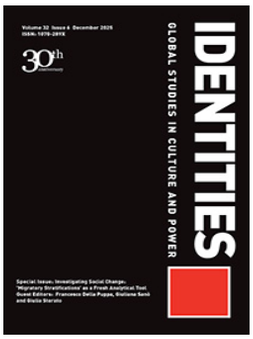

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Still whitewashing Britain: race, class and the UK citizenship test

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the UK citizenship test promotes an exclusionary vision of Britishness which is both classed and racialized. Reflecting on a longer trajectory of British nationality and citizenship policy-making since 1948, I argue that the citizenship test must be situated within a broader ideological project that equates Britishness with whiteness. Drawing on ethnographic research at training centres which assist migrants in learning and memorizing the Life in the UK Handbook, I show that candidates must regurgitate this exclusionary version of Britishness in order to pass the test. However, the Handbook's contents are not cleanly imparted but rather messily refracted as migrants' and teachers' own worldviews bleed into this idealized version of Britain and challenge its hegemony.

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KEYWORDS Citizenship tests; class; colonialism; migration; UK; whiteness

More than a decade ago, significant changes were made to the UK citizenship test by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. As the government stated at the time, these changes were made in order 'to put British history and culture at the heart of it'. The revisions made in 2011, amid the increasing weaponization of immigration as a political issue, paint a nostalgic and idealized version of Britain which is highly classed and racialized. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in privately-run training centres which help applicants to prepare for the test, I argue that the test equates Britishness with a White,[1] middle-class identity that ignores migrants' existing participation in British society and excludes much of the British citizenry. However, at the same time, through the process of teaching and learning the Handbook, this normative and exclusionary version of Britain and Britishness is also re-interpreted and challenged.

Citizenship tests emerged across Europe 20 to 25 years ago amid increasing hostility towards migrants and anxieties around cultural difference (Byrne 2017,

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324; Kostakopoulou 2010, 830). The U.K. citizenship test's introduction can be traced back to the New Labour government's 2002 White Paper *Secure Borders, Safe Haven*, which was published at a time of heightened public debate around citizenship, national identity, integration and multiculturalism. In 2001, so-called 'race riots' involving White and Asian British men had taken place in several northern towns and cities. The government-commissioned Cantle report identified the clashes as evidence that Britain was characterized by 'divided communities' who led 'parallel lives' (Cantle 2001). In response to what they viewed as the 'failures of multiculturalism', policymakers resolved to 'thicken' citizenship through the introduction of more stringent naturalization requirements (Kostakopoulou 2010, 830). It was within this context that the 2002 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act was passed, which made it a legal requirement for citizenship applicants to show 'a sufficient knowledge of English, Welsh or Scottish Gaelic' and have 'sufficient knowledge about life in the United Kingdom'. While at first these requirements were only for naturalization applicants, in 2007 they were extended to those applying for Indefinite Leave to Remain.

Following recommendations made in the Cantle Report, the Life in the United Kingdom Advisory Group was set up to 'advise the Home Secretary on the method, conduct and implementation of a "Life in the United Kingdom" naturalization test' (Home Office 2003, 3). However, when it was first introduced, the test did not fulfil many of the commissioned Advisory Group's recommendations. These included the suggestion that the assessment should *not* be an examination but rather based on progress, with the warning that a 'one size fits all' approach could discriminate against those who 'contribute to the needs of the economy through unskilled labour' (ibid). The Advisory Group was, however, successful in gaining some concessions. This included giving candidates the option to undertake a course for English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) combined with components from the Handbook, instead of taking the online test. This ESOL with citizenship course option was particularly beneficial to those with weaker literacy and/or English language skills. The first two editions of the Handbook were ridiculed for their inclusion of incorrect and trivial information. The section on pubs, for example, included advice on good manners after spilling somebody's pint of beer (Brooks 2013, 10). Overall, however, the test in its early form was relatively easy to pass.

The content and the process of the Life in the UK test dramatically changed under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government. In 2011, as part of a speech outlining reforms in order to 'get a grip of immigration in this country', then Prime Minister David Cameron acknowledged errors in the Handbook and announced that an updated version would soon be published which would foreground British history and culture. This involved removing practical information about education, health care, policing and

neighbourhood safety in favour of historical and general knowledge facts, such as the names of particular battles or the height of the London Eye (Brooks 2013: 23). Based on 24 questions, topics include the Bronze Age, cricket, the Tudors and Stuarts, the Bayeux Tapestry, pantomimes, the Scottish judicial system and countless others. The changes made to the contents of the test must be contextualized within the political climate of the moment, in which the topic of immigration was becoming increasingly weaponized (Hirsch 2018, 273). The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was gaining political momentum and the referendum on Britain's membership of the EU would be announced in less than two years' time. Following the revisions, in its current form the test requires migrants to rehearse an antiquated and idealized version of British history, culture and society aligned with the nostalgic nationalism celebrated by Nigel Farage and his fellow UKIP members (see Franklin 2019). In addition to changes to the content of the test, the testing procedure also changed under the Coalition Government. The ESOL with citizenship course, which was designed to help those with weaker language skills, was abolished and all candidates were required to take a separate English language test with an accredited body and to sit the Life in the UK test. Both the procedural and substantive changes to the test have made it more difficult to pass, especially for those with weaker language and/or literacy skills.[2]

