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White innocence in the Black Mediterranean: hospitality and the erasure of history

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Abstract

Themes of loss, grief, and vulnerability have come to occupy an increasingly central position in contemporary poststructuralist and feminist theory. Thinkers such as Judith Butler and Stephen White have argued that grief has the capacity to access or stage a commonality that eludes politics and on which a new cosmopolitan ethics can be built. Focusing on the role of grief in recent pro-refugee activism in Europe, this article argues that these ethical perspectives contribute to an ideological formation that disconnects connected histories and that turns questions of responsibility, guilt, restitution, repentance, and structural reform into matters of empathy, generosity, and hospitality. The result is a veil of ignorance which, while not precisely Rawlsian, allows the European subject to re-constitute itself as “ethical” and “good”, innocent of its imperialist histories and present complicities.

Keywords: migrant deaths, ethics, mourning, colonial amnesia, race, Judith Butler

White Innocence in the Black Mediterranean: Hospitality and the Erasure of History

“It is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.”
 – James Baldwin¹

Introduction

On the evening of the 3rd of October 2013, an overcrowded fishing boat carrying more than 500 migrants sank off the coast of the Italian island Lampedusa. Amongst the 368 found dead was an Eritrean woman who had given birth as she drowned. The divers found her a hundred and fifty feet down in the ocean together with her newborn baby, still attached by the umbilical cord. Her name was Yohanna, the Eritrean word for “congratulations”.²

Over the last years the Mediterranean migrant crisis has provoked numerous responses and activism; ranging from Ai Wei Wei's life vest installation³ to Pope Francis's “day of tears”⁴, from Angela Merkel's “open door” refugee policy⁵ to radical activist campaigns such as “The Dead Are Coming”⁶, from the silent minute in the European parliament⁷ to #AlanKurdi⁸. Seeking to counteract the rise of populist, far right, anti-immigrant, xenophobic, and racist political parties, a variety of scholars, activists, artists, and politicians have called for empathy and solidarity with the fate of shipwrecked migrants. By recognising and publicly mourning the lives that have been lost, many have sought to “humanise” those who, like Yohanna and her baby, are swallowed by the turquoise-blue waters of “Our Sea”.

The question of who counts as human—and who does not—has recently risen to prominence in international theory.⁹ A longstanding area of concern for post- and decolonial thought¹⁰, poststructuralist and feminist theorists have increasingly begun to interrogate the normative frames that cast some lives as waste, bogus, and non-human. Responding to an era shaped by the global

war on terror and securitizing discourses that figure the nation-state as a body under threat, some of these thinkers have argued for a new humanism based, not on the rationalist sovereign subject central to liberal political theory, but on notions of loss, grief, relationality, and bodily vulnerability. Applied to the context of the European migrant crisis, this is an ethic of hospitality that seeks to disrupt nationalist protocols of kinship and that points towards new forms of solidarity beyond borders—emblemized by activist slogans such as “I am a migrant” and “Lampedusa is everywhere”. As Alexandra Délano Alonso and Benjamin Nienass explain, such an ethic enables a forum where migrants' lives “can be recognized as part of a political community, where deaths can be mourned individually and collectively, and where responsibility for these deaths can be assigned”.¹¹

In this article, I critically interrogate what these critical humanist interventions produce and make possible—and crucially, what they foreclose and hide from view. Building on what some activists, artists, and academics have begun to call “the Black Mediterranean”, I argue that these responses are indicative of a general problematique, endemic to both leftwing activism and academic debate, which reproduces rather than challenges the foundational assumptions of the far right. By focusing on abstract—as opposed to historical—humanity, these discourses contribute to an ideological formation that disconnects connected histories and that turns questions of responsibility, guilt, restitution, repentance, and structural reform into matters of empathy, generosity, and hospitality. The result is a colonial and patronizing fantasy of the white man's burden—based on the desire to protect and offer political resistance *for* endangered others—which ultimately does little to challenge established interpretations that see Europe as the bastion of democracy, liberty, and universal rights.

