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Necropolitical Compassion: Rhetorical Care and Repressive Borders in the English Channel

TESFALEM HABTE YEMANE 
University of Liverpool, UK

LUCY MAYBLIN* 
University of Sheffield, UK

THOM DAVIES 
University of Nottingham, UK

JOE TURNER 
University of York, UK

ARSHAD ISAKJEE 
University of Liverpool, UK

This article examines how a discourse of compassion is used to facilitate harmful, even deadly, bordering practices. That is, governing migration through exposure to harm, including premature death. Whilst important scholarship has explored this phenomenon in terms of “compassionate borderwork” and “humanitarian bordering,” we extend these analyses by foregrounding the racial-colonial logics underpinning bordering. This is done through engagement with Carolyn Ureña’s concept of “colonial love” and Achille Mbembe’s concept of “necropolitics”. These allow us to centre the relationships between contemporary bordering and colonial logics of human hierarchy. We explore this through analysis of UK political discourse surrounding the “small boat” Channel crossings phenomenon 2018–2024. Our analysis focuses on four archetypes: the evil smuggler, the criminal queue jumper, the vulnerable victim, and the compassionate state. This article contributes to our understanding of the political use of compassion as a racio-colonial technology of organised abandonment, banishment, exclusion and expulsion, in the UK and beyond.

Cet article examine l'utilisation d'un discours de compassion pour faciliter des pratiques frontalières nuisibles, voire mortelles. Plus précisément, il s'agit de la gouvernance de la migration par la mise en danger, mais aussi la mort prématurée. Bien que des travaux de recherche importants aient exploré ce phénomène en termes de « travail frontalier charitable » et de « pratique frontalière humanitaire », nous prolongeons ces analyses en mettant en avant la logique raciale-coloniale qui sous-tend la gestion des frontières. Pour ce faire, nous utilisons le concept de nécropolitique d'Achille Mbembe et celui d'« amour colonial » de Carolyn Ureña. Ils nous permettent de situer les relations entre les

pratiques frontalières contemporaines et la logique coloniale de hiérarchie humaine. Nous nous y intéressons au travers de l'analyse du discours politique britannique autour du phénomène des traversées de la Manche en « small boats » de 2018 à 2024. Notre analyse se concentre sur 4 archétypes : le mauvais passeur, le resquilleur criminel, la victime vulnérable et l'État charitable. L'article contribue à enrichir notre compréhension de l'utilisation politique de la compassion en tant que technologie raciale-coloniale d'abandon, de bannissement, d'exclusion et d'expulsion organisés, à l'intérieur et hors des frontières du Royaume-Uni.

Este artículo analiza cómo se utiliza un discurso de compasión con el fin de facilitar prácticas fronterizas dañinas e incluso mortales. Esto significa una gobernanza de la migración a través de la exposición al daño, que incluye la muerte prematura. Aunque existen estudios importantes que han estudiado este fenómeno en términos de «trabajo fronterizo compasivo» y «fronterización humanitaria», en este artículo, ampliamos estos análisis destacando las lógicas raciales y coloniales que subyacen a la delimitación de fronteras. Para llevar esto a cabo, utilizamos el concepto de necropolítica de Achille Mbembe y el concepto de «amor colonial» de Carolyn Ureña. Ambos conceptos nos permiten centrar las relaciones entre las fronteras contemporáneas y las lógicas coloniales de la jerarquía humana. Para analizar esto, llevamos a cabo un análisis del discurso político por parte del Reino Unido en torno al fenómeno de los cruces del Canal en pequeñas embarcaciones entre 2018 y 2024. Nuestro análisis se centra en cuatro arquetipos: el contrabandista malvado, el criminal que «se salta la fila», la víctima vulnerable y el Estado compasivo. Este artículo contribuye a proporcionar una mayor comprensión del uso político de la compasión como una tecnología racial y colonial de abandono organizado, destierro, exclusión y expulsión, tanto en el Reino Unido como más allá de sus fronteras.

Introduction

In December 2018, former UK Home Secretary Sajid Javid declared a “major incident” in the English Channel, the body of water which separates France from the UK. This was in response to the apparently new phenomenon of people crossing in small boats to seek asylum. Then Immigration Minister Caroline Nokes, stated that the decision to announce the major incident was taken “to protect the lives of those attempting to make this dangerous crossing.” But also, more specifically, because: “we have an absolute duty to protect the border and stop organised crime gangs exploiting vulnerable individuals who want to come here by sending them through the busiest shipping lane in the world” (HC Deb, January 30, 2019, vol.653, c424WH).

In various contexts around the world (the EU's southern borders, northern France, Australia, and the US border with Mexico) researchers have found that when politicians announce border control measures which seek to stop people from moving, and which consequently result in harm to people on the move, they couch this in the language of compassion (see [Fassin 2012](#); [Williams 2016, 2015](#); [Little and Vaughan-Williams 2017](#); [Sanyal 2017](#); [Sirriyeh 2018](#); [Pallister-Wilkins 2022a](#)). It is claimed that borders stop smugglers from

harming people, protect children and vulnerable refugees from drowning, and prevent trafficking. In short, they save lives. The good, life *saving* work of borders is therefore contrasted with the bad, life *threatening* work of smugglers, who must

be stopped. This discourse “interpellates the “irregular” migrant as the “victim,” the smuggler as the “perpetrator” and the [state authority] as the “saviour”” (Little and Vaughan-Williams 2017:547). This framing is curious in part because it is in direct contradiction to all available evidence on the impacts of bordering on irregularised people on the move. As Anderson (2014) articulates, a border “produces what it is meant to eliminate. . . more migrant illegality, violence, and death.” Indeed, research globally shows that borders are deeply harmful, causing mass injuries and widespread fatalities (Steinhilper and Gruijters 2018; Brambilla and Jones 2020; Pallister-Wilkins 2022a; Davies et al. 2024a).

In this article we explore this logic within British political discourse on bordering the English Channel. While these dynamics have been researched in other contexts (as noted above), the politics of the Channel borderzone has not been explored in these terms. To some extent this is because until 2018, clandestine entry to Britain occurred primarily in lorries and containers, and was far less visible and of relatively little public interest (Neylon 2025). The rhetoric of intercept to rescue, and bordering to save lives at sea, so well established vis-a-vis the Mediterranean and elsewhere, was taken up in this context only after people began to cross the English Channel in small boats in larger numbers from 2018 onwards (Davies et al. 2021).

