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# Theorising the “humanisation” of refugees: a decolonial approach

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## ABSTRACT

While there is growing literature on the dehumanisation of refugees, there is comparatively little theorisation of humanisation. Humanisation is often assumed to be a progressive move of recognising the common humanity of refugees. Naming this the “humanisation as inclusion” thesis, I use decolonial theory to challenge the dichotomy between dehumanisation/exclusion and humanisation/inclusion. Based on thematic analysis of scholarship on the humanisation of refugees during the “European refugee crisis”, I identify four main elements that comprise the concept of humanisation: individualisation, common humanity, empathy, and voice. I use those elements to illustrate how a decolonial approach to humanisation sheds light on the modern/colonial hierarchies that continue to organise who is considered human, and problematises which humanity refugees are excluded from/included into. This broadens the scope of scholarship on humanisation and refugees: from whether refugees are included into humanity, to revealing and reimagining who is defining the human, and for what purpose.

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## Introduction: “humanisation” of refugees

Although post-Second World War migration policies have become more liberal overall, there has been increasing securitisation of borders and the uses of contemporary migration policies as tools to select “desirable” migrants based on specific criteria (de Haas et al. 2019; Walia 2021). These developments continue to be shaped by racist and colonial dynamics that produce a “myth of difference” (Chimni 1998) between refugees from the Global South and the Global North, whereby refugees from Europe and refugees from the Global South are framed as being fundamentally different; refugees from the Global South are presented as “economic migrants” vis-a-vis “political refugees” in Europe; and displacement in the Global South is attributed to internal factors with no regard for capitalist forces and imperialism (Chimni 1998). Such a myth is exacerbated by entrenched Islamophobia particularly following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 (Danewid 2022; Walia 2021). Building on scholarship that examines the dehumanisation

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of refugees (e.g. Bleiker et al. 2013; Esses, Medianu, and Lawson 2017; Innes 2010), there has been a growing body of literature following the “European refugee crisis”<sup>1</sup> (2015/2016) that investigates the ways in which refugees are dehumanised specifically in the European context (e.g. Azevedo et al. 2021; Chouliaraki and Stolic 2017; Martikainen and Sakki 2021; Montagut and Moragas-Fernández 2020; Porto 2022).

In response to the dehumanisation of refugees, there have been recent efforts to “humanise” refugees. Such efforts include narratives and representations of “super-refugees”<sup>2</sup> (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2017) and of “good migrants” who have made contributions to society (Turner 2020). In popular media, there have also been calls to recognise refugees’ “humanity” (e.g. Jones 2015; Weiwei 2018). Moreover, refugees themselves have demanded treatment as human beings in the face of state and border violence (Suzuki 2016). Audiences also seem to be more receptive to humanising depictions of refugees, as Kyriakidou (2021) found in her audience study that Greek participants discussed “the idea of a shared humanity” with Syrian refugees based on a common historical experience of displacement as Greek people had fled the Turkish-Greek conflict (1919-1922).

Such humanising efforts also reflect the wider shifts in humanitarian communication. Since the mid-1980s, positive humanitarian communication emerged to challenge negative humanitarian communication of the previous decades (Scott 2014). While negative humanitarian communication emphasises the suffering of innocent and helpless “victims” in the Global South that evoke pity and guilt in the audience in the Global North, positive humanitarian communication focuses on the beneficial effects of aid, and people are depicted as individuals with agency and voice. In the minds of humanitarian actors, this “personalisation” “humanises” refugees as being more “like ‘us’”, underlining “the sense of shared humanity between themselves [the audience] and the subject” (Scott 2014, 149).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has also led to the production of scholarship examining the “humanisation” of Ukrainian refugees (e.g. Martikainen and Sakki 2023; Munandar and Akmal 2023). The puzzle behind such work is the fact that countries that were hesitant to welcome or were outright hostile to refugees during the “European refugee crisis” have been more accepting of refugees from Ukraine (Martikainen and Sakki 2023). However, as Martikainen and Sakki (2023) point out, “the concept of humanisation lacks extensive theoretical elucidation” (3). Although it seems that the idea of “humanity” constitutes one of the key elements of humanisation as demonstrated in the aforementioned examples, there is little conceptual clarity on what humanisation comprises. This lack of conceptual clarity, I argue in line with Çubukçu (2017), is attributable to the fact that because dehumanisation is accepted as “bad”, its antithesis, humanisation, is assumed to be inherently “good”. In this view of humanisation as inherently progressive, its meaning is assumed to be self-evident, or one that does not require elaboration. This is despite, as Brankamp and Weima (2021, 2) state, humanisation encompassing “complex processes of (re)building, (re)constructing, and (re)thinking ‘the human’, humanity, and social relations”.

Building on such discussions, my aims in this paper are twofold. Firstly, I apply insights from decolonial theory – particularly from the modernity/coloniality framework – to the theorisation of humanisation to reveal what is missed when “the human” in “humanisation” is left unquestioned as an abstract, universal category. Secondly, I conduct a thematic analysis of existing scholarship to identify four elements that comprise humanisation, to better understand how scholars are currently using this term. Those elements are then used as examples to illustrate how a decolonial approach to humanisation can lead to a more in-

depth, critical engagement with the concept and practice of humanisation. In sum, this paper is not an investigation into how refugees are humanised (for example, Kirkwood 2017; Martikainen and Sakki 2023). Rather, I bring together both decolonial theory and empirical data on existing scholarship to bring clarity to the concept of humanisation.

