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“... Here I Went Through Deportation – Which was also Torture for Me”: Air-Deportations and Liberal Violence in Great Britain

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Abstract

This article contributes to understanding violence in deportation. Drawing on data from eight months of fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2017 and interviews with asylum seekers and practitioners, the article shows how liberal violence, in its various forms, is integral to the contemporary air deportation process. The violence, as argued here, is not unusual, spectacular or resulting from procedural failures and lapses in individual officer judgement, but is integral to it. The conclusion calls for scholars to consider the very practice of deportation as violence and a crime against humanity, gather comprehensive evidence with an explicit aim of making deportations interrogatable by international criminal law, and hold the British state accountable and demand reparations.

Keywords Deportation · Asylum seekers · Liberalism · Racism · Violence · Great Britain

This is the first time I am talking to someone about our deportation ... Oh gosh, feels like it happened yesterday. It is not something I can just forget ... My children are very strong. But when they see the [immigration enforcement] van, they get upset because it reminds them of raid and deportation. I sit with them and say that we should talk. I am a single mother, you know. I have gone through a lot in my life. I want my children to be strong and proud of who they are ... You know, I don't want them to be afraid of anyone ... I was tortured in X [country of origin], and here I went through deportation – which was also torture for me. I want to talk about this with you today.

(Interview with Fatima (Culturally suitable pseudonyms are used throughout the article))

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Introduction

On 14th June 2022, the Home Office¹ executed the plan to forcefully deport² people seeking refuge in Great Britain to Rwanda, an East African country approximately 4000 miles away from Britain. Despite numerous attempts to challenge the lawfulness of the plan, the charter flight operated by a Spanish company, “Privilege Airlines”, was scheduled to depart from the Ministry of Defence’s Boscombe Down Airbase in England. The media reported a heavy police presence around the Colnbrook Immigration Removal Centre (IRC), where those facing deportation were held. Several anti-racist activists were arrested for lying on the road with their arms in metal lock-on tubes to block the deportation vans from taking people to the airbase. Meanwhile, lawyers lodged a series of successful appeals, reducing the total number of those facing deportation to a single digit. However, it was the last-minute European Court of Human Rights judgement that led to the cancellation of the inaugural flight altogether.

Following the failed deportation attempt, investigative journalists uncovered the sheer scale of injuries that refugees endured. They obtained documents from the Home Office under the Freedom of Information Act, which mainly included forms completed by custody staff following use of force incidents (Walawalkar et al. 2023). The media highlighted several cases—for instance, moments before his transportation to the flight, a man experiencing severe mental health issues repeatedly cut his wrists, resulting in profuse bleeding. He was treated by a nurse and then handed over to the deportation escorts for transfer to the airbase. Similarly, an individual exhibiting suicidal ideation was placed under a constant watch and later transferred to the flight, subjected to a waist restraint belt, and physically attached to the seat. There were also cases of severe pain-inducing techniques used against vulnerable deportees to gain compliance (e.g., the mandibular technique³ and sustained wrist grip).

The use of force, however, was not merely restricted to those considered for Rwanda deportation. Another report revealed the suspension of 102 staff between January 2020 and mid-February 2023 for excessive force, and over half (57) of these were deportation escorts (Walawalkar and Sommerlad, 2023). This report outlined cases of violence—for example, an officer delivering knee strikes on a deportable person’s head and at a location which was known to not have CCTV cameras. The other situations involved staff kicking a self-harming 14 year-old child and using unapproved and painful restraint techniques on a 38 year-old woman’s head and neck area (also see Medical Justice report, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2023). The police were not notified about these acts of violence. Furthermore, only one recorded case explicitly outlined an allegation of racism—demonstrating a deliberate and strategic omission of mechanisms to record and report racist assaults.

The aim of this article is to contribute to understanding violence in the deportation process. By bringing narratives and experiences of asylum seekers/survivors who were subjected to and who rejected enforced-removal attempts to the forefront, the article shows

¹ The Home Office is the lead government department for immigration, crime, drug policy, fire, counterterrorism and police.

² Note on terminology: Under British law, deportations and removals are two separate categories. However, this article uses the terms interchangeably, as both involve expulsion of those deemed non-citizens.

³ Mandibular angle involves putting pressure on a nerve centre on the jawbone, below the ear. According to one governmental document, the technique causes a sharp burst of pain, and it can cause long-term nerve damage (Taylor, 2020).

how violence, in its various forms, is integral to the air-deportation process. This violence, as argued here, is not unusual, spectacular or resulting from procedural failures and lapses in individual officer judgement. It is rather impersonal, routinised, institutionalised, cumulative, sustained, repeated, and patterned. To this end, the article will first offer a review of the literature, followed by the theoretical framework and methodology, and three sections drawing on field data and exposing the violence during various phases of deportation. The conclusion calls for scholars and practitioners to consider the very practice of deportation as violence and torture, and gather comprehensive evidence, with an explicit aim of making deportations interrogatable by international criminal law and holding the state accountable.

