The Gendered Necropolitics of Migration Control in a French Postcolonial Periphery

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the postcolonial politics of migration control in Mayotte, an overseas French department, and argues that these bear necropolitical consequences. It sheds light on the gendered dimension of this necropolitical power by focusing on the life and border-crossing experiences of undocumented Comorian women. Entrenched barriers to the regularization of their administrative status endanger their access to healthcare and degrade the conditions for life long-term. The constant risk of arrest and massive forced removals furthermore engender dangerous border crossings, each instance exposing the passengers to the risk of death. The article also foregrounds that these necropolitics are exacerbated as a result of the postcolonial conundrum in which Mahoran elites find themselves, with the increasing support of Black and Muslim elites for the French far-right political party.

KEYWORDS: France, gender, Mayotte, migration, necropolitics, postcoloniality

“There is the law and there is Mayotte.” In 2017, when an NGO representative met with the director of a Mahoran detention center for migrants, this statement was the only justification given for the unlawful practice of the forced removals of minors taking place on the island of Mayotte, a French “overseas” department in the Indian ocean. Practices of migration control carried out in this postcolonial periphery operate outside the republican legal frame that applies to metropolitan France—owing to a combination of legal exceptions custom-made for Mayotte as well as to recurrent violations of legal dispositions that in principle do apply to this periphery, as explored in this article. Furthermore, women are affected in specific ways by migration control and I seek here to shed light on the gendered dimension of the necropolitics that underpin restrictive migration policies implemented in this postcolonial periphery. Achille Mbembe defines “necropolitics or necropower” as “the various ways in which, in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximally destroying persons and creating death-worlds, that is, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to living conditions that confer upon them the status of the living dead” (2019: 92, emphasis in the original). This article questions some of the ways in which postcolonial power asymmetries, anchored in fundamentally unequal relations of power inherited from the colonial period, continue to shape contemporary practices of migration governance in French overseas territories.

Mayotte was sold to France by the Malagasy sultan Andriantsoly in 1841 (Denis 2006) and administered from the colonial center of Madagascar before being grouped with the three
Comorian islands of Ngazidja, Mwali, and Ndzuwani (or Grande-Comore, Mohéli, and Anjouan in their French denomination). The struggle for independence of the Comorian islands led the French state to organize a referendum in 1974 in which a majority of voters supported the islands’ independence—except on the island of Mayotte. Opposing the Comorian claim that the results should be counted across the four islands as one sovereign unit, France organized a second referendum in Mayotte in 1976, which led to Mayotte remaining under French administration. In fact, Mahoran elites had actively fought for the island’s integration into the French compound since the 1950s (Idriss 2013), while the Union of the Comoros continues to claim its sovereignty over the island, a claim that has received the formal support of the General Assembly of the United Nations and of the African Union (Blanchard 2019; Tchokothe 2018). While Mayotte formally became a French overseas department in 2011 after a sequence of varied post-colonial administrative statuses, a series of dedicated legislations and legal exceptions (from labor market regulations to social services to migration governance) perpetuate a state of marginalization and exteriority.

This article argues that the postcolonial legacy in Mayotte engenders politics of exclusion against the subalterns that can have lethal consequences. It reads migration management in Mayotte as the operation of a necropolitical power that removes this territory from the republican rule of law. Its empirical contribution sheds light on the gendered dimension of this necropolitical power by focusing on the life and border-crossing experiences of undocumented Comorian women. This leads to the analysis of the postcolonial conundrum in which Mahoran elites find themselves, revealed by the increasing support of Black and Muslim elites for the French far-right political party, as the security overkill around migration issues is produced by this specific configuration of power. The final section thus foregrounds how postcolonial matrices of power can produce strange bedfellows whereby local elites become driving forces in the implementation of ever more restrictive migration control, transforming the racist hierarchies in place yet certainly not erasing them. In doing so, the article seeks to contribute to the intellectual project of “critiquing the ways in which legal, social and economic definitions and functions of border regimes produce certain migrants as a problem,” undertaken by post- and decolonial approaches to migration (Mayblin and Turner 2021: 17).