This paper makes two contributions to the literature on humanisation of refugees in politics and critical migration and refugee studies. Empirically, I conduct a thematic analysis of existing literature on the humanisation of refugees to identify four elements that comprise humanisation, clarifying what the concept entails. My intention is not to define what humanity is but to elucidate how existing scholarship uses the term. Theoretically, I use decolonial theory to reveal the assumptions and limitations of what I call “humanisation as inclusion” thesis. I use the four elements from the empirical analysis to demonstrate how a decolonial approach to humanisation can lead to a more in-depth, critical engagement with the concept. Using insights from decolonial theory that illuminate the entanglements between the concept of humanity – which I argue is integral to humanisation – and modernity/coloniality, I suggest that the conceptualisation of humanisation ought to go beyond the dichotomy of exclusion/dehumanisation/“bad” and inclusion/humanisation/“good”. In other words, there is a need to conceptualise humanisation not only in terms of whether refugees are excluded from (dehumanisation) or included in (humanisation) humanity. Decolonial theory enables this by illustrating how colonial logics not only exclude certain people from the category of humanity, but how some are also included into the category and yet remain “potential humans” or “not-quite-humans” along a racial hierarchy.

Moving away from the conceptualisation of humanisation as (merely) inclusion makes possible a broader scholarly inquiry that starts from the question of which humanity – or whose humanity – is being centred in the claims to universal humanity. This can then lead to asking questions about who is humanising whom and for what purpose(s), thus expanding the scope of scholarly enquiry to include the conditions that require or engender the humanisation of certain people in the first place. One of the key insights from decolonial theory, therefore, is that going beyond the “humanisation as inclusion” thesis situates scholarship on this topic within the broader context of the constant contestation over around whose humanity the world is organised (Wynter 2003).

The article proceeds as follows: First, I offer theoretical grounding for this paper, providing an overview of a decolonial approach to the concept of humanity that is at the core of humanisation. In what I call the “humanisation as inclusion” thesis, humanity is conceptualised as ahistorical and universal. In contrast, a decolonial approach deconstructs the veil of universality by elucidating the entanglement between modernity/coloniality and a universal humanity. The next two sections cover the empirical aspect to illustrate the theoretical contributions a decolonial approach can make to the theorisation of humanisation. I first explain how I conducted the thematic analysis of existing literature on the humanisation of refugees, and then present four constitutive elements of humanisation based on the analysis. In the final section, using those four themes as examples, I return to what insights a decolonial approach to humanisation can bring to a more critical engagement with the concept of humanisation.

Before proceeding, I note that this paper uses terms “migrant” and “refugee” with the understanding that the former encompasses the latter (Carling 2023). I also use the term “refugee” expansively to include the imaginaries and popular constructs of people

categorised, discussed, and represented as “refugees”, regardless of whether they fit the legal category as defined by the Refugee Convention (1951).

### **Beyond humanisation as inclusion: a decolonial approach to the concept of humanity**

Although refugees are often represented as “humanity” – even as “the purest expression of humanity” (Nyers 2006, xvi) – particularly in the realm of human rights and humanitarianism (Hyndman 2000; Malkki 1996), all too often they are not treated as human at all. Arendt (1973) summarised this as a paradoxical relationship: “It seems that a man who is nothing but a man [in the sense that refugees have been expelled from the political community of nation-states] has lost the very qualities which make it possible for other people to treat him as a fellow-man” (300). In other words, refugees reveal that the supposedly universal category of humanity, which in theory guarantees human rights to everyone by virtue of being human, is a façade. However, Gilroy (2009) argues that Arendt misrecognised the nature of this problem. The relationship between refugees and the idea of humanity is not paradoxical if one takes race seriously. If what Arendt understood as the “abstract nakedness of being human and nothing but human” (297) is rather “a racialised human”, “a particular, infra-human [not-quite-human] invention” (Gilroy, 2009, 19; italics original) rooted in colonial and imperial rule, then the violence and mistreatment refugees face are not paradoxical but constitutive to the category of humanity. Building on Gilroy’s call to foreground the relationship between colonialism and the category of humanity, this section demonstrates the insights decolonial theory offers towards a more in-depth theorisation of humanisation. Decolonial theory challenges what I call the “humanisation as inclusion” thesis, behind which is an assumption that humanisation understood as inclusion into humanity is a necessarily progressive move.

