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DISPLACING BORDER VIOLENCE: FLOATING PRISONS, EVERYDAY INCARCERATIONS AND ABOLITIONIST JOURNEYS

Aila Spathopoulou, University of Stirling

Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the everyday incarcerations and injustices in and through bordered spaces by focussing on the Bibby Stockholm barge that accommodated people racialised as 'asylum seekers' on the Isle of Portland (Dorset, UK) from August 2023 until the end of November 2024. In showing how detention, containment, and incarceration, as well as projected deportation intersect in floating offshore spaces, this paper argues for the abolition of such spaces. I reflect on how visibility and invisibility, distance and closeness were used against people contained on the barge and how spatial and mobile distancing (through the barge's mobile extensions) functioned to segregate and expose people in racialised and gendered ways. I refer to El Jone's (2022) concept and method of 'abolition intimacies' to discuss the fleeting moments of justice as the result of turning to, feeling and engaging with one another beyond carceral views and 'bordered gazes' (Carastathis, 2022). I conclude the discussion with an image of a travelling ship that was visible in the horizon, as we talked together with Shiraz, a resident of the barge, about our ongoing journeys that brought us to the Isle of Portland, our dreams for future ones, and our commitment to (re)connect against a system of containment, forced removal and dispersal. The travelling ship that we never saw set anchor becomes a metaphor to reflect on abolitionist views and horizons. In this way, floating vessels transcend their immediate physical presence, becoming symbolic of people's desires to connect beyond and against borders.

Keywords

floating prisons, Bibby Stockholm barge, everyday incarcerations, carceral views, abolitionist views, border abolition

Introduction

In this paper, I discuss the everyday incarcerations and injustices in and through bordered spaces by focusing on the Bibby Stockholm barge within the carceral context of the Isle of Portland, in Dorset, UK. The barge has been docked at Portland's Harbour since July 2023 with the purpose of accommodating up to 500 people racialised and criminalised as 'asylum seekers'.[1] The UK Home Office, under the Sunak Conservative government, referred to the barge as 'non-detained accommodation' (Home Office, 2023a) and claimed that the 'migrant barge is not a floating prison as the people on board would be free to come and go as they want' (Thompson, 2023). However, those forced to live on board and their supporters argue how the barge is essentially a 'floating prison'. By arguing in this paper for the abolition of offshore floating prison sites like the Bibby Stockholm barge, as well as all carceral spaces, this stance inherently calls for the abolition of both prisons and borders (see also Dadusc and Mudu, 2020; Aiken and Silverman, 2021; Bradley and Noronha, 2022); highlighting 'the inextricability of borders and prisons and their antecedents in forced migration and carceral punishment in slavery' (Walia, 2013: 43).

In what follows, I show how the barge forms yet another example of the expansion of floating vessels such as ferries, cruise ships, naval/military ships and barges as emerging sites in the governance and criminalisation of people labelled as 'migrants' across Europe and the UK (see also Baldacchino, 2021). This paper links offshore floating vessels to the broader spatial strategy of containment within the political economies of 'carceral seas' (Khalili, 2021). It shows how detention, containment, and incarceration intersect in floating, offshore spaces, segregating certain groups of people in racialised and gendered ways. I discuss how placing people offshore on a barge that is docked in the private and highly securitised and restricted area of Portland Harbour imposes a spatial/mobility distancing that serves to reduce opportunities for contestation, and to disconnect the personal relationships that are so necessary for abolitionist work.

Throughout the paper, I draw on El Jones's concept and method of 'abolitionist intimacies' (2022) to focus on the ways in which fleeting moments of freedom, justice and togetherness emerge within ephemeral communities of care and solidarity that refuse to comply with the state logic of separation, division and segregation.[2] Abolitionist intimacies, as opposed to carceral intimacies, are generative of 'meaningful relationships in the present' (Simpson, 2017) that refuse to be shaped and contained within state categories and undermined by punitive logics and institutional forms of 'care' (see Dadusc and Mudu, 2020; Thompson, 2021; FAC, 2023 ; also Carastathis et al. forthcoming;). While these instances and moments of connection may not constitute abolition as such, they generate small moments of

[1]Throughout this paper, I use quotation marks when referring to the categories that states use to describe certain groups of people whose belonging within the territories of the nation-state is questionable. Here, I also want to emphasise the fictious character of these categories and how they are the result of a process of racialisation and criminalisation of certain groups of people.

[2] Here I want to acknowledge that I am engaging with El Jones's conceptual framework from a different positionality as a non-Black scholar and activist. Another important point of reflection is that whereas, as El Jones's points out, Abolitionist Intimacies is not based on academic research or the outcome of a funded research project, my paper stems from academic research funded work.

freedom and justice, compared to the unfreedoms of the everyday incarcerations (Cassidy, 2018) surrounding the barge and the island (see also Balagopalan et al., 2019).

Floating Vessels in the Mapping and (Re)mapping of Carceral and Colonial Histories

Floating accommodation/containment inherits the spatial relations of offshore prisons, such as slave ships, convict ships, hulks, prison islands and ships, rooted in colonial histories of offshoring both locally and internationally racialised and criminalised populations (Kimberley and Turner, 2015; Khalili, 2021; McKay, 2023; Turner et al., 2023). Anna Mckay has pointed out how 'accommodation barges share parallels with eighteenth and nineteenth century prison hulks, repurposed ships that detained convicts awaiting transportation – they were nicknamed 'floating hells'' (2023:n.a). Mckay notes that 'hulks were supposed to be temporary measures to ease prison overcrowding but lasted for 80 years due to a reliance on mass deportation to punish offenders, a reluctance to invest in prisons, and demand for cheap labour' (2023:n.a). Ships' emergence in the 'management of migration' is linked to histories of colonialism, dispossession and displacement, all of which are bound to the Middle Passage and the pervasive genocidal politics born from the transatlantic slave trade and present in the aftermath of slavery (also Bridges Collective:12). Mckay (2023) describes how incarcerated people on the Vernon C. Bain Center in New York, a floating prison barge that has capacity for 870 inmates, have compared its cramped conditions to a modern-day slave ship.

