

Colonial Cisnationalism: Notes on Empire and Gender in the UK's Migration Policy

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Introduction

Anti-immigration rhetoric is a notoriously reliable fixture of British politics, with Conservative politicians regularly turning to border controls [to appeal to right-wing voters](#). In recent years, however, two flagship policies have allowed the UK government to dominate the debate in ways that warrant close inspection. [Introduced by the Home Secretary](#), Priti Patel, in April 2022, the Rwanda Plan proposes to deport asylum seekers that have entered the UK 'illegally' to Rwanda, requiring them to claim asylum there instead. The plan was taken up by Rishi Sunak when he became Prime Minister in October 2022. Patel's successors in the Home Office, Suella Braverman and James Cleverly, have worked to bring the plan to fruition in the face of [legal challenges](#) from the European Court of Human Rights and the Supreme Court of the UK. The second policy that I wish to discuss, the use of a giant barge called Bibby Stockholm as a detention centre for asylum seekers who have entered 'legally' and are waiting to have their claims processed, was [announced by the Home Office](#) in April 2023, with the first migrants being moved onto the vessel in August of that year. [Often denounced](#) as cruel and inhumane, these two policies have been hugely controversial among liberal commentators, religious leaders, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

In this article, I would like to add to these objections by examining the coloniality of these two policies, including the ways in which they are gendered. I believe this focus is helpful in situating the policies within the context of the "culture wars" that [increasingly](#) shape the tenor of political discourse in the UK. Culture wars, [according to a recent study by King's College London](#), are much more than disagreements over public policy: they are powerfully divisive disputes that represent "irreconcilable worldviews," often becoming emblematic of long-waged ideological battles. Regarding the Black Lives Matter movement, for instance, the study found that supporters and opponents of BLM had very different perceptions of racialised inequality in the UK, and held negative views

about those on the other side of the debate.¹ In considering the colonial and gendered dimensions of the Bibby Stockholm policy and the Rwanda Plan, my aim is to show that these policies are not just about immigration—they also participate in broader, high-profile disputes over [how the UK should reckon with its imperial past](#), as well as the extent to which the state should [recognise and protect trans lives](#). In short, I read the two policies as political narratives that work to define the position of the Conservative Party within several interconnected issues.² Taking inspiration from Jasbir Puar’s concept [homonationalism](#), which names the racializing and Islamophobic aspects of certain LGBT rights practices, I use the term *colonial cisnationalism* to describe the conjuncture of closed borders rhetoric, anti-trans [cisnormativity](#), and [empire nostalgia](#) within the Conservative position. In what follows, I explain how the Bibby Stockholm policy and the Rwanda Plan produce narratives of colonial cisnationalism, political messages addressed to potential migrants and British voters which reveal xenophobia, transphobia, and coloniality to be deeply entwined.

Before turning to these examples, let me briefly locate myself in the field of power relations at hand. I am not an asylum seeker, refugee, or migrant, and nor am I an employee of the Home Office, meaning that I do not have first-hand knowledge of the UK’s asylum and immigration system. Writing from the privileged position of someone who has never had to leave their home country to escape persecution or precarity, it is not my intention to represent experiences of displacement or ‘give voice to’ subjects of migration. Furthermore, as a white, English, middle-class citizen of the UK, I have been and continue to be a beneficiary of historic and ongoing colonial and neocolonial projects of theft, exploitation, enslavement, and domination, some of which I discuss below. Undoubtedly, then, part of what motivates me to study contemporary formations of coloniality is an uncomfortable awareness of the violence of the structures that sustain me. But my complicity is double-edged: being transgender, nonbinary, and queer, I am

¹ 77% of BLM supporters correctly identified the wage gap of 9% between Black and white employees in 2018, while only 39% of BLM opponents believed the statistic to be true. 69% of BLM opponents described BLM supporters to be “closed-minded,” while 78% of BLM supporters characterised BLM opponents in the same way. 55% of BLM supporters said they would find it difficult to be friends with someone who opposed the movement. See pp. 79-85 of [the study](#).

² Because the government is unlikely to achieve its ostensible objectives of deterring migrants and reducing costs—as commentators have shown regarding both the [Rwanda Plan](#) and the [Bibby Stockholm scheme](#)—it’s necessary to read the policies as rhetorical interventions designed to produce the other political effects that I describe here.

also marginalised by those same structures, specifically in relation to the norms that regulate gender and sexuality. In what follows, I reconstellate the coloniality of anti-immigration policy with the coloniality of anti-trans rhetoric, writing from within the nexus of these power relations, not from a position of critical distance.