I primarily draw on the modernity/coloniality framework (notably Quijano 2000, 2007; see also Grosfoguel 2007; Lugones 2008) within decolonial theory, largely developed by scholars from Latin America. Modernity/coloniality refers to the idea that modernity and coloniality are co-constitutive (Mignolo 2018) as the idea of Europe as being “modern” is intrinsically tied to its colonial endeavours that began in the fifteenth century (Quijano 2000). By centring this colonial encounter in their analysis, decolonial scholarship theorises the intertwined development of modernity, capitalism, and colonialism. Coloniality refers to the ways in which the global relations of exploitation and domination rooted in European colonialism<sup>3</sup> continue to shape the contemporary world, despite the formal end to colonialism through the creation of independent nation-states (Maldonado-Torres 2011; Tamale 2020, xiii). Decolonial theory consequently highlights the unfinished project of dismantling coloniality, and the continuing urgency of engaging in anti-colonial world-making. One of the key insights of decolonial theory, elaborated on below, is the entanglement between the category of humanity and modernity/coloniality: a hierarchy of humanity was invented to justify and enforce interlocking systems of global oppression (e.g. racial, sexual, and economic systems) to achieve colonial domination. As Mayblin (2017) argues, the modernity/coloniality framework provides one perspective on what makes it possible for human beings who are categorised as “refugees” to be marked as different in the first place, with shifting claims to humanity.

In an oft-cited article on the humanisation of refugees, and one of the few articles that clearly define how the concept of humanisation is used in the analysis, Kirkwood (2017) conducts a discourse analysis of parliamentary debates in the United Kingdom (UK) in response to the “European refugee crisis” to identify processes of humanisation. In the paper, he defines humanisation as “the process (and effect) of portraying others in ways that encourage empathy and legitimise support”, and “ways of discursively constructing people as belonging to a common moral community, of acting in ways that are understandable, as deserving of support” (117). This question of “common moral community” is what is habitually understood as “humanity”. Rooted in European Enlightenment, the concept of humanity is assumed to be universal: a community to which all human beings are assumed to belong (Çubukçu 2017; Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Graf 2021). For instance, humanity as a collective subject is often invoked to suggest that “we” are all part of the “human family” or “human community”; and that consequently everyone who is part of it is equal and needs to be treated with dignity and respect (Barnett 2020, 10).

As Danewid (2017) and Malkki (1996) point out, however, such universalisation of the category of humanity can present an abstract and ahistorical conceptualisation of humanity that minimises or disregards specificities and unequal power dynamics, including those rooted in modernity/coloniality. For example, analysing the interdependent development of what she terms “modern liberalism” in Europe that espoused “the narration of political emancipation through citizenship in the state, the promise of economic freedom in the development of wage labor and exchange markets, and the conferring of civilisation to human persons” (3–4) alongside colonial conquest and exploitation, Lowe (2015) argues that liberalism’s “universal promises of rights, emancipation, wage labor, free trade” are not contradictory but dependent on “the modern distinction between definitions of the human and those to whom such definitions do not extend” such as Indigenous people and enslaved people from Africa (3). That is, the racialised classification within humanity and the international division of labor through colonial settlement, slavery, and indentured labor are integral to universal humanity, not an aberration from it. It is not my claim that a universal conceptualisation of humanity is necessarily entangled with modernity/coloniality. However, as it will be clearer in the following sections, and as Mayblin (2017) shows, the modernity/coloniality framework highlights the colonial continuities in the hierarchisation of humanity to which refugees are subjected in the present.

Crucially, the operations of the category of humanity are historically contingent, functioning along both exclusionary *and* inclusionary logics. In positioning European man at the top of the hierarchy of humanity, modern/colonial humanity relied upon exclusions such as the racialised divisions between human/non-human or human/property. At the same time, there were attempts to include and assimilate certain groups of people into humanity as potential humans (as was the case with colonial “civilising missions”) whereby Europeans laid claim to “being human” while others were relegated to the perpetual state of “becoming human” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2016, 45). It is important to note here how racialised modern/colonial humanity travelled globally, and adapted to the specific context through the “absorption, modification, and multiplication of European concept of race and its political strategy of modern racism” (Nishiyama 2015, 341). Japan is an illustrative example. Japanese racist discourse in the nineteenth century identified with

whiteness (thus civilisation) to construct its racial superiority and distance itself from “the yellow race” (Nishiyama 2015; Untalan 2023). As Nishiyama summarises, this was “predicated on a twofold negation – “Japan is not as civilised as the West” yet “Japan is not as uncivilised as China and Korea”” (Nishiyama 2015, 337–338). As the work by Untalan (2023) and Nishiyama (2015) demonstrate, the example of Japan points to the importance of going beyond the white/non-white dichotomy when theorising coloniality and racial hierarchy, paying attention to specific manifestations and transmutations of modern/colonial humanity. Decolonial theory, as well as the example of Japan, show that humanisation as inclusion thesis that understands it (only) as inclusion into humanity may uphold modern/colonial “genres” of the human<sup>4</sup> (Wynter 2003) instead of being a progressive move it is assumed to be.

A decolonial approach therefore demonstrates how the concept of humanity does not simply follow the logics of exclusion (dehumanisation) and inclusion (humanisation). In contrast to the humanisation as inclusion thesis, a decolonial approach shows that humanisation is not necessarily more progressive than dehumanisation given the existence of a hierarchy of humanity. It matters, therefore, whose humanity one speaks of, who is speaking in the name of humanity, and to what effect (Feldman and Ticktin 2010).