This article makes two contributions. First, it contributes to debates about the ethics of migration by showing how left-liberal and multicultural discourses of inclusion reproduce the starting premise of white nationalism: Namely, that migrants are “strangers”, “charitable subjects”, and “uninvited guests”. I argue that historicisation and contextualisation of the crisis—placing the ongoing tragedy in the context of Europe's constitutive history of empire, colonial conquest, and transatlantic slavery—disrupt these assumptions, and unveil the umbilical cord that links Europe to the migrants washed up on its shores. Second, and relatedly, the article also develops a critique of the recent turn to ethics in poststructuralist theory. Focusing on Judith Butler's work on vulnerability, loss, and mourning, I argue that poststructuralist attempts to recover the humanist project result in a fetishisation of the stranger and a consequent erasure of history. By privileging a focus on the ontological—as opposed to historical—links that bind together humankind, this literature contributes to an ideological discourse that removes from view the history of colonialism

and the way in which it continues to structure the present. The result is a veil of ignorance which, while not precisely Rawlsian, nonetheless allows the white subject to re-constitute itself as “ethical” and “good”, innocent of its imperialist histories and present complicities.

The article proceeds in four parts. Section one charts the poststructuralist turn to ethics, focusing on Butler's call for a new, critical humanism based on bodily vulnerability. The second section demonstrates how recent forms of pro-refugee activism in Europe have mobilised these insights to challenge xenophobic discourses that cast migrants as ethically non-recognised subjects—what Butler describes as “ungrievable life”. The third section begins to build a critique of these interventions, demonstrating how they contribute to an ideological formation that renders invisible the continuities between past and present forms of violence. In the final section, I argue that such an ethical framework operates to turn dead migrants into the conduit through which the European left redeems its *own* humanity and ethical salvation. If the migrant crisis, as Zygmunt Bauman has suggested, “is humanity's crisis”¹², then this raises questions about whose humanity is at stake and, indeed, for what purposes.

Precarious Life: The Critical Turn to Ethics

Questions of ethics have come to occupy an increasingly central position in contemporary poststructuralist and feminist theory. Where there was once a relative consensus that the philosophical tenets of poststructuralism—anti-foundationalism, the emphasis on the multiplicity of possible readings or interpretations, and the critique of subjectivity—rule out an engagement with concrete ethical issues and the articulation of substantive responses to them, recent years have witnessed a poststructuralist “turn to ethics”. Building on the works of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas, thinkers such as Judith Butler, Simon Critchley, David Campbell, François Raffoul, Stephen White, and Ewa Ziarek have argued for an ethic characterised by infinite responsibility to the Other.¹³ Bonnie Honig describes this as a “turn to Antigone”, highlighting how these thinkers seek to counter sovereign violence and rationality (identified with Oedipus) with a new humanism grounded in exposure, ek-stasis, mortality, and vulnerability (identified with Antigone). Humanism, Honig argues, has thus made a comeback: This is “not the rationalist universalist variety discredited by post-structuralism and the horrific events of the twentieth century, but a newer variant. This humanism asserts that what is common to humans is not rationality but the ontological fact of mortality, not the capacity to reason but vulnerability to suffering”.¹⁴

Judith Butler has been at the forefront in theorising such a humanistic ethic. In *Giving An Account of Oneself*, *Precarious Life*, and *Frames of War* she calls for a “reconceptualization of the

Left” based on precariousness as “a shared condition of human life”.¹⁵ As she explains, “we are, as it were, social beings from the start, dependent on what is outside ourselves, on others, on institutions, and on sustained and sustainable environments, and so are, in this sense, precarious”. She argues that mindfulness of this ontological vulnerability can serve as a new basis of political community, enabling a “we” to be formed across cultures of difference. The experience of loss and mourning is central to this project because, as Butler explains, it unravels the precariousness of life and our vulnerability to the Other, showing that we are never completely autonomous “bounded beings”¹⁶ but always already linked to others, to strangers. Indeed, “many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility”.¹⁷

The immediate problem for such an ethics is that “certain human lives are more grievable than others”.¹⁸ Indeed, while precariousness for Butler is an ontological, shared condition of humanity, her work is alert to the various ways in which this vulnerability is differently distributed, rendering some lives more vulnerable than others. In *Frames of War* she explains how the possibility of acknowledging another person’s vulnerability and suffering depends on certain “epistemological frames”.¹⁹ That is, while some lives are constructed as grievable and in need of protection, others are cast as bogus, “collateral damage”, and destructible. A simple acceptance of grief is therefore not sufficient to establish bonds of solidarity beyond borders. Rather, the political task consists in organising precariousness in a more egalitarian way, most crucially by devising alternative epistemological frames that enable those that are currently excluded to be recognised as fully human and as lives that matter. When the recognition of corporeal vulnerability is universally extended, or so the argument goes, there is potential for a different kind of global politics.

