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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Gothic humanitarianism: Moving beyond the securitised approach to migration while embracing fear

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Abstract

The relationship involving the unknown other has so far been exclusively translated into the language of fear as part of the securitised response to migration. The fear of the unknown other divides people into those who are associated with illegality and chaos and those who need to be protected from such 'danger'. In contrast, the humanitarian approach to migration challenges the securitised response to the unknown other: it refuses to separate the self from the other and instead appeals to the idea of common humanity. This paper draws on the idea of the gothic to develop a humanitarian way of embracing the fear of the unknown. In the gothic framework, the other is feared not because of categorical differences between the self and the other, embodied in the securitised response to migration, but categorical ambiguity between the two. Using UK-based welcome activism as an example, I argue that gothic-inspired humanitarianism embraces the fear of the unknown other through the sharing of not knowing oneself. This offers a new basis for solidarity, in the language of fear, without resorting to the securitised relationship between the self and the other.

Keywords: borders; fear; humanitarianism; migration; securitisation; the gothic/gothicity

Introduction: The fear of the unknown other in responding to migration

In the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its neighbouring countries, such as Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria, promptly opened their borders to welcome Ukrainian refugees. This welcoming stance was in stark contrast to these countries' hostile responses to the previous arrival of refugees, many of whom fled the Syrian conflict. The Bulgarian prime minister Kiril Petkov at that time explained his country's change from its previous unwelcoming response to its support for Ukrainian refugees as follows:

> These [Ukrainian refugees] are not the refugees we are used to; these people are Europeans … These people are intelligent. They are educated people … This is not the refugee wave we have been used to, people *we were not sure about* their identity, people with *unclear* pasts, who could have been even terrorists.[1]

Petkov's comments echoed those of other countries that also used race as a reason to assist people fleeing Ukraine while refusing to help those from other countries, such as Syrians and Afghans,

[1]Renata Brito, 'Europe welcomes Ukrainian refugees – others less so', *Associated Press* (28 February 2022), available at: {https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-refugees-diversity-230b0cc790820b9bf8883f918fc8e313} (accessed 26 March 2025), emphasis added.

many of whom entered Europe between 2015 and 2016.[2] This different 'welcome' response reveals the racialised rhetoric of humanitarianism.[3] Ukrainian refugees were welcomed because they were deemed familiar to 'us' and fit into the racialised image of 'Europeans'. In contrast, people who arrived from places outside Europe were identified as a racially different 'other'. This racialised welcoming response was also displayed in the blatant denial of care and hospitality towards some international students and migrant workers who were also fleeing from Ukraine. They were denied care because they did not meet the racialised image of 'refugees' from Ukraine. Outraged by this response, the African Union and other international organisations demanded the equal treatment of people regardless of race and ethnicity.[4]

The racialised welcome discourse that emerged in response to the Ukrainian refugees not only demonstrates the persistent role racism plays in shaping global migration[5] but also informs us about the role that the fear of the unknown other plays in the securitised response to migration. Knowledge about the other brings a sense of certainty to 'us' that serves as the condition of 'our' acceptance. In the case of Ukrainian refugees, they were racially categorised as belonging to 'us'. Meanwhile, not knowing the other is translated into the language of fear, igniting suspicion and doubt about the stranger, as exemplified in Petkov's disturbing remarks.

Crucially, how to deal with the unknown other is not an alien question in forming the humanitarian response to migration, either. Indeed, identifying the stranger through categories such as refugee, asylum seeker, and immigrant is a critical part of delineating the contour of altruism which determines whether care can be provided, to whom, and to what extent. For example, Jacques Derrida writes about the desire to know the other as a central condition of welcoming the stranger through two different types of hospitality, conditional and unconditional.[6] Conditional hospitality refers to the welcoming of someone whose information, such as name, history, and status, is known to the host in advance, whereas unconditional hospitality is for 'the absolute other' of whom the host knows nothing:

> absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names.[7]

Derrida's account of hospitality suggests that dealing with the unknown other involves fear even in the humanitarian context. Since the host knows nothing, not even the name of the guest, a sense of unease pervades the welcoming of the unknown other. The uneasy feeling about the guest unsettles the host. The two types of hospitality highlight the fear of not knowing the

[2]Tazreena Sajjad, 'Ukrainian refugees are welcomed with open arms – not so with people fleeing other war-torn countries', *The Conversation* (9 March 2022), available at: {https://theconversation.com/ukrainian-refugees-are-welcomed-with-open-arms-not-so-with-people-fleeing-other-war-torn-countries-178491} (accessed 26 March 2025).

[3]Polly Pallister-Wilkins, 'Saving the souls of white folk: Humanitarianism as white supremacy', *Security Dialogue*, 52:1(2021), pp. 98–106.

[4]For example, see the statement issued by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner titled 'Ukraine: UN experts concerned by reports of discrimination against people of African descent at border' (20 March 2022), available at: {https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/03/ukraine-un-experts-concerned-reports-discrimination-against-people-african} (accessed 26 March 2025).

[5]Andrew S. Rosenberg, *Undesirable Immigrants: Why Racism Persists in International Migration* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

[6]For a recent reframing of Derrida's work in relation to migration, see Maja Zehfuss and Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'From security-space to time-race: Reimagining borders and migration in global politics', *International Political Sociology*, 18:3 (2024), pp. 1–19.

[7]Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 25, emphasis in original.

other as limiting (in the case of conditional hospitality) or not limiting (in the case of unconditional hospitality) the degree of compassion extended to people arriving on one's doorstep for help.[8]

Drawing on the idea of gothicity, this paper examines the fear of the unknown other to explore a new way of building relationality beyond the idea of common humanity. The relationship involving the unknown other so far has been exclusively translated into the language of fear as part of the securitised response to migration. Meanwhile, the humanitarian approach to migration has primarily been understood as an altruistic expression of helping others. However, little attention has been paid to how the humanitarian response to migration can also be realised beyond the idea of altruism. I argue that the gothic perspective provides a helpful intervention in this inquiry because it theorises the fear of the unknown other as a productive force in blurring the boundary between the self and the other. Ultimately, what the existing humanitarian approach to migration does, or intends to do, is to challenge the divisive language of fear which depicts the other as posing threats to the self. By refusing the language of fear, humanitarianism aims to go beyond division and form relationality in the name of common humanity. In this paper, I argue that the idea of gothicity helps in realising this humanitarian position while recasting the meaning of fear. Gothic-inspired literature speaks about dealing with the unknown other in terms of fear, as the securitisation approach does, but theorises this through a categorical ambiguity between the self and the other. In the gothic framework, the other is feared not because of differences between the self and the other, but because of categorical ambiguity between the self and the other. I suggest that this categorical ambiguity offers a new basis for solidarity in the language of fear, beyond the binary division between the self and the other.

Finding a different way of speaking about solidarity with migrants than altruism is an urgent task for humanitarianism because the provision of care and assistance to people crossing the border no longer stands in opposition to the tightening of border control. As will be elaborated in the 'The humanitarian-securitisation nexus' section below, the separation between the language of fear on the one hand and that of altruism on the other fails to address the contemporary border practices that are increasingly realised at the nexus between humanitarianism and securitisation. The securitisation of the humanitarian ethos becomes especially problematic when non-state actors demand that the state takes a more compassionate approach to border crossings. My aim in this paper is to explore a way of speaking about fear in a manner that strengthens the ideal of humanitarian ethos rather than, as the existing scholarship argues, undermines it. To be clear, the theoretical exploration is not conclusive but speculative in nature. How such a theoretical exploration can be translated into humanitarian practices on the ground is also beyond the scope of this paper. With these limitations in mind, however, the paper is intended to open a wider conversation about the different ways in which the formation of solidaristic relationality might be possible through fear, rather than solely through the altruistic desire to help others.

The paper is divided into five sections. The first section ('Humanitarianism-driven grassroots activism') discusses the specific role performed by humanitarian-based grassroots activism that emerged in response to the 2015–16 arrival of people into Europe. The second section ('The humanitarian-securitisation nexus') goes beyond this specific case to discuss how the existing humanitarian scholarship on migration finds the language of fear problematic. The separation of fear from the humanitarian ethos is re-examined in the third section ('The gothic approach to the fear of the unknown other') through the idea of the gothic. Building on the gothic approach outlined in the third section, the fourth section ('Reading the humanitarian response to migration gothically') investigates the way in which the gothic representation of the other was formed in humanitarian grassroots activism between 2015 and 2016. The fifth section ('Solidarity based on uncertain subjectivity') further explores the conceptual language around fear that can be aligned with humanitarianism. The paper concludes with the suggestion that fear holds the subversive potential to welcome the other.

[8]Ibid., pp. 24, 26.

