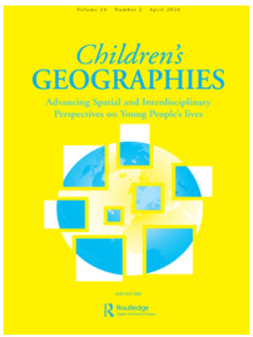

Children's Geographies

ISSN: 1473-3285 (Print) 1473-3277 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cchg20

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To cite this article: Ashwiny O. Kistnareddy (15 Apr 2026): Recurrent spectres: children on the move between Calais and the UK, Children's Geographies, DOI: 10.1080/14733285.2026.2659335

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2026.2659335

Published online: 15 Apr 2026.

CHILDREN'S GEOGRAPHIES
https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2026.2659335

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Recurrent spectres: children on the move between Calais and the UK

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ABSTRACT

Anonymous collages are evidence of the presence of children on the move who come through Calais daily. Secours Catholique keeps the vestiges of what I call their Derridean spectral absent presence next to the sketches of an artist volunteer who has also made portraits of some of these children who transit through. Through these sketches, I contend that the children are 'living-on', co-existing in the same space time as children who currently occupy the premises of Secours Catholique, their ghostly presences haunting the premises. In France, where repression has overtaken compassion, charities attempt to look after children's wellbeing while they are in transit. France's protection of minors is contingent upon the young person first requesting refugee status and this extends to children who undergo an evaluation process to determine whether they are legally minors, much like the UK's National Age Assessment Board. For children in transit, such protections are inexistent. They are ghosts in a system that does not recognise them until they make their presence legally known. Drawing on fieldwork undertaken in Calais and in the UK, this paper looks at the ways in which these two places can function as a limbo space that exists outside of time as previous children and current children also co-exist with future children who are inevitably *always to come* due to the lack of legal routes to apply for asylum in the UK.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 9 July 2025
Accepted 13 February 2026

KEYWORDS
Spectral children; migration; refugees; UASC; Calais; hauntings

Introduction: spectral children

On the walls of the charity, Secours Catholique's premises in Calais, in the quarters reserved for women and children, are stuck collages, colourings and drawings produced by children who passed through Calais on their way to the UK over the years. Anonymous and produced with the magazines and colours that the volunteers gave them, these collages are evidence of the presence of these children on the move who arrive and leave on a daily basis. Volunteers do not always keep these drawings, sometimes the children take them on their journey, others are discarded, but the walls in Secours Catholique's secluded women and children section are adorned with traces of these young people aged anywhere between one and eighteen (see Figure 1), who are now either in the UK or lost to the waters in the Channel. These children are only a small cohort of a much larger group. At the end of 2023, 117.3 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide according to the UNHCR website. In 2023, 67,337 applications for asylum were made in the UK, which related to 84,425 individuals, including children (House of Commons Library 2024). The total number of

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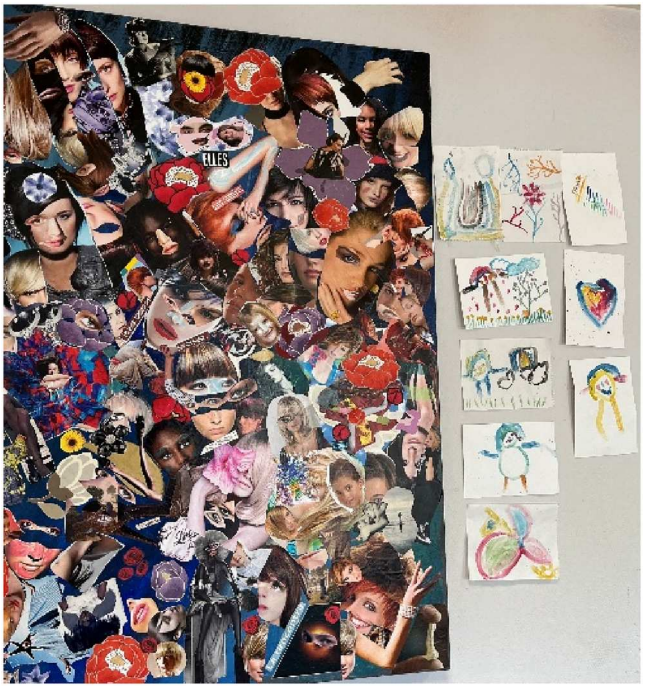

Figure 1. Collage made my children in Secours Catholique, Calais.

Channel crossings in 2023 was 29,437 with the figures to the end of November 2024 being 30,700. In the year ending September 2022, the UK received 5,152 applications for asylum from unaccompanied children (Refugee Council 2024a), and in 2023, the number was 3412 (The Children's Society 2025).

