

# POLICING “SMALL BOATS” AND PERIPHERIES: CHANNEL CROSSINGS AS SITES OF MORAL PANIC

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This paper looks at the United Kingdom’s governing of the Channel during the late 2010s, early 2020s – exposing how relationships of capital and race have been configured in this particular conjuncture through the policing of “small boats”. Using the analytic of moral panics (Hall et al. 2013), I investigate how concerns of maritime safety, hard immigration, and crackdowns on “smuggling” gangs convene in the policing of “entry” via sea, yet obfuscate a set of socio-economic conditions prevailing in post-2008 racial capitalism. Drawing on Stuart Hall’s analysis of “mugging” in 1970s Britain (Hall et al. 2013), and Ida Danewid’s conjunctural work on the European border regime (2022), the paper situates “small boats” in a longer arc of racialised panics in which various crises of accumulation and racial hegemony have been rendered onto migrants and vessels (via policing, mediatisation, courts and policy). In particular, I focus on Eastern and Southeastern European migrants as an important part of the Channel’s political economy. Foregrounding the historic interaction of enclosure of Britain’s imperial space and Europe’s peripheries, and ongoing securitisation of Channel crossers (as facilitators, criminals, bogus asylum seekers, and surplus labour), I argue for a closer understanding of how the racialisation of Black, Brown and “not quite white” articulate.

Keywords: moral panic, the Channel, small boats, peripheries, enclosure

## INTRODUCTION

This is a different account of the United Kingdom’s (UK) southern maritime border with the European Union (EU). The Channel, and its recent policing, is often handled as a novel space, an instantiation of new British and EU sovereignties, new problems and new legal solutions – all often centring on the material and existential threat of “small boats” carrying

illegalised migrants. With this paper, I want to recast the Channel and the boat, asking what the UK's policy of "stop the boats" tells us (or seeks to displace) about the current conjuncture, and the congealment of bordering and exploitation over a longer arc of racial capitalism. Through the lens of moral panics (Hall et al. 2013; Danewid 2022), the paper questions the notion of maritime crossings as an exclusively "new" sovereign concern. Rather, "small boats" form a reactionary consensus around the reorganisation of capital and whiteness, and the unfolding policing of their "outsides" in the Channel. Investigating the rise in boat crossings since 2018 in conjunction with historic patterns in British visa and asylum policy, I show how certain people, vessels, and peripheries take on the spatial-racial contours of "crisis". In doing so, I argue for a tighter understanding of overlapping processes of enclosure (Rexhepi 2023), which entangle the racialisation of Black, Brown, and "not quite white" migrants (Lewicki 2023: 4) from the EU, its peripheries, and Britain's ex-colonies.

I start by outlining insights from Stuart Hall's (2013) and Ida Danewid's (2022) conjunctural analyses. Following from this, I foreground the importance of understanding the current conjuncture within a history of border panics in the Channel that relate interlocking processes of enclosure (Rexhepi 2023) involving so-called Global Souths and Easts (Aparna et al. 2025). The paper then brings these racialised entanglements (Lewicki 2023, 2024) into a discussion of unstable hegemony post-2008, exploring how Euro-scepticism developed in tow with increased racialised unease about the rights of Black and Brown migrants to remain and work in the UK. From this context, I unpack how policing "small boats" externalises deepening contradictions in the 2010s/20s racial capitalism onto the Channel and migrants on "entry". Further, I pose the policing of Romanian truck drivers, Albanian "gangs", and Polish dockworkers as associated racialised panics (over organised crime, asylum "fraud", and disease) which index overlapping British imperial and European enclosures.

## MORAL PANICS OVER MIGRATION

To think with Hall and do a policing of the crisis now is therefore to look beyond the European migrant "crisis" and to examine the relationship between racism, mobility controls and changing forms of capitalist political economy. (Danewid 2022: 31)

In "Policing the Crisis"<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, together with Chas Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke, and Brian Roberts, undertook a conjunctural analysis of early 1970s Britain, showing how state policing of racialised Others emerged as a way to resolve deteriorating socio-economic control (Hall et al. 2013). Hall unpicked how the moral panic around "mugging" (street assault/robbery) at that time did not correspond to a straightforward

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<sup>1</sup> "Policing the Crisis" was first published in 1978. Throughout this article I reference the Second Edition published in 2013.

rise in crime rates. Rather, the speed at which such incidents were occurring had slowed around the decade Hall was analysing. The attempt to assert a rise in “muggings” was more about reinterpretations and reclassification of crime by the police, media, and courts, than being a substantive trend. Instead, muggings, often simply being police and ticket inspector attacks on young Black and Brown people, became a figure through which to understand migration as a threat to society, transferring Britain’s crisis in economy and hegemony onto the racialised body. Rather than conspiracy from ruling elites, this moral panic was analysed by Hall as a reaction by various institutions to changing socio-economic conditions in the 1970s. The conjuncture saw Fordism and Britain’s wider imperial order change, including oil embargos by Arab states against the ongoing colonisation of Palestine (Hanieh et al. 2025), renewed resistance to the British occupation in the North of Ireland, and strikes and protests from domestic labour movements, and decolonial and Black power struggles.