Humanitarianism-driven grassroots activism

The basic assumption of this paper is that the meaning of humanitarianism and the practices that embody the humanitarian ethos are open to contestation. While the humanitarian ethos can be broadly understood as 'saving human lives in the name of humanity',[9] how that ethos is, and can be, enacted, and by whom, remains highly contested. As Willim Walters argues, 'the meaning of humanitarianism… and the identity of humanitarian actors' are far from 'settled'.[10] For example, Vicki Squire draws on the examples of the US–Mexico and Mediterranean border crossings to propose an alternative conceptualisation of humanitarianism which defines the category of the human through places and objects, without normalising migrant death at the borders.[11] Drawing on the gothic approach, I am interested in examining how the fear of the unknown other enacts the humanitarian desire to help people in distress and forges a basis of relationality between the self and the other.

To develop a humanitarian approach to migration beyond altruism, this paper focuses on the welcome campaigns that were mobilised by local residents in the UK between 2015 and 2016. For two reasons, I find this focus helpful. First, the 'stranger' was not clearly defined in the welcome campaigns. To be sure, many welcome campaign slogans, including 'welcome refugees' and 'refugee welcome here', indicated the centrality of the figure of the refugee. Some campaigns discussed in this paper, such as Project Paddington, also specifically targeted refugees. At the same time, the welcome campaigns also extended solidarity with people on the move more broadly. For example, at the Welcome Summit which I participated in 2016 in Birmingham, local participants explained their motives to help people coming to the UK not simply through their ancestors' experiences of political persecution but also economic migration to the UK (for details, see 'Beyond the self–other division' below). The character of Paddington Bear, which was used as a symbol in some welcome campaigns, also came to the UK not because Paddington was seeking asylum, but because Lucy, Paddington's aunt, saw the UK as a place that could enhance Paddington's life opportunities after she went into a retirement home.[12]

Signalling the extended solidarity with migrants was subtle and perhaps sometimes unintentional. However, this highlights a unique aspect of these welcome campaigns. Unlike the arrival of people from Ukraine, the people arriving to Europe during 2015–16 came from different places for mixed reasons.[13] Extending solidarity beyond the strict category of the refugee, the welcome campaigns demonstrated that local residents were not deterred by the lack of knowledge about the people they were assisting. Without knowing exactly whether the person in need of help was a refugee or not, people provided a wide range of care. Crucially, these local residents' welcome response made a stark contrast with anti-immigration sentiment unfolding at the same

[9]Henry Radice, 'Saving ourselves? On rescue and humanitarian action', *Review of International Studies*, 45:3 (2019), pp. 431–448 (p. 431).

[10]William Walters, 'Foucault and frontiers: Notes on the birth of the humanitarian border', in Ulrich Bröckling, Susanne Krassmann, and Thomas Lemke (eds), *Governmentality: Current Issues and Future Challenges* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp. 177–209 (p. 155).

[11]Vicki Squire, 'Desert "trash": Posthumanism, border struggles, and humanitarian politics', *Political Geography*, 39 (2014), pp. 11–21; Vicki Squire, 'Governing migration through death in Europe and the US: Identification, burial and the crisis of modern humanism', *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:3 (2017), pp. 513–32.

[12]Paddington Bear, available at: {https://www.paddington.com/us/heritage/paddington/#:~:text=Although%20Paddington%20now%20lives%20in,him%20to%20England%20to%20live} (accessed 28 March 2025).

[13]To draw attention to the nature of these mixed migration flows, international aid agencies, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), also used the words 'refugees' and 'migrants' side by side to refer to people arriving to Europe during 2015 and 2016. See: '2015 Stories: The year of Europe's refugee crisis' (8 December 2015), available at: {https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2015-year-europes-refugee-crisis} (accessed 26 March 2025); 'Irregular migrant, refugee arrivals in Europe top one million in 2015: IOM' (22 December 2015), available at: {https://www.iom.int/news/irregular-migrant-refugee-arrivals-europe-top-one-million-2015-iom} (accessed 26 March 2025).

time. Especially during the 2016 Brexit campaign, the language of fear dominated the immigration debate, depicting migrants as various sorts of 'threats' to the UK.[14] This makes the UK-based welcome campaigns a useful site for investigating what is at stake in knowing, or not knowing, the other, when the other is the object of both sympathy and fear. Such investigation allows us to explore powerful possibilities of humanitarianism articulated through the figure of the unknown other.[15]

Secondly, it was nearly a decade ago that the widespread humanitarian campaigns were organised within, and beyond, the UK, in response to the migrants' arrival to Europe. Nevertheless, the impact of these campaigns has been long-lasting. The humanitarian campaigns developed then have introduced the vocabulary of 'welcome' as a core identity of humanitarianism at the grassroots level. For example, the welcome language has been extensively used in the humanitarian response to Ukrainian refugees coming to Europe, and solidarity activism with refugees and migrants in general.[16] In response to the anti-immigration riots that spread across the country in summer 2024, a Newcastle-based charity also collected supportive 'welcome' messages for refugees and migrants living in the area.[17] For this reason, the welcome response that encouraged many people to express their humanism at the grassroots level back then offers an important site to investigate limits and possibilities of humanitarianism in contemporary border politics.

In this paper, I follow Nick Gill's interpretation of local activism whereby humanitarianism was expressed through compassion and solidarity with people coming to Europe in 2015–16. Gill[18] observes that, during that time, the language of compassion and sympathy was explicitly associated with various local campaigns to support people arriving in Europe. Local residents and non-governmental organisations launched a range of actions including providing food and accommodation, offering medical and legal assistance, and advocating for the rights of those fleeing their countries. Gill describes this type of response as 'genuine, spontaneous' and 'grassroots',[19] in contrast to the 'official'[20] and 'institutionalised'[21] welcome of the state and international actors. Gill calls the former humanitarian actors that are 'driven by strong discourses of compassion and solidarity'.[22] In contrast, he described the latter as being motivated by 'statist and nationalistic logics and demands'[23] and only offering 'humanitarian "welcome" in an abstract sense',[24] because refugees received little of the support they needed.

To be clear, not all grassroots activism is driven by compassion and solidarity. Born out of the frustration with the government not doing enough to control the movement of people, some grassroots activism expresses a securitised response to border crossing.[25] Similar examples can be

[14]For example, see Alan Travis, 'Fear of immigration drove the leave victory – not immigration itself', *The Guardian* (24 June 2016), available at: {https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/24/voting-details-show-immigration-fears-were-paradoxical-but-decisive} (accessed 2 April 2025).

[15]For this reason, the paper also uses interchangeably various categories of movements associated with migration, such as refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers, and migrants, unless specific welcome campaigns discussed in the paper refer to a particular group of people.

[16]As to the former, see the Ukrainian Welcome Centre, available at: {https://www.ukrainianwelcomecentre.org} (accessed 26 March 2025) and the Jesuit Refugee Service UK, available at: {https://www.jrsuk.net/ukrainian-refugee-hosting-faqs/} (accessed 26 March 2025). As to the latter, see, for example, the '"Refugees Welcome" high-street campaign' led by a group of organisations in response to the Conservative Party-led British government's immigration policy debate in 2023, available at: {https://weare.lush.com/press-releases/refugee-action-and-lush-launch-refugees-welcome-campaign/} (accessed 26 March 2025).

[17]Jason Arunn Murugesu, 'Refugee charity translating "welcome" messages', *BBC News* (13 August 2024), available at: {https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/clynk8005v7o}(accessed 26 March 2026).

[18]Nick Gill, 'The suppression of welcome', *Fennia*, 196:1 (2018), pp. 88–98.

[19]Ibid., p. 90.

[20]Ibid., p. 90.

[21]Ibid., p. 90.

[22]Ibid., p. 89.

[23]Ibid., p. 90.

[24]Ibid., p. 93.

[25]Roxanne Lynn Doty, *The Law into Their Own Hands: Immigration and the Politics of Exceptionalism* (Tucson, AZ: The University of Arizona Press, 2009).

found in citizen-led activism that expressed hostility towards people coming to Europe in 2015.[26] For this reason, I use the term grassroots activism contextually: it refers to altruism-based activism that was organised in the UK by non-state actors, including local residents, to express compassion for and solidarity with migrants during 2015–16. As I discuss in the next section, such activism is not an outlier but a persistent feature of the contemporary migration landscape. Therefore, I use specific examples in the UK to explore the limitations and possibilities of humanitarianism in the contemporary migration context more broadly.

The humanitarian-securitisation nexus

The motive to help migrants has been predominantly expressed through the language of care and compassion in various places. For example, drawing on cases from the Sonoran Desert (US–Mexico) and the Mediterranean Sea (European Union–North Africa), Squire[27] identifies local volunteer actors, such as the Samaritans and the No More Deaths organisation, as 'humanitarian activism' motivated by 'compassion' and the pursuit of 'human rights'.[28] By looking at the cases of Italian seafarers who were penalised for helping irregular migrants in the Mediterranean, Tugba Basaran uses compassion to distinguish 'the Good Samaritan who rescues the stranger and his counterpart, the bystander, an ideal observer lacking active compassion'.[29] Jill M. Williams discusses the humanitarian response to migration in the United States through the lens of care. She points out that 'the work of non-governmental humanitarian organizations has been criminalized and regulated'[30] by securitising actors, such as border guards, which expand their roles to provide medical care and support for people crossing borders.