Scholars have argued that citizenship tests act as a restrictive form of governmentality which aim to form migrants into ideal liberal citizens (Löwenheim and Gazit 2009; Schinkel and van Houdt 2010; Suvarierol and Kirk 2015). The process of preparing for and sitting citizenship tests acts to shape migrants into responsible, self-governing subjects with the correct values. Turner takes up these ideas in his analysis of the UK citizenship test, which he argues is an inclusive-exclusive mode of liberal governance (2014). He argues that the testing process is a series of normalizing strategies which ask the migrant-subject to conform to a certain set of behaviours and processes. These behaviours are aligned to those possessed by the ideal citizen, characterized by certain economic, cultural and social forms of capital, namely communication skills, access to resources and economic solvency (2014, 342).

Turner notes that this inclusive-exclusive mode of liberal governance must be seen in the context of the security concerns which emerged after the civil disturbances in 2001, and the ensuing discourse of anxiety over community cohesion (2014, 342). As he points out, one of the central rationales for the testing process was the problematization of certain differences which created the conditions for 'fractured and divided' communities (2014, 343). While diversity was somewhat celebrated by the government, too much difference or the wrong kind of difference was conceived to be dangerous. While some migrants need to work extensively on themselves before they would be

eligible for British citizenship, others – namely those with good English language skills, higher levels of education and familiarity with exam-type assessments – are in a privileged position. Implicit but not acknowledged in Turner's analysis is the classed and racialized nature of this inclusive-exclusion.

Aihwa Ong's work (Ong 1996) on the processes of racialized normalization in the United States, highlights how this ideal liberal citizen is a racialized conception. Ideologies of racial difference are interweaved with liberal conceptions of citizenship, which are made evident in popular notions about who deserves to belong in implicit terms of productivity and consumption (Ong 1996, 739). 'The ideological formation of whiteness as the symbol of ideal legal and moral citizenship' (Ong 1996, 742) is rooted within imperial histories when whiteness distinguished colonizer from the colonized and became invested with the power to legitimize domination (Anderson 2013; Clarke 2021, Hall and Rose 2006: 7-8). Whiteness as a social construct was not concerned simply with skin colour but, over time, became associated with disposition, culture and habits (Anderson 2013). Much like the liberal citizen referred to by Turner, 'key dispositions, fostered in the bourgeois family, were self-discipline and self-control' (ibid: 36). In the British Empire, the construction of Britishness through whiteness was also classed (Clarke 2021, 281). 'Whiteness and class worked together to co-produce a normative white middle-class British subject' who, as Amy Clarke points out, continues 'to enjoy a relatively privileged sense of national belonging, routinely represented as the norm against which others are defined' (2021, 281).

In what follows, drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in privately-run training centres which prepare applicants for the Life in the UK test, I argue that the citizenship test is an inclusive-exclusive mode of governance that is heavily racialized and classed. By paying close attention to the contents of the test, as well as how it is taught and learnt by applicants, I show that in modern Britain, migrants are required to rehearse a particular political ideology of Britishness in order to access secure legal status and citizenship. This narrow and limited version of British identity, promoted by the test, sits at odds with the 'conviviality' that characterizes everyday life in much of contemporary Britain. Conviviality refers to 'the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas' (Gilroy 2004, xi, see also Keddie 2014, 55 and; Modood 2007). However, as I show, through the process of preparing for the citizenship test, the Handbook's official version of British history and culture is reinterpreted, hybridized and subtly challenged by teachers and students. Therefore, while the citizenship test process is undoubtedly an exclusionary mode of governance, it is not only a top-down repressive process. In citizenship classes, the classed and racialized figure of the White liberal citizen ideal is simultaneously reinforced and challenged.

Life in the UK training centres

There are no state-funded classes to help candidates prepare for the test and the Handbook on which the test is based must be bought at individuals' own expense for £7.99. For many, however, reading the Handbook independently is not sufficient to pass the test. In particular, those with weaker English and/or literacy skills struggle to understand and absorb the Handbook's dry and dense prose. Many individuals take the test several times (at significant personal cost[3]) before passing, while others decide that they are unable to pass the test independently and seek help to prepare.