In court proceedings, journalistic coverage and government debate, “muggings” as a scare sought to refortify a conservative moral order in which a traditionalist white bourgeois “decency” was subject to the “polluting” breakdown of law and order attached to Black and Brown migrants (Hall et al. 2013: 124). This conservative morality lent the establishment crackdown a kind of commonsense logic, targeting people of colour as undermining the “structure of ‘Englishness’ [...] work discipline, the family, and so on” (Hall et al. 2013: 64). The violent enforcement strategies brought in to shore up “law and order” in 1970s Britain included new police divisions targeting people of colour on the street and steeper custodial sentences (Hall et al. 2013). This also dovetailed with immigration law, such as the 1971 Immigration Act, which tightened rules on movement from ex-colonies. As Ida Danewid (2022) has effectively argued in the case of the present European border regime, moral panics about migration bely a set of changing social, economic, governance, and mobility conditions. Analysing responses to the sexual assaults during the 2015–2016 New Year in Cologne, Germany, Danewid (2022: 29) shows how the figure of the Brown Muslim man is reinscribed as an invasive “threat” (Tudor 2018: 1067), not as part of an exceptional discourse tied to this event, but corresponding to wider social and material forces which produce migration as social/racial formation to be policed. In this light, tracing the concurrent processes of surveillance, detention, and deportation highlight “attempts to defend white bourgeois order and to police a (neoliberal) racial formation in crisis” (Danewid 2022: 21).

In this paper I draw on Hall and Danewid’s approach to conjunctural analysis, which takes seriously the historical processes and antagonisms, and the diverse ideological work underpinning social control (Danewid 2022: 29). Conjunctural analysis moves us away from a causal approach to law and order – *muggings equal crime pandemic, small boats equal migrant influx*. Instead, its application here (through analysing media, court reports, government statements, and statistics) alerts us to the repressed socio-historical content of the “small boat” panic and racialised dispositions it organises; as Hall incisively shows, “there appears to be a vigorous reaction to ‘mugging’ as a socio-criminal phenomenon

before there are any actual ‘muggings’ to react to” (Hall et al. 2013: 183–184). In analysing the conjunctural currents reorganised in the “small boat” panic, we can attend to what Alana Lentin (2025), building on Cedric Robinson (2007), refers to as recalibrations of a new racial regime.

## POLICING PERIPHERIES

The policing of “small boats” takes strength from a lineage of earlier panics in the Channel, reflecting important shifts in immigration and capitalist labour markets *vis-à-vis* British imperial and European peripheries. Piro Rexhepi’s analysis of “white enclosure” (2023) deepens an understanding of how interdependent forms of racialisation govern colonial contact zones and, while focused on the Balkans, offers a connective way of thinking about “core” shipping corridors like the Channel, which organise multiple peripheries. Rexhepi illustrates how Euro-Atlantic enclosure in post-Ottoman space involves unfolding forms of colonial, racial, and religious bordering (Rexhepi 2023: 92), where combined projects of Europeanisation, post-socialist “transition” and border externalisation differentiate populations – “white” Muslims from Roma Muslims, local communities from refugees (Rexhepi 2023: 147). This analytic brings the governing of so-called Global Souths and Easts into a relational project (Aparna et al. 2025), where the production of Europe’s “internal ‘others’” (Hall 2021: 381; Boatcă 2013) and movement from different global colonial peripheries articulate to one another within a regime of whiteness (Baker et al. 2025).

Thinking this in the context of the Channel, the work of enclosure constantly augments, sometimes pacting violence against “undesirables” as a collective “outside” (such as non-citizens and organised labour), but more often than not different peripheries to racial capital are hierarchised, offsetting the control of “one labelled section against another” (Hall et al. 2013: 190). As the following genealogy shows, Black, Brown, “not quite white”, and white are not fixed to nationality, as the violent ambivalence to EU citizens of colour and British colonial subjects shows (El-Tayeb 2011). These are shifting ascriptions which combine with, but do not directly equate to, what Alyosxa Tudor (2018) calls “migratisation” (a changing interplay of citizenship, class, gender, and racialisation).

We can see the relational dynamics of enclosure sharply in how antisemitism and settler colonialism combine in the policing of the Channel at the start of the 20th century. As Rob Waters (2024) illuminates, the 1905 Alien Act had already targeted British immigration control towards “small boats” at this time. Vessels with more than twenty passengers crossing the Channel were subject to new checks under the Act, creating an associated panic about the “undesirable aliens” (Dias-Abey 2025: 116) avoiding these checks in smaller boats. The new immigration controls were designed to prevent Eastern European Jews fleeing the Pale of Settlement, part of the then Russian Empire (modern day Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova). Brought in by Prime Minister Arthur

Balfour, the timing of the Alien Act showed how enclosure to Europe's Eastern periphery was enmeshed with Britain's changing imperial order, particularly the Zionist colonisation of Palestine (Hall 2021: 384) facilitated by Balfour's 1917 declaration.