Migration is one of the central concerns of human geography, and one of the discipline's main focus lies in the connections between 'people and places and the mode of connection is as important as the connection itself' (Rosenfeld and Burtch 2023, 3). Across the discipline, 'the capturing of human emotions and affective responses to, in and from place, has remained an elusive but ongoing topic of considerable interest' (Foley et al. 2022, 109). Children and young people have a particular understanding of how place affects them. Some human geographers have been interested in the perspective of young people on borders (Mendoza, Dina, and Fernández Huerta 2010), while others have studied the agency and decision-making processes of unaccompanied minors upon arrival in Europe (Uzureau et al. 2024). Children and young people are particularly at risk, partly because of the need to adapt to new contexts within transit and receiving societies (Behrendt, Lietaert, and Derluyn 2022). They are constantly renegotiating their relationship with place, at a time when being rooted and stable is important in their development. Displacement leads to an interrogation of 'the precarious trace of what remains of the out of place, of the out-place, of (not) belonging there' (Doel 2020) and how this affects children on the move is a central concern of this paper.

Insofar as the artwork of children on the move constitute remnants of their embodied presences in Calais, they also serve as trace evidence of lives that are left behind as the children seek new beginnings in the UK and lives that could very well have been snuffed out during the crossings. Furthermore, with the constant arrivals of children into the premises as people on the move cross over to the United Kingdom daily, traces of children from the past coexist with those of the present, in many ways reminiscent of what Derrida has called a hauntology in *Spectres of Marx* (1994).

In his study, Derrida argues that ghosts are 'living-on' (1994, xx). Discussing what he calls the 'spectral moment', Derrida observes that it is 'a moment that no longer belongs to time, if one

understands by this word the linking of modalized presents (past present, actual present: 'now', future present)' (1994, xix). I want to extend this understanding of 'spectrality' to children who 'no longer belong to time' insofar as the children whose artwork adorns the walls of Secours Catholique in Calais are both present and absent, embodied through the materiality of their paintings, sketches and collages, and disembodied in the fact that they do not exist in this time and place anymore. In fact, many of them are not children anymore, or have not reached the English shores, having perished during the Channel crossing. Yet they remain always as children, as they are robbed of their opportunity to reach adult states of maturity and actualisation and are fixed in time, thereby exacerbating their spectral qualities as their adult selves remain unrealised.

This paper engages with the absent presence or co-existence of past and present children in Calais, looking at what can be termed 'spectral children' in their disembodiment both in the artwork that remains, and the way in which the French state treats children on the move as inexistent, while also examining the ways in which charities strive to make a difference to the lived experiences of these children with the limited means, resources, and time that they have at their disposal. Despite the 'evolving geopolitics of compassion' (Casavetes Bradford 2022, 209), which has been identified regarding children in the US context, and which is also evident in France where repression has overtaken compassion (Kistnareddy 2024), there are charities that attempt to look after children's well-being while they are in transit. France's protection of minors is contingent upon the 'the young person first requesting refugee status' and this extends to those who undergo an evaluation process to determine whether they are legally minors. For asylum-seeking children who are in transit, such protections are inexistent. In many ways they are also ghosts in a system that does not recognise them until they make their presence legally known, so that ECPAT, the international NGO that fights against modern slavery and the sexual exploitation of children, has a strong presence in Calais and follows unaccompanied minors, while those who come with their families receive help from Refugee Women's Centre (RWC) and Secours Catholique. Drawing on fieldwork carried out in the UK in 2024 regarding the current state of play in the UK for a project I headed, called 'Newly-Arrived children: EAL and other Provisions Project', reports on children's treatment in the UK and fieldwork in Calais in April 2023, and my observations of and conversations with representatives of charities working in Calais, along with young people who are travelling through Calais on their way to the UK, this paper looks at the ways in which Calais functions as a limbo space that exists outside of time as previous children and current children also co-exist with the future children who are inevitably *always to come* due to the lack of legal routes to apply for asylum in the UK.

Methodology

Ethics clearance was obtained from the University of Oxford's Ethics Committee for fieldwork to be carried out with children and young people. The first part of this research was undertaken over two weeks (1–14 April 2023) in Calais. During this time, I observed the work accomplished by Secours Catholique and Project Play and interviewed representatives of Refugee Women's Centre and ECPAT. Due to the very short-term nature of these migratory movements, with people on the move only staying sometimes hours or one or two days, often it was not possible to conduct interviews. Moreover, sometimes the children were either too young, which posed difficulties in gaining informed consent (Trustcott and Benton 2023), or they were too traumatised for me to feel comfortable speaking with them about their experiences, though we did have general conversations as they played on the premises of Secours Catholique with Project Play volunteers or Secours Catholique volunteers. When I was finally able to speak to three Syrians (a boy and two girls), I used a recorder to capture their words and a fieldwork diary to write my observations. I then transcribed the recorded interviews myself. I was able to interview these three Syrian siblings aged 13–16 (with informed consent from their father and self-consent from the oldest sibling) on their journey from Jordan camps towards the UK. It bears noting that per my observations, unaccompanied minors are usually boys who are deemed to be safer by their parents, while girls are considered to be at the