Methodology

The article draws on qualitative data collected during a three-month period of fieldwork in Mayotte in 2017 in the framework of the EU Border Care research project focused on Southern and overseas European borders. Over this period of time, I conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with healthcare professionals in perinatal health services, 40 semi-structured interviews with Comorian women, as well as 15 stakeholder interviews with NGOs and health institutions. I met the Comorian women I interviewed either while accompanying an associative “health truck” that provided free consultations with a midwife or by visiting at home other women whom the NGO had supported in the past. Interviews with Comorian women were conducted either in French or in Shi-mahoré with the help of an experienced interpreter. This set of interviews was conducted across the island and they were usually not recorded but transcribed through note-taking. The women I interviewed were on average 30 years old, although several of them were unsure of their age. The overwhelming majority were married (35 out of 40 interviewees) but it is important to note that most had a religious and not a civil marriage (which means it was not administratively registered with French authorities) and many did not live with their husbands owing to the matrilocal structure of Mahoran society.
This article draws predominantly on interviews and participant observation with Comorian women and migrants’ rights organizations. My position in the field was somewhat ambiguous: as a French researcher, I could be assimilated to the metropolitan Whites, yet as a person with a Moroccan background and surname, I was also read as Muslim (the majority religion in Mayotte). All names are pseudonyms and little contextual information regarding the NGOs and their workers is provided in order to protect interviewees’ anonymity given that the small number and size of migrants’ rights NGOs could lead to their identification. Ethical clearance for this research was granted by the institutional review board of the funding body, the European Research Council.

**Mayotte, a Postcolonial Periphery of the French Republic**

How is the postcolonial periphery situated within the liberal state? What does Mayotte reveal about the workings of French state power? Following Martin Lemberg-Pedersen, postcoloniality is here understood as “the complex and ongoing impacts of colonial encounters and their power matrices” for both colonized and metropolitan societies (2019: 248–249). Drawing on the historical sociology of Gurminder Bhambra (2007), I understand postcolonial peripheries as central in the formation of contemporary postcolonial states. In the French context, the universalist ambitions of the republican narrative sit on intentional omissions when it comes to interrogating the country’s colonial past (Mbembe 2005; see also Blanchard et al. 2005).

Mobilizing the notion of coloniality (Mignolo 2007; Quijano 2000) in examining migration policies aims to take into account the political, economic, social, and cultural legacies of European colonialism (Gutiérrez-Rodriguez 2018) in the analysis of contemporary migration governance. Furthermore, this article analyzes the manifestations of this coloniality of power in the management of migration in Mayotte as a “necropower” (Mbembe 2019) with gendered implications. The notion of the subaltern, as revisited by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), is referred to here in order to foreground that undocumented Comorian women are othered along colonial tropes and their perspectives are thus silenced and remain unintelligible to all those in a position of power in the setting of Mayotte.

A former colony, initially acquired for agricultural and commercial undertakings, Mayotte did not fulfill the hopes of its early colonial administrators in the nineteenth century (Martin 1976). Relatively neglected, colonial matrices of power (Lemberg-Pedersen 2019) continued nevertheless to define the island’s position within the French postcolonial geography. In the contemporary period, French administrative migration management on the island is illustrative of the coloniality of power that underpins the violence of widespread practices of control. Mayotte is portrayed as constantly facing an unmanageable flow of migrants from the neighboring Comorian islands, notably the closest one, Anjouan. In fact, 48 percent of the island’s inhabitants fall into the category of foreigners—the overwhelming majority (95 percent) of whom are Comorians (INSEE 2019)—and about half of them are estimated to be undocumented (INSEE 2017), which, as I argue below, is in large part the result of entrenched policies of illegalization.

Ever more restrictive migration policies led to a significant share of the forced removals carried out in France to take place in Mayotte. To give an order of magnitude, in 2017, 25,274 undocumented persons were detained in “metropolitan” France, and 17,934 in Mayotte, while the island counts only 256,500 inhabitants (La Cimade 2017). The vast majority of these detainees (94 percent) were removed from Mayotte to the Comoros, while the rate of removals from migrant detention centers in “metropolitan” France is generally below 50 percent (La Cimade 2018).
In Mayotte, the necropolitics of migration management thus manifests itself through the forceful deportation of a tenth of the island’s inhabitants each year (Blanchard 2019). Those being forcibly deported are likely to embark again on kwassa-kwassa fishing boats and take greater risks the more the border is “securitized,” by crossing at night or in bad weather to avoid being intercepted. Necropower—that is, how the exercise of sovereign power can cause death—operates through racialization: only bodies marked as “other” can be exposed to death, as a more or less direct consequence of the actions of the state. Death by shipwreck in the Indian Ocean represents a tragic case in point. The dead are so invisible in the absence of monitoring and documentation of the situation that it is difficult to establish a precise number. A 2012 report by the French Senate estimated the number of deaths since 1995 at between seven and ten thousand (Sueur et al. 2012), while no other sources or more up-to-date estimates are available, as confirmed by local NGOs. The media and political silence around the life-threatening sea crossings of the unruly Indian Ocean illustrates the subaltern status of the “death-worlds” engendered by necropolitics.

