living "in the midst of racism's ruins" of postcolonial urban spaces such as London, strangers develop unanticipated capacities to live side by side, developing a sense of "worldliness beyond local confines" (p. 525). In the wake of Brexit, race (with a "xeno" prefix) was reactivated to serve as a screen onto which unresolved antagonisms could be "projected."

Xenoracism ("racism in substance, but 'xeno' in form"; Sivanandan, cited in Fekete, 2001, para. 1) emerged as a description of Europe's post-1989 policy treatment of refugees. I find the concept useful to describe the treatment that many laboring migrants from Eastern Europe received in parts of Western Europe following the post-1989 expansion of the European Union and its single market. More specifically, the postreferendum assaults had something to do with the historical role of race in postwar class antagonisms in the United Kingdom. "Populist racism" and racially motivated moral panics against disempowered minorities have been employed by the elites and the media in moments of crisis to postpone confronting class- and race-based inequalities (Hall, 1978/2017, pp. 153, 156). As a "floating signifier," race was made into a medium of the conflict, whereby "blacks become . . . the signifiers of the crisis" (Hall, 1978/2017, p. 152). This time, the blame was not only directed at UK-born non-Whites, but also against

[2] In McKenzie's (2017) ethnographic research, some working-class Leave voters suggested that the referendum was primarily their chance to finally get heard. Indeed, the mediated public sphere in the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, is characterized by "public disconnection": People have views, but politicians usually do not listen (Couldry, Livingstone, & Markham, 2010).

Eastern Europeans (Whites with work permits and a strong accent, alerting us to the issue of "gradations of Whiteness" that begs further consideration, particularly in the context of "postrace" discourse, which proclaims that "to speak of racism is to be excessive"; Lentin, 2018, p. 410). Thus, the problem of unaddressed inequalities is quite familiar, but the context is new, and it again galvanized strangers' coexistence in UK cities, including the order of daily passing by.

Cities of Encounters

Although repetitive and seemingly inconsequential, daily encounters among passers-by are of considerable significance for the constitution of modern urban society, politics, and the public sphere. Notwithstanding the relevance of urban infrastructure and institutions, it is people's endless crossing of each other's paths that produces the city as "a being together of strangers" (Young, 1995, p. 268). The same argument is traceable all the way from relational ontology of the self to major issues pertaining to politics of national belonging. One is constituted only when one recognizes the other as different from the self. Etymologically referring to that which is "contrary or opposed to," the encounter can be a significant event because it indexes sites in public space where "limits are marked and borders are drawn" (Wilson, 2017, pp. 452, 456). In that sense, encounter is vital to the constitution of the nation as a space of countless selves, a space that is produced by historically contingent definitions of insiders and outsiders. As Ahmed (2000) reminds us, "The work of 'the nation' is done as much through the everyday encounters in public life, as it is done through the political machinery of the nation-state" (pp. 98, 101). It follows that the public is never a priori, but posteriori (Marchart, 2004/2005). The public results from daily meetings among strangers, which can lead to improvised forms of tolerance, agonistic disagreement, or assault and violence.

Urban encounters have adopted different, yet complementary meanings as analytical tropes in urban and cultural analysis and might be crudely identified as to do with the following key dimensions. First, there is the *aesthetic* dimension, whereby voyeuristic, yet reserved urban interaction defined the specific modern (Western European) urban sensitivity. It involved *flaneuring*, the blasé attitude, and technological environments of display and mobility. Commenting on the then-new spectacular spaces of collective consumption such as the 19th-century arcades, Benjamin (1999) defines streets as "the dwelling place of the collective" (p. 879). Urban spaces figured as aestheticized landscapes to observe rather than situations to intervene in. Second, encounters assume a *political* dimension, detected by writers such as Sennett (1993), who see the cultivation of the nonconflictual (antipolitical) private gaze in the modern city as degrading the confrontational potential of public life. Sennett (1994) also argues that cities of gaze always hold potential for such exercise; within "a second of response looking at snapshots of life" (p. 358), passers-by may express critical interest in how others like themselves are coping. Greetings or practical arrangements of neighborly transaction (leaving one's apartment keys with neighbors) without long-term obligation or deep intimacy maintain civic life and can even help develop a vivid urban community (Jacobs, 1972). In former imperial urban centers in particular, such as London, encounters are increasingly recognized as indices of "throwntogetherness" (Massey, 2005). This central characteristic of postcolonial urbanity can underpin contingent and undecided forms of civic improvisation of coexistence that can lead to (conflictual or peaceful) mingling and unmanageability of identities, or "conviviality," as opposed to calculable, policy-oriented (top-down) conceptions of "multiculture," based on categorical assumptions of pre-established and monolithic ethnic, national, or racial traits (Back & Sinha, 2016; Gilroy, 2004) or "communitarian, groupist precepts"