Literature Review

Deportation is a cruel, extreme and excessively grotesque form of state power (Gibney, 2008). It has a long history in nation-building processes and remains one of the ways in which the state continuously re-establishes itself (Collyer, 2012). Deportation functions as ‘waste removal’ or perfunctory ‘taking out trash’—and it disposes and eradicates deportees’ identities, connections and ties, life trajectories, ambitions, hopes, and desires (De Genova, 2017:253). According to Gibney (2013), deportation has clear parallels with and replicates several aspects of forced migration. Scholars investigating modern deportation have widely argued that it is a controversial practice, pushing the limits of law, ethics, and morality (Gibney, 2008; Walters, 2019). Deportations, as explained by Smith (2022:6), “take place at the level of the individual or the family and are justified on the basis of an individual’s particular case—a refugee claim or a criminal history, despite the overwhelming evidence towards racialised patterns of decision-making. Deportations also rely upon another state—the real or alleged ‘home’ of the deportee—being willing to receive the person (even if the receiving state is coerced or compelled by financial incentives). Deportation is thus both the act of expelling someone and the relocation of that person elsewhere ... This ‘elsewhere’ is fundamental in legitimising the expulsion of deportees, regardless of the relationship between the individual and the place they are expelled to, which may be one of estrangement or danger”.

Deportations scar and leave a trauma imprint on the memories of individuals, their families, relatives, friends, and communities—all of whom are somehow connected and affected by the actions and inactions of state agencies, immigration and police officers, private security companies and personnel, and even certain non-governmental organisations (Coutin, 2015; also see Hasselberg, 2016). Deportation cannot be merely reduced to a singular act or moment of boarding the flight, as it encompasses a much wider space–time (Smith, 2022). For asylum seekers, this includes, but is not limited to, being: (i) trapped in Kafkaesque (?) bureaucracy that operates on a culture of suspicion, disbelief and denial (Canning, 2019); (ii) excluded from the labour market and welfare safety-net and left in prolonged poverty, destitution, limbo, and neglect (Bhatia, 2020a; Mayblin, 2020); (iii) pushed into designated segregated zones in the community and under an ever-present threat of deportation (Kalir, 2019); (iv) subjected to degrading technologies of control, such as electronic monitoring and the so-called ‘alternatives to detention’ (Bhatia 2021) and/or painful indefinite detention (Bosworth, 2023); (v) confronted with an expansive crimmigration dragnet and

punitive environment (Bhatia 2020b); and (vi) exposed to conditions that disrupt the core principles of reproductive justice (Bhatia, 2023). The space–time dynamic reveals the cumulative traumatic impacts of deportation (deportability).

The scholarship on contemporary deportation continues to grow, but there remains a distinct blind spot. According to Walters (2019:167), the spaces, procedures, personnel, transportation and vehicles by which enforced removals are executed—are all missing from the debates. He calls for an examination of the “microphysics of deportations”—the practices and the scale of work required to make removals happen, along with the “production of speed”. Walters further explains that flight is a visible tip, air-deportations are a vast iceberg, and microphysics give a glimpse of what is “lurking below the surface”. Paying attention to this also enhances the understanding of corporeality in removal practices and the ways in which the body, feelings and force interact in enacting deportations (Khosravi, 2009).

The modes of transportation, linked to the histories of banishment and colonial violence (the latter expanded in the next section) have been subjected to intense critical scrutiny and discussion. For instance, Christina Sharpe’s book *In the Wake* (2016) examines the maritime crossings of the Middle Passage, and shows the varied and various ways in which ship and water hold on to the evidence of racism and violence and become “archives of breathlessness” (p. 109). Similarly, Browne (2015) subjects the architectural plan of the slave ship *Brooks* to interrogation and demonstrates the intertwining of the historical formations of surveillance with slavery and colonialism. Both Sharpe and Browne powerfully narrate how slavery and the material structures of slave ships inform contemporary violence, regulations, containments and controls—rooted in racial fungibility (also see Blee, 2005; Bhatia, 2020b). Moreover Mishra’s (2021) work unveils the black box of bound ‘coolie’ experiences, focusing on transportation ships as microcosm and precursor to life on the plantations. The violence on ships, as the author explains, was both extreme/physical and routinized—and inflicted to break migrants’ sense of self and assume the dehumanised ‘coolie’ identity. On the other hand, Gigliotti’s (2009) work explores train deportation and trauma in relation to the Holocaust. By presenting survivor accounts of train/cattle-car/freight journeys, she draws attention to both the sensorial and corporeal dimensions. Gigliotti presents various chronological phases of deportation and how they were experienced. She also discusses deportees’ escape attempts and how such acts of defiance became a management issue for the escorts. Equally, it explains why certain deportees chose not to escape—fearing for their families and to avoid running from one captivity and getting trapped in countless others.

In the post-war period, and since the 1980s, Britain and most Western liberal democracies have witnessed a “deportation turn” (Gibney 2008:167). Successive British governments have been on a mission to proudly outdo one another on cruelty, to avoid appearing a “soft touch” on “bogus” and “fraudulent” asylum claimants. The governments have used policy innovations to bypass liberal norms—and continuously expanded and turned deportations into an acceptable practice and a legitimate exercise of state sovereignty (Gibney, 2008). The intensification of deportations shows the willingness of the state to treat asylum seekers in illiberal ways (Gibney, 2008)—resulting in a continuum of violence. Contemporary air-deportations are remnants or rather mutations of past violence that, being part of the daily view, are simultaneously asserted and denied. The next section explains the framework for the article.

Air-Deportations as Liberal-Violence

In 1955, a Martiniquais writer, Aimé Césaire, interrogated European colonialism from a non-Eurocentric lens and explained that colonialism worked to decivilize and brutalise the coloniser and colonised. Césaire’s analysis placed colonialism at front and centre to interpret Nazism. He argued that Nazism was not an exception but an ultimate expression or outcome of a civilisation that justified, absolved, tolerated and normalised colonial violence—without perceiving its dangers—and thereby pushing the continent towards savagery. The racial hierarchies between Europeans and non-Europeans established around the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries resulted in racist dehumanisation, which paved the way for violent treatment of the colonised. The racial terror unleashed by Nazis on Jewish, Black, and Roma people within Europe was not an aberration but lied within the continuum of racist-colonialist violence.

