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'They don't look like children': child asylum-seekers, the Dubs amendment and the politics of childhood

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ABSTRACT

In October 2016, following a campaign led by Labour Peer Lord Alfred Dubs, the first child asylum-seekers allowed entry to the UK under new legislation (the 'Dubs amendment') arrived in England. Their arrival was captured by a heavy media presence, and very quickly doubts were raised by right-wing tabloids and politicians about their age. In this article, I explore the arguments underpinning the Dubs campaign and the media coverage of the children's arrival as a starting point for interrogating representational practices around children who seek asylum. I illustrate how the campaign was premised on a universal politics of childhood that inadvertently laid down the terms on which these children would be given protection, namely their innocence. The universality of childhood fuels public sympathy for child asylum-seekers, underlies the 'child first, migrant second' approach advocated by humanitarian organisations, and it was a key argument in the 'Dubs amendment'. Yet the campaign highlights how representations of child asylum-seekers rely on codes that operate to identify 'unchildlike' children. As I show, in the context of the criminalisation of undocumented migrants', childhood is no longer a stable category which guarantees protection, but is subject to scrutiny and suspicion and can, ultimately, be disproved.

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In October 2016, the first child asylum-seekers allowed entry to the UK following the so-called Dubs amendment to the UK's Immigration Act 2016 arrived in England.¹ Their arrival was the result of a campaign by Lord Dubs and refugee advocates in early 2016 to pressure the government into offering unaccompanied children stranded in refugee camps across Europe a safe and legal route to Britain. The campaign, which placed the figure of the lone child refugee at the centre of the country's political and moral landscape, dovetailed with the increasing visibility of children in the media as the face of the humanitarian crisis unfolding at Europe's borders. Since the summer of 2015, when the photograph of the dead body of three-year-old Alan Kurdi² washed up on a Turkish beach shocked people across Europe, media images of very young children stranded in increasing numbers at Europe's border points have served to place moral pressure on politicians

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to lend prioritised protection to child refugees. The mediatisation of the ‘summer of migrations’³, and its foregrounding of child victims, has produced a humanitarian narrative of crisis which is built on a politics of innocence and vulnerability. At the centre of this ‘media spectacle’ (Fernando and Giordano 2016) is the iconic figure of the child, the embodiment of the very quality of innocent vulnerability that is seen to define a universal childhood (Holland 2004a). The universality of childhood has been central to the mobilisation of public sympathy for child asylum-seekers; it also underlies the ‘child first, migrant second’ approach advocated by humanitarian organisations, and it was a key argument in the ‘Dubs amendment’. Yet whilst the representation of asylum-seeking children, and the humanitarian response to them, draws on a powerful universal politics of childhood, the very idea of a universal childhood is one which is being increasingly challenged by scholars who are critical of its normative and ideological underpinnings (Nieuwenhuys 1998; Aitken 2001; Prout 2005; Wells 2009). In this article, I want to explore some of the issues raised by the Dubs campaign that I see as exemplary of discursive and representational practices around children who seek asylum in present-day Britain and which, as I shall demonstrate, hinge on the problematic notion of the universal child. As I argue, the campaign’s reliance on two central arguments to gain public and political support, namely the emphasis on the country’s moral responsibility to protect innocent children and the legacy of the Kindertransport, the scheme which brought Jewish child refugees to Britain from Nazi Europe before the outbreak of the Second World War, positioned present-day child asylum-seekers within a politics of universal childhood. In turn this detracted not only from their complex geopolitical reality as undocumented migrants, but also from a racist politics of asylum that determines who is seen as a worthy refugee, deserving of protection, and who is criminalised as an undocumented non-citizen. My argument thus echoes the growing recognition within scholarly discussions of childhood of the role which race (as well as gender and class) plays in children’s concrete experiences of their childhood (Wells 2009; Ticktin 2015). I draw on scholarly discussions of the figure of the ‘unchildlike child’ (Aitken 2001; Brown 2011) which identify childhood as a construct ‘within which the otherness and peculiarity of children are rendered safe and manageable’ (Aitken 2001, 119). My analysis also ties in with a growing body of work that critiques the equation of childhood with innocence (Gittins 1998; Baird 2008; Stockton 2009; Faulkner 2011; Ticktin 2016). Yet I also seek to show how, in the cultural politics of asylum in Britain, the construct of childhood operates to exclude unchildlike individuals, rendering them adult Others, an event with material consequences. Through a discussion of the media reception of the first group of children to arrive in Britain following the Dubs campaign, I show that one consequence of the campaign which had foregrounded the innocence and vulnerability of these children was their immediate transformation into non-children whose claims for asylum were suspect. Within hours of the arrival of the first so-called Dubs children, which was captured by a heavy media presence, doubts raised by right-wing tabloids and politicians about their age were quickly followed by allegations against ‘bogus child refugees’. The response to the images of these ‘unchildlike’ unaccompanied minors highlights how discursive and representational practices around asylum-seeking children rely on codes that preclude demonstrations of resilience, maturity and agency in these children, and suppress bodily markers of gender and race that would detract from their perceived childhood. My discussion thus corroborates the idea that the child’s body today constitutes a ‘political

