

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

Christopher Griffin, *Engenderings*, April 23rd, 2024

Since 2023, the UK government's response to the “migrant crisis” has revolved around two controversial flagship policies: the deportation of asylum seekers to Rwanda, and the detention of migrants aboard a giant barge. In this short article, I examine the colonial and gendered dimensions of the two policies, finding them to be examples of the coloniality of gender. What this indicates, I suggest, is that the purpose of these policies is not merely to deter potential migrants—particularly LGBTQIA+ migrants—but also to create a political narrative that allows the Conservative Party to garner right-wing votes by participating in high-profile culture wars; namely, the debate over transgender rights and the debate over how the UK should reckon with its imperial past.

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> The second policy

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<sup>1</sup> Jennie Portice and Stephen Reicher, “Arguments for European Disintegration: A Mobilization Analysis of Anti-Immigration Speeches by U.K. Political Leaders,” *Political Psychology* 39, no. 6 (December 2018): 1357–72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12551>.

<sup>2</sup> Rajeev Syal and Nadeem Badshah, “UK to Send Asylum Seekers to Rwanda for Processing,” *The Guardian*, 13 April 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/apr/13/pritipatel-finalises-plan-to-send-asylum-seekers-to-rwanda>.

<sup>3</sup> Holly Bancroft, “Sunak’s Rwanda Plan in Tatters after Supreme Court Judges Rule It Unlawful,” *Independent*, November 15, 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/rwanda-supreme-court-decision-braverman-b2447652.html>.

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.<sup>4</sup> Often denounced as cruel and inhumane, these two policies have been hugely controversial among liberal commentators, religious leaders, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs).<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> In short, I read the two

<sup>4</sup> Peter Walker, “Asylum Seekers to Be Housed on Dorset Barge despite Local Opposition,” *The Guardian*, April 5, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/apr/05/asylum-seekers-to-be-housed-on-dorset-barge-home-office-confirms>.

<sup>5</sup> “UK: Controversial Rwanda Bill Passes Second Reading Amid Concerns; Death of Asylum Seeker on a Barge & Another Asylum Seeker Crossing the Channel Embody Country’s Inhumane Migration Policies; The Government Uses ‘Harmful, Unnecessary and Ethical’ Age Assessment Methods,” European Council on Refugees and Exiles, December 15, 2023, <https://ecre.org/uk-controversial-rwanda-bill-passes-second-reading-amid-concerns-death-of-asylum-seeker-on-a-boat/>.

<sup>6</sup> Bobby Duffy, “Britain’s Descent into Culture Wars Has Been Rapid, but It Needn’t Be Terminal,” *The Conversation* (blog), May 12, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/britains-descent-into-culture-wars-has-been-rapid-but-it-neednt-be-terminal-182885>.

<sup>7</sup> Bobby Duffy et al., “‘Culture Wars’ in the UK” (Kings College London; The Policy Institute, 2021), <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/culture-wars-in-the-uk.pdf>, 12.

<sup>8</sup> 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. Duffy et al., “‘Culture Wars’ in the UK,” 79–85.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Lester, “The British Empire in the Culture War: Nigel Biggar’s *Colonialism: A Moral Reckoning*,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 51, no. 4 (July 4, 2023): 763–95,

policies as political narratives that work to define the position of the Conservative Party within several interconnected issues.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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 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-

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/03086534.2023.2209947>; Ned Simons, "The 'Culture War' Challenges To Trans Rights In The UK," *HuffPost*, April 12, 2023, [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/the-culture-war-challenges-to-trans-rights-in-the-uk\\_uk\\_64366d9de4b00ac9aa15d38](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/the-culture-war-challenges-to-trans-rights-in-the-uk_uk_64366d9de4b00ac9aa15d38).

<sup>10</sup> 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. See Poppy Bullen and Naomi Bartram, "Rwanda Plan Explained: Why the UK Government Shouldn't Be Sending Refugees Anywhere," International Rescue Committee, June 13, 2022, <https://www.rescue.org/uk/article/rwanda-plan-explained-why-uk-government-should-rethink-scheme>; Eleanor Longman-Rood, "The Government's Barges Will Not 'Stop the Boats', Says Migration Expert," The New European, August 9, 2023, <https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/the-governments-barges-will-not-stop-the-boats-says-migration-expert/>.

