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# Necropolitics in Refugee Governance

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## Abstract

*In recent years, patterns of [ir]regular migration have become ubiquitous across much of the world – spawning the controversial term ‘refugee crisis’. In engaging with the work of Achille Mbembe, who coined the postcolonial theory of ‘necropolitics’, I attempt in this short article to build upon existing scholarly literature on necropolitics and biopower in relation to refugee camps as a distinct form of exclusionary and violent refugee governance. This article uses the empirical case study of the ‘Calais Jungle’ to show how such geographical spaces are a neo-colonial device that function to exclude ‘Others’ in maintaining national sovereignty and borders against a culturally imaged ‘threat’.*

**[ K e y w o r d s ]** : Refugees; Necropolitics; Biopower; ‘Refugee Crisis’; Exclusionary.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again)”* (Butler, 2004: 33)

In recent years, the eponymous ‘Refugee Crisis’ has become somewhat of a spectacle in both academic discourse and media alike. The UNHCR (2018) states that there are 68.5 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide – of which, 25.4 million are recognised as refugees. International human rights law, including the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, outlines not only refugee rights but also state obligations to protect. However, member states of the EU – a destination ‘hot spot’ of migration in recent years – have collectively failed to provide adequate provisions and recourse to asylum for refugees (Davies et al, 2017). Danewid argues that the ‘crisis’ “must be understood as part of Europe’s ongoing encounter with the world that is created through more than 500 years of empire, colonial conquest and slavery” (2017: 1680). Importantly, the ‘crisis’ has shone light on the disparities that were sustained through restrictive immigration policies established by former colonial powers at the height of empire, designed to keep colonised people out. The creation of new spatial and temporal boundaries during the Colonial projects was tantamount to the production of hierarchies and dangerous dichotomies that worked to classify individuals and manufacture ‘cultural imaginaries’ (Mbembe, 2003). This cultural imagination is a necessary ‘tool’ of statecraft, as identities are constructed to legitimate action or, indeed, non-action. As Hall (1996) argues, it has never been possible to set oneself up as the ‘One’ without at once setting up a direct oppositional ‘Other’.

In this article, I locate the ‘crisis’ not at the heart of Europe, as contemporary discourse often suggests (Quinn, 2018); rather, I locate the ‘crisis’ in the lives of refugees/asylum seekers<sup>1</sup> contained in spaces regarded as extensions of necropolitical power. In this first section of this short article, I

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<sup>1</sup> While outwit the scope of this article to contend with the linguistic importance of these terms, it should be noted that the definitions I use here reflect both the UNHCR and IOM.

will provide clarification to the term ‘necropolitics’ through an engagement with Achille Mbembe’s work. Subsequently, I will demonstrate that this rather abstract concept can be seen ‘at work’ in contemporary refugee governance, most notably in emergency ‘camp’-like situations, to show the ways in which the governance of refugees constitutes a form of necropolitics

## **Defining Necropolitics**

Refugee studies has expanded in recent years to include a plethora of literature on how states should approach unprecedented numbers of arrivals of both legitimate refugees and illegal migrants (Betts, 2009); international refugee law (Price, 2006); and gendered perspectives on migration (Oxford, 2005; Freedman, 2016). Yet, despite this bountiful literature, one nascent area of refugee studies is that of the necropolitical landscape of refugee governance.

Achille Mbembe’s conception of necropolitics builds upon both Foucault and Agamben’s approach to biopower. For Agamben, sovereign power is not linked to the capacity to bear rights, but is covertly linked to ‘bare life’: life included in the political realm by a paradoxical exclusion, exposed to the violence and the decision of sovereign power (Genel, 2006). In the context of governing migration into the EU, this managerialism is evident in the strategies and rhetoric of immigration control. For Davies et al, this is presented as a “technical exercise underpinned by managerial language of cooperation, partnership, best practice and technical know-how” (2017: 1267). For Foucault, “such a power has to qualify, measure, appraise and hierarchise, rather than displace itself in its murderous splendour” (1978: 144). Biopolitics, however, does not fully account for contemporary forms of subjugation of “life to the power of death” (Mbembe, 2003: 39).

Necropolitics, then, reacts to these inadequacies to conceptualise the more extreme cases of body regulation, when life is not as much governed as death is being sanctioned (Davies et al, 217). Building upon Foucault’s dichotomy of ‘making die/letting live’, Mbembe argues that necropolitics transitions this dichotomy to ‘making live/letting die’ (Mbembe, 2003; Fassin, 2009). Accordingly, Mbembe states that the “ultimate expression of sovereignty resides in the power and capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (2003: 11). Where biopower is demonstrated in

extermination camps or prisons, Mbembe (2003) argues that it is the colony which represents the paradigmatic space of contemporary violence and oppression. The colony, as a manifestation of racial hierarchy and superiority, demonstrates the ways in which race has been an “ever present shadow in Western political thought and practice. Especially when it comes to imagining the inhumanity of, or rule over, foreign peoples” (Mbembe, 2003: 17). Necropolitics is a form of colonial governance, with race the primary identifier of subjectification. Necropolitics can, therefore, be used to describe new forms of social existence in which “vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (Mbembe, 2003: 40): conditions that are obscene, vulgar and sanctioned for the political ends of exclusion.

It is important to note that biopower and necropolitics are not antithetical. Rather, they are interrelated and constitute a “spatial dialectical unity” (McIntyre and Nast, 2011: 1472). Where Agamben details extermination camps as the epitome of biopower and Mbembe details colonies as emblematic of necropolitics, the two rather neatly converge when looking at contemporary refugee camps scattered across the European continent. If biopower is dependent on the creation of a biological field that divides those who ‘must’ live from those who ‘can’ be left to die (or be killed), it follows that some subjects due to the conditions of their existence are denied humanness and acquire the status of the living dead –that of ‘bare life’, that one can be killed without that death being considered murder (Papailias, 2018).