battleground' (Colls and Hörschelmann 2010, 11). The recent turn to the 'politics of childhood' in the field of childhood studies is reflective of the understanding of childhood not simply as a social construct, but as a site of contested social and cultural meanings and political agendas.⁴ Whilst popular views of childhood continue to imagine children as apolitical, the experiences of children who seek asylum are proof of the highly political nature of childhood. At the same time, I want to show that, in the context of the 'increasing illegality of asylum' (Dauvergne 2008, 51), childhood is not a fixed, stable category which guarantees protection, but is subject to ideologically and politically driven interpretation, scrutiny and suspicion and can, ultimately, be disproved. My discussion of the Dubs campaign highlights the encounter between a politics of childhood, which positions child asylum-seekers as innocent victims, and the politics of asylum in Britain, which increasingly seeks to criminalise and demonise undocumented migrants. The foundations on which child asylum-seekers are given prioritised protection are thus extremely fragile, rendering their position within the 'secure zone of childhood' (Leifsen 2013) precarious. Ultimately, then, my discussion here forms part of a wider argument that seeks to problematise the 'child first, migrant second' approach of humanitarian initiatives such as the Dubs amendment since, as I demonstrate, the very foundation on which children are given protection, namely their childness, is unstable when subject to the more powerful politics of border control.

Putting children first

In the spring of 2016, following a visit to the Jungle Camp in Calais, Lord Dubs launched a campaign to force the UK government into accepting responsibility for some of the unaccompanied child asylum-seekers stranded in camps in Europe.⁵ It quickly gained strong support across the political spectrum, with even the right-wing press intervening to put pressure on the government to act on behalf of unaccompanied child refugees. *The Daily Mail* stepped aside from its otherwise 'robust' stance on migration to Britain to make a plea to the British public on behalf of the 'frightened children [...] suffering in the squalid camps of France' (April 28, 2016). *The Sun* also appealed to the moral code of the British public and government on behalf of innocent and vulnerable children (April 25, 2016). Central to the campaign were two arguments, which I will now discuss, that placed the figure of the lone child refugee firmly at the centre of the country's political and moral landscape. These also set out the terms and conditions on which unaccompanied child refugees would be welcomed in Britain before the selection process in the camps had even begun.

The first argument was the call for Britain to fulfil its moral duty in lending protection to vulnerable children (see e.g. *The Guardian*, October 17, 2016). In this respect, Dubs' intervention dovetailed with an increasing focus on the presence of children seeking asylum alone in Europe. In the media, throughout 2015 and early 2016, photographs and reports of living conditions in camps such as the Jungle Camp in Calais became more widespread and the presence of children there became difficult to ignore. Similar images accompanied media reports from across the political spectrum; very young children were central to the iconography of this media campaign, with photographs highlighting their childlike features – smooth, baby skin, large eyes and small hands. These physical markers of childness served to foreground qualities of innocence, dependence and

vulnerability, qualities projected here, as in other images of children ‘in distress’, as the ‘natural state of childhood’ (Prout 2005, 13), forming a stark contrast with the images’ backgrounds depicting the squalor of the immediate surroundings.⁶ Images of teddy bears and children’s shoes stranded in the mud of the Jungle Camp (e.g. *The Guardian*, October 31, 2016; *Al Jazeera*, April 1, 2016), signifiers of innocent childhoods destroyed, operated to suggest that what was at stake was not the lives, indeed the bodies, of individual children, but the very idea of childhood. Operating in the service of a humanitarian agenda, these images were designed to ‘cut across cultural and political difference’ and appeal to a common humanity (Malkki 1996, 388), yet in doing so they accumulated into what Liisa Malkki has described as an ‘anonymous corporeality’ which rendered individual lives and narratives silent (389). I would also argue that these images fetishised children’s bodies, reducing them to embodiments of innocence, objects of a humanitarian gaze that recognised them only in terms of their vulnerability. The design of these images drew on the knowledge that the ‘child-body is the quintessential site of moral compassion’ (van Wichelen 2015, 552). Yet their power lay not in their documentation of the complex, material geopolitical circumstances of each individual child (-body), but in their iconicity, which allowed them to be read as part of an archive of representations of suffering Third World children, whose right to a ‘proper’ childhood forms the basis of countless humanitarian campaigns.⁷