I conducted 12 months' intensive participant observation at five training centres which run citizenship classes in London between 2016 and 2017 and then carried follow-up research with participants intermittently until 2020. These nationwide centres exist in various guises, often combining Life in the UK classes with other services such as English lessons, booking services for immigration related exams, immigration advice and professional qualifications. All of the training centres charged students for Life in the UK courses, which usually cost between £250 to £300. Training centres organized their teaching in different ways. Some centres offered one-to-one or very small group sessions which, depending on the students' schedules, they would attend on a weekly or twice-weekly basis. Other centres would run occasional full-day training sessions which students would attend just once. The most popular centre I attended offered daily classes from Wednesday to Friday, running from 10 am to 2pm. Participant observation involved many hours sitting in classes, listening and taking notes. Permission to attend lessons was granted by the teacher or manager of the centre and all participants were aware that I was a researcher and gave informed consent. I situated myself as a student, sitting with the other students and taking notes as they did. On finding out that I was conducting research on the Life in the UK test, students were often keen to relay their opinions and experiences of the test process to me, typically emphasizing their feelings of frustration and injustice. They were gratified when I – a White, British person born in the UK – confirmed that indeed 'not even English[4] people know this stuff'. Fieldwork also extended beyond the training centres. Once I had developed relationships with particular individuals, I accompanied them on other tasks related to their citizenship applications such as the test itself, the citizenship ceremony and other more everyday bureaucratic activities. Students attending the various training centres where I conducted fieldwork were from diverse backgrounds in terms of their age, nationality and length of time spent in the UK, but they shared a need for assistance in order to digest the Handbook's information and pass the test. Most people in the classes had low levels of formal education or, less often, limited English language skills which meant that independently reading the Handbook and successfully passing the test was

not possible. My interlocutors who attended training classes experienced the citizenship test process very differently to participants I met in other sites, for example at test centres. While these individuals thought the test – and the broader citizenship process – was 'annoying', they also thought it was easy. Interlocutors with this experience tended to be university educated and already held the kind of social capital which the test privileges (Turner 2014). Overall, therefore, those who attended lessons on the Handbook were migrants with low levels of education, employed in poorly-paid work such as retail, care work, security and catering. They did not, in other words, possess access to resources or economic solvency that characterize the 'citizen ideal' in modern Britain (Turner 2014, 343).

'Not even English people know this stuff!': life in the UK classes

Robertson's College's[5] popularity was largely due to its location on a high street next to a busy bus stop in an ethnically and socio-economically diverse area of inner-city North London. Its flexible attendance policy, that allowed students to drop in and out of classes without notice, was also extremely useful because it enabled the many students on zero-hours contracts with unpredictable shift patterns to continue their classes. While in theory the course was taught over two weeks from Wednesdays to Fridays, the sporadic attendance of many students meant that they often continued to attend for many more hours than the set time. Robertson's College did not charge for extra attendance and actively discouraged the students from booking their test until they were expected to pass. Students hailed from diverse parts of the world, although the College's location did reflect the make-up of the local area to some extent. Many students originated from ex-British colonies in Africa, Asia, Cyprus and the Caribbean. Large numbers had lived in the UK for years, if not decades, and already held permanent residency but needed to take the Life in the UK test in order to naturalize. During my fieldwork period, I met several individuals who had even grown up and been schooled in the country but did not hold British citizenship, meaning they were required to take the test. For those who already held permanent residency, ease of foreign travel was a common motivation to apply for naturalization. Fieldwork at Robertson's College was particularly insightful as the comparatively large class sizes (usually 10 to 15 students) led to a lively atmosphere where students would often interrupt the teacher and group discussions on particular topics would follow. There was far less student participation in other training centres I attended.

In addition to the course's flexibility, students were also drawn to Robertson's College due to the instructor's effective teaching style. Adam, the teacher, was a 30-year-old Ghanaian man who had migrated to the UK just under 10 years before and, perhaps ironically, was not

a British citizen himself during my fieldwork period. He was always immaculately dressed, wearing a dark suit, white shirt and red tie. Adam was a charismatic teacher, animatedly moving around the white board where his PowerPoint presentation was projected. In his lecture-style seminars, he seamlessly jumped through topics and deftly connected questions about British history and society to others about current affairs. Adam's engaging style and lively classes were a contrast to the more sedate styles of other instructors. Because many of his students struggled with reading the Handbook or comprehending its meaning, Adam came up with clever stories and memory tricks – which he called his 'secret weapons' – so that students could both understand and memorize the Handbook's contents.

> Richard Arkwright. Who was he? A successful factory owner. So how can we remember this one? Adam asks the class, before he underlines R-I-C-H in Richard and R-I-G-H-T in Arkwright. Rich, profitable, you see. And right, good. He was famous for making factories that were profitable – *rich* – and worked well – in the *right* way. Get it?! *Rich*ard Arkw*right*!