(Valluvan, 2016, p. 218). A third dimension concerns dynamics of *interaction* discernible during encounters as microsocial situations, which I discuss further below. Encounters are conceived more as procedurally/technically constituted sites where site-specific and nonverbal rules of functional street conduct, such as avoidance of collision, are reproduced, hence underpinning a wider sense of order (Goffman, 1972).

These key frames of deciphering encounters—aesthetical, political, and interactional—share the assumption about the interdependence of actors in public space for how the urban society turns out. As Wilson (2017) reminds us, cities are not merely the stage or location of encounters; cities emerge from encounters (p. 453). And each of the three modalities outlined above has relevance for understanding the intersubjective construction of public space and its constitution in visual cultures: Encounters do not always require physical or even verbal exchange, but they have to do with matters of visibility and always lead to something.

Encounters can speak volumes even when passed over in silence: Being looked down by someone and recognizing the look as a look from above, at a bus stop or at the store, are moments that express social hierarchies in ways that words can fall short to relay. Thus, we might think of assaults in UK cities less as a worrying sign of a sudden (or "shocking," as media put it) collapse of an otherwise harmonious society, which is conceivable only as utopia (Young, 1995, p. 259). Rather, the assaults are better seen as belonging to some actually existing form of order, although one that is unjust and normally visible only to the powerless. A violent gaze or comment might not disable pedestrian traffic entirely, but it can say something to outsiders about how they are seen to exist: It establishes their difference. In these semivisible situations, glances meet, exchange something along the way, and part, as if their paths never crossed—just like in popular filmic scenes of "drug deals" when "two people . . . hand something to each other and walk away in different directions."[3] Encounters bind perfect strangers into a society and they can serve to articulate social crises, particularly when recorded in displaced, technologically mediated form, via social media.

Technological Mediation of Encounters in the City

In the mediated city, encounters switch from actual to virtual, and vice versa, routinely, as the citizen navigates urban spaces. In my study on everyday encounters with public screens (Krajina, 2014), an elderly local female respondent professed a positive sense of witnessing smiling upon encountering "happy" faces on a billboard advertisement for a popular soft drink in a street in London, in which she had increasingly felt an outsider, amid "cold" faces of younger and upscale people moving into the gentrified neighborhood. Another respondent (from unpublished materials of the same project), a younger female migrant, was horrified, while finding her way through the same street, by realistic images of children lying on the pavement after being hit by a runaway car, which she had noticed plastered on a phone box (in a campaign against speeding). For her, this encounter was a warning about a likely event, threatening to disrupt her newly established flow of daily life at any moment.

"Three people have been arrested following an apparent incident of racial abuse on a tram in Manchester early this morning. The identities of those in this video have been obscured by Channel 4 News for legal reasons," the mainstream news read on social media on June 28, 2016. It referred to an urban encounter

[3] Cited from unpublished materials pertaining to Krajina (2014).

documented and forwarded to the media by a witness via a mobile phone, which have become a popular form of citizen journalism. Civic records of city life are not an entirely new phenomenon. The United Kingdom's Mass Observation movement in the early 20th century documented aspects of public life that were deemed underrepresented in the press. Elsewhere, strangers posted advertisements after encountering strangers for prospects of getting back in touch. Urban photographic and cinematographic records of street life served urbanists and ordinary passers-by alike to "tame" the perceived chaos of the then novel urban life, involving transport facilities, high-rise architecture, and neon lights, by putting it all into manageable perspective (McQuire, 2008). Videotaping provided a subsidiary form of surveillance, as it became famously exemplified in the 1991 case of the police beating of a Black taxi driver Rodney King in Los Angeles, which was recorded and sent to a local television station. Widespread development of CCTV surveillance systems further encompassed the criminalization of site-specifically defined "suspicious" behavior, often resulting in the policing of peaceful "outsiders."