In their staging of these children in distress, these images exemplified the ‘cultural performance of (child) vulnerability and (adult) protection’ (Christensen 2000, 57). Significantly, this required the absence of the child’s ‘real’ parents from the photograph: almost all of these images (e.g. articles in *The Independent* on October 10, 2016 and October 15, 2016) represented even the very youngest children as being utterly alone, separated from any form of parental protection, epitomising the ‘global orphan’ as ‘the quintessential vulnerable child’ (Meintjes and Giese 2006, 408). In turn, this positioned them also within an archive of representations of abandoned children which, as Wells (2007, 63) describes, ‘places the viewer of the image in the role of these missing carers’. The images thus functioned as ‘critical sites’ on which a particular narrative of abandonment and rescue was inscribed (55), allowing the British public to step in as substitute parents. In turn, this fed into the demonisation of asylum-seekers as bad parents, a recurring theme of anti-asylum discourse in Britain as well as other countries.⁸ Hence, the dominant narrative of the media and humanitarian campaign was that of young, vulnerable and innocent children, abandoned by neglectful parents, and all in need of Britain’s parental generosity and protection. The subtext of the campaign was that this was not about the politics of undocumented migration but about the suffering of innocent children; the safe and easily legible narrative of child rescue transcended the messy politics of ‘illegal’ migration. Equally important, however, is the fact that these images planted a very specific idea in the British public’s mind of the kind of children who needed rescuing.

The second key argument in the Dubs campaign was the forging of parallels between lone children seeking refuge in present-day Europe and Jewish children in pre-Second World War Europe brought to Britain as part of the Kindertransport scheme of the 1930s. When Lord Dubs first introduced his first proposed amendment, he drew explicit parallels between these groups of children and used his own story as a Kindertransport veteran to highlight Britain’s history of protecting child refugees and its tradition of

helping children in need ('Proceedings of Immigration Bill debate in the House of Lords' 2016). From the outset, then, the Dubs scheme was represented in the public imaginary as a kind of modern-day Kindertransport.⁹ The parallels between the Kindertransport children and present-day unaccompanied child asylum-seekers were quickly picked up by the media (see, e.g. *Huffington Post*, April 26, 2016; *BBC News*, May 20, 2016; *The Guardian*, September 5, 2016; and Dubs' 2017). Newspaper coverage of the proposed amendment highlighted Lord Dubs' story of arriving in Britain from Prague as a six-year-old boy as part of the scheme organised by Nicholas Winton. *The Guardian* published a series of interviews with former child refugees of the Kindertransport asking them to reflect on the situation of child refugees today (May 19, 2016). Similar rhetoric also resounded in humanitarian organisations' support of the amendment.¹⁰ And on Holocaust Memorial Day in January 2017, at a ceremony rededicating a plaque commemorating the Kindertransport, the correlation of the situation of children seeking asylum in Britain today with that of Jewish children in the 1930s was symbolised by the presence, alongside Lord Dubs, of child asylum-seekers recently arrived from France (see 'Holocaust Memorial Day' 2017).

This appeal to Britain's self-image as a protector of vulnerable children no doubt helped to increase public support and place moral pressure on the government to act on behalf of child asylum-seekers. At the same time, this part of the Dubs campaign stands as an example of how, as Tony Kushner has observed (2003, 266), history is used (and often abused) in contemporary debates around asylum. The Dubs campaign positioned present-day child asylum-seekers within a specific politics of memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust in Britain. Having been neglected for decades as a part of Britain's public memory of the Second World War, in the past 15 years the Kindertransport has been the subject of an 'abundance of memory' (Kushner 2006, 143–145). Now firmly embedded in a memory politics which has given privileged status to victims and refugees of Nazism, the children brought to Britain under the special scheme have, as Kushner (2006, 145) has noted, 'become doubly set apart, both special and celebrated'. The Kindertransport has become 'one of the most written-about refugee movements' (Sharples 2012, 19) with the recent memoirs and films on the topic contributing to a dominant overarching narrative that envisions Britain as a saviour of vulnerable, innocent children fleeing Nazi persecution (for an overview of these, see Kushner 2006). Yet, as Kushner suggests, the appeal of the Kindertransport story has resulted in an unwillingness to confront the actual moral and political messiness of the scheme and its implementation. Whilst this is now gradually changing, through the work of historians such as Tony Kushner, Caroline Sharples and Jennifer Craig-Norton, there is still little room in the current official memory of the initiative for scrutiny of, for example, the political resistance encountered by the scheme's initial proposal, or for the discriminatory selection procedures which determined which children would be rescued (see Curio and Axelrod 2004). Furthermore, a particular image of the very young Jewish child refugee which has established itself in the public imagination is at odds with the fact that early in the scheme, priority was given to adolescent boys of 16–17 years of age, as this was the group most likely to be detained or interned under National Socialism (Fast 2011, 25). Nor is there any room for a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of individual children that challenge the dominant overarching image of vulnerable child refugees who felt only gratitude for Britain's generosity. The homogenised innocence, vulnerability and