mercy of predators, and as such are accompanied, though unaccompanied boys are often victims of modern slavery and traffickers, per ECPAT. The exploitation of unaccompanied or separated child refugees for instance is documented (Chak 2018). I was also able to collect observational data from Project Play and had time to observe the work carried out by Secours Catholique and Project Play. I took photographs of collages and drawings made by children who had arrived for years before and whose sketches and collages are stuck to the walls of the Secours Catholique premises, toys, and the portable set ups that Project Play offers (Figures 1–3). As I observed new children arriving and making their own collages and drawings, it became obvious that these artworks are traces and reminders of the absent presences of the children whose futures are unknown. Inasmuch as these children seemingly occupy two time spaces, I began to think of their artwork and their absent presence as spectral. This present paper therefore draws on Derrida's hauntology to begin to understand the ways in which spectral children continue to haunt the Calais-UK border. The second part of this research was conducted between 2023 and 2024 while I was studying the current state of affairs in the UK regarding newly arrived children (NACEPP). During this period, I spoke with charity organisations (Positive Youth Foundation and Jacari) and observed the work they were accomplishing with the young people and met with Strategic Migration Partnership leads and Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) Leads in several parts of the UK. I was also able to briefly speak with children's services managers in areas such as the Western Isles, where increasing numbers of UASC were being sent. I also draw on newspaper articles and reports that have been published regarding the treatment of newly arrived UASC to examine the ways in which they start to become spectres that haunt a system a system which is currently failing children on the move specifically.

Derrida coined the term 'hantologie', translated as 'hauntology', to denote the fact the 'figure of the ghost' is 'that which is neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive' (Davis 2005, 373). For Frederic Jameson, 'Spectrality does not involve the conviction that ghosts exist or that the past (and maybe even the future they offer to prophesy) is still very much alive and at work, within the living present: all it says, if it can be thought to speak, is that the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be' (Jameson 1999, 39). According to Derrida, as for Jameson, then, it is the potent possibilities associated with the ghost that make it such a rich and complex entity worthy of enquiry. Its ability to exist within multiple times and spaces enable us to rethink what the subject itself can do. In the context of children on the move in Calais and as they have just arrived in the UK, spectrality permits a rethinking of both the modalities of time and place in the border space.

Traces, absent presence

Of the spectre, Derrida claims: 'one does not know if it is living or if it is dead' (1994, 5), yet it is always 'living-on' (1994, xx), and this statement could very well apply to a number of children who transit through Calais on their way to the UK. 8692 children crossed the Channel in 2022 according to the Refugee Council (2024a), but this figure does not account for children whose boats capsized on the way to the UK and who might have died during the crossing. Those disappeared children, whose sketches or colourings might still adorn the walls of Secours Catholique, do not form part of the figures and statistics available in the UK. Likewise, France does not keep a record of who transits through Calais unless they ask for asylum in France, nor do the charities keep tight records beyond a logbook of their activities during the day. Project Play collects observational data, but this is anonymized and only pertains to interactions between volunteers and children who do join them. However, some children might simply not leave their temporary shelters at all in the makeshift camps. Thus, aside from their interactions with their families (immediate for unaccompanied asylum seekers and extended for those travelling with their immediate family), the only traces of children's presence in Calais are moments spent with the volunteers, and sketches, colourings, papier-mâché and clay figures that they made as they stopped for respite when they first arrived in Secours Catholique or when they produced crafts with Project Play either in Secours Catholique or Loon-Plage, a camp site that Project Play volunteers also regularly visit. In every material, all the coloured

Figure 2. Premises of the women's and children's section of Secours Catholique in Calais.

pens, crayons, sketch pads, and magazines used for collages, lie traces of children whose absent presence is constantly felt and emblematised in this space.

In the context of photography, Roland Barthes has examined the image as having a value of pastness, in that it deals with something 'that-has-been', but also of proximity, for it is always 'of something' (Barthes 1981, 76). However, 'no such ontological commitment is made in the case of handmade images' (Pettersson 2011, 186). As much as Petterson argues that photographs are traces, because of that Barthesian proximity, I would also suggest that drawings, sketches, watercolours, in sum, all handmade images, are also traces. J. J. C Smart argues that traces are a 'polymorphic concept' (1955, 125), while Bernard Mayo understands them as 'states which bear more reliable marks of their own beginnings than of their own endings' (Mayo 1955, 39). Traces left by images 'provide evidence' (Pettersson 2011, 190), though photographs give more epistemic access than handmade images, which are 'slack' and do not have the proximity to and dependence on the original scene (or person) (Pettersson 2011, 191). Nonetheless, insofar as the evidence that I am looking at in the case of the artwork produced by children in Calais is of their presence and perhaps the last traces of their passage in this transit space (or indeed in this world if they perished during their journey to the UK), I would argue that these paintings, drawings, collages and so on, meaningfully constitute traces of the spectral children crossing the Channel.