### **Necropolitics in Action**

Power is often conceived in relation to exception, emergency, and a fictionalised notion of the enemy. For Mbembe, the perception of an ‘Other’, as a threat to life and security, is one of the “many imaginaries of sovereignty characteristic of both early and late modernity itself” (2003: 18). As has been the case in this contemporary ‘refugee crisis’, across many European states the refugee has been constructed as an external threat to both the state and the idea of a cultural nation. Refugee camps may be understood as part of the contemporary necropolitical landscape. As spatialized territories of abjection, camps are demonstratively peripheral sites (Diken, 2004), where political

violence is administered to a particular group through the lack of opportunity to improve one's miserable condition of existence.

One characteristic of the state of 'refugeeness' is existing 'outside the confines of political normality' (Dillon, 1999): in other words, an estrangement from political normativity. Not only is estrangement manufactured by state-centric legal and policy imperatives, but estrangement is also constitutive of these. There are many forms of refugee experience and, therefore, many forms of estrangement. Questions arise as to who benefits from estrangement, and who is able to move. The human being is intertwined with others; otherness is at the very core of *being* human. The refugee is figurative of the inherent incompleteness of the human being, "as a figure of the 'inter', or the 'in-between'", of the human way of being, neither wholly inside nor completely outside (Dillon, 1999: 95).

The Calais 'Jungle' camp was situated on the northern edge of the Schengen Zone, "on the border of two former colonial powers, [it] became a deliberately constructed place of inequality and abjection for non-European peoples, in the heart of northern Europe" (Davies and Isakjee, 2018: 2). Although the UK is part of the EU [correct at the time of writing], it is not party to the Schengen area; therefore, Calais became a bottleneck for migrants attempting to reach the UK, as well as "an emblem for mass suffering of refugees" (Hurley, 2016: 1). Many of those contained within the camp were seeking an opportunity to smuggle themselves through the border in lorries, or seeking equally dangerous routes involving jumping onto passing trains, or awaiting to seek asylum in France. In 2015, the 'Jungle'<sup>2</sup> was the largest refugee camp in Europe, and housed 6000 refugees. For Davies et al, "thousands of forced migrants deep within European territories resorted to living informally in urban and rural spaces with minimal or no state intervention" (Davies et al, 2017: 1263). In the case of the Calais camp, the inaction of the state to effectively provide recourse to asylum or ensure sufficient standards of cleanliness is emblematic of the 'letting die' approach that Mbembe

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<sup>2</sup> Although the Calais camp has since been destroyed, the language of the 'jungle' is suggestive of both the French and UK government's approaches. It is suggestive of an untamed and overgrown area, teeming with life, and demonstrates that the inhabitants are treated like animals.

demonstrates in his work: brutality is administered upon the colonised body. It is the racialized identity that allows them to be neglected and abandoned. Disposable others are not *actively* killed; rather, they are instead kept injured, dehumanised and excluded often through the deliberate and harmful *inactivity* of the state.

Abandonment or state [in]action often has a direct and violent impact upon the refugee body: from the “confinement of living in the polluted and ill-equipped makeshift encampment, to the violence then enacted very directly on – and within – refugee bodies, through assault, preventable illness and the systematic deprivation of food” (Davies et al, 2017: 1275). Aggressive border controls and an unwillingness to take responsibility from both UK and French governments prevented camp residents from accessing the adjacent road where they may attempt to smuggle themselves onto lorries (Davies et al, 2017). Many have perished in the camp through illness, squalid conditions, and direct violence (Hurley, 2016). Many have been killed in attempted border crossings or drowned in the English Channel. The potentiality of death was an ever-present reality – part of an active process of violent abandonment. The direct violence accompanied by untreated infections, widespread squalor, hunger, cold conditions, physical injury and psychological trauma all constitute what Mbembe (2003: 21) terms a ‘death world’. While this ‘phantomlike world’ was envisioned in relation to spaces of slavery, the very purpose of being exposed to ‘gradual wounding’ is to subdue, coerce, and make bodies docile through a spectacle of pain. For the residents of Calais, they were no more than ‘disposable subjects’, “kept alive whilst injured through extreme marginalization, in a morbid spectacle that puts their lives in severe jeopardy” (Davies et al, 2017: 1280). Despite the living conditions in Calais, the ‘Jungle’ was the only option for refugees available at that time. Stuck in a perennial state of limbo, there appears to be an irremediable paradox in one’s ability to be considered both human *and* a refugee simultaneously: neither citizen nor human; neither living nor dead.

## CONCLUSION

Concerned with how a political power may dictate how some live and some die, necropolitics captures the very essence of the ways in which state actors control every aspect of refugees' lives. As state constructions of the refugee as diseased and criminal, a threat to the nation, have become deeply entrenched into cultural imaginations of the 'other' (Round and Kuznetsova, 2016), the representation of the refugee as less than human becomes normalised. In the context of forced migration into Europe, it is the invisible groups rendered subaltern who are subject to necropolitical governance. Spaces of necropolitical power such as refugee camps are neo-colonial devices, restricting both the movement of its inhabitants and their very ability to live. Disenfranchised 'others' are subject to hegemonic control (Davies and Isakjee, 2017: 3), and the sovereign 'right to kill' is an unstoppable force in protecting national borders and the [imagined] cultural identity of the threat of the unknown: the 'other', 'alien', refugee.

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