The compassion towards others is, however, increasingly losing its humanitarian ground. The humanitarian reasons to protect and save migrants' lives are no longer sustained through the idea of common humanity which resists the division between us and them. The humanitarianism approach to migration is instead being co-opted by policies that aim to control the population movement through the language of fear that divides people between those who are associated with illegality and chaos and those who need to be protected from such threats. The British government's Rwanda relocation scheme is an emblematic example of the nexus between securitisation and humanitarianism.[31] The humanitarian motive to protect people from the danger of drowning in the English Channel was used as a justification for discouraging people to seek asylum in the UK, some of whom needed to rely on smugglers to arrive there in the first place. The government's Rwanda scheme was designed to punish those asylum seekers with irregular entry by relocating them from the UK to Rwanda. Thus, the altruistic desire to help others, which underlines the humane response to migration, is increasingly intertwined with the desire to control the border and penalise people for 'illegal' crossings.

In light of this nexus, Adrian Little and Nick Vaughan-Williams argue that the present conceptualisation of humanitarianism only takes us so far in problematising the securitised border control.[32] As much as the existing studies are helpful in identifying various humanitarian practices through compassion and sympathy, they are quick to conclude the limitations of humanitarianism when the

[26] For example, see Atika Shubert, 'German anti-migrant protest: "We don't want to be strangers in our own country"', *CNN* (20 October 2015), available at: {https://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/19/world/dresden-protests-against-immigrants/index.html} (accessed 26 March 2025).

[27] Squire, 'Governing migration through death in Europe and the US'.

[28] Squire, 'Desert "trash"', p. 13.

[29] Tugba Basaran, 'The saved and the drowned: Governing indifference in the name of security', *Security Dialogue*, 46:3 (2015), pp. 205–20 (p. 206).

[30] Jill M. Williams, 'From humanitarian exceptionalism to contingent care: Care and enforcement at the humanitarian border', *Political Geography*, 47 (2015), pp. 11–20 (p. 11).

[31] The Rwanda scheme, which was designed and partially implemented under the Conservative party-led government, was scrapped by the new government led by the Labour Party after the 2024 general election.

[32] Adrian Little and Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'Stopping boats, saving lives, securing subjects: Humanitarian borders in Europe and Australia', *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:3 (2017), pp. 533–56.

language of fear is tied to humanitarian response to migration. The humanitarian scholarship fails to offer a productive response when the humanitarian ethos to help others is used as part of securitisation practices. This poses a serious challenge to the existing humanitarian approach to migration, let alone critical International Relations (IR) scholarship, when 'much of that [IR] scholarship relies precisely upon humanitarian arguments'.[33] The separation of compassion from fear foregrounds the analysis of contemporary border practices which securitises humanitarian practices, leading to the current deadlock where humanitarianism only works as a 'diagnostic tool'.[34]

As Didier Fassin's work[35] shows, the troubling link between humanitarianism and securitisation has existed for a long time. Drawing on Michel Foucault's idea of biopolitics, Fassin painstakingly traces the persistent feature of governance that simultaneously controls and saves human lives. Fassin's observation about humanitarianism reveals that the desire to save others based on empathy and compassion is intimately connected to the desire to 'manage, regulate, and support the existence of human beings'.[36] Fassin's work is part of a growing body of literature that highlights increasingly securitised humanitarian practices at the border.[37]

Two fundamentally different approaches to migration, one driven by the securitising desire to protect national borders and the other by the humanitarian desire to save people, reveal the tension between the principles of particularity and universality. The former positions individuals' ethical responsibility in the community to which they belong. It reflects the idea of state sovereignty, whereby people are first and foremost defined as 'us' as citizens of a particular country, and solidarity is formed primarily with 'our' fellow citizens. The movement of people is monitored and controlled to manage various socio-economic and political threats associated with 'others', people outside the community. For instance, in 2015–16, the us–them division emerged through the depiction of people coming to Europe as potential 'terrorists' and 'bogus refugees' in the media.[38] Such division underscores the call for tighter border control and securing borders. Meanwhile, the latter principle, universality, is guided by the desire to go beyond particularism (of a specific state and the state system in general). This principle appeals to the ethical consciousness of humanity as a whole. What matters is not a person's citizenship status, or lack thereof, but that everyone should be perceived as humans first and foremost, and thus treated humanely.

However, enacting ethical responsibility based on the principle of universality is not a straightforward task. Humanity, and what constitutes being human, is far from a neutral and apolitical concept because it is deeply implicated in the sovereign condition of the world itself. To practice humanity evokes a particular type of politics that is tied to the temporal and spatial domains of the state. As Giorgio Agamben argues,[39] to be human is to be implicated in the operation of sovereign power which categorises life as either *bios*, a form of life worthy of being included in the polis, or *zoē*, a form of life that can be sacrificed in the interest of the polis. Life is thus subjected to categorical ambiguity, and sovereign power manifests itself through the control of that ambiguity. Under such conditions, as Edkins argues, 'humanitarianism, generally seen by liberal commentators as the challenge to sovereign authority on behalf of common humanity, turns out to be the very manner in which a sovereign order is achieved'.[40] What it means to be human and act as such is contingent upon the condition in which one is living in a world divided by state boundaries and governed by sovereign political orders. To realise a humanitarian ethical obligation is tricky because there is no

[33]Ibid., p. 535. See also Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (eds), *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labour* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

[34]Little and Vaughan-Williams, 'Stopping boats, saving lives, securing subjects'.

[35]Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012).

[36]Ibid., p. 1.

[37]For example, see Maria Gabrielsen Jumbert and Elisa Pascucci (eds), 'Conclusion: Citizen humanitarianism beyond the crisis', in *Citizen Humanitarianism at European Borders* (New York: Routledge, 2021), pp. 193–200; Squire, 'Desert "trash"'.

[38]Andrew Higgins, 'Migrant crisis leads to calls for tighter borders in Europe', *New York Times* (15 October 2015).

[39]Giorgio Agamben, *Homo sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

[40]Jenny Edkins, 'Sovereign power, zones of indistinction, and the camp', *Alternatives*, 25:1 (2000), pp. 3–25 (p. 18).

easy way out of this world. In other words, the question is not simply about how to shift our sense of belonging from particularism to universalism, as Andrew Linklater suggests.[41] It is also about how to address our ethical obligations in a world where sovereign political orders persistently encroach upon the way we imagine ourselves as humans. As Peter Nyers deftly puts it, the main question is not 'Should I be universal or particular in my ethical obligations?' but 'What relation of universality and particularity allows me to express my humanitarian vision?'[42]

In recent years, the relationship between universality and particularity has developed in a troubling direction. The humanitarian ethos has been increasingly used as a reason to enact securitisation practices of migration. For reasons ranging from the provision of medical and legal assistance to food and shelters to migrants, people are increasingly penalised for their humane desire to assist others in distress. For instance, Basaran discusses the emergence of a legal environment that criminalises humanitarian practices that are conducted based on the principle of humanity. In this new environment, people are encouraged to help a person in distress at sea based on the individual's 'assumed legal status'[43] and discouraged from helping a person who is in distress at sea but lacks proper legal status. Williams identifies an expanding role of border guards that combines patrolling and policing with provision of medical care for people crossing borders.[44] He argues that this development suggests that humanitarianism is no longer used as a justification to treat the safety of migrants as an exceptional reason to exonerate them from their illegality. These studies suggest that it is no longer sufficient to assume the separation of humanitarianism from securitisation, because the humanitarian attempt to save people's lives is used as the very reason to tighten border control and protect national security. If one's humanitarian vision depends on a unique relation between universality and particularity, as Nyers suggests, what kind of humanitarian vision is informed by the overlap between universality and particularity?

The existing studies remain unresponsive to the nexus between securitisation and humanitarianism other than indicating the limitations of the latter. Securitising actors, such as border guards and state officials, use humanitarian logic to govern human mobility and maintain border enforcement regimes. As opposed to securitising actors that approach migration through the lens of control and fear, humanitarian grassroots actors use humane motives to assist people crossing borders. Their emphasis on compassion and sympathy underlies the view of common humanity: it resists the language of fear through which the other is produced in opposition to the self. By resisting the language of fear, humanitarianism is troubled when the language of fear is introduced in securitising the humanitarian response to migration. The humanitarian ideal, envisaged in the humanitarian approach to migration, is compromised by its association with the language of fear which underscores the securitising logic of border-control practices.

The contemporary humanitarian discourse thus faces an impasse, because the justification of saving migrants' lives allows the securitisation response to overtake the humane desire to save people in distress.[45] Pallister-Wilkins describes the troubling connection between humanitarianism and securitisation as follows:

> Humanitarianism's universal claims, premised on 'humanity' as a whole, are often challenged in many instances when the disorder or risk from which people are in need of rescue or care are the products of other human beings. Therefore, humanity is linked to sympathy and compassion *and* ideas of fear and insecurity. … This is one tension that exists at the heart of

[41] Andrew Linklater, 'Cosmopolitan citizenship', in Kimberly Hutchings and Roland Dannreuther (eds), *Cosmopolitan Citizenship* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1999), pp. 35–59.