The notion of necropolitics (Mbembe 2019) thus allows us to grasp the way in which a sovereign power can shape the conditions for death by failing to “make live.” Necropolitics characterizes a sovereign power that divides people into those to be kept alive and those who may be exposed to death. Policies introduced by the French state in the Indian Ocean are implemented under the guise of exception, yet they are symptomatic of the structures and operations of sovereign power at large. To quote Mbembe, “in modern philosophical thought and in the imaginary and practice of European politics, the colony represents a site in which sovereignty fundamentally consists in exercising a power outside the law (ab legibus solutus) and where ‘peace’ is more likely to take on the face of a ‘war without end’” (2003: 23). In the former colonial space, the postcolonial periphery, sovereign power operates outside of the law, revealing the necropolitical underbelly of the liberal state beyond its biopolitical façade. The following section examines how the border police arrest and deport in Mayotte, arguing that these “exceptional practices” of migration control amount to a necropolitical management of those rendered subaltern.

**Normalized Exceptions within Migration Control as Necropolitics**

Against the background of a growing anti-immigrant sentiment among the electorate (Biard 2019), deportations in French overseas territories are instrumentalized to boost aggregated numbers at the national level. The state and its representative at the local level, the prefecture, resorted to a self-congratulatory tone in 2019 to celebrate the fact that the target of 25,000 removals had been exceeded in Mayotte (27,421) and that this number had risen by 39 percent from 2017 (Leclerc 2020). Undocumented Comorians have thus been objectified for a strategic use of deportation figures to construct the image of a tough stance on immigration, entirely disconnected from the complexities of the regional context. This instrumentalization of their lives, which translates into a highly hostile environment, constitutes a dimension of the death-worlds in which undocumented persons are to constantly fear arbitrary arrests on land and at sea. A worker with an NGO providing legal support to migrants noted that such figures were attained through “unusual” practices that lead to the deportation of persons who should not have been arrested in the first place:

Some people arrive in the detention center [Center for Administrative Detention, CRA] who shouldn’t get there. Especially persons for whom the legal situation can be verified. So, for example, people who are carrying with them a document from the prefecture [the state’s
The official document that states one’s AGDREF number means indeed that the application is being processed and that the person should not be removed while the application is being examined. The disregard for the usual laws of the French republic, those that ensure the rule of law and are imbued with biopolitics, is apparent in the (mal)practices of migration control in Mayotte.

Another example that reveals the workings of power at this peripheral border concerns the deportation of children. Separation and detention practices of the Trump era in the United States triggered condemnations across Europe, and the French government spokesman even stated, “We do not share the same model of civilization, clearly we don’t share certain values” (Dettmer 2018). Yet it has been documented for several years that children placed in detention in Mayotte are counted in the thousands: 2,493 in 2017. Not only is the detention of children a common practice for the migrant detention facility of this postcolonial periphery, but removals are known to take place in violation of the legislation that makes such deportations legal only if children are being deported with their legal guardian. The police practice of administratively linking children to adults they do not know to make deportations possible is common knowledge among local NGOs. For instance, a worker in one of these NGOs explains:

As for the minors intercepted on a kwassa [fishing boat], I have had statements from nautical brigades where, indeed, the connections to adults are made haphazardly. This is obvious. . . . On a general basis they are adults who know the children. But we have also had adults who, well . . . adults always tell us that they know the children . . . But we had testimonies from children who told us that they did not know the adult they were traveling with [when they were deported].

Even on the sensitive issue of children’s deportations, malpractice is common in Mayotte and the work of NGOs in documenting these violations had no leverage on practices. Condemnation by the State Council in 2015 (the Supreme Court of French administrative judiciary) for having deported a nine-year-old boy wrongfully “connected” to an adult and the consequent court order to respect the “best interest of the child” remained, for instance, ignored by the border police at the local level. In June 2020, these practices were nevertheless given some visibility by the condemnation of France by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) for the hasty “return” to the Comoros—on the day of their arrest in 2013—of two children aged three and five, born in Mayotte. Being de facto exempted from respecting the law, while there is no doubt about the actual practices and their systematic nature, constitutes one of the manifestations of this coloniality of power which the French “overseas migration regime” continues to enact. Certain territories, certain populations can be maintained outside the law, whether by the operation of the law itself through legal exceptions or in patent violation of the law (which makes little difference to the lived experience of those subjected to this power). These populations are rendered subaltern through this process in that their lived experiences are ignored, their voices silenced, and their grief remains imperceptible. Even when the border police contravene the law, the configuration of power ensures its impunity and the reproduction of practices that are structurally “permitted.” As briefly quoted in the Introduction, the manager of another NGO describes through the following account a configuration of power between the prefecture, the
detention center, migrants’ rights NGOs, and migrants themselves that guarantees the impunity of the administrative actors involved:

The removal of a minor is supposed to be, not impossible, but very supervised. And so, if we want to expel a minor, s/he must be expelled with his legal guardian. It is therefore necessary to clearly establish the identity of the minor, the identity of the adult and the link between the two, the legal link between the two. The prefecture was condemned in January 2015 on this point and has not changed anything in its practice. . . . We had a meeting five months later with the head of the CRA [detention center] and he told us, “There is the law and there is Mayotte” with regard to these issues of expulsion of minors.

The assumption that rights do not need to be respected in this overseas territory, that there is no need to “play by the rules,” is clear. In “metropolitan” France, the duration of stay in a detention center should be no shorter than 48 hours by law in order for the detained person to be able to legally contest the deportation order and potentially avoid an unlawful deportation. Yet in Mayotte this minimum duration of stay does not apply on the basis of a legal exception, and on average those detained are deported after only 17 hours (La Cimade 2019). Clearly, this leaves very little time for anyone who is detained to contact family relatives or a lawyer.

In spite of Mayotte’s formal integration into the French postcolonial assemblage, migration control is performed under the assumption of coloniality: “the colonies are the location par excellence where the controls and guarantees of judicial order can be suspended—the zone where the violence of the state of exception is deemed to operate in the service of ‘civilization’” (Mbembe 2003: 24). The production of structural violence is a means of control and discipline observable in the practices of power and in the everyday lives of those subjected to these practices. The following section provides concrete insights into how illegality is being produced and explores some of the implications of these necropolitics for the lives of undocumented Comorian women.

The Making of Gendered Undocumented Lives

This section examines the workings and manifestations of gendered necropolitics (Ahmetbeyzade 2008; Wright 2011) through the study of the trajectories and experiences of undocumented Comorian women, foregrounding how gendered inequalities are exacerbated by policies of migration control. While all undocumented Comorians face the arbitrariness of arrest and deportation as well as the socio-economic dispossessions that illegality produces, women face particular challenges within the death-worlds of necropolitics. Their sexuality is criminalized, and their intentions are read by the state through the lens of the nation’s racialized reproduction, relying on biased and partial understandings of local mobilities. The proposal made by the government in 2018 that Mayotte’s maternity unit become an extra-territorial hospital, where French nationality laws would not apply (de Mareschal 2018), illustrates how women are particularly stigmatized. There is little novelty in the fact that maternity politics are central to the reproduction of the nation and that women’s bodies are exposed to various forms of biopolitics and nationalist politics (Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1989; Yuval-Davis 1996). The situation in Mayotte uncovers in particular how racialization plays out within French politics of the nation’s reproduction. The portrayal of Comorian women as a potential threat to the French nation (Sahraoui 2021), demonized for their reproductive capacity to bring undesired bodies into the national community, is part and parcel of the processes that create the conditions for death. The stigmatization of women that such politics entail, and the
state's patriarchal fear of these women's sexuality and reproductive lives, produce a form of
gendered necropolitics.

Interviews conducted with Comorian women documented that the reasons for women's ini-
tial visit or stay in Mayotte were diverse and many got stuck in Mayotte because of the repressive
migration regime, echoing the experiences of undocumented migrants in other parts of the
world. Several expressed regrets of a lifetime spent in the shadows, with no administrative exist-
ence, no prospect of socio-economic improvement, and a constant fear of being arrested and
forcibly removed. Having left family and at times some land in the Comoros (owing to the matri-
local structure of Comorian society), they resigned themselves to stay in Mayotte because of a
husband, children, or other relationships built over the years. There is also no doubt that many
were hoping to improve their life chances by moving to Mayotte, yet due to the death-worlds
that they joined as undocumented women, these aspirations were rarely met. It became clear
that they remained in Mayotte because the border had rigidified local mobilities. On average,
the 40 Comorian women interviewed had been living in Mayotte for 11 years at the time of the
interview, and yet the overwhelming majority (25 women) had no documentation: 21 had no
French administrative document. And at the time of the interview five had had only a receipt testifying
they had submitted an application (“récépissé”), which provides a temporary authorization
to remain without however prejudging the outcome of the application. Those in possession of a
legal administrative status had a one-year residency permit, which, for some, had already been
renewed several years in a row. Yet the administrative category of the undocumented migrant
conceals the social processes involved in regularization. In theory, undocumented migrants in
Mayotte can apply for regularization through the administrative categories available in France,
for instance as parents of children who are French or as spouses to a person holding French
nationality. Yet a combination of legal exceptions custom-made for Mayotte and gate-keeping
practices at the prefecture render regularization procedures particularly difficult and burden-
some. Several women thus deplored the many barriers to regularization, from the intricacies of
French bureaucratic procedures to the cost (340 euros for a first demand) to the mere impossi-
ibility to access the French administration. Faida, a 24-year-old woman who arrived in Mayotte
at the age of 18, explains:

If you want to enter there it's very difficult, there is a lot, a lot of people. You have to queue for
four days and you might not even enter. You're up from five or four in the morning. . . Many
people sleep there to get a spot. I don't know how to explain but it's really difficult.

Halima, a woman who had been living in Mayotte for over 20 years and was still undocu-
mented, recounted how she went to the prefecture several times and was asked each time for
a different document. On one of her attempts to submit an application, and with a notification
in hand signaling an appointment, she wasn't even allowed to enter the facility and was sent
away by security personnel, a story that appears to be quite common. The subalternization
of undocumented Comorian women is so strong that not only do street-level bureaucrats in
immigration services possess a discretionary power (Spire 2008) but the security guards of
the prefecture also come to exert an arbitrary power that most often remains unchallenged,
unless the person is accompanied by a “metropolitan” (i.e. white) activist (on the persistent
colonial privileges of whiteness within the sector of public administration in Mayotte, see
Girard et al. 2022). In 2018, when the administrative services for foreigners were already satu-
rated and unable to process applications within a reasonable period of time because of the
continuous production of illegality (De Genova 2002; Menjívar and Kanstroom 2013), the
prefecture closed its doors for several months, making such access de facto impossible (Roger
2018a).
In addition, a piece of “exceptional legislation” contributes to this production of illegality in Mayotte. People in metropolitan France can apply for a 10-year residence permit, after having obtained one for three years. In Mayotte, however, additional conditions with regards to financial resources are required. The law demands proof of full-time employment remunerated at the minimum wage in France, a condition that is impossible to meet for most women in the socio-economic context of Mayotte. It is difficult not to read this specific amendment as a deliberate act of power to impede significant numbers of persons from having their situation regularized. The coloniality of that power shines through the racialized logic of these “exceptions” in that they concern a peripheral and marginalized territory of the Republic. Houria, for instance, renewed her one-year permit eight times; Imani who has been in Mayotte since the age of 15 renewed it seven times; and Houdou renewed it for 10 years in a row without ever meeting the conditions for a 10-year residency permit. Houdou, who is 42 years old and arrived at the age of 29, thus paid 10 times for her regularization, which at the current rates would amount to a total sum of approximately 2,770 euros. The costs associated with these procedures represent an often-concealed dimension of migration management. Yet they function to extract resources from an impoverished and marginalized population. The payment of these fees is often based on traditional loans or savings that are difficult to build up, thus exacerbating the poverty of a population whose worrying living conditions—lack of access to drinking water and electricity, tin houses—are widely documented (INSEE 2019). This financial violence represents one dimension of the necropolitical power that oppresses undocumented migrants.

The following section examines the day-to-day consequences of such large-scale illegalization, notably the constant risk of arrest and the multiplication of perilous sea crossings as a result.

**Daily Arrests and Dangerous Sea Crossings:**

**The Gendered Consequences of the Necropolitics of Illegalization**

The omnipresent risk of being arrested fundamentally affects undocumented women’s everyday lives and access to healthcare. Pregnant women are in theory entitled to access healthcare free of charge. Although some women decide to attend their health appointments, others prefer to minimize the risks of being detained and deported by keeping their movements to a minimum. Depending on a woman’s own experience of the sea crossing, of the stories she has heard, of her knowledge of the neighborhood and of the sites of regular police “checkpoints,” perceptions are formed about the risks associated with going to a health center or to the hospital. One of the midwives I interviewed recounted her experience of working in a center for perinatal and maternal health:

> There is a fear, not about the health center itself, but about the journey to reach it. Some are not able to have their pregnancy properly monitored because of this. It is a hindrance for accessing care. . . . If I saw border police roadblocks, I knew very well that the day would be almost empty.