This “small boats” phenomenon, a direct by-product of thirty years of bordering in northern France, precipitated three acts of parliament, billions of pounds spent in border security contracts, a media storm, calls to abolish human rights, and the near end of asylum in the UK (see Parker et al. 2022; Mayblin et al. 2024a, 2024b; Turner et al. forthcoming; Mayblin et al. 2025). Yet in the midst of all this action to keep people seeking asylum out of the country at almost any cost (human, financial, legal, geopolitical, reputational), bordering was, and is, nevertheless couched in terms of the humanitarian imperative to save lives. The display of compassion remains a key pillar of the discourse.

This article introduces the concept of *necropolitical compassion* as a means of conceptualising the practice of exposing people to harm, even risk of death, under the cloak of “care” (see Mbembe 2003). In developing this concept, we draw on literature on humanitarian compassion, humanitarian reason, humanitarian borderwork, and the care/compassion nexus, and apply it to examine the instrumentalisation of “compassion” as a technology of racial (b)ordering in the English Channel. Our aim is to nuance and contribute to the conceptual apparatus of humanitarian bordering. In doing so, we introduce the new concept of necropolitical compassion—to capture the false gesture of compassion for the overfetishised refugee figure, which we frame in terms of “colonial love” (Ureña 2017). In this way, this article builds upon and expands existing debates within critical political sociology, where narratives of humanitarianism are deployed as embedded technologies of border violence (see, for example, Vaughan-Williams 2015; Pallister-Wilkins 2015; Dobbernack 2025). This theoretical development helps us to better understand the empirical case that we are focussed on here, and our intention is not to over-extend into a universal analysis, but our conceptualisation may aid in the analysis of other contexts.

We are particularly interested in the way that false claims to care are fundamentally shaped by colonial racism, resulting in the representation of refugee subjectivities as inanimate, limited and inferior. Much of the existing work draws from Michel Foucault’s theory of biopolitics, but we are particularly inspired by Achille Mbembe’s (2003) development of biopolitics into the concept of necropolitics. We conceptualise our findings in terms of necropolitics in order to explicitly foreground the racial-colonial logics which underpin articulations of compassion in projects of violent bordering, and which we see playing out in the English Channel. In doing so, we build on scholarship that foregrounds the distinctly colonial nature of the UK–France border zone (Davies and Isakjee 2019; Brito 2024; Tyerman and Van Isacker 2025), including work that frames Calais as a site of eco-coloniality (Davies et al. 2024b ; Hagan 2026), postcolonial dispossession (Bruto 2023), domicile (Van

Isacker 2021), racial segregation (Isakjee et al 2020; Tyerman 2021), and as a space of violent necropolitical inaction (Davies et al. 2017). By moving beyond the physical geographies of Calais, we extend these insights to examine the racial-colonial logics through which *compassion* is mobilised as a wider bordering technique, particularly as they materialise in the English Channel.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section we discuss the existing literature on compassionate borderwork, and following that we explain how an engagement with the postcolonial theories of necropolitics (Mbembe 2003) and colonial love (Ureña 2017) can help us in centring racism within analyses of these phenomena. We then introduce our wider project and the data and methods that we draw on in this article. The analytical sections are structured around four archetypes within the discourse: the evil smuggler, the criminal queue jumper, the vulnerable victim, and the compassionate state. In the final section we foreground the material dimensions of this discursive framework in the Channel borderzone.

From Compassionate Borderwork to Necropolitical Compassion

As Pallister-Wilkins (2022a:15) observes, “saving lives while taking lives is the perverse logic of global borders today.” This logic took hold, according to Williams (2016:7), in the 2010s, when “humanitarian discourse and rationality [was] increasingly integrated into the way in which border enforcement efforts [were] both framed and justified.” This means that “those who design and deliver borderwork [. . .] become framed as..] the “good guys,” while the smugglers are the “bad guys”” (ibid:30). Politicians amplify the figure of the dangerous, evil, smuggler/trafficker (the two tend to be used interchangeably), projecting them as the primary target of outrage, while simultaneously distancing themselves from the causes of deaths at borders. Through this frame, governments present themselves as if they are acting to save lives that are put in danger by the evil smugglers. Hence, they have to be cruel to be kind; ultimately to save lives. Through this rhetoric, politicians commit what Ala Sirriyeh (2018:78) calls “compassionate violence.” Compassionate violence depends on maintaining the different archetypes of the migrant figure: 1) the callous people smuggler, 2) the migrant queue jumper, and 3) the speechless and suffering victim in need of saving. Compassion is retained for the migrant victim, though only to the extent that they are stopped from moving.

What Pallister-Wilkins (2022a) calls “care and control” in the EU context, Williams (2016) calls the “safety/security nexus” in southern Arizona (USA). In both cases this strategy has three primary effects, according to Williams (2016). First, it works to dilute the criticisms of transnational human rights organisations that border security violates rights. Second, it justifies the continued militarisation and securitisation of national borders. Third, it upholds the idea that state efforts to secure, fortify, and regulate transnational mobility are legitimate and well founded. This is how we get to the position where “greater border security is posited as the means to increase migrant safety” (Williams 2016:27), or as former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott put it, “the only way you can stop the deaths is in fact to stop the boats” (quoted in Pallister-Wilkins 2022a:84).

Didier Fassin’s work on “humanitarian reason” (2012) and “compassionate repression” (2005) has been influential for many scholars. Focussing on France, Fassin shows how the substitution of the rights-based claim to asylum with compassion/humanitarian-based grounds for protection results in the construction of the refugee figure as the “suffering body.” This “suffering body” is then the subject of humanitarian intervention to the detriment of human rights based asylum claims. Under the frame of “humanitarian reasons,” the “suffering body,” as a subject of the humanitarian language of compassion, is displaced from the public and political spheres and sheltered in camps such as Sangatte (former humanitarian camp in northern France). “Compassionate repression” is thus state repres-

sion in disguise; control embedded in the language of compassion and humanitarianism. In this “compassionate repression,” the state ostensibly makes minimum biopolitical interventions that provide the most basic subsistence needs for the undesirable migrant while relegating him/her in the realm of social death. In this context, Fassin shows how compassion and repression are not contradictory logics but are constitutive of each other. The idea of “compassionate repression” offers an important basis for understanding how the rhetoric of humanitarian language, care and compassion can be deployed by nation-states to formulate border and asylum policies intended to effect the encampment, detention, warehousing and deportation of the undesirable “others.”