Social media on user-friendly mobile phone interfaces tapped into the specifically modern urban ("swift and transient," following Baudelaire) character of public intercourse. Mobile media capacities (locative imaging and messaging) allowed the sharing of information about activity and location to other physically absent but connected users with minimal delay. This personal and mobile point of connection between media and the city served the development of sites dedicated specifically to civic documenting of daily life such as "Humans of New York," dating applications showing physical distance from matching profiles of users or applications developed for civic alarming of the police about witnessed crime. Users' sharing of information about events in public via social media can alert mainstream media too, offering aspects of the situation that do not fit typical black-and-white media portrayals of actors as either heroes or villains. During a period of heightened public concerns over alleged racially motivated police violence in certain American cities, social media documented not only the conflicts, but also positive encounters between White policepersons and Black residents. One post by a young Black female resident told a story about one such serendipitous meeting in a local deli that ended with a mutual acknowledgment that "it's not easy being either of us right now" and a supportive hug.

Methodological Procedures and Challenges

Although social media are now usual aspects of daily life for many citizens in the affluent parts of the urban world, analyzing the posts in the context of urban life poses a number of methodological challenges. These include sampling (data mining of a filtered data set or convenience sample), accounting for the technical and rhetorical elements (the medium-specific cap on length, typical language picked up by subsequent users to define the situation), and most useful techniques of interpretation (algorithmic clustering by keywords or more conventional thematic coding of each post as text). In making these decisions, I took into account issues that have emerged since social media posts have become part of the media studies agenda, which include sound skepticism about whether semiaccessible data mining (extracting all posts that share keywords or location) via privatized data sets, without sufficient sensitivity to connotational meanings, can ever promise reliable sampling (boyd & Crawford, 2012). Furthermore, users can choose fake names and avatars, turn the location recognition on and off or set a false one, or link up their post or not to a certain keyword clustering (hashtag; boyd & Crawford, 2012).

Thus, seeking a representative sample based on a keyword, such as location, would have produced a sample as arbitrary as any other. Only half of the posts I analyzed featured a reference to a toponym and even those were not standardized or easy to recognize by a machine. Posts included anything from postcodes (e.g., "N16"), regions (e.g., "midlands"), and neighborhoods (e.g., "Brockley"), to train stations (e.g., "Kings Cross") and cities (e.g., "Sheffield"). Hashtags, another usual cue for recognition, were used only in a minority (14) of posts, with most frequent hashtags #PostRefRacism, #Brexit, and #EURef. Thus, a more conventional methodology was chosen, using thematic/qualitative content analysis of a convenience sample of 66 posts. The analysis sought to identify, through several stages of coding, typical thematic patterns concerning the relationship of users with witnessed encounters.

The sample was part of a publicly accessible and collaboratively created album of screenshots of various social media posts. They were not only about assaults or hateful messages in streets, but also images of racist comments on forums and right-wing media front pages. UK-based users stumbled on this wide array of media instances and collected them into an album, which they shared as "incidents we should all be aware of." The album circulated social media accounts as a digital scrapbook among many European users across the continent, myself included, during the postreferendum period and became a familiar showcase of typical "Worrying Signs" as the title of the album suggested. A range of UK organizations and websites (e.g., True Vision, Stop Hate UK, Tell Mama, The Muslim Council of Britain) for hate crime detection and prevention received such posts from citizens before and after Brexit, and many, including those from the analyzed album, were later reprinted in newspapers. Of 138 posts in the album, 66 posts (57 tweets and nine Facebook posts, each about a unique event) reporting specifically on street assaults were selected for analysis. Posts in which users only commented on the situation in society in general or only expressed hatred toward minorities in general, media front pages, and duplicates of any posts were excluded. I emphasize, where relevant, that the cap on length (140 characters) in Twitter demanded very brief exposition (although nine users posted follow-up tweets to add information such as details of the assault, cultural identity of victims, or location), as opposed to Facebook, where users could afford a lengthier narration.