While Butler’s work on grief and vulnerability has had a pronounced influence on international theory²⁰, a number of critics have denounced it for reanimating an extra- or pre-political ground for politics; that is, for substituting politics for ethics or ontology.²¹ Honig, perhaps most forcefully, has argued that Butler’s ethics succumbs to a “Hamletization” of politics which transforms “‘the figure of the avenger into a reflective, self-conscious melancholic’, mournful, and incapable of action”.²² A “politics of lamentation”, she suggests, easily slides into a “lamentation of politics” which merely mourns, rather than challenges, sovereign violence.²³ For some, this problem is endemic to all poststructuralist ethics. Ernesto Laclau, for example, argues that poststructuralist attempts to revive the ethical project evade politics’ “radical contingency”²⁴; Chantal Mouffe, similarly, describes the turn to ethics as “a retreat from the political”.²⁵

Whilst some of this critique is overstated (for example, it oversimplifies the relationship between politics and ethics, or politics and ontology, in Butler's work²⁶), it nonetheless points to a crucial issue: Namely, whether an ethics grounded in the generalized suffering of a generic humanity is the best way for counteracting contemporary forms of violence and injustice. Butler, for example, takes it for granted that the contemporary unequal distribution of mourning—whereby some forms of suffering and violence manage to generate mass outpourings of outrage, sorrow, or anguish, while others are barely noticed at all—is best countered by a pronounced emphasis on recognition, cultural difference, and affective identification with the wounds of others: in essence, by compassion, care, empathy, and love. Her call for an international politics of mourning in this way assumes that “proper” recognition will make the world less violent, and that resistance to normative “frames” will honour and protect the precarious, disposable bodies shattered throughout the world. As Burkhard Liebsch's explains, this is a “grief for strangers”, a mode of mourning that refuses to “abandon the child who dies between boundary stones, the tortured person, the victim of racist violence, or the starving person to a history that heedlessly walks over dead bodies”.²⁷ In that, the problem with an ethics of loss and mourning might not be its lack of political engagement (as suggested by critics such as Honig) but, rather, the particular kind of politics it serves to legitimise. If mourning, as Freud argues, is a form of “work”—a *Trauerarbeit*—then we need to ask: What work does this “work” do in international politics? In what follows, I interrogate what is at stake in framing the quest for justice as a project based on taking “a grieving concern for the fate of strangers”²⁸, that is, on moving those in a hegemonic position of power to tears. Focusing on recent activist responses to the Mediterranean migrant crisis, I ask: What kinds of politics does grief for ungrievable life produce and make possible—and crucially, what does it foreclose and hide from view?

Mourning the Migrant Dead in Europe

In June 2015, the German activist collective the Center for Political Beauty, CPB, staged a mass funeral in Berlin to honour the thousand of migrants that have died trying to cross the Mediterranean. With the permission of relatives, bodies of migrants buried at the periphery of Europe were exhumed and transported to Berlin, where they were to be given a “dignified burial” before the eyes of their “bureaucratic murderers”.²⁹ “The German government’s worst nightmare is coming true”, explained the group: “Over the next few days, refugees who drowned or starved to death at Europe’s external borders on their way to a new life, will be brought to Berlin. The aim is to tear down the walls surrounding Europe’s sense of compassion”.³⁰ Inviting the residents of Berlin to join them in commemorating the victims of “Europe’s aggressively sealed-off borders”³¹, the

group drew together thousands of protestors who together marched towards the vast grass lawn between the Chancellery and the German Parliament, where they dug holes and left behind “a mass graveyard at the heart of a leading bourgeois democracy”.³²

While the CPB's burial of deceased migrants has received mixed responses—some calling it an act of “political pornography”³³, others hailing it as an attempt to “transform refugees into people”³⁴—a variety of actors have followed the group in framing their calls for empathy, hospitality, and the right to asylum through the rhetoric and iconography of mourning. For example, in 2008 Mimmo Paladino's memorial sculpture *Porta d'Europa/Gateway to Europe* was built on Lampedusa to commemorate the migrants who have drowned while trying to reach Europe.³⁵ Shaped as an open door facing the sea, the sculpture seeks to bring to memory those who, in Butler's terminology, are ungrievable; those who, “not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames [...] are never lived nor lost in the full sense”.³⁶ In 2013, after a shipwreck off Lampedusa caused the death of 368 migrants, the European parliament observed a minute of silence, President Martin Schultz later explaining that he had spent the minute imagining “the screams of children seeing their parents drown, of parents unable to save their children”.³⁷ Pope Francis condemned the “globalization of indifference” and declared “a day of tears”, while the Italian Prime Minister Enrico Letta promised posthumous citizenship and a state funeral for the victims.³⁸ More recently, activist organisations such as Boats4People, TracesBack, and the Italian feminist collective 2511 have held public commemorations for Europe's migrant dead, demanding the right to have the dead identified and properly buried, and for relatives to reclaim the bodies and personal belongings of the dead.³⁹

