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# Challenging Nation-Statism Political Boundaries and Bodies at the Border

Nitasha Kaul

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# Challenging Nation-Statism: Political Boundaries and Bodies at the Border

Nitasha Kaul

University of Westminster, London  
n.kaul@westminster.ac.uk

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## Abstract

Critical scholarship can be a way of enacting insurrections against entrenched and enduring dogmatisms of the nation-state and its inalienable right to systematically deploy violence against selective Others. This article focuses upon the violent bordering practices of the nation-statist system, their connexion to the bordering of knowledges, and their impact upon specific kinds of bodies at the border, which together enforce a systemic vulnerability that is tied to legacies of colonialism, slavery, and capitalism. In the first part, I reflect upon the violence of bordering practices in the nation-statist system, foregrounding how those who predominantly receive this violence in the form of death and debility are the racialized Others. I put forth four specific implications of these violent bordering practices: they enable a cascade of interlinked dehumanizations of people within the nation-state borders; they occlude from view how any nation-state is not homogeneous over time in terms of what one might see as national culture; they allow economic processes to be perceived as scientific and abstract rather than as embedded in the realms of contested political jurisdictions; and they render and sustain the nation-state itself as a racialized construct that both produces and profits from class inequality in contemporary capitalism. In the second part, I argue for the need to perceive the link between violent bordering practices and bordered knowledges, highlighting and synthesizing insights from across disciplines that can aid in asking counter-hegemonic questions. In conclusion, and as part of necessary anti-national scholarly enquiry, I call for a multidimensional and sustained critical stance towards the nation-states' rights to enforce borders.

## Keywords

Border, nation-state, nation-statism, violence, colonization, racialization

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### *No human being is illegal*

## Introduction

"I am, Sir, a sovereign man"<sup>1</sup>

[Response of a Syrian man in Europe to a BBC journalist]

This article focuses upon the violent bordering practices of the nation-statist system and their explicit and systematically harmful impacts on racially Othered bodies. These practices are connected to the bordering of knowledges, which are in turn implicated in the production of indifference or the limiting of empathy towards those human bodies that perish in the border-crossings between nation-states. This argument squarely focuses on the systematic vulnerability to violence of *specific kinds* of bodies at the border, and this systematic vulnerability is interlinked with legacies of colonialism, slavery, and capitalism. In contradistinction to strands of social science that seek explanations for phenomena but ultimately produce justifications for the inevitability of the phenomena, here I reject the notion that violent bordering practices of the nation-statist system are inevitable consequences of the conjunction of particular economic, political, or technological forces (such as the prison-industrial complex, authoritarian populist demagogues or technological regimes of surveillance) that profit from the violent enforcement of borders. I take as given that violent bordering practices exist and are politically profitable; nonetheless, I propose that we cannot be 'objectively distanced' from the relationship between knowledge-making and repetitive systematic death by refusing to ask vital questions about nation-statist borders as a strand of our scholarly enquiry. I also acknowledge that there are multiple emotional reasons persuasively offered by nationalists that result in the resilience of support for the violent bordering practices of the nation-statist system. What motivates my article is the need to build upon and advance scholarly arguments that challenge these violent bordering practices by directly linking them to racist colonial legacies. The dominant knowledges produced on nation-statist border-making in the Euro-American world is largely tied to Eurocentric epistemologies and generally located in academes in the global north (see Cole 2016); even so, as I will demonstrate below, the literature makes clear that nation-statist borders are violent. However, beyond the acknowledgement of the violence of nation-statist borders and

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<sup>1</sup> This striking sentence is part of a conversation between a Syrian refugee in crutches and a BBC journalist Nick Thorpe (BBC 2015a). It is related as follows: "At first light, a Syrian man in a suit stained dark with sweat, still wearing his tie, swung down the railway track towards me on his crutches. 'And who are you?' I asked wearily, like so many Europeans. 'I am, Sir, a sovereign man,' he replied. Among so many sovereign nations, it was a relief to meet a sovereign man".

the need to address the 'problems of migration' or the 'flow of refugees', the aim here is to question the 'sanctioned ignorance' (Spivak 1999) of what one can afford not to speak about. There is a salient identitarian distance between those who face death and debility due to the bordering practices, and those who create knowledges about them, resulting in a systematic and significant linking of the structures of oppression with discourses of legitimation in institutionalized knowledge trajectories.

The structure of the article is as follows. In the first part, I reflect upon the violence of the bordering practices of the nation-statist system, foregrounding how those who predominantly and systematically receive this violence in the form of death and debility are the racialized Others. I put forth four specific implications of these violent bordering practices: they enable a cascade of interlinked dehumanizations of people within the nation-state borders; they occlude from view how any nation-state is not homogenous over time in terms of what one might see as national culture; they allow economic processes to be perceived as scientific and abstract rather than as embedded in the realms of contested political jurisdictions; and they render and sustain the nation-state itself as a racialized construct that both produces and profits from class inequalities in contemporary capitalism. In the second part, I argue for the need to perceive the link between violent bordering practices and bordered knowledges, highlighting and synthesizing insights from across disciplines that can aid us in asking counter-hegemonic questions. In conclusion, and as part of necessary anti-national scholarly enquiry, I call for a multidimensional and sustained critical stance towards the nation-states' right to enforce borders.

