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Blue Humanism:

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution and the Contested Politics of Race, Nation and Humanity in the Channel

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Abstract

This paper seeks to interrogate how the work of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (the RNLI) has become a central point of tension in the conflicts over "race", nation and the human in Britain today. Engaging with the literature on blue cultural studies and critical border studies, it adopts a historical, cultural and philosophical approach to understand how the RNLI has become drawn into the contemporary moral panic over migrant boats crossing the Channel / la Manche. The article starts by examining the longer history of the RNLI and its relationship to Britain's disavowed imperial histories. It then turns to the RNLI's rescue operations in the Channel itself, in order to think through how the difficult work of salvaging orients us towards a new anti-racist, embodied and reparative humanism.

Introduction

On November 24th, 2021, at least twenty-seven human beings lost their lives trying to cross the Channel when their small boat capsized. Their deaths marked the greatest single loss of life in a stretch of sea where hundreds have died making the same journey. Four days prior to the disaster, on November 20th, 2021, several fishermen had assembled on the beaches of Hastings to block the launch of a RNLI (Royal National Lifeboat Institution) lifeboat. They were there to protest the charity's involvement in rescuing migrants in the Channel. The events of that one week in November make for grim reading. They mark a new phase in the politics of cross-Channel migration, whereby the state now seeks to aggressively target, track and shut down the movement of people by sea. The political forces of indifference and wilful cruelty have not only increasingly turned these waters into spaces of mass death, but they have created a situation that emboldens a hostile and visceral response towards what should be a basic and uncontroversial act: the preservation of human life. This paper seeks to understand this sea change in the politics of bordering in modern Britain. More specifically, it interrogates how and why the RNLI itself has become a central point of tension in the conflicts over "race", nation and the human in Britain today.

Over the last few years the RNLI's role in saving migrant lives in the Channel has come under intense pressure, both from hardening state policies towards migration and the forces of the far-right. The situation we are witnessing today builds on developments that are both slow and fast-moving. The politics of "race", bordering and xenophobia in twenty-first century Britain, shaped by events like the War on Terror, the displacement crisis of 2015 and Britain's withdrawal from the European Union, now tightly articulate themselves around cross-Channel migration, as alternate routes into Britain are shut down and the numbers of people crossing by sea rises. The spectre of the migrant boat, traditionally associated with migration across the Mediterranean, increasingly preoccupies racist and nationalist discourse amidst Britain's chronic economic crises. Intensifying practices of sea and coastal militarisation across Britain's borders, as part of the current government's aggressive manoeuvres to fully "stop the boats", have emboldened the linkage between the arrival of these boats and the attendant racist discourses of war and invasion. The line between border policing and military operations in the Channel has now become increasingly blurred. Political demands for spectacular military responses – gunboats, "wave machines" and worse - have been accompanied by the interchangeable use of both Border Force and Royal Navy ships to manage sea migration.² As part of this highly militarised response, new practices of bordering have begun to reshape the Channel's coastal environment. The state now seeks to shuttle migrants into spaces of exception along England's southern coast; these include inland detention camps such as Napier Barracks, Manston, and Bexhill, as well as new offshore detention barges like the Bibby Stockholm. These transformations are not just restricted to land: border agencies are increasingly deploying high-tech military drones, such as the Watchkeeper fleet, above Channel airspace as a means of tracking and prosecuting migrants.3

- 1 Since the 1990s, the British border has been increasingly extended physically to northern France and fortified around Calais, Dunkirk, and the Coquelles Eurotunnel. Stowaway attempts via lorries have declined significantly in the last decade as a result of more aggressive policing around these transit zones. See BBC News, 'Migrants: Stowaway cases decrease as hauliers take measures', BBC, 27 November 2023 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-67528110> [accessed 24 March 2024].
- 2 Gargi Bhattacharyya, Adam Elliott-Cooper, Sita Balani, Kerem Nişancıoğlu, Kojo Koram, Dalia Gebrial, Nadine El-Enany and Luke de Noronha, *Empire's Endgame: Racism and the British State* (London: Pluto Press, 2021), p. 157. The use of the Royal Navy's resources in the Channel was known as "Operation Isotrope" and lasted between January 2022 and January 2023.
- 3 Keren Weitzberg, 'A Very British Problem: The Evolution of Britain's Militarised Policing Complex' *Campaign Against Arms Trade* and *Netpol* report (2022) 1-53 (p. 22). Accessed from https://caat.org.uk/publications/a-very-british-problem-the-evolution-of-britains-militarised-policing-industrial-complex/ [accessed 24 March 2024].

This militarisation of the UK border draws on transnational precedents, knowledge and expertise. Offshore detention was previously deployed by the Australian government as part of its own repressive crackdown against sea migration in the 2010s. Drawing on the siege mentalities and global Islamophobia that erupted in the wake of 9/11, that earlier campaign to "stop the boats" positioned the Australian island-nation as engaged in a permanent war against terror and migration. The resulting 'Operation Sovereign Borders' led to the extensive deportation of migrants into off-shore detention centres in Christmas Island, Papua New Guinea, and Nauru, as well as pushbacks at sea by the Australian Navy. We see similar trends emerging in contemporary Britain, as the state relies on new forms of encampment, offshoring, and deportation to identify, capture, and expel its racialised outsiders. These material transformations in Britain's border architecture configure the migrant boat as a military threat to national/racial sovereignty. These boats sit uncomfortably both inside and outside the nation, in liminal, grey spaces where they are at once inside the nation's sovereign waters, yet still outside its sovereign land territory.⁵

The results of this deadly logic are increasingly visible for anyone to see: those who dare to aid migrants in distress at sea are suspects, traitors guilty of betraying the national-racial encampment. The RNLI's humanitarian work in the Channel now comes under regular and sustained attack for aiding migrants in these waters, whether it be from far-right vigilantes or the acolytes of GB News and their agno-political compatriots. Volunteers have been accused of all kinds of fantastical and twisted conspiratorial evils, such as providing an illegal "taxi service", aiding paedophiles and rapists, and supporting a national invasion. One volunteer at Dungeness station reported being asked why he did not kick migrants into the water instead of saving them. If we now inhabit a world where a citizen believes a human being should be kicked into the sea, rather than being pulled from it, then the ship of liberal democracy is in troubled waters indeed. Critical theory must demand not only how such a political-cultural situation could ever arise in the first place, but what kind of action must be called forth today in response.