Fassin’s Foucauldian insights in this area have been helpful for many scholars in understanding these types of dynamics as they emerged and intensified globally in the 2000s. Much work in the area of compassionate borderwork has therefore explored this in dialogue with Foucault’s work on biopolitics, considering the “positive” and (inadvertent) “negative” outcomes of biopolitical governance. Working through the case studies of Australia and the EU, for example, [Little and Vaughan-Williams \(2017:535\)](#) discuss what they conceptualise as “compassionate bordering,” a practice which “fuses humanitarian and militarised logics—with highly ambivalent ethical and political effects.” While they find biopolitics (which is about enhancing and optimising life at the population level) to be a helpful conceptual framework, they observe that it only helps us to understand compassion, or humanitarian help. In light of “the demonstrable capacity for contemporary forms of compassionate borderwork to lead to “irregular” migrants’ and refugees’ dehumanisation and death,” they seek supplementary theoretical insight. They find it in [Roberto Esposito’s \(2011\)](#) concept of “(auto)immunity” which they use to argue that “transnational compassionate borderwork [. . .] has the potential to both protect the lives of migrant and refugee populations, and develop aggressive, militaristic and autoimmune tendencies that may negate those very lives” ([Little and Vaughan-Williams 2017:536](#)).

While we find much insight here which can help us understand the British context, we have two concerns with this conceptualisation. First, Little and Vaughan-Williams’ claim seems to suggest that “exclusion and death” are unfortunate, unintended outcomes resulting from “autoimmunity.” In our research we find that these policies are not an inevitable by-product of “autoimmunity,” but deliberately designed injustices against refugees. We contend that they are deliberate policies of abandonment designed to condemn the racialised other to what Frantz Fanon calls a “zone of nonbeing” (1986:10). As Fanon explains, the “zone of nonbeing” is an “extraordinarily arid and sterile region” where “colonial and racial violence” is the principal objective, aiming to “expel the humanity of its victims, or even to suspend it” ([Mbembe 2023:270](#)). In short, it is evidently clear that UK and EU borders like the one focussed on here are designed to exclude unwanted refugees at any cost, and therefore designed to harm. Second, if the logic of immunisation is based on the idea of protecting, preserving and optimising life, then their analysis is still within the theoretical frame of Foucauldian biopolitics. In our view, this fails to identify the point at which biopolitics meets necropolitics ([Turner 2018](#)). That is, the racial and imperialist logic of “modernity/coloniality” that operates along the racist lines of “human” vs “subhuman” ([Wynter 2003](#)). For us, necropolitics is a more appropriate theoretical supplement to address the limits of the biopolitical framing.

Biopolitics refers to the management and administration of life by the state. But [Mbembe \(2003:39\)](#) argued that “the subjugation of life to the power of death” is a cornerstone of sovereign biopower. His influential work on necropolitics asks critical questions about “the work of death” (ibid:16) within societies characterised by racism. Necropolitics is connected to biopolitics in that people are not killed (punished) as individuals who have defied the sovereign, they are targeted because their existence is seen as detrimental to the wider population. Their death is beneficial to the whole population, and their suffering is of little consequence. Who may

live, who may die, and whose lives may be exposed to conditions of “death-in-life” (Mbembe 2003:21) are questions that animate scholarship with necropolitics as their conceptual framing (for example see Davies et. al 2017; Mayblin 2019; Mayblin et al. 2020; Peters et. al 2025). Mbembe (2003:16) notes that “race” is often the principle marker of subjectification and within this context: “power (and not necessarily state power) continuously refers and appeals to exception, emergency, and a fictionalised notion of the enemy. It also labours to produce that same exception, emergency, and fictionalised enemy.”

While of course there are important discontinuities with the past (things today are not literally the same as the colonial plantation that Mbembe drew inspiration from), scholars have nonetheless found necropolitics helpful in making sense of bordering at UK, EU and US borders (see Squire, 2016; Mayblin 2019; Mayblin et al. 2020; Davies et. al 2017; Davies and Isakjee 2019; Peters et al 2025). It has been argued that serious harm is designed into contemporary border controls globally, and that this harm is founded on racist logics. Recent scholarship in critical border studies (see, for example, Walia 2014; De Genova 2016; Mayblin 2017; Davies and Isakjee 2019; Mayblin and Turner 2021; Danewid 2022; Brito 2023, 2024; Topak 2024; Tyerman and van Isacker 2025) has highlighted the coloniality of Europe’s borders and the polymorphous forms of violence inflicted upon racialised migrants in multiple borderzones (Davies et al 2024a). Collectively, this scholarship gives us a broader historical overview of Europe’s racial borders work to effect the racialised containment of migrants through violent borders, discourse of “crisis” and systematic denial of refuge (see Peters et al 2025). For example, the so-called “jungle” camp near Calais in northern France became, for Davies et al. (2017: 1268) a “concentrated visible symbol of the “apartheid” of migrant Others from the Global South, who survive in conditions far removed from the residences of normative French and EU citizens, living in their neat houses with kept gardens.” They argue that the abject conditions of the camp, in its various incarnations, are deliberately produced, and that this is part of a broader policy of necropolitical abandonment within Europe. Rather than actively killing the people who find themselves in the camp, the French state keeps them “alive but in a state of injury” (Mbembe 2003:21).

Necropolitics, as an analytical concept, foregrounds the “distinctly colonial and racial logics that (re)produce and sustain the ongoing violence of borders” (Davies et. al 2017:2). In other words, those who are cast outside of European political communities are not generalised “others,” as often represented in the literature, their otherness emerges from the hierarchical racialized logics of colonialism (Mayblin 2017; Davies et al. 2024b). Suffering, then, is a political technology of control for those designated illegitimate and therefore outside of the purview of the biopolitical community. Conditions which might, in other contexts, be viewed as extreme and grotesque cruelties become politically acceptable in fulfilling the aims of exclusion (Davies et. al 2017; Mayblin 2017; Peters et al 2025). Equally, humanitarian care for migrants is often located adjacent to, and intertwined, with enforcement efforts, making it contingent on the rejection of people racialised as “illegal migrants” at the border (Williams 2015; Walters 2010).

While the theory of necropolitics and its application in border studies allows us to understand how borders are grounded in racial logics which formed through colonialism, it does not give us the tools to understand where articulations of compassion enter the picture. Here, we find the concept of “colonial love” (Ureña 2017) particularly instructive. Rather than signifying mutual recognition or affection, colonial love names a mode of attachment shaped by colonial power relations. In this framework, love functions not as care, but as a controlling hierarchical relation that cloaks domination in the rhetoric of compassion. It denotes a paternalistic desire: to “save” or “civilize” the dominated others, including in highly gendered ways, which we discuss below. In this way, colonial love follows the colonial logic of the salvationist and “civilizing mission,” whereby European powers argued that they had a

duty to “civilize” indigenous populations, even if this meant oppressing and inflicting harm upon them. From the perspective of the British colonizer, for example, “empire ostensibly always was, *conquering in order to free*” (Gopal 2019:2, emphasis added). Today, this notion of the “civilizing mission” and “colonial love” resonate closely with the notion of the necropolitical compassion we discuss in this paper: just as the colonial crimes of empire were so often obfuscated through the myth of European benevolence, so too are the contemporary crimes of British bordering concealed behind a veil of necropolitical compassion.