### **On Violent Nation-Statist Bordering Practices**

Borders in the contemporary nation-statist sense are a violent political technology (see Hayter 2003; Anderson, Sharma and Wright 2009; Jones 2016). There are comprehensive literatures across various disciplines about the multiple ways in which the idea of a border functions in theory and practice, but few challenge the very legitimacy or rights of any and all nation-states' borders to function to exclude Others. The open borders literature provides an exception (see Fine 2013; Oberman 2014; Carens 2015) insofar as it theoretically considers the question of such rights for the nation-state using liberal philosophical approaches. But, while we recognize that nation-statist borders are violent, and are violently enforced, it is important to underscore that they are additionally and systemically violent against darker skinned poor people of the world. This is not a coincidence because those who risk or face death in trying to cross borders share a specific historical identity that cannot be made sense of without accounting for the legacy of slavery, colonialism, and racism. The explicit recognition and reiteration of this fact is crucial for scholarly schemas that study bodies at the borders of the nation-state.

Butler (2009: x) has referred to how "there is no reproduction of the social world that is not at the same time a reproduction of those norms that govern the intelligibility of the body in space and time". Analogously, I argue that the Othered bodies at the peripheries of the consciousness of the citizen-selves requires us to think about nation-state boundaries and

North-South relations, to challenge “the naturalisation of meaning [that] has had consequences ranging from the appropriation of land, labor, and resources to the subjugation or extermination of entire groups of people” (Doty 1996: 7). This is why I refer on the legacy of slavery, colonialism, and racism here.

While the rights of modern nation-states to enforce contemporary border regimes may seem commonsensical and overwhelmingly unchallengeable, these border regimes are barely a century-old (see Hayter 2003). Further, consider that a little over 75% of the world’s current international borders only came into existence in the period between 1850 and 1950 (Moverdb 2018). Let us place this alongside the fact that the volume of the slave trade peaked in the preceding 18th and early 19th century (Kahn and Bouie 2015). My argument then is that the institutionalization of contemporary nation-statist borders is relatively recent, was preceded by a period when millions of people were forcibly displaced around the globe cramped into slave ships as legal objects. Kaul (2007: 89-118) has argued for the need for modernist knowledge to be haunted by a postcolonial memory. Not only were the populations of those racial Others of a Eurocentric self-understanding branded, classified, and moved across the globe to serve a profit motive, the resultant regimes set up to manage resistance and enforcing white rule were presented as ‘rational’. During this epistemic shift, the world was inscribed through colonizations that were legitimated through the ascendance of scholarly disciplinarity and scientism.

The biopolitics of border management in the contemporary Euro-American world is deeply embedded in the practice of violence over the most vulnerable bodies, and these bodies are exceptionally vulnerable to death and debility because they are racialized as the Other of a triumphalist ‘West’ (which is accessed through a convenient amalgam of contradictions to designate the hierarchically preferred identity over the ‘rest’, see Hall 1996). From the U.S.-Mexico border to the borders of Fortress Europe, from the Rohingya and Afghan refugees to the Syrians fleeing endless war, thousands of people of colour, whether refugees or migrants, perish on their way to seeking better life chances in formerly colonizer Euro-American societies. These thousands of deaths at the land and sea borders every year, over decades, adds up to tens of thousands of human lives that need not have been lost. And, behind every death of every human body are additional tragedies of grief, exploitation, abuse, and misery (see Jones 2016; Kovras and Robins 2016).

In 1979, Foucault said in an interview: “The state must not exercise an unconditional right of life and death, over its own people or those of another country. To deny the state this right of life and death meant opposing the bombings in Vietnam by the United States and currently it means helping refugees”. With clear echoes of the Holocaust in mind, he continues, “In 1938 and 1939, Jews fled Germany and Central Europe, but because nobody received them, many died. Forty years have passed since, and can we again send 100,000 people to their deaths?” (Progressive Geographies 2015). In 2023, another forty years later, we confront this question again. What makes possible the sustenance of such a cavalier attitude to life of

human beings of a different skin colour and identity, in the presence of what we know, and what we have experienced?

The Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserts “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”. This declaration was created through a global effort including significant involvement and input of non-Western individuals involved in various anti-colonial struggles, and human rights are not the exclusive preserve of any part of the world. In keeping with this 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights,<sup>2</sup> a large number of those who work on political boundaries apparently believe that all human beings are equal, or that they should be treated equally. If so, how can we refuse to perceive the link between the differential entitlements of people around the world to be able to access safety or livelihood by moving across national borders, and the specific identity of those people as non-Western, colonized or inferior racialized Others? As Butler (2015) asks, why are some lives more grievable than others?

This is not an emotive question ostensibly outside the purview of scholarly thinking; nor is it obvious or irrelevant; it confronts us with the urgent connexion between knowledges and the worlds that they enable. When human lives are ranked by a differential worth, we see that this differential worth is *systematically aligned* with colonial status in the recent centuries, chromatist lens of skin colour, and economic ranking of wealth. The dark-skinned poor people of those parts of the world that have for many centuries served as a playground for the rivalries of Western powers (and those powers that aspire to be Western), are seen/represented as a ‘threat’ and are seen not as human beings equal to those who are privileged; they are simple ‘flat characters’ with easily summarizable lives or who are imagined as a composite mass of colourful/deprived huddled bodies, and then they die, and are forgotten. What Roy (2001) wrote about the people of Afghanistan in 2001 holds true for the people of Yemen and elsewhere in the present: “Witness the infinite justice of the new century. Civilians starving to death while they’re waiting to be killed”. In these contexts, scholars must explicitly recognize the central role of race, slavery, and colonialism in how borders pose systematic violence, to whom, and why.