gratitude of these children is central to the overarching narrative; the knowledge that some children may have lied about their age in order to be included in the scheme¹¹, or that others were traumatised by the separation from their families, or abused in their new homes, would only interrupt the 'safeness' (Kushner 2006; Sharples 2012) of this story.

Thus, the parallels drawn between the child refugees of the Kindertransport and the children targeted by the Dubs campaign appealed to a specific memory politics of the Second World War victims. Central to 'the hermetically sealed moral universe' of Holocaust commemoration (Kushner 2006, 169), in which the Kindertransport has taken a firm place, is the figure of the genuine, deserving refugee and a black-and-white historical narrative which places refugees and their protectors on the 'right' side of history. Crucially, as Kushner points out, this figure does not exist in the present, but 'is firmly, and of course safely, located in the past' (2003, 266). Hence, the genuine refugee that exists in popular consciousness is a disembodied one, and one whose border crossing does not constitute a threat to British sovereignty but rather reinforces a sense of national pride that the country has proved its moral worth when history has demanded it. It is this extraction of the figure of the deserving refugee from the present that has enabled politicians to celebrate Britain's legacy of giving asylum to vulnerable groups whilst advocating ever more restrictive asylum policies in the name of protecting Britain's borders (Kushner 2006, 170).

In this way, the two distinct but interconnected arguments that drove the Dubs campaign, namely the appeal to childhood innocence and the memory politics of the Second World War, allowed the British public to self-fashion itself, just as it did in the 1930s, as substitute parents to the abandoned children of the so-called refugee crisis. The media crusade mobilised public sympathy and placed moral pressure on the government: in danger of appearing indifferent to the plight of children, the government eventually conceded to Dubs' proposed amendment and inserted Section 67 into the Immigration Act 2016 in May of that year (see *Huffington Post*, April 25, 2016). It was a minor humanitarian concession in an otherwise unchanged politico-legal document. As I have shown, the key arguments behind this amendment positioned unaccompanied child asylum-seekers within a universal, ahistorical politics of childhood contingent on qualities such as innocence, passiveness and dependency on adults. Yet, the effect of the campaign's arguments was not just to plant further images of very young children in the public's mind as deserving of rescue and protection. They also appealed to the idea of children as ahistorical and apolitical, making them the subjects of a humanitarian response, their needs and rights conceived as no different from those of the child refugees of Nazism. This not only meant that a very specific image of a worthy child refugee had lodged itself in the public's mind ahead of the arrival of the first Dubs children. It also meant that the condition on which these children would be provided with British hospitality and generosity, namely their deservingness, contingent on their innocence, had also begun to cement.

Turning children into non-children

I want now to turn to the media coverage of the arrival of the first of the 'Dubs children' from Calais in October 2016 which illustrates how the campaign's mobilisation of the politics of childhood I have described shaped their reception. Within hours of their arrival in

Britain, the heavy media presence which met the group quickly raised doubts about whether they were children at all. *The Sun* (October 17, 2016 and October 18, 2016) wrote of ‘fake child refugees’ and set about identifying the ‘real’ age of the arrivals using face-recognition apps, with other tabloid newspapers soon joining in (e.g. *Evening Standard*, October 21, 2016). On 17 October 2016, Conservative MP David Davies tweeted ‘These don’t look like “children” to me. I hope British hospitality is not being abused’ and in an interview on *BBC Radio 4* on the same day suggested that the British public had been misled into expecting ‘much younger children’ to benefit from Britain’s ‘hospitality’. Calls for dental examinations to establish the real age of some of the children, though quickly dismissed by the government and medical professionals as unethical and inaccurate, sparked a debate about how best to undertake age assessments (e.g. articles from *The Guardian*, October 19, 2016; *Huffington Post*, October 24, 2016; *BBC News*, October 19, 2016). In the right-wing press, the rhetoric shifted quickly away from one of protection and humanitarian responsibility to one of suspicion and outrage that Britain had been deceived, its hospitality abused. The word children was quickly dropped to be replaced by ‘youths’, ‘minors’, ‘lads’, or it was placed in inverted commas to imply that imposters had taken their place. Many were pictured with their hoods pulled up over their heads. Comments on facial hair, their physicality (in the tabloid press, many of the boys were described as ‘burly’), and their height all served to reinforce the suspicion that these were not children.