In sum, a decolonial approach highlights two important points with regard to the humanisation of refugees. A decolonial approach to humanisation takes as a starting point (1) that there is a colonial hierarchy of humanity that operates along both exclusionary and inclusionary logics, and that (2) because of this, there is a need to challenge the assumed dichotomy between dehumanisation as exclusion from humanity/“bad”, and humanisation as inclusion into humanity/“good”. A decolonial perspectives thus challenges the humanisation as inclusion thesis. It enriches the theorisation of humanity that is so central to humanisation by questioning the assumed unproblematic existence of a universal humanity.

With this theoretical grounding in mind, the next section turns to the empirical analysis on how existing literature conceptualises humanisation. My aim here is to clarify the key elements that comprise humanisation in the existing literature, and to use them as examples in the following section to demonstrate how a decolonial approach to humanisation can lead to a more in-depth, critical engagement with those different elements and with the concept of humanisation as a whole.

### **Method: thematic analysis of existing literature on humanisation of refugees**

Before outlining the method, given the global interconnectedness that is foundational to decolonial theory, it is worth explaining why I have decided to analyse existing literature related to the “European refugee crisis”. Firstly, specificity and context are fundamental to decolonial theory, as a body of scholarship that challenges a particular that purports to be universal. For this reason, it is important to situate the scholarship I am analysing in a particular context. Secondly, my reason for focusing on literature concerning the “European refugee crisis” is that this moment generated scholarship that analysed who is humanised and who is not in the media (for example, El-Enany 2016; Montagut and Moragas-Fernández 2020; Martikainen and Sakki 2021). It was a moment that prompted scholarly discussions around the nuances of humanisation. Empirically, it is worthwhile to study how

scholars use “humanisation” in the context of Europe, in ways that differ from previous scholarly debates about “dehumanisation” as discussed in the introduction. Practically, it also provided me with sufficient data to analyse in a language I could understand. Future studies could cover other regions and/or work in multilingual teams to conduct comparative analysis. For now, this paper uses the example of this particular body of scholarship to suggest a way to go beyond the humanisation as inclusion thesis.

I conducted a thematic analysis on existing literature that engage with the concept of humanisation in relation to refugees in the context of Europe. Due to the importance of considering the context in which concepts are used, I decided to restrict the literature to be reviewed to those concerning the “European refugee crisis”, published after 2015. I performed searches on the database Web of Science, Scopus, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences using different combinations of the following keywords: “humanisation”, “dehumanisation”, “humanise”, “dehumanise”, “humanising”, “dehumanising”, “refugees”, “forced migrants”, and “asylum seekers”. The results were then supplemented with additional online searches. I set the language to English, which inevitably excluded literature in other languages. The initial search yielded eighty-four articles. After applying the exclusion criteria in terms of geographic context and date of publication, I was left with twenty-six articles (see Appendix).

I then coded the articles using NVivo. The process started with reading around the literature on the humanisation of refugees broadly (not just restricted to those concerning the “European refugee crisis”), to cultivate a sufficient level of knowledge around the issue so I could identify themes as I read through the selected literature. I generated codes as I read through the literature. Since most articles did not explicitly define “humanisation”, this was an iterative coding process, whereby I amended the codes and created sub-codes as I read the articles several times and identified common themes centred on the following two questions: How is “humanisation” conceptualised? What are the different elements of humanisation? It was at this stage that I also started grouping the codes together, for example “empathy” and “compassion” under “affective disposition” or “deservingness” and “sameness” under “common humanity”.

### Analysis: four main elements of humanisation

In the interest of space, I focus on the four most common themes that emerged from the thematic analysis. Table 1 shows the four most common themes of individualisation, common humanity, the affective disposition of empathy, and refugee voice identified in the thematic analysis. Based on the thematic analysis, they are the elements that

**Table 1.** Four most common themes from the literature.

Theme	Sub-theme	Number of articles
<b>Individualisation</b>		<b>11</b>
<b>Common humanity</b>		<b>10</b>
	Deservingness	6
	Sameness	6
<b>Affective disposition</b>	<b>Empathy</b>	<b>10</b>
	Compassion	6
<b>Refugee voice</b>		<b>10</b>



comprise humanisation as scholars understand the concept. While they are presented separately, there are connections and overlap between the different elements.

### **Individualisation**

Individualisation refers to representing refugees as individual people, emphasising the particularity of the individual and their life: a person with unique experiences, stories, history, and identities. This can be in terms of storytelling (e.g. focusing on individuals and telling their stories) or images (e.g. close-up perspectives on individuals). Consequently, the literature analysed suggests that individualisation counters the oft-critiqued representations of refugees as an anonymous mass (Malkki 1996), statistics, or metaphors (e.g. water metaphors) (Porto 2022) that are said to dehumanise refugees. In this way, individualisation disrupts attempts to fix people into the category of “refugees”. “Refugee” becomes one of the many layers of who someone is rather than a defining category, or a category that people do not (have to) identify with in any way.