The defeat of Nazism, together with freeing the colonies, however, did not end racism. According to Kalir (2019), contemporary border controls and mobility regimes are the mutations of colonial configurations, and coded in a racial matrix. He further explains that exclusions, violence, suffering, injuries and deaths resulting from these controls are strategic and calculated—as opposed to tragic or unintentional consequences of otherwise benign and race-blind policies/practices. Kalir calls for scholars and practitioners to challenge the notions of “humane”, “progressive” and “democratic” Western governing regimes that have wandered off the right path and can be fixed through simple reforms or fine-tuning—as border controls are entrenched in racism. Similarly, Isakjee et al. (2020:1768) argue that border controls inflict “liberal violence” and contradict so-called liberal values with respect to human dignity/rights and this contradiction is obscured and sustained through the re-framing and denial of violence using colour-blind logics (also see Mondon and Winter, 2020). The controls exist to maintain the global racial order established by colonialism and white supremacy, treating black and brown bodies as valueless, inferior and disposable. In her work, El-Enany (2020) demonstrates that British borders are drawn around the spoils of colonialism and enforced through immigration laws. This has turned the country into a racially configured space in which the racialised poor are subjected to internal borders and racial terror that is “uninterrogable by the law” (p. 66).

Race, as Weheliye (2014:4) asserts, is not simply about biology or cultural classification but rather “racializing assemblages”—a set of socio-political processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not quite humans and non-humans. Weheliye cites Wilson Gilmore (2002: 261), who defines racism not as resting on phenotype or culture, but as “the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death” and asks, “what, then, is racism if not the political exploitation and (re)production of race?”. All the above understandings of racism and violence expose the ways in which deportation controls life chances on the level of populations, creating intersectional oppressions along the lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, age and other identity markers (Cházaro, 2021). According to Cházaro, violence is central to understanding deportation, and using this lens pushes our thinking and moves beyond the existing debates that simply treat deportation as disproportionate/unfair/unjust punishment. Framing deportation as punishment steers the discussion towards how the practice can be reformed, made softer/more humane, aligned better with the rule of law, or its compatibility increased with due process and rights (Cházaro, 2021). But when deportation is looked at through the lens of violence,

it allows for questioning and challenging the civility of the practice and liberal racism inherent to it, and at the same time, reveals the violence that does not meet the criteria of a spectacle but is frequent, recurrent and re/produced.

Deportation violence cannot be merely reduced to physical and brutal, resulting in immediate (and overt) injuries and death. It can also be quiet (and slow—i.e., the pace of violence) and can also result in psychological, social and material injuries. While analysing the deportations of people in the Mandate Palestine, Banko (2022) moves away from the previous understandings of structural violence that treat it as silent and unintended harms. Instead, she argues that quiet violence is linked to the very structures of colonialism, and it is intended, as well as bureaucratic and administrative. The deportation regime is an emotional regime, with paperwork procedures, and officials holding emotional force over deportees (see Borrelli and Lindberg 2019). The violence of deportation materialises on bodies and minds, and it is procedural, lived, injurious, and concealed through benign processes. While explaining this, Banko draws attention to the deportation of an older blind man, whose physical infirmity was disbelieved and flagged as exaggeration and he was considered “fit to travel” to another part of the world plagued by conflict. The author argues this was an intended quiet violence inflicted through the orderly, neat and logical colonial state-bureaucratic apparatus.

Using the lens of violence shifts the attention to immigration enforcement as a tool through which the violence of deportation is enacted and expanded—as opposed to treating deportation as a mere tool of immigration enforcement (Cházaro, 2021:1083). The racism and violence in contemporary deportations are not an aberration but integral to it and must be placed within the continuum of slavery and colonialism. The violence is justified through the discourses of “deterrence”, “securing the nation”, “conduciveness to the public good”, “in the public interest”, and “delivering the will of the people”. Furthermore, those who enact deportation, enact violence. This very view moves beyond the good and bad apple theory and diverts attention to the (colonial) architectural plan of the shed holding the apples. Those who are tasked to carry out deportation, in the words of Seigel (2018: 26), are doing “violence work”, and are given the “permission to be cruel” (Bhatia, 2020a). Siegel explains that violence workers need not activate violence/cruelty—but their labour relies on violence or the threat thereof. Indeed, racism is a framework in which to understand the toil of violence workers—which can include state and non-state actors who are given in/formal consent. Border agency staff, private security officers/escorts, tribunal judges, employers and landlords—whose decisions and actions impose the threat of deportation—can all be viewed as violence workers enacting liberal white supremacy and racism on behalf of the state (Cházaro, 2021; Beeman, 2022).

Framing *deportation as liberal violence* in Britain is a bold step towards the politicisation and delegitimisation, derationalisation and denaturalisation of the practice. It will drag deportations into broad daylight and gradually destroy the reproduction and reification of race and violence. At the same time, it will advance the racial justice, liberation and abolitionist agendas, and reject the racializing assemblages that deny asylum seekers personhood. The next section explains the methodology.