As we explore below, this logic of colonial love is evident in the British asylum and bordering regimes, particularly following small boat tragedies. In these moments, political actors often frame violent border policies as acts of compassion. This is a form of *necropolitical compassion*, one that ostensibly “protects” idealised victims from the twin spectres of the “criminal queue jumper” and the “evil smuggler” (as we elaborate later). Violence, then, is narrated as care; brutality disguised in the language of love. In the next section we introduce our broader research project and the methods used in collecting data in this case, before going on to put necropolitical compassion to work in our data analysis.

Methods

This article forms part of a broader ESRC-funded project examining how successive UK governments, NGOs, activists, and migrant communities respond to small boat Channel crossings. The specific focus in this article is on political discourse—covering government and opposition proposals, statements, and related initiatives. Our empirical analysis in this article is based on a collection of 345 texts spanning from 2018 to 2024 that address bordering practices in the Channel. The dataset includes a wide range of publicly available sources: government announcements and proposals, think tank publications, parliamentary debates, legislation, select committee reports and minutes, political speeches, party manifestos, cabinet correspondence, and international agreements. These texts were collected via search engines, Hansard, and following intertextual references. They were coded for central actors (who is represented?), representational strategies (what are they represented to be doing?), and narrative forms (e.g., the parliamentary speech, the think tank report, etc).

Our approach to textual analysis is informed by Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 2003). CDA views language not merely as a neutral tool for communication but as a form of social practice deeply intertwined with social structures, power relations, and ideologies. It emphasises that discourses (systems of meaning and knowledge) are shaped by ideologies. That is, sets of beliefs, values, and assumptions that often serve the interests of dominant groups. These ideologies are often implicit and embedded within the language people use. Power, in CDA, is understood as the ability of certain groups or institutions to control and shape discourse in ways that legitimise their dominance and marginalise others. This control can manifest in various ways, such as: controlling access to discourse (who gets to speak, where, and to whom), shaping the content of discourse (what can be said, how it can be said, and what is left unsaid), and influencing the interpretation of discourse (framing issues in ways that favour certain perspectives). In CDA discourse is not merely about language or expression, it constitutes the dominant systems of meaning that emerge in specific historical contexts, structured by power relations. Discourse, in this sense, shapes what is imaginable and actionable within a given hegemonic order.

In the next section we discuss the dominant systems of meaning around Channel crossings in the contemporary period. These are systems of meaning which shape how responses are imagined and actions implemented within the current hegemonic order of British (and international) politics.

The Villains, the Victims and the Compassionate Saviour

Necropolitical compassion depends on four archetypes (see also [Sirriyeh 2018](#)). First, the evil smuggler, a villain whose heinous activities put vulnerable refugees in danger, and who the state must stop. Second, the speechless, innocent refugee victim, waiting in perpetual passivity, and in need of saving from the evils of the smuggler. The victim is a child or is a gendered female. Third, the criminal migrant, a queue jumper, who, by virtue of his crossing borders is produced as a criminal body. The criminal queue jumper is an adult gendered male. The fourth archetype is the state, branding itself as the moral saviour, rescuer of the victim from the evils of the smuggler, and the scourge of the criminal queue jumper ([Ticktin 2016](#); [Little and Vaughan-Williams 2017](#); [Sirriyeh 2018](#)).

In this section, we analyse the discursive policy construction of each archetype within the frame of necropolitical compassion, and show how British politicians frequently deploy the discourse of compassion to justify the “right to dispose” ([Mbembe 2001:25](#)) of the racialised “border-body” ([Mbembe 2003:86](#)). Through the spectacle of necropolitical compassion, UK politicians deliberately collapse the security agenda, the idea of the crisis, and the humanitarian imperative to “save lives”—particularly children’s lives, and those gendered female. In this way, then, public conscience is appeased, the state becomes the caring saviour, and necropolitical policies are implemented with little opposition.

The “Evil” Smuggler

In contemporary political discourses around small boat Channel crossings in the UK, state authorities construct the figure of the people smuggler using various discursive permutations such as “evil criminal gangs” (Pursglove, HC, November 17, 2021, HC 194), “modern slavers,” and “evil tribe of traffickers” (HL Deb, May 10, 2023, vol.829, c1774–1807). First, the people smuggler is constructed as a predatory perpetrator of crimes, preying on and exploiting vulnerable migrants to “make money—millions—from putting lives at risk” (Malhotra, HC Deb, March 13, 2025, c279). As former Prime Minister Boris Johnson (2012) said, “these vile people smugglers are abusing the vulnerable and turning the Channel into a watery graveyard, with men, women and children, drowning in unseaworthy boats, and suffocating in refrigerated lorries.” Similarly, during an oral evidence in the Home Affairs Committee in 2021, MP Tom Pursglove, said:

Today our policy is directed at the evil criminal gangs who are responsible for the dangerous crossings, where they put lives in danger and where they imperil lives at sea. We need to render this route unviable [...]. It is, frankly, terrible that we have people being threatened at knifepoint. It shows the evil intent that these individuals have. All they are interested in is making money (HC, November 17, 2021, HC 194).

Furthermore, Suella Braverman, when she was Attorney General, said:

The traffickers organising these dangerous crossings are putting lives at risk, and it is vital that we do everything we can to protect them and prevent them from operating from France. We must break the business model of criminal gangs exploiting vulnerable people (HC Deb, November 17, 2021, vol.703, c718).

In this sense, smugglers are constructed as criminals of the cruellest kind, those who “treat human beings as cargo,” as former Home Secretary Priti Patel said in November 2021 following the death of 27 people in the English Channel (HC Deb, November 25, 2021, vol.704, c499). Labelled as dangerous, this imaginary of the evil smuggler is then deployed to justify the “need for urgent action to stop dangerous boat crossings, which are putting lives at risk and undermining border security,” as Yvette Cooper (then shadow, now Home Secretary) declared during a parliamentary

debate (HC Deb, March 13, 2023, vol.729, c584). Keir Starmer (then Leader of the Opposition, now Prime Minister) also claimed that it is the “criminal gangs” that “are sending these people to risk their lives;” hence his call for setting up a “specialist cell” within the National Crime Agency to dismantle the “criminal gangs” (HC Deb, December 13, 2022, vol.724, c889).

As we discussed in the introduction, in 2019, Caroline Noakes stated that the reason for declaring a “major incident” in the English Channel was “taken because we have an absolute duty to protect the border and stop organised crime gangs exploiting vulnerable individuals who want to come here by sending them through the busiest shipping lane in the world” (HC Deb, January 30, 2019, vol.653, c424WH). In this way, we can see how border security and regressive state practices of migration control are folded into the discursive rhetoric of “smashing the gangs” to save lives.