Or another favourite was:

> What was the Battle of Bosworth Field? A battle to be King. 'Boss', he says as he underlines the letters B-O-S, 'like a King, yes?' 'Worth' he says as he underlines the second section of the word. You see, Bos-worth field. They both thought they were *worthy* of being the boss, the King. You see!

In addition to his 'secret weapons', Adam's teaching also involved translating and explaining the contents of the Handbook into a form the students understood since they were unable to relate to much of the information. Listening to the exchanges between Adam and his students brought into sharp relief the simultaneously absurd and exclusionary version of Britain that is depicted in the Handbook. On one occasion, in relation to a question on Dolly the Sheep, Adam and some students in the class attempted to explain genetic cloning to one student by comparing Dolly the Sheep to Frankenstein. The student remained none the wiser, with Adam eventually moving on the discussion by telling her, 'you'll just have to memorize that bit' (as opposed to understand). Or, while teaching the sports section – which students often complained about – Adam was required to explain golf to one student who did not know what the sport was. He said:

> You know, it is the one with the small ball . . . the one for the rich. They go there and talk about all their business deals. It's for the rich. Not like football which you only need a leg for. Anyone can play that.

Here the combination of Adam's very literal description of golf alongside the acknowledgement of the inequalities which characterize the sport in practice offered both a wryly amusing and piercingly accurate description.

Some of Adam's explanations elicited laughter among the students, as in the case of IVF, which Adam explained as an invention 'to help women who wanted children but not husbands'. As these exchanges demonstrate, the often wild tangents that class discussions took reveal the absurd and farcical nature of the information in the Handbook that is deemed to be essential knowledge for 'new residents' to meaningfully participate in British life. While, therefore, the exchanges in the citizenship classes were often humorous, they also highlighted the exclusionary nature of the version of Britain being presented in the Handbook. The unfamiliarity of much of the Handbook's contents 'othered' the citizenship applicants who did not relate to the Britain being presented, despite the fact that many of them had lived in Britain for a long time. This gulf in knowledge highlighted the disjuncture between the normative representation of 'essential knowledge' of 'Britishness' in the Handbook and the students' everyday experiences in contemporary Britain.

In contrast, at other times, Adam's translations of the Handbook for students, demonstrated their existing participation in British life – just not the kind that the test assesses. For example, when describing where the Cenotaph is in central London, Adam drew on bus routes to illustrate its location: 'You know, where the 24 and the 88 go. They go up there and that is Whitehall'. The students might not be aware of what the Cenotaph is, but they were familiar with London bus routes. Similarly, while students might have struggled with memorizing dates of battles or the names of sports-people or actors, they found some sections of the Handbook easy to remember. Notably, these were the sections that related to practical life in the UK. Indeed, subjects relating to national insurance, P45 forms or the TV licence would often lead to long discussions that demonstrated the students' existing participation in British society.

The Life in the UK test highlights many of the tensions and contradictions that surround the boundaries of Britishness in contemporary Britain. The Handbook upon which the test is based is described as 'A Guide for New Residents', but many of the people I met had lived in the UK for decades and were already 'integrated' participants in their local communities. My respondents may not have been regulars at the local pub, but they all worked, paid taxes, watched popular television shows, chatted to their neighbours and sent their children to local schools. Yet many I met had failed the test and so had sought out help from Robertson College or one of the other training centres where I conducted fieldwork. They failed because the Britain represented by the Handbook is one of tea and scones, the Proms and the Monarchy. It is elite, White, antiquated and unrelatable for most of those taking the test, as well as for many existing citizens. The division, rather than cohesion, fostered through the citizenship process was made clear through students' use of 'they' and 'them' when talking about 'the British' or 'the English' (the two were used interchangeably) but referring to White British

people. Adam would often respond by jokingly exclaiming: 'say we!', 'say we!' to which students snorted and smiled, highlighting the absurdity of this idea. The students were keenly aware that the version of Britishness the Handbook espoused was one which they would never be a member of – official citizenship notwithstanding.

While scholars have highlighted the discriminatory and restrictive nature of citizenship test procedures, less attention has been given to how the *contents* of the test also acts as inclusive-exclusion (Turner 2014). In the case of the Life in the UK test, those less familiar with stereotypical White, middle-class, English culture find the test more challenging than those who are familiar with this version of British culture. This is reflected in the high pass rates of White Anglophone candidates, as well as those with higher levels of education who are familiar with formal testing procedures and are able to independently study for the test (Van Ooers 2022). In this sense, the current UK citizenship test must be viewed as embedded within long-standing immigration and nationality policies that, since the 1960 s, have been enacted to 'whitewash' Britain (Paul 1997) by removing and restricting racialized British subjects' access to British citizenship (Anderson 2013; El-Enany 2020; Patel 2021; Paul 1997).

