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El-Kurd, M. (2025). *Perfect Victims and the Politics of Appeal*. Haymarket Books.

Review by Sophie Bols
PhD candidate in Migration Law, Ghent University
Sophie.Bols@UGent.be

Review by Moé Suzuki
Fellow in Interdisciplinary Social Science, London School of Economics and Political Science
m.suzuki3@lse.ac.uk

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El-Kurd, M. (2025). *Perfect Victims and the Politics of Appeal*. Haymarket Books.

Perfect Victims and the Politics of Appeal is written by Mohammed El-Kurd, a Palestinian writer, poet, journalist, and organiser. We decided to write this collaborative book review as El-Kurd's work has inspired us academically but also personally, highlighting the necessity of standing in solidarity with Palestine as Israel's genocide against Palestinians continues.

We initially met at the workshop 'Borders in Motion: Critical Conversations on Race, Migration, and Intersectionality' at King's College London. Moé's current research theorises the 'humanisation' of refugees, conceptualising it not as a moral good as it is often assumed to be as the antithesis of dehumanisation, but as a technology of power. Using decolonial theory, the project examines how the category of humanity itself is shaped by coloniality. Without questioning the category itself into which refugees are 'included', humanisation ends up reproducing the power dynamics it seeks to challenge (Suzuki, 2025). Sophie's doctoral research analyses how EU border governance constructs the figure of the migrant man, with particular attention to gender and racialisation. The racialised migrant man is often positioned as the dehumanised Other, and as the point of reference against which other migrants are humanised. Sophie's research traces how this figure is (re)produced and formalised through legal discourse. Bringing our research projects into dialogue with El-Kurd's work allows us to reflect on how the same structures of racialised governance that are operationalised in relation to Palestine are used in migration governance.

In this book, El-Kurd critiques what he terms the 'politics of appeal' in the Palestinian context, referring to strategies through which Palestinians are rendered 'worthy' of 'empathy' by conforming to colonial narratives of humanity, innocence, and vulnerability. He provides a critical lens for migration studies, where similar politics of appeal shape people's understanding about migrants and migrant rights. We reflect on the implications of engaging with this often-unquestioned narrative.

Humanisation and the politics of appeal

One of the key contributions of this book is a critique of what El-Kurd terms the "politics of defanging" within the broader politics of appeal. These concepts describe the discursive strategies that seek recognition for Palestinians through humanisation, attempting to undo "implicit or explicit biases ingrained against 'the Palestinians' through depicting them in 'respectable' and 'relatable' terms" (p. 35). Humanisation strategies emphasise vulnerability, innocence, and exceptionalism. El-Kurd shows that they ultimately concede to settler-colonial power, which dictates the terms on which Palestinians are allowed to speak and be human. This is how Palestinians are 'defanged': made tolerable, acceptable, palatable, and legible to regimes of empathy. Palestinians are robbed of their voice, only given a platform if they speak within the set parameters of humanity, or their voice is replaced by so-called experts speaking on their behalf.

One of the most impactful aspects of this book is El-Kurd's incisive and fierce critique of humanisation. He meticulously dissects the strategies and traps of humanisation in relation to Palestine, writing as someone who has 'always been advised to want to become human' (p. 33). This phrasing gets to the absurdity of the need to humanise, the 'perplexing demand to make humans out of humans' (p. 30). This perplexity is what Moé's project tries to theorise critically. Starting from this perplexity as pointed out by El-Kurd throws humanisation into question: why are some people not seen or treated as human in the first place?

For Palestinians, it is because of Zionism and settler-colonialism. For example, El-Kurd discusses the 'unchilding' (p. 149) of Palestinian children, highlighting how innocence and racism work together. A politics of appeal that locates innocence in Palestinian children not only contributes to the demonisation of Palestinian men, but also fails to recognise that Palestinian children are not protected by Zionist violence by virtue of their childhood. El-Kurd shows that the racist constructions of Palestinian children as 'being taught to hate' or

'culturally regressed', especially when they defy the innocent and de-politicised figure of children by fighting back colonial rule, demonstrate the intrinsic connection between discursive strategies and material violence. Racism against Palestinians under colonial rule legitimises the murder of Palestinian children, as El-Kurd painfully documents.

Such traps of humanisation strategies are evident in relation to migrant men, which is directly relevant to Sophie's research. Questioning why racialised migrant men are often excluded from legally relevant categories such as vulnerability formed the starting point of her research, but El-Kurd's work complicated this. Rather than challenging the exclusion of migrant men or advocating for their inclusion within these categories, his critique suggests that the categories themselves, and the systems of oppression that produce them, be scrutinised. Similarly, Turner (2019) argues that attempts to recognise migrant men as "vulnerable" neither critique vulnerability as a tool of humanitarian governance nor seek to challenge it. Moreover, the "adultification" of migrant children of colour is well-documented, where Black, brown and Muslim children in particular are seen as older and less innocent (Alaydi and Whitham, 2026). This in turn fuels police and border violence against such children.