The spectrality of these children becomes evident insofar as they are children of the past, but they are very much kept alive through the work that they have produced, thereby existing in the past and the present simultaneously. The artwork becomes a reminder of the continuous flow of children

Figure 3. Table, chairs and colours provided by Project Play charity in Calais.

who come through the doors of Secours Catholique, but also of the others who do not come to Calais centre and instead follow adults in transit into makeshift camps that constantly mushroom around Calais and Dunkirk in the aftermath of the dismantling of the Calais Jungle (Agier et al. 2008). The local government in Calais has renounced any responsibility towards people on the move as they are seen as the UK's problem (Kistnareddy 2024), and as such there is little official information available regarding the number of children who are stopping in Calais be it for a short period or for longer. Insofar as they retain the handmade drawings and collages produced by at least some of the children, Secours Catholique women's and children's section has become a form of repository for these short-lived moments, traces that, for now, still exist of these children's former presence in Calais.

While migration can be said to be a means of 'creating futures' (Cheung Judge, Blazek, and Esson 2020; Walker 2023), it is also the site of multiple pasts that join in the border as traces of past migrations are inscribed in the present space. Therefore, through their left-behind artwork, children on the move not only remind us of waves of migrations that have been through Calais but also foreshadow the continued transits as the UK does not have legal pathways to asylum beyond existing specific schemes such as the Homes for Ukraine or the Hong Kong British National Overseas and the UK Resettlement Schemes for refugees from Syria and the Middle East and North African (MENA) region.[1] These schemes have strict guidelines as to who qualifies, and many do not. For instance, the siblings I interviewed in Calais, were Syrians who were displaced for ten years in refugee camps in Jordan. Their two older siblings were resettled in the UK, gaining the opportunity to

become an engineer and a nurse, respectively, but the four younger siblings and their parents were left in the refugee camps as they were not chosen. Therefore, the father has travelled with his four remaining children through five countries to join his older children in Birmingham, through illegal routes. The mother could not travel as she injured her foot shortly before they were due to leave. The older siblings were seen as adults and separated from the rest of the family, creating a rift within the family, taking them half a world away and prompting them to want to reunify and for the remaining children to dream of achieving similar success to their older siblings. Three of them admitted with voices full of hope that they would like to be doctors and expressed the wish to attend school as soon as they arrive. I did not want to shatter their hopes or mitigate their zeal by telling them that the Illegal Migration Bill (at the time, now Act) would destroy their chances of being granted asylum and that its effects are retrospective.[2] These children's imagined future selves (gaining an education, achieving professional qualifications) are destined to remain spectral, profoundly present in the imagination for the children themselves, but doomed not to be actualised in a future which the Illegal Migration Act has curtailed.

Moreover, in the UK itself, there are many unaccompanied children who have arrived and are in limbo in the system, as often their age is disputed. For example, in July 2024, United Nations experts warned the UK against treating children as adults and housing them with adults, thereby putting them in safeguarding risks. A Refugee Council report dated January 2024 identified that 'Over an 18-month period, at least 1,300 children were wrongly assessed to be adults by the Home Office and in the first half of 2023, nearly 500 children were placed in adult accommodation or detention (Refugee Council 2024b). Insofar as these children are being treated as adults, I would argue that they are being forced to exist outside their real temporal framework, therefore becoming spectral in a different way. Moreover, they are treated as not belonging in the UK, but they cannot go back to their war-torn countries and therefore are in a no man's land that leaves them haunting the asylum system, not in and not out, existing in the thresholds, much like Derrida's spectre as discussed above.

Embodied spectrality

In Calais, there are two categories of minors on the move: those who are accompanied, travelling with their families, such as the siblings I interviewed as well as countless others I observed coming through the women's and children's section, and the unaccompanied (mostly boys) who most often prefer to stay in the men's section. In France, unaccompanied minors who wish to obtain asylum are legally allowed to do so, by seeking a legal representative, who will start the process on their behalf in the local area authority (OFPRA 2025). If they do not have a legal representative, then an *ad hoc* representative is appointed to act on their behalf. Before this point, these minors do not exist for the local authority or for France. Many minors travel through France without seeking asylum as their goal is to reach the UK, with Calais being the shortest clandestine distance to Dover and the UK (Sanyal 2017). Since France and the local authorities do not acknowledge their presence even though they are in the country, they can be said to have an embodied spectrality, being present on the territory but also moving like spectres whose presence is disavowed by the authorities.