As such, this paper seeks to better understand these attacks on the RNLI in relation to its role in saving migrant lives in the Channel, as well as what this situation tells us more broadly about the politics of "race", nation and humanity in Britain today. To do so, this paper adopts a two-staged approach that is both interdisciplinary and unorthodox. The first section, 'Imperial Disavowal', examines the longer history of the RNLI itself since its original foundation in 1824 as the National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck. By situating the institution within Britain's maritime imperial histories, this section argues that the contestation over the RNLI itself is symptomatic of the persistent denial and disavowal of colonialism's importance to shaping the modern "island nation". The second section, 'Towards a Blue Humanism', takes a more hopeful stance on the situation unfolding today in the Channel. By focusing on the RNLI's rescue operations at sea itself, it argues that the difficult work of salvaging bodies from the water orients us towards a new anti-racist, embodied and reparative humanism.

The project draws on a broad range of scholarship and thinking across its argument, but for the sake of clarity it can be (loosely) grouped into three

- 4 Greg Martin, 'Stop the Boats! Moral Panic in Australia over Asylum Seekers', *Continuum*, 29, 3 (2015) 304-322; Julia C. Morris, 'Violence and Extraction of a Human Commodity: From Phosphate to Refugees in the Republic of Nauru', *The Extractive Industries and Society*, 6 (2019) 1122-1133.
- 5 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer:* Sovereign Power and Bare Life, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).
- 6 Anonymous, 'Crew Testimony', *RNLI*, October 2022, accessed from https://rnli.org/news-and-media/2022/october/18/rnli-releases-new-channel-rescue-footage-and-first-hand-crew-testimony [accessed 24 March 2024]; John Phipps, 'The Lifeboat Crew on the Frontline of Britain's Migrant Crisis', *1843*, 8 November 2022, https://www.economist.com/1843/2022/11/08/the-lifeboat-crew-on-the-frontline-of-britains-migrant-crisis [accessed 24 March 2024].

main strands. The first strand is informed by scholars of blue cultural studies like Steve Mentz and John R. Gillis, whose works are valuable aids in exploring the historical-cultural relationships between human beings and the seas that surround them.⁷ Phillip Steinberg's insistence on the need to engage the sea as a material space marks another important guiding spirit for this project, particularly in thinking through how water itself is shaping the politics of racism and nationalism today.8 Accompanying this is much of the current literature on "race", migration and bordering in Britain and beyond. Existing work on migration and the Mediterranean, represented by figures like Iain Chambers, the Black Mediterranean Collective, and Maurice Stierl, is especially relevant here as theoretical foundations, although the Mediterranean's unique and complex historical trajectory means that their insights cannot automatically be transposed to the Channel. The 'Black Channel/Manche Noire', to use Paul Gilroy's wording, is not simply the same as the Black Mediterranean, and there needs to be more archival and theoretical enquiry into the Channel's specific relationship to the histories of movement, migration and imperialism before that turn of phrase can be used comfortably.¹⁰ More recent works on racism and nationalism that are closer to home, such as Sivamohan Valluvan's The Clamour of Nationalism and the collective intervention Empire's Endgame: Racism and the British State, will also be important for this paper, although their analyses will need to be adjusted to accommodate for thinking at sea-level. 11 The final strand relates to humanism and recent scholarship on its contemporary importance to anti-racist struggles today. As the title of the paper suggests, this part of the project owes an important intellectual debt to Gilroy's pelagic thinking, particularly his recent work on 'offshore' or 'blue humanism', and much of what follows takes place in conversation with his collection of concepts. 12 In the spirit of friendly intellectual collaboration, however, this paper seeks to push his insights further by examining a concrete example of a revitalised humanism through the work of the RNLI, as well as engaging in its own additional dialogue with thinkers like Frantz Fanon, Jean Améry and Theodor W. Adorno.

Finally, this paper engages with a number of diverse and varied primary sources alongside secondary texts to support its arguments. This includes material such as historical documents relating to the RNLI's origins, contemporary visual media covering the RNLI and the Channel, as well as examples of governmental, media and far-right discourse on Channel migration. Written and oral testimony from RNLI crew members involved in migrant rescues, either published by the charity itself or by media outlets, also forms an important foundation for the second section, the arguments of which will be composed in a polyphonic dialogue with these voices. Needless to say, the challenge – and reward – of trying to think through the politics of "race", nation and humanity at sea-level is that efforts to organise these particular "sources" into neat and tidy containers, especially when dealing with concepts like water itself, will inevitably overspill the author's attempts to contain them. All that can be said in response is that, in an age of political and intellectual enclosure, perhaps this overflow is exactly what we need.

- 7 Steve Mentz, Shipwreck Modernity: Ecologies of Globalization, 1550–1719 (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015); John R. Gillis, The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013).
- 8 Phillip Steinberg, 'Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions', *Atlantic Studies*, 10, 2 (2013) 156-169.
- 9 See Iain Chambers, Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008); Iain Chambers, 'Maritime Criticism and Theoretical Shipwrecks', PMLA, 125, 3 (2010), 678-684; The Black Mediterranean Collective, eds., The Black Mediterranean: Bodies, Borders and Citizenship (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Maurice Stierl, 'A Fleet of Mediterranean Border Humanitarians', Antipode, 50, 3 (2018), 704-724.
- 10 Paul Gilroy, 'Antiracism, Blue Humanism and the Black Mediterranean', *Transition*, 132 (2021) 108-122.
- 11 Sivamohan Valluvan, *The Clamour of Nationalism: Race and Nation in Twenty-First Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019); Bhattacharyya, Elliott-Cooper, Balani, Nişancıoğlu, Koram, Gebrial, El-Enany and de Noronha, *Empire's Endgame*.
- 12 Paul Gilroy, "Where every breeze speaks of courage and liberty": Offshore Humanism and Marine Xenology, or, Racism and the Problem of Critique at Sea Level', *Antipode*, 50, 1 (2018) 3-22; Paul Gilroy, 'Antiracism, Blue Humanism and the Black Mediterranean'; Paul Gilroy, 'Never Again: Refusing Race and Salvaging the Human', Holberg Prize Lecture (2019) accessed from https://www.newframe.com/long-read-refusing-race-and-salvaging-the-human/> [accessed 24 March 2024].