In this way, extending humanising categories such as vulnerability or innocence ultimately reinforces a system that remains fundamentally unequal, exclusionary and harmful to all. El-Kurd argues that the moral code produced within the framework of humanisation fails to account for power dynamics, diverting "critical scrutiny away from the colonizer and onto the colonized, obscuring the inherent injustice of colonialism, thus shielding the colonial project" (p. 38). In other words, the conditions that demand the humanisation of Palestinians in the first place are left unquestioned.

Similar points have been made by critical migration scholars like Harsha Walia. In *Border and Rule,* she refuses 'anthropological consumption' of migrant subjectivities and representations to 'turn our gaze away from varied subjectivities to the systems of power that create migrants yet criminalize migration' (p. 2). Moé is also interested in thinking about what possibilities may be opened by turning away from individual figures of refugees—as important as they are in some contexts—and towards the strategies and processes of humanisation that dictate and shape who can move and stay where they want within the racialised regime of global (im)mobility.

The enthusiastic embrace and representations of 'good migrants' who make great contributions, refugees who are 'grateful' to the 'host' society (Nayeri, 2017), or 'super-refugees' (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2017) who achieve great feats, are often well-intended but reinforce the hierarchy of humanity that El-Kurd discusses. 'Good migrants' implies there are 'bad' migrants; 'grateful refugees' implies that there are 'ungrateful' refugees (and, as Nayeri [2017] and Buxton and Gibney [2024] ask, why should refugees be grateful?). Those discursive frames are ultimately rooted in particular conceptualisations of humanity, whereby the boundary of humanity shifts in pursuit of perfect victims.

There are vast universes outside of the courthouse, worlds beyond the colonizer's field of vision

El-Kurd's critique also has significant implications for migration law scholars. He for instance writes: 'having been born and raised in Palestine, I did not need to be particularly astute to understand the law as often the most lethal weapon in the oppressor's arsenal' (p. 3). This resonates with critical legal scholarship, which has long examined how the law reproduces structural inequality. El-Kurd's phrasing emphasises that for those who are indigenous, marginalised, or oppressed, this insight does not require critical intervention but is understood through lived encounters with legal systems. For legal scholars and practitioners, understanding the law as a weapon in the oppressor's arsenal, or to use Audre Lorde's terms, as one of 'the master's tools' (Lorde, 1979), raises the complex question of how to approach law critically while also engaging it strategically in struggles ranging from Palestinian liberation to migrant rights.

Law is both a tool of domination and a site of struggle. As such, Montesinos Coleman shows how human rights can be mobilised against the very systems that produced them (Montesinos Coleman, 2024); Gearty notes that law 'has a way of escaping its controlling roots' (Gearty, 2024); and Erakat argues that law is not loyal to any single actor or outcome (Erakat, 2019). Litigation before the European Court of Human Rights, for example, has advanced migrant rights, yet Theilen warns that participation in human rights litigation before the ECtHR requires caution, especially for those seeking to imagine alternatives such as border abolition (Theilen, 2025). In this sense, his findings echo El-Kurd's observation that 'we have unwittingly reproduced that which we seek to subvert (and should want to abolish)' (p. 25). Still, El-Kurd does not call for a total rejection of the politics of appeal. Rather, he urges caution, admitting that such strategies may at times 'coerce powerful regimes into action,' but their use requires careful consideration of their consequences and whether they are 'worth the gamble' (p. 55).

Sophie's research foregrounds the discursive effects of law and legal reasoning, drawing inspiration from El-Kurd's insistence on looking beyond the possibilities and limits of humanising discourse to expose its overlooked consequences. Even where dominant power structures appear to be challenged and rights advanced, his intervention urges us to ask what is being discursively reproduced or normalised, and whether a 'win' for some quietly disadvantages others in ways that ultimately affect all. These insights require a methodological approach attentive not only to legal outcomes but also to the discursive work that surrounds, produces, and legitimates them: the underlying presuppositions, what is normalised, and what remains unquestioned. El-Kurd's focus on framing and discourse is central here, informing the use of critical discourse analysis to examine how legal texts construct migrant men and (re)produce racialised and gendered assumptions.