Interestingly, France has acceded to all international texts that protect and promote children's rights, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). According to France Diplomacy (2025), France 'actively promotes increased child protection in the face of today's challenges'. The irony is that the children who are in transit in Calais do not benefit from the same zeal which France demonstrates on the international stage. While France protects children *it recognises as children* from human trafficking, sexual exploitation and armed conflict (France Diplomacy 2025), children on the move are left to their own devices, because they are not perceived as children or human beings at all, and it is charities such as ECPAT on whom the onus of protecting and following unaccompanied minors falls in Calais. Ironically, in its 'Plan d'action national contre la traite des êtres humains /National Action Plan against Human Trafficking (2019–2021), France

stipulated that:'La traite des êtres humains est un phénomène qui reste peu connu et mal appréhendé. Or, c'est une réalité qui touche en France des enfants, des femmes et des hommes, ressortissants français ou étrangers/ Human trafficking is a little known and understood phenomenon. Yet it is a reality that affects children, women and men in France' and the first aim of the action plan is to 'Informer, communiquer, sensibiliser le grand public, les professionnels et les publics à risques sur les différentes formes d'exploitation liées à la traite des êtres humains est au cœur des actions de prévention/ inform, communicate, sensitise the masses, professions and vulnerable populations regarding the different forms of exploitation linked to human trafficking' to prevent it from happening.[3] Unfortunately, these preventive measures, and the goals that France has set herself policy-wise, do not translate into the empirical world where children on the move are not even deemed to exist as human beings, much less as children.

In his analyses of the situation regarding immigration in France two decades earlier, Fassin (2005) discussed the ways in which compassion and repression have slowly become the oxymoronic rationale behind France has come to see and treat people on the move. On the one hand, the state would like to be perceived as understanding and supportive but on the other, it also wants to kerb the number of people who transit through Calais. This, of course, led to the shutting down of the Calais Jungle. Fassin argued that there was a need for a balance between compassion and repression in his paper, but France has not been able to achieve that equilibrium. Instead, a veritable biopolitics (Foucault 1978) is at play insofar as children on the move are not seen as real children but can be deemed to be 'bare life' existing outside the political apparatus and only claiming physiological rather than socio-political 'liveness' (Agamben 1997). For many minors transiting through Calais, survival is the only objective until they reach the UK, with state apparatus absent, and only charitable organisations providing support.

Since Secours Catholique is a popular stopping place for people in transit in Calais, many unaccompanied minors find their way into the premises as they follow adults who have contacts and know where they are going. ECPAT, the charity that seeks to protect children from exploitation and human trafficking, sends representatives to Secours Catholique and to the main areas where unaccompanied minors are likely to arrive (including squats), on a daily basis. Often, the representatives can speak several languages so that they may establish a rapport with minors on the move. I spoke with the ECPAT project leader in Calais at the time, who explained that frequently, these minors will attempt to cross the Channel with whatever funds that their parents were able to give them when they set off, but for many, crossings are multiple and often are unsuccessful. Consequently, they are at risk of falling prey to human traffickers and gangs who will use them in different ways. For instance, the ECPAT project lead revealed that there were boys who were told to stand watch for drug gangs in case the police appeared and were paid to warn them off. These minors often have no other means of earning safe passage to the UK. According to the ECPAT project lead, the other way in which human traffickers often use unaccompanied children on the move is that they ask them to pilot the small boats in exchange for free passage, which they do as they do not have money to cross the Channel otherwise. In March 2024, The Guardian (2024a) published the story of Ibrahima Bah who was charged with four counts of gross negligence manslaughter for piloting a dinghy which capsized during the Channel crossing in December 2022. Of the 39 passengers, about a dozen were unaccompanied children, including Bah himself. Cases like his bring to bear the risks that unaccompanied minors take to ensure they can cross. As Bah was unable to afford the £2000 that the smugglers asked of him, he was forced to steer the boat in exchange for free passage to the UK. Many others like him have taken the same risk, but new legislation in the UK means that minors like him, who are victims, will now be treated as perpetrators.

Prior to crossing to the UK, ECPAT is the only source of protection for such children, and while they can provide support, they cannot compel the children not to associate with gangs or traffickers as they are desperate. According to the ECPAT project leader, often parents who are left behind in the countries of origin are emotionally putting a lot of pressure on their sons to leave France and reach the UK as they believe that their sons would be able to find employment and help them out.