Imperial Disavowal

As a camera flies over the blue waters surrounding Britain's coast, the narrator of Saving Lives at Sea, the BBC's documentary series on the RNLI, opens by confidently proclaiming 'we're an island nation ... drawn to the sea that surrounds us'. 13 At once a link is established between the RNLI and the significance of "islandness" to what defines Britain as a nation. For all the documentary's triumphal celebrations of this ordinary 'volunteer army' at sea, however, such banal, everyday invocations of nationalism need to be critiqued for the alternative histories and stories they mask, particularly if we are to meet the urgent task of re-writing and re-defining the "island story" that Stuart Hall set out over two decades ago. 14 As such, this section examines the longer history of the RNLI as an organisation and situates it within Britain's histories of maritime imperialism. Borrowing from Catherine Hall and Daniel Pick's analyses of denial in history, it argues that the conflicts over the RNLI's work in the Channel are symptomatic of the persistent denial and disavowal of imperialism's importance to modern Britain. The tensions over the RNLI's role in aiding migrants can be perceived as the return of the repressed, in which forgotten and disavowed historical entanglements between the RNLI, the Channel and empire return to disrupt popular discourses of the "island nation" cut off from both its colonial past and the wider world.

There have been a number of historical-psychoanalytical diagnoses over the last twenty years to characterise postcolonial Europe's difficult relationship to its imperial histories, ranging from amnesia and aphasia to nostalgia and melancholia. 15 While all of these conditions are relevant to modern Britain's complex relationship to empire and migration, this section focuses on disavowal specifically as a useful term to explore the RNLI's place within these contested postimperial histories. This concept is taken from Catherine Hall and Daniel Pick's article on the relationship between denialism, disavowal and cultural memory throughout history. Examining case studies such as the British slave-owner Edward Long and the 1946 Nuremberg trials, they define disavowal as 'the refusal to avow, the disclaiming of responsibility or knowledge of something'. Historical disavowal, as is they see it, is a slippery and ambiguous phenomenon that oscillates between a knowing and unknowing at once. 16 For the purposes of this section, disavowal speaks to the histories of maritime imperialism and colonialism that are actively buried and denied under simplistic representations of the RNLI as a heroic force within the "island nation". "Islandness", as Peter Mitchell has noted, carries the notion of both isolation and global connection, which, like disavowal, accepts a limited knowledge of Britain's place in the world whilst refusing to fully accept its implications for national borders.¹⁷ Carl Schmitt, reflecting much earlier on the consequences of historical spatial revolutions in Land and Sea, similarly insisted on the fundamental imperial and racial dimensions of "islandness" that emerged with England's elementary turn to the sea and its capture of the world's oceans. Writing during the Second World War, he argued that the English peoples' maritime existence – as opposed to landed existence - had transformed them into something less than human, as

- 13 Saving Lives at Sea, Series 7, Episode 8 (BBC, 2022), in BoB https://learningon-screen.ac.uk/ondemand/index.php/prog/3B-FF5191?bcast=137755483 [accessed 24 March 2024].
- 14 Stuart Hall, 'Whose Heritage? Un-settling 'The Heritage', Re-imagining the Post-Nation', *Third Text*, 13, 49 (1999-2000) 3-13, (p. 10).
- 15 See Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2016); Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Peter Mitchell, *Imperial Nostalgia: How the British Conquered Themselves* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).
- 16 Catherine Hall and Daniel Pick, 'Thinking about Denial', *History Workshop Journal*, 84 (2017) 1-23, (p. 2, p. 11). See also Alan Lester, *Deny & Disavow: Distancing the Imperial Past in the Culture Wars* (London: Sunrise Publishing, 2022); Paul Gilroy, 'Working with "Wogs": Aliens, Denizens and the Machinations of Denialism', *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 15 (2022) 122–138.
- 17 Mitchell, Imperial Nostalgia, p. 89.

Seeschäumer or "sea dogs". Schmitt applied the same argument to the Jewish people, perceived by him to be in a permanent state of landlessness, in order to exclude them from the category of the human. His antisemitic thought is now increasingly being reworked into contemporary far-right conspiracies over migration in the present.¹⁸

Crucially, Hall and Pick's interpretation stresses the important consequences of historical disavowal. Denial may attempt to suppress conflict within the subject, but symptoms always return and what is repressed inevitably comes back in some form. ¹⁹ It is exactly this dialectical tension – between the long-held attachment to RNLI's place within ordinary nationalism on the one hand, and the return of disavowed imperial legacies in the figure of the postcolonial migrant on the other – that drives much of the bitter contest over the RNLI's work in the Channel today. The struggle over what the RNLI represents, alongside its role in aiding migrants, is a microcosm of a broader struggle underway over representation and identity in Brexit Britain, or what Gilroy identifies as 'the crisis in our nation's ability to represent itself, both to itself and to the world'. ²⁰

To understand these points further, however, we need to examine the RNLI's relationship to nationalism in twenty-first century Britain more closely. Sivamohan Valluvan has done important work in pushing us to retheorise and complicate how we understand the current 'nationalist moment'. Crucial to his argument is the need to recognise how nationalist politics 'draws upon an assortment of opposing ideological traditions, meanings and symbols', rather than simplifying it merely as a product of right-wing populism.²¹ Following Valluvan's point, it is worth scrutinising the RNLI's historical relationship to ordinary and banal constructions of the "island nation" and "Britishness". From its inception in 1824, the National Institution for the Preservation of Life from Shipwreck – the original name of the RNLI – has had a close relationship to nationalism in its role as the country's largest charity responsible for saving lives at sea. The RNLI's founding document, Sir William Hillary's Appeal to the British Nation (1824), proposed 'the establishment of a national institution' with the aim of preserving 'human life from the perils of the sea', framing its appeal to Britain as 'the greatest maritime nation in existence'. 22 The charity was renamed the Royal National Lifeboat Institution in 1854 and adopted its own flag of Saint George's Cross and the monarch's crown in 1884. Today, the organisation has become one of Britain's largest charities with over 30,000 volunteers and regular fundraisers, local events and its own documentary series. Throughout its two centuries of existence, the RNLI has clearly occupied a popular and important place both in the formation of contemporary national identity and the nation's relationship to the sea. There is a need, however, to understand how the dynamics of race operate within this comfortable story of ordinary nationalism. As Valluvan has stressed at length, nationalism is always structured by, and articulated with, its racial exclusions.²³ One recent book on the RNLI remarks, for instance, that 'as an island race (emphasis added), the sea will always be indivisible from British identity' and hence 'the RNLI maintains its hold on the nation's heart'.24 At best, these are mere expressions of national pride in the language of heritage and philanthropy. At worst, however, the relationship