A recent special issue on “Borders and the Politics of Mourning” links these interventions to Butler's ethics of grieving ungrievable life, and explores the political force of public grief for strangers (in this case, migrants)⁴⁰. Mourning, the contributors argue, enables “new affective and political grammars in response to suffering, injustice and death”⁴¹. Pro-refugee groups such as the CPB are praised for asserting “a politics of mourning that disrupts the script of nationalist kinship”⁴², and for scandalizing what makes migrant deaths possible in the first place. Grief for unknown others—for strangers—is here understood as offering a radical challenge to the xenophobia and white nationalism that underwrite the necropolitical logic of the European border regime. When viewed closely these calls for rescue, welcome, and hospitality nonetheless confirm rather than disturb colonial relations of power. As we shall see, by seeking to extend “grief and care to the dead stranger”⁴³ they contribute to an ideological formation that disconnects connected histories and that divorces the contemporary Mediterranean crisis from Europe's long history of empire and racial violence.

A Drowned Memory Space: Disconnecting Histories

The term the “Black Mediterranean” has recently started to surface amongst academics, artists, and activists to describe the history of racial subordination in the Mediterranean region.⁴⁴ Inspired by Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*, the “Black Mediterranean” invites us to place the contemporary migrant crisis in the context of Europe's constitutive history of empire, colonial conquest, and transatlantic slavery. As Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods explain, the Mediterranean “has been an *ongoing* crisis for black people for the better part of the past and present millenniums”.⁴⁵ In what follows I build on these insights to reveal the Mediterranean crisis, not as a moment of exception or as a discrete event in time but, rather, as a late consequence of Europe's violent encounter with the Global South.⁴⁶

Post-, decolonial, and black studies scholars have produced a rich body of literature that highlights the various ways in which racial violence is structurally linked to the emergence of European modernity. As Enrique Dussel explains, while modernity is typically understood as an exclusively European phenomenon—as a product of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment—in reality “modernity appears when Europe affirms itself as the 'center' of a *World History* that it inaugurates”.⁴⁷ Colonial conquest and transatlantic slavery contributed to the growth of industrial capitalism in Western Europe⁴⁸ but also, and importantly, provided the condition of possibility for the formation of Enlightenment thought. The very idea of Europe emerged through a process of differentiation from the “periphery” that surrounds it; hence, and as Édouard Glissant has argued, Europe is not a *place* but a *project*.⁴⁹ In the words of Sabine Broeck,

“To come into being, the European subject needed its underside, as it were: the crucially integral but invisible part of the subject has been its abject, created in the European mind by way of racialized thingification: the African enslaved: an un-humaned species tied by property rights to the emerging subject so tightly that they could—structurally speaking—never occupy the position of the dialectical Hegelian object as other, and remained therefore outside the dynamics of the human.”⁵⁰

As Broeck makes clear, colonialism, genocide, and transatlantic slavery are not aberrations or shameful by-products of European modernity; rather, they are its very essence. Europeans were able to emerge as free and masterful subjects, not only through their struggle for liberty, equality, and fraternity in Europe, but also through the creation of colonial empire abroad. As writers such as Aimé Césaire, W.E.B. DuBois, Frantz Fanon, and C.L.R. James have argued, this means that Nazism and fascism should be understood, not as exceptions to Western modernity but, rather, as its logical culmination—as an extension of Enlightenment humanist thought and its splitting of the

world into humans and non-humans.⁵¹ In Césaire's formulation, what the European bourgeois “cannot forgive Hitler for is not crime in itself, the crime against man, it is not the humiliation of man as such, it is the crime against the white man, the humiliation of the white man, and the fact that he applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then had been reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India, and the blacks of Africa.”⁵²