[42] Peter Nyers, *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 42.

[43] Basaran, 'The saved and the drowned', p. 213.

[44] Williams, 'From humanitarian exceptionalism to contingent care'.

[45] Didier Bigo, 'Security and immigration: Toward a critique of the governmentality of unease', *Alternatives*, 27:1 (2002), 63–92 (p. 79). See also Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labour*, pp. 167–204.

> humanitarianism, based as it is on universal claims that can be both oppressive and liberating, and in practice are almost impossible to engender in a world made up of categories and boundaries through which we make our world safe.[46]

As Little and Vaughan-Williams argue, the troubling connection between humanitarianism and securitisation suggests that humanitarianism alone cannot provide a useful way to avoid the securitising response to migration.

> An impasse has been reached whereby the framework for engaging critically with 'humanitarian border security' policies and practices that nevertheless expose 'irregular' migrant and refugee populations to dehumanising and lethal conditions is one that is reliant on pointing to a 'gap' between 'humanitarian' rhetoric and 'national security' realities on the ground. This is potentially problematic because it is an argument which suggests that widespread human rights abuses would be preventable if only humanitarian border security policies were enacted rather than exploring the possibility that these policies perpetuate the very forms of violence that they purpose to legislate against.[47]

Considering that humanitarianism 'runs up against its own diagnostic limits',[48] the authors call for the assessment of humanitarianism itself. They ask how and if humanitarianism can still be conceptualised in a way that offers a useful language to not just address but also prevent human rights abuses when humanitarian borders are securitised.[49]

The gothic approach to the fear of the unknown other

To take up Little and Vaughan-Williams's call to re-examine the idea of humanitarianism, I turn to the idea of gothicity. In the IR discipline, fear is predominantly associated negatively with politics, for it perpetuates the self–other separation.[50] The gothic approach opens up a new perspective in which fear can be considered as a transformative form of politics that defies the self–other division. As I argue below, identifying fear as a humanitarian vernacular, rather than externalising fear from humanitarianism, might invite us to explore alternative ways in which relationality might be formed than the philanthropic intention of helping the other.

The gothic perspective situates fear at the centre of forming the self–other relationship beyond division. As Windfeld et al. put it:

> The Gothic Other is not fully separated from or external to the Self but constituted through the Self's own actions and imaginations. Hence, the Gothic tradition allows us to capture more complex constitutions of 'other' places and subjects than do binary separations between Selves and Others.[51]

The key aspect of gothicity lies in its approach to the fear of the unknown other along a spectrum. This fear can be manifested as hostility towards the stranger, as is exemplified by the securitised response to migration. However, not knowing the other can also evoke curiosity about or even attraction to what is mysterious. In this way, the figure of the other remains unknown because the

[46] Polly Pallister-Wilkins, 'The humanitarian politics of European border policing: Frontex and border police in Evros', *International Political Sociology*, 9:1 (2015), pp. 53–69 (p. 59), emphasis added.

[47] Little and Vaughan-Williams, 'Stopping boats, saving lives, securing subjects', p. 10.

[48] Ibid.

[49] See also Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labour*.

[50] Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison, 'Fear no more: Emotions and world politics', *Review of International Studies*, 34:S1 (2008), pp. 115–35 (p. 119).

[51] Frederik Carl Windfeld, Marius Hauge Hvithamar, and Lene Hansen, 'Gothic visibilities and International Relations: Uncanny icons, critical comics, and the politics of abjection in Aleppo', *Review of International Studies*, 50:1 (2023), pp. 3–34 (p. 5).

feeling towards the other oscillates between terror and fascination, and anywhere in-between. This uncertainty about who the other is, and who the other can be to the self, makes the unknown the central feature of the gothic understanding of the self–other relationship.

The gothic genre emerged in response to the brutality of the French Revolution and the rationalism of the Enlightenment to speak about the monsters and ghosts reminiscent of a bygone era.[52] While these haunted and haunting creatures and 'things' are there to be feared, they are also to be desired. The 'intertwining of fascinating and repulsion, of fear and desire, of the urge to look away and the desire to look anyway'[53] constitutes the essential feature of gothicity.

> Normally we turn away from horrible, monstrous things, but gothic art and literature are exercised, even obsessed, by them: revulsion and fear are combined with attraction and desire.[54]

The conflicting emotions towards monsters speak of what categorical ambiguity does to the perception of the self. As Devetak points out, as metaphors, monsters reveal 'anxiety of self-identity' because 'monsters are liminal creatures who "defy borders" and defy "normality"'.[55] It is not that horrible and scary images of monsters and ghosts inspire the gothic, but their categorical undecidedness, or what Mary Douglas calls 'categorical impurity' – for instance, between civilisation and barbarism, beauty and ugliness, human and non-human, virtue and evil, normality and abnormality – that lies at the heart of gothicity. These creatures or 'things', be they monsters, ghosts, or whatever names are given to them, transcend categories and are 'ambiguous, *difficult to classify and know*, and thus the objects of fear'.[56] The encounter with the monster is frightening because it strips away the sense of certainty about the categories upon which the self is formed, such as civility, normality, and virtue. Without that certainty, anyone can become a monster. The gothic speaks of this very possibility that the self might slip into the realm of monstrosity.

The gothic approach to international politics has been around for some time,[57] but the idea of gothicity appears to have attracted increasing attention in recent years.[58] Some of these studies specifically focus on the idea of gothicity. For example, Devetak draws on Edmund Burke's idea of the sublime, together with Julia Kristeva's idea of the abject, to examine how terror works not only to push people away but also to draw them in.[59] For Burke, the sublime manifests 'darkness, vastness, grandeur and danger' and evokes 'terror and awe' at the same time.[60] Devetak uses Burke's understanding of the sublime to highlight the way in which fear and fascination work in tandem. Building on the idea of the sublime, Devetak refers to Julia Kristeva's interpretation of the abject to argue that monsters and ghosts, which are central figures in international politics, represent

[52]Richard Devetak, 'The Gothic scene of international relations: Ghosts, monsters, terror and the sublime after September 11', *Review of International Studies*, 31:4 (2005), pp. 622–43 (pp. 622–4).

[53]Windfeld, Hvithamar, and Hansen, "Gothic visibilities and International Relations', p. 29.

[54]Devetak, 'The Gothic scene of international relations', p. 624.

[55]Ibid.

[56]Ibid., p. 632, emphasis added.

[57]For example, Devetak, 'The Gothic scene of international relations'; Bonnie Honig, 'Difference, dilemmas, and the politics of home', *Social Research*, 61:3 (1994), pp. 563–97; Bonnie Honig, *Democracy and Foreigner* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[58]For example, Windfeld, Hvithamar, and Hansen, "Gothic visibilities and International Relations'; Felix Berenskötter and Nicola Nymalm, 'States of ambivalence: Recovering the concept of "the Stranger" in International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 47:1 (2021), pp. 19–38; Felix Berenskötter, 'Anxiety, time, and agency', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 273–90; Reiko Shindo, 'Home, sweet home? Community and the dilemma of belonging', *Geopolitics*, 26:2 (2019), pp. 425–43; Slavoj Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail: Refugees, Terror and Other Troubles with the Neighbours* (New York: Penguin, 2016); Slavoj Žižek, 'Stranger danger: To resolve the migrant crisis we must recognize the stranger within ourselves', *In These Times* (19 March 2016), available at: {http://inthesetimes.com/article/18991/stranger-danger-to-resolve-the-migrant-crisis-we-must-recognize-the-strange} (accessed 16 October 2016).

[59]Devetak, 'The Gothic scene of international relations'.

[60]Ibid., p. 627.

the sublime because of their categorical ambiguity. Windfeld and his colleagues[61] combine Freud's concept of the uncanny with Kristeva's approach to the abject to theorise the gothic approach to the stranger. They argue that the uncanny 'marks an aesthetic encounter in which the distinction between Self and Other collapses', and thus it 'represents a particular "species of the frightening" in which the Other is not radically different from, but eerily familiar to the Self'.[62]

Not all of these recent works explicitly use the gothic framework. Indeed, there are various political concepts other than gothicity that theorise foreignness through categorical ambiguity.[63] For example, Berenskötter and Nymalm focus on the concept of the Stranger, defined as 'a form of otherness that captures ambiguity as a threat to modern conceptions of identity'.[64] They draw on George Simmel's approach to the Stranger, in which otherness is understood through conflicting physical distances. The Stranger 'embodies that synthesis of nearness and distance' and is thus someone who is in close contact but not 'organically connected'.[65] They also rescue Jef Huysmans's original depiction of the other 'as a figure representing ambiguity and triggering feelings of ambivalence … in the modern logic of (in)security'[66] rather than the other as a representative of threats to undermine the collective identity of the self.