The body at the border, poor and seeking a better life, discriminated against, and fleeing oppression, has its vulnerability obscured by a map with colour-coded countries. When the dominant framing of borders occurs through restricting human mobility in the interests of ‘national security’, the bodies of the non-Western/racialized Others are automatically constructed as potential sources of threat (see Sharma 2006). The entirely natural act of moving across artificially constructed/delineated borders for safety or livelihood reasons comes to be

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<sup>2</sup> Imagine a world where every child could begin education with this document, and where people everywhere could read/hear news of suffering that was not divided into ‘national’ and ‘international’ pages or segments but referred to only in terms of severity and scale.

perceived as something threatening, unusual, and undesirable. That such racialized Othered bodies face lack of grievability and dehumanization or death at the border is evident empirically in the statistics, and representationally in signifying texts and images.

The histories of these formerly colonized non-western Others are deemed irrelevant (Prashad 2008; Wolf 2010); as they perish in camps or drown at sea, they are presented as a raw mass of throbbing bodies, with their specific histories and stories leached out in a dehistoricizing universalism, cultural anesthesia and anonymous corporeality, or as a sentimental composite figure (Malkki 2006; Feldman 1994). Precisely in line with the historical echoes of slavery and colonialism, these people are seen as less than or differently human, with a focus on their illegality and criminality (see Philo, Bryant and Donald 2013 for empirical examples) or negatively conceived animality. The negative view of the animal in Western thought then promotes their ill treatment. The Calais camp was referred to as 'the jungle', a term that underscores what Vaughan-Williams (2015: 2, 7), following Derrida's work (in *The Beast and the Sovereign, Rogues*) refers to as the 'animalization' of the 'irregular migrant'; "the first move of sovereign power is to posit animality as the Other against which reason is defined". Though at the heart of Europe, this camp lacked basic facilities while the people there were fenced off from view, demonized for their attempts to escape poverty and violence, and ultimately the camp was brutally decimated (see Rigby and Schlembach 2013; Mould 2017). In a visually overdetermined viral photograph taken in Melilla (Spain's north African exclave, geographically on the continent of Africa), black African migrants climbed razor-wire fences that starkly separated their world from that of white-clad white European golfers (see *The Guardian* 2014). According to an EU law (Council Regulation 539/2001), the countries whose nationals need a visa to enter the Schengen area are designated in the 'Schengen Black List', and those whose nationals do not, comprise the Schengen 'White List' (see ESI n.d.). The terms 'expatriates' and 'immigrants' are similarly applied to people with different affiliations to formerly colonizer or colonized regions (*The Guardian* 2015a).

At the heart of this comprehension is the internalized idea of a racial hierarchy of worth of human bodies, and this is further connected to the origins of the racialized hierarchy of nation-states (see Vitalis 2010; Anievas, Manchanda and Shilliam 2014). Analogous to Said's Orientalist critique (1978), we might see that the political Other is designated as an overdetermined object of simultaneous threat and fantasy. This fantasy can be witnessed in how the figure of the refugee sometimes becomes an exotic identity role-played by the citizen through a grotesque idiom of fashion in a sedated capitalist dream. Not only is there such a thing as torture chic/ torture couture (see Hron 2008; Martin and Steuter 2010: 155), there is also 'refugee chic'. The Finnish women's magazine *Anna* had a fashion spread called "The Refugee Look" (in Malkki 2006: 386). Following the brutal policies adopted by the Hungarian government towards the refugees, there was a Hungarian 'migrant chic' photo-spread (*The New York Times* 2015a) The pictures were defended and later only grudgingly removed (BBC 2015b). Meanwhile, an American missionary in South Africa found it possible to dress as a Syrian refugee for Halloween (*Metro* 2015), and the editor of *Vogue* had to apologise for

referring to Kanye West's clothing collection as 'migrant chic' (The Independent 2016). As AFP (2017) report noted, "Balenciaga brought the refugee look to Paris men's catwalks Wednesday with a collection which seemed to evoke Europe's migrant crisis and the dreams of thousands seeking a new life there".