Subsequently, the Aliens Order of 1920 brought in new work permit regulations, reflecting a growing unease about migration and labour militancy in Britain after World War I. Controls on entry to coastal ports threaded the spectre of socialist ideas "travelling" from the East, given the recent Bolshevik revolution (Dias-Abey 2025: 117), alongside concerns about the growing employment of colonial British subjects (from South Asia, Africa and the SWANA region) in domestic dockwork and merchant navy posts. The Coloured Seamen Order came into force in 1925 obligating Black and Brown seafarers to prove that they were British subjects, with proofs arbitrarily dismissed in order to aid deportation from Britain (Dias-Abey 2025: 120).

World War II also saw hierarchised reorganisation of colonial and European peripheries, with Black and Brown colonial subjects forcibly enlisted to the military (particularly in exploitative logistic roles), while sections of the Polish infantry, for example, were integrated into the British army's defence of the Channel. A less discussed development, though, was the domestic introduction of the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme (SAWS). Formalised in 1945 but effective since 1943, this scheme began to bring in Eastern European workers to the UK to pick fruit and vegetables to relieve labour shortfalls (Nye 2016). The visa route would become one of *the* sites of moral panic around the presence of Eastern labour in British agriculture and packing industries around later EU enlargement.

In the post-war era, migration encouraged from Britain's ex-colonies filled shortfalls in industries including transport and healthcare. These mobilities were subject to increasing racialised panics, such as Enoch Powell's 1968 "Rivers of Blood" speech and changing border controls (Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962, Immigration Act 1971, British Nationality Act 1981). Notably, it was at this time that post-colonial migration was offset by the UK's accession to the European Communities (EC) in 1973 (Sigona 2023), signalling visa liberalisation which would "whiten" the labour pool – the backdrop being the systematic removal of British citizenship from Black and Brown people. This shift was already about a panic of "stopping boats", halting the movement of large passenger vessels like the HMT Empire Windrush, which had come to symbolise Black migration from the Caribbean.

Yet as Hall's later writings signal, the ensuing 1980s and 1990s developed "a space of free movement still more of a 'home' to some Europeans than it is to others, as the Poles, Bulgarians, Kosovans, Albanians and others from the former Soviet republics, clamouring for entry at the gates of 'Europe,' testify" (Hall 2021: 383). Moralised unease about migration from Eastern and Southeastern Europe was reflected in the British mediatisation of the fall of Communism, such as televising of Romanians in "overcrowded orphanages, of deplorable conditions in hospitals, of children sick with AIDS" (Petcu 2023: 119) and the press portraying Romanian migrants as threatening "moral and medical contamination" (Light and Young 2009: 292). Entwined with this was growing anti-Roma racism

(Paraschivescu 2020), as seen in the press coverage of Czech and Slovak asylum seekers arriving at the port of Dover as threatening a “British way of life” (Clark and Campbell 2000).

The interdependent racialisation of post-socialist migration in this period (Kalmar 2023) interlocked with the staggered geography of the EU and Schengen Area: enclosures within enclosures. Because of the UK’s longstanding exemption from Schengen (Mayblin et al. 2024), the Channel emerged as a site of differentiated control for Europe’s internal and outside “others”. The panic over Kosovar Albanian refugees crossing in the late 1990s – those whose “outsiderness” the bloc depends on (Hall 2021: 384) – exemplified the structural stratification where Fortress Europe and British bordering met. EU enlargements between 2004 and 2013, meanwhile, eased migration restrictions to the UK for some Eastern and Southeastern Europeans. But it was also a period that saw increasingly layered logics of “invasion” form, though with very different stakes. This included moral panics about white British agricultural labour being “replaced” by Romanians and Bulgarians (Light and Young 2009: 287), meanwhile the War on Terror framed Brown migrants as vectors of “Islamisation” while real-time British invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were underway.

## **BREXIT’S “OTHER WHITES” AND THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT**

Building from these interconnected processes of enclosure, here I draw on the context of Brexit and the Hostile Environment policies, showing how new hierarchies of precarity (especially around the right to work and the right to remain) were policed onto migrants from European and ex-colonial peripheries as a precursor to “stop the boats”.

With the global collapse of financial capital in 2008, the UK’s economy went into recession, underscored by unemployment, underemployment, and collapses of the public infrastructure (particularly health and education). Racial capitalist hegemony during this period was jointly eroded by Britain’s failed foreign policy involvements in the post-9/11 security order (including in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya), waning control of the North of Ireland, as well as subsequent uprisings related to the police killing of Mark Duggan, Black Lives Matter, and Palestinian liberation.