Migrants in the Hold

The use of the Bibby Stockholm barge as a detention centre was presented as a way to deter potential migrants while also saving money on accommodation. Immediately prior to the announcement of the policy, Robert Jenrick, the Immigration Minister, [told the House of Commons](#) of his intention to reduce the standard of accommodation for asylum seekers to the minimum required by law, providing for their “essential living needs and nothing more.” Hundreds of charities, faith groups, and other NGOs have voiced opposition to the policy, with many highlighting its colonial overtones. In [an open letter to Bibby Marine](#) (the company that owns the barge), organisations including the Refugee Council, Asylum Matters, and Refugee Action provided evidence of the direct historical association between the vessel and the transatlantic slave trade. The founder of Bibby Line Group Limited (Bibby Marine’s parent company) was John Bibby, the co-owner of three slaving ships that transported abducted Africans in the early 1800s. While the occupants of the Bibby Stockholm are not, of course, enslaved, they are reduced to human cargo in order to unmistakably differentiate them from the British citizenry, and from British citizenship itself. In achieving this dispossession of rights and personhood aboard a floating prison that evokes the darkest chapter of the Bibby lineage, the government condemns these asylum seekers to what Christina Sharpe, in her 2016 book *In the Wake*, calls [“the hold”](#)—the place or condition of dehumanising incarceration that is produced in the afterlife of slavery.

In keeping with these colonial dimensions, the Bibby Stockholm is a strongly gendered space. [After acknowledging that the barge could not provide suitable accommodation for women](#), the government proceeded to use it to detain “single men” only, thereby segregating migrants according to a binary notion of gender that ignores the complexities of lived experiences. Binary segregation disregards the anxiety that may be caused to any transgender, nonbinary, and/or intersex people who are unlucky enough to find themselves onboard the Bibby Stockholm, where everyone is assumed to be a cisgender man. This is further evidence of what I have described [elsewhere](#), in

relation to the official nonrecognition of nonbinary genders, as the cisnormativity of the government's stance: successive Conservative administrations continue to treat cisgender identity as the norm, stigmatising, invalidating, or simply ignoring a swathe of trans and nonbinary lives.

In October 2023, the London-based charity Rainbow Migration, which supports LGBTQI+ people through the UK immigration system, [reported the “extremely concerning” news](#) that some of the asylum seekers it works with had been informed that they would be moved to the Bibby Stockholm soon, [noting that](#) immigration detention is especially dangerous for queer people and gender minorities. Rainbow Migration also [criticised the Home Office](#) for requiring asylum seekers to “prove” their sexuality and/or gender in accordance with Western notions of identity that cannot encompass the diversity of claimants' experiences. In its efforts to create an inhospitable environment as a deterrent, the Home Office has produced an immigration system that exposes vulnerable people to homophobic and transphobic abuse, while [subjecting them to Eurocentric assessment criteria](#) that incorrectly assume the universality of Western norms. The Bibby Stockholm represents the apogee of this hostile environment: as if to expose the links between the violent aspects of the immigration system as vividly as possible, the cisnormative segregation of the biopolitical space of “the hold” evokes Britain's role in [the imposition of European concepts of sex-gender onto colonised populations](#). The Bibby Stockholm is, in short, a site where contemporary formations of the [coloniality of gender](#) are connected to their archive, making explicit the ties between the history of the transatlantic slave trade and ongoing attempts to reduce gender to static binary categories.

On the Use of Rwanda as a Deterrent

The Rwanda Plan makes a complementary but distinct contribution to the government's migration narrative. Promising that the scheme will reduce the number of people reaching British shores in small boats, [the government intends](#) to remove migrants who have: a) arrived since 1 January 2022; b) undertaken a “dangerous” journey; c) travelled through another country in which they could have claimed asylum. Once in Rwanda, deportees will not be authorised to return to the UK. [As critics have observed](#), for the UK to forcibly deport migrants to a country with which they have no prior association would be to resume the involuntary displacements of the British Empire. From [the](#)

[horrors of the Middle Passage](#), to [the “transportation” of criminalised groups to the settler state of Australia](#), practices of relocation were central to the Empire’s apparatus of domination. The UK government’s use of Rwanda as a deterrent is also telling of its colonial mindset. Reducing the East African state to an undesirable location, implying that it is the last place anyone would choose to seek asylum, the Home Office instrumentalises Rwanda, disrespectfully brandishing the memory of [the Genocide of 1994](#) as a spectre to scare away would-be migrants. It is also notable that we are never informed precisely where in Rwanda—which city or province—the deportees will be taken to, suggesting that, in the discourse deployed by the government, “Rwanda” doesn’t signify a country or sovereign nation-state so much as an offshore detention centre and former warzone. This attitude is captured by John Stuart Mill (quoted in [Said 1994](#): 59):

These [outlying possessions of ours] are hardly to be looked upon as countries, ... but more properly as outlying agricultural or manufacturing estates belonging to a larger community. Our West Indian colonies, for example, cannot be regarded as countries with a productive capital of their own ... [but are rather] the place where England finds it convenient to carry on the production of sugar, coffee and a few other tropical commodities.