Berenskötter also focuses on anxiety as a crucial affective condition to re-examine the role of uncertainty in the ontological security framework.[67] Berenskötter identifies three different types of uncertainty – the social, the temporal, and the spatial – and pays heed to 'the psychological sensibilities of political actors' rather than 'physical security as the primary concern'.[68] Through this categorisation, Berenskötter presents a counter-reading of political actors to the realist framework of security: 'whereas in the realist framework, the actor is imagined as a complete whole (a clearly delineated sovereign state) that knows what to fear (other states with military resources), the actors in an ontological security framework are incomplete and conditioned by their inability to know, by anxiety'.[69] These works point to the gothic undertone in building the self–other relationship formed through the uncertainty of subjecthood and categorical ambiguity between the self and the other.

My purpose in using the gothic framework in this paper is not to theorise the idea of either gothicity or categorical ambiguity, as the existing studies have done. Instead, I aim to use the language of gothicity to examine how categorical ambiguity emerged in the humanitarianism-driven grassroots activism during the 2015–16 arrival of migrants into Europe. Studies related to the gothic appear persistently in the analysis of international politics, but their focus so far has been predominantly on war and terrorism.[70] These studies focus on different empirical examples but collectively investigate the process of the construction of the 'self' through the other, whereby the other is represented as monstrosity and barbarity in the narrative of war and conflict. This paper expands the analytical scope of the existing studies beyond war and terror to address the humanitarian response to migration.

In the following section, I draw on the 2015–16 refugees welcome campaigns in the UK to examine how the gothic representation of people coming to the UK was formed in the campaigns. Unlike

[61] Windfeld, Hvithamar, and Hansen, 'Gothic visibilities and International Relations'.

[62] Ibid., p. 8.

[63] For example, Berenskötter, 'Anxiety, time, and agency'; Brenskötter and Nymalm, 'States of ambivalence'; Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail*; Žižek, 'Stranger danger'.

[64] Brenskötter and Nymalm, 'States of ambivalence', p. 19.

[65] Ibid., p. 26.

[66] Ibid., p. 20. See also Jef Huysmans, 'Security! What do you mean? From concepts to thick signifier', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:2 (1998), pp. 226–55.

[67] Berenskötter, 'Anxiety, time, and agency'.

[68] Ibid., p. 273.

[69] Ibid., p. 276.

[70] Windfeld, Hvithamar, and Hansen, 'Gothic visibilities and International Relations'; Caron E. Gentry, 'The mysterious case of Aafia Siddiqui: Gothic intertextual analysis of neo-orientalist narratives', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 45:1(2016), pp. 3–24; Anara Karagulova and Nick Megoran, 'Discourses of danger and the "war on terror": Gothic Kyrgyzstan and the collapse of the Akaev regime', *Review of International Studies*, 37:1 (2011), pp. 29–48; Devetak, 'The Gothic scene of international relations'.

the cases on war and terrorism that resort to the emotive element of fear,[71] the language of fear that appeared in the welcome campaigns was directly centred around categorical ambiguity. As shown below, these campaigns revealed that the image of the other was not based on the sameness with the self (founded on the idea of common humanity) but rather on ambiguity. Refugees and migrants coming to the UK were depicted as people who were simultaneously similar to and different from 'us'. The gothic way of understanding humanitarian practices thus draws our attention to undecidedness regarding the other, whereby the other is depicted through the tension between the other as familiar and foreign, same and different.

Reading the humanitarian response to migration gothically[72]

During the 2015–16 arrival of people into Europe, slogans such as 'refugees welcome', 'welcome refugees', and 'refugees welcome here' became ubiquitous in many parts of Europe. In the UK, these slogans were used to organise a range of welcome activism to express their support of bringing people from conflict-ridden places to the UK. The welcome actions were not necessarily coordinated, and what they delivered also differed. Nevertheless, I understand these campaigns as primarily driven by the same welcoming stance to act on the humane desire to help people in distress. The organisations I discuss below are selective. I have chosen them because their campaigns explicitly used the word 'welcome' or were part of wider welcome-themed campaigns. I was also drawn to these organisations because their activities highlighted the similarities and divergences within the welcome campaigns.

Beyond the self–other division

In September 2016, I attended an event called the 'Welcome Summit' held in Birmingham. The meeting, organised by Citizens UK, gathered activists, volunteers, local councillors, bureaucrats, and refugees to celebrate the achievements of the Refugees Welcome campaign which began the year before. It was 'a gathering of the groups behind the Refugees Welcome movement from right across the country', including Safe Passage, City of Sanctuary, Salvation Army, Education Beyond Borders, Christian Aid, and Refugee Action.[73] The conference was an occasion to celebrate both the past year's achievements and, more importantly, to energise the welcome momentum that had

[71] For example, Gentry, 'The mysterious case of Aafia Siddiqui'; Devetak, 'The Gothic scene of international relations'.

[72] The primary materials about the refugees welcome campaigns used in this section were collected in 2015 and 2016. For reasons described in the first section ('Humanitarianism-driven grassroots activism'), I began gathering data about the UK-based welcome campaigns in 2015 and 2016 to learn more about how they articulated their ideas of 'welcome'. Despite several attempts, however, I struggled for long to make sense of these materials in my own language. It was only around 2020 when I encountered an emerging body of research on uncertainty and ambiguity (discussed in the section, 'The gothic approach to the fear of the unknown other') that I started to find a way to examine what I felt back then with the materials I collected. Due to this time lag, most of the campaigns used in this paper ceased to exist, were absorbed into different organisations, or changed their focus. Some of these campaigns were run by groups of volunteers and no longer exist. In some cases, either their URL is connected to a different site, or the same content can be found on a different URL link. This archival impermanence poses a difficult question about how to archive activism of such an ephemeral nature against the often-assumed assumption that everything once posted on the internet will forever remain there. I hope that this paper can serve as an archival site of its own to record such activism even to a limited extent. For the publication of this manuscript, I went through all the sites I last accessed in 2015–16. When I found that the original site no longer exists but another site, or similar sites, carried the relevant information of the original site, I provided that new URL, alongside the original. I did not delete the original URLs that no longer work, because I believe it is important to keep the history of the welcome activism that emerged back then, if not online, at least on paper.

[73] 'Welcome Summit', available at: {http://www.citizensuk.org/refugee_welcome_summit} (accessed 27 August 2016). This page no longer exists, but the participants' account of the event can still be found in the following sites: {http://togetherwegrow2.org.uk/2016/09/11/welcome-summit/} (accessed 26 March 2025); {https://hbtsr.cityofsanctuary.org/2016/10/16/the-welcome-summit-stronger-together} (accessed 26 March 2025). Citizens UK, which was founded in 1989 and continues to serve, to date, as a leading community-based organisation in the UK, seemed to have its website remodelled: on the current website, there is no specific reference on the Welcome Summit held in Birmingham in 2016. However, the welcoming of refugees continues to be one of the main focuses of Citizen UK (see, for example, {https://www.citizensuk.org/campaigns/

been built in the prior year. The event united the participants with the sense of common humanity, despite their differences. During the convention, newly arrived refugees talked about the loss of their families, the hope for their children, their ambition for study and career development, and their longing for home.

The refugees' stories effectively reminded the participants that we are all humans who feel grief and relief in the same way and find joy and sadness in similar places. The refugees often shared their life stories in English, which also communicated the subtle yet important point that that they spoke like 'us'. During the event, stories also abounded about how we, people in the refugee-receiving community, were once refugees or experienced a refugee-like situation in the past. For example, some participants talked about their own experiences of coming to the UK as refugees. Others shared their ancestral histories of their parents and grandparents coming to the UK as migrants. The sharing of these stories transgressed the divisions that ordinarily divided people into various categories of migration, such as irregular migrants, immigrants, refugees, citizens, and foreigners. Instead, the meeting generated a remarkable sense of togetherness among the participants, a collective feeling of belonging to the community of humanity.

The emphasis on the shared sense of humanity was also reflected in the widespread of use of the iconic British character, Paddington Bear, in welcome activism.[74] Paddington is a bear who smuggled himself as a stowaway from the 'darkest Peru' to live in the UK. Paddington's status in the UK is at first undoubtedly precarious, but he is eventually adopted by a British family, the Browns, who pity the bear and become fond of Paddington. The Brown family's decision to adopt the bear is woven into Britain's past, the time when the British people themselves needed sanctuary during the world wars. As Aunt Lucy, Paddington's guardian bear in Peru, put it:

> Thousands of children were sent away for safety, left at railway stations with labels around their necks, and unknown families took them in and love them like their own. They will not have forgotten how to treat a stranger.[75]

Indeed, it was this passage that inspired Joy French, a woman in Sheffield, who felt devastated by Alan Kurdi's death and started Project Paddington.[76] The project collects bear dolls from children in the UK and sends them to refugee children. Within a year, French and her team 'sent all 25,000 teddy bears to refugee children in Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan' and 'raised over £40,000 for refugee projects'.[77] The phrase 'Paddington Bear' also went viral soon after Kurdi's death, when people started changing their Facebook profile photos to Paddington Bear to show their support for welcoming refugees to the UK (BBC, 5 September 2015).

refugees-and-migrants-welcome/} [accessed 28 March 2025]). After the Welcome Summit event, the organisers also sent an email together with the photos of the event to the participants who shared their email addresses. I digitally archived those photos together with the email.