Drawing on John Narayan’s (2017) analysis of the “wages of whiteness”, Ida Danewid (2022) explains how crisis in racial and neoliberal hegemony further threaten the contract between white labour and capital (previously guaranteeing material and cultural supremacy). While on the one hand, neoliberal crises continues to impact racialised (and gendered) people the most: data from 2009 to 2013 shows the deepest wage drop in Britain impacting “Chinese (30 per cent) followed by Indian, Black African and Other White (10 per cent)” (Fisher and Nandi 2015). On the other hand, these crises also expose portions of white labour to unemployment, casualisation, and real-time pay cuts due to

inflation (Danewid 2022). With the racial contract no longer sustainable purely in material wages (Narayan 2017), punitive policing and immigration drives that target racial Otherness come to the fore as a mediating response (Danewid 2022: 30). These are wages paid in panic that involve both carceral and deportation infrastructure, as well as reshaped visa and labour restrictions.

It is in this context that the Brexit campaign, mustering preexisting currents of Euro-scepticism about “other whites” (Blachnicka-Ciacek and Budginaite-Mackine 2022), targeted the circulation of precarious East-West labour in UK social care, agriculture, and food industries (Lewicki 2023: 1491). This built on previous panics about the so-called “EU8”, made up of Poland, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia, Estonia, and Latvia, and “EU2”, Romania and Bulgaria. Pre-economic recession, people from these countries were already subject to restrictive checks on the right to social welfare (Barbulescu and Favell 2020) and aggressively targeted by deportation if deemed to be breaking EU treaty rights by sleeping rough (Radziwinowiczówna and Galasinska 2021). With the 2008 financial collapse, Brexit channelled racialised panic over job and welfare theft from the East (Fox et al. 2012), threats from “just outside” the borders of whiteness (Böröcz and Sarkar 2017: 312). The ambivalent figure of the hard-working Polish labourer (Lewicki 2023: 1489) reemerged as a racialised and gendered trope through which to govern the outsides of class and whiteness. This, despite at other times being fetishised in the labour market or included in the production of racism against Black and Brown communities.

Concurrently, sovereignty panics during the Brexit campaign about “reclaiming” whiteness were entangled directly with racialised calls to “reclaim the border” against the movement of Black and Brown bodies. The timing of the Hostile Environment (Liberty 2019) – a toolkit of migration acts, policies and propaganda – speaks to this. Developed by the Home Office since 2010, in tandem with the Brexit campaign, the Hostile Environment rolled out increased raids and immigration checks – involving schools, workplaces, landlords, and the National Health Service – as well as deportation advertising designed to make the UK “unlivable” for people without the right to remain. As Maya Goodfellow (2020) illustrates, rather than exceptional, this government approach drew on a long *durée* of colonial and racist violence, distilled in the Windrush deportations of Black British citizens.

Perhaps less discussed, though, is how this program of policing deepened a particular fold in racial capitalism, one in which the British immigration regime aggressively initiates precarious migrant labour into low waged sectors (such as health, care work, service) and yet is doubled with an intense policing drive against overstaying. We might call this “fire and rehire” through visas/deportation, a socio-economic relationship of disposability embedded in longstanding geographies of enclosure (Commonwealth, EU, and Schengen among others). In this dynamic, people from ex-colonies and the wider Global South are targeted as mobile surplus labour to fulfil particular roles (such as Brexit and COVID-19

related shortfalls) and yet simultaneously blamed and policed for consecutive crises (for taking up jobs, social protection, and “demographic” space).

This contradiction works in tandem with restrictions on EU mobility, especially seasonal work contracts and tightened visa and resettlement routes after Brexit. As Aleksandra Lewicki compellingly argues, these are entangled hierarchies, and where “employment profiles are being designated based on racialised ascriptions; postcolonial and intra-European mobilities fill different niches” (Lewicki 2023: 1494). Differentiated employment across logistics, construction, manufacturing, and agriculture for mostly Eastern and Southeastern European migrants is set against labour migration from the Global South into hospitals, social care, and the service sector. These “niches” (Lewicki 2023), which overlap and change over time, condense classed, racialised, and gendered structures. Certain groups are funnelled through skills, talent and study routes, while a spectra of surplus labour is portioned into underpaid gig or informal work, exploiting people of colour the most. These emergent sites of control around the right to “stay” and “work” would soon be externalised onto the militarized prevention of “entry” in the Channel.

## POLICING “SMALL BOATS”

Rooted in a racial and neoliberal constellation undergoing transformation, “small boats” emerged as a particular moral panic in late 2010s and early 2020s Britain. In this conjuncture, the Channel as a space of *fading law and order* to be “rectified” by policing misdirects attention away from the overdetermined context of racialised labour circulation, stunted capital accumulation, and government legitimacy post-2008. The apprehension of the “small boat” becomes a further figure, like the “mugger” (Hall et al. 2013), through which to police the crisis (as if it could be stopped before it *comes ashore*).