As with other media contents, which never assume a single, closed text, but potentially endless references, social media posts too are to be treated as part of everyday murmurings. In multimedia settings, sampling is always conditioned by the fact that posts remain part of a much greater variety of content and activity such as filtering, scanning, browsing, lurking, or using private messengers to share and comment, while being engaged in a variety of urban activities, such as strolling. Thus, I read the analyzed posts as both media texts and testimonies: civic media reports about witnessed events made for the public. "Findings" thus refer us to only a small but important section of the much more complex relationship between urban encounters and social/mobile media practices, and hence remain incomplete, yet nonetheless indicative. Unlike the usual textual or interview analysis in which prior consent is available and quotes can be lengthier, for purposes of protecting the identity of users of this public album, excerpts from the posts have been significantly shortened and reduced to typical phrases, without reproducing names or full statements. Seeking any further available empirical insight into public spaces where the assaults happened, I also ventured post ante ethnography (participant observations and brief conversations) in March 2017 in the Sunderland area, which was among the towns with most Leave votes.

Reading Conflictual Encounters

This study assumes a coconstitutive relationship between media practices and urban space. I explore how users translated encounters from complex social situations into straightforward social media posts stripped of information available to onlookers such as vantage point, composition of space, presence (tone, posture) of others, and background knowledge. I also seek to indicate which kind of response to the assaults the posts represented. The former question, examined first, can give us some insight into the construction of the encounter as (media) event, and the latter, which I explore second, ponders the extent to which networked concern could also be considered intervention.

Stretched in Time and Space: Digital Reflection on Encounters as Potential Participation

The structure of encounters among strangers in the posts differed from depictions offered by Goffman (1972), who pioneered the study of encounters as microsocial situations. Some matching was obvious between the posts—their narrative structure (the witness reported hearing or seeing someone communicating something to another) and demonstration of intention (victims were addressed or approached)—and encounters described by Goffman, in which one sends nonverbal or verbal signals to the approaching other about their direction of movement and harmless intention. This formal affinity did not apply entirely to the issue of accountability of actors, which Goffman defines as conditioned on their sharing of time and space. Goffman argues that the copresence of interlocutors is crucial for their participation in social situations and thus in sustaining wider social order. This important aspect of his work has seen a more inclusive rendition in media studies (see Moores, 2012, on "doubling of place") and in microsociology (Knorr Cetina, 2009, on "synthetic situations"), which have demonstrated that situation, such as live broadcast or a mobile phone conversation, can also involve those who are present virtually rather than physically. In our case, encounters became widely available for reaction from other witnesses who were physically absent, with some delay. They were multiplied via social media as potential participants in the situation, as interlocutors who could spectate the narrated portrayal of events. Thus, the capacity to intervene in the situation was substituted by the promise of participating in the wider social/media problematic by way of posting, sharing, or commenting. This does not mean that accountability became irrelevant. On the contrary, users worked hard to maintain a connection with the offline world by citing physical time–space coordinates.

To claim accountability, some (29) users included improvised time stamps, such as "today," "yesterday," or "now" and "just." Stretched across time, the posts sought anchors in actual urban space too, again with the aim of extending copresence into the virtual realm and claiming accountability. Nearly all (60) posts referred explicitly to a public space such as "park," "street," or "outside" a certain building, or, in fewer cases, semipublic spaces such as "factory," "bus," "office," "airport," "restaurant," "Tesco," and "school." Spatiotemporal dramatization and validation of the witnessed situation (e.g., "men chanting go home in front of a school") were particularly relevant given that Twitter users had to think hard about which information to prioritize in the limited space they had.