Complicit with the cultural politics of asylum, the politics of age worked against the new arrivals to transform them from innocent children into blameable adolescents who were no longer deserving of protection.¹² The language used in the media coverage suggests it was the unaccompanied minors’ appearance as ‘unchildlike’ children, their transgression of the boundary between childhood and adulthood (Aitken 2001, 124) that caused such controversy. This bears out Elizabeth Brown’s point that ‘the modern view of childhood often fails to consider the muddled category of youth or adolescence’ (2011, 362). Their bodies, framed within the stereotypes of juvenile delinquency, were positioned within a ‘racialised hierarchy’ that stigmatised them as less important than other children (Hopkins and Hill 2010, 139). In this way, the construct of the ‘unchildlike’ asylum-seeking child can be seen as a further instance of what Elizabeth Brown (2011, 362) calls the ‘fracturing of childhood’, which has served to facilitate and legitimise the criminalisation of non-white youths in their transgression of the boundaries of normative childhood (see also Jackson and Pabon 2000). Faced with unchildlike children, the state of Britain that had self-fashioned itself as a protector of innocent children was now a victim, vulnerable to foreign delinquents.¹³ This response lays bare how both race and gender play a determining factor in the way in which children are positioned differently in relation to prevailing notions of childhood (Ticktin 2015). It also underscores the extent to which such markers of difference were downplayed in the photographs used in the media campaign I examined earlier, through their focus on markers of childness. And, it shows how normative idealisations of childhood leave little room for the ‘messy actuality of the body’ (Brown 2011, 362). The focus on the ‘unchildlike’ appearance of the new arrivals reveals how their failure to conform to dominant expectations of what lone child refugees would look like undermined the legitimacy not only of their claim to be children but also of their need for protection. This not only demonstrates how representational practices around child refugees, which foreground young children, rely on codes that preclude the

possibility (appropriateness) of demonstrations of resilience, agency, capacity and maturity in children; it also makes clear that the perception of who is deserving of protection is contingent on these codes. Whilst images of very young children had served to mobilise public sympathy for child asylum-seekers as helpless victims, the photographs taken of the first Dubs children were quickly used as *evidence against them*, to challenge their status as children. According to the logic of representation that had governed the discourse of child refugees in early 2016, and which had already pre-determined what a worthy refugee looks like, these male adolescents could only fail to convince the British public of their deservingness, their specific need for protection. The images framed them as non-children. The ensuing calls for age checks meant that their childness, the very foundation of their inclusion in the scheme, was now subject to suspicion and disbelief. Their expulsion from the fractured category of ‘child’ did not simply propel the Dubs children neatly into a long-standing discourse on ‘bogus’ asylum-seekers in Britain (Tyler 2006; Innes 2010); it also drew on a tabloid-fuelled moral panic around dangerous and criminal ‘imposter’ children (see articles in *The Daily Mail* and *The Sun* on February 20, 2016).¹⁴ In the anti-asylum climate of present-day Britain, norms of appropriate childlike appearance and behaviour operated ultimately to position asylum-seeking youths simultaneously as adults and as a criminal threat to British society.