More regular crossing of the Channel with dinghies rose from late 2018 onwards, peaking with 46,000 people crossing in 2022 (UK Home Office 2023) and 20,000 people crossing in the first six months of 2025 (Walsh and Cuibis 2025). Yet while discursively timestamped from 2018, the maritime space between the UK and the EU had been a key site of crossing, abandonment, and killing in the decades prior. Migrant crossings had previously relied mostly on lorries which used the regular ferry routes to Dover, while other people moved as stowaways on the Channel Tunnel railway. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, these terminals were used by refugees to cross to the UK, in particular by Kosovars fleeing former Yugoslavia (Schuster 2003; Mayblin et al. 2024: 254). There was already racialised hysteria in the UK media and parliament at this time about “influxes” of migrants, with a reported 18,500 attempts to access the train tunnel in the first half of 2001 (Schuster 2003: 510). As Hall elaborates:

Thousands of those who have been nightly hurling themselves at passing Euro star trains at the mouth to the Channel Tunnel are from that “other” Europe on whose difference “the idea of Europe” has always depended. (Hall 2021: 384)

These recent histories of bordered enclosure against Southeastern Europeans in the Channel are important reference points for the “small boat” panic. It was the heavier policing of these rail and shipping routes to stop “not quite white” mobilities that impacted the move to small fishing boats and inflatable vessels, resulting in the ongoing killing of migrants at sea (Walsh and Cuibus 2025).

As “small boat” crossings to the UK rose in the late 2010s, racialised dispositions (Lentin 2025) emergent in the post-2008 socio-economic order were restitched into a demonstrative figure of social control. Instead of boats in distress, the shift in mobility came to be intensively policed as a new “invasion” – though this mooted *newness* drew on a long *durée* of maritime enclosure in the Channel controlling “illegal” vessels and “alien” passengers (Davies et al. 2021; Waters 2024; Dias-Abey 2025). Within the montage of media coverage, entrants by boat were variously cast as part of “smuggling gangs” which kill and exploit, as duped migrants leaving “safe countries”, or as “bogus asylum seekers” playing the system (often a combination of all three). These media responses entwined with institutional approaches to migration as (racially) fused with organised crime: exemplified by Prime Minister Keir Starmer’s emphasis on “smashing the gangs” (Prime Minister’s Office 2024) and boosted powers for INTERPOL and the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS).

The gang logic *vis-à-vis* migration resonates with a number of racialised offensives against supposedly emergent social formations. These include stop-and-search tactics against Black communities, the Prevent Strategy targeting “radicalisation” of British Muslims, and the targeting of “not quite white” EU migrants for social welfare “fraud”. Advancing these sites of racialised unease over societal breakdown came as a way to mediate contradictions in 2010s/20s British economy. “Small boats” extend and further externalise these threats, engaging the Channel as a plane where conservative morality and nativist bordering projects can be ultimately reinforced.

On a legislative level, “small boats” have been the subject of a swathe of new laws, including the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, Illegal Migration Act 2023, and 2025 Borders Bill. These have increased maritime policing, surveillance and interception, and inhumane incarceration of arrivals in repurposed army barracks and hotels. Meanwhile, in the courts, “small boats” have been handled through new punitive sentencing of “illegal entry” and people criminalised as “drivers” (steering dinghies, though arbitrarily applied). The demonstrative incarceration for “facilitating illegal entry to the UK [...] and] manslaughter by gross negligence” has targeted survivors like Senegalese teenager Ibrahima Bah, who tried to save friends from drowning (Captain Support 2024). In July 2025, Home Secretary Yvette Cooper declared that every boat crossing where a child dies should be prosecuted onto the “driver” in French or UK courts (Cooke 2025), using border killings perpetrated by the state as a threat to migrants deemed as *endangering each other*. Selective prosecution has often been rendered through anti-Blackness (Captain Support 2024), racialised assumptions of how “smuggling” maps to nationality, as well as targeted incarceration, like that of Mosab Abdulkarim Al-Gassas from Gaza whose court case and media coverage was used to police and delegitimize armed Palestinian resistance.

As Hall et al. allude to in “Policing the Crisis”, these revanchist responses do not spring out of the ether. 1970s “mugging” in the UK was understood as a crime arriving already bound up in an “American panic about race, crime, riot and lawlessness” (Hall et al. 2013: 31). In the current conjuncture, the labelling of “small boats” arrived with its own racialised *law and order* baggage from the Mediterranean and Aegean. Here, Greece as Ursula Von der Leyen’s so-called “shield” of Europe against migrants (and Islam), and the Italian coastline as a bulwark of enclosure against waterborne Black bodies (Proglio et al. 2021) inform how the panic of “small boats” came to be understood. This is both discursive “import-export” of terms (Hall et al. 2013: 31) that guide the securitarian response, as well as the influence of practical maritime connections, such as the use of the vessel VOS Grace, a UK Border Force cutter deployed in Mediterranean Frontex operations in 2015 (UK Home Office 2015). The public debate about whether “pushback” methods (violent and deadly expulsions) could be expanded from other EU external borders to stop “small boats” in the Channel (Kirka and Lawless 2021) epitomised this moving label for abandonment.