People smugglers are often synonymised with criminal groups such as drug traffickers, people traffickers (for forced labour and sexual work), terrorist groups and other organised crimes (see also [Aradau 2004](#)). They are even associated with links to funding other organised crimes and leading “cross border threats of terror” ([Goodhart and Norrie 2018](#):10) by bringing the dangerous and unknown “others” into British society. For example, during a parliamentary debate in 2023, MP John Redwood asked the Home Secretary Suella Braverman if she “was worried that the criminal gangs [. . .] may also be linked to other types of serious crime and helping to finance other destabilisation” (HC Deb, March 13, 2023, vol.729, c576). Braverman responded:

I am afraid that my [...] friend raises a very worrying fact about what we are seeing. When I have spoken to police chiefs around the country, they tell me that criminality—particularly drug supply and usage—is now connected to people who came here illegally on small boats in the first place (HC Deb, March 13, 2023, vol.729, c576).

It is also in the above context that MP Phillip Hollobone shared his anxiety about the imaginary of the racialised “other,” saying, “we do not know who those people are. Where they come from, and what their intentions are [. . .]” (HC Deb, January 30, 2019, vol.653, c420WH).

We can see, then, how a racialised and masculinised imaginary of the people smuggler is produced. Drawing on racial-colonial templates about dangerous Third World men, the smuggler is reinvented through essentialised “imaginary significations” ([Mbembe 2001](#)). As Mbembe explains, “imaginary significations” is “that something invented” that,

paradoxically, becomes necessary because “that something” plays a key role, both in the world the West constitutes for itself and in the West’s apologetic concerns and exclusionary and brutal practices towards others” ([Mbembe 2001](#):2). Portrayed as a “sign of the strange and the monstrous” (ibid:1), the people smuggler is framed as “a great child crushed by long atavism” and, therefore “could make no distinction between vice and virtue” (ibid:33).

In contemporary securitised border narratives, the colonial/racist frame of the demonised and dangerous male of the colonial era is then replaced by the threat of the contemporary masculinised people smuggler. That is, framed through this “racist/imperial Manichean misanthropic skepticism” whereby their “very humanity is questioned” ([Maldonado-Torres 2007](#):245), smugglers are constructed as the pathology of the “civilised” order. By demonising them as “free of the rules of humankind” ([Mbembe 2001](#):33–34), people smugglers are represented, like the contemporary version of the “natives” described in Mbembe’s *Postcolony*, as “clumsy and bestial [. . .], crushing the weak, destroying without rhyme or reason for they are [. . .] incapable of resisting violence.” In the context of small boat Channel crossings, the rhetorical figure of the criminal smuggler is deployed by UK politicians to justify draconian asylum policies such as the Conservative government’s Rwanda policy or Labour’s counter-terrorism style border security. In this way, the spec-

tral portrait of the evil smuggler is utilised as a powerful discursive resource against whom a seemingly benevolent and compassionate state projects itself. From this standpoint, the portrait of a compassionate British state emerges—one that, while speaking the language of compassion, love and care for those harmed by the evil smuggler yet continues to condemn them to the zones of racial abandonment. This narrative of a compassionate state is predicated on a disingenuous “moral duty” to smash the smuggling gangs and rescue/save vulnerable refugees. As we show later, such rhetoric of compassionate state is indeed a realist wreath that reproduces the postcolonising state as a “paternalistic and educative design of power that underpins relations of trusteeship” (Duffield and Hewit 2009:12))—a kind of benevolent protective state in the postcolonial present.

The Criminal Queue Jumper

The rhetoric of compassion for “vulnerable” refugees in the Channel crossings is not only produced through the imaginary of the “evil smuggler.” It is also deployed through the construction of specific migrant subjectivities and their irregular entry into the UK as illegal and unfair on genuine refugees, the law-abiding migrants, and (somehow separately) the British taxpayer. Through this framing, migrants who enter the UK through the Channel are demonised as “Channel queue jumpers” (Goodhart 2022) and “enemies of genuine refugees” (Lord Dobbs, HL Deb, May 10, 2023, vol.829, c1807); hence undermining the care and compassion owed to the most vulnerable. Labelled as unscrupulous, “illegal economic migrants,” “bogus claimants” (HC Deb, March 13, 2023, vol.729, c612-36) masquerading as genuine refugees, they are produced as the other criminal party for gaining unfair advantage over the most vulnerable of their own.

In public statements, legislative debates, and moments of tragic incident in the English Channel, it is not uncommon to hear British politicians directing their outrage against the figure of the illegal Channel queue jumper that exploits the “compassion and generosity” of the British people as Rishi Sunak (then Prime Minister) framed it (HC Deb, December 13,

2023, vol.724, c903). Similar claims were also made by Priti Patel (then Home Secretary) in 2021. In a statement about Channel crossings, Patel pushed for a “differentiated approach” in the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. She claimed that the Act allowed authorities to crack down against “economic migrants [. . .] masquerading as asylum seekers and elbowing to one side women and children—the very people to whom we should be giving asylum” (Patel, HC Deb, November 22, 2021, vol. 704, c35). What both politicians are implying here is that the capacity of the British state (and its people) to help the most deserving refugees is taken up by the unscrupulous “illegal” migrants who do not have concern for others. As “illegal” entrants, those framed as Channel queue jumpers are blamed for causing “uncontrolled migration” (Johnson 2022) into the UK, “pushing this country beyond its practical limits” (Lord Sandhurst, HL Deb, May 10, 2023, vol.829, c1865). Regarding this, Boris Johnson claimed in April 2022 that “uncontrolled migration”:

Creates unmanageable demands on our NHS and our welfare state, it overstretches our local schools, our housing and public transport, and creates unsustainable pressure to build on precious green spaces. Nor is it fair on those who are seeking to come here legally, if others can just bypass the system.

The migrants constructed as Channel queue jumpers are also counterposed against the “law-abiding,” and “hard-working” British people who “place a good deal of reliance on fairness” (Lord Hodgson, CL Deb, May 10, 2023, vol.829, c1883). As Suella Braverman (then Home Secretary) said in 2023:

The British people are famously a fair and patient people. But their sense of fair play has been tested beyond its limits as they have seen the country taken for a ride. Their patience has run out. The law-abiding patriotic majority have said, "Enough is enough." This cannot and will not continue (HC Deb, March 7, 2023, vol.729, c153).

In this context, we can see how the imaginary of Channel queue jumpers is blamed for creating a trinity of (un)fairness—unfair on the most vulnerable, unfair on other migrants who follow the rules, and unfair on the law-abiding British people.