Descriptions of encounters suggested a similar effort toward connecting the urban with the virtual worlds. The majority (44 posts) reported about face-to-face assaults such as "my mums just seen a group of people verbally attack a polish woman telling her to fuck off back to her own country and that 'we've won'");

only a minority referred to encounters with offensive printed messages distributed in public space (see below). In most cases (57 posts), users described events in their own words, whereas only a minority used images (mostly of hateful signage) to report about the event. At the same time, the majority (42) of posts were made by witnesses, but a smaller portion of (12) posts were made by friends or family members of witnesses who retold in their posts what they had heard. Among the posts made by those copresent in encounters, the fewest (12) were made by victims, which said something about how discouraged victims felt about challenging their status of disputed stranger via social media. Because it was less documented, damage done by assaults to outsiders' life worlds was far from insignificant. Reviewing a vast array of hostile urban encounters, Ruddick (1996) notes that "such encounters deeply scar the psyche, inscribing in the very bodies of people their understanding of themselves and their place in a racialized hierarchy" (p. 136).

To conclude, some half century after Goffman's (1972) wide-ranging studies of the finesses of social obligations and procedures, which continue to matter, urban encounters involve complex identities (e.g., nuances such as White-but-not-Western) as well as being sites of networked attention, political release, and disagreement about codes of conduct (assumed as rather technical by Goffman). The mediated urban encounter extends from a passing social situation to become a retold event with multiplied witnesses, to whom it offers a parable for reflection on wider social issues and a (potential for) visibility of less visible groups.

Disconnected Through Connection: The Mediation of "Casual Racism" and Limits of Civic Intervention

Visibility can mean quite different things in cities of media and communication. Not everything that is experienced and personally known about social life in mediated cities is also always visible. Civic media practices can help heighten the visibility of certain events, such as protest, but not necessarily increase people's involvement in them. Positive efforts toward expressing and sharing concerns with countless others tend to transform witnesses into spectators of the networked space and multimedia audiences. This structural characteristic of civic media responses to events in public space becomes evident if we compare the range of reported events in the analyzed posts and users' professed reactions. The reported situations included

(a) overhearing someone ("chanting Make Britain white again," "chanting out out out");

(b) seeing hateful images ("making victory signs at families walking past," fliers "No more Polish vermin," T-shirt messages "send them back," banners held by right-wing protesters, or graffiti on Polish centers);

(c) verbal assaults ("get out of here," "c*nt," "fuck off home," "nicknamed ISIS") and approaching with aggressive or unkind attitude ("yelled Brexit in my face," "asked for an English waiter," refused a seat on a bus offered by a migrant, a woman "kept very obviously staring" at a victim in a bus and said "you should be scared"); and

(d) physical attacks (threw rubbish bags at a man, "spat at," "battered," "cornered a girl," "heckled and mocked girls").

This very broad range of conflictual encounters reported by citizens was not followed by a very diverse range of responses in the posts. Nearly a third (21) of the posts consisted only of technical information about the situation (one did something to another). The narration rarely involved the character of a concerned citizen ("I just saw . . ."); rather, posts mostly adopted a distanced, news-like form, recounting the event, and obscuring the observer's presence, suggesting a sense of impartiality.

The 45 posts that featured more than technical information and expressed some form of position did so by adding one or two of the following elements to the narrative:

(a) *emotional reaction* (feeling "sad" or "scared," witnessing "awful times," having a "difficult day" or "broken heart," or posting a sad sign ☹);

(b) *condemnation* (using hashtags such as #PostRefRacism; direct qualifications such as "petty racism," "extreme nationalism," "intolerance," and "xenophobes"; or cursing "ffs," "despicable scum"); or

(c) *framing the situation* (in fewest, 20, cases, of which 13 on Twitter and seven on Facebook, the situation was explicitly linked to uncertainty over postreferendum developments, asking whether the situation has also "given a mandate to racists," or questioning the definition of outsiders in a multicultural society, "Who is foreign here?").