Furthermore, categorisation in government records has provided a crucial backdrop to the panic. UK government data on “small boats” is issued weekly and defines them as vessels “used by individuals who cross the English Channel, with the aim of gaining entry to the UK without a visa or permission to enter” (UK Home Office 2025). Yet despite the language used often dealing in the watery metaphors (Bradley and De Noronha 2022) of floods and surges of illegal “entry”, government data consistently shows that the broader realities of asylum processing and policing of irregularised migration do not take place in the Channel. While 37,000 people who crossed by “small boat” in 2024 started an asylum claim, a further 40,000 people claimed asylum in the same year having initially come to the UK on a visa (Walsh and Cuibus 2025). People arriving on “small boats” only accounted for a third of total asylum claims that year, matching the general trend between 2018 and 2025 (Walsh and Cuibus 2025). Moving from the visa to asylum system, or “overstaying” on visas (on which there is no official data), form the broader backdrop.

These experiences are not about clandestine “entry”, which can be so readily dramatised in the policing of “small boats”. Rather, they underscore more complex navigations of visa and asylum status, structured by the tensions of racial capitalist exploitation and nativist bordering projects. Given the UK’s reliance on a racialised schema of precarious labour, these dynamics of “stay” expose underlying contradictions on migrant “exit”. Hence, while Brexit and the Hostile Environment corralled attention to the right to remain/work, I argue that the current fetishisation of “entry” seeks to externalise some of the ambivalences to these panics. Here, the “small boat”, which can be stopped before arrival, emerges as a reductionist cipher, symbolic of a racial border contract which increasingly advertises hermetic properties – as dramatised in the one-in-one-out policy of deportation from the UK to France (Armstrong 2025).

## TRUCKERS, BOAT DRIVERS, AND SEAFARERS

This section seeks to situate “small boats” in a wider political economy of the Channel, one structured by overlapping enclosures (as the relationship of Windrush migration and EC accession showed). Drawing necessary connections between Black, Brown, and “not quite white” mobility in shipping, I show how the policing of racialised figures such as Romanian truck drivers, Albanian “gangs”, and Polish dockworkers offers a distinctive lens on the relational organisation (Lewicki 2024) of racial capitalism in the conjuncture.

### TRUCKERS

Drivers of Heavy Goods Vehicles (HGVs), especially those from Eastern Europe and Ireland, are an under-discussed part of Channel crossings. These border crossers, using ferry and train routes to Dover, Portsmouth, and other ports, have been pivotal to the changing contingency of whiteness in 2010s/20s Britain. Their surplus labour has been exploited in logistics (Andriotis 2023), including special work permits issued post-Brexit to resolve driver shortfalls (UK Government 2022), and policed as a vector of illegal migration with distinct classed, racialised, and gendered contours.

Prior to the Brexit referendum, truck drivers were invested with a range of political and racial ambivalences. Fascist groups held protests in Dover under the banner of “Support the Calais to Dover Truckers”, claiming truckers were under “attack” from Black and Brown migrants trying to cross from Northern France (Anti-Fascist Network 2015). Simultaneously, European truckers were claimed to be taking up British jobs, despite making up less than 10% of the UK workforce in 2015 (RHA 2025: 17). Their troubled inclusion to whiteness was crucial to both the “Leave” and “Remain” campaigns around the UK’s withdrawal from the EU. In November 2020, shortly before Brexit was implemented, so-called liberal Remain campaigners doctored road signs which had read “Kent: Garden of England” to read “Kent: Toilet of England” (Kent Online 2020). The adusting played on the scare of motorway queues caused by the new customs checks and the prospect of drivers turning Kent’s motorways and petrol stations into an open toilet. These racialised claims over hygiene cast Southern English counties as “overwhelmed” and were deepened by press articles comparing HGV queues in Kent to the “Calais refugee crisis” (Meikle 2016), tapping into the racialisation of Black and Brown migrants to discipline “other whites”. The panic over hygiene merged with the policing of COVID-19, with international drivers claimed to be “spreading” the virus across the Channel (Lewicki 2023: 9), exposing the racialised limits of praise for “front line” logistics workers keeping deliveries going during lockdowns.

Bound up in the figure of HGV drivers as vectors of “disease” was not only COVID-19 transmission and roadside toilets, but the role of the “not quite white” as conveying Black

and Brown bodies across the Channel. This has been condensed in cases of border killings, particularly the death of 39 Vietnamese people hidden in a refrigerated lorry in Essex which had crossed the Channel from Zeebrugge in Belgium. In the wake of these killings, police “crackdowns” on Irish and Romanian haulage workers as “smugglers” (CPS 2023) were aided by racialised media coverage. British press focus on the grieving families in Vietnam (Yang 2021) bracketed the lorry away from critical understandings of the border regime and labour exploitation, policing a British economic and racial order in crisis onto the interplay of the racialised; the Vietnamese worker, only thinly humanised after death, and the abhorrent whiteness of Irish and Romanian truckers, extracting criminal profits from the Other.