Importantly, *how* individualisation occurs matters. For example, speaking of the pitfalls of “humanising stories”, Malik (2019) points out that even individualising stories can be one-dimensional if told from the perspective of “the host”. Similarly, Xu (2021) points out that individualisation alone is not enough. Refugees’ own voices are silenced if it is done on behalf of refugees. In contrast, when individualisation occurs through everyday interactions between volunteers and refugees as shown in Stavinoha and Ramakrishnan’s (2020) work on grassroots humanitarianism, it is a process that can transform how they relate to each other (even temporarily) as people with histories and various identities. Those points highlight the connection between individualisation and refugee voice. Finally, Darling (2021) warns of the dangers of individualisation when it becomes concerned with “the human as an individual *like us*” (58, emphasis mine). In this case, similarities to “the host” (those who are typically in the position to “humanise” refugees) are privileged even as refugees are individualised. This point is relevant to the themes of common humanity and empathy in particular.

### **Common humanity**

As discussed earlier in this article, foregrounding the idea of a common humanity, or the idea that refugees are “fellow human beings”, is a key element of humanisation. Common humanity implies a community to which all human beings are assumed to belong by virtue of being human. In this sense, humanity can be understood as a universalised, collective subject, encompassing attributes and qualities of “being human” that all human beings supposedly share (Çubukçu 2017; Graf 2021; Suzuki 2023), and superseding all other categories. In terms of the literature analysed, such attributes and qualities include vulnerability (Da Lomba and Vermeylen 2023) and (being deserving of) “innate dignity” and respect (Kirkwood 2017).

The literature analysed also suggests that common humanity entails certain moral and affective dispositions. Those who belong to common humanity are assumed to relate to each other in “moral ways” (Kirkwood 2017). In the context of the European refugee crisis,

this meant accepting refugees and providing support. The mere fact of being part of a common humanity is said to generate moral responsibility towards refugees.

As Kirkwood (2017, 117) defines humanisation as “the process (and effect) of portraying others in ways that encourage empathy and legitimise support”, the theme of common humanity is intimately connected – or in some of the literature analysed, posited as fundamental – to the affective disposition of empathy. The relationship between common humanity and empathy appears to be mutually constitutive, though it is unclear from the literature analysed which comes first. For example, analysing the narratives about the “European refugee crisis” on Twitter, Nerghes and Ju-Sung (2019) write that the “image of Alan Kurdi, a figure with which the audience might be able to empathise and sympathise, is meant to elicit a feeling of shared humanity” (276). In this example, as El-Enany (2016) points out, it was the figure of the innocent child, who was racialised as white, and thus assimilated into a modern/colonial humanity, that elicited empathy and a feeling of shared humanity. Empathy and common humanity are invoked simultaneously, on the basis of the figure of a refugee child who symbolises common humanity.

Three articles in particular (Danewid 2017; Darling 2021; Suzuki 2022) from the literature analysed shed a critical light on the idea of common humanity as mobilised through humanisation. They all make the case that common humanity, when conceptualised and practised in a way that assumes a universal humanity that foregrounds a commonality that is simply assumed to exist, can obscure global power relations that drive displacement and border violence.

### ***Affective disposition: empathy***

Empathy is a key element of humanisation, particularly related to individualisation and common humanity, both of which are said to encourage empathy towards refugees. Empathy is discussed as a consequence of and an integral part of the process of humanising refugees. Although empathy is not clearly defined in the literature analysed, it is generally considered to comprise three elements: (1) affective empathy (sharing the feelings of the other person), (2) cognitive empathy (perspective-taking and understanding another’s point of view), and (3) the ability to engage with others in a social manner (Howe 2013; Stueber 2020). While the first and second elements are implied in the literature analysed, all studies that take empathy at face value share the third element (the assumed “prosocial” element of empathy) in their use of the term empathy. This is especially so because of the assumed inherent link between common humanity and empathy (i.e. being part of the common humanity presupposes an affective disposition of empathy towards “fellow humans”).

However, some of the literature analysed takes a more critical perspective on the potential and implications of cultivating empathy towards refugees. For example, Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) argue that what they term the “visibility of empathy” (individualisation, though in ways that portray refugees as vulnerable and in need) can elicit empathy but is paternalistic as it deprives refugees of agency and voice. Similarly, Coschignano, Minnema, and Zanchi (2023) claim that certain discourses encourage empathy but “do not necessarily give a fully agentive, and thus human, representation of them [refugees]” (117). In this way, the next theme of refugee voice complicates the

argument that empathy is inherently “good”. Empathy can also devolve into “a politics of preference” (Darling 2021, 59), where whether one can empathise with someone becomes the basis for whether they should be supported. In such cases, empathy does not disrupt the underlying power relations that structure global patterns of im/mobility. As a consequence, both Darling (2021) and Suzuki (2022) point out the dangers of empathy: if the humanisation of refugees is a question of cultivating more empathy, but empathy is attached to certain subjects who embody a particular conception of humanity, this reproduces the hierarchy of humanity and reinforces the power relations that undergird the violence of borders. This is one of the insights from decolonial theory, as I discuss in the next section.