[74]The purpose of looking at the campaigns involving Paddington Bear is not to assess what actual 'help' these campaigns brought to refugees. Instead, I am interested in what kind of humanitarian desire was communicated through the use of the Paddington Bear image.

[75]A remark made by Aunt Lucy in the film *Paddington* (2014, 08:47-09:05), which adopts the original Paddington story but also
expands it. This quote is slightly different from the one used by Joy French (see footnote 76).

[76]Joy French, 'How teddy bears have turned my life upside down' (18 October 2015), available at: {https://alphamothernomore.wordpress.com/2015/10/18/how-teddy-bears-have-turned-my-life-upside-down/} (accessed 20 September 2016); see also 'Thousands of teddies donated to refugee children in Project Paddington', *Glasgow Times* (17 October 2015), available at: {https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/13876637.thousands-of-teddies-donated-to-refugee-children-in-project-paddington accessed} (accessed 10 April 2025).

[77]See {http://projectpaddington.com/whats-it-all-about/} (accessed 20 September 2016). This project's website no longer exists, but it can be still found on Facebook at {http://www.facebook.com/projectpaddington} (accessed 28 March 2025). On its first page, it says that the project has 'long since closed as we were all volunteers' (posted on 22 March 2022). One of the group's Facebook posts (3 September 2016) provides the same figure of teddy bears but a different donation figure (£50,000) (accessed 1 April 2025). The £40,000 for donations is mentioned in another post (5 January 2016) (accessed 1 April 2025).

What was communicated through the Paddington Bear story in the welcome campaigns discussed above was the universality of home[78] – not merely that the UK was a country offering a sanctuary to people from war-torn countries, but also that anyone could lose their home. As Smith argues,[79] the story of Paddington, first published in the late 1950s, reflects the shifting image of the UK from a place that was still 'a war-time place of danger' to 'a safe haven' where 'an evacuee to London' could come and be taken care of. Paddington embodied the latter image of the UK to remind others of 'our' own experience of losing home in the past: the loss of home was not limited to people coming to the UK now, but 'we' also once lost our homes, too. In this way, the image of Paddington Bear conveyed the image of sameness through the universality of home. That is, we are all human beings, bounded by the need for home.

Spatial division between 'us' and 'others'

While people coming to the UK were identified as part of 'us' through the sense of humanity, they are also spatially differentiated as the other who comes from the place 'over there' to 'our' place. In the welcome campaigns, the UK was often associated with phrases such as 'sanctuary', 'safe haven', and 'safety', in contrast to the turbulent, unstable, and war-torn places from which people were fleeing. Through this spatial differentiation, the other was represented as being different from, rather than the same as, the self.

For example, Solidarity with Refugees (SWR) stressed refugees' right to live in safety. In its description of the demonstration organised in 2015, SWR says:

> 'This march [organised on 12 September 2015 in London] was a message from the people of the UK that we would like to welcome more refugees into our country. We believe that the only appropriate response to the current refugee crisis is to allow many many [sic] more people to come here, be *safe here* and build their lives here.'[80]

Oxfam Great Britain (Oxfam GB) similarly described the UK as 'a safe home'. Mark Goldring, then the chief executive of Oxfam GB, criticised the failure of many governments to offer resettlement to Syrian refugees, stating: 'It's shocking that while people continue to flee Syria, most countries have failed to provide a safe home to the most vulnerable.'[81] At the Refugees Welcome Here National Day of Action held on 12 September 2015, the British government was also criticised because: 'Unlike Germany, Italy and Greece, Britain has not offered a safe haven for these people.'[82]

People's messages collected during the 'Make Refugees Welcome' campaign also highlighted the contrast between the safety of the UK and the danger of elsewhere. The campaign, organised by Refugee Action, set up a 'Refugees Welcome Wall' where people left comments online to 'show the world that you welcome refugees – and that you think everyone should be treated with kindness and respect.'[83] More than 1,500 messages were collected online and displayed inside the office of Refugee Action. These messages included:

[78] For a different interpretation of Paddington Bear in the context of migration, see Kyle Grayson, 'How to read Paddington Bear: Liberalism and the foreign subject in a bear called Paddington', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 15:3 (2013), pp. 378–93.

[79] Angela Smith, 'Paddington Bear: A case study of immigration and otherness', *Children's Literature in Education*, 37:1 (2006), pp. 35–50 (p. 37).

[80] {http://www.swruk.org/about/} (accessed 28 March 2025).

[81] {http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-35913972} (accessed 28 March 2025).

[82] {http://www.standuptoracism.org.uk/2015/09/refugees-welcome-here/} (accessed 1 September 2016). This quote can no longer be found on the site initially accessed in 2016. However, the following site re-posted the call for the Refugees Welcome Here – National Day of Action, which included the same quote: {https://qarn.org.uk/refugees-welcome-here-national-day-of-action-london-and-near-you-12-sept-2015/} (accessed 28 March 2025).

[83] {http://www.refugee-action.org.uk/support_us/campaign/welcome_a_refugee} (accessed 9 October 2016). This link no longer works, but the same quote can be found at a different website about the same campaign led by Refugee Action at: {https://www.justgiving.com/campaigns/charity/refugeeaction/youarewelcome} (accessed 28 March 2025).

> Welcome to the UK! I can't begin to imagine what you have been through, but I hope you feel safe now. You are so brave for leaving your home to come somewhere new where you have to start again. (Joanna)
>
> My wish for you is that you find some peace here and a way to start to rebuild. You are very welcome (Jacquie)
>
> Hello, hope you feel safe now when you are in UK. (Amelia Baath)
>
> I hope you feel safer here in UK. (Zerina)
>
> I hope that now you can finally feel safe enough, and permanent enough to dream […] (Alex)
>
> I hope you feel safe and welcomed here in the UK. (Emmy)
>
> Welcome to our country. I hope you will have a better life here and live in peace. Your new life will be better with more safety. (Xhenet)
>
> I hope you are feeling safe, loved and peace. I'm sorry that you have faced devastation and been forced to leave your beloved home country in search for safety' (Yasmin)[84]

Imagining the UK as a safe place also extended to the reference to its past experience of offering sanctuary. For example, the Refugees Welcome campaign led by Citizen UK and the National Refugee Welcome Board explained the UK's role in helping refugees as follows:

> Britain has a proud history of offering sanctuary to people fleeing persecution. Whether it was Jewish kids before the Second World War, Polish people who fought alongside us in the Battle of Britain, Ugandan Asians fleeing Idi Amin, the Vietnamese Boat People or those fleeing ethnic violence in Kosovo, we are a country that offers protection and believes in a warm welcome when you get here.[85]

To live up to Britain's 'proud history', the Citizen UK-led Refugees Welcome campaign organised a range of actions to 'go further in bringing more refugees safety to the UK'.[86]

To be sure, it is not surprising that the UK was imagined as a safe place compared to conflict-ridden places. After all, living in the UK promises a certain level of security, which is unlikely to be attained in places such as Syria and Iraq. Understandably, therefore, some people urged the UK to offer a sanctuary to those fleeing from conflict. Furthermore, the appeal to the 'proud history' of sanctuary might have been an effective campaign strategy to galvanise wide public support in accepting refugees. At the same time, this spatial division evokes the Hobbesian approach to the self–other relationship, whereby the other is associated with danger outside 'our' community. According to Hobbes,[87] there is a sharp boundary between the inside and the outside of a community. The former, personified as the figure of Leviathan, is a space of order and peace. In contrast, the latter is described as 'the state of nature' in which chaos and violence loom.[88] The inside of

[84]Refugee Action, which is still active today, continues to collect welcome messages and display them at: {https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/campaigns/welcome_a_refugee/} (accessed 28 March 2025). The quotes used here can be found at: {https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/welcome-message/NAME/} (accessed 26 March 2025) (Type the person's name in the part, 'NAME').

[85]{https://www.refugees-welcome.org.uk/refugeeswelcome-groups-training-action/} (accessed 1 September 2016). This page no longer exists. However, Refugee Action organised an event with a similar idea which drew on the past refugee experiences of the UK. The event was called 'Remembrance Walk', held in 2015, as part of the campaign, 'Another Way To Safety'; At the walk, people who came to the UK as refugees in the past marched together with Syrian refugees. The event's description is available at: {https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/past-campaign-another-way-safety-refugees/} (accessed 28 March 2025).

[86]See the 'About Us' page at: {https://www.refugees-welcome.org.uk/} (accessed 10 August 2016).

[87]Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin, 2014 [1651]), pp. 68–110.