The violent bordering practices of nation-states cause death and debility to racialized bodies, and I argue that they further enable the following. First, they assist in what I would call a *cascade of interlinked dehumanisations* of people within the nation-state borders. The routinized indifference and apathy of nation-state's border fantasy towards the fate of the Other bodies (black, brown, formerly colonized and so on) outside of the borders, is connected to a scale of deservingness that moves up from refugees to migrants<sup>3</sup>, to migrants of different skin color and identity, to the impoverished precariat citizens, to those citizens further up the socio-economic scale. Arendt once argued about the impact upon Europe of European colonialism (see Grosse 2006; Mishra 2017), suggesting the atrocities carried out by Europeans upon those they had colonized eventually found a home in Europe itself. In a similar vein, the absolute Othering of the body at the border grants legitimacy to selective regimes of bordering justice and reproduces the rights of those within the nation-state borders up the hierarchy of worth. It creates consent for the extensive use of surveillance technology to monitor conformity and limit dissent within the nation-state and entrenches a discourse of calculable monetary value as worthiness in order to limit access to resources such as healthcare and education. This selective granting of rights and access life and livelihood is constructed as 'natural', but there is every reason to question its foundational legitimacy or moral ground (see King 2016) by asking questions of justice that link specific histories and their colonality, focus on the violence upon vulnerable bodies, interrogate Eurocentricity, and refuse to accept the inevitability of contemporary nation-state border regimes.

Second, racialized violent practices of bordering occlude from view that any nation-state is not homogenous over time in terms of what one might see as national culture. Mikesell (1983: 257) points to the division of the world into 'countries' marked by coincident cultures offers a misleading view of the world frequently produced through scholarly and political discourse. While almost every nation-state has a history of migration and intermingling, most nation-states in the present seek to invisibilize this history and reinvent themselves in line with specific identities necessitated by the awkward yoking together of nation and state as an inevitable coincidence of identity and politics, people and territory (questioning the work of that hyphen, see Butler and Spivak 2007). Thus, Europe functions according to its self-image as a white Christian continent (to which refugees/migrants from West Asia/Middle East offer a direct threat), the Indian government imagines an exclusively Hindu 'Aryan' history (where Muslim Rohingya refugees are denied sanctuary), settler colonial nations like the USA, Australia

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<sup>3</sup> Much hangs in the difference between 'refugees' and 'migrants' (see Alldred 2003: 153; Holmes and Castañeda 2016), between deserving and undeserving migrants (see Dhaliwal and Forkert 2016).



or Canada seek to forget their origins in the genocide of the Indigenous peoples of the First Nations. In each case, whether formerly colonized or colonizer, the internalized racialized hierarchy of worth remains intact with the grievability of white bodies at the top and black bodies at the bottom. Fear-mongering over the intrusion of other cultures remains available through a forgetting of histories of extermination, persecution, and immigration. When the most salient identity of bodies is conceived as rooted in the geographical region of birth, the movement of people is seen as damaging to national culture. Yet, the idea of culture insofar as it can be defined as any coherent collectivity is not contiguous with the borders of the nation; cultures are never 'purely' one thing, but rather contested imaginaries. Without the focus on the distinguishing racialized differences of bodies in order to define the border of identity and culture, cultures cannot be threatened by 'new arrivals' as all cultures are always already in flux. As Moses (2006: 179) states:

American concern with 'Latinization' or French references to 'Africanization' or 'Islamification' are little more than new, often racist, names for 'otherness'. In this conventional view, culture is understood in terms that are sterile, rigid, standardized, and tightly linked to specific territorial (national) spaces. National cultures are stereotyped images of a romantic and imagined past.

Furthermore, whether it is the question of migrants moving to a community, or a corporation reaching into a village, the changes in each involve a shifting of frames and the extension of the dimensions of interaction and impact. Whether the transformations in social landscapes are wrought by the movement of bodies or the movement of capital, these transformations are part of a global economic system of capitalism which produces goods and services as well as identities (see Shantz 2006).

Third, nation-statist bordering renders our understanding of 'economic' processes as if they were abstract, apolitical, and scientific, rather than embedded in the realms of contested political jurisdictions through which the globally interconnected nature of exploitation between 'here' and 'there' in the era of neoliberal capitalism is made invisible. It must be remembered that contrary to the tenets of neoclassical theory, which is the ideological basis for capitalist economic systems, only capital can move freely across national borders, labour cannot. The apparently peaceful theoretical equilibria can never be translated into lived reality though, because we live in a world of globally legitimated labour sanctions through the violent nation-statist border controls. Economic violence (Kaul 2009) is not an exception under these circumstances; it is a fundamental part of the way the system operates. Meanwhile, nationalism and neoliberalism are erroneously understood in mutually opposed registers so that 'nation' and 'economy' are seen to be available a-priori rather than co-constructed. In this way, the immiserating effects of neoliberalism (e.g. greater inequality, monetization of relations, commodification of intangibles) and the pernicious effects of nationalism (e.g. revanchism, anti-minority populism, conservatism) are seen as 'unintended consequences' and not as central to the creation of the subjectivities needed for the constitution of neoliberalism or nationalism (for more detail, see Kaul 2019: 8-13). The idea of a nation-state is promoted in

the context of nationalism, but often rejected in the context of nationalization; the 'people' are valorized at the same instant as that which is 'public' is under attack. Labour sanctions, through the use of restricting labour movement across borders, become almost universally accepted.