The Bibby Stockholm barge is rooted in colonial histories. An open letter to Bibby Marine, the owner of the Bibby Stockholm, signed by 50 organisations and campaigners, highlights the company's well-evidenced historic ties to the transatlantic slave trade and points out the detention-like conditions on board (One Life to Live and Refugee Council, 2023). The Bibby Stockholm is owned by Bibby Maritime, a subsidiary of the Bibby Line Group, company based in Liverpool. Turner et al. note that 'while the current corporate structure of Bibby Line Group involves multiple subsidiaries, the company was originally founded by John Bibby Senior in 1807 (as John Bibby & co. in Turner et al., 2023:9). They emphasise how 'at the time, Liverpool was one of the primary ports of the British empire and, formerly until 1807, a centre of the triangular slave trade' (Turner et al., 2023:9). The Bibby Line Group's (BLG) website states that in 1807 (when slavery was abolished in Britain), 'John Bibby began trading as a shipowner in Liverpool with his partner John Highfield' (One Life to Live and Refugee Council, 2023: n.a). John Bibby is listed as co-owner of three slaving ships, of which John Highfield co-owned two. As Turner et al. highlight, 'such histories reveal important resonances for how the company continues to profit from exploitation and racialised confinement today' (2023:9). The barge forms part of the 'multiplying technologies acting as a wall to migration, including visa restrictions, safe third country agreements, offshore detention, deportation, interdiction, militarisation of maritime space, and an empire of externalisation' (Walia, 2021: 34). It floats upon a 'racialised carceral archipelagos' (Waller, 2023) where offshore spaces are transformed into spaces of containment, waiting, and administrative torture.

Floating Vessels in 'European Migration Management'

The Bibby Stockholm is not the first vessel to be used as floating accommodation/detention for racialised populations in the UK. In 1987, the Earl William ferry moored at the port of Harwich, Essex was used as an official detention site for 120 'asylum seekers', the largest detention centre at the time in Britain (Bazalgette, 2018; Turner et al., 2023). Moreover, the Bibby itself was previously used as a floating detention centre for 'asylum seekers' in Rotterdam, almost 20 years ago (Turner et al., 2023) 'After several human rights scandals were revealed on board, including sexual assault and suicide, the Dutch government ended the contract' (Turner et al., 2023:9). In recent years, especially since the 2015 European 'refugee crisis', there has been a trend in the usage of floating vessels within 'migration management' and their emergence as solutions to what governments construct as a 'housing crisis' regarding the accommodation of 'asylum seekers' and 'refugees'.

The UK Conservative government has justified the use of offshore accommodation by stating it is 'cheaper and more manageable for communities as our European neighbours are also doing' (Home Office, 2023b). Indeed, floating vessels have been employed in various ways across different sea-spaces and on the pretext of various 'crises'. In March 2016, Belgium's federal agency for the reception of asylum seekers, Fedasil, started using the Ponton Reno, a converted boat moored in the Muide district (Yanatma, 2023). Other examples include deportation ferries across the Greece-Turkey Aegean border, 'floating hotspots' on ferries at the Greek border islands in 2017-2018 (Spathopoulou, 2023), 'floating detention' on a naval ship on Lesvos island in February 2020 (LCL and FAC 2023), plans by the Greek government to transfer people on the Blue Star Chios ferry and two naval ships after the Moria camp on Lesvos was burnt down in September 2020 (BBC, 2020), and secret pushback 'prisons' on the ferries of the Greece-Italy route (Creta et al., 2023). Creta et al., describe how 'this is Europe's lesser known pushback practice, where secret prisons on private ships are used to illegally return asylum seekers back to where they came from' (Creta, et.al., 2023: n.a.).

Baldacchino refers to cruise ships and other 'floating islands' (2021:86) as 'the new avatars of carcerality on the sea' (2021:86) with a focus on how, on the pretext of the Covid-19 pandemic in May and early June 2020, 425 categorised as 'migrant men' were detained on four chartered tourist boats, anchored in international waters in the central Mediterranean sea, just outside the territorial zone of Malta. Quarantine ships were used in Italy, moreover, 'raising concerns about the prevention of access to asylum procedures through the cumulation of bordering policies within the physical and procedural borders of quarantine ships' (Denaro and Boccagni, 2024: 364; also Stierl and Dadusc, 2022).

From 2022-2023, the French, Estonian, Dutch, and Scottish governments used floating vessels temporarily to accommodate 'displaced people' from Ukraine (Yanatma, 2023). Additionally, a crisis of accommodation in the Netherlands in the summer of 2022 prompted authorities to house asylum seekers with residence permits on former cruise ships (Wallis, 2023). The people, who had already been granted residence permits, were transferred to the ship while waiting for accommodation on land amid a wider housing shortage in the Netherlands. The former luxury facilities like pools, boutiques, and bars were stripped out and turned over to provide basic accommodation (Wallis, 2023). Prior to 2015, the Flotel

Europa ship in Copenhagen in the early 1990s hosted 'refugees' from the former Yugoslavia. Docked at the port of Copenhagen, it hosted for two years about 1,000 'refugees' from the former Yugoslavia during the Bosnia-Herzegovina war; individuals were waiting offshore to be accepted on Danish territory (Vidal, 2015; Deiana, 2020).