In a few other cases, the witnessed event was used as an occasion for political comment by way of ending the post with "Thanks, Boris" or "Thanks, Jess" (referring to UK politicians Boris Johnson and Jess Philips). Among posts that condemned the witnessed assaults, one dubbed the situation ironically as "casual racism," thus encapsulating the predominant sentiment in public debates, as well as the posts, that Brexit was "legitimizing" or "emboldening" preexisting xenoracism. In posts that referred to victims explicitly, most frequent references were either ethnic/national ("Polish," "European") or racial ("Asian," "Black," or "Muslim"). Offenders (dubbed as "lads," "man"), mainly male, were rarely represented as "British" and almost never named "White" (except in one case), which suggested something about social media users' taken-for-granted (assumed) knowledge about racial violence in UK cities.

In media studies, Silverstone (2007) argues that people broadly remain "complicit" with the media in their wider "collusive" everyday work of comforting us with the assumption that viewing equals doing. As Ang (1996) explains, television presents itself as an "institutional eye which looks to the world on behalf of the viewers" (p. 23), inviting them to stay at home and tune in. This haunting aspect of life with media shares one of the oldest concerns in media studies: the narcotizing dysfunction, which Merton and Lazarsfeld (1957) notably recognized as one of key functions of media in modern society. In the contemporary mediated city, not much seems to have changed in that sense, apart from there arguably being more technologies for communication. According to Georgiou and Hou (forthcoming), social media assume a similar dysfunction. Social media are more likely to reproduce rather than challenge what classic urban commentators such as Simmel (1950) and Wirth (1938), in the early 20th century, had also famously recognized as the distancing function of the urban encounter. The paradoxical nature of

mediated visibility of the stranger means that "the stranger is never quite that far, but, at the same time, she is always remote, as mediated filtering of encounters enhances proximity in the media but increases physical distance in the material city" (Georgiou & Yu, forthcoming).

Within the entire sample, only one user testified, in a follow-up, about also engaging in the witnessed situation ("tried to look after" the victim "a bit"). Two other users testified to "a friend" "intervening" in the situation (without specifying how), and two further others generally called for action ("we MUST tackle racism," which "we cannot allow"). In this context, we are reminded of Milgram's urban experiments in the 1960s, which involved acted street fights that passers-by avoided getting involved with, reminding us that modern urban life is premised on "abdication of responsibility." At the same time, users' preference for reacting in general suggests that citizens prioritized the urgency of restoration of the order of street life in their posting about assaults to discussing the national or global agenda on their mobile phone screens. Information about assaults was passed to others as a civic warning of a new pattern of unacceptable behavior to be added to the continually evolving civic connoisseurship of the street codes (e.g., recognizing screams as signs of endangerment or friendly chatter as signs of belonging) to be called on in further pedestrian management of passing by.

Mediated participation in urban living, however, does not necessarily equal social action (Carpentier, 2011). Users posted about witnessing "worrying signs" not only as concerned citizens, but also as media audiences, thus participating in a developing topic within the mediated public sphere. As I suggested earlier, the contentious postreferendum handling of difference was a response to actual conditions of inequality that originated from national contradictions of global capitalism, which had brought offenders and victims into contact. The local workforce had citizenship but not jobs and prospects for mobility, whereas the migrant workforce was physically mobile (in a very limited way) and employed, but unaccepted. That the injustice hit both locals and newcomers became more obvious during my ethnographic visits to select sites referred to in posts.

Memories of Conflicts Amid Budget Stores: Ethnographic Encounters in the Contested Urban Space

When I visited the Sunderland/Newcastle area in early 2017, less than a year after the posts, I found that the flow of the daily routine, which had been restored, did not erase entirely the memories of the conflictual encounters. City spaces remember past events, particularly those that leave underlying issues unresolved (Bonnett, 2006). In addition to recognizing signs of liveliness in the typical central urban inventory (dense traffic, people mingling, open businesses, signs about events), I also noticed, as an outsider coming from a culture of postsocialist disappointment in the former Yugoslavia, familiar signs of melancholy, which, in the context of Northern England, I was made familiar with in advance from the press (see Carter, 2016). The central area was flanked by closed storefronts, isolated alleyways, and a number of budget stores, just as in many formerly warring areas of my part of Europe. Some, mainly male, pedestrians moved at a much slower pace, and in a much less reserved mode (pointing and chuckling at signs of my stranger's disorientation, again similar to some people's reactions to strangers in ex-Yugoslavia) than might be argued for high streets of big cities in Western Europe. At the southern end of the high street, the city center meets the eye, along with an adjacent museum commemorating