Fourth, the nation-state is a racialized construct (on this see Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Balibar and Wallerstein 1991; Henderson 2013), that both produces and profits from class inequalities in contemporary capitalism. On the one hand, the exploitation of workers within more industrialized states (or so-called 'developed' states - a term which invisibilizes the connexion of this status to foreign policy and colonial history) reproduces antagonisms between states and migrants that can be politically activated for electoral or ideological benefit, whether through the generation of nationalist xenophobia, or via arguments for the rights of domestic workers that restricting migrants through oppressive technologized and neoliberal border regimes. On the other hand, the exploitation of workers within less industrialized ('developing') states produces variations of the same process, but greater brutalization of Indigenous or Tribal peoples, and the interpellation of the citizen-consumer into the imagined utopia held out by the deep social penetration of western corporations, a process that generates various insecurities on a war-nonwar continuum of violence: climate disasters, land grabs, mining violence, civil wars linked to rival patronage networks (see Cramer and Reuveny 2007; Richards 2011; Sassen 2014) that can result in desperate measures to access livelihoods or safety.

In view of the entrenched and enduring implications of violent nation-statist bordering practices noted above, it is clear that radically challenging these practices requires responses beyond those that relate to numbers and historicity, and those that call for charity and benevolence. While it is useful to draw attention to how the numbers of people that move across national borders are not tremendous,<sup>4</sup> doing so does not challenge the rights of the nation-states to enact such practices, and it does not directly address the specific nature of those bodies that systematically receive death and debility. Even so, it is useful to highlight the historical and numerical perspective in the question of human mobility across borders. Similarly, appeals to charitable liberal benevolence as a response to violent bordering practices faced by racialized Othered bodies often rely upon specific media images and such 'humanitarian' impulses aroused by the exceptional brutality can prove fickle. Without

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<sup>4</sup> Kofman (1995: 127) refers to the consistently denied and deliberately forgotten idea of Europe as a continent of immigration. Sassen (2006: 637) asks why only a fraction of the global poor have migrated to rich countries (100 million, less than 4% of the world's poor) and so poverty is, by itself, not the explanans for emigration. Roth (2015: n.p.) refers to how the 2015 European refugee crisis was "a crisis of politics, not capacity"; the so-called influx in 2015 was 0.068% of the EU's population.

questioning the underlying logic of the violence, charity may be vertical, momentary, and easily overturned.<sup>5</sup>

I have argued that there are multiple reasons why we might seriously question the rights of nation-states to enact violent bordering practices against political Others; and that the legacies of slavery, colonialism, and capitalism are key to why darker skinned poorer people from the formerly colonized parts of the world systematically receive death and debility at the nation-statist border. The institutionalization of nation-statist borders in their current sense is a relatively recent phenomena in history and was preceded by the remaking of the world through the movement of people deemed objects. Contemporary border control practices are thus naturalized through an internalized racial hierarchy of the worth of human bodies, and on that basis open to interrogation.

### On Questioning Bordered Knowledges

In this section, I highlight counter-hegemonic ways of linking the violent bordering practices of the nation-states to bordered knowledges, positing that speaking truths to state power beyond disciplinary constraints is an urgent endeavour. If the violent bordering practices of contemporary nation-states are the answer, what are the questions we might ask to begin their undoing? Further, which ideas do these practices take as unquestionable, and relatedly, what questions are impossible to ask within such a framework? Every explanatory framework takes certain things as self-explanatory. As Kaul (2007: 56, *italics original*) writes, “[I]t is this self-explanatory aspect which signals that one has *reached the outline* of the explanatory frame in use”. Nation-states’ right to enact violent bordering practices is taken as self-explanatory in much contemporary discourse. As a direct consequence, the violence inherent in such practices as it affects the racialized and Othered bodies becomes merely an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of the rational ordering of the world through the nation-statist system.

Violence cannot, in the final instance, be sustained without the knowledge constructions that legitimize and perpetuate it. Powerful disciplines construct knowledge categories that operate as holistic systematizing schemas that subject the individual to the dominating forces of land, capital, and rule. With few exceptions, there is a general clinging to the concept of national borders in scholarly work that limits the acknowledgement of historicity, reclamation of agency, and the ability to think otherwise when it comes to questioning the rights of nation-states. Institutionalised knowledges that deal with border-making and the management of bodies can tend to be problematic, if not occasionally complicit, through their avoidance of normative questions, elisions of vocabulary, disciplinary boundaries, and instrumentalised investment in state-centered as opposed to people-centred discourses (for example, see

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<sup>5</sup> This was witnessed, for example, in the trajectory of European public opinion following on from Alan Kurdi’s haunting image, and then the dramatic change after the (eventually proven false, see The Independent 2017) allegations of sexual assault by refugees in Germany.

Chimni 2009 on the disciplinary move from refugee studies to forced migration studies, see also Romero 2008; Agnew 2008; Bauder 2014). Facing up to the ongoing violence requires a synthetic bringing together of ideas from different literatures (historical, philosophical, sociological, economic, political) to ask urgent questions that are too often obscured

In social sciences, the role of methodological nationalism is especially significant. Methodological Nationalism essentially reifies the nation-state as a basic unit of study. As Sager (2016: 42-43) explains, "Methodological Nationalism is a stance in the social sciences that unjustifiably presupposes the nation state, uncritically treats it as the natural form of social organisation and/or reifies it...Critics of methodological nationalism do not deny the continued importance of nation states in shaping migration flows...but rather invite a more careful consideration of their nature and role". Agnew (1994) previously referred to the "territorial trap", which he saw as the assumption that the territorial state developed as an immutable spatial framework of political order, not a unique political geographical formation.