<sup>11</sup> Jasbir Puar, "Rethinking Homonationalism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45, no. 2 (May 2013): 336–39, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074381300007X>; Nadine El-Enany, "Europe's Colonial Embrace and the Brexit Nostalgia for Empire Are Two Sides of the Same Coin," *LSE Brexit Blog* (blog), April 29, 2020, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2020/04/29/europe-s-colonial-embrace-and-brexit-as-nostalgia-for-empire-are-part-of-the-same-story/>.

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.”<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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 unmistakeably 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.<sup>14</sup>

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

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Walker, “Asylum Seekers Will Get the Most Basic Housing Possible, Says Robert Jenrick,” *The Guardian*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/mar/29/asylum-seekers-housed-portakabins-maybe-ships-robert-jenrick>.

<sup>13</sup> Nicola David, “An Open Letter to Bibby Marine,” Refugee Council, July 4, 2023, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/stay-informed/articles/an-open-letter-to-bibby-marine/>.

<sup>14</sup> Selamawit Terrefe, “What Exceeds the Hold?: An Interview with Christina Sharpe,” *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*, no. 29 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e06>.

of lived experiences.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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

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<sup>15</sup> Charlotte Andrews and PA Media, "Bibby Stockholm Discrimination Report 'Published in Error,'" *BBC News*, December 30, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-dorset-67847393>.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Griffin, "Recognition Against Liberation: On the UK's Unreformed Gender Recognition Act," *The Interfere Blog* (blog), October 30, 2020, <https://interferejournal.org/2020/10/30/recognition-against-liberation-on-the-uks-unreformed-gender-recognition-act/>.

<sup>17</sup> "LGBTQI+ People Shouldn't Be Moved to a Floating Prison," Rainbow Migration, October 20, 2023, <https://www.rainbowmigration.org.uk/news/lgbtqi-people-shouldnt-be-moved-to-a-floating-prison/>; "LGBTQI+ People Still at Serious Risk of Harm in Immigration Detention," Rainbow Migration, February 8, 2023, <https://www.rainbowmigration.org.uk/news/lgbtqi-people-still-at-serious-risk-of-harm-in-immigration-detention/>.

<sup>18</sup> "The Colonial Past That Shapes the Present Asylum Process for LGBTQI+ People," Rainbow Migration, February 19, 2024, <https://www.rainbowmigration.org.uk/news/the-colonial-past-that-shapes-asylum-process/>.

<sup>19</sup> Bojana Asanovic, "Still Falling Short" (UK Lesbian & Gay Immigration Group, July 2018), [https://www.rainbowmigration.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Still-Falling-Short-Jul-18\\_0.pdf](https://www.rainbowmigration.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Still-Falling-Short-Jul-18_0.pdf).

populations.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

## 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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

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<sup>20</sup> See Victoria Kravtsova, "Oyeronke Oyewumi. The Invention of Women (1997)," *EastEast* (blog), <https://easteast.world/en/posts/292>; Oyérónké Oyéwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

<sup>21</sup> See Jennifer Manning, "Coloniality of Gender," Global Social Theory, n.d., <https://globalsocialtheory.org/topics/coloniality-of-gender/>; María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186–219, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.2007.tb01156.x>.

<sup>22</sup> Peter William Walsh, "Q&A: The UK's Former Policy to Send Asylum Seekers to Rwanda," The Migration Observatory, July 25, 2024, <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/commentaries/qa-the-uks-policy-to-send-asylum-seekers-to-rwanda/>.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Collyer and Uttara Shahani, "Offshoring Refugees: Colonial Echoes of the UK-Rwanda Migration and Economic Development Partnership," *Social Sciences* 12, no. 451 (August 11, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12080451>.

<sup>24</sup> "The Middle Passage," National Museums Liverpool, n.d., <https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/history-of-slavery/middle-passage>; "Defining Moments: Convict Transportation Peaks," National Museum Australia, September 20, 2022, <https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/convict-transportation-peaks>.

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:

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.<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup>

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.”<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> Despite this, Rwandan women face severe economic inequality, high rates of gendered violence, and patriarchal social practices that make women dependent on men.<sup>29</sup> Queer people also suffer

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 59.