Politics of defanging in academia

El-Kurd's critique extends to the politics of knowledge production, which applies to academia. He writes: 'Academics stand idle. That is, until the dust settles, then they will write books about what should have been. Coin terms and such. Lecture in the past tense' (p. 8). We, academics, need to turn the gaze back onto ourselves, our institutions, and our roles in inadvertently reproducing the hierarchies we seek to critique as a consequence of our research, writing, and teaching. Neither doing critical research, centring 'subaltern voices,' nor using participatory methods absolves us from this responsibility. For example, Gani and Khan (2024) argue that positionality statements can function as tools of coloniality, reinforcing the power hierarchies they are meant to expose. Tuck and Yang (2014) similarly warn that research often becomes a 'voyeuristic' and 'consumptive' enterprise, particularly through damage-centred frameworks that fixate on documenting the pain of marginalised communities. El-Kurd writes:

> 'Academics use Palestinian poets to aestheticize their research', and 'Seldom do we encounter the Darwish who tells the colonizers: Do not pass between us like flying insects.... Pile your illusions in a deserted pit, and be gone.... Live wherever you like, but do not live among us.... Die wherever you like, but do not die among us. They defang him before they recite him' (p. 164).

Moving away from the coloniser's gaze is therefore not a methodological fix, but an ongoing practice of reflexivity.

World's beyond

However, it is not only necessary to talk about Palestine. We need to stand and act in solidarity with Palestinians. Palestine solidarity movements led by students have emerged at universities around the world, seeking to hold their institutions accountable by demanding that they cut ties with the Israeli apartheid and genocidal regime. Our institutions in Europe

are also complicit in sustaining Fortress Europe in what has been named the border-industrial academic complex (Transnational Institute and Stop Wapenhandel, 2026).

At Moé's institution, the London School of Economics and Political Science, students set up an encampment in May 2024, before being evicted in June. They also published the reports Assets in Apartheid (2024) and Stakes in Settler Colonialism (2025), which outlined LSE's complicity in the genocide of Palestinians, the arms trade, and climate breakdown through its investments. At Sophie's institution, Ghent University, students organised an encampment and occupied university buildings in protest against academic partnerships with Israel, pointing to the complicity of Israeli universities in Israel's apartheid regime and ongoing Nakba. These actions followed months of peaceful protests, sit-ins, die-ins, demonstrations, internal pressure on university boards, and open letters. Because the institutions did not respond to the demands, brave students proceeded to occupy space on campus (Brems, Rombouts and Stolle, 2025).

These Palestine solidarity movements have had impact within and beyond the university. They have raised awareness of the ongoing Nakba, shifted public discourse, built coalitions, and influenced university policy. At Ghent University, although no full academic boycott was imposed, the university formally decided to discontinue both bilateral collaborations with Israel and multilateral collaborations with Israeli partners within European research projects. However, as we write, only one tie has been cut. Therefore, a new encampment has been organised at Ghent University demanding a full academic boycott. The university responded by promising to accelerate the process of breaking five additional ties, while the movement continues to demand cutting all seventeen remaining ties. The encampment continued until 20 May 2026, when riot police were invited to university grounds, a decision that resulted in violent arrests of students and staff; more than twenty people were injured, and several were hospitalised.

Perfect Victims and the Politics of Appeal has pushed us towards a more radical scrutiny of our research practices, institutions, and ourselves as researchers. Migration scholars, especially critical scholars, should take seriously the example set by Palestine solidarity activists and support such struggles where they can. This is a book that should be read and engaged with collectively, encouraging us as academics to consider how we can act in solidarity with Palestinians. As El-Kurd urges: 'Those of us with platforms, with some level of protection, with some social capital or actual capital, must dare to shift culture and not only talk about the necessity of shifting culture' (p. 191).

Sophie Bols and Moé Suzuki

Sophie Bols (she/her) is a PhD candidate at Ghent University. Her PhD research, funded by the Research Foundation Flanders (FWO), examines the gendered dimensions of EU border governance, with a particular focus on the construction of racialised migrant masculinity through an intersectional lens. She is affiliated with the Centre for Law, Families and Diversity and the Migration Law Research Group at the Faculty of Law and Criminology Ghent University. She is co-chair of the Young Scholars Research Forum of ICON-S Benelux. She is also an editor of the International Encyclopaedia for Migration Law and the Strasbourg Observers Blog. Sophie is affiliated with the Human Rights Centre Ghent University and the Centre for the Social Study of Migration and Refugees (CESSMIR), and teaches as a legal coach in the Human Rights and Migration Law Clinic.

Moé Suzuki (they/she) is a Fellow in Interdisciplinary Social Science at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Working in critical migration and refugee studies, Moé uses feminist and decolonial theories to analyse the mobilisation of the concept of humanity in relation to migrants including refugees. They are currently working on a monograph, which offers a critical theorisation of 'humanisation' of refugees. In this work, humanisation

is conceptualised not as a moral good but as a technology of power. Moé has also conducted research on the experiences of racially minoritised academics in UK higher education, looking at how race and racism impact their experiences of teaching, research, wellbeing, and sense of belonging.

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