Girls are deemed to be at risk and as such are usually not sent off for their own protection, though there are exceptions. For these unaccompanied minors, the emotional burden makes them further liable to give in to gangs and human traffickers (Behrendt, Lietaert, and Derluyn 2022). This is also the case when they arrive in the UK and find themselves stuck in limbo in Home Office hotels rather than accommodation that is more secure and tailored to minors who need safeguarding. The case of the missing children who disappeared from hotels is fresh in our memories as it was heavily publicised, but many unaccompanied minors have fallen prey to modern slavery over the years as they need to earn money and send it home to their families (Bloch, Sigona, and Zetter 2011). As of July 2024, there were still 118 missing children unaccounted for, and they were likely to have been trafficked (The Guardian 2024b). Since they arrived and made their asylum claim upon arrival, UASC are under the protection of the Home Office until it shifts the responsibility to local area authorities for those whose claim is upheld. Prior to this, there is an age assessment process that could scupper their claim, were they deemed to be adults, in which case they can be deported if their asylum claim is rejected. Therefore, the unaccompanied minors' status as children itself is subjective and to another level spectralized as they are children according to themselves and their families, but they might suddenly become adults in the eyes of the law in the UK. They exist outside their own temporality, being at once children and not children, projected forward in time to an age where their claim could be rejected and where they are put in spaces with adults, leading to safeguarding issues, which is an ongoing problem in the UK (Refugee Council 2024c). When it comes to children's health and well-being, 'place matters' (Sampson and Gifford 2010); as Doel (2020) puts it, and as I discussed earlier, being out of place leads to feelings of not belonging, and the UK is yet to find the best solution for the children who arrive and are under their care, leading to wellbeing issues. In February 2024, my UK fieldwork for the NACEPP project mentioned at the beginning, revealed, for instance, two Vietnamese boys who were sent to the Western Isles and who were struggling mentally as well as logistically as they did not have anyone who speaks their language and can understand what they have undergone before and since arriving. Despite the best efforts of the local authorities, the lack of resources precluded them from getting adequate support. In the last year, I have spoken to a number of charities, local authorities and Strategic Migration Partnerships in the UK who are struggling to find a sustainable solution with limited resources.

Enlivened spectres and ghosts in the system

Nonetheless, the work that is accomplished by charities has an evident important impact on children on the move's wellbeing. This begins with the recognition that they are simply children when they arrive in places like Secours Catholique. Figure 2 shows the set up for the women's and children's section, where colourful bunting, toys, coloured pens, crayons and a range of material are offered to children as they arrive. Figure 3 shows the portable chairs and tables with colours that Project Play brings along to Secours Catholique on the days when they are on the premises rather than at Loon-Plage or in some of the temporary accommodation that is given to families upon arrival, so they can sleep for a night or two before they continue their journey to the UK.

While these gestures do not change the fact that these children have undertaken perilous journeys to reach Calais before boarding yet other dangerous small boats to reach the UK, they acknowledge the fact that children on the move *are children*. This recognition is important since, as I mentioned earlier, the minors who are transiting through Calais are not perceived as children and instead, as yet more 'migrants' who are passing through by the authorities.[4] Though the charities use the term 'exilés/exiled' to refer to them (Kistnareddy 2024), thereby rejecting the connotations that have become associated with the term 'migrants' in the last decades, it is evident that changing nomenclature is not enough to reshape a system which is failing people on the move, and especially children who need additional support and protection.

Secours Catholique, as with Project Play, ECPAT and Refugee Women's Centre, the other charity that aids children who are part of families, play a significant role in, as I term it, at least

temporarily 'enlivening' those spectral children. I would suggest that both meanings of the term as 'to make alive' and to 'make lively' are relevant in this context (Merriam-Webster 2025). The ghost children who are ignored and are made to feel absent by the authorities while they are in these transit spaces, momentarily feel acknowledged, their needs are being at least partially met, and they are also permitted to act as children while they are with these charities. The latter facilitate this firstly by giving the space to minors arriving to be children and play to their heart's content. Part of my observations revealed that the volunteers are well trained in providing first aid and provisions to those who have just been saved from boats. Often the volunteers will provide blankets, food, a change of clothes and make arrangements for the newly arrived to spend the night in a safe accommodation. On Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs these would belong on the bottom rung, the most basic physiological needs upon which all others are built until the individual finally reaches self-actualisation (if they ever do). However, the work that the charities accomplish in providing these basic necessities goes a long way in ensuring that the children feel safe, at least momentarily. One of the most interesting moments I observed during my Calais fieldwork is the arrival of an Iraqi family of three, a young couple and their toddler, a little girl. Soaking wet, they were all relieved to be warm, the father set about checking that both his wife and child were fine, the mother was struggling and said she only wanted to rest, but the toddler's first reaction was to go straight to the pile of toys at the far end of the room and sit down to play. She was happy as long as she was able to do something which felt normal to her even at that age.