Methodology

The empirical data on which this article is based come from a study conducted between 2015 and 2017 involving eight months of non-consecutive fieldwork (and redacted case documents sent by the organisation to the author and written communication with interviewees up to 2018) that investigated the deportation process and resistance. For the

purposes of the study, the author was based at a migrant support organisation and spent an average of two days each week in the field. The organisation was located a short bus ride away from the regional immigration reporting centre (RC). Service users often notified the organisation prior to visiting the RC, and then re-notified it once the event was completed. If they did not return or get in touch by the end of the working day, a member of staff would attempt to establish contact to check their whereabouts. If unsuccessful, staff would call the emergency contact and/or solicitor. Migrants can be abruptly taken into custody from RC, have their mobile devices confiscated, swiftly moved to a detention centre, and subsequently processed for deportation. To ensure no time was wasted and that people had access to legal support, the organisation provided this service and made relevant parties aware of the situation. On many occasions, individuals from within detention centres (especially those subjected to raids and subsequently confined) also contacted the organisation for legal referrals and/or mobile phone top-ups (as their devices remained confiscated and they were issued a burner handset by the detention centre).

Most individuals would continue to keep in touch with the organisation and some would request further assistance/support (regardless of whether they were released back into the community or deported). After seeking consent from the staff, the author invited them for an interview. In the previous study the author noted that those receiving treatment and support for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and mental health issues and showing signs of stability were abruptly detained and subjected to the deportation process on multiple occasions. On release, their conditions were worse than before, and medical practitioners had to start over to help them achieve stability (Bhatia, 2020a). Therefore, it was agreed with the manager that the author would first seek their/staff consent to add an extra layer of safeguarding. When this was granted, the author (and at times the staff) would pass on the details of the project, along with the author's contact information, and ask the individuals to get in touch if/when they became interested in participating. In total, thirty-three individuals were approached who had experienced deportation, and the author conducted (repeat) interviews with six. The author also interviewed two migrant charity workers with over fifteen years experience. Throughout the project, the author maintained detailed field observation notes that included direct experiences both inside and outside of the interview realm. Furthermore, approximately 45 case files were also included in the study, along with third-sector and official reports and emails/letters from the participants. Following Scraton (2016) and Stanley (2016), this study intended to bear witness, gather testimonies and evidence, and seek out views from below—and write against rather than simply about victimisation.

The Deportation Process

The following sections present the field data and expose the violence during various (chronological) phases of deportation.

Detecting, Apprehending and Confining

As mentioned above, people can be caught off-guard at the RC, taken into custody, detained, and subsequently processed for deportation. This state tactic is well-known and causes significant anxieties. Some asylum seekers, who already had underlying health conditions, suffered from further injuries. Throughout the fieldwork the author noted several

cases. For example, an individual diagnosed with a serious mental health condition experienced nosebleeds prior to each reporting event. Another case involved a woman with high blood pressure and PTSD who suffered dizzy spells and panic attacks in the days leading to reporting. The author also encountered victims of torture and older people, and in one case, a young man who had recently completed a course of chemotherapy, who were all asked to report. Similarly, the Migrants Organise report (2020) highlighted that trafficking victims, unaccompanied minors and those with disabilities are all subjected to reporting, and there is a distinct absence of safeguards to protect welfare and rights. The official justification for reporting is that it assists in “contact management” and increases “compliance with immigration law”. However, it is designed to deport through attrition. As a well-known military tactic called the *Fabian strategy*, attrition is used to exhaust or wear down opponents. In the case of immigration enforcement, it is deployed under the false hope that people will give up and “self deport” (see also Bhatia and Burnett, 2022). The National Audit Office (2020:28) confirmed the official use of attrition and, at the same time, raised serious concerns about the lack of evidence of its so-called effectiveness and/or ways to measure the desired outcomes. Moreover, while reporting (and attrition) may appear benign or gentle, they are deeply injurious and must be seen as continuous racial-psychological warfare.

During the fieldwork, the author met a 38-year-old asylum-seeking single mother, Lorna, with a school-aged daughter, Abi. Lorna was subjected to monthly reporting and would usually visit the RC by herself. However, due to the recent rejection of her asylum claim, Lorna was anxious about getting deported and becoming separated from Abi. Therefore, on this occasion, Abi accompanied her to the RC. Once the event was completed (following which she was not subjected to detention/deportation), Lorna returned to the organisation and approached the author to talk about her experience. Ever since her asylum claim had been rejected, Lorna suffered from severe migraines. She mentioned thinking about and imagining being deported, how she would navigate and re-escape her country of origin, and potential dangers to herself and her daughter. Whilst this conversation was ongoing, Abi was sitting on the other side of the room drawing. Abi later presented an image, replicated below, which gave her accounts of the event.⁴ There are several aspects of the image that are striking, such as showing awareness of race and positional power, sensory and spatial witnessing, understanding and ability to feel the humiliation, fear and helplessness of her mother, and emotions in a bureaucratic encounter. Like a camera, Abi quietly captured the violence inherent in the process.

⁴ Ethical approval for the study did not cover research involving children. Abi was not asked to make this drawing, and neither was she asked any further questions about the image. She was sitting some distance from and out of earshot of the author’s conversation with Lorna. Also, Lorna was surprised to see the drawing – especially as she did not register the encounter, and her mind was focused on deportation. She mentioned that Abi was learning to communicate through poetry and art and had become very observant. Both Lorna and Abi consented to the author photographing her drawing.



(Drawing by Abi, an asylum-seeking child).