- 18 Samuel Garrett Zeitlin, 'Propaganda and Critique: An Introduction to Land and Sea', in Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea: A World-Historical Mediation* (Candor, N.Y.: Telos Press Publishing, 2015), pp. xlii-xliv. See also Miri Davidson, 'Sea and Earth', *New Left Review* (2024) accessed from https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/sea-and-earth> [accessed 14 April 2024].
- 19 Hall and Pick, 'Thinking about Denial', (p. 7, p. 9).
- 20 Gilroy, 'Working with "Wogs", (p. 132).
- 21 Sivamohan Valluvan, *The Clamour of Nationalism: Race and Nation in Twenty-First Century Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), p. 4, pp. 12-13.
- 22 William Hillary, An Appeal to the British Nation on the Humanity and Policy of Forming a National Institution for the Preservation of Lives and Property from Shipwreck (London: George Whittaker, 1825).
- 23 Valluvan, *The Clamour of Nationalism*, p. 5, p. 14, pp. 54-55.
- 24 Janet Gleeson, *The Lifeboat Baronet:* Launching the RNLI (Stroud: The History Press, 2014), p. 180.

between the RNLI, its work at sea and the culturally assembled identity of the "island nation" can play into far more dangerous logics, particularly when it is no longer just "Britons" that are being pulled from the water. These logics are exemplified by the dangerous trend of white supremacist thinkers increasingly mobilising what they call "lifeboat ethics", which frames rescuing racialised bodies from the water as a threat to the national community's own "lifeboat". ²⁵ In other words, the RNLI lifeboat can quite easily become the symbolic double of the armed "national lifeboat": a deeply contested site of who should and should not be included in this "island nation".

This assembled relationship between the RNLI and national identity also importantly occludes possible understandings of the charity's historical links to slavery and colonialism. The story of the RNLI's origin cannot be retold in its entirety here, but its foundations lie firmly in the transatlantic economies of the British slave-trade and slave-ownership. Sir William Hillary, the charity's principal founder, had been raised in the slave-trading port of Liverpool and was an absentee slave-owner in Jamaica. The Hillary family had deep connections with the transatlantic slave economy in the West Indies, both as Liverpool-based merchants and absentee plantation owners, and Hillary's father Richard Hillary and his mother Hannah Winn-Lascelles were firmly enmeshed in these circles.²⁶ When Hillary decided to launch an appeal to the nation to form a national lifeboat institution in the early nineteenth-century, he used these family connections to Britain's maritime imperial economy to reach out to politicians, merchants, slave-traders and slave-owners to help fund the creation of the charity. Many of the charity's first patrons, including George Hibbert, Thomas Wilson and John Vincent Purrier, equally owed their riches to British slavery.²⁷ These clear financial links between the RNLI and the offshore wealth generated by the labour of enslaved Africans raise important questions. They push us to reconsider, for instance, what the celebration and symbolism of the RNLI's history within the "island nation" might have historically excluded. We might ask – at the risk of sounding provocative - what these links between the charity and Britain's maritime imperial economy suggest about the importance of saving lives at sea in earlier periods, particularly the need to maintain and secure the smooth flows of people, ships and global capital between the island metropole and its exterior colonies. For instance, HMS Racehorse, whose shipwreck off the Isle of Man in 1822 partly motivated Hillary to establish the charity, was one such ship of empire, having previously been involved in the capture of Mauritius in 1810.²⁸ Of course, all of this is not to be construed as somehow condemning or shunning the RNLI's work today. It is, however, a plea for a more difficult and extended reflection on the RNLI's relationship to the politics of "race", nationalism and empire. This reflection would refuse to accept the current media-political framing of the charity's activity in the Channel as a sudden, short term "crisis", which feeds and emboldens the politics of spectacle, outrage and backlash. It would instead seek a longer and more worldly view of the charity's disavowed connections to imperialism and racial capitalism, as well as how those histories continually bear upon the present.

Given the RNLI's work in saving migrant lives at sea takes place specifically in the Channel, it is worth similarly interrogating that body of water's

- 25 See Matthew Whittle, 'Hostile Environments, Climate Justice, and the Politics of the Lifeboat', *Moving Worlds* (2021) 83-98; Angela Mitropolos, 'Lifeboat Capitalism, Catastrophism, Borders', *Dispatches Journal*, 1 (2018) 1-19.
- 26 Gleeson's book *The Lifeboat Baronet* provides a biography of Hillary's life, including some detail on his family's links to British slavery. See also 'Sir William Hillary 1st bart.', *Legacies of British Slavery Database*, https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/person/view/2146660909> [accessed 24 March 2024].
- 27 Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, Katie Donington and Rachael Lang, Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 52, p. 231-232. The RNLI's original minute book from 1824 recording patrons also lists a number of figures with connections to British slavery. See Geraldine Patricia Wilson, 'The Royal National Lifeboat Institution: Its Foundation and Organisation' (MA dissertation, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2019), pp. 85-86.
- 28 Gleeson, The Lifeboat Baronet, pp. 23-28.

own relationship to nationalism and the disavowed histories of imperialism. As a major point of passage and entry into the world of the Black Atlantic for legions of British, French, Dutch and Danish slave ships, the Channel has its own important place in the story of transatlantic slavery, colonialism and the makings of modernity.²⁹ There are thus important historical and present-day linkages between the Channel and what has been called the Black Mediterranean, though additional historical and theoretical work needs to be done before the appellation of the 'Black Channel/Manche Noire' can be employed more convincingly. Here we might think of figures like the sea faring radical Olaudah Equiano, hopping across the various nodal points of the Channel including Falmouth, Portsmouth, Guernsey and Le Havre, or the many slave and colonial ships that lie buried, "locked up" and sedimented on the palimpsestic seafloor of the Channel.³⁰ Despite this extensive archive, both the Channel's imperial histories and alternative narratives of movement and migration continue to be actively disavowed today. In the case of the UK, the Channel is instead reduced to an exhausted role of a nationalist myth-making device central to dividing and defining "us" from "them". At Dover, where Matthew Arnold once composed his poetic reflections on an earlier crisis of modernity, symbolic images of the White Cliffs are employed ad nauseum by political forces, in an effort to mobilise sentiments of patriotism, independence, and solidity amid the liquid uncertainty of Britain's withdrawal from the European Union.³¹ The Channel itself also features heavily as a cultural staging ground for the attempted revivals of the Second World War's fading memories, which still command the power to dominate the cultural imagination of the nation and its watery exteriors. Morbid representations of war, invasion and militarism continue to be recycled in depictions of the Channel. Recent war films such as *Darkest Hour* (2017) and *Dunkirk* (2017), for instance, wind the national clock back to the 1940s to resurrect feelings of victory snatched from defeat, but, in their haste to glorify "bringing our boys back", they never stop to think about those stuck on the beaches today.³² As with the RNLI, this all means that there is an additional and potent dimension to the charity's work in the Channel today. The Channel, like the lifeboat, serves as another symbolic figure in the tensions over identity and self-representation in Brexit Britain, in which healthier understandings of the body of water's relationship to the histories of imperialism, migration, and movement have been disavowed in favour of nationalist and militarist fantasies.