By 'accommodating' people offshore and at a distance, with controlled exit and entry, 24-hour security system, airport-like bodily scans, and curfews in the case of the Bibby-barge; governments claim to be minimising the impact on local communities and services, thus constructing 'asylum seekers' as a problem to be managed (Home Office, 2023a). At the same time, placing a group of people on a barge creates the assumption that these people do not belong to Britain and, thus, will not remain; moreover, it perpetuates the idea that at any moment they can and will be (forcefully) returned, whether through official deportations or push-backs, as has already occurred.

Floating vessels serve as material embodiments of the shared strategies and approaches employed by states to manage and restrict the mobility of racialised/gendered populations. They represent the physical manifestation of the transnational networks and cooperation between nation-states in their efforts to exert control over people on the move. By sharing and replicating these 'solutions' across borders, states collectively reinforce and perpetuate a broader regime of border enforcement and migration containment. However, states are unable to contain people's dreams, desires and hopes and to impede communities of solidarity and moments of justice from emerging. In this way, floating vessels transcend their immediate physical presence, becoming symbolic of people's desires to connect against and beyond borders.

The Isle of Portland

The transfer of people racialised as 'asylum seekers' to the Bibby Stockholm barge is particularly compelling due to its location on the offshore 'forgotten town' on the Isle of Portland (Marfleet and Lennon-Wood, 2022), an 'out of sight'/ 'out of mind' place, or as Shiraz , a resident of the barge described it, 'a place at the end of world' (Shiraz, personal communication, 2024). Weymouth and Portland, two towns in Dorset, have been labelled 'forgotten towns' in a report by the South Dorset Research Group[3] , owing to low social mobility and deprivation. It is no coincidence that most people, myself included, had not heard of Portland previously or knew its exact location when I mentioned going there for 'fieldwork'. The 'forgotten island' stands in stark contrast to the tremendous media attention the barge has garnered, both prior to and since its arrival on Portland in July 2023.

With a population of around 13,400 residents, Portland is connected to mainland England via the famous and lengthy Chesil Beach, a barrier beach that has long intrigued geologists. A ferry also provides access when weather permits. I was informed that during extreme weather conditions and flooding, Portland can be completely cut off from the mainland. One could argue that Portland constitutes a quasi-island, an in-between space, a border at

[3] I am grateful to Laney White, co-founder of Portland Global Friendship Group, for sharing with me this report and for always welcoming me to the island and to the various activities/social events that PGFG had been organising with the residents of the barge.

the edge of the world. It is characterised by its dramatic landscape with cliffs, the renowned Portland stones and their quarrying, and a thriving variety of flora and fauna. The island is also known for its rough and treacherous seas, being a site of many shipwrecks. Until 1995, it served as an important naval base where ships of the Royal Navy and NATO countries exercised in its waters (Portland Town Council, no date).

Crucially, Portland functions as a prison island, a location to which criminalised populations have been transferred. There are currently two official prisons operating on the island: HMP Portland, a training and resettlement prison for men aged 18 and over, and HMP The Verne, situated within the historic Verne Citadel, housing men on medium- and long-term sentences (The Prison-The story of an institution, no date). Incarcerated people who were transferred to Portland, would say jokingly that they reached the highest and final point in their 'prison career' (Former prison employee on Portland, personal communication, June 2024).

From 1997-2006, in Portland Harbour, in the same area as the Bibby Stockholm, HMP Weare, an Adult Male/Category C prison ship was berthed (Inside Time, 2023).[4] By 2004, it had a capacity of 396, with 400 individuals incarcerated within this floating prison (Ricketts, 2020)—the latest in Britain's lengthy history of such vessels until the arrival of the barge with its own carceral/colonial histories. Crossing the long-distance highway evokes memories of the past when cars were stopped on suspicion of aiding escaped inmates (Former prison employee on Portland, personal communication, June 2024). Across these very waters, 'convict ships' once sailed, transporting incarcerated people in mobile/floating prisons to the colonies (Peters and Turner, 2015).

The Isle of Portland, with its complex history and multiple prisons, and current role within migration governance, serves as a microcosm of larger socio-political issues surrounding freedom, confinement, and segregation. This 'forgotten island', at the epicentre of past and current historic-political events[5], provides a unique vantage point from which to reflect on the interconnections between prisons and borders.

Methodological Reflections

This paper is based on ethnographic research conducted between May and September 2024 on the Isle of Portland as one case study for my Leverhulme funded project on offshore carceral spaces. During this period, I visited Portland three times, in the months of May, July and September; each time engaging in one week's fieldwork. My fieldwork included participant observations, extensive fieldnote taking, and in-depth conversations/discussions with people living on the barge and people volunteering with the Portland Global Friendship Group[6] , a group of people living on the island, who from the

[4] For an interesting discussion on the Vessel HMP Weare's offshore status and reflections around its legality/illegality and visibility/invisibility see Ricketts (2020).

[5] I am grateful to the conversations I had with Prof. Tony Walter and member of Portland Global Friendship Group with whom we discussed the island's unique geographic-historic-political position.

[6] https://www.facebook.com/PortlandGlobalFriendshipGroup/

very first moment of the barge's arrival at Portland Harbour, welcomed and supported the barge's residents with a range of social activities and advocacy work.