'A long and illustrious history'

Perhaps the clearest way in which the UK citizenship test process actively works to equate Britishness with whiteness is the version of British history that is included in the Handbook. While there was some inclusion of historical information in early iterations of the Handbook, questions on history were not included in the test itself. Substantial debate on whether to include questions on history had taken place among the advisory group who eventually decided 'the best way to manage the problem of developing a definite account was to exclude history from the testable material' (Merolli 2015, 62). Following the Coalition Government's revision, however, a history section is now included in the test and has been greatly extended in length. In its current formation, the chapter entitled 'A Long and Illustrious History' focuses on monarchs and battles, and reads like the kind of history textbooks that David Cameron and his fellow Tory ministers might have studied at their prep-schools. Reflecting a primordialist reading of national origins, the chapter traces British history from the Stone Age to the Coalition government of 2010, Brexit and beyond. The story told by this nationalist and glorified account of British history is particularly evident from what is excluded. As a group of historians calling for a review of the Life in the UK test have argued, the Handbook misrepresents slavery and empire. The abolition of slavery is presented as a British achievement in which the enslaved played no part, while colonial protests, uprisings and independence movements are missing

from the record. And 'people in the colonies and people of colour in the UK are nowhere actors in this official history' (Historians Call for a Review of Home Office Citizenship and Settlement Test 2020).

As noted above, the correlation between whiteness and British national identity was a key mechanism of colonialism (Anderson 2013, 36). In contemporary Britain, the failure to acknowledge the country's colonial past is a way to ensure the ongoing equation of Britishness and whiteness and to delegitimise ex-British subjects' and their descendants' claims to membership in Britain (El-Enany 2020; Tyler 2012). All of the people I spoke to at Life in the UK training centres – both students and teachers – as well as those at test centres, unanimously agreed that this inclusion of the history section was the reason that students were failing the test. It was also given as the main reason by applicants for their decision to attend (and pay for) citizenship classes. Indeed, after the introduction of the history section there was a sharp fall in successful applications, with 40% fewer people being granted citizenship in 2015 than two years earlier, before the policy change (Brooks 2016). In this sense, the inclusion of the history section in the exam is embedded within the UK's recent hostile environment policy with regard to immigration (Goodfellow 2019): it makes it much harder to pass the test, enables the government to accrue more money in administrative fees, and puts off some potential candidates – especially those who struggle with literacy – from even applying for British citizenship.

As well as this practical outcome, the test's inclusion of history also has a more poignant effect. It requires candidates, many of whom originate from ex-British colonies, to regurgitate the Handbook's manicured account of slavery and colonialism. For example, the Handbook acknowledges that 'commercial expansion and prosperity was sustained in part by the booming slave trade' (2019, 42), but it more strongly emphasizes that slavery was illegal in Britain and that British people campaigned to end the slave trade. The discussion of the Empire, meanwhile, is an example of what Paul Gilroy has labelled 'postcolonial melancholia' (2004, 125). Colonisation is presented as benign with the only related conflicts mentioned being those with rival France and the Boers. This omission of the brutality and violence which actually characterized colonial expansion is typical of the dominant public portrayal of colonialism in the UK, which both flattens and objectifies history, disconnecting it from the present (see also Edwards 2016; Gapud 2020; C. Hall and Rose 2006).

Gilroy has argued that this sort of reflection on Britain's colonial past illuminates something 'fundamental about the cultural life of a post-colonial country that has never dealt with the consequences of its loss of empire' (Gilroy 2005). He contends that 'the vanished empire is essentially unmourned' in British culture, which 'feeds a melancholic attachment' to the past (ibid). As anthropologists Tyler (2012) and Wemyss ([2009] 2016) have

both argued, the result is the production of an airbrushed version of colonial history, which invests the British Empire with positive meanings associated with merchants, profits, and the spread of liberty and democracy. Negative connections with exploitation, disease and racism, which Wemyss labels the 'Invisible Empire' are obscured" (Wemyss [2009] 2016, 6). In his ethnographic study of heritage practices in Bristol, Gapud (2020) has argued that these processes are made possible through 'practices of displacement' which conceptualize the British Empire as something that happened a long time ago in a faraway place. Like Wemyss, he argues that the term 'trade' effaces the violence of empire and slavery and 'substitutes it with a practice generally considered to be productive and positive' (Gapud 2020, 334). It is this melancholic and carefully curated version of British colonial history that migrants – many of whom are descendants of ex-British subjects themselves – must learn and regurgitate in order to pass the Life in the UK test.