Having established the relationship between the RNLI, nationalism and imperialism, as well as the wider background of the Channel itself, we can now examine how these historical disavowals frame the conflict over the RNLI's role in rescuing migrants from the sea. Hall and Pick's notion of the inevitable return of what has been repressed in the process of disavowal is important here. The figure of the Channel migrant - without wanting to sound pathologising - might be seen as the symbolic return of these disavowed imperial histories. Amidst broader conflicts about identity and the nation's relationship to its past, the migrant enters into a highly charged political-cultural seascape that, as of yet, has been unable to reconcile the idea of the "island nation" with its fundamental imperial and worldly dimensions. Earlier analyses of racism and nationalism in Britain, exemplified by thinkers

- 29 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993)
- 30 Olaudah Equiano, ed. by Brycchan Carey, The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Or Gustavus Vassa, The African (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 49-52; Dalya Alberge, 'Wreck of the World's Oldest Slave Ship at Risk of Destruction', The Observer, 11 October 2020, accessed from https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/11/wreck-of-the-worlds-oldest-slave-ship-at-risk-of-destruction [accessed 31 July 2023]; Derek Walcott, 'The Sea is History', in Derek Walcott, The Poetry of Derek Walcott 1948–2013 (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), pp. 253-257.
- 31 Matthew Arnold, 'Dover Beach', *Poetry Foundation* https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43588/dover-beach [accessed 31 July 2023]; Helena Feder, 'Dover Beach' and the Uncertain Afterlife of Victorian Environments, *Green Letters*, 24, 2 (2020) 199-214; Phil Hubbard, *Borderland: Identity and Belonging at the Edge of England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022), pp. 1-22.
- 32 Darkest Hour, dir. by Joe Wright (Universal Pictures, 2017); Dunkirk, dir. by Christopher Nolan (Warner Bros., 2017). See also Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia.

like Hall and Gilroy, identified how the symbol of the postcolonial migrant was central to British society's "quarrel with itself". 33 A similar process is at work today in the Channel. The internal dynamics of British society, unable to conceive of healthier political alternatives to racial nationalism or recognise empire's enduring legacies, play themselves out in response to the image of the perceived alien intruder and, by extension, the RNLI lifeboats "complicit" in aiding such figures. Far-right politicians and groups have seized on these dynamics by framing the RNLI - the once-treasured symbol of the "island nation" - as guilty of betraying the nation on behalf of some fictional imaginary elite. Farage, Golding and their allies, for example, have launched consistent attacks on the RNLI, labelling the charity as a "taxi service for illegal immigration" and a "treacherous organisation". Farage's written response in *The Telegraph* to the ensuing backlash provides a precise example of how the RNLI's relationship to imperial disavowal has been articulated. Aside from bemoaning how the 'noble organisation' seemed to have lost its way by aiding migrants, Farage's piece was notable in its suggestion that the RNLI's historical connections to slavery meant that its supporters might decide to turn on it.³⁴ The throwaway line was a clear example of imperial disavowal in operation: a sort of half-conscious acknowledgement of empire, but routed in such a way to flatly refuse any engagement with its concrete legacies or to question the workings of racial nationalism.

Towards a Blue Humanism

The German philosopher Hans Blumenberg has described the shipwreck as the figure of an initial philosophical experience. 35 With Blumenberg's claim in mind, this section turns to the RNLI's rescue missions at sea itself, in order to ask how the charity's difficult work of salvaging orients us towards a richer, re-enchanted anti-racist humanism. Today, the lives of both human beings and multicultural democracy itself are a stake in the politics of salvage. In response, this section argues that the RNLI volunteers exemplify what we might call an embodied and reparative humanism in their duty to pull bodies from the water. To illustrate these arguments further, this section begins by setting out its own theoretical approach to contemporary debates on humanism. It follows by examining the scale of the challenge that Channel migrant crossings present for RNLI rescue lifeboats, as well as the wounds of violence and torture that are inflicted on migrants making these sea-voyages. The profound humanist orientation embedded in the very act of salvaging marks the final section for discussion. This section's arguments are, for the most part, embedded in the available written and oral testimony from RNLI crew members working in the Channel today. These accounts have either been published by the RNLI itself or by media sources reporting on their work. Usually unnamed, the often necessary anonymity of these volunteers is just one indication of the severity of the threat presented by far-right forces today. Facing both the clamour of the media spectacle that surrounds Channel migration, as well as the oft-conventional demands of academic writing for a singular and univocal voice, this section hopes that their important words might flow polyphonically through the writing that follows.

- 33 See Stuart Hall, 'Black Men, White Media', in Stuart Hall, *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. by Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2021) 51-55, (p. 52); Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, p. 101.
- 34 Nigel Farage, 'Certain Metropolitan Liberals have used my Observations about the RNLI for their Own Ends', *The Telegraph*, 4 August 2021, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2021/08/04/certain-metropolitan-liberals-have-used-observations-rn-li-ends/> [accessed 31 July 2023].
- 35 Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator*, p. 12; Gilroy, 'Antiracism, Blue Humanism and the Black Mediterranean', (p. 108).