While Lorna and Abi were not detained, another participant, Otieno, who reported on a fortnightly basis, was taken into custody and processed for removal. During the interview he mentioned going through invasive eye surgery, being partially sighted, and given a course of strong painkillers. Due to his health, along with deteriorating political conditions in his country of origin and filing a fresh claim, Otieno presumed that reporting would be quick and uneventful. However, soon after his arrival, he was taken into the “back room”. Otieno stated:

They put me behind the mirrors, like a partition. I thought they may be giving me my papers [refugee status] or something ... Then, after some time, two officers came. The officer asked me “Mr Otieno Dube, do you understand what’s going on?” I was like “no!” He said “we’ve refused all your papers and asylum claim, and you are due to be detained and prepared for deportation...” I was shocked. It was all happening so fast. I was so confused. I felt they were acting aggressively towards me. I said that I do not understand what’s happening – and they started screaming “you perfectly understand what’s going on, you speak English very clearly” ... they asked me to stand-up and started to search me. They were big officers. I asked them to get off me and held on to my bag, which had my phone and papers. One officer twisted my arm and took the bag and phone. He wanted me to sign something. I refused. Then I told him: “Look what you are doing” [while the officer was twisting his arm]. He said: “Well, stop resisting then”. I was not resisting, I just needed space to think.

(Interview with Otieno)

Disorientation, obstruction and creating confusion are some of the tactics used in the deportation process. Otieno also mentioned that he often had “friendly banter” with a few RC staff, one of whom was present on the day and “felt bad”. When the two officers left, the RC staff handed a phone to Otieno so he could call his solicitor. Later during the day, Otieno was transferred to a detention centre in Scotland, Dungavel, where he experienced further disorientation tactics. Otieno mentioned that, over the next few days, each time he had a phone chat with his partner or a lawyer and a course of action was agreed on, the Home Office (HO) created immediate and further obstacles, something that was only possible if someone had passed on or made the HO aware of this information. Initially he thought that the law firm was working with the immigration authorities. However, he was later informed by other migrants that some of them had similar experiences, and that the HO could hack burner phones provided by the detention centre. According to *The Guardian* (2016), the amendments to the Police Act 1997 granted the HO powers that included the right to interfere with equipment, which can include planting listening devices or hacking phones. Of course, such intangible intrusions are difficult to identify and prove by deportees (and especially by those who are actually deported). Also, it is unclear when or why certain individuals might become subjected to such intrusions. The extent of the practice and the scale of rights violations and injuries remain unknown. Nevertheless, Privacy International’s (2019) investigation reveals that the British government has been extracting mobile data and interfering with asylum seekers’ electronic devices for years—using this as a weapon to speed up the deportation process.⁵ Such strategies of observation and tracking by the white capitalist state are what Browne (2015) calls “racializing surveillance”.

For reasons unrelated to his experiences described above, Otieno decided to change his lawyer. The new law firm acted on the change promptly and sent a member of staff to visit the detention centre at the weekend (instead of Monday) and sort out the legal aid and other paperwork. This was a fortunate occurrence, as on the next day and without any warning, Otieno was transferred to a detention centre in England.⁶ It was noted that people who were moved to England struggled to find a solicitor in Scotland (due to legal aid restrictions) – unless they already had one and who was willing to represent them in England. Otieno mentioned that there were extremely limited legal provisions in the English detention centre and the queue was often long, and not having a solicitor would have resulted in his “guaranteed deportation”. Furthermore, one of the charity workers explained that legal firms in the (English) detention are overwhelmed with heavy caseloads. He raised concerns that giving access to only selected firms violated the legal principle of impartiality. He also felt that certain lawyers were taking an easier route and repeatedly submitting bail applications instead of working on the actual asylum case. Of course, the legal aid restrictions and restricting legal representation, both add to the speed of removal (and quiet violence). While reflecting on his transfer to England, Otieno said:

⁵ In 2018, an asylum-seeker won £15,500 in damages after the HO admitted to hacking his phone and giving out sensitive information to officials in his country of origin. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/jan/17/home-office-pays-out-15500-to-asylum-seeker-over-data-breach>

⁶ Otieno felt that the HO was aware of this as well, as the solicitor mentioned on the phone that they would visit him on Monday afternoon (when he was abruptly moved to England), but surprisingly turned up on Sunday instead.

This is where the hard time started. The staff in Dungavel try to make the situation less bad and keep you positive ... they also liked football – so we had footie chat sometime. They let me organise football game with other detainees ... My stay there wasn't horrendous. The only horrendous thing was that I was locked in my room a lot. And I kept thinking about deportation. That stress never went away. But when I went to England, the whole situation changed. Just being in that place made everything much worse ... the cells were filthy, they were disgusting ... I also think they knew that I will not be there for more than a week, and they put me in a certain place. You know that place where you are shit, and no one gives a shit about you ... The shower and toilets had no door or curtain. And you could see and smell everyone. The food was also dry and cold, it was like leftovers or something. I hardly ate there – I was so stressed and depressed. The constant and loud door-banging noise was keeping me awake all night ... Don't know how many days I spent there – maybe three or four days – but it felt like three months ... it was terrible man, it was terrible.

(Interview with Otieno).

Otieno experienced the interactions with Dungavel staff as giving hope and positivity and the ability to organise football as a gesture of care and generosity. In Kalir's (2019) research, those working for the deportation regime often characterised their jobs as humane and ensured that “client” dignity was maintained, and they remained nice even when handing out unpleasant information. Similarly, Khosravi (2009) also highlighted the narratives of caring and saving in Sweden (a progressive haven) and the ways in which they worked to facilitate expulsion. Otieno's explanation arguably exposed another layer. As Davidson and Virdee (2018) argue, the myth of Scottish exceptionalism and the dominant narrative that Scotland in some sense is different from England—more egalitarian, pro-migration, abiding by humanitarian ideals, and an anti-racist utopia—has disguised the structuring power of racism and pushed colour-blind thinking. The progressive and humanitarian ideals are dragged into the deportation process, creating an oppressive kindness or kind oppressiveness—so that people continue to comply, do not disrupt, and depart feeling good about Scotland and/or good about their confinement experience. The author encountered more migrants who spoke positively about Dungavel and often highlighted the friendly and caring personalities of staff. While reflecting on Dungavel and the deportation process, one Scottish charity worker and activist stated: “Don't get me wrong, it is great they [officers] are not being nasty...but we need to push the abolition movement forward and start questioning as to why some Scots feel the need to work for the racist system in the first place.”