### **Refugee voice**

The question of voice emerged as one of the important aspects of humanisation, particularly in relation to individualisation and empathy. It matters *how* individualisation occurs. As storytelling (e.g. literary or journalistic work) is one of the main ways in which individualisation of refugees occurs, *who* tells the story matters. Opinions of refugees are rarely represented in newspapers, which tend to privilege the voices of actors like government representatives and politicians (Chouliaraki et al. 2017; Xu 2021).

Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) and Stavinoha and Ramakrishnan (2020) share a similar understanding of voice. Chouliaraki and Stolic (2017) underline the importance of refugees’ “narratability”, “the ability to articulate their own life histories, trajectories and aspirations” (1164) as well as refugees taking up space to speak and act rather than others speaking or acting on their behalf. Drawing on the work of Couldry (2010), they make the case that the ability to give an account of oneself is part of what it means to be human. Similarly, using Brun’s (2016) idea of “biographical life” – giving an account of their lives and giving them meaning – Stavinoha and Ramakrishnan (2020) highlight how spaces for refugees and volunteers to exchange biographical life enable volunteers to conceive of “a different conception of the ‘human person’ to emerge”, beyond the oft-critiqued categories of “beneficiary” or “victim” (182). Those examples demonstrate the need to shift the power relations regarding who gets to speak, and to cultivate the ability to listen. Scarabicchi (2019) similarly argues in relation to French and Italian literary fiction on contemporary migration in Europe that, while novels can be a tool for individualisation, they can disempower and silence migrants if they are not written by migrants themselves. In this way, she calls out the “ventriloquist” nature of certain storytelling.

As a step forward, Scarabicchi (2019) and Malik (2019) advocate for funding and spaces so that refugees are free to tell their own stories in whatever way they wish, rather than being confined to particular narratives. This would also help to avoid reproducing particular narratives that reinforce the common humanity of refugees in terms of how similar “they” are to “us” (Darling 2021; Suzuki 2022), or those that reproduce stereotypical narratives: for example, emphasis on the suffering of refugees can reinforce their racialised image as passive victims without agency, and confines their being to displacement (i.e. the idea that they do not have a history outside the experience of displacement) (Xu 2021).

Voice also pertains to the medium through which humanisation takes place. The uses of certain media for particular purposes can silence the voices of refugees, as argued by Suzuki (2022) in their examination of the United Nations’ virtual reality (VR) film *Clouds*

*Over Sidra* (2015), which claim to elicit empathy towards refugees by sharing the experience of displacement. This critique of VR technology is part of Sirriyeh's (2018) broader critique of experience-based campaigns: "... if audiences need to feel it to believe it, they appropriate the pain felt by others and undermine the voice and legitimacy of those who testify to their suffering" (69). The techno-optimistic claims about VR technology and its ability to "humanise" refugees thus must not be taken at face value.

### **A decolonial enquiry into the four themes**

Having identified the four elements of humanisation – individualisation, common humanity, empathy, and refugee voice – in relation to existing literature on the "European refugee crisis", this section returns the discussion to what a decolonial approach can add to the theorisation of humanisation.

In terms of the modern/colonial dynamics that shape refugees' humanity as part of the process of humanisation, the emphasis on similarity to "us" – the "host", or those who are in the privileged position<sup>5</sup> to humanise refugees – cuts across the themes of individualisation, common humanity, and empathy. For instance, Darling (2021) highlights the pitfalls of the turn to "the individual" or "the human", as the focus shifts towards whether this particular human is intelligible as such from the perspective of those who are humanising refugees. This may result in the universalisation of humanity, as pointed out by decolonial theory: an attempt to assimilate refugees into a genre of the human rooted in modernity/coloniality, rather than dismantling the conditions that require humanisation in the first place (Suzuki 2023). Again, it is important to remember that a decolonial approach to humanisation pays attention to both the exclusionary and inclusionary logics of a modern/colonial humanity. Some examples of the modern/colonial dynamics that shaped the humanity of refugees during the "European refugee crisis" include the conflation of "Muslim refugees" with "terrorists" and their construction as the constitutive outside of Europe, where Europeanness is defined by whiteness, Christianity, and modernity (Abbas 2019). This is an example of a modern/colonial logic of exclusion, whereby "modern" Europeans is juxtaposed with and is mutually constituted by "uncivilised" Muslims. A modern/colonial logic of inclusion was also at play. The wave of public mobilisation in support of refugees after the mediated death of the 2-year-old Kurdish-Syrian boy Alan Kurdi demonstrates the intimate connections between modernity/coloniality, innocence, and humanity. Sirriyeh (2018) points out that children feature prominently in campaigns and discourses designed to elicit compassion towards refugees due to their connection to ideas of innocence and vulnerability. Combined with this symbolic association, as El-Enany (2020) claims, race played a key part in the mobilisation of public sentiment in the aftermath of Kurdi's death. Because of the clothing and the colour of his skin, he was racialised as white, thus could be imagined as part of "humanity". Modernity/coloniality thus shapes who is considered to be an innocent child worthy of being mourned, and who can be imagined as "our" children (El-Enany 2020; Sirriyeh 2018). In this way, far from being a liberatory force, humanisation can be an attempt to forge refugees into modern/colonial genres of the human and to reinforce rather than dismantle the hierarchy of humanity.