[88]Ibid.

the community is a safe and rational space where violence is managed. In contrast, the outside is dangerous because there is no mechanism to control violence. Recasting fear onto the outside, the Hobbesian narrative of community imagines the other as different from the self. The other, embodied as the figure of the foreigner, is spatially located outside of the community and regarded as a source of terror that can bring chaos and disorder to the inside. Imagining Britain as a safe place reinforced such spatial division between 'us' as people living in safety and people who flee from places of danger.

The community envisioned in the refugees welcome campaigns thus revealed the paradoxical depiction of the relationship between the 'self' – as people offering help in the UK – and the 'other' – as people arriving in the UK. On the one hand, imagining the community of humanity binds the self and the other as belonging to the same community. One the other hand, the emphasis on Britain as a safe place of refuge differentiated the self from the other whereby the latter is associated with anarchy, unlawfulness, and insecurity.

Imagining the 'self' through the ambiguous separation from the 'other'

The focus on the contribution of refugees and migrants to society was another key part of the welcome campaigns. To justify the welcome stance, some campaigns highlighted previous contributions to society made by earlier groups of refugees and emphasised the possibility of future contributions by newly arriving refugees. For example, in the Refugee Week campaign which was held in June 2016 to raise awareness of refugee issues nationwide, its main aim was explained as follows: 'to create better understanding between different communities and to encourage successful integration, enabling refugees to live in safety and *continue making a valuable contribution*'.[89] The 'I Am a Refugee' campaign also presented an image that refugees were future potential contributors to society. The latter campaign was launched by the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI) in June 2016 and was featured in Refugees Welcome Week the same year. The JCWI employed a unique method whereby numerous plaques, mostly blue, were created to advertise the past experiences of refugees' contributions to British society. Each plaque bore a name and a brief description of a person who earlier came to the UK as a refugee. Some plaques were attached to buildings that had connections to the persons featured in the plaques. On the JCWI's campaign website, some plaques were further accompanied by brief summaries of the journeys made by the refugees and their lives in the UK.

The JCWI collected an impressive array of people who came to the UK as refugees and contributed to the creation of what was considered as 'British' culture today. For instance, one plaque featured Freddie Mercury, the lead vocalist of Queen, an internationally well-known British music band. Sir Alec Issigonis graced another plaque as one of the designers of the iconic British car, the Mini. Other plaques included Michael Marks, a co-founder of the leading British supermarket, Marks and Spencer, and Rita Ora, an internationally recognised singer. One plaque even celebrated 'Fish and Chips', 'a UK national dish', which was 'brought to the UK by Jewish refugees and first sold with chips by Joseph Nalin', a Jewish refugee who had fled to the UK.[90]

These plaques were meant to remind people that part of British culture was produced by the people who came to the UK from elsewhere in the past. By showing how migrants contributed to

[89] {http://refugeeweek.org.uk/about-us/} (accessed 20 September 2016), emphasis added. This website no longer exists. However, the same quote, explaining the aim of Refugee Week 2016, can be found in the Refugee Week UK 2016 Evaluation report (p. 4) at: {https://refugeeweek.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/RefugeeWeek2016Evaluation.pdf} (accessed 31 March 2025).

[90] {http://www.iamarefugee.net/} (accessed 10 August 2016). This website no longer exists, but the same quote can be found on the JCWI's Facebook page (posted on 2 June 2017) at: {https://www.facebook.com/JCWImmigrants/photos/on-national-fish-chip-day-did-you-know-that-the-traditional-british-dish-was-act/1360429064006041/} (accessed 26 March 2025). Other names mentioned here, except Michael Marks, can be found on the JCWI's another Facebook post (11 May 2016) (accessed 1 April 2025).

what was considered as iconically 'British', the JCWI's campaign powerfully questioned the meaning of being 'British'. Britishness was not a prerogative of the 'British' people but rather a product of the refugees and migrants who came to Britain. People who came to the UK as 'foreigners' were, after all, part of who 'we' are and what contributes 'our' Britishness. This rendered the separation between the self and the other ambiguous.

Importantly, weighing the value of refugees and migrants in relation to societal contribution also differentiated them from 'British' people. They were worthy of being welcomed so long as they would serve 'British' society. To be clear, this was not communicated either deliberately or explicitly. Indeed, the JCWI's campaign was designed explicitly to challenge the securitised response to migration whereby the other was depicted as a social and economic threat in terms of being 'burdens' and 'abusers' of the social welfare system in the UK. To question this securitised image of refugees, the 'I Am a Refugee' followed the same format as another JCWI-led campaign, 'I Am an Immigrant', which was developed as part of the Movement Against Xenophobia in 2013. Following the same style as the earlier campaign, the 'I Am a Refugee' campaign aimed to dispel 'inaccurate portrayals of refugees as being entirely helpless and unable to look after themselves'.[91] In the campaign, refugees were represented as people who were assets to British society because of their skills and talents. Vicky Bullen, CEO of the branding agency Coley Porter Bell, which helped the JCWI launch the campaign, explained the reason of her agency's involvement in the campaign as follows:

> I am absolutely delighted not just because of the beautiful simplicity of the idea [of the campaign] … but also because of the fact that it's going to challenge perceptions of what refugee is. It's going to get people to think about refugees as people, not just the statistics, to think about what they can contribute to society. And that is just so important to our world today.[92]

At the same time, using the contribution to 'our' society as a benchmark to define the goodness of refugees, the campaign also drew a line between 'us' and 'them'. Refugees' worthiness was measured in terms of their services for 'us'. With the focus on refugees' societal contribution, the welcome campaigns justified that the UK should offer a sanctuary to them because earlier refugees contributed to British society and thus the incoming refugees will be able to do so. What these campaigns either communicated implicitly, or failed to challenge, was the idea that the refugees' societal contribution was a condition of 'our' welcome. As long as they served 'us', they were worth accepting into 'our' place. It is unclear whether such a welcome could be sustained if and when refugees did not quite meet 'our' expectations regarding societal contribution. The depiction of refugees as (potential) contributors to society certainly removes the image of social and economic threats from refugees, unlike the securitised depiction of refugees. However, such a depiction also divides 'us' from 'them', identifying the worthiness of refugees by their 'service' to their host society.

Solidarity based on uncertain subjectivity

In the previous section, I presented a gothic representation of the other whereby people coming to the UK were depicted as both someone like and different from 'us'. While the idea of common humanity bound people together, the spatial narrative about the UK as a safe place in contrast to the dangerous places elsewhere separated people living in the UK from those coming from the outside. The emphasis on migrants' societal contribution also presented refugees as being simultaneously similar to and different from the 'British' people. One the one hand, the welcome campaigns highlighted the indispensable role refugees and migrants played in creating what is now perceived as British. This raised the question of who could be called British, blurring the division between 'us' as British people and 'them' as refugees. On the other hand, these campaigns also measured the

[91] {https://refugeeweek.org.uk/i-am-a-refugee/} (accessed 10 August 2016). This URL is now changed to: {https://refugeeweek.org.uk/i-am-a-refugee/#} (accessed 26 March 2025).

[92] The campaign fundraising video, available at: {https://www.jcwi.org.uk/policy/i-am-refugee} (accessed 8 August 2016).

worthiness of refugees in terms of their contribution to British society, identifying them as people who are expected to enrich 'our' culture.

I neither consider these contradictory images of the other as mere representational differences in the welcome campaigns, nor do I intend to say that these two seemingly contradictory responses to the other are the only defining characteristics of the campaigns. Instead, I consider this paradoxical depiction of the other as inviting us to read, gothically, the self–other relationship. What these contradictory representations of the other suggest is the uncertainty regarding the other in the welcome campaigns. That is, the understanding of refugees and migrants oscillated between sameness and difference, familiarity and foreignness.

The conventional understanding of humanitarian-inspired local activism sees the self–other relationship through the lens of certainty based on our common identity as humans: 'we' know who 'they' are – they are 'humans' just like 'us'. Meanwhile, the gothic reading of humanitarian activism is centred around the unknown other in building relationality. The other could be the same as or different from 'us'. Importantly, the gothic sees this uncertainty about the other as not limiting humanitarianism. Instead, it embraces this uncertainty through the language of fear. In the gothic framework, the unknown other, or uncertainty about the other, is feared because it reveals the vulnerability of subjecthood. The other is a fearful subject because it remains unclear to the self what the other is, or might be, and hence ultimately what the self can be. Fear, therefore, does not differentiate the self from the other as the securitisation response to migration does. Seen through the lens of gothicity, not knowing the other is a projection of not knowing the self.

As Radice points out, the idea of rescue within humanitarianism 'oscillates between self and other, that is always infused with power relations, and which involves a constant (political) negotiation of what humanity means and entails'.[93] Saving others is, Radice argues, deeply implicated in the question of what kind of image about the self the rescuers would like to have through the action of saving: 'humanitarians, in attempting to save others, are often seeking to save themselves'.[94] Following Radice, I argue that, in the case of the welcome campaigns, the search of the humanitarian self was compounded with the unknowability of the other. That is, who exactly the other is – are they like us? are they different from us? – remains uncertain, which mirrors the uncertain image of the self.