the industrial golden age of the area up until the mid-20th century. The museum’s bookshop featured a variety of publications (postcards, booklets) that took pride in the industrial history. It was a period when, although poor, the local workforce was employed and shared a sense of direction. This is now a long bygone era, one that declined steeply during the Thatcher era, when the mining, construction, and shipping industries had started to close.

“What about publications about the ’80s, ’90s, and the noughties?” I asked a friendly senior shopkeeper. “No, nothing . . . from then on it was just downhill,” he said. Scarce thin copies of “Sunderland diaries” placed on lower shelves featured undigested brief notes of anonymous workers’ memories of industrial life, where one could find out that “Sunderland had lost its heavy industries all at once,” which also created “a void in recorded memory . . . across the region” (Hilton, 2008, p. 8). Generations of victims of the Northern decline, owing to transformations of Western cities from production to service centers, remained largely hidden from my outsider’s view and from local public reflection. Returning to the high street, news headlines were reporting that the local Nissan car plant, a major and now rare one to provide work in manufacturing, was reconsidering its future operations there in fear that Brexit might obstruct its free trade with its major export market, the European Union, which many in Sunderland had voted to leave. The agony of the local workforce was set to deepen. This curious connection between the handling of the difficult past in the city center and the articulation of the anxious near future in the center of the city together offered important clues to understanding a situation of severe misfortunes that, from an analytical standpoint, only became clearer when media and city spaces were read together rather than separately, as tends to be the case.

A short train ride from the Sunderland Station is the central Newcastle metro station where people were much busier, moving around, holding their mobile phones, and unwilling to pause and speak with me unless they were waiting for someone. A non-White middle-aged man with a local accent, puzzled as to the relevance of my interest, said he had known “nothing” of the assaults himself, “only through the media.” Many locals might have heard something was happening at the time, as several of my other respondents there told me too. It was something occurring to various (non-UK) others and remained invisible, and hence unmemorable (see Figure 1).

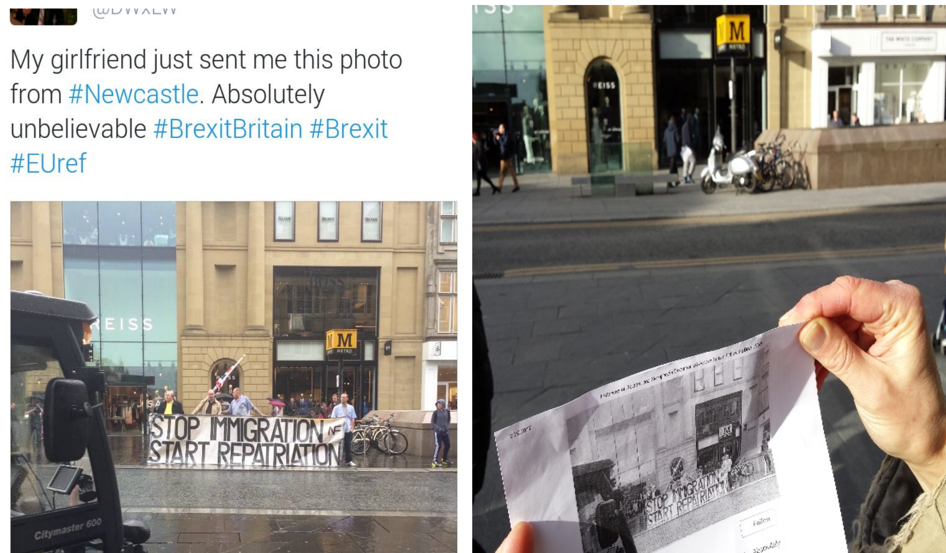

Figure 1. Tracing the echoes of postreferendum encounters in an urban space in 2016 (left) and in 2017 (right). Source of the right image: Shaun Moores and Zlatan Krajina.