The events unfolding in the Mediterranean and the Channel are fundamentally reshaping the meanings of humanity, humanitarianism and humanism in our times. In the swirling waters of debate over humanism, post-humanism, and anti-humanism, the former has frequently been rejected by those resigned to both the racial ordering of planetary life and an-ever deepening fatalism amidst political turbulence.³⁶ In much of the scholarship emerging from the Black Mediterranean, for instance, the possibility of a re-enchanted, critical humanism is either briefly mentioned, before being left mostly unexplored or even dismissed outright. While some of these authors are all too happy to quote Du Bois, Césaire, Fanon and others - without taking their political and moral commitments to a new humanism seriously - they frame activist interventions at sea as sentimentalist, patronising and guilty of enacting a novel white man's burden. The difficult - and increasingly criminalised - work of solidarity by groups like Sea Watch in the Mediterranean is dismissed for having a 'whitening gaze'. Gilroy's Black Atlantic can be dutifully invoked as a theoretical reference point, while his more recent work on offshore humanism is quietly left to one side.³⁷

Such critical inertia, bluntly put, gets us nowhere. Instead, the work of RNLI volunteers and the embodied humanism they perform in pulling bodies from the water orients us in a more productive direction. Enacted through material and performative acts, this notion of an embodied humanism is theoretically guided by the spirits of Frantz Fanon, Jean Améry and Theodor W. Adorno. Both veterans of the Second World War, Fanon and Améry shared a profound intellectual commitment to not only confronting the workings of torture in fascist and colonial regimes, but daring to imagine a new humanism that could be called forth in response. Fanon's hopes for 'a real dialectic between the body and the world' found their counterpart in Améry's lifelong commitment to a radical humanism.³⁸ Together, their shared conviction in both the centrality of torture to the machinations of colonialist and ultranationalist regimes, as well as the possibility of resistance and refusal through bodily acts, points us towards similar historical dynamics that are unfolding in the Channel at present. Adorno – intellectually removed from existentialism, yet still deeply committed to facing a world in which Auschwitz could ever be possible - provides us with a third point of critical reference. His belief in what he called 'the impulse' - 'naked physical fear, and the sense of solidarity with what Brecht called "tormentable bodies" - as a guide for moral action after Auschwitz is equally important here.³⁹ Although Adorno firmly refused to rationalise such behaviour, the weight he places on impulsive actions, or preconceptual, spontaneous and embodied acts that defy the murderous logic of identity-thinking, arguably find their material and symbolic counterpart in the RNLI's work at sea today.40

For RNLI crewmembers, there are significant challenges in undertaking Channel migrant rescues. These lifeboat rescues are physically and mentally demanding. Crews must regularly brave the natural dangers of the sea, including storms, waves, and high-speed winds, work difficult hours that are often in the dark of night, and, in the worst cases, be prepared to face lifeor-death situations. ⁴¹ In the case of Channel migrant rescues, the stakes are even higher in the world's busiest shipping lane. The kinds of boats used by

- 36 Gilroy, 'Offshore Humanism and Marine Xenology'.
- 37 The Black Mediterranean Collective, *The Black Mediterranean*, p. 11, pp. 14-15; Ida Danewid, 'White Innocence in the Black Mediterranean: Hospitality and the Erasure of History', *Third World Quarterly*, 38, 7 (2017) 1674-1689.
- 38 Paul Gilroy, 'Fanon and Améry: Theory, Torture and the Prospect of Humanism', Theory, Culture & Society, 27, 7-8 (2010) 16-32; Fanon, Peaux Noire, Masques Blancs, p. 89; Jean Améry, At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities, trans. by Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1980).
- 39 Theodor W. Adorno, Negative Dialectics, trans. by E. B. Ashton (London; New York: Routledge, 1973), p. 286. Adorno also refers to Améry's experience of torture in his lectures on metaphysics. See Theodor W. Adorno, Metaphysics: Concepts and Problems, trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 106-109.
- 40 See Brian O'Connor, *Adorno* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021), pp. 120-129, pp. 139-146; Mathijs Peters, 'The Zone of the Carcass and the Knacker'—On Adorno's Concern with the Suffering Body, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 23, 4 (2013) 1239-1258.
- 41 See Michelle O'Toole and Chris Grey, 'Beyond 'Thick' Volunteering and the Case of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution', *buman relations*, 69, 1 (2016) 85-109.

migrants to cross the Channel, such as dinghies, catamarans, or even kayaks, are often overcrowded, unseaworthy and barely afloat. With radar signals frequently unable to locate such small vessels, volunteers may have to rely on the lonely glimmer of a phone light, the desperate sweep of a searchlight, or the sound of a human cry to identify where the boats are in the water. In these extreme conditions, RNLI crews must now prepare for the possibility of mass-casualty situations at sea. One crewmember reports the additional demands placed on volunteers:

we have received extra training in not only how to assist a childbirth at sea, but also what to do should we come across tens of bodies floating face down in the water. Our greatest terror is not if but when.⁴²

Away from the challenges of venturing into these off-shore zones, RNLI volunteers increasingly face acts of abuse, hostility, and intimidation from members of the public in their day-to-day lives. Volunteers have reported becoming increasingly socially isolated because of their work, receiving threats by phone and on social media, and being forced to conceal their identities publicly.⁴³ In December 2021, the RNLI was also briefly forced to take down its website after a suspected cyberattack that was likely launched by far-right actors.⁴⁴ Another testimony account describes the scenes that have taken place when returning from a Channel rescue:

when we got there, there were some members of the public who saw us coming in with this – two families, little children, four or five years old in this boat, and a small group of them were standing there on the beach shouting, "Fuck off back to France" at us as we tried to bring them in ... I've never been met by an angry mob before. And it's one of the most upsetting things I've ever seen. I can't imagine what those families felt like, coming ashore to that after the night they'd had.⁴⁵

RNLI rescue accounts also testify to the extent of violence inflicted upon migrants during the Channel sea-passage. In the waters of the Channel, border violence is both *environmental* and *temporal*. The state has harnessed the Channel's natural dangers to assemble and mobilise its own zone of non-being, a zone that is fundamentally hostile to the movement and passage of human beings across the water. ⁴⁶ Migrants bodies are repeatedly exposed to the worst elements of the natural environment at sea. On board these boats, they are faced with horrific conditions that include severe cases of dehydration, hunger, seasickness, heatstroke, hypothermia, chemical burns, and worse. One crewmember has given detail to the resulting medical emergencies out at sea:

They are often injured and poorly. We've had several women collapse. People suffering from blood sugar problems. We have witnessed several people with leg and foot injuries including break strains and lacerations. They are nearly always wet, without shoes, ill prepared for sea. Throughout the winter months most casualties are wearing a light jacket. At best they are freezing. They are exhausted, thirsty, and hungry.⁴⁷