Channel queue jumpers are presented through a catalogue of racialised tropes such as "non-compassion," "unfairness," "illegality," "criminality," "clandestinity," "cheating," "lying" and "rule-breaking." Importantly, they are also constructed through the discourse of racialised masculinity. Here, by racialised masculinity we mean the discursive construction of Black and Brown bodies as excessively violent and wayward—what Patricia Williams' (1991:64) calls a "pattern of generalising particular others into terrifyingly uncontrollable [. . .]" collectivity against whom the imagined public must be protected. In this way, the body of the masculinised migrant is produced as a symbol of threat; and thus, the legitimate site of racist border violence. The language commonly used by politicians to characterise Channel queue jumpers is that the "overwhelming," or "vast" majority of them are "young men," "single, adult men" under the age of 40, and "rich enough to pay criminal gangs thousands of pounds for passage" (Braverman, HC Deb, March 7, 2023, vol.729, c152). As Boris Johnson (2022) claimed, "it's a striking fact that around seven out of ten of those arriving in small boats last year were men under 40, paying people smugglers to queue jump and taking up our capacity to help genuine women and child refugees." This question is raised repeatedly in parliament and across the media.

Ultimately, this figure of the Channel queue jumper is conveniently deployed as part of the UK government's justification for the most anti-asylum policies in recent years, such as the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, Illegal Migration Act 2023 and the UK-Rwanda asylum deal. Through the "moral framing" of "compassionate control" (Goodhart 2022) over British borders; UK authorities simultaneously claim to act with compassion and "duty to support people in dire need," as Sunak proclaimed in 2022. Hailing the humanitarian visas issued under the Conservative government, he claimed:

That is the strength and depth of our compassion [...] but we cannot have that compassion and generosity exploited by people who break the rules. There is nothing fair about that, and it does nothing to help the people we really need to target (HC Deb, December 13, 2022, vol.724, c903).

Similarly, during the Second Reading of the Illegal Migration Bill in 2023, Suella Braverman echoed Sunak's "moral framing." In a House of Commons statement, Braverman claimed, "that is why it is absolutely essential that the UK takes a robust but compassionate approach. That is at core a humanitarian package of measures that sends the message to people: "Do not come here illegally"" (Braverman, HC Deb, March 7, 2023, vol.729, c159). Like in the above section, we see how necropolitical compassion is also justified by constructing an image of the criminal queue jumper that abuses the "compassion and generosity" of the British people. From the statements of British politicians, we see how the UK's hostile border and immigration policies against the "criminal queue jumper" are rooted in the idea of liberal and compassionate state whose primary objective is to save the lives of the vulnerable refugees and children. In reality, the frame of the queue jumper is used by a seemingly compassionate state to legitimate anti-asylum policies. The narrative then goes like this: in order for the British state to give compassion and care to the vulnerable refugees, it needs to act against those who jump the queue.

The image of young, single men exercising their agency, notwithstanding the structural barriers, and making proactive choices, including paying people smugglers to enter the UK, runs counter to the image of the speechless victim politicians want to project onto the public imagination. As MP Vicky Ford claimed, the arrival of “men under the age of 40, not the disabled or the frail,” creates a situation where the amount of support that should go to “safe and legal routes” is reduced while vital resources are also diverted “away from the most vulnerable” (HC Deb, March 13, 2023, vol729, c613).

Having said this, however, it is important to stress that the political work of racialised masculinity is inherently complex, transcending simplistic representation of racialised men as violent, hyper-agential, or barbaric, and at times signifying them as docile and feminised (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Pallister-Wilkins 2022b). In this context, the same racio-colonial logics that produce a distinct subjectivity in the frame of the criminal queue jumper in the English Channel are often deployed to construct another image of a docile and victimised male migrant in other border-zones such as the Southern Mediterranean borders. In Libya, for example, migrants are represented in a homogenised collectivity—as a kind of feminised social minors and victims of the evil smuggler. Through such situational framing of passivity and agentiality, the body of the migrant can be constructed as “both at risk and a risk” (Pallister-Wilkins 2015:60).

The Essentialised Victim

Through the discourses of vulnerability and victimhood, refugee women and children (although sometimes this includes the disabled and elderly) are constructed as quintessentially passive victims, in need of saving by the morally superior state from the evil smugglers and criminal queue jumpers. Framed as innocent social minors, women and children are particularly imagined as the most vulnerable and wretched people in the world. Through this framing, we can see how UK politicians ostensibly express sentiments of empathy and compassion—what Suzuki (2025:7) calls an “affective disposition,” towards victims of evil smugglers and criminal queue jumpers.

In this context the trinity of the evil smuggler, the criminal queue jumper and the essentialised victim are knitted together to prescribe solutions to small boat Channel crossings. In doing so, UK politicians have deployed narratives of vulnerability and compassion as moral and political justification for legislating draconian border policies that aim to expel and exclude undesirable “others.” Whilst on the surface these discourses of vulnerability and compassion may seem to alleviate the conditions of those imagined as the most vulnerable, they can also be deployed to effect the geopolitical banishment of the same vulnerable refugees under the guise of protecting them.

What is important in this context is to note that politicians often frame border and asylum policies as though they are motivated by the “welfare” and “best interests” (Jenrick, HC Deb, April 26, 2023, vol.731, c779) of the vulnerable victims. In 2023, for example, MP Robert Jenrick claimed that at the heart of the Illegal Migration Bill 2023 was the protection of children and families against the evil smugglers. Speaking about the Bill, Jenrick claimed:

As a parent, I, the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister gave these questions (protecting children) a great deal of thought and our motivation was the best interests of children. We do not want to see children put into dinghies and their lives placed in danger. When we do see that, it is a harrowing experience that lives with us. We have to take these steps to ensure that, when we operationalise the scheme at the heart of the Bill, the UK is not then targeted by people smugglers specialising in families and children (HC Deb, April 26, 2023, vol.731, c779).

Similarly, as we showed in the previous sections, Boris Johnson used the archetype of “vulnerable” victims dying at the hands of the “vile people smugglers” who are turning the English Channel “into a watery graveyard.” Defending the Nationality and Borders Bill 2022 and the Rwanda relocation deal, Johnson claimed that “there is no humanity or compassion in allowing desperate and innocent people to have their dreams of a better life exploited by ruthless gangs.” And he went on to say that “big calls” were “needed to break the business model of the gangs and stop these boats coming,” adding that “there is no humanity or compassion [...] offering the false hope of asylum in the UK to anyone who wants it” (Johnson 2022).