My field-notes comprise of personal reflections, narratives, experiences, and emotions in relation to the island's carceral/bordered landscape and atmosphere, along with recollections of the conversations that I engaged in and that contributed towards my understanding of the island's everyday incarcerations. Several of my field-note taking took place at the Jailhouse Café at the Prison Verne on top of the island and from where the barge becomes visible. It was at Jailhouse Café, gazing at the barge from above, that I was compelled to reflect on issues around visibility/invisibility, (researcher's)positionality and research-ethics within a carceral/bordered context.

I engaged in in-depth conversations and developed more personal relationships with five people living on the barge and with five volunteers from the PGFG. I, also, had informal conversations during the various activities/walks that I joined together with the volunteers and the barge's residents, at the bus stop at Victoria Square and at two cafes that I hung out in. It is important to mention that in this paper, I do not include direct quotes from my conversations, rather they consist of my own recollection and interpretation of what was said/discussed (from my notes that I took right after a conversation took place).

To protect the anonymity of the people forced to live on the barge as well as the volunteers on Portland, I use pseudonyms. In this regard, I do not include people's personal information from which they could be identified (e.g., age, gender that people identify with, ascribed nationality, previous occupation), date of arrival or departure from the barge/Portland, or specific site/date of conversation. In May 2024, during my first stay on the island, I conducted a semi-structured interview with the former mayor of Portland who asked to be identified in my research publications.

The analysis and many of the concepts that I draw upon in this paper are, also, informed by my collaborative and activist research praxis and writing with my collaborators and friends at the Feminist Autonomous Centre (FAC) for research. It is to my journey with FAC and particularly to Deanna Dadusc, Camille Gendrot, Anna Carastathis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi, as well as to my collaborator and friend Isabel Meier, that this paper and research owes its abolitionist perspective on criminalisation and border violence that in turn draws on abolition feminisms and refusals articulated by Black (trans and queer) feminists and no border struggles (such as No Borders movements, No One Is Illegal movements, struggles to end detention and deportation, as well as solidarity movements with and amongst criminalised and incarcerated people). I am grateful to the ongoing conversations with Nicola De Martini Ugolotti who is, also, engaged in research and activist work on Portland, where we shared our reflections and observations from our common research/activism on the island.

This paper could not have been written without the connections and friendships I developed with some of the people living on the barge and the Portland Global Friendship Group volunteers-activists in solidarity with them. Importantly, our encounters/personal relationships were, also, conditioned by the existence of the barge. The fact, that, I could meet up again with residents of the barge during my second and third visits to Portland,

was because while I could come and go freely from the island, they were geographically restricted to the confinements of the barge. Here, I must, also, acknowledge how the spatio-temporalities of my research draw upon those of the carceral spaces I am interrogating and how certain people are turned into 'research subjects' due to their confinement in those very spaces. This raises important ethical questions and has compelled me to think of what it means to connect with people within the context of research, to embody the dual positionality of a researcher/activist and to find ways to connect and build relationships, beyond and against the confinements (timeframes, deadlines and funding) of a research project. The connections that flourished (and continue to flourish) between the PGFG friends and the people forced to live on the barge are teaching me, however, that 'as long as a self and another yearn to learn about each other, as long as they strive to walk and dance and slip and rise together, there is hope for them to move, play, become, and create together ethically' (Nayar et.al., 2023: 270). It is to these brave connections and friendships that this paper is dedicated to.

Carceral Views

The view from above: At the Jail house Café

'What a wonderful view' remarked a father to their child as they gazed across Portland Harbour and Weymouth Bay from the hilltop garden of the Jailhouse Café. Situated on the grounds of HM Prison The Verne, at the Verne Citadel – Portland's highest point – the café promises visitors an experience of 'travelling through the Verne Prison tunnel' and boasts 'a large outside seating area with stunning views across the harbour and beyond'.[7] The Verne itself, as mentioned previously, a Category C men's prison established in 1949, occupies the citadel's southern portion. Its entrance tunnel bears testament to its operation as an Immigration Removal Centre from 2014 to 2017, before reopening as a prison in 2018 to house sex offenders. The carceral histories and layers of this place are palpable everywhere.

The café personnel informed the father about another prison on the opposite side of the island, referring to HM Prison Portland's male Adult/Young Offenders Institution in a Victorian-style impressive building. This facility houses the Jailhouse Diner at the Grove Portland, where visitors can dine, and the Grove Prison Museum, which has been operating since 2014, showcasing the institution's history as a Convict Prison, Borstal Institute, Youth Custody, and finally, as a Young Offenders Institute.[8] Portland's prison, established in 1848, was initially intended to utilise convict labour to build the breakwaters of Portland Harbour and its defences (The Prison-the story of an institution, no date). The harsh conditions within the prison and its quarries during the 19th century contributed to calls for penal reform in the UK, as numerous prisoners died while quarrying stone (The Prison-the story of an institution, no date). From its inception, the convicts became a tourist attraction, prompting residents of the Grove village, developed due to the prison, to open cafes in their homes for visitors to observe the convicts at work (The Prison-the story of an institution, no

[7] See: https://www.thejailhouse.co.uk/jailhouse-cafe

[8] See, https://www.dorsetmuseums.co.uk/grove-prison-museum

date). Despite local opposition, the government declared the initially temporary prison a permanent establishment in 1869 (The Prison- the story of an institution, no date).