Montages of this relationship in the press are numerous, such as the Daily Mail’s description of a Romanian trucker sentenced in 2020 for smuggling “two Bangladeshis, one Indian and one Egyptian” in his HGV (Wynne 2020). The nationalities of the Brown passengers are their only mention in the article, alongside a blurry picture of four people in the back of the vehicle. However, the article zooms in on the Romanian trucker “hand-cuffed and pictured wearing a disposable face mask, grey tracksuit bottoms, a Hi Vis [high visibility] jacket over a black Puma hoodie and grey t-shirt” (Wynne 2020). The reading of dress, alongside other “cultural” signifiers such as food, hairstyles, accents, and types of employment (as indexed in the high visibility jacket), ascribes the Romanian driver “another” form of whiteness (Paraschivescu 2020: 2668). There is no actual account from the migrants or the trucker, only the words of a National Crime Agency employee who claims that Marius, the HGV driver, treated the migrants like “commodities” and did not care for their “wellbeing and safety” (Wynne 2020). The moral panic over facilitation is one where Eastern European “smugglers” (making ill-gotten profit) and post-colonial “customers” (turned commodities) are racialised in their transactions. Here the fusing of organised crime and migration pushes neoliberal crisis onto racial Others deemed as acting outside of the legal market.

## BOAT DRIVERS

As discussed, “driving” is an explicitly racialised category of policing and sentencing for “small boats”. The focus on “drivers” underscores a counter smuggling politics in which certain peripheries come to represent a so-called nexus of illegal migration and organised crime. The policing of Albanians highlights in particular how “demographic threats” which unsettle whiteness, asylum and *law and order* are an integral part of enclosure in the Channel.

The “small boat” panic draws on particular racialised, gendered, and Islamophobic tropes about Albania, indexed in headlines about mafias, trafficking, drugs, and violent crime. Examples such as the BBC podcast series *Shadow World: The Smuggler* (Deas

2025) portray Albanians as “organised crime gangs” running Channel crossings. As Rexhepi writes, “it is not their racial otherness that makes Albanians suspects but their similarity and proximity to whiteness, people who, once inside the Euro-Atlantic enclosure, can move seamlessly and pass the policing gaze” (Rexhepi 2024: 100). Entry by “small boat” by Albanians has been posed as a particular threat to the racial hegemonic order, what then Home Secretary Suella Braverman called in November 2022 an “invasion”, leading to protests by Albanians in London (Si 2022).

A month earlier, the Minister for Immigration Robert Jenrick made similar remarks to the House of Commons, claiming “1% or even 2% of the adult male population of Albania either have attempted to leave the country in this manner, or are contemplating doing so” (House of Commons 2022). Jenrick claimed that, since Albanians were coming from a “safe country”, their “bogus” asylum claims came at the “expense of people we would want to bring to this country, such as those from Hong Kong, Afghanistan and Ukraine” (House of Commons 2022). Here, Albanians supposedly block humanitarian routes, part of a racialising structure to the “small boat” panic in which different bodies – Black, Brown, and “troublingly” white – are enlisted in divide and rule separations which specify the bounds of reception.

Albanian migration is thus conjured as a figure of moral unease, justifying the “brokenness” of an immigration system in need of toughening, building on previous panics such as Kosovar Albanian refugees crossing the Channel Tunnel in the late 1990s. Far from a politic consigned just to the UK coastline, the moral panic over Albanians on “small boats” works in connection with increased deportation flights, UK Border Force involvement in the Port of Dürres and Tirana Airport, as well as drones and technical support to prevent migration of Albanians through the so-called Western Balkans (UK Home Office 2025). The timing and scale of these securitisation responses (Danewid 2022) show how the policing of neoliberal crisis in Britain moves through an assemblage of domestic and neo-colonial externalisation policies. UK panics over Albanians as criminally facilitating Black and Brown migrants or undermining the asylum access of certain “wanted” refugees spotlights the policing of different colonial peripheries against one another, and proximity to whiteness as an unfolding site of social control.

## SEAFARERS

Ferry and commercial shipping routes are a further element to policing of the Channel, a site at which relationships of capital and racialisation have been reorganised. Here I want to depart from the focus on “small” boats and argue that the disciplining of migrant seafarers and dockworkers on “big” ships is also critical to an understanding of the 2010s/20s crises in racial capitalism. Through this, we can see how multiple peripheries are exploited in relief with one another as part of a wider colonial maritime order (Khalili 2021).