Britain's selective memory in relation to its colonial past is not only significant in relation to the country's history, but has important implications for the boundaries of citizenship today. The fact that regurgitation of this airbrushed dominant narrative is a necessary requirement to obtain secure legal status is highly significant with regard to political ideologies around the racialized boundaries of Britishness. As scholars have argued, the dominant historical narrative not only celebrates colonialism but also works to exclude contemporary migrants 'whose relationship to Britain is seen to commence only at the moment when they or their ancestors arrived' (Tyler 2012, 20, see also S. Hall 1999; Hesse and Sayyid 2006; Wemyss [2009] 2016). As Tyler has argued, 'disconnecting Britishness from its imperial histories not only denies postcolonial people who live in the UK their place in the history of Englishness and Britishness but also their place within contemporary formations of nation' (2012, 12). The displacement of colonial history limits the imaginary of the nation and reproduces inequalities of power along racialized lines (see also Gapud 2020). As a result, migrants to the UK from former British colonies and their descendants are easily construed as immigrants, foreigners and outsiders (*ibid*).

The dominance of this sanitized version of Britain's colonial past is not a new phenomenon (see C. Hall 2012, xv). Indeed, the Conservative Party has a long-standing rhetorical tradition of nostalgically evoking British history and national identity (Göhrmann and Henneböhl 2024). However, as Göhrmann and Henneböhl (2024) point out, instances of this rhetorical strategy being used by the 'traditionalist' bloc have become more frequent and prominent in recent years, playing a significant role in the 'culture wars' that have characterized British political life before, during and after the Brexit vote. The uproar around the Colonial Countryside Project which explored links between National Trust properties and slavery, as well as the controversy surrounding the pulling down of statues of

those involved in slavery and colonialism, are two examples. While this sanitized portrayal of Britain's history is not new, the revisions made to the citizenship test in 2011 can be read as early warning signs of the culture wars that would ensue. Central to such clashes are not simply tensions over citizenship and migration, but rather conflicts in which the country itself becomes an ideological object to be fought over, with history, heritage and identity as key discursive battle grounds (Satia 2022). Situating efforts to foreground British history and culture into the test within this political context, the Life in the UK test can be seen as a key site of performative politics to define 'real Britishness', through which inauthentic Britons would include naturalized citizens, racialized Britons, as well as the metropolitan elite. The consequences of apparent inauthenticity would, of course, be experienced very differently by these groups.

Postcolonial discourses among students

How then does the teaching and learning of this airbrushed version of British history play out in Life in the UK classes? Despite the Handbook's limited and sparse mention of Britain's colonial history, the subjects of colonialism and slavery are common topics of discussion in the classes. The personal significance of the history section to the majority of students became clear when, during discussions regarding colonial independence Adam went around the class asking his students: 'Who were you colonised by? When did you get independence?' Student responses to Adam's teaching on this subject varied. In some classes, many nodded in agreement while he spoke, but in others, students' responses were harder to gage. On other occasions heated opinions were voiced.

On several occasions students referred to Britain as 'stealing' from other countries. For example, during a discussion on slavery a Jamaican woman remarked: 'Why did the Black people have to be the slaves? Because they are stronger and poorer'. To which Adam responded, 'Yes, stronger. Look at sports, the blacks are good at running'. The Jamaican woman then said: 'They should keep us separate [Black and White people] because the whites steal from the blacks'. The discussion ended with the Jamaican woman saying: 'I don't like history'. Later I asked her if she thought it was important to learn about history, to which she responded: 'Yes, but Britain just steals everything. They don't have any ideas of their own'. Reflecting the English-centric contents of the Handbook, at other times students accused England of stealing from the other home nations. Cara, a woman originally from the Dominican Republic but who had lived in the UK since she was six-years-old, remarked:

> Do you know in the test they give every sports achievement to England [in relation to the sport's invention]. But actually it's just that they are the rules we

> play by now. Really, truly who invented the game? In cricket it was India, for rugby it was Wales.

The following exchange ensued.

Adam: Yes, but England has a lot of influence.

Cara: But everything they've got they have stolen.

Adam [laughing]: Say we, say we!

Cara: *We* stole. Even all our bridges and buildings, it was really Scotland. England had nothing to do with it.

Adam: Yes, I told you the Anglo-Saxons were very dominating. They dominated. It's in their blood, they conquer.

This more vocal and critical attitude towards the Handbook's grandiose and sanitized portrayal of British history was more typical of students such as Cara who had been in the UK for a long time.

Adam's own position in relation to colonialism was ambiguous, but broadly reflected the idea of evolutionary progress that the Handbook espouses. For example, when the topic of countries gaining independence arose, Adam described ex-colonies' future success as depending upon whether they were 'winning' or 'losing' in relation to a balance of power between colonizer and colonized (see Table 1).