In this way, the apparently unshakeable moral foundations on which the Dubs’ children’s legal entry into Britain was based, namely their childness, quickly crumbled in the face of what Heaven Crawley has termed a ‘culture of disbelief’ (cited in Silverman 2013, 32). The use of photographs as evidence against their claim to asylum highlights how representational practices around children often serve political ends that ultimately bypass a genuine concern for the lives of real children. It also shows just how heavily politicised the issue of age assessment has become (Kvittingen 2010). For although we could easily dismiss the response to the Dubs children as typical only of the anti-immigration discourse of right-wing newspapers, in reality many child asylum-seekers are subjected to suspicion about their age upon entering Britain, and age-assessment disputes are on the rise (see Bhaba and Finch 2006; Crawley 2007). Indeed, the rhetoric of adults posing as children is also a feature of government documents on the issue of age assessment (Crawley 2007, 24–25), and it is government policy to judge the age of children based on their appearance and demeanour and to detain anyone who *appears* to be significantly over 18 (Refugee Council 2017). As legal scholars such as Crawley (2007) and Jacqueline Bhaba (2006) have demonstrated, this culture of disbelief exposes the precarity of childhood as a category in its encounter with the politics of border control and its failure to offer genuine protection to children in the framework of Britain’s punitive asylum system.¹⁵ In the context of asylum, psychological assessments and bio-metric technologies serve to determine who passes for a child and who does not. The age-assessment process highlights how the category of childhood, i.e. who counts as a child, is open to interpretation, negotiation and manipulation. And the quickness of accusations of fake children illustrates how, as Ticktin (2015) has highlighted, concepts such as vulnerability and innocence operate to quickly expel unsuitable individuals from the category of child. If expelled as a non-child, the child asylum-seeker becomes an asylum-seeker, subject to the policing of the border, moved out of the secure zones of childhood and faced with detention, deportation, etc. Whilst childhood scholars have also long challenged the fixing of age through ‘arbitrarily chosen bodily markers’ (Colls and Hörschelmann 2010, 10), in the politico-legal

context of asylum, there is real pressure on asylum-seeker children to conform to dominant notions of childlike appearance and behaviour in order to not jeopardise their asylum claims (Crawley 2011). The age-assessment process highlights how abstract idealisations of childhood have concrete, material implications for child asylum-seekers, not least because the need to prove their identity *as* children in order to ensure their right to protection *as* children means that they are often subjected to more intrusive mechanisms of bio-power than adults. Despite the humanitarian and legal mechanisms which facilitate the prioritised treatment of child asylum-seekers in line with national child-welfare frameworks, there remains an enormous difference between children who are British citizens and those children whose border-crossing positions them as undocumented non-citizens.¹⁶ The non-citizen child is always subject to the border first, a political reality which unsettles the ethical foundations of the ‘child first, migrant second’ approach advocated by international children’s rights frameworks and humanitarian organisations.

Contesting the politics of child rescue

In February 2017, the government announced the closure of the Dubs scheme, capping the total number of children transferred to Britain at just 350 (see *The Guardian*, February 8, 2017). Despite widespread condemnation, and another celebrity-backed media campaign, the government voted against re-opening the scheme (*The Guardian*, February 2, 2017). To date, in October 2017, according to the website of the charity Safe Passage, just 200 children have been brought to Britain under the Dubs amendment. Section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016 constituted an unprecedented recognition of the specific circumstances of unaccompanied child asylum-seekers. Nevertheless, as a political instrument it proved ineffective. The foregrounding of children as innocent and vulnerable victims of the European border regime in the media and humanitarian campaigns have had little impact on the material and political reality which these children, who number in the tens of thousands (Full Fact 2016), inhabit. Briefly visible as humanitarian subjects under the scheme, the closure means they are once again subjected to a border politics which makes no distinction between adults and children, rendering them, in Agamben’s words, ‘legally unnameable and unclassifiable’ (2005, 3). Whilst the British public and politicians have signalled their readiness to rally around the plight of lone refugee children, the status of ‘child’ offers no guarantee of protection once these children encounter the bio-power of Britain’s border.¹⁷ For as long as the UK continues to define individuals in their relation to the border, their status as children is of no consequence. Yet, outside of the secure zone of childhood, inhabitants of Europe’s spaces of exception, they continue to be targeted *as children* by traffickers and other criminal groups.¹⁸

As I have tried to show here, the Dubs scheme highlights why the mobilisation of a politics of childhood in seeking to generate public sympathy for child refugees to overcome political opposition is problematic. It is not just that it ultimately fails to offer concrete political leverage for children who seek asylum. Equally problematic is the fact that a foregrounding of a universal idea of childhood, which rests on qualities of innocence and vulnerability, ultimately sets out of the very terms on which children are offered protection. Specifically, the Dubs children highlight how notions of deservingness serve to expel seemingly unsuitable individuals from the category of child. For as the bio-politics of age-assessment show, the inclusiveness of childhood is as subjective and ideologically driven

as it is changeable (Crawley 2007). For this reason, as I have attempted to show here, the ‘child first, migrant second’ approach, underpinned by a universal politics of childhood, does not guarantee genuine and effective protection of child refugees (for further on this see Doná and Veale 2011, 1286). Furthermore, if the child is only visible as an object of humanitarian aid then s/he becomes invisible as a political subject in his/her own right (Agamben 1998, 133), and the concrete socio-political factors which affect their perceived childness fade into the background. To insist on the universality of childhood as a basis for the protection of child refugees obscures how markers of gender and race position children in different ways in relation to their perceived (and actual) childness. The response to the first children to arrive from refugee camps in Europe reflects how such markers of difference operated to remove them from the category of ‘child’, making them unworthy of protection.