Notably, one of the only locations on Portland offering a view of the Bibby Stockholm barge is the grounds of HM Prison The Verne (Chakelian, 2023; also Ricketts, 2020). While the barge is not formally part of the 'commodified production of carceral tourism' (Brown, 2017) represented by the Prison The Verne, the Grove Prison, and their associated cafés, restaurants, and museum, its visibility from this vantage point inadvertently contributes to the penal tourism's rural landscapes (Schept, 2014). Visitors are drawn to the 'stunning views' across the port, inadvertently noticing the barge in the process. By normalising the existence of one prison, they are able to view another. Located on the grounds of a prison layered with carceral histories, we gazed down upon yet another site of confinement. Our vista encompassed a sea of prisons, 'ghosts of racialised regimes' (see Schept 2014), intermingled with present ones (also see, Peters and Turner, 2017). On land, a former prison transformed into an immigration pre-removal centre, now reverted to its original function; at sea, the memory of HMP Weare prison ship. The geographies of imprisonment and detention intersect on this island, their distinctions blurring on land and sea.

It was from the Jailhouse Café that I first laid eyes upon the barge, the gaze of the researcher or tourist from above (in such situations and places, the difference is nearly irrelevant), peering down upon the floating vessel from the island's highest point, almost forgetting the people confined within. 'I could see them, but they could not see me', I recalled Shiraz's remark about the arrival of 'tourists' on a large cruise ship from Norway that he observed from inside the barge. 'You cannot see me from above, but from another prison, I see your prison, watching you in prison, yet still, I cannot see you', I painfully thought as I gazed upon the barge from above, repeating to myself that there are people inside, that he is inside. According to Risa Puleo and Ruby C. Tapia, 'the figure has a tendency to reenact violence by recreating a situation in which a viewer can occupy a surveillant's gaze upon a body who can't look back, thus replicating panopticonism' (2018: n.a). From the vantage point of the prison, we end up seeing through the eyes of the state and reproducing the violence of the categorisation to which states subject different groups of people (Carastathis et al., forthcoming). Through so many 'bordered gazes' (Carastathis, 2022, also Carastathis and Tsilimpounidi, 2020), we become the spectator who watches what Saidiya Hartman calls 'scenes of subjection' (2022).

Out of view

As I began to walk down from the prison on the hill past Fortuneswell village towards Victoria Square near the harbour, the barge would gradually disappear from my view. From Victoria Square, I began to walk towards the port at Castletown, in search of the Bibby Stockholm barge. However, I soon realised that one is not able to reach or even see it due to its location in the private and restricted area of Portland Port (also Ricketts, 2020). Upon arriving at the gates, there is a security box and notice boards that say: 'No entry/access beyond this point'. I had to, therefore, turn away and start to walk back to Victoria Square.

The barge is not visible as you walk from Victoria Square to Castletown and back, even at the port, due to the multiple layers of securitisation. One cannot get anywhere near the

barge, or even catch a glimpse of it. It has been carefully placed out of sight, so as not to disturb the locals and tourists on the island, except if they choose to see it by entering the grounds of another prison/from the vantage point of another prison. 'Prison is a space of hyper-surveillance at the same time that it is largely invisible to those who do not have to encounter it, to those who support it by ignoring it, or condoning it, or naturalising it' (Puleo and Tapia, 2018: n.a.).

As I walked back to Victoria Square, I encountered the bus moving towards the opposite direction and as I, momentarily, caught sight of the passengers inside, moving towards the barge, I inevitably saw them through the lens of the state. As El Jones powerfully puts it, 'the worst part is, you start to only think of the person behind bars, as if they belong there, as if we should get used to this' (2022:126).

Imaginaries and Everyday Incarcerations Around the Barge

The concept of border-ing refers to 'the processes through which the boundaries demarcating what is proper to a nation state (geographical territory, social body, history, etc.) - what legitimately belongs in or to it, versus that which does not, and is excluded, expunged, removed, or differentially included, generally by violence - are constituted, reproduced, and naturalised' (Bridges Collective 2022:2, see also Cassidy, et al., 2018). The symbolic timing of the Bibby Stockholm's journey and arrival on Portland on 17 July 2023, coinciding with the passage of the Illegal Migration Bill, perfectly exemplified the logic of border-ing. With its stated aim to stop people crossing the Channel in small boats, the Illegal Migration Bill became law in July 2023, becoming the Illegal Migration Act (Home Office, 2023c) on the same days that the barge was sailing across the English Channel from Cornwall. The vessel had been refitted and refurbished to accommodate up to 500 asylum seekers on the Isle of Portland, the first of whom arrived on 7 August 2023.

The individuals being moved to the floating vessel were already in the asylum process and had been living in the UK for varying periods - weeks, months, and in some cases, even a year. According to the Conservative government under Sunak, individuals being moved to the vessel must have arrived in the country at least eight weeks before being notified about any move and would not remain more than eight months on the barge (Home Office, 2023a). During my research, I encountered people who had been in the UK for periods ranging from six months to a year upon being transferred to the barge.

In May 2024, as Rwanda deportations loomed over asylum seekers, their transfer to the Bibby Stockholm was imagined and feared as potentially leading to detention and deportation. Rumours that the barge would become a detention site or a pre-removal centre for people at risk of being deported to Rwanda, due to its securitised nature, further reinforced the imaginaries and lived experiences of the Bibby Stockholm as a floating prison.

As Shiraz shared, 'when I told my friends that I was going to be transferred to the barge, they jokingly told me that perhaps during the night it will sail off back to your country' (Shiraz, personal communication, 2024). The barge immobilises people in floating prisons - literally offshore, quasi-extraterritorial spaces - which nonetheless can become mobile vehicles of deportation (Spathopoulou, 2023). As previously discussed, floating vessels have

been used as deportation vehicles in various geographical locations and sea spaces, in some cases simultaneously transporting unaware 'tourists' on the upper deck and detained 'migrants' below. Offshoring people, even if locally, creates the assumption that certain groups categorised as 'migrants', 'refugees', and 'asylum seekers' constitute a separate population whose presence on national territory is illicit until proven otherwise (Carastathis et.al, forthcoming) The spatio-temporal distinctions between arrival and departure become blurred, as people both by being 'kept' offshore, at a distance, and through the endless waiting time for asylum, have yet to be formally accepted on UK territory. This provokes the fear of being removed at any moment, even secretly during the night, as Shiraz's friends jokingly remarked.