In recent years, questions of race and colonial history have opened newer frames situating power and inquiry about the rights of nation-states. As Crawford (2015: 13) writes: "Geographic distance is not the primary reason that borders sometimes hinder the ability to see others and to listen empathetically: emotional and [...] cognitive distance creates borders and bystanders". Understanding which kinds of bodies are systematically excluded and why requires us to connect the centrality of race and ethnicity to the history and politics of immigration controls. Here, Fine (2016: 5) is instructive:

It is no exaggeration to claim that the modern system of immigration controls, so much a part of the present political landscape in liberal democracies, was born of racism—of hostility to those perceived as inferior races. While political communities of all shapes and sizes always have taken measures (often ineffectual) to exclude unwanted outsiders, and to expel unwanted insiders, the kinds of state centralized, bureaucratized forms of immigration restriction that we know today were inventions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The most basic idea that "sovereign states should be free to control entry and settlement of non-citizens in their territories, as well as the terms and conditions for acquiring citizenship" is problematic, and the moral justification for it is ambiguous (Fine 2013). The assumed justifications for immigration controls (a late 20th century development) and states' presumed moral right to exclude, are, Fine argues, "neither obvious nor uncontroversial" (ibid: 255) in view of a range of normative philosophical arguments including assertions of the right to immigrate alongside the right to emigrate, the moral equality of all people regardless of their place of birth, and of self-determination even within an existing 'nation-state'. Philosophy and theory can take the form of counter-factual thinking, and thus, ought to offer resistance to the presumed facticity and unchallengeability of the status quo.

Situating the terms refugees and illegal immigrants in their contexts of origin is further insightful. Agamben (2008) wrote that the very idea of refugees as a mass phenomenon appears at the end of World War I when millions of people from south, east and central Europe left their countries. We might connect this with what preceded it, namely, the high noon of imperialism and the space-time transformations brought by new technology in the lead-up to the first world war (on the details of space-time transformations in this period, see Kern 2003). This was also a period of enumerating people in specific ways that 'identified' them, in order to address the racialised anxieties emanating from eugenics debates. Citizen ID cards in Britain, for example, come into being at this time (see Elliot 2006 for origins of link of ID cards to entitlement and surveillance) and by the second world war, a 'parasitic vitality' had been built into them (by tying them to rations) so that the entitlements of citizen identity become bureaucratised in specific and exclusionary ways (for further links, see Kaul 2017). The term 'illegal immigrant' was not widely used to describe a population of people until the second world war, "when the media began ascribing it to Jews fleeing to Palestine without authorization...Holocaust survivor and Nobel peace prize winner Elie Wiesel...first framed the debate: 'You who are so-called illegal aliens must know that no human being is illegal'" (The Guardian 2015c). As Gahman and Hjalmarson (2019: 114, 117) remind us, the border partitions and segregates, not only space, but people(s) and races. Regardless of the actual identity of the unwanted migrants, they are treated "as if they are a Black person, assumed migrant, or perceived 'foreigner'...despite being white, some white people are discursively framed as non-white, on occasion, in order to justify and more swiftly facilitate their devaluation and exploitation". Whiteness therefore serves as a hierarchical signifier of a colonial binary of power reflected in border violence.

What makes Black, Third World, and Indigenous Others especially vulnerable are the histories that place them as the perpetual Other of a Eurocentric modernity. Kaul (2007: 34) writes that colonialism, imperialism, slavery and racism are often signalled as deviance from the promises of modernity. What Sharpe (1993: 5-6) refers to as Stepan's paradox is salient here: Consider the fact that as slavery was challenged successfully over the first half of the nineteenth century, racial explanations became particularly forceful; the reason this was so is because "they sanctioned *both* the management of the free slaves *and* the expansion of empire". In other words, after abolition, the slaves who were not seen as human beings but commodities, began to be seen as inferior human beings. Within the institution of increased immigration controls against 'Third world' formerly colonized people in the period *after* the official decolonization in the second half of the twentieth century, a parallel is revealed as the officially decolonized former 'inferior' colonial natives now represent illegal aliens and undesirable migrants.

Achieme (2019), in their postcolonial case for rethinking borders, emphasizes that the problem is not of political strangers, whether too many or of the wrong kind, but that the enforcement of national borders including through immigration restrictions is not a legitimate exercise of sovereignty and self-determination. As they suggest:

Due to neocolonial and other forms of imperial interconnection...Third World peoples are political insiders to First World nation-states. Over the course of about a century and a half, more than 62 million Europeans emigrated from their nations as participants in the colonial project of political and economic domination over the very peoples that Europe and its former settler colonies seek to exclude today. They explored, exploited, conquered, and decimated in the absence of the sorts of strict immigration controls that exist today. These migrants and permanent settlers ensured the flow of human and natural resources overwhelmingly for the benefit of Europe and its settler colonial satellites.

In the simplest terms, history is not over, and further, a Whiggish view of history that sees it as a teleologically unfolding story of progress is problematic in its obliteration of profound historical experiences such as slavery and colonialism as if they were merely anachronisms and have no influence upon world-making in the present.