Moreover, as discussed earlier under a decolonial approach to the concept of humanisation, the qualities of being human that all human beings are assumed to share under

common humanity cannot be taken at face value. From a decolonial perspective, “common humanity” can be understood as what Danewid (2017) calls generic humanity, whereby the universalisation of the human condition disconnects the modern/colonial project of Europe from the displacement of people like those fleeing the Syrian conflict, positioning Europe as a saviour and an innocent bystander (Danewid 2017). Rather than a generic humanity, she advocates for a historical humanity that is rooted in “a shared, global present built on colonialism, racism, and white supremacy”, of which refugees are a victim (Danewid 2017, 1683). In this sense, the portrayal of refugees as being part of a common humanity may in fact obscure structural factors that displace people in the first place. There is therefore a need to be specific about what kind of common humanity one is talking about.

A decolonial approach to humanisation also sheds light on the modern/colonial dynamics of empathy. When Kirkwood (2017) defines humanisation as the categorisation of refugees as “human beings” (i.e. belonging to a common humanity) and “the process (and effect) of portraying others in ways that encourage empathy and legitimise support” (117), decolonial theory offers a reminder that who counts as “human beings” in the first place cannot be taken for granted due to the modern/colonial hierarchy of humanity. Because of this, empathy cannot be assumed to automatically follow from a claim to or a recognition of common humanity. Whether and to what extent someone is viewed as human affects whether they can be empathised with. Moreover, as Sirriyeh (2018) argues, compassion and empathy, understood as a “gift” as a response to refugees’ plight, erase the continuing colonial dynamics that shape contemporary immigration and asylum policies. Therefore, as Pedwell (2014) argues, empathy does not necessarily lead to a betterment of society; it functions within transnational relations of power, and more specifically within colonial relations of power.

Finally, on the theme of refugee voice, a decolonial approach elucidates the ways in which the modern/colonial world we continue to inhabit affect whose voices are heard, and whose voices are deemed “worthy” of listening. For example, as Sharp (2024) found in his study on refugees’ creative production in institutional contexts in the UK, refugees may present themselves as “grateful refugees” in line with institutional and normative expectations. By performing this gratefulness, the UK becomes a “generous” and “welcoming” host, obscuring refugees’ experiences of violence, as well as state complicity in a world order that contributes to displacement such as through military interventions and neocolonial economic exploitation (Danewid 2017). Therefore, as pointed out by some of the literature analysed such as Malik’s work critiquing “humanising” stories, refugee voice must leave space for other genres of the human to be expressed, including those that refuse the normative narratives about gratefulness or someone’s ability to contribute to the “host” society.

## Conclusion

This paper began by pointing out the relative paucity of literature that engages critically with the concept of humanisation. In general, dehumanisation is understood to be exclusion from humanity. Humanisation is then posited as the antithesis to dehumanisation, understood as inclusion into humanity, thus a positive move of recognising the humanity of refugees. In contrast to what I term “humanisation as inclusion” thesis that takes for

granted the unproblematic existence of a universal humanity to which everyone is assumed to belong, a decolonial approach complicates this picture. The modernity/coloniality framework leads to a more critical engagement with the concept of humanisation, as it acknowledges that a colonial hierarchy of humanity operates on both exclusionary and inclusionary logics. There is no clear dichotomy of dehumanisation/exclusion/“bad” and humanisation/inclusion/“good”.

Through thematic analysis, I identified four key elements of humanisation in relation to refugees: individualisation, common humanity, empathy, and refugee voice. It should be noted that humanisation as discussed in this article through the four elements is not the only way to conceptualise it. As much as decolonial theory is about revealing the entanglements between humanity and modernity/coloniality, it is also about reimagining, reconstructing, and reclaiming humanity for liberatory purposes (Brankamp and Weima 2021). It matters who is humanising whom, and for what purpose. For example, refugees’ efforts to reclaim their own humanity (Suzuki 2016) would need to be theorised differently to a “host” society’s attempt to humanise refugees.

The final section summarised the insights a decolonial approach brings to the theorisation of humanisation of refugees. Taken together, a decolonial approach adds more nuance to the four constitutive elements of humanisation. More specifically, it provides critical groundwork for questioning some of the assumptions behind the concept of humanity that is fundamental to humanisation, and highlights the need to go beyond the binary logic of exclusion (dehumanisation as exclusion from the category of humanity) and inclusion (humanisation as inclusion into the category of humanity).

Starting from a critical position towards the assumed progressiveness of humanisation opens up new avenues for research, looking at whose humanity is assumed, who is humanising whom, and for what purpose(s). Those questions enable scholars to delve deeper into the actors and reasons behind humanising efforts. For example, recent attempts by governments strengthen deterrence policies in the name of “saving lives” could be analysed as one way in which humanisation occurs – in the sense that the rhetoric of “saving lives” appeals to some kind of common humanity – with obvious detrimental effects on refugees. Ultimately, a decolonial approach to humanisation shows that the issue is not whether to be included or excluded from humanity, but to reveal, reimagine, and recreate around whose humanity the world is organised.