Further, in a follow-up interview with Otieno, he emphasised that the English officers were “evil” and those in Dungavel were “friendly”, and that he got “nerves shiver” each time he heard a (Southern) English accent as it reminded him of deportation. Of course, individuals have limited frames of reference to make sense of and explain their treatment. For Otieno, comparing two jurisdictions and officers was his way of highlighting the sheer degradation, humiliation and physical pain he experienced in England, resulting in each passing moment feeling longer than it was (more in the following section). However, while doing so, he also tapped into the complicated workings of the exceptionalism myth, which obscures, distorts and submerges the experiences of deportation violence. It is important to also highlight the mass hunger strikes in Dungavel in 2015 and earlier (and sporadic strikes ever since). Furthermore, 7% of those in Dungavel are on suicide watch each month, and 14% are monitored for risk of self-harm. A recent inquiry about the death of a Chinese man found a chronic lack of medical provision and grave failings on the site (PAIH, 2023).

Preparation for Removal

Fatima, a single mother and a torture survivor, was subjected to an immigration raid and subsequently taken to a regional reporting centre in Scotland. Once the officers completed the paperwork, she and her children were immediately taken to the nearest airport, held there for a further four hours, and then transferred to a detention near London. Since the detention of children was abolished in Scotland in 2010, and in the absence of a buffer, people with children were processed quickly and moved out of the jurisdiction and to England for deportation. Fatima also mentioned that at some point during her transfer, the officer mentioned that her enforced removal was scheduled in three days' time – leaving very little room to act (and her phone was confiscated, so she could not contact a solicitor until after reaching England). Fatima highlighted:

We arrived on Monday and on Thursday evening they tried deporting us. The detention centre was OK. The staff there were actively involved with children. They were trying to get their mind off what's actually happening. They kept telling children "all is good in X [country of origin]". They were showing them pictures of schools – the schools in rich areas, where government and rich people's children go – schools that I will never be able to afford. All big private schools. I recently looked up the names, and you pay £4000 for an academic session for each child. Those were type of schools they were telling children that are available in X [country of origin]. We were getting deported without anything. I had no roof over my head, nowhere to stay ... how will I give my children all this?

(Interview with Fatima)

Beneath the humane and caring approach, as the above quote reveals, lies the (seeking of consent through) deception. Fatima mentioned that at no point were her children told the truth and that their lives could be potentially in danger. Whilst her asylum claim was rejected, the fact remained that she was a torture survivor and was fleeing her country of origin. Further, since deportations are corporeal, calming, soothing and preparing the body and mind becomes necessary for the smooth functioning of the process (Khosravi, 2009; Walters, 2019). With regard to the deportation of children, such tactics are not new and often reproduced across the liberal West. For instance, the Swedish Migration Board used a popular children's cartoon character *Bamse* ("the world's strongest bear") and created a comic strip to condition asylum-seeking children. In the final frame, deportees (all animal characters) are arriving "back home", and welcomed by family and friends. The message conveyed was that no harm will come to those refused asylum by the trusted Swedish state—and that children "have rights to know about their rights"—which is their right to return "home" (Khosravi, 2016). In Britain, a charity (previously) providing support services in the detention system published a report outlining their "success". The report mentioned a story of a family distressed at the prospect of deportation, who were later "transformed" by staff "care and expertise", into one dressed in their best clothing and looking forward to seeing their extended family again and going to the beach on their return. Towards the end it stated that, after deportation, children sent a thank you email to staff (Webber, 2014).⁷ Another asylum-seeking single mother, Mercy, who was also

⁷ Cedars was closed in December 2016 and the charity organisation's contract subsequently ended. The Tinsley House detention centre managed by Serco (and G4S until 2019) has a family unit that holds families with children.

subjected to a raid and moved to “pre-departure accommodation”, fiercely rejected the idea of a “humane” and “caring” approach. While appreciating the kindness of the staff (whom she referred to as social workers), she pointed out that:

Nothing made sense! As a mother, it was hard for me to watch. They [staff] thought they were trying to help children by showing them pictures of X [country of origin]. It was all beautiful areas where rich people lived. I didn’t even know where it was ... They were showing them things they [children] couldn’t even relate to; it was totally alien to them ... There is one more thing that made me angry – the officers would walk into room without knocking [and unannounced]. Maybe to check that you are not doing anything to yourself? Still breathing? No privacy ... once we came out, they [children] asked why they were “treated like terrorist?”

(Interview with Mercy)

The surveillance and monitoring of breathing and ensuring that bodies were kept alive was all part of the process and to retain speed. In the case of Otieno, his eye had started to become infected in Dungavel, but he was not offered an appointment with a medical practitioner as his transfer was already scheduled. The condition of his eye continued to deteriorate in England, and soon started leaking a considerable amount of pus and turned painful. This also started to cause issues in his other eye. Nevertheless, on the day of his deportation, he found that he had been issued with a ‘fit to fly’ letter:

The doctor was away, and there was a male nurse. The nurse looked at me and started arguing as I requested a doctor ... Then the escort team came – six of them, and one was the driver and one medic. All big guys – looked like professional rugby players in suits. When I say big, I mean BIG! The medic was a woman, and she was like a rugby player too. She kept referring to me as “these people”. All of them started tormenting me, asking me questions – why you want to see a doctor blah blah. It was very racist ... They said: “doctors are all gone here. If you are to see a doctor, that means you will need to miss your flight today. Unfortunately, that’s not going to happen – because here in our file it says you are fit to fly. We are going to take you regardless and it is up to you to chose whether you want to go forcedly or not.” So, I decided not to argue. I was like, “I understand you are doing your job”. They searched me. They frisked me. And then we left the detention centre.