In part, the discourse of vulnerability and compassion is based on racialised understandings of refugee women and children as inherently docile and passive subjectivities. Through this vision of gendered and infantilised vulnerability, refugee women and children are in a state of perpetual risk because of their natural characteristics (gender, pregnancy, age, disability and

long-term health conditions). These framings are illustrative of the construction of vulnerability as a natural marker of the racialised, gendered and infantilised refugee victim who is legible only in her/his receiving of compassion. The characterisation of the docile subjectivity of the refugee figure draws on a racial-imperial attitude reminiscent of the “racist/imperialist/Manichean misanthropic skepticism” (Maldonado-Torres 2007:245) that underpinned the Britain’s colonial logic.

If colonised societies were defined as weak, primitive, and in need of protection, salvation, civilisation, and development through the colonial project, we can see that the vulnerable postcolonial refugee is ontologised “as that of a being constituted by a catalogue of deficits and a series of lacks,” to use Ndlovu-Gatsheni’s (2013:4) expression. The vulnerable refugee is portrayed as lacking agency, lacking capacity, lacking knowledge and information. Moreover, the vulnerable refugee figure is assumed to act only with intuition rather than reason and rationality. Such infantilising tropes are often reiterated in statements by politicians who speak of desperate and vulnerable refugees risking their lives by making “dangerous and unnecessary” journeys across the Channel, as the MP Matt Vickers said (HC Deb, September 10, 2024, vol.753, v262WH). In this way, a paternalistic state takes upon herself the role of deciding on the (un)necessariness or dangerousness of crossing the Channel; ascribing herself the moral position of saving the vulnerable refugees not only from the evil smugglers but also from themselves.

Deprived of any agency, those framed as vulnerable refugees are pitied for being “threatened at knifepoint” by evil smugglers where “women, children and even babies are being threatened and forced into the most appalling, unseaworthy vessels” (Patel, CH Deb, November 25, 2021, vol.704, c503) to cross the Channel. In this sense, our findings also align with broader discourses of vulnerability of refugee women and children (see for example, Sigona 2014; Little and Vaughan-Williams 2017; Smith and Waite 2019; Gilodi et al. 2024). But the care that Channel crossers are then subject to is colonial love. It functions not as genuine care, but a paternalistic desire to “save” or “civilize,” including in highly gendered ways. It is a controlling hierarchical relation that cloaks domination in the rhetoric of compassion, and uses expressions of concern to justify border policies which systematically expose all Channel crossers to both the slow harms of destitution through abandonment, and the direct harms of police brutality in northern France. In this way, colonial love means acting to “save” racialised others, even if in practice this means inflicting harm upon them.

The Compassionate State

The negatively racialised triumvirate of the evil smuggler, the criminal queue jumper and the vulnerable refugee have given British politicians a convenient path to brand a compassionate image of the state whose outrage is directed towards the

victimisers—the evil smugglers and the criminal queue jumpers. In this grammar of moral outrage, the state becomes what can be called, following [Goldberg \(2002:119\)](#), “a condition of assertion.” This condition of assertion, as analysed above, is mediated through the state’s claim of taking back control of British borders, dismantling the smuggling gangs, and saving the lives of vulnerable refugees.

With regards to the latter, the condition of assertion is mediated through a racialised re-invention of a naturalistically (and historically) speechless refugee in need of saving by rendering small boat crossings unviable. Using the rhetoric of compassion, British politicians seek to project an image of Britain as that of a benevolent state bearing “a proud history of providing sanctuary to those most in need” ([Sunak, 2022](#)); hence deriving the confidence for branding herself as “a beacon of openness and generosity” ([Johnson 2022](#)).

In this way, making the Channel crossing unviable is a moral duty. This moral framing of “stopping the boats to save lives” is also used as a condition of assertion, for portraying Britain as a bastion of metropolitan civility. As Dame Diana Johnson claimed in 2022, “stopping those dangerous journeys must be one of the highest priorities of a civilised society” (HC Deb, July 21, 2022, vol.718, c1138). Similarly for [Johnson 2022](#) d be , Britain’s moral obligation as it applies to small boat crossings, means that the evil smugglers:

must be stopped in order to save countless lives; and because tackling illegal migration is precisely the way to sustain a safe, legal and generous offer of sanctuary to those in need, that is in the very best traditions of this country and the values we stand for in the world.

In this context, the prevailing implication of the state as a moral saviour—a wellspring of civility and moral superiority, manifests itself through an over-fetishisation of the beloved refugee victim. In this logic of racial-colonial fetishisation, the vulnerable refugee emerges as the pitied receiver of the state’s compassion and care. Such discourse of the state as the moral saviour is reminiscent of the civilising mission, where British colonisers claimed to carry the burden of civilising colonised peoples. As [Mbembe \(2001:35\)](#) writes, the identity of the colonial state that emerged from this moral duty to “civilise” was predicated on self-identification of herself as “protective” and the colonised as its “protégé.” This was best captured by Mbembe’s notion of the gendered “mother country,” self-portrayed as a benevolent protector, a civilising force and provider to an infantilised “protégé” (ibid:34–35). In this colonial power relation, the mother country as a protective state, “could in no way look kindly on any abdication of the family guardianship over its “protégé,” the native” (ibid:35).

Following Mbembe’s thinking, the same can be said of the postcolonial protective state and the vulnerable refugee—constructed here as the contemporary “protégé” of the moral saviour. The vulnerable refugee is constructed as an object of compassion, and in need of saving from the savagery of the evil smugglers and unfair advantage of the criminal queue jumpers. But the discourse of saving and compassion for the vulnerable refugee—the “free gift” ([Mbembe 2001](#)) of the protective state—is not authentic love but rather as a form of uncaring love—what [Ureña \(2017:86\)](#) calls “colonial love.” Colonial love, as [Ureña \(2017:86\)](#) explains, is “based in an imperialist, dualist logic.” As a loveless love, it “dangerously fetishises the beloved object and participates in the oppression and subjugation of difference” (ibid). In the same way, the discourse of compassion for the vulnerable refugee comes as nothing but a tool for “compassionate repression” in Fassin’s terms (2012). That is, a paternalistic modality of state control and repression –we must stop them to save them.

Lending his intellectual backing to the UK government’s Rwanda deportation policy, right wing commentator Nigel [Biggar \(2022:9\)](#) argued that the policy “is not lacking in care or compassion. Nor does it obviously violate human dignity. Love

can be tough without ceasing to be love.” For this, Biggar contends that compassion cannot mean identifying:

with the feelings of the needy as to give them whatever they want. For not all felt-needs are genuine, and often the satisfaction of a genuine need can come in a variety of forms, some of which are more just—*all things considered*—than others.