For Adam, this win/loss balance was a powerful explanatory tool that he used as a rationale to explain what he called the world's 'lopsided development'. During discussions about colonized countries gaining independence, referring to the table he drew on the whiteboard (see Table 1), he told the class:

> Some countries like South Africa and America were very clever. They let them (the British) stay a bit longer. But most countries got their independence here at Win: Win. It's not good if you exit here, you may not manage yourself well. They [colonised countries in Africa] exited at the wrong time. They weren't ready, you want to exit when they [the colonisers] are losing. You have to be strategic. Wait for them to construct their roads, hospitals, railways and then they can go. Because we couldn't do it. It's all about experience. Like in East Africa there was an effective railway in the 18th century and now it's rubbish. How can

Table 1. Adam's explanation history of American independence which he applies to other countries colonized by Britain. He would draw this table on the whiteboard.

Britain	U.S.A.	Outcome
Win	Win	"Everybody happy. Britain developing U.S.A., making them better".
Win	Loss	"After a while U.S.A. not happy as Britain is taxing but taking money back
Loss	Loss	"There is fighting".

> something get worse?! It should get better! We weren't ready … those like America are doing well because they were set up. But others were not mature enough. Imagine if when you're a one-year-old, you had to find your own food. You would die! That's what happened. That's why some countries are developing because they weren't ready. That is why we have this lopsided, developing world.

While, in general, Adam's perspective on colonialism appeared to uncritically reflect an imperialist mentality of development and evolution, at other times his explanations led him to highlight the shared histories of Britain and its ex-colonies. For example, explaining why the UK became a colonial power, in words almost mirroring those of Ambalavaner Sivanandan,[6] he tells the students:

> That's why this country [the UK] is so rich. It's small and doesn't produce much. So it took from the rest of the world. That's why *we* came here.

Here, not only was Adam pointing to the economic exploitation upon which colonialism was based but, counter to the mainstream discourse on migration, he was also implying that migrants from ex-colonies had a right to migrate to the UK. Meanwhile, in discussions of the Second World War, Adam often told the students in some depth about how soldiers from West Africa fought for Britain, a fact that is omitted from the Handbook. As Anderson (2013, 41) has pointed out, erasure of Britain's imperial history entrenches the idea that Britain is a highly desirable place to be. While the Handbook portrays migrants as *choosing* to come to Britain, Adam's teachings – at times – reinstated the postcolonial legacies that shaped that 'choice' (ibid). It would be misleading, however, to present Adam as explicitly asserting the rights of migrants from ex-British colonies. His position and teachings were ambiguous and conflicted. At times he seemingly challenged anti-migrant rhetoric, yet at other times espoused views aligned to concerns about too much migration. During interviews, when I asked him about how colonialism is dealt with in the Handbook, he tended to answer rather cryptically and uncommittedly. He usually drew on a favourite analogy of his about a blind man describing an elephant, in order to make the point that reality is subjective.

So far, I have painted a rather insidious picture. Migrants, many from ex-British colonies, must memorize and rehearse a particular version of British culture and history in order to pass the test and acquire secure legal status in the UK. The teacher, himself a Ghanaian migrant without British citizenship, reproduces this idealized and sanitized version of British society and history. Yet, alongside this process, in subtle ways the Handbook's messages were altered and challenged through teaching and learning. Adam interpreted and explained the information in a way he thought would be understandable to his students and, in doing so,

created a hybrid version of the Handbook in which the teacher's and students' interpretations merged with its prescribed views. The plague, for example, was likened to Ebola, while Adam jokingly wondered if Queen Mary performed voodoo on Edward VI. The devolved parliaments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, meanwhile, were explained in terms of how a family might make decisions: 'You don't need to tell your parents everything, like what you are eating for dinner. But if, for example, you get married, you have to say, otherwise they will not give their blessing'. In other moments, discussion of the Handbook provides space for students to level criticism at its grandiose claims and to critique British society. For example, when discussing the section in the Handbook on literature, Adam told his class:

> They [British people] always want to read books. This is one of the problems with British culture, they always want to read even in congestion time. [he acts out someone reading on a busy tube]
>
> To which a student responds: Yes, because they don't want to look at each other.
> Or in discussion about the TV licences:
>
> One student: Lots of White [British] people don't even have TVs.
>
> Adam: 'Yes, because they spend all their time in pubs. They go to work. Go to the pub and then go home to sleep. So there's no point'.

On one occasion a Nigerian student suddenly and unexpectedly interrupted Adam during his espousal of the Handbook and its account of Britain's greatness, to tell the class:

> We think red passports [British passports] make you become God. But to be honest I think we need to *not* forget about our own country. That is my speech.