Mobile Segregation

'Where is the Bibby Stockholm'? I had asked a group of people on my first day of arrival on Portland. They were standing at the bus stop at Victoria Square. One of them told me that they 'were from the Bibby' and showed me their card with 'Bibby Stockholm' written on it, functioning as proof of identity to board the private Excel bus that transports them to and from the barge. As one of them explained, 'this bus is just for us who live on the barge; people like you cannot get on this bus'. 'It is really close, but you cannot see it nor reach it or enter it', another person from the group added. 'Why would you want to go to the Bibby? It is not a nice place', they continued. 'You cannot walk to the Bibby, although it is really close, perhaps fifteen minutes on foot from here'. 'We need to wait for the next bus; you cannot walk there', I was repeatedly told by the group, as we stood at the bus stop merely a few kilometres from the barge. I also learned that the barge residents have a curfew, having to return by 11 pm, with the last bus departing at 10 pm.

People's segregation begins even before they board the offshore barge, on the barge's mobile extensions.[9] People racialised as 'asylum seekers' are separated and differentiated from communities through a mobile detention/segregation system running between three permitted destinations: Victoria Square, Weymouth and the barge. The buses' façade bears the words 'Private: not for public use', creating a paradoxical situation. Whilst the barge remains out of sight, its inhabitants are exposed to public scrutiny through mobile segregation on these private buses. Here we encounter the mobility and expansionist reach of border-ing (the naturalised division of people) and its spatial extension to transportation, policing, housing and recognition beyond the geographical limits of the borders themselves (see also Cassidy, 2019). One is reminded of how 'discourses about race and colonisation also replicate institutional divide-and-rule tactics' (Jones, 2022: 97). This spatial/mobility distancing functions to reduce opportunities for contestation and impede personal relationships from flourishing.[10] Simultaneously, this distancing facilitates the emergence

[9] See Care4Calais (2023) crowd justice campaign against the government's 'segregation' of asylum seekers.

[10] Jonathan Darling (2020) draws on Roberto Esposito's theory of biopolitics and the 'immunitary logic', to discuss how according to this logic, asylum migration in the UK is approached through mechanisms of moral-political distance and deferral by state officials, as well as symbolic-spatial splintering of urban spaces with asylum migrants concentrated in already deprived areas.

of distorted perceptions and narratives about the people living on the barge, and those who support them in solidarity, to circulate on the island. These narratives are constructed in racialised and gendered ways, which I encountered in comments directed towards the passing Excel bus.

Upon arriving on Portland in May 2024 by taxi from Weymouth, the driver pointed out the Excel bus stationed at Victoria bus station and stated: 'I find it very alarming that these men on the barge have left behind their wives and children. I would never leave behind my wife and children. I think this tells everything about what kind of men they are on the barge'. The racialised and gendered connotations in the driver's remarks are evident.

During another visit to Portland in September 2024, whilst chatting with a group of teenagers, one remarked as the Excel bus passed: 'Oh, there are the bargies. You know that they kill and rape women'. We barely glimpsed the passengers, seeing just flashes of their faces as the bus drove past. I wanted to tell the teenagers that the 'bargies' are actual people, that the bus contains individuals, some of whom I know and consider friends. The barge, like all the carceral spaces in which the UK government has placed asylum seekers, in reality constitutes an easy and visible target (through its mobile extensions) for racist and sexist remarks as well as attacks from far right and fascist groups. As a result, certain groups of people become recognisable only as 'bargies', 'rapists', and 'dangerous' individuals.

Everyday Securitisation

On the pretext of the barge's arrival, the Dorset police, the second most underfunded police force in the UK, received large amounts of funding, leading to the implementation of 24-hour security on the barge. Such securitisation did not exist in the previous housing sites that people were being accommodated in, prior to their transfer to the barge, such as the hotels. This provokes the question of what has changed except from the location.[11] As the former mayor of Portland explained to me in May 2024, 'while, indeed, the port is a securitised space, and passengers of cruise ships are bussed off and on the cruise ship and to and from the port, they do not go through security checks upon returning to ship as the people on the barge do [...] I was told that the people on the barge stay overnight in the port and this is why they undergo extra security, but so do the cruise ship's passengers, on many occasions, the cruise ship also stays overnight' (Interview with former mayor of Portland, Carralyn Parkes, May 2024). In the following examples, we encounter the everyday securitisation and the effects it has on the people it targets.

Yunus, a resident of the barge, told me, 'they have security cameras everywhere on the barge. It feels as though we are being watched constantly and cannot be ourselves even in the most private spaces. I think they are conducting some kind of experiment to test our behaviour, to see how we act and if we get angry, so they can decide if they will allow us to remain in the UK' (Yunus, personal communication, 2024). During my September 2024 visit,

[11] I owe this question and insight to the online discussion I had with Nicola David the campaigner and founder of One Life to Live that campaigns against large-scale accommodation containment sites and who provided me with very helpful information regarding the context that the barge is placed within, and connected me with volunteers on Portland. I am very grateful for her support prior to my journey to Portland.

as multiple transfers of people from the barge across the UK had begun, Shiraz informed me that security had taken people's luggage to the security box two days before their departure date. 'Like, what are we supposed to steal from the barge'? Shiraz remarked. We can see how asylum seekers are already scripted in particular ways and constructed as potential 'criminals'.