Other children from Iran and Afghanistan who arrived were in a similar mindset: they had crossed a number of countries clandestinely to reach Calais, which they saw as the last stepping stone before the UK, where all of them had family or close friends they were joining for what they hoped were better prospects than what awaited them back home, especially for the daughters. Many of these families revealed that they were crossing as they had daughters whom they believed were going to be oppressed under the new regimes and changes in the rights of women in their countries. The girls who arrived, aged 1-15, were given toys or paper and colours, collages or puzzles to do. A shy seven-year-old Iranian girl sat and drew a beautiful rose. While she could not speak much English, the moments when she was able to communicate through these drawings of flowers that remind her of home (according to her mother) were deeply revelatory of the child's need to draw to feel at home and to feel herself again. These activities also enabled volunteers and myself, as I took part and assisted, to create links with the children, who sometimes shared some information about where they had come from and a little about their journeys.

Minors travelling with their families often were the only ones who could speak English and acted as interpreters between volunteers and their parents. Often, they are barely surviving and far from coming to terms with their journeys and what they have lost in terms of home, country, family ties, and psychologically when they become language brokers for their parents or other family members with whom they are travelling. This type of cultural brokering can have a negative impact on young people's wellbeing, especially as this will continue as their families reach a host country and they will need their children to interpret and translate for them constantly (Lazarevic 2017). Projected forwards in time, when they begin to take roles that are usually assigned to adults, these minors are once again occupying two timespaces simultaneously as they are compelled to grow up fast so that they can support their families. Ironically, their level of English is also not good enough for them to join mainstream schooling straight away and certainly not at a level where they will be able to access primary or secondary school classes without support. Many will be in hotels or temporary accommodation for an extended period before they enrol in school, during which time many will suffer from depression. For instance, when I organised a workshop as part of my project 'Resettled Children', on the current state of play regarding newly arrived children and young people in Oxford, Coventry and Bristol in July 2023, a then fourteen-year-old boy expressed his sadness at being kept out of school in Coventry due to the lack of spaces in schools. Coventry also only has one college, making it very difficult for new arrivals to enrol. Charities such as Positive Youth Foundation (PYF) in Coventry play a crucial role in helping these newly arrived young people by creating

activities and programmes that enable them to have a sense of belonging and community, but their resources are also limited. For a year PYF were able to employ a counsellor to work with the newly arrived young people, which made a difference to the minors' wellbeing, but they did not have the funds to continue to do so. Interestingly, local authorities and the Home Office continue to be responsible for the UASC, but it is charities like PYF who help them out in the limbo in which they find themselves.

By the tenets of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Article 3(1), countries that have ratified the convention the best interests of children should be 'a primary consideration in all actions affecting them' (Bhabha 2014, 204), and usually decisions based on this principle are made by adults on behalf of the children. When UASC are on the move, these decisions are made by themselves or whoever places themselves as temporary guardians, like the independent charities which attempt to look after them like ECPAT or Secours Catholique, while the authorities choose to deny their presence and their rights as children. If, and when, they arrive in the UK, the Home Office takes on this role of guardian, followed by local authorities onto whom the onus shifts. While the process is guided by policy, which rests on the 'best interests' of the child enshrined in the CRC, the fact is that in empirical terms, local authorities are under-funded, under-resourced and often schools and local authorities outsource support for UASC to charities like PYF. But children who come as part of families also experience difficulties and a lack of support from local authorities who rely on charities to aid them. In Bristol and Oxford, for instance, Jacari, a charity that focuses on providing English language assistance to migrant, refugee and asylum-seeking young people in primary and secondary schools, offers limited help for an hour once a week to a number of pupils in schools, as I observed during fieldwork conducted between May and June 2023 as part of my project on 'Resettled Children'.[5] As Jacari relies on volunteers from the universities in the area to provide tutoring, the amount of help they can offer is limited by the number of volunteers in any given year. Most of the schools partnering up with Jacari rely on this limited weekly intervention to help the newly arrived pupils, but though this is valuable, and the children do benefit from this support,[6] more should be done by the local authorities themselves to help the schools and the newly arrived pupils for a more consistent approach.

Nonetheless, this help is only available to those who have moved beyond the no man's land of the asylum-seeking process in the UK. The longer children are made to wait while their family's or their own applications are being scrutinised, the longer they spend in the limbo of a system that denies their existence until it either lets them through or tells them that they are unwelcome. In the former case, by the time they are processed and sent to different parts of the UK, they will have been out of school for a long period of time and many of them will not have an adequate level of English but will be sent to mainstream classes. In the latter case, they either appeal and continue to live in limbo haunting the system, or disappear underground, ensuring that they are never recognised by the state and making them vulnerable to human trafficking and modern slavery, or are deported to a country from which they fled as they feared for their lives. With the Illegal Migration Act, the option to stay is not even open to them as they have come through illegal routes. Moreover, those who arrive before they are eighteen are considered for deportation once they turn eighteen such that the nominal loss of childhood is tantamount to a death sentence for some as they are sent back to volatile and dangerous situations, and a crisis for others who would have spent enough time in the UK for the country to feel like home. Thus, while there may be stakeholders who are clearly working in the best interest of the children, enabling some of them to at least begin the process of integration and eventually feel more settled, the system itself is rigged to work against many of the recent newly arrived children in the UK.