One of the “variety of forms” that Biggar speaks of as “more just” is the Rwanda deportation policy. In the language of Boris Johnson (2022), this enables Britain to effect swift and “humane” removals of the racialised “other” from the country. In this way, the discourse of compassion for the vulnerable refugee is a mask behind which lies the cynical logic of racial exclusion and expulsion. In the same context, we can see that the discourse of compassion for the vulnerable refugee bears striking resemblance to what Fanon (1967:251) described as “the European game,” the European doublespeak of colonial hypocrisy “where they never stopped proclaiming that they were only anxious for the Welfare of Man [. . .],” but at the same time “murder men everywhere they find them [. . .].” If colonial Britain had the burden of “civilising” colonised peoples, post-colonial Britain now has that of “saving” vulnerable post-colonial refugees.

Compassionate Necropolitics

Necropolitical compassion, as outlined thus far, is the discursive strategy of using compassion as a smokescreen for necropolitical policies, a “tough love” which favours abandonment over genuine care. Policies are necropolitical when they expose people to harm, including to premature death. The state has “the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (Mbembe 2003:27), producing forms of social existence in which people “are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (ibid:40). Because necropolitics operates not only at the discursive level, but also has material effects, in this final section we briefly sketch out some of the harmful practices that this discourse in turn legitimises and materialises.

First, what does “smashing the gangs” entail in practice? In part it means finding ways to quarantine people outside of the UK, in northern France. This does not keep them safe, it confers conditions of life which are necropolitical (Davies et al. 2017). Would-be Channel-crossers who find themselves in this area are homeless, living in tents which are cleared by riot police every 48 hours as part of a “no point of fixation” policy (Hagan 2023; Davies et al. 2024b). Most rely on hand-outs from charities for food, clothing, and camping equipment. Only 59 percent of people who seek asylum in France are housed, and only 37 percent of asylum applications are successful (compared to 57 percent in the UK) meaning that applying for asylum in France is not a route to safety (Forum Réfugiés 2025; EUAA 2025). If people have passed through another European country where their fingerprints were taken, they risk returning there if they present themselves to the French authorities. There are widespread reports of police racism and violence amongst those living in northern France (Jeannerod 2017). Contrary to state accounts, we have found in our interviews with people who have crossed the Channel that smugglers are the only people offering a way out of this situation (publication forthcoming). Smashing the gangs will not keep people safe, then, it will expose them to harm, even premature death.

Smashing the gangs, in the Labour government’s articulation, also means using counter-terror-style policing approaches (though this is continuous in practice from the former administration). An important part of this is to charge those steering the boats with people smuggling, sometimes using drone footage. Five hundred and fifty six people have been charged in this way since 2022, most of them teenage boys who intended to apply for asylum (Taylor, 2025). Imprisoning them is not keeping them

safe, nor others who might travel via this route, it only exposes them to harm, and risks deportation to countries of origin which they fled.

In a misguided attempt to deter people from making irregular journeys to the UK to seek asylum, there has also been an expansion of carcerality, and the threat (if less often the successful implementation of) deportation. The carceral containment of people seeking asylum on the Bibby Stockholm barge (until its closure), for example, exposed inmates to *Legionella* bacteria (Davidson 2023). Far from the compassion with which politicians speak of the vulnerable refugees, they use spaces such as Bibby Stockholm as floating spaces of abandonment, incarceration and exposure to deadly bacteria.

While removal to Rwanda was threatened by the Conservative government as the ultimate form of deterrence through banishment, people who seek asylum in the UK live under the threat of deportation, under the affective cloud of deportability even after the Rwanda plan was cancelled. Under this condition, many people are housed in poor quality housing or hotels with subsistence payments set well below the poverty line (Darling and Burridge 2025). The Labour government announced in 2025 that anyone who crossed by irregular means will never gain British citizenship, and anyone else will have to wait ten years before they can apply. This bundle of policies spatially, socially, economically, legally and politically exclude people, exposing them to the real physical and mental harms of poverty and exclusion. Far from being caring, state actions to stop the boats, smash the gangs, and deter future arrivals are violent. They constitute structural and slow violence, where the bodily harms are detached in time and space from the perpetrators, but without whose colonial love the harms would not exist (see also Mayblin 2019).

Conclusion

In this article we have analysed a corpus of discourse data relating to the English Channel “small boats” phenomenon, and in doing so we have advanced the concept of necropolitical compassion. In Sanyal’s words, we have discussed the “doublespeak symptomatic of hypocrisy, wherein humanitarian language masks securitarian violence” (2017:2). Our analysis shows how the language of compassion is deployed as a necropolitical technology for scripting the exclusion, expulsion, banishment and abandonment of unwanted refugees. In this way, we have shown how the vulnerable refugee is produced as a “border-body” (Mbembe 2023:86) through the rhetoric of compassion. Our analysis has unravelled this rhetoric to interrogate an approach that is not of care and compassion, but of control, and banishment. We have shown that beneath the language of compassion lies the perverse logic of carceral policies and geo-racial exclusions, where those seeking refuge are contained in spaces of segregation; preventing them from accessing refuge. In this way, we show that the British state’s ultimate goal is not to aid the vulnerable, as its rhetoric suggests, but to entrench border control through restriction, rendering the unwanted immobile, externalised, or encamped in carceral spaces.

Much of the existing literature on “compassionate borderwork” draws from Foucaudian theory of biopolitics, but we are particularly inspired by Mbembe’s (2003) development of biopolitics into the concept of necropolitics. We have combined Mbembe’s necropolitics with the idea of “colonial love” (Ureña 2017) to conceptualise our findings in terms of necropolitical compassion. This has allowed us to explicitly foreground the racial-colonial logics which underpin articulations of compassion in projects of bordering, and which we see playing out in the English Channel. This enables us to develop the concept of necropolitical compassion, to name the way that state elites use rhetorical compassion as a foil for violently racist borderwork. This allows us to analyse the case of British discourse on Channel crossings, and our intention (as noted in the introduction) is not to over-extend into a universal analysis. Nevertheless, in light of the fact that similar discourses have been noted by

researchers looking at the EU, the USA and Australia, it seems plausible to suggest our conceptualisation may aid in the analysis of other contexts.

The purpose of this article is not to critique compassion, since compassion is in itself not the problem, but to understand the work that the “doublespeak” (Sanyal 2017) of compassion does in the production of border violence. We recognise and draw inspiration from the many solidarity movements across various necropolitical borderzones that seek to transform compassion into political outrage, “articulating the need for a radical transformation of the social, economic, political, cultural, and legal relations that form the basis of social injustice” (Ticktin 2016: 266). In this context, and remembering Sirriyeh’s (2018:166) call for “compassion as solidarity,” we remain hopeful that alternative models of compassion grounded in solidarity, and not in racial exclusion, remain possible.

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