By establishing a narrative in which Rwanda is discussed as if it were a colony, the government fuels the [empire nostalgia](#) that it believes will convert into votes.³

Unlike the Bibby Stockholm policy, the Rwanda Plan is not explicitly gendered. This does not mean, however, that the Rwanda Plan addresses gender in a neutral way. It is important to consider the Plan’s indirect connotations because, as María Lugones reminds us, “work that ignores the imbrication of the coloniality of power and the colonial/modern gender system also affirms this global system of power” ([Lugones 2007](#): 188). In recent decades, Rwanda has been celebrated for the diversity of its parliament: [61% of seats are currently held by women](#), the highest proportion in the world. Despite this, Rwandan women face [severe economic inequality](#), [high rates of gendered violence](#), and [patriarchal social practices](#) that make women dependent on men.

³ Collyer and Shahani point out that it’s unusual for the government to publish an agreement of the kind that it has negotiated with Rwanda. “Communication of this nature suggests that the government realises that the value of the MOU [Memorandum of Understanding] is to be found in the publicity that it generates amongst the UK voting public rather than the impact on reducing the backlog of outstanding asylum decisions”: <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0760/12/8/451>

Queer people also suffer discrimination: although homosexuality is not technically illegal, Rwanda is [not a safe place to be gay](#), and [trans people are in danger](#) as well. These circumstances are the legacy of German and Belgian religious-colonial prerogatives that [diminished the status of Rwandan women](#), while stigmatising, pathologizing, and criminalising traditional practices that could be understood today—anachronistically, of course—as homosexual, bisexual, and/or transgender ([Epprecht 2008](#)).⁴ This violent history constitutes the symbolic substrate from which the UK government’s use of Rwanda as a political signifier emerges.

The Official Opposition

Although the policies that I have briefly considered here belong to the Conservative Party’s messaging campaign, the approach taken by Labour, the official opposition party (which is [currently projected](#) to win the general election that must be held by January 2025), is not substantively different. In August 2023, Stephen Kinnock, the Shadow Immigration Minister, announced that [Labour will continue to hold asylum seekers on the Bibby Stockholm](#) if the party forms the next government. Although he described this as a temporary measure, Kinnock also confirmed that Labour does not wish to use hotels either, allowing for the possibility of another form of detention. Regarding Rwanda, the Labour leader, Keir Starmer, [has promised to cancel the deportation scheme](#) if he becomes Prime Minister. But the policy itself is hardly anathema to Labour: in 2004, Starmer’s predecessor, Tony Blair, [attempted to establish](#) an asylum camp in Tanzania, a country that was [a colony of the UK](#) for much of the twentieth century. And given Labour’s [ongoing failure](#) to stand up for transgender rights, it seems likely that the cisnormative practices of the Home Office are set to continue.

Conclusion

The Bibby Stockholm scheme and the Rwanda Plan belong to a messaging operation directed at two groups: potential migrants and the UK electorate. To deter the former,

⁴ This is not, of course, to deny that power was already gendered prior to colonisation. While the introduction of European patriarchal norms reduced the standing of Rwandan women, research indicates that women living in rural areas during the Nyiginya Kingdom (the era that colonisation brought to an end) were often doubly burdened with domestic work and hard agricultural labour. For a detailed historical overview of women in Rwanda, including how colonisation “irrevocably changed Rwandan women’s lives,” see [this article](#) by Sarah E. Watkins, Erin Jessee and Emma Brunton.

many of whom are fleeing persecution, the government terrorizes them with the threat of [re-traumatisation](#), detention within “the hold,” and/or removal to a country that may be unsafe for them and could be thousands of miles away from their communities and support networks. If the cruelty of this narrative is shamelessly conspicuous, then its utilisation of the violent history of European empire is just as brazen. It is the undisguised coloniality of the narrative which is addressed to British voters, exploiting the anxiety and misery caused by Conservative projects like [Brexit](#) and [austerity](#), and offering the illusion of an administration that could make Britain “great” again. The gendered components of the discourse also address migrants and voters simultaneously. Aiming to create a hostile environment that will deter LGBTQIA+ migrants, the government brandishes the threat of binary segregation onboard the Bibby Stockholm and deportation to Rwanda, a country that European empires have rendered inhospitable to queer subjects. All of which speaks to British voters as well, confirming the government’s transphobic stance in the culture wars being waged across the UK and beyond. [As I have argued elsewhere](#), in response to the colonial cisnationalism of Hungary’s president Viktor Orbán, the securitization of national borders often goes hand in hand with the policing of the border that is understood to separate men and women.

If the interpretation that I have sketched here is correct, then it suggests that an effective counter to the government’s migration narrative should attend to its own polyvalence. Critics cannot expect to be able to focus on just one of the vectors of power currently operative: the critique of Home Office coloniality must also attend to Home Office cisnormativity, for example. As the policies regarding Rwanda and the Bibby Stockholm demonstrate, these gendered and racialised vectors of power are deeply enmeshed. Public anxieties regarding national identity and gender identity are indexed in the perceived crisis at the border, and attempts to disaggregate them into separate battles risk leaving part of the story unspoken and available for weaponization.

Christopher Griffin works across political theory, decolonial studies, literary studies, and philosophy to examine narratives of subjectivity and rights, particularly those that produce constitutive exclusions. Their work has appeared in *Derrida Today*, *South Atlantic Review*, and *Interfere: Journal for Critical Thought and Radical Politics*.