Borders are clearly not neutral lines but “emotional landscapes of control” (Paasi 2009: 225) and also “fantasies of...homogenous bounded spaces that need to be securitised against the other” (Cash and Kinnvall 2017: 267-268). We might also read specific deprivations faced by the Othered bodies at the nation-state borders through the histories of colonial regulation of intimacy and the racialized Eurocentric idea of ‘presumptive modernity’. Let me illustrate with two examples. First, the marriage rules in the UK mean that British citizens earning less than a specific threshold income per year (£18,600 in 2012) cannot legally stay with their overseas non-EU spouses in the UK. This has resulted in divided families and approximately 15,000 “Skype kids” (able to communicate with one parent only via Skype, see The Guardian 2015b, 2017a), 79% of whom are British citizens. In court the government has successfully argued for what Lord Justice Aikens referred to as the “rational conclusion on the link between better income and greater chances of integration”. As Innes and Steele (2015: 9) point out, these spousal visa rules produce structural violence through an intersectional discrimination, affecting disproportionately on average: women, ethnic minorities, people in early career stages, those who are retired, people in the North, and in specific political constituencies. But, the history of the border is also, *inter alia*, the colonial story of race management and construction of identity through ‘threat’ population control. In this context, the family migration visa rules need to be located within the broader history of colonial marriage restrictions in 20th century border regimes that have “targeted the intimate and the familial to regulate racial proximity” between the colonizer and the colonized (Turner 2015: 623). Second, let us what Butler (2008) terms a “presumptive modernity” - an assumption that Eurocentricity has an exclusive purchase on civilization, progress, humanist values. In The Netherlands, a range of exemptions for the homophobia screening test that all potential immigrants otherwise must undergo, applied only citizens of the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Japan and Switzerland (ibid: 3-4). Homophobia exists in these ‘presumptively modern’ countries too, but

it is assumed away or deemed irrelevant, since these are countries that rank higher up in the internalized racialized hierarchy.

By erasing European implicatedness in colonial histories, it becomes possible to exclude Others, for example, refugees and asylum seekers, from the very idea of Europe (see Mayblin 2014; Danewid 2017). To quote Bhambra (2016: 199, *emphases original*), the history of the colonizer nation-states of Europe is read in such a way that “colonialism was something that happened to *them*, the colonized, and is only relevant to *them*; it has nothing to do with *us*, the colonizers, either as material or historical fact or in conceptual terms”. Simultaneously, the white European citizen-subject is offered as the exemplar of a development-creating saviour (see Loftsdottir, 2016 for how erasures of colonial history and racism work in international development). When we speak of the rights of ‘Skype kids’ in the UK or the refugees at the borders of Europe, we might see them as requiring policy responses in specific contexts, but they are also reflective of the global historical racialized prejudice of nation-statism and the violence that this enables.

Critical political geographers have also hinted at the arguments that I make here. Nagel (2001: 255) referred to “the elusive goal of a truly non-state centric approach to the social sciences”. Johnson et al (2011: 62) called for a more robust agenda for scholarly enquiry into borders, and highlighted “the need for any border scholar to accompany the ongoing transformations of state power with critical and politically attuned eyes”. BurrIDGE (2014) wished to promote a critical questioning of the legitimacy of borders. Gatt et al (2016) emphasized, among other things, the way in which heteronormativity, intersectionality, Eurocentricity, and cultural homogeneity are important principles to undo in work on migration and refugees. Further, Robinson (2003: 648) argues that “finding ways to adopt a critical intellectual stance of postcoloniality is perhaps the most significant contemporary challenge the political geography's future” and cautioned against the “knowledge-publishing complex, [which is] not unlike the military-industrial complexes with secure real-world geo-political power”.

In such engagements, memory is an important resource for creating counterfactual challenges to the naturalized violent bordering practices of the nation-state that rely upon internalized racial hierarchies of worth of human bodies. What individuals or collectivities think of as comprising their sense of self varies across time and space; to borrow Kundera’s phrasing, the individual and the collective can be linked through ‘the struggle of memory against forgetting’. Because those borders that are violently enforced and those bodies that are to be empathized with, represent constructs, the role of memory is crucial. Nandy (2015: 601) refers to memories as alternative pasts, “worse off are memories that challenge the mega-projects of Westphalian nation-states, ideologies of progress, development, national security and dominant ideas of national identity”. In recent times, sustaining the violent border regimes has required a significant investment in discourses that limit empathy for the Other.

A survey indicated that the Holocaust is fading from the memory of newer generations (The New York Times 2018), and alongside the receding memories of such histories, there is

the evidence of anti-semitic rhetoric that was used to justify the persecution and killing of Jews, being replicated in the anti-refugee rhetoric in public and social forums. There are numerous examples of how black/brown/Muslim/Others bodies are routinely depicted as 'swarms', 'cockroaches', or 'vermin', and violence against them is encouraged by growing border vigilantism (see Chacón and Davis 2006, The Guardian 2015d, e, f). In an online experiment, some anonymous users commented on The Daily Mail articles with actual Nazi propaganda in order "to see what level of support the comments would get if we took some famous pieces of Nazi propaganda and changed the word 'Jew' with 'migrant'" (The Independent 2015a). Posts employing the most blatant racism tended to be those which were most frequently upvoted by other users. In sharing their results, the researchers noted they were: "fairly shocked by the tone of much of the migrant debate, especially the dehumanising and hateful nature of the language used to describe them." This normalization of hate speech against a target group is crucial to the way in which states respond to the perceived need to protect their border. In other words, the very existence of those undeserving inferior Others justifies the states' violence, death or debility, towards them. It is the rationalized rights and structures of the nation-statist system that enable violence. Hundreds of people drowning in the Mediterranean is treated as a state security issue rather than an urgent humanitarian need, and significant penalties are imposed on those who try to rescue Othered black and brown bodies denied both humanity and rights.