Rendering hateful encounters toward newer groups of minorities, such as Eastern Europeans, as irrelevant can be read as a means of survival for some of the older, now local (UK, non-White) minorities, who might find themselves in an uncomfortable position of replicating the attitude of ignoring or stigmatization, which their ancestors, the then new non-White (former colonial) minorities, experienced from the White majority one generation back in mid-20th century. As noted in Back, Sinha and Bryan's (2012) ethnographic study into instances of denigration of others (as an existential reaction to systemic inequality), such as at international transport check points, "by putting others down, one elevates oneself" (p. 149).

Progressing downtown, seeking sites where Eastern and Central Europeans might be interviewed, the Krakow restaurant in central Newcastle showed up on an online map, but not at its professed physical address, as it had gone out of business in the meanwhile, and a new, different business was fully operational. A nearby Polish parish, on the other hand, looked deserted from the outside. A kind person working there came out to see who was at the door but was not keen to explain why the blinds were entirely shut, unless there was an event on weekends. They were on the other hand very eager to convince me of this being "a very welcoming, peaceful area" without major issues concerning acceptance. Notwithstanding efforts of the local community, memories of the postreferendum days were still very vivid for a young male Greek Cypriot student I met at the Newcastle station, who remembered details of eggs being thrown at him in Sunderland. He insisted that such incidents were happening even before the referendum. He had started giving more attention to the gaze or gesture of fellow passers-by in the street than before, as he went on living with this haunting reminder of the fragility of the everyday order for various strangers such as himself. The unsaid in the daily uses of streets is not just about way finding and codes of behavior. It is also about a careful pedestrian reading signs of belonging, which can be loudest in the silence of the gaze.

Conclusion

Action at different scales—local, national, global, virtual/networked—coalesces in the mediated city. Thus, according to Bauman (2003), "affairs 'within reach,' local matters, . . . seem to be the only issues we can 'do something about'" (p. 18). As strangers are brought into contact along the fault lines of belonging and nonbelonging, urban encounters become social situations in which the tiniest of struggles in relation to the biggest of issues can be recognized. Moreover, these quotidian, semivisible events concerning usually invisible groups become a public concern only when translated into visible form, via screen devices, whereby spectacular, and limiting, representation is given a sense of tangibility and legitimacy. In Collins' (2010) words,

> it is in the "banal" spaces of interbeing that the potential of the urban is really decided . . . ideas gestate in the everyday spaces of the city and require some conjunction of visible and invisible to come into the world. (p. 923)

The mediation of postreferendum encounters, whereby some locals felt excluded from the fortunes of globalization and many recent laboring newcomers learned that they were welcome only as temporary service providers rather than citizens, reminds us that belonging in mediated cities remains a contentious and technologically coconstructed issue rather than merely an automatic outcome of daily life (Krajina, 2017).

If meeting strangers in public urban spaces has been given contrasting meanings in urban and cultural studies as either moments of ordinariness or choreographed gathering, both have been used to signify two sides of the same, contained and positive, character of street life. The postreferendum violence in UK cities disclosed a layer of public conduct that had existed within the flow of pedestrian traffic throughout urban history but became a widely shared concern during social crises, as was the case during the increased visibility of Brexit in social media. Filing conflictual encounters in spontaneous digital civic archives, such as the analyzed album, served the creation of a familiar media event, which positively contributed to raising public awareness of these issues. As a form of intervention in witnessed situations, this virtual extension of urban agony was limited to the practice of letting others know of hostility toward difference. Social media screens transferred the contentious events to the networked, and pacifying, surveillance of the mediated city, thus articulating a characteristic feature of reductive, "orthodox multiculture," namely, "indifference to difference" (Valluvan, 2016, p. 207). The posts thus simultaneously raised and withdrew from debate the issues of imputed scapegoat identity of migratory strangers and their disputed presence in cities of networked visibility, social inequalities, and selective acceptance.

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