Casualising dockwork and seafaring (increasing the proportion of agency staff to fixed staff) was already a method prior to Brexit used by shipping companies to exploit migrant labour from Eastern Europe on lower wages and weakened worker protections. Like HGV drivers, agency workers from Poland in the ports of Liverpool and Harwich have variously created protest from British trade unions over exploitation of EU labour (EADT 2004), as well as Brexit fuelled narratives of job theft from the East (Waddington 2013). In exiting the EU, the UK changed its law on labour disputes and removed partial protections previously offered by the EU Collective Redundancy Directive (Abdul 2024). This opened new avenues for labour casualisation, coming to a head in 2022 when the shipping company P&O, its full colonial title being The Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation Company (Khalili 2020), embarked on a massive program of firing, making 800 seafarers redundant. Many were fired while on shift with a pre-recorded video and removed from ships in handcuffs by private security (RMT Press Office 2022). Crews staffing the ferry routes from Dover across the Channel were to be replaced by new agency staff paid £1.81 per hour and employed on 12-hour shifts (Nautilus International 2022).

The reorganisation of labour in P&O, replacing British and EU workers with Indian and Filipino staff paid £7 less than UK minimum wage, belied several dynamics to neoliberal racial capitalism. With the company registered outside the UK (P&O is owned by Dubai Ports World), it could use the legal geography of internationally flagged ships to employ staff outside of wage and worker protections. Moreover, the “fire and rehire” was set against the backdrop of new deals between the UK and United Arab Emirates over British freeports (Topham 2022). These “special economic zones”, which also play on territorial regulation, integrate dockwork into broader intercolonial relationships and deepen the offshoring of capital.

The recent experiences of labour casualisation involving Eastern European, and subsequently South and East Asian seafarers, show an interdependence of multiple peripheries in racial capitalist exploitation in the Channel – alongside “small boats”. Notably in the P&O case, rather than reproducing the racial replacement logic which pits white, “not quite white”, and Brown workers against each other, The National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers (RMT) went against the reactionary panic and took an internationalist position. The RMT critiqued poverty wages for migrant workers (RMT Press Office 2022), refusing to shore up the contract between white labour and capital through the exploitation of fellow seafarers.

## CHANNELLING HEGEMONY

This paper investigates the underlying socio-economic currents and ideological workings behind the policing of so-called “small boats”. In exploring how this moral panic emerges (Hall et al. 2013), and the “histories of racism, capitalism and colonialism in the production

of security threats" (Danewid 2022: 25), I expose how a set of establishment responses to unstable racial and economic hegemony are externalised onto the Channel. Policing "crimes of entry" (as racially fusing illegal migration and organised crime) comes to violently mediate a far more complex economic congealment of overstay and exit under racial capitalism – where precarities over the right to remain and right to work in the UK deepen exploitation. I emphasise this is an entanglement (Lewicki 2023; 2024) which stratifies Black, Brown, and "not quite white" labour in violent loops of surplus. Furthermore, by spotlighting associated racialised panic over Romanian truckers, Albanian "gangs", and Polish dockers, I argue for a closer understanding of the interlocking processes of racial capitalist enclosure (Rexhepi 2023) of EU and British colonial peripheries, organised along HGV and ferry routes, as well as "small boats".

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## POLICIJSKI NADZOR NAD "MALIM BRODOVIMA" I PERIFERIJAMA: PRIJELAZI PREKO LA MANCHEA KAO MJESTA MORALNE PANIKE

Ovaj se rad bavi upravljanjem La Mancheom u Ujedinjenom Kraljevstvu tijekom kasnih 2010-ih i ranih 2020-ih – razotkrivajući kako u navedenom čvorištu (engl. *conjunction*) policijski nadzor nad "malim brodovima" stvara konfiguracije kapitala i rase. Koristeći analitički okvir moralne panike (Hall et al. 2013.), istražuje se kako se putem policijskog nadzora ulaska preko morske granice naglašavaju pitanja zabrinutosti zbog pomorske sigurnosti, stroge imigracijske politike i represije nad "krijumčarskim" bandama, dok se ujedno prikriju društveno-ekonomski uvjeti koji prevladavaju u rasnom kapitalizmu nakon 2008. godine. Oslanjajući se na rad Stuarta Halla (Hall et al. 2013) u kojem se analiziraju "ulične pljačke" u Britaniji tijekom 1970-ih godina, kao i na rad Ide Danewid o europskom graničnom režimu kroz prizmu čvorišta (2022), u ovome se radu "male

brodove" smješta u dulji slijed rasnih panika u kojima se razne krize akumulacije i rasne hegemonije pripisuju migrantima i plovilima (putem policijskog nadzora, medijalizacije, sudova i politike). Rad se pobliže bavi migrantima iz istočne i jugoistočne Europe kao važnim dijelom političke ekonomije La Manchea. Ističući povijesnu interakciju između zatvaranja britanskog imperijalnog prostora i europskih periferija, kao i stalnu sekuritizaciju onih koji prelaze La Manche (bilo kao posrednici, kriminalci, lažni tražitelji azila ili višak radne snage), zalaže se za bolje razumijevanje suodnosa rasijalizacije crnih, smeđih i "ne sasvim bijelih" ljudi.

Ključne riječi: moralna panika, La Manche, mali brodovi, periferije, zatvaranje