Shiraz, also told me how he had witnessed a verbal racist attack by the security guard at the entrance to the barge. 'We were entering the barge and going through the usual security checks. The security guard told an African guy in front of me to stop. But he didn't understand and continued. The security guard started to curse, and I said to him he doesn't understand what you are saying, he doesn't speak English. And he responded by moving his fingers and saying that if I said money he would then understand. I hope the guy didn't hear him.' (Shiraz, personal communication, 2024). How does it feel to witness such a racist attack on another person, as your own body is being scrutinised, I wondered.

The everyday securitisation instils fear amongst people living on the barge, as everyone is constructed and monitored as potentially harmful or dangerous. The multiple profound silences and awkward moments during our conversations about the barge reveal more than words about the violence at stake. This reality brings us to W.E.B. Du Bois's groundbreaking question, 'how does it feel to be a problem'? in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), which criticises American institutions that defined being American as White, and therefore made being Black a problem in White America (see also De Genova, 2016). Indeed, the above examples are revealing of the 'carceral intimacies' that are at stake, that is, 'the idea that the system is always using closeness against us [...] abusing intimacy to police us and damage us and taking us from ourselves' (Jones, 2023: n.a), little by little, day by day. 'Whatever happens don't let them take you from yourself', I told him, knowing that this experience on the barge has and will change him.

On one rainy evening, after a walk with Shiraz, I accompanied him to the bus stop at Victoria Square, from where he would catch the bus back to the Bibby. We had just missed the bus and, with another hour to wait, Shiraz risked missing dinner on the barge. In a nervous attempt to bridge the distance between us, I gave Shiraz a hug, and somewhere inside me, I hoped that the next bus would never come. He then kindly asked me to leave, perhaps because he did not want another pair of eyes watching him board the bus.

Abolitionist Intimacies, Views and Journeys

In this final section, I turn to El Jones's concept and method of 'abolitionist intimacies' to discuss how fleeting moments of justice, freedom and togetherness challenge the carceral views, imaginaries and everyday incarcerations discussed in the previous sections. As Jones eloquently points out, 'against these inhuman, dehumanizing violations of person and privacy, abolitionist intimacy in face-to-face, voice-to-voice, or hand-to-hand refusals of separation realise a world that is still human, one where prisoners are not left behind' (2022:156). As an embodied experience, abolitionist intimacies challenge practices of distancing through sight by centring on other senses such as touch, sound, voice (also, Jones et al., 2012). In the words of Ravi, a resident of the barge, 'the problem is not Portland but the barge. When I am outside of the barge with the volunteers for walks and games, I am

happy. It is a great and very supportive community. I will miss their smiles and kindness' (Ravi, personal communication, 2024).

The community that Ravi refers to are part of the Portland Global Friendship Group, island residents who, from the moment the barge arrived, created a wide range of leisure, sport, art, creative writing, gardening, collective walks, music events and gatherings, and multiple other social activities.[12] These activities and social gatherings are generative of 'meaningful relationships in the present' (Simpson, 2017) and forms of care and solidarity that do not just fill in the gaps (also, Dadusc and Mudu, 2020) of the inadequate (institutionalised) service provision by the Dorset Council (despite it receiving substantial amount of funding from the Home Office). The PGFG, through their work, also seek to challenge the racism- and Islamophobia-infused narratives circulating (particularly on social media) by other local groups and individuals on the island, in Dorset and across the UK about the people living on the barge, as well as distorted and harmful information about so-called 'asylum seekers' in general. It represents a refusal to 'abandon or dehumanize those living inside the walls' (Jones 2022: 81)—in Portland's case, those living behind the gates of the port. Such activism/labour continues to flourish in defiance of multiple sexist and misogynistic threats and abusive online attacks that individuals, particularly women, who have been welcoming and supporting the barge's residents, I was told, have received. Ultimately, the PGFG volunteers and residents of the barge co-create moments and spaces on the island that fulfil the vital need for basic forms of human contact and courtesy that structures of imprisonment seek to control and undermine (see Jones, 2022).

As people move between these two different spaces—the welcoming community of the PGFG group and the offshore securitised barge to which they cannot invite their friends—they await their asylum interview, with the ongoing possibility of being transferred again from one day to the next, 'without sometimes even managing to even say goodbye' as a volunteer told me. As the volunteers accompany their friends to the bus stop to wait together for the bus that will take them to the Bibby Stockholm, they bid farewell because their separation is meticulously planned. However, it is within these ephemeral communities of care and solidarity and fleeting moments of togetherness—a hug, a smile, a laugh, an uplift, words such as 'see you tomorrow', even at a bus stop, one of the many 'connected small stops' (Waller, 2023:180)—that offer the potential for 'abolitionist intimacies' (Jones, 2022) to emerge amongst groups of people committed to (re)connecting with one another beyond borders and no matter how many buses arrive, ships depart and 'goodbyes' they (are forced to) say.

'Abolitionist intimacies' form part of a commitment to being there for one another, despite and against states' and supranational attempts to divide us and turn us against one another. In this way, the bus stop becomes a meeting point and a space of encounter, as well as separation—a site of immense joy in meeting one another followed by sadness and anger at seeing people forced to return to the barge. These emotions and feelings that we develop for one another, from which everyday caring and personal relationships 'characterised by love, care, forgiveness, healing, faith, and uplift' (Jones, 2022:148) emerge, resist carceral

[12] For further research on leisure, forced migration and the (necro)politics of asylum, see De Martini Ugolotti, N., & Webster, C. (2024).

logics and violences. Even if one group of people (those categorised as 'asylum seekers') are forced to board the bus and the 'rest of us' to remain at the stop before walking away. The next day the volunteers will be there at the bus stop again to greet them and to share some moments together before their friends embark on their next step in their journey.