Police roadblocks and arrest operations in targeted neighborhoods have an impact on the possibility to access healthcare, notably for pregnant women. The arrest in July 2019 of a woman who was eight months pregnant and was on her way to the hospital, according to information relayed in national and local newspapers (Melloul 2019), and the stillbirth that subsequently took place on the premises of the detention center, represent a tragic case in point of the lethal consequences of the continuous policing of undocumented women. The creation of an atmo-
sphere of permanent fear makes conditions for life impossible, impeding those so controlled from conducting autonomous lives, shattering their worlds in Mbembe’s words. In this context, some healthcare professionals observed the purposeful targeting of the surroundings of healthcare facilities by the police:

For example, several times the ladies, they leave the PMI [Maternal and Child Health Center], I prescribe them medical examinations and in fact they are caught by the PAF [border police] the moment they go to the laboratory [for medical testing]. So, it’s that they know. . . They can’t do it on the premises of the PMI, but. . . Several times, the ladies were just coming out of the lab.

Such stories of arrest circulate fast and can deter other women from seeking healthcare, as is also the case in other “hostile environments” for migrants such as the UK (Hill 2020). This hostile climate, entrenched by frequent arrests, clearly impacted the possibility for pregnant women to access healthcare. A 33-year-old woman who had been residing in Mayotte for four years confessed to being scared of the border police in this context: “I don’t go out, only to the shop.” This necropolitics thus endangers women’s access to healthcare and reduces women’s possibilities for leaving the home.

As the postcolonial state manufactures illegality on this island in the Indian Ocean, undocumented women need to resort to informal sea crossings on small and often packed kwassa-kwassa fishing boats to reach Mayotte from the Comorian islands. Among the women I met, those who traveled to Mayotte over 20 years ago, before the introduction of the visa Balladur in 1995, did so either by plane or commercial boat. Yet most of the women interviewed experienced at least one crossing in a precarious fishing boat, unanimously considered to be a dangerous undertaking. A few women were lucky enough to cross by boat with few people, but most remembered long hours of crossings with over 20 persons in one boat. Faida, quoted above, recounted: “It’s difficult but we had no choice. All day long in the boat, I threw up, a lot of things happened there, but I managed to bear it.”

Nadjma, a 19-year-old woman from Anjouan, the closest Comorian island to Mayotte, explained that the strong winds and the heavy rains made it a traumatic experience as she feared for her life during the crossing. Many had no other choice but to undertake a kwassa-kwassa crossing several times as a result of arrests, confirming that the deportation machinery lives on the removal of (some of) the same people again and again. Rukia, for instance, who was 23 years old and had two young daughters, attempted the crossing three times in total after being arrested and deported twice in a four-year period. Hairia in turn was deported while seven months pregnant and embarked on a kwassa-kwassa three times, in a state of advanced pregnancy, before being able to make it to Mayotte. She had horrendous memories of the crossings. By keeping a significant share of the Comorian population undocumented, the state exacerbates the structural violence created by a dangerous sea passage.

The stories of the sea crossings recounted by Comorian women uncover the gendered manifestations of necropolitics. Women’s bodies are exposed to both state and non-state violence: on the one hand the deportation machine removes women, even in a state of advanced pregnancy (Sahraoui 2020), and on the other hand the undocumented crossings involve a reliance on men whose power within the local informal economy of the crossings produces threats for women’s safety. Asmata, a 21-year-old woman and mother of two who had been living in Mayotte for 12 years at the point of the interview, made a solemn promise not to return to the Comoros as her first attempt to cross was marked by beating, an attempted rape, and the loss of all the money she carried with her. She obtained her first residency permit after six years and only then traveled back to the Comoros once she knew she wouldn’t have to risk the journey again.
The story of being stuck, while otherwise opting for circular patterns of mobility, is not only common to most undocumented Comorian women, as few are willing to risk traveling back on the *kwassa-kwassa* boat, but is also by now a classic finding of migration research (Massey et al. 2016). Paradoxically, this migratory regime, after having rendered usual local mobilities unlawful, produces both a large-scale immobilization of undocumented populations and massive displacements by means of a repressive system that constantly removes the same people, again and again, in a theatrical performance of state sovereignty, in other words a border spectacle (De Genova 2013). Yet that power is fundamentally necropolitical in its nature as every removal entails the possibility of death for those expelled from their homes.

The necropolitical exclusions engendered by such migration policies unfold against the background of