Ultimately, the media coverage of the so-called refugee crisis which accompanied the Dubs campaign points, in my opinion, to the media’s complicity in the creation of a new, invisible precariat: young, single men seeking asylum. Invariably represented in the media as aggressive, moving in large groups – note the contrast with the lone figure of the abandoned refugee child – these men are rarely a priority for humanitarian assistance, and yet they are the ones most likely to be detained, arrested or deported, and they are heavily criminalised (Ponthieu 2017). This places race and gender at the heart of a politics of rescue which determines who is deserving of protection. The reliance on very young children as the face of the humanitarian crisis in 2015 and 2016 served to cement vulnerability, innocence and passiveness as the conditions on which Britain would offer help and support to refugees stuck in Europe that silently excluded certain groups as non-vulnerable and thus as unworthy of humanitarian assistance.

I would like to illustrate my closing points by drawing on two images that have responded to the iconography of the media spectacle of the ‘refugee crisis’ and its hierarchy of victims. The first is the controversial recreation of the Alan Kurdi image in January 2016 by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei, in which he placed himself in the same position as Alan Kurdi, lying face down on a beach. The image, which was dismissed by some as ‘crass’, ‘sickening’ and marking a ‘new low-point for the artist’ (Neuendorf 2016), I think points to the pitfalls of a humanitarian response to refugees that is contingent on qualities such as innocence and vulnerability. By forcing us to ask ourselves whether an image of a dead man would have triggered the same emotional response as that unleashed by the image of Alan Kurdi, Ai Weiwei’s recreation exposes the implicit order of worthy vulnerability that silently makes certain bodies more grievable (Butler 2004, xiv) or more worthy of protection than others. In the context of the ongoing situation in the Mediterranean, Ticktin (2016) describes the ‘racial hierarchy’ that governs the allocation of places on smugglers’ boats, with lighter-skinned migrants being seen as more likely to be rescued. The child/adult Other binary at the core of the politics of child rescue, which Aiwei’s reconstruction points to, is also a theme of the highly controversial *Charlie Hebdo* cartoon, also from January 2016, which suggested that had Alan Kurdi lived to grow up, he would have become one of the men accused of sexually assaulting women in Cologne on New Year’s Eve 2015 (e.g. CNN, January 14, 2016). Whilst its crassness and racist implications are reason enough to disregard the image as a helpful comment on the topic, I would like to suggest that the cartoon can also be read as a critique of the representational practices which have framed the reporting of the ‘refugee crisis’. As Fernando and Giordano

(2016) argue, the cartoon's depiction of the sexually aggressive Arab male as 'little' Alan's double draws attention to the racial hierarchy that is central to the politics of innocence which dictates who is seen as a worthy refugee. Both images draw attention to the child/adult Other binary that shapes media and humanitarian campaigns, and I, therefore, read these iconoclastic pictures as inviting us to ask, along with Judith Butler,

Which humans count as the human? Which humans are eligible for recognition within the sphere of appearance, and which are not? What racist norms, for instance, operate to distinguish amongst those who can be recognized as human and those who cannot? (2015, 36)

The work done by images of child refugees thus becomes complicit in a logic of representation that determines who is deemed worthy of protection, because innocent, and who is figured as an undocumented non-citizen, whose border-crossing constitutes a threat to national security and sovereignty.

In questioning the politics of childhood that underpin the representation of children who seek asylum and the humanitarian campaigns which target them, it is not my aim to suggest that these children should not receive greater protection, nor do I want to place their identity as children in doubt. I also do not want to undermine the work done by Lord Dubs and organisations such as Safe Passage to support and protect people affected by Europe's dehumanising border regime. This notwithstanding, as de Schweinitz (2005) has also shown, historically appeals to ideas of childhood have failed to effect serious political change on issues of social justice. Furthermore, the issue of age assessment in particular shows that we need to interrogate the potentially harmful material effects of policies and practices which prioritise children who seek asylum *as children*. And at the same time, we should be alert to the fact that as we rally around humanitarian causes with their easily identifiable victims, we leave intact the political mechanisms that inflict the violence of border control on all undocumented non-citizens.