(Interview with Otieno)

Otieno emphasised quantifying control (six abled-bodied and athletic officers) to draw attention to his condition, being in pain, temporarily disabled, and standing 5 feet 6 inches. There are three distinctly different aspects converging in his deportation. Historically, enslaved, colonised, and dark-skinned people were said to possess limited capacity to truly *feel*—turning it into a biological fact and resulting in diminishing culpability when inflicting violence (Bourke, 2014). The different ideas of pain continued throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and beyond. According to Bourke, patients considered to be ‘truly’ in pain were constituted by power differentials. At the same time, contradictory ideas circulated that while being insensitive to noxious stimuli, the profound inferiority of the ‘other’ also meant that they were especially likely to respond to pain with exaggerated sensitivity. Despite pus oozing from his painful eye, not fully recovered from surgery, and the real risk of becoming permanently/partially blinded—Otieno was deemed “fit to fly”. Simultaneously, he was considered as exaggerating, not in “real” pain and a nuisance for wanting to see a doctor. Second, despite the acceptance of his condition (but not his “real” pain), he was stereotypically considered strong and disruptive enough to merit the control

of six athletic-built and strong escorts. There is also a third aspect i.e., medical complicity in border controls and the (colonial) racial governance of “othered” bodies through medicine (one example of this being the gynaecological examination/virginity testing at London Heathrow Airport in the 1970s—see Smith and Marmo, 2014). Furthermore, in the recent Brook House Inquiry, it was noted that limited details about an individual’s medical history were referred to in “fit to fly” and “fit for detention” letters. In one letter, a doctor wrote to the HO “... detainee is fit to fly and fit for detention. He will need a medical escort due to the nature of his medical condition. I am happy for reasonable force to be used (C and R) in order to facilitate the removal” (The Brook House Inquiry website, 2017). Here the doctor “approved” the use of force for the sole purposes of effecting deportation, thereby discarding the medical safeguarding role, and showing the medical entanglements with deportation. Elsewhere, Bhatia and Burnett (2019) have highlighted how medical practitioners consider torture survivors and at-risk adults “fit” to be detained.

Transportation to the Flight and the Use of Force

Otieno was escorted to a van that was heading for the airport. The flight departure was scheduled for 21:00, and they left the site (close to the airport) at 17:00. He was driven to different parts of the city, and along the journey, two officers kept asking him questions. During the interview, Otieno mentioned that one officer was lending a sympathetic ear, while the other was trying to agitate him. The former was behaving “as if he cared” and wanted to know his life story and what brought him to Britain, whilst the latter continued to talk in a rough manner, trying to solicit a response or reaction. Otieno apologised to both and politely asked for space, and said that he was not in a conversating mood. Although, the strict officer asserted thrice throughout the journey: “you do understand that if you resist, we are allowed to forcibly remove you, whether you like it or not”. Otieno described two different worlds operating in the van: his world—which was being destroyed, as he was once again getting pushed into insecurity and danger. The other world was, as explained below:

One of the escorts had arranged the holiday – when they get to Africa, they were going to drop me off at the airport and take the next flight to a X [holiday destination] and stay there for five-six days. The medic escort had actually paid a lot of money for the childcare – think she mentioned £800 ... they booked the hotels and everything. They were quite excited, you know. And it was the trip they were looking forward to. They were talking about how they will spend the weekend, what they will eat ... and go around beaches and everything. They were not concerned about me. We drove around – went there, picked up some stuff, went there, picked up more stuff. Think it was passports or sunscreen – I don’t know. It was so hot in that van. They offered me water and a sandwich. But I did not eat – I was too scared they might drug me.⁸ I felt dehydrated and tired.

[Interview with Otieno]

The van arrived at the airport around 20:30. Otieno went through the check-in process. While he was waiting to board the flight, one of the ‘caring’ escorts offered him a phone

⁸ The HO does not use sedation for deportation purposes. However, sedatives are used by other Western states and some individuals assumed that it is used within the British deportation system as well.

and said: “I’m sorry this happened to you, but I am just doing my job”. Otieno called his partner, and both started crying profusely. He mentioned holding his breath and his Bible and hoping for a miracle to happen. On the other hand, Fatima and her children were escorted to a private bus/coach, which drove for several hours. They left the detention centre at 14:30, and the flight was scheduled for 22:00. Fatima mentioned that she was experiencing severe body ache and was sweating and exhausted. All along the way, she was patiently waiting to hear about the decision on her case. Fatima’s legal team had applied for a claim under Article 8 (ECHR), asylum for children, and submitted further psychological assessments—which she referred to as her “lifeline”. When they arrived at the airport, one of the female escorts handed her the last-minute decision and that all claims had been refused. Mercy went through a similar exhausting experience and mentioned that one of the escorts was trying to manipulate her and said: “this is not deportation, it is temporary relocation. And I can re-apply to come here from X [country of origin]”.