- 42 Anonymous, 'Crew Testimony', *RNLI*, October 2022, accessed from https://rnli.org/news-and-media/2022/october/18/
 rnli-releases-new-channel-rescue-footage-and-first-hand-crew-testimony> [accessed 24 March 2024]. See also Steven Morris, 'RNLI Reveals Channel Rescue Stats and New Kit to Save More People in Seconds', *The Guardian*, 14 June 2023, accessed from https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/jun/14/rnli-reveals-channel-rescue-stats-and-new-kit-to-save-more-people-in-seconds>[accessed 24 March 2024].
- 43 Anonymous, 'Crew Testimony'.
- 44 Harry Taylor, 'RNLI Takes Down Its Website After Suspected Hacking Attempt', *The Guardian*, 3 December 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/03/rnli-takes-down-its-website-after-suspected-hacking-attempt [accessed 24 March 2024].
- 45 RNLI, 'Statement on the Humanitarian Work of the RNLI in the English Channel', RNLI, 28 July 2021, accessed from https://rnli.org/news-and-media/2021/july/28/statement-on-the-humanitarian-work-of-the-rnli-in-the-english-channel [accessed 24 March 2024].
- 46 Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1952), p. 6; Ibrahim, *Migrants and Refugees at UK Borders*, pp. 87-88.
- 47 RNLI, 'Statement on the Humanitarian Work'.

It is imperative we name these cruelties, not as unfortunate occurrences of crossing by sea, but the willing consequences of state abandonment.⁴⁸ This environmental violence is firmly linked to the state's additional use of temporal violence against migrants. European maritime border states, as Stierl has argued, have actively engaged in the weaponisation of time itself, decelerating the process of search and rescue while accelerating interceptions.⁴⁹ The UK government's use of "driftback" tactics, whereby rescue appeals from migrant boats have been missed or ignored in the cruel hopes that the boats will drift back into French sovereign waters, have further compounded the violence and lethality of Channel sea-crossings. 50 RNLI accounts testify to migrants being stuck on the waters for as long as thirty hours, as well as volunteers frequently being left responsible by Border Force for the most difficult late-night and early-morning rescues.⁵¹ These willful policies of neglect, apathy and abandonment - on both sides of the Channel - are increasingly turning the space into a site of mass drownings. The tragic losses of life during the nights of November 24th, 2021 and December 15th, 2022 mark the deadly result of such decisions.

Faced with such bleak conditions, the RNLI's embodied humanism inscribed in the act of salvaging bodies from the water, no matter who they are - offers an impulsive and powerful refusal against "race" and the material wounds it inflicts. The RNLI's self-identified core purpose is clear: they are there to save lives at sea. Mark Dowie, the charity's chief-executive, has avowed that 'we do not judge who we rescue ... anyone can drown, but no one should'.52 This bold commitment to an explicit moral principle, closely resembling Adorno's insistence on an unquestionable solidarity with the victims of torture, should be seen as firmly anti-racist. Each time a RNLI boat goes out to confront a shipwreck in the waters of the Channel, this moral stance translates into a unique act of embodied humanism at sea. Crews have repeatedly referenced the instinctual sense of a common, fragile, and vulnerable humanity that comes from venturing into the watery gates of death. Confronted with the grotesque suggestion that migrants should be abandoned at sea, the telling reply of one volunteer fisherman demonstrates this amply:

"I'd say (to them), 'How about you go out and look at them and kick them in the water? Have you seen someone drown? I have. You go look them in the eye and do that."" 53

Another volunteer offered a similar reflection:

I think what you realise when you get to the migrant boats, when you get to these dinghies, I think what hits you more than anything, irrespective of your own thoughts on this situation is the desperation that they must be in to put themselves in this situation and then you look at them as human beings irrespective of where they have come from, human beings that are in a state of distress that need rescuing, so every other thought goes out of your mind.⁵⁴

- 48 RNLI, 'Statement on the Humanitarian Work'; Anonymous, 'Crew Testimony'.
- 49 Maurice Stierl, 'Rebel Spirits at Sea: Disrupting EUrope's Weaponizing of Time in Maritime Migration Governance', *Security Dialogue* (2023) 1-18, (p. 2). See also Paul Gilroy's important reflections on the weaponisation of time and state indifference in the aftermath of the Grenfell Fire in 2017, Paul Gilroy, 'Never Again Grenfell', *Serpentine*, 24 April 2023 https://www.serpentinegalleries.org/art-and-ideas/never-again-grenfell/> [accessed 24 March 2024].
- 50 Aaron Walawalkar, Eleanor Rose and Mark Townsend, "Horror Beyond Words': How Channel Distress Calls were 'ignored' 19 Times before 2021 Disaster', *The Observer*, 29 April 2023 https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/apr/29/uk-coastguardignored-distress-calls-2021-channel-boatdisaster [accessed 24 March 2024].
- 51 RNLI, 'Statement on the Humanitarian Work'; Phipps, 'The Lifeboat Crew on the Frontline of Britain's Migrant Crisis'.
- 52 RNLI, 'Statement on the Humanitarian Work'.
- 53 Phipps, 'The Lifeboat Crew on the Frontline of Britian's Migrant Crisis'.
- 54 RNLI, 'Statement on the Humanitarian Work'.

In such hostile conditions, the embodied act of pulling people from the water and providing care marks a blunt refusal to accept any notion of a human being beyond rescuing. The simple acts of care performed by RNLI volunteers – keeping people warm, giving medical attention, or even just offering entertainment for children – represent not only a bulwark against the assault on decency carried out by various political actors today, but a sharp reminder of the kind of values that have become increasingly rare across democratic life.