Notes

1. Their arrival also coincided with that of other unaccompanied children under the Dublin III Regulation, which allowed children to be transferred to Britain in order to be reunited with close family members. Although legally and politically these are two distinct groups of child asylum-seekers, in the media coverage that documented their arrival, no clear distinction was made. My argument in this article is that the Dubs campaign shaped the conditions of the reception of both groups. The confusion between the two legal frameworks also occurred at the practical level: by August 2016 the only children to have arrived in Britain since the Dubs amendment was passed in May of that year were those who would have been eligible anyway under the Dublin III regulation. For further on this, see the British Red Cross report, 'No Place for Children' (2016).
2. This was not his real name (see *Aljazeera America*, September 4, 2015). However, as Fernando and Giordano (2016) point out this factual error mattered little in the circulation of his image and the emotional response to it.
3. This is the term favoured by scholars working in Border Studies. See, for example, Kasparek and Speer (2015) and also Perkowski (2016). Although I am also critical of the narrative of 'crisis' which has framed the arrival of refugees at Europe's border crossings over the past two years, I use it here because of its centrality to the media coverage of the events and to the humanitarian initiatives which have emerged in response.
4. See Sherper-Hughes and Sargent (1998, 1), who define the politics of childhood as 'the political, ideological and social significance of childhood'. In the field of childhood

- studies, attention is increasingly turning to the political significance and nature of childhood (Stephens 1995; James and James 2004; Goddard et al. 2005; Thomas 2009; Drerup et al. 2016).
5. The scheme was meant to focus on children in camps in France, Greece and Italy (Home Office 2016). By February 2017, not a single child from Italy or Greece had been transferred under the Dubs scheme (*The Telegraph*, February 9, 2017).
 6. This is a trend seen mostly starkly in a series of images which appeared in the online version of the Danish newspaper *Politiken* (February 28, 2017) which enabled readers to click on the images of child refugees and to blend out their backgrounds, leaving just the image of the child. Scholarly texts have also featured images of very young children (see, e.g. Fili and Xythali 2017; Rooney 2017).
 7. From the imploring eyes of the Rwandan child that Agamben (1998, 33) invokes, to the children that dominated the media coverage of the Balkans war (see Burman 1994) or the Iraq war in 2003 (see Holland 2004b). Children, of course, have also featured heavily in the media coverage of the ongoing conflict in Syria.
 8. See, for example, David Farrier's discussion of the removal of children from their asylum-seeking parents into care in the UK (2011, 98). In Australia, the Children Overboard affair hinged on the government's demonization of asylum-seekers as bad parents (for further on this see McLaughlin 2017). For more on how the control of children is bound up with border politics in the Australian context, see Silverstein (2016).
 9. The Kindertransport initiative that saved 10,000 Jewish children from probable death in Nazi death camps was launched in the wake of Kristallnacht in November 1938. The lobbying of the British government by leading British Jewish figures resulted in the lifting of visa requirements for Jewish children in Europe under the age of 17 and allowed groups of selected children to enter Britain. For a brief overview of the scheme, see Grenville (2012).
 10. Kirsty McNeill of Save the Children, for example, highlighted the importance of the chance to 'live up to Britain's proud history of reaching out a hand to the most vulnerable children who need our help' (*Huffington Post*, April 25, 2016). Parallels were also drawn by a spokesperson for the charity and campaign group Safe Passage, Rabbi Janet Darley: 'Our grandparents set us the example when they rescued 10,000 child refugees from Nazi persecution through the Kindertransport' (cited in *The Guardian*, February 8, 2017).
 11. See, for example, the story of Susanne Goldsmith, who would have been excluded from the scheme had she not pretended she was 16 (recounted in *The Los Angeles Times*, December 4, 2013).
 12. For more on the ideological work done by age, see Rosen (2005, 132).
 13. See, for example, Perrin 2016; Royston and Mills 2016; Matthews 2016; Davidson 2016. The criminalisation of adolescent / young male asylum-seekers has largely been looked at in the French context. See, for example, Terrio (2008).
 14. For a discussion of the discursive construct of the 'imposter child', see Silverman (2013).
 15. Challenges to the age-assessment procedures used in the U.K. have also emerged from the fields of medicine and dental health (see Abbing 2011; Aynsley-Green et al. 2012).
 16. Many scholars (e.g. Cemlyn and Briskman 2003, 167) have highlighted, for example, the structural failures of the welfare system with regard to asylum-seeker children.
 17. The conflict between child-welfare instruments and asylum policy in the UK is explored by Giner (2007). She also discusses the failure of legal instruments to address the specific legal and political position of children who seek asylum.
 18. Since the closure of the Dubs scheme in early 2017, the media has focused on the dangers to which unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in Europe are exposed. See, for example, articles in *The New Yorker*, February 27, 2017; *The Guardian*, May 17, 2017.

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