## Notes

1. I use quotation marks to underline the politically manufactured nature of the so-called crisis.
2. High-profile examples include Mamoudou Gassama and Sarah and Yusra Mardini. In 2018, Gassama, a 22-year-old from Mali who had just arrived in France via Libya and Italy, saved a child who was about to fall off a balcony. After a video of him rescuing the child went viral online, he was praised for his courage and received French citizenship after his immigration papers were fast-tracked (Chrisafis 2018). Another story that has received much media attention is that of Sarah and Yusra Mardini, sisters from Syria who rescued fellow refugees when their boat heading towards Europe broke down in 2015 (Saul 2016).
3. This is not to suggest that colonialism is a uniquely European phenomenon, as illustrated by the example of Japan.
4. Wynter (2003) argues that the struggle of our contemporary world is one between two ‘genres’ of the human, Man, the “present ethnoclass (Western bourgeois) conception of the human ... which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself”, and Human, “the

human species itself/ourselves" (260). The quote emphasises the importance of questioning which human—is it Man disguised as Human?—is assumed when discussing the concept of humanisation.

5. Needless to say, refugees *are* human. It is only through an encounter with the world that casts doubt on people's humanity (Fanon 2008) that the need for humanisation emerges. It is hardly ever refugees who 'humanise' others, which speaks to the inherent unequal power dynamics involved in humanisation.

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**Appendix: List of literature analysed in the thematic analysis**

	Date	Author	Title
1	2021	Azevedo, R.T.; De Beukelaer, S.; Jones, I.L.; Safra, L.; Tsakiris, M.	When the lens is too wide: The political consequences of the visual dehumanization of refugees
2	2018	Bruneau, E.; Kteily, N.; Laustsen, L.	The unique effects of blatant dehumanization on attitudes and behaviour towards Muslim refugees during the European “refugee crisis” across four countries
3	2017	Chouliaraki, L., Georgiou, M., Zaborowski, R., Oomen, W.	The European “migration crisis” and the media: A cross-European press content analysis
4	2017	Chouliaraki, L.; Stolic, T.	Rethinking media responsibility in the refugee “crisis”: a visual typology of European news
5	2023	Coschignano, S.; Minnema, G.; Zanchi, C.	Explaining the distribution of implicit means of misrepresentation: A case study on Italian immigration discourse
6	2023	Da Lomba, S.; Vermeulen, S.	Rethinking Vulnerability as a Radically Ethical Device: Ethical Vulnerability Analysis and the EU’s “Migration Crisis”
7	2021	Darling, J.	The Cautious Politics of “Humanizing” Refugee Research
8	2018	Gómez-Martínez, C.; Moral-Jiménez, M.D.	Dehumanization and Islamophobia: attitudes towards the Syrian refugee crisis
9	2017	Danewid, I.	White innocence in the Black Mediterranean: hospitality and the erasure of history
10	2018	Joanna K., Mélodine S.	Children in the visual coverage of the European refugee crisis: A case study of the World Press Photo 2016
11	2017	Kirkwood, S.	The Humanisation of Refugees: A Discourse Analysis of UK Parliamentary Debates on the European Refugee “Crisis”
12	2020	Leurs, K.; Agirreazkuenaga, I.; Smets, K.; Mevsimler, M.	The politics and poetics of migrant narratives
13	2018	Lutgard L.	Discursive constructions of the summer 2015 refugee crisis: A comparative analysis of French, Dutch, Belgian francophone and British centre-of-right press narratives
14	2019	Malik, N.	Humanizing Stories: Migrants and the Media
15	2021	Martikainen, J.; Sakki, I.	Visual (de)humanization: construction of Otherness in newspaper photographs of the refugee crisis
16	2020	Montagut, M.; Moragas-Fernández, C.M.	The European Refugee Crisis Discourse in the Spanish Press: Mapping Humanization and Dehumanization Frames Through Metaphors
17	2016	El-Enany, N.	Aylan Kurdi: The Human Refugee
18	2019	Nerghes, A.; Ju-Sung, L.	Narratives of the Refugee Crisis: A Comparative Study of Mainstream-Media and Twitter
19	2022	Paskuj, B.; Orosz, G.	The tendency to dehumanize, group malleability beliefs, and perceived threat from migrants in Hungary
20	2019	Perreault, G.; Paul, N.	Narrative Framing of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in British Religious News
21	2018	Sacco, V.; Gorin, V.	Journalistic practices in the representation of Europe’s 2014–2016 migrant and refugee crisis
22	2019	Scarabicchi, C.	Borrowed voices: narrating the migrant’s story in contemporary European literature between advocacy, silence and ventriloquism
23	2018	Sirriyeh, A.	The Politics of Compassion
24	2020	Stavinoha, L.; Ramakrishnan, K.	Beyond Humanitarian Logics: Volunteer-Refugee Encounters in Chios and Paris
25	2022	Suzuki, M.	The limits of humanization: “ideal” figures of the refugee and depoliticisation of displacement in virtual reality film <i>Clouds Over Sidra</i>
26	2021	Xu, M.	Constructing the refugee: Comparison between newspaper coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis in Canada and the UK