Both Fatima and Mercy started uncontrollably crying at the airport, and, consequently, their children started crying. The attempts to remove them were unsuccessful, and they were taken back to detention. However, a few days later, Fatima was subjected to a second attempt. On this occasion, fifteen escorts accompanied her and the children to the airport. The children were subsequently separated, and Fatima was escorted to the flight. She explained the intensity of the force:

I started screaming. They carried me with hands and legs and I was put flat on the floor. They tied my legs, put handcuffs on me. They carried me up to the flight ... I kept screaming for my children, screaming because I was hurting. They had to get me off the flight ... the man [escort] who was holding my hand was twisting the handcuffs. But he did not understand, there was a greater pain in me and that they were trying to deport me to a place I was tortured. They dropped me twice on my head. My whole body everywhere was aching. It was terrible. It was a very terrible experience. Terrible. Very terrible. It was terrible.

(Interview with Fatima)

Whereas Otieno explained:

The escorts were holding me tight. There was one on each side, one in the front and one at the back. They started taking me up the stairs, which was leading to the back of flight. I was weak, I was shaking ... I just panicked. I started screaming. They jumped on me, one guy jumped on my back – so I fell on the flight kitchen. The pilot immediately said take him off, he’s not going anywhere. You know, these guys were angry. The big guy grabbed my hoodie and started dragging me out and pulling me down. I was screaming, like shaking. My shoulder was hitting the staircase ... one of them was a big Scottish fella, who lived in England – he was hitting me on my chest ... they lifted me up and put me in the van and started screaming “shut-up, shut-up” ... I was in bed for 3-4 days ... this time they put me in a disabled room and nice side of detention ... I think they did that because I made a police complaint. They [police] gave me a reference number and said they were coming to see me ... I think they were not allowed to see me. Don’t know what happened, but I never heard from them again.

[Interview with Otieno]

The violence in the deportation process is not an aberration but integral to it. The path-breaking work by Medical Justice (2008, 2010, 2013, 2023) has revealed—year after year—the sheer scale of suffering and ways in which it is reproduced, ignored and denied.

The state-corporate response to violence has been to (sort of) discipline individual staff, correct violence through revised use of force and training manuals or invest £6.4 in training for escorts and private contractors and oil the wheels of the immigration-industrial-complex.⁹ This, in a paradoxical manner, is a liberal state response to dealing with violence that it truly desires.

Conclusion: Towards Deportations as Crime Against Humanity?

Deportation and deportability make people suffer and result in mass victimisation. To see it as a benign, routine, race-blind practice and a legitimate exercise of sovereignty is not only misleading, but it also disguises the volume and intensity of injuries meted out by the liberal capitalist state and the immigration-industrial-complex. Deportation emulates forced migration, and it is violent. To understand the liberal violence within the contemporary deportation regime requires setting it up against a much longer historical backdrop, as it is honed within colonial violence and banishment (see Burnett, 2022). Far from deviation, the violence is intertwined with the liberal state and very much desired. As Césaire (1955:37) writes, while dismissing the pseudo-humanism in liberal Europe: “for too long it has diminished the rights of man, that its concept of those rights has been—and still is—narrow and fragmentary, incomplete and biased and, all things considered, sordidly racist”. The operation of a deportation regime in the liberal capitalist states not only shows their bankruptcy but also reveals a racial/social order that has mutated from a particular context of coloniser-colonised and white supremacist logics. As evidenced throughout this article, deportation violence surpasses procedural irregularities, individual officer concerns, insufficient training, and complaint mechanisms and is inflicted through mutated colonial structures. But an important question arises—where do we go from here?

On the one hand, Kalir and Cantat (2020) argue that researchers have very little power to influence or bring about meaningful change to the deportation regime. Western liberal states have consistently deployed policies that do not meet or rather openly violate human rights norms—and, at the same time, defy expert knowledge produced by researchers working in the migration field (while also making state funding available for research). Whereas Bosworth and Kellezi (2017) have explained that researchers feel powerless and guilty when hearing testimonies of violence—feeling emotionally exhausted from thinking about abandoning the participants and watching powerless people being deported. On the other hand, the research participants have let the researcher witness and/or shared and trusted the researcher with their stories of violence. How can we retain the trust of the victims/survivors who have shared their testimonies with us and avoid disappointing them?

The researcher agrees with Bossow (2024: 30–31) in saying that *deportation is a form of torture and violates human dignity*. Therefore, the role of the researcher could be one of witnessing, gathering and furnishing evidence (by working in conjunction with the third sector and legal organisations), with an explicit view to hold the liberal British state accountable under international criminal law mechanisms and demand reparations for deportation violence. The recent legal submission to the International Criminal Court, calling for punitive action over Europe’s deterrence-based migration policy after 2014,

⁹ See: <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/politics/two-ex-tory-donors-profit-32360246>

has provided a blueprint to challenge the state. The evidence establishes criminal liability within the jurisdiction of the Court for policies resulting in:

- (i) the deaths by drowning of thousands of migrants, ii) the refoulement of tens of thousands of migrants attempting to flee Libya, and iii) complicity in the subsequent crimes of deportation, murder, imprisonment, enslavement, torture, rape, persecution and other inhuman acts, taking place in Libyan detention camps and torture houses (p. 8)¹⁰

While writing this paragraph, the Conservative Party’s Rwanda plan was abandoned by the newly formed Labour government. Nevertheless, the incoming Labour government has retained a sharp focus on deportation and increased the funding and resources for its execution. Perhaps now is the time for scholars researching deportation in Britain to form a cross-disciplinary alliance, working in conjunction with the third sector, activist and campaigning organisations, and start thinking seriously about making deportation violence interrogable by law.

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¹⁰ See: <https://www.statewatch.org/media/documents/news/2019/jun/eu-icc-case-EU-Migration-Policies.pdf>

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