<sup>26</sup> 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.” Collyer and Shahani, “Offshoring Refugees,” 6. On empire nostalgia, see El-Enany, “Europe’s Colonial Embrace.”

<sup>27</sup> Lugones, “Heterosexism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System,” 188.

<sup>28</sup> Victoire Ingabire Umuhoza, “Rwanda Shows That It Takes More than Seats in Parliament to Liberate Women,” openDemocracy, March 8, 2023, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/rwanda-women-in-parliament-employment-culture-empowerment/>.

<sup>29</sup> “Global Gender Gap Report 2021” (World Economic Forum, March 2021), [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf); “The Fight against GBV Concerns Every Rwandan,” Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, December 10, 2021, <https://www.migeprof.gov.rw/news-detail/the-fight-against-gbv-concerns-every-rwandan>; Annie Boss, “A Woman’s Place Is in Inteko: Examining Gender Equality in Rwanda Amidst Gender Parity in Its Parliament,” *Liberated Arts: A Journal for Undergraduate Research* 9, no. 1 (May 6, 2022), <https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/lajur/article/view/14652>.

discrimination: although homosexuality is not technically illegal, Rwanda is not a safe place to be gay, and trans people are in danger as well.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32</sup> 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.<sup>33</sup> But the policy itself is hardly anathema to Labour: in 2004,

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<sup>30</sup> “Proposals to Offshore Asylum Claims to Rwanda Will Be Harmful to LGBTQI+ People,” Rainbow Migration, April 14, 2022, <https://www.rainbowmigration.org.uk/news/proposals-to-offshore-asylum-claims-to-rwanda-will-be-harmful-to-lgbtqi-people/>; Maggie Andresen, “Rwanda’s Transgender Community Face Violent Detentions For Being Trans,” *Vice*, November 20, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/4adxv9/rwandas-transgender-community-face-violent-detentions-for-being-trans>.

<sup>31</sup> 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 Sarah E. Watkins, Erin Jessee, and Emma Brunton, “Women in Rwanda,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.522>. See also Marc Epprecht, *Heterosexual Africa? The History of an Idea from the Age of Exploration to the Age of AIDS* (Athens, Ohio; Scottsville, South Africa: Ohio University Press; University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2008).

<sup>32</sup> Jon Stone, “Labour Says It Would ‘Temporarily’ House Refugees on Offshore Barges,” *Independent*, August 6, 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/labour-immigration-policy-barges-b2388409.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Rachel Wearmouth, “Keir Starmer Pledges to Reverse Rwanda Scheme Even If Declared Legal,” *The New Statesman*, October 8, 2023, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/labour/2023/10/keir-starmer-pledges-to-reverse-rwanda-scheme-even-if-declared-legal>.

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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup>

## 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, many of whom are fleeing persecution, the government terrorizes them with the threat of re-traumatisation,<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> 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

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<sup>34</sup> “UK Plans Asylum Camp in Tanzania,” *BBC News*, February 26, 2004, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/3485996.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/3485996.stm).

<sup>35</sup> Sophie Perry, “Labour’s Keir Starmer Backs Trans Sports Bans: ‘Common Sense Has to Prevail,’” *PinkNews*, March 12, 2024, <https://www.thepinknews.com/2024/03/12/keir-starmer-trans-athletes-ban/>.

<sup>36</sup> Jennifer Allsopp, “Bibby Stockholm – Another Cruel Twist in UK Asylum Policy?,” University of Birmingham, August 10, 2023, <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/2023/bibby-stockholm-an-cruel-twist-in-uk-asylum-polic>.

<sup>37</sup> Antonis Kousoulis, “‘I Feel Frightened of the Angry World Outside My Door’: The Impact of Brexit Anxiety,” *Mental Health Foundation* (blog), August 9, 2019, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/blogs/i-feel-frightened-angry-world-outside-my-door-impact-brexit-anxiety>; Robert Booth and Patrick Butler, “UK Austerity Has Inflicted ‘great Misery’ on Citizens, UN Says,” *The Guardian*, November 16, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/nov/16/uk-austerity-has-inflicted-great-misery-on-citizens-un-says>.

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.<sup>38</sup>

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 cismorality, 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.

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