Those fleeing persecution are often seen as not being worthy of sympathy. The hope written into the actions of the refugees as they undertake long perilous journeys, which is visible in their attitude to the future is seen as proof of the fact that their need is not genuine. In "We Refugees" (1996: 110-113 [1943]), Arendt refers repeatedly to the curious optimism of the Jews and what it often conceals:

In the first place, we don't like to be called 'refugees'...We wanted to rebuild our lives, that was all...Our optimism, indeed, is admirable, even if we say so ourselves...No, there is something wrong with our optimism...They seem to prove that our proclaimed cheerfulness is based on a dangerous readiness for death...Nobody cares about motives, they seem to be clear to all of us.

Frequently, the media focuses on the facial expressions of refugees or on their clothes, shoes, and mobile phones. When these expressions or accoutrements do not signify utter destitution, this is interpreted as evidence of their lack of need for refuge. In 2015, the refugees owning mobile phones became the focus of anti-immigrant sentiment and commentaries from advocates appeared alongside to explain why refugees might need phones or should be allowed to have them (see The Independent 2015b). This did not stop countries such as Denmark enacting laws that allowing police to seize refugees' assets (The Guardian 2016). Many European countries have sought to enact laws that ban, restrict, or discriminate against refugees and migrants, in some cases, specifically targeting Muslims (see The Washington Post 2016). The New York Times (2015b) noted "perhaps not since the Jews were rounded up by Nazi Germany have there been as many images coming out of Europe of people locked into



trains, babies handed over barbed wire, men in military gear herding large crowds of bedraggled men, women and children”.

Re-memembering is a form of sustained action that requires making imaginative links across conventionally bordered knowledges and using critical scholarship as a way of enacting insurrections against the entrenched and enduring dogmatisms concerning the nation-state and its right to systematically resort to violence against selective Others. Challenging the violent bordering practices of nation-states involves reconstructing the knowledges about nation-statist borders that give primacy to those who experience the effects of violent power, rather than comprehending the rationales for those who exercise such violent power as force. We everywhere live in a present that has been marked by the experience of colonialism both for the former colonizers and the formerly colonized; the ways in which power is exercised and upon whom, when Othered bodies seek to cross borders, cannot be understood without attention to the legacies of dehumanization and differential worth of life that were instituted by the remaking of the world through the colonial endeavour.

## Conclusion

While a transnational elite cosmopolitanism of the affluent is celebrated, the unjustifiable rights-deprivation of the darker-skinned poor people of the formerly colonized nations is seen as rational in the nation-statist system of border controls; the self-arrogated presumptive modernity of the West, combined with the uneven and exploitative nature of global capitalism, results in a weaponization of borders.

Psychoanalysing the constructions of geographical longing, one might ask, with Van Houtum (2005: 676-677): “In what way does this self-fulfilling geometrical fantasy of drawing lines in spaces contribute to the Self and the Us in daily life? And what explains the unwillingness to give up power or privilege? What are we protecting? What is precisely the *raison d’être* of borders?”. The questioning of nation-statist bordering can better account for states as processes of power, and provide ways of thinking/linking the precarity and performativity of identities in the contemporary world. Reflecting on the resonance between a politics of no borders and queer critique, White (2014: 993) writes, “[t]he solution to the unevenness in life chances that national borders not only reflect but actively produce and organize is therefore not ‘citizenship-for-all’ but rather the dissolution of borders and nation-states”. The enforcement of nation-statist borders creates and reproduces a hierarchal heteropatriarchal racist capitalism. Challenging the nation-states’ rights to enforce borders is an anti-national act everywhere, but perhaps in a journal, such thought might be part of a vital scholarly enquiry in fraught times when the violent racial hierarchy of nation-states is a toxic common sense that performs under the cover of legitimizing nationalisms.

The dehumanization that is enabled by the ever-limiting borders of imagination is the work of a discourse that operates in resonance with, and in, the present memory of colonialism, racism, and capitalism. The unequal power among nation-states is linked to historical operation of coloniality that continues to be salient in the present; the contemporary nation-

state is a commodified and racialized construct, the spatial form of a racist capitalist coloniality. Questioning the dehumanization of Othered bodies requires a challenging of ignorance granted by privilege, and also of scholarly and popular analyses that reify the differential worth of people.

I have argued that we need to recognize this nation-statism and grasp its explicitly and systematically violent impact on Othered bodies. This article is, thus, part of an anti-nationalist desiderata. The migrant slave markets in Libya are a reality of our times (see The Guardian 2017b). The impoverished black and brown bodies that were auctioned once in the era of slavery are still auctioned now. Can we be so sure that a few centuries hence, our dehumanizing and selectively violent nation-statist border regimes will not be seen in the same way as we see the double-entry bookkeeping records of slave ships in the past?

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