Blue Humanism: e Royal National Lifeboat Institution and the Contested Politics of Race, Nation and Humanity in the Channel

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Abstract

is paper seeks to interrogate how the work of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (the RNLI) has become a central point of tension in the con icts 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. e 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 dicult work of salvaging orients us towards a new anti-racist, embodied and reparative humanism.

is militarisation of the UK border draws on transnational precedents, knowledge and expertise. O shore 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 e resulting 'Operation Sovereign Borders' led to the terror and migration. extensive deportation of migrants into o -shore detention centres in Christmas Island, Papua New Guinea, and Nauru, as well as pushbacks at sea by the Australian Navy.4 We see similar trends emerging in contemporary Britain, as the state relies on new forms of encampment, o shoring, and deportation to identify, capture, and expel its racialised outsiders. ese material transformations in Britain's border architecture con gure the migrant boat as a military threat to national/racial sovereignty. ese 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

e 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. e 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.⁶ 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 rst 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. e rst 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". e 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 di cult work of salvaging bodies from the water orients us towards a new anti-racist, embodied and reparative humanism.

e 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

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- 4 Greg Martin, 'Stop the Boats! Moral Panic in Australia over Asylum Seekers', C , 29, 3 (2015) 304-322; Julia C. Morris, 'Violence and Extraction of a Human Commodity: From Phosphate to Refugees in the Republic of Nauru', E , 6 (2019) 1122-1133.

 5 Giorgio Agamben, H , B Life, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

main strands. e rst 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. 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. 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 gures 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 autt-s3ce the (ns,)]Tnnellism today.

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Imperial Disavowal

As a camera ies over the blue waters surrounding Britain's coast, the narrator of , the BBC's documentary series on the RNLI, opens by con dently 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 signi cance of "islandness" to what de nes 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-de ning 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 con icts over the RNLI's work in the Channel are symptomatic of the persistent denial and disavowal of imperialism's importance to modern Britain. e 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 o from both its colonial past and the wider world.

ere have been a number of historical-psychoanalytical diagnoses over the last twenty years to characterise postcolonial Europe's di cult relationship to its imperial histories, ranging from amnesia and aphasia to nostalgia and melancholia. While all of these conditions are relevant to modern Britain's complex relationship to empire and migration, this section focuses on speci cally as a useful term to explore the RNLI's place within these contested postimperial histories. i22sSapn, specihis

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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 conict within the subject, but symptoms always return and what is re

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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. ese logics are exemplied 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". 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".

is assembled relationship between the RNLI and national identity also importantly occludes possible understandings of the charity's historical links to slavery and colonialism. e story of the RNLI's origin cannot be retold in its entirety here, but its foundations lie rmly 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. 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 rmly 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 rst patrons, including George Hibbert, omas Wilson and John Vincent Purrier, equally owed their riches to British slavery.²⁷ ese clear nancial links between the RNLI and the o shore wealth generated by the labour of enslaved Africans raise important questions. ey 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 ows of people, ships and global capital between the island metropole and its exterior colonies. For instance, HMS , whose shipwreck o 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 di cult and extended re ection on the RNLI's relationship to the politics of "race", nationalism and empire. is re ection 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 speci cally 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', (2021) 83-98; Angela Mitropolos, 'Lifeboat Capitalism, Catastrophism, Borders', $D_{\rm p}$, $J_{\rm p}$, 1 (2018) 1-19.
- 26 Gleeson's book \mathcal{L} B 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.', \mathcal{L} B D , 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, \(\alpha \) B \(\cdot \) F

 B (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 52, p. 231-232. e RNLI's original minute book from 1824 recording patrons also lists a number of gures with connections to British slavery. See Geraldine Patricia Wilson, e Royal National Lifeboat Institution: Its Foundation and Organisation' (MA dissertation, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2019), pp. 85-86.
- 28 Gleeson, $\angle B$, 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 ere 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 gures 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 sea oor 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 de ning "us" from "them". At Dover, where Matthew Arnold once composed his poetic re ections on an earlier crisis of modernity, symbolic images of the White Cli s are employed ad nauseum by political forces, in an e ort to mobilise sentiments of patriotism, independence, and solidity amid the liquid uncertainty of Britain's withdrawal from the European Union.³¹ e 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 lms such as D H = (2017) and D. 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. e Channel, like the lifeboat, serves as another symbolic gure 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 con ict 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. e gure of the Channel migrant - without wanting to sound pathologising - might be seen as the symbolic return of these disavowed imperial histories. Amidst broader con icts 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, exempli ed by thinkers

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e 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 brie y 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. e di cult - and increasingly criminalised - work of solidarity by groups like Sea Watch in the Mediterranean is dismissed for having a 'whitening gaze'. Gilroy's B Acan be dutifully invoked as a theoretical reference point, while his more recent work on o shore 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 eodor 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

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migrants to cross the Channel, such as dinghies, catamarans, or even kayaks, are often overcrowded, unseaworthy and barely a oat. 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:

Away from the challenges of venturing into these o -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 brie y 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:

RNLI rescue accounts also testify to the extent of violence in icted upon migrants during the Channel sea-passage. In the waters of the Channel, border violence is both and and a 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. Migrants bodies are repeatedly exposed to the worst elements of the natural environment at sea. On board these boats, they are faced with horric 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:

- 42 Anonymous, 'Crew Testimony', ∠I,
 October 2022, accessed from https://rnli.org/news-and-media/2022/october/18/rnli-releases-new-channel-rescue-footage-and-rst-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', G , 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', G, 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', ∠I, 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].
- 47 RNLI, 'Statement on the Humanitarian Work'.

It is imperative we name these cruelties, not as unfortunate occurrences of crossing by sea, but the consequences of state abandonment.⁴⁸ is

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and providing care marks a blunt refusal to accept any notion of a human being beyond rescuing. e simple acts of care performed by RNLI volunteers - keeping people warm, giving medical attention, or even just o ering 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. e kind of humanism exempli ed by the act of pulling bodies from the water is not just an embodied practice. It is, above all, a humanism.55 In our times, the struggle for reparatory justice has often been dominated by calls for nancial and material restitution. 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 testi ed to the e ect that Channel rescues have on their own personal lives:

In such hostile conditions, the embodied act of pulling people from the water

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. is 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 nally 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 ights 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 ere will only be more private o shore their path, will continue to come. detention centres, more dangerous pushback attempts, and more deaths at sea: nothing but pain, cruelty, and misery. 60 e 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. e attempted vigilante rebombing 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. e Channel is neither the Mediterranean nor the Australian seas

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Attentiveness to the important work of RNLI volunteers like Judith Richardson is instructive here. For the past—fty-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:

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