All of the other students nodded and thanked the student for mentioning this. The following discussion involved the students talking about their own countries and how much they love them and do not want to forget them. Veronica, an outspoken woman from Sierra Leone, then commented:

> Even if you've got the red book, you are still a second-class citizen. The others responded by nodding, and several muttered: yes, racism.

This latter exchange highlighted the way in which the process of learning the Handbook involved uncritically celebrating the UK and implicitly acknowledging its superiority to candidates' countries of origin. The Nigerian student's interjection highlighted the ambivalent feelings that this produced. Veronica's comment, meanwhile, challenged the Handbook's claims that its

values and principles – in this case freedom from prejudice – are actually practised in British society.

While the Handbook therefore only acknowledges migrants' contribution and participation in British society and history in the most tokenistic way, through the process of teaching and learning the Handbook, its meanings shift from those originally intended. The teachers' interpretations did not clearly mirror the test's contents but were messily refracted, as migrants' and teachers' own worldviews bled into this idealized version of Britain and challenged its hegemony.

Conclusion

Over the past decade, while conducting this research, I have had many informal conversations about the Life in the UK test. Those who have taken the test, or those who know somebody who has, consistently point out the triviality of the test's contents, which are deemed to be irrelevant to everyday life and unfamiliar even to those who have grown up in the country. This emphasis on triviality, however, detracts from the racist and exclusionary message that the citizenship test communicates about authentic Britishness, which is anything but inconsequential. Focusing on the contents as well as the process of the citizenship test reveals that the 'citizen ideal' (Turner 2014, 343) imagined by Handbook is a classed and racialized figure, whose roots lie in colonial constructions of normative ideas around Britishness that legitimized the empire. However, while the test may be an inclusive-exclusive mode of liberal governance designed to include some migrants while excluding others, it also has unexpected consequences. The withdrawal of the ESOL with citizenship course has successfully reduced the number of citizenship applicants, particularly those with lower levels of education and literacy who are far removed from the 'citizen ideal' (Turner 2014, 343). However, 'filling the gap' – in Adam's words – are privately run organizations which, albeit for a fee, assist those struggling to pass the test. In these spaces, through dual processes of teaching and learning, the Britishness presented in the Handbook is re-interpreted and hybridized: at times, the normative White middle-class British subject is reinforced, while at other times it is challenged.

More than a decade since they were introduced, the revisions to the citizenship test can be seen as early signs of the culture wars that have come to shape British society and politics (Göhrmann and Henneböhl 2024; Satia 2022), in which the meanings of Britain and Britishness have become key ideological objects to fight over. Attempting to control who can be deemed as authentically British is deeply relevant to contemporary debates in Britain, but is not new. As Afua Hirsch writes, the debate around immigration is 'a window into Britain's deepest view of itself . . . (–) the strongly held belief that "indigenous" British are a white race, with a pristine culture

stemming from time immemorial' (2018, 298). Indeed, the version of British history and culture in the Life in the UK test can be situated within a longer trajectory of British nationality and citizenship policy-making since 1948, which has been characterized by the political class's desire that authentic Britishness is equated with whiteness (Anderson 2013; El-Enany 2020; Patel 2021; Paul 1997). The persistent espousal of this version of authentic Britishness is not only discriminatory towards those migrants who are not deemed desirable, but also towards many British people, in particular those for whom migration is part of their identity (Hirsch 2018, 298).

As Parekh observed more than two decades ago, while whiteness nowhere features as an explicit condition of being British, Britishness has systematic, largely unspoken racial connotations – namely that it is racially coded as White (Parekh 2000, 38). The current UK citizenship test formalizes these racial connotations and promotes a narrow and limited version of Britain and Britishness. As an inclusive-exclusive mode of governance, based on a set of normalizing strategies (Turner 2014), the citizenship test is situated within a broader ideological project to control what counts as 'real' Britishness, a project that affects not only migrants but all Britons. The 2024 race riots, which saw outbreaks of violence against racialized Britons and migrants across the U.K., shows the dangerous consequences of weaponizing the issue of immigration. The citizenship test was, in theory, introduced to produce social cohesion. In its current form it is an expression of a particular ideology of Britishness – one that is rooted in racism – that fosters division and alienation.

Notes

1. I have chosen to capitalize the B and W in white and black to acknowledge that both are historically created racial identities (see Appiah 2020).
2. 40% fewer people were granted citizenship in 2015 than two years earlier, before revisions were introduced (Brooks 2016).
3. The test costs £50 and applicants can take it as many times as they like. In addition citizenship applicants must pay for an English language test which costs £200 and the citizenship application itself which currently costs £1375.
4. English and British were often used interchangeably.
5. Other than politicians, names of all people and places have been changed.
6. I am referring to Sivanandan's well-known aphorism 'we are here because you were there' in relation to contemporary migration and the British empire.

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