'We are only just a part of their journey, but we want to make this part as memorable, welcoming and joyful as possible', I remember a volunteer from PGFG saying. 'I will never forget this place, the volunteers, the community here, I will miss them', were words that I heard from people living on the barge. Indeed, these abolitionist moments and connections form part of an ongoing journey that we take step by step, stop by stop. It is an ongoing, incomplete journey with all its messiness, imperfections and contradictions, like all journeys we embark on together against injustice, for as El Jones (2023) tells us, there is justice in the moment and beyond that, it is work. It is the appetite for engaging in such labour, what Jones refers to as 'abolition labour' (2022). As Washin living on the barge, beautifully put it, 'here on Portland, I learned the importance of doing things all together and how each of us can contribute to the community, even with something small. Small things make a difference; we all need to work together to create something bigger. It is a journey that never ends, with bad and good moments' (Washin, personal communication, 2024).

In concluding this section, I turn to the final walk I took with Shiraz in May 2024. During this walk, we occasionally stopped and paused to look across the sea beyond the multiple prisons and bordered spaces that surround the island. On one such stop, beyond Chesil Beach, our gazes fell upon a ship crossing the English Channel Coast, eventually disappearing into the horizon. As we stood there gazing at the ship until it moved out of sight, moments of silence would be followed by talks of journeys—past, present and future ones—of places we were dreaming of travelling to, always with the hope and commitment of meeting up again, somewhere else. I am reminded that 'abolition is both a vision and a practice' (Burns, et al., 2020: abstract). As we spoke of these ongoing journeys, why and how we had arrived on this island, our gaze became a travelling ship that moved beyond the Isle of Portland, towards 'a horizon of border abolition' (Carastathis, et al., forthcoming) where the gazes infused with racism and sexism that we encountered during our walk could not stop us from committing to meet and walk together again. Neither could the racist and misogynistic abuse and attacks that circulate amongst certain individuals and groups living on the island regarding the 'Muslim men' on the barge and the 'women' (as both groups are described along racialised, gendered and heteronormative lines) who in solidarity are supporting them, contain our gaze or immobilise the ship across the sea's horizon.

I will never forget the walks I took on Portland, together with the volunteers and residents of the barge to the top of the hill and down to some of the island's hidden bays, around and beyond the island's prisons. 'Despite the challenges of walking together on an uneven terrain' (Nagar, 2019), marked by racial but also gender divisions, refusing to end our walk at the prison/barge, we continued ostensibly to walk together, a community in motion, 'committed to unstoppable dreams and labours that yearn for justice' (Nagar, et al., 2023: 271). Inspired by Richa Nagar, who has powerfully said that 'rather in the expectation of arrival, the hope for justice is found in the ongoing journey' (Nagar et al., 2023: 271; also, Spathopoulou and Meier, 2023), I end this paper with the image of the ship that we saw

disappearing into the horizon and that has yet to arrive (see Hartman, 2008) and set anchor at a port, as it has now become a liberating memory from/of the past.

Conclusion

In this paper I discussed the ways in which detention, containment, and incarceration intersect on the Isle of Portland, by focussing on the Bibby Stockholm barge that had been berthed and accommodating people racialised as 'asylum seekers' on the Isle of Portland from August 2023 until the end of November 2024. I showed how both, visibility and invisibility, distance and closeness were being used against people contained on the barge and how the spatial and mobile distancing attached to the offshore barge and its mobile extensions, such as the private Excel bus, ended up segregating and exposing a group of people who felt being watched inside and outside the barge. I turn to El Jones's concept and method of 'abolition intimacies' that reveals the liberatory power of turning to, feeling and seeing one another beyond and against carceral views and structures, including those imposed through/by academic research.

My discussion is based on ethnographic research on the island between May and September 2024. During this period, many changes have occurred. At the beginning of July 2024 the British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said he will not continue with the previous Conservative government's policy to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda (Francis, 2024) and on the 23rd of July 2024, the Home Office released a statement confirming that the contract for the Bibby Stockholm will not be renewed past January 2025 (Home Office, 2024). A few weeks later, at the end of July and beginning of August 2024, riots, attacks, and pogroms targeting people racialised as 'migrants', 'asylum seekers', and 'refugees' were meticulously organised and expanded across England and Northern Ireland. During this time, people who could potentially be targeted were advised by authorities not to exit their homes, to skip work or to remain in the various carceral spaces in which the UK government has placed them and which, in reality, constituted easy and visible targets for fascists. However, demonstrations opposing fascism, racism and Islamophobia, as well as less visible forms of resistance and solidarity and refusal emerged and prevailed (FAC, 2024).

As I finalise this paper in October 2024, most of the people living on the barge that I knew and have kept contact with have already been transferred to other parts of the UK, where they await the decisions to their asylum interviews that they conducted offshore on the floating barge. Once again, on a very short notice, in some cases without even being notified where they are about to be transferred to, they are separated from the personal relationships they created on the barge and on the island, and placed within a new location, not knowing for how long and whether they will be allowed to stay. Our struggles for justice and liberation, do not end with the closure of the barge. The demand for border and prison abolition, includes the abolition of all carceral spaces as well as the abolition of the asylum system itself. Such demands stem from the lived experiences of those targeted by these systems, and materialise through ways of relating otherwise inside, outside and against prisons. Amidst and in defiance of all the forced removals, transfers and containment of people, we are committed to meeting, walking, laughing and smiling together again.

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