To further examine the gothic-inspired relationality that emerged in the welcome campaigns, I turn to Bonnie Honig's gothic analysis of the contradictory image of the other and its implication for the image of the self.[95] Drawing on a range of texts including the Old Testament, Rousseau's *Social Contract*, Michale Walzer's *What It Means to Be an American*, and L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, Hoing identifies the persistent contradiction in the representations of foreignness. According to Honig, foreigners are, on the one hand, depicted as givers to the community. Ranging from figures such as Ruth in the Old Testament to Dorothy in Baum's novel, they are narrated as good and model immigrants who represent the community's virtue. Foreigners are perceived as valuable assets to a community, with their skills, their family values, and their culture. On the other hand, these very same figures are simultaneously represented negatively. The presence of foreigners is linked to the resources available in the 'host' community (e.g. jobs, social welfare), making them unwelcoming takers who steal, consume, and depend on, the community's resources.

Importantly, Honig argues that the two contradictory narratives of foreignness do not merely derive from different responses to the other, xenophilia and xenophobia. Instead, they both express the same question of 'what she [a foreigner] will do for – or to – us as a nation'.[96] While others such as Michael Walzer and Rogers Smith argue that these two responses to foreignness reflect conflicting political camps, traditions, or changing domestic labour-surplus economics, Honig argues

[93] Radice, 'Saving ourselves? On rescue and humanitarian action', p. 440.
[94] Ibid., p. 448.
[95] Honig, *Democracy and Foreigner*.
[96] Ibid., p. 46.

that, although 'these may be parts of the story', 'there is a deeper logic at work here'.[97] According to Honig, regardless of the phobia or philia of foreignness, the figure of the foreigner is used to shore up the original and core ideals of the community. In other words, these paradoxical images attached to the stranger constitute the core of community-making – of (re)imagining who 'we' are. The xenophilic-or-xenophobic interpretation of foreignness allows a community to vivify its ideal. What 'we' should be, or should not be, is projected onto the figure of either the 'good' or the 'bad' foreigner. Ambiguity of foreignness thus serves as a key mechanism through which the self is told, and re-told, about what 'we' are and what 'we' aspire to be.

Drawing on Bernard Williams's idea of dilemma, Honig further argues that the paradoxical interpretation of foreignness 'is always already there'.[98] Honig takes on Williams' understanding of dilemma where contradiction of 'two values, obligations, or commitments'[99] is acknowledged in the analysis of political community. And yet, she is also sceptical of the way Williams keeps dilemma 'at bay rhetorically, psychologically, and politically'.[100] For Honig, this unresolvable paradox, or dilemma, itself lies at the heart of how 'we', as a community, imagine ourselves. She thus calls for a gothic way of engaging with the contradiction: 'What if, instead, democratic subjects [are] related ambivalently, gothically, and, yes, passionately, to their leaders, their nations, their state institutions, and all their sites of belonging?'[101]

Elsewhere, I have examined Honig's gothic analysis of foreignness, alongside Jean-Luc Nancy's work, in rethinking what it means to come together to form a community.[102] For the purpose of this paper, I would like to push Honig's interpretation of foreignness to highlight the critical role the unknown plays in forming the self–other relationship. I read Honig's work as pointing to the undecided nature of foreignness in constituting the humanitarian self. Importantly, as Honig argues, the paradoxical interpretation of foreignness – good and bad interpretations of the stranger – leaves room for manoeuvre. It is through this obscurity about foreignness that the question of 'we' is mobilised to determine the community's (that is, 'our') ideal.

> Exotic, desirable, mysterious, wise, insightful, dangerous, objective, treasured, and so on. Foreignness will signify different things depending on what work it is being made to do, depending on what goal the community is trying to achieve through the foreigner.[103]

In other words, not knowing exactly what the stranger is turns out to be intrinsically linked to the question of how 'we' might see ourselves through the undecidedness of the other. Slavoj Žižek offers a helpful response to this question.[104] Žižek does not use the gothic framework explicitly, but his analysis of the self–other relationship inspires gothicity because it situates the fear of the unknown at the heart of relationality. Speaking about a widespread solidarity activism emerged in the 2015–16 response to migration, Žižek expresses his reservation about the welcome solidarity activism where relationality was based on a shared sense of humanity. Instead, he suggests solidarity based on undecidedness about who 'we' are: he calls for 'a dose of alienation',[105] an attitude of 'getting-out-of-each-other's way' and trying *not* to understand everything about the neighbour. Žižek refers to Robert Pippin's interpretation of John Ford's film, *The Searchers*, to argue that we cannot even understand who we are, let alone our neighbour, or someone who is considered different from us. Instead of considering the inability to understand the neighbour as an obstacle

[97] Ibid., p. 76.
[98] Honig, 'Difference, dilemmas, and the politics of home', p. 569.
[99] Ibid., p. 568.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Honig, *Democracy and Foreigner*, p. 121.
[102] Shindo, 'Home, sweet home? Community and the dilemma of belonging'; Reiko Shindo, 'Translators as mediators of citizenship: Rethinking community in relational translation', *Citizenship Studies*, 25:6 (2021), pp. 843–59.
[103] Honig, *Democracy and Foreigner*, p.71.
[104] Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail*; Žižek, 'Stranger danger'.
[105] Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail*, p. 74.

for relationality, Žižek takes that as a solution to the divisive relationship that separates the self from the other. For Žižek, 'every neighbour is ultimately creepy' because of 'the impenetrability of the desire that sustains these [creepy] acts',[106] but, crucially, this impenetrability extends to us all. Hence, he argues: 'Universality is a universality of "strangers", of individuals reduced to the abyss of impenetrability in relation not only to others but also to themselves.'[107]

I argue that, from the gothic perspective, humanitarianism can be understood as the solidarity of a shared uncertainty of subjecthood. Extending the unknown other to the self, manifested as categorical ambiguity, humanitarianism is exercised with a shared sense of not knowing exactly what we are. This allows the gothic reading of humanitarianism to go beyond securitisation's logic of fear that sees the other as intrinsically different from the self. What underlines the securitisation approach to migration is the certainty upon which the fear of the other is based, that is the conviction about the other as representing threats that endanger the well-being of the self. As I argued in the third section ('The gothic approach to the fear of the unknown other'), the separation of fear from humanitarianism foregrounds the analysis of contemporary border control where the humane desire is increasingly securitised. The humanitarian approach to migration externalises the fear of the unknown other precisely to resist the divisive relationship between the self and the other. However, such an externalisation of fear leads to the current deadlock whereby humanitarianism only works as a diagnostic tool.[108] As much as the existing scholarship on the humanitarian approach to migration is helpful in identifying various grassroots practices driven by altruism, it becomes unresponsive when the humanitarian response intersects with the fear of the other.

I argue that the gothic approach unlocks this impasse of humanitarianism and points to a conceptual opening. Gothicity introduces the language of fear based on the uncertainty of subjectivity, which is manifested as the categorical ambiguity between the self and the other. From the gothic perspective, the fear of the unknown other constitutes relationality that is based on uncertain subjecthood. By embracing the fear of not knowing who we are, gothic-inspired humanitarianism makes uncertainty the basis of solidarity. Using the shared vulnerability of being as the basis of solidarity, the gothic perspective invites us to embrace the fear of the unknown other as an opening for a possibility that transcends the division between the self and the other. It thus offers an alternative humanitarian language of fear theorised through the sharing of not knowing oneself.

Conclusion

This paper has engaged with the language of fear to explore how the unknown condition of the stranger helps us to reimagine politics differently than the conventional approach to fear-based politics does. Fear of the unknown other has thus far been predominantly associated with the securitised approach to migration that depicts the other as a threat to the self. Meanwhile, the humanitarian response to migration has primarily been identified as an act of compassion and sympathy. This paper aimed to develop a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between fear and humanitarianism. I have argued that the humanitarian approach to migration can be realised not only through an altruistic desire to help others but also through the fear of the unknown itself. To do so, I have used the concept of gothicity to theorise the fear of the unknown in terms of the uncertainty of subjecthood. The gothic perspective considers fear as a spectrum along which both terror and fascination towards the other are simultaneously embraced. This spectrum makes the unknown the central part of the self–other relationship in the gothic framework. What the other turns out to be remains unclear to the self. By drawing on UK-based humanitarian grassroots activism, I have demonstrated that the unknown is manifested as categorical ambiguity in the gothic representation of the other. This categorical ambiguity blurs the self–other boundary

[106] Žižek, *Against the Double Blackmail*, p. 73.
[107] Žižek *Against the Double Blackmail*, p. 79.
[108] For example, Little and Vaughan-Williams, 'Stopping boats, saving lives, securing subjects'.

through uncertainty about who we are or the failure to understand ourselves. Gothic humanitarianism thus leads to a powerful realisation of solidarity based on the feeling of alienation from our own. We are all the same not through our common humanity but only in the shared uncertainty that we can never exactly know our own self.

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