Conclusion

I can't write about how innocent people died:[…]
how cruel this world can get;

how frightening it is
for kids like me ('My Hazara People', Shukria Rezaei 2018)
i want to go home,
but home is the mouth of a shark
home is the barrel of the gun
and no one would leave home
unless home chased you to the shore ('Home', Warsan Shire 2016)

In her poem based on the experiences of the Hazara people of Afghanistan and the ethnic cleansing they suffered, fifteen-year-old Shukria brings attention to the vulnerability not only of people of her ethnicity but of children like herself, who will inevitably die if they were to stay in Afghanistan. Many minors like her travel through different states, transit through Calais, sometimes living on in portraits drawn by a volunteer, but mostly anonymous and unseen, and eventually reach the UK only to be told to 'go back home' when home is not a safe place. Similarly, in her famous poem, Warsan Shire, a Kenyan-born Somali refugee who moved to London at the age of one, brings to bear the despair that leads people on the move, when they are faced with war and strife, to leave their home for countries where they might never feel at home again. Both grew up as refugees in the UK and their poems clearly delineate the fact that no one leaves unless they are compelled to do so. Growing up as a displaced child has repercussions too, and the trauma that forced displacement entails is something that many grapple with constantly, whereas the French and UK states belabour the fact that those moving between Calais and the UK are socio-economic migrants.

While both the French and UK state apparatuses focus on creating a hostile environment (Fassin 2005; Goodfellow 2020), the fact is that it hardly deters those who are trying to save their children from wars and violence. Though the UK tries to reject the asylum-seekers based on the fact that they travelled through safe countries like France before reaching the UK and should have applied for asylum in these countries instead, the 1952 Refugee Convention does not stipulate that they should stop in the first safe country. More often than not, the motivation to reach the UK is based on two specific reasons: knowing someone here (either family connections or friends) and/or being able to speak English. The Illegal Migration Act and the new stipulation that refugees will not obtain British citizenship might be intended as deterrents, but as both Shukria and Warsan indicate, many will continue to come because they will seek for safe places where they speak the language and have ties, and if that is the UK, then Calais and the UK will continue to see the arrival of these children on the move, whether they want to or not. The legal instruments that the UK has put in place to eradicate the figure of the illegal child migrant will not achieve this goal, instead resulting in populations of children on the move who 'live on' spectrally.

Notes

1. And indeed, the Home Secretary has announced that any refugee who has arrived illegally, be it in small boats or as stowaways, will not be able to apply for British Citizenship, which attests to the ongoing hostility of the UK against those who are reduced to choosing illegal means to arrive. The guidance for 'good character' to apply for British citizenship has been changed as of 10 February 2025 to stipulate that: 'Any person applying for citizenship from 10 February 2025, who previously entered the UK illegally will normally be refused, regardless of the time that has passed since the illegal entry took place' (Home Office, Nationality Policy 2025).
2. The Illegal Migration Act stipulates that there is a duty to remove people under specific conditions:

   (1) The third condition is that, in entering or arriving as mentioned in subsection (2), the person did not come directly to the United Kingdom from a country in which the person's life and liberty were threatened by reason of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

   (2) For the purposes of subsection (4) a person is not to be taken to have come directly to the United Kingdom from a country in which their life and liberty were threatened as mentioned in that subsection if, in coming from such a country, they passed through or stopped in another country outside the United Kingdom where their life and liberty were not so threatened. (The Illegal Migration Act 2023)
3. See https://www.egalite-femmes-hommes.gouv.fr/sites/efh/files/migration/2019/10/2e-Plan-action-traite-etres-humains.pdf Accessed 21 January 2025.

4. As Anderson (2017) suggests, the word 'migrant' has negative connotations of problematic mobility, and it is often used to demonize those who are transiting through Calais.
5. Prior to this I was also one of Jacari's volunteers in Oxford and also volunteered for Cambridge Refugee Resettlement Campaign (CRRC). The fieldwork conducted during the period May-July 2023 was funded by the Oxford Policy Engagement Network Seed Fund.
6. In their Impact report (Jacari 2024), Jacari highlights the fact that 91% of pupils said that Jacari helped improve their English, and 100% of teachers said that Jacari improved pupils' English language.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research has been funded by the Leverhulme Trust, Oxford Policy and Engagement Network Seed Fund and Public Policy Challenge Fund.

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