The kind of humanism exemplified by the act of pulling bodies from the water is not just an embodied practice. It is, above all, a *re-enchanted* and *reparative* humanism.55 In our times, the struggle for reparatory justice has often been dominated by calls for financial and material restitution. The contestation over the work of the RNLI, however, suggests a unique and alternative direction for reparations. In light of the historical and political forces that have shaped the meeting of the RNLI lifeboat and the migrant boat at sea, both of which have been deeply embedded in the histories of slavery and colonialism, we might venture to demand whether these rescues themselves represent a novel form of reparatory justice. Indeed, amidst these sea-encounters between migrants and rescue volunteers, there are glimpses of a new, reparative dialectic of recognition that is slowly beginning to emerge. One volunteer has testified to the effect that Channel rescues have on their own personal lives:

There's a few things I've seen that have really affected me. The first job I went to that involved a Channel crossing, we rescued this little girl who was five years old and about the same size as my daughter. And she was very scared and obviously exhausted, very cold, hungry. She was wearing the same lifejacket that my daughter wears when we go sailing together and I now can't look at my daughter in her lifejacket without thinking of this little girl, and being reminded every time we go to play with our boat for fun, that another family just like ours very nearly lost their lives trying to make it to England. 56

"I now can't look at my daughter in her lifejacket without thinking of this little girl". These words mark a fundamental re-orientation of what it means to be human away from the corrosive power of racism, nationalism, and xenophobia. They powerfully capture a newly acquired and repaired sense of not only our common 'amputated humanity', but the primal interdependence we share together as vulnerable fellow beings on this blue planet. Fanon, for his part, *always* insisted that the struggle against racism involved substantive gains for everyone, both for the victims *and* the witting or unwitting beneficiaries of the planet's racial orders. ⁵⁷ We might be inclined to see these encounters between migrants and rescue volunteers as a microcosm of his reparative humanism in practice; a kind of anti-racism driven not by acts of triumphalist heroism or futile self-criticism, but by the grim, difficult work of holding on to one another in our emergency conditions.

- 55 See Paul Gilroy, 'Humanities and a New Humanism', The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, 21 February 2014, (pp. 67-74); David Scott, 'The Reenchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter, *Small Axe*, 8 (2000) 119-207; Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, 'What Does It Mean to Be Human in the Aftermath of Mass Trauma and Violence? Toward the Horizon of an Ethics of Care', *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 36, 2 (2016) 43-61.
- 56 RNLI, 'Statement on the Humanitarian Work'.
- 57 Fanon, *Peaux Noire, Masques Blancs*, pp. 187-188; 'Gilroy, 'Refusing Race and Salvaging the Human'.

Conclusion

In the face of damaged life, one which so often feels politically overwhelming, the sociologist Les Back has argued for the importance of what he calls "worldly hope": the hope created by being attentive to the emergent alternatives, directions and possibilities that are being manifested in the social world today. 58 This project's engagement with the work of the RNLI remains in close dialogue with that spirit. Like the city of London from which Back writes, the Channel/la Manche today is a space of contradictions and antagonisms in which the forces of division and solidarity, unfreedom and freedom, despair and hope are constantly swirling, mixing and battling against one other. 59

Looking out on to the horizon, what comes next for the Channel and the politics of migration in Britain is unclear. While the Illegal Migration Bill has finally managed to make its way through Parliament, the government continues to lurch from failure to failure over its border policies and – as of yet - has been unable to send any deportation flights to Rwanda. In the midst of so much uncertainty, Australia's existing crackdown on boat migration might be instructive here as to what happens if we choose to stay on this route. We know from that case that migrants, despite everything placed in their path, will continue to come. There will only be more private offshore detention centres, more dangerous pushback attempts, and more deaths at sea: nothing but pain, cruelty, and misery. 60 The ugly, vicious attacks on the RNLI, or anyone who dares express sympathy with the lives of migrants, will certainly escalate further in such a scenario. The attempted vigilante firebombing attack that took place two years ago on a migrant detention centre in Dover, which lies only a stone's throw away from the town's RNLI lifeboat station, should remind us of what the stakes are now this late in the game.

Or there are different, healthier alternatives that await us on the horizon. The Channel is neither the Mediterranean nor the Australian seas - and it does not have to be tomorrow. There is much to despair in watching the events unfolding today, but people do make it to England, and they will continue to make it tomorrow. Attending to the rich histories of the Black Channel/la Manche Noire through a longer lens, as the first section tried to do, will offer a powerful weapon in challenging the corrosive political forces of imperial disavowal and border spectacle. Just as equally, the ongoing work of the RNLI represents an important and necessary example of Back's worldly hope for us to collectively draw upon. There is much that can be critiqued about the charity, whether it be their historical roots in slavery-derived wealth or their relationship to island nationalism, and yet their bold commitment to saving lives at sea - no matter who they are - represents a profoundly moral anti-racist stance. The RNLI's embodied and reparative humanist work of salvaging marks a defiant rejection of a politics that would prefer to abandon those in distress. The charity's obligations at sea, to be sure, cannot substitute for the longer political struggle for the right to mobility and safe passage for all across our blue planet. But whatever direction we choose to head in, there will surely be more people that need to be pulled from the water.

- 58 Les Back, 'Hope's Work', *Antipode*, 53, 1 (2021) 3–20.
- 59 Ibid, p. 4.
- 60 Nicola Kelly, May Bulman, Tomas Statius, Bashar Deeb and Fahim Abed, 'Revealed: UK-funded French forces putting migrants' lives at risk with small-boat tactics, *The Observer*, 23 March 2024 https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2024/mar/23/uk-funding-french-migrants-small-boat-border-forces [accessed 24 March 2024].

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Attentiveness to the important work of RNLI volunteers like Judith Richardson is instructive here. For the past fifty-three years, Judith has been a volunteer for the RNLI's Dungeness station, working in various roles such as launching lifeboats, teaching water safety courses and fundraising for the charity. In June 2023, she was awarded royal honours for her lifelong work. RNLI Dungeness, located on the south-east coast between Hastings and Folkestone, has been one of the stations most heavily involved in Channel migrant rescues, and in 2022 Judith was interviewed by an Economist reporter on the subject:

(Judith) still volunteers today and is known in the boathouse as "Granny". I found her enduringly blonde aged 74, with a Conservative Party membership leaflet on her desk and a Platinum Jubilee flag flying in the garden. She grew quiet when I asked about the "vigilantes", which is what the RNLI volunteers call people who hurl abuse at them. "Why am I a traitor? I don't get it."

The cynical forces of pessimism and resignation would probably turn their backs on the idea of Judith being a part of the struggle against race. Yet the work she does on behalf of the RNLI, a charity partly founded by slave-owners that today goes out to rescue migrants, *matters*. When there are bodies in the water, we need all hands on deck – even those of the most unlikely of anti-racists.⁶¹

61 RNLI, 'Dungeness RNLI Volunteer Recognised in King's Birthday Honours', RNLI, 17 June 2023, https://rnli.org/news-and-media/2023/june/17/dungeness-rnli-volunteer-recognised-in-kings-birthday-honours [accessed 24 March 2024]; Phipps, 'The Lifeboat Crew on the Frontline of Britain's Migrant Crisis'.

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