Book Review of Pallister-Wilkins, Polly 2022. *Humanitarian Borders. Unequal Mobility and Saving Lives*. London: Verso. 240 pp.

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BOOK REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

What does it mean when humanitarian relief and rescue are the response to deaths and suffering at the border? In her new book, Pallister-Wilkins explores this question and probes the politics and limitations of humanitarianism in a world marked by unequal mobility. The book draws upon 8 years of research with border police, EU officials, professional aid workers, grassroots humanitarians and activists in the European borderlands. Mixing ethnography with deft political and historical analyses, Pallister-Wilkins demonstrates that unequal mobility and border violence are not natural and inevitable outcomes but, instead, the effects of particular histories, political decisions and the everyday works of border guards, government officials and aid workers who help to make borders an everyday, material reality (p. 7). Likewise, saving lives is not an inherent response to border deaths and suffering but a product of particular and liberal rationalities about life, movement and responsibility. The book argues that lifesaving interventions to relieve border deaths and violence are symptoms of global inequalities, not a cure. While presented as a moral and urgent task, such responses mask structural violence, depoliticise violent borders and bolster European paternalism and innocence.

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The book is divided into six chapters, including an introduction and conclusion. The introduction opens with an ethnographic vignette from Evros, on the land border between Greece and Turkey, where Pallister-Wilkins encountered police officers combining border control with rescue. The vignette neatly introduces the readers to the book's key arguments and methodology, thus setting the stage for the chapters that follow. Chapter 2 traces the history of unequal mobility as a project of modernity and highlights its racial and colonial underpinnings. More specifically, it details how the 'global colour line' was created through transatlantic slavery, plantation capitalism and settler colonialism and later consolidated through state-sanctioned national identity documents like passports and visas. The analysis closely resembles Besteman's theorisation of 'Militarized Global Apartheid' (2020), which could usefully have been cited and engaged with here.

Nevertheless, the chapter productively challenges dominant genealogies of humanitarianism. Moreover, her attention to historical and colonial continuities confronts the tendency of many refugee advocates to define current border restrictions as a violation of European cosmopolitanism and hospitality. She describes this as a myth that exceptionalises Europe and hides a 'deeply racist white supremacist and exclusionary history' (p. 17; see also Mogstad 2023).

In the second part of Chapter 2, Pallister-Wilkins introduces the readers to her concept of 'humanitarian borderwork,' understood as humanitarian practices and actions that serve to reproduce or deepen violent borders and hierarchies of life and suffering. She frames humanitarian borderwork as a liberal response that makes border violence more palatable to European citizens while consolidating global and racial inequalities.

Chapters 3–5 provide case studies of three different actors providing humanitarian assistance in the European borderlands: the border police acting on behalf of the state and the EU (Chapter 3), Médecins Sans Frontières as a professional and independent humanitarian organisation (Chapter 4) and the inexperienced 'grassroots humanitarians' Pallister-Wilkins encountered on the Greek island of Lesvos in 2015 (Chapter 5). The book illustrates their differences in motivation, practice, resources and politics but also their common logics and effects.

Her analysis of grassroots humanitarianism is especially sobering. Describing the 'humanitarian carnival' unfolding on Lesvos during the height of the 'refugee crisis', she highlights the very reason humanitarian action comes to be institutionalised with oversight, ethical codes of conduct and access to vast resources. As such, the book provides an important antidote to contemporary scholarly romanticisations of informal humanitarian assistance. However, for Pallister-Wilkins, humanitarianism cannot offer an escape from border controls, as the border structures the very possibilities and practices of aid and care in this context. Consequently, even organisations that experiment with less hierarchical forms of aid and try to empower refugees are limited by their 'intimate relationship' to violent borders and (neo-) colonial practices of control and confinement.

The argument that humanitarian care and control go hand in hand is anything but new. In fact, this argument has become so well-established that it is often stated as a truism with little or no elaboration or argumentation. Conversely, this book does a great job of illustrating how care and control become blurred both discursively (e.g., when politicians argue that refugees can be saved by stopping boats or frame the externalisation of border controls as a form of 'pre-emptive rescue') and in refugee camps like the former Moria camp on Lesvos, where control is exercised through care.

The book also meticulously explains how humanitarian borderwork relies upon the infrastructure and registration systems that underpin global, unequal mobility and violent border controls. She further emphasises her own complicity as a European citizen and researcher taking advantage of the unequal infrastructures of mobility and tourism (p. 138).

The force and clarity of Pallister-Wilkins's prose are arguably the book's biggest strength and make it an important intervention in scholarly and political debates about humanitarianism.

However, as an anthropologist who has researched European humanitarianism, I sometimes felt that the book's strong arguments and generalisations came at the cost of more nuanced ethnography and analysis. For instance, Pallister-Wilkins often indicates that the aid workers and volunteers she interviewed were only concerned with relief and rescue work and always spoke the language of humanitarian reason (Fassin 2012). However, as recently pointed out by Slim, 'there is a lot going on in western humanitarianism aid alongside the promotional rhetoric of urgent life-saving and protection' (2022: 205), and many citizen humanitarians are centrally concerned with the personal biographies and futures of the people they are trying to help (Vandevoordt & Fleischmann 2021). Moreover, humanitarianism has many histories and genealogies both inside and outside 'the West,' some of which have more political and radical traditions than the classical Swiss model (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Pacitto 2016; Slim 2022). Finally, in my experience, humanitarian workers and volunteers are usually acutely aware of the limitations of their work and rarely think of humanitarian relief as a cure or panacea to the suffering and injustice they observe. This does not mean that they have no biases or blind spots, but it might indicate that lack of knowledge or reflexivity is not the main problem and that we must look more carefully to identify their attachments to the national and humanitarian '(b)order of things' (De Lauri 2019; Malkki 1995).

Notwithstanding these minor remarks, *Humanitarian Borders* provides a poignant critique and reminder of the limitations of humanitarian relief in response to global and racialised inequalities. Unfortunately, the book's publication is also timely, as 2023 has so far been the deadliest year in the Mediterranean since 2014. Pallister-Wilkins demonstrates that the Mediterranean, like other border spaces, is not naturally dangerous but 'made deadly by unequal mobility regimes that actively and violently discriminate against those who find themselves on the wrong side of the global colour line' (p. 38). However, unlike many other humanitarian scholars, she does not end with critique and condemnation, nor with statements of hope, which too easily can be complicit in furthering the status quo. Instead, the sixth and final chapter of the book explores alternative and less debilitating ways of living with and relating to mobility. Drawing eclectically from indigenous scholars, decolonial theory and posthumanism, this chapter is arguably the most interesting part of the book. While connections could have been made to Mbembe (2021) and Gilroy's (2019) work on planetary humanism, the chapter provides plenty of conceptual and intellectual resources for readers to think anew about borders and mobility. The conclusion also offers an important rejoinder to the Autonomy of Migration literature by pointing out their ableist biases and foregrounding the right to dwell and make a life in the world alongside the right to freedom of movement.

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