Viewed from this perspective, the contemporary migrant crisis must be understood as part of Europe's ongoing encounter with the world that it created through more than five hundred years of empire, colonial conquest, and slavery.⁵³ As Saucier explains, what we are witnessing today is “a new declination of an older repressed issue” that “has its roots in Mediterranean racial slavery, Enlightenment thought (i.e. humanism that has relied on the provision of a dehumanized other), the colonial North-South relationship, its colonial legacy, as well as in its fascist and imperial worldview”.⁵⁴ The philosophical disappearance of this history has served as a bedrock for contemporary discourses of migration, solidifying the belief that the Mediterranean crisis originates outside of Europe—and that Europe, as a result, is an innocent bystander.⁵⁵ This overlooks that the majority of migrants seeking asylum in Europe are coming from countries that until recently were under colonial rule. Libya and Eritrea were Italian colonies until 1947; Somalia was ruled by Italy and Britain until 1960; Syria was a French protectorate under the Mandate System until 1946; Britain invaded and occupied Afghanistan three times until formal independence in 1919. From the days of colonial conquest and genocide, to the economic exploitation under the Mandate System, and recent years' interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, any serious consideration of what lies behind the surge of migrants into Europe must account for this colonial history and the way in which it continues to structure the present. As Gurminder Bhambra makes clear, “Europe’s relatively high standard of living and social infrastructure have not been established or maintained separate from either the labour and wealth of others, or the creation of misery elsewhere.”⁵⁶ In fact, and as Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson have shown, the origins of the EU are inextricably bound up with imperial politics and “the perceived necessity to preserve and prolong the colonial system”⁵⁷. From the beginning of the Pan-European movement in the 1920s to its institutionalisation in the European Economic Community (EEC), European integration was inextricably bound up with the question of Europe's continued dominance over Africa; indeed, “a unification of Europe and a unified European effort to colonize Africa were two processes that presupposed one another”.⁵⁸ The 2008 agreement between Italy and Libya, in which Colonel Gaddafi agreed to help curb migration flows in return for colonial reparations, is but a recent example of how the historical reality of colonialism continues to pattern the present.

In light of this, while activist groups such as the CPB have been effective in drawing

attention to the “death worlds” that underlie and condition contemporary Europe, their calls for hospitality, empathy, and affective identification with the fate of migrants reproduce, rather than challenge, dominant interpretations that portray Europe as an innocent bystander. In framing the Mediterranean crisis as a problem of inhumane Frontex policies and a society that turns a blind eye to suffering, they do little to challenge established interpretations that cast migrants as “uninvited guests”, “charitable subjects”, and “strangers at our door”.⁵⁹ This not only obscures Europe's role in having created the conditions which, in part, have set in motion the migration of today; as Broeck argues, it also reproduces dominant interpretations that see Europe as the haven of democracy, liberty, and universal rights, as opposed to “a colonialist product which guards its comparative wealth and guarantees of freedom carefully, sheltered by broad mass approval of its hegemonic white citizenry, and by the support of its intellectual elites”.⁶⁰ By divorcing the ongoing Mediterranean crisis from Europe's long history of empire and racial violence, these left-liberal interventions ultimately turn questions of accountability, guilt, restitution, repentance, and structural reform into matters of empathy, generosity, and hospitality. The result is a politics of pity rather than justice, to borrow the words of Hannah Arendt, and a consequent recasting of the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed as one between the lucky and the unlucky.⁶¹ As anti-colonial scholars such as Césaire, Cabral, and Fanon remind us, such wilful amnesia sits at the heart of the colonial project. Charles Mills and Linda Alcoff have recently described this as “an epistemology of ignorance” (of not knowing, or of not wanting to know), as a form of Forgetting⁶² or white amnesia⁶³ through which Western publics come to believe, not only that the world is *postcolonial* and *postracial*, but also that the long history of colonialism, racialized indentured servitude, indigenous genocide, and transatlantic slavery have left no traces in culture, language, and knowledge production.⁶⁴ As Gloria Wekker points out, this sanctions a white(washed) sense of self and satisfied way of being in the world—what she describes as “white innocence”—that sees little or no relation between current social advantages and the long history of structural violence.⁶⁵

Stranger Fetishism

In the previous section I argued that the majority of left-liberal responses to the ongoing crisis in the Mediterranean have contributed to an ideological formation that removes from view the shared and interconnected histories that link Europe and the migrants washed up on its shores. By foregrounding the spectacle of death and suffering—emblematised by the circulation of the picture of 3-year old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi, lying dead and abandoned on a beach in Bodrum, Turkey—these discourses call on Europeans to open their hearts, and to feel compassion and empathy with the suffering of migrants. As we shall see, this focus on bodies in pain not only decontextualises and

dehistoricises the ongoing tragedy, but also contributes to the construction of a particular cultural narrative—of European goodness, humanity, and antiracism. Overall, if there exists a link between mourning and the mattering of human life, as Butler suggests, then this raises questions around whose humanity is invoked and, indeed for what purpose.

Sarah Ahmed's work on stranger fetishism offers a good starting point for thinking about these issues. In *Strange Encounters*, she explores how colonial amnesia and the erasure of connected histories lead to the objectification of the stranger, that is, to a “cutting off” of figures from the social and material relations which overdetermine their existence”.⁶⁶ This is a move that ontologises the stranger, and that turns him or her “into something that simply *is*”. Ahmed argues that this is a logic that is shared by both anti-immigrant and xenophobic policies, *and* liberal and multicultural discourses that welcome strangers. Indeed, while liberal and multicultural discourses challenge representations that frame the stranger as a source of danger, they take for granted “the stranger's status as a figure that contains or *has* meaning”.⁶⁷ The stranger is here turned into a reminder of the difference, relationality, and vulnerability that is common to all of us—as Bülent Diken argues, “with the stranger, we find ourselves”.⁶⁸ Uncovering the self-serving motives that underpin multicultural calls for welcoming the alien stranger, Ahmed notes how

“the alien is a source of fascination and desire: making friends with aliens, eating with aliens, or even eating one (up), might enable us to transcend the very limits and frailties of an all-too-human form. Or, by allowing some aliens to co-exist “with us”, we might expand our community: we might prove our advancement into or beyond the human; we might demonstrate our willingness to accept difference and to make it our own. Being hospitable to aliens might, in this way, allow us to become human.”⁶⁹

In her trilogy on national sentimentality, Lauren Berlant raises similar questions about the limits of liberal and multicultural discourses of inclusion. Her argument centres on how the language of emotions and the personal increasingly has come to replace politics and responsibility. She describes this as a form of sentimental politics that operates by burning the pain of excluded others “into the conscience of classically privileged [...] subjects” in order to make them “feel the pain [...] as their pain”.⁷⁰ Berlant argues that this focus on the wounds, pain, and suffering of others works to turn political problems into an affective matter to be solved through proper feeling, equating structural change with feeling good. Sentimentality, she argues, must therefore be understood as a political project launched on behalf of the beneficiaries of social injustice, as a “defensive response by people who identify with privilege yet fear they will be exposed as immoral by their tacit sanction of a particular structural violence that benefits them”.⁷¹ As Ahmed reminds us,

such “cannibalisation of the other masquerading as care”⁷² is made possible by historical amnesia and the erasure of history, because only by obscuring the privilege obtained through colonial conquest, genocide, and racial subordination can the white subject present itself as empathetic, caring, and good.

Applying Ahmed and Berlant's arguments to the Mediterranean crisis, it becomes possible to see how public mourning, liberal hospitality, and calls for multiculturalism ultimately function as continuations of, rather than breaks with, the key premises of the populist, far right, anti-immigrant, xenophobic, and racist political parties they supposedly seek to challenge. Indeed, while many of the pro-refugee groups and activists discussed above challenge the xenophobic discourses that present migrants as a form of danger (to Europe's security, welfare state, women, and so on), they rely on a similar fetishising logic. In seeking to extend “grief and care to the dead stranger”⁷³, these interventions not only transform the migrant into a predetermined universalized figure in need of Europe's help and hospitality. They also reproduce a narrative of European goodness and benevolence. As Saucier points out, this kind of activism might ultimately not be about migrants at all but, rather, “about constructing a new European citizen” by highlighting the difference between “good whiteness” (tolerant, multicultural, liberal) and “bad whiteness” (fascist, white nationalist). Dead migrants, he argues, here function as the conduit through which a more positive, cosmopolitan, and empathetic European identity can be created, one that supposedly is attuned to the suffering of all of humankind, but which in reality is concerned with saving Europe for itself.⁷⁴ In other words, by erasing Europe's colonial past and its neocolonial present—and with that, the responsibility that Europe bears for the bodies on its shores—the migrant's status as a stranger is secured. This enables the European subject to re-constitute itself as “ethical” and “good”, innocent of its imperialist histories and present complicities. The result is a modern version of white abolitionism, which, as Woods reminds us, aims “at the salvation of the rescuer, not the rescued”.⁷⁵ Hence the focus on migrants that are *dead*, with sentimental stories of innocent children washed up on shores, and with mothers who drown while giving birth—that is, with bodies that cannot speak back. As Broeck argues, these are the “waves of white empathy” that come “washing up when things get all too obviously horrible for black so-called illegal migrants”.⁷⁶

All of this, I want to suggest, points to a general problem that extends beyond the choppy waters of the Mediterranean. This is a problem which is endemic to the Western tradition of ethical theorising, and which includes both Oeidipusian (liberal, rationalist, sovereign) and Antigonean (poststructuralist, vulnerable, mortal) strands. As we have seen, these traditions are grounded in different ontological understandings of the human condition but, importantly, agree that ethics must have such an ontological foundation. The paradox is thus that, although poststructuralist thinkers

such as Butler, Critchley, Raffoul, and Ziarek are deeply critical of the abstract subject that anchors liberal ethics, their own ethical formulations operate behind a similar veil of ignorance: that is, behind the generalized and anonymised suffering of a generic humanity. The focus on the ontological condition of vulnerability thus leads to a similar erasure of history, because it substitutes abstract humanity for historical humanity. In the context of the European migrant crisis, such a framing has led to an ethics based on mourning and welcoming migrants as universal humans—rather than as victims of a shared, global present built on colonialism, racism, and white supremacy. This choice is not innocent because, as Bhambra reminds us, “addressing particular sets of connections leads to particular understandings”, and as such it is imperative to consider “why certain connections were initially chosen and why choosing others could lead to more adequate explanations”.⁷⁷ What, we must therefore ask, might it mean to rethink global ethics and solidarity on the basis, not of the connections forged from the ontological universal experience of vulnerability and mourning but, rather, of the shared, intertwined histories that arise out of the colonial past and the neocolonial present? Asking such questions would mean shifting the focus, away from the interconnectedness and oneness of humanity—metaphorised by the umbilical cord that connects Yohanna to her lifeless baby—towards the entanglements that link Europe to the diverse regions from which migrants and refugees are coming. In the words of Stuart Hall: “They are here because you were there. There is an umbilical connection. There is no understanding Englishness without understanding its imperial and colonial dimensions.”⁷⁸

Conclusion

The poststructuralist turn to ethics has brought questions of who and what counts as human to the forefront of contemporary political and international theory. Thinkers such as Judith Butler, and Stephen White have argued that the experience of loss and mourning has the capacity to access or stage a commonality that eludes politics and on which a new cosmopolitan ethics can be built. Mourning is here understood as a critical resource for expanding our spectrum of empathy and for broadening our notion of whose life matters. As Butler explains, “grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters”.⁷⁹

In this article, I have argued that mourning does something more than simply mark the loss of certain lives: It makes possible certain forms of politics while obfuscating others. In the context of the European migrant crisis, a variety of artists, activists, academics, and policymakers have harnessed the rhetoric of mourning to challenge the xenophobic and white nationalist discourses that figure migrants as vermin, pariah, and bogus; that is, as less-than-human. By seeking to know, recognise, and publicly grieve these lives, they challenge the dehumanisation, disposability, and

differential distribution of grievability that underwrites “Europe’s aggressive isolation”.⁸⁰ In contrast, I have argued that these interventions reproduce the underlying assumptions of the far right: Namely, that migrants are “strangers”, “charitable subjects”, and “uninvited guests”. By focusing on abstract—as opposed to historical—humanity, they contribute to an ideological formation that erases history and undoes the “umbilical cord” that links Europe and the migrants that are trying to enter the continent. This replaces questions of responsibility, guilt, restitution, repentance, and structural reform with matters of empathy, generosity, and hospitality—a move that transforms the responsible colonial agent into an innocent bystander, confirming its status as “ethical”, “good”, and “humane”. In a poem meditating on the violence of historical erasures, Derek Walcott portrays the history of colonialism, transatlantic slavery, and white supremacy as being “locked in the sea”. “Where”, he asks, “are your monuments, your battles, martyrs?” Written almost 40 years ago, his words speak almost directly to the contemporary moment and the tragedy in the Mediterranean: “The sea. The sea/has locked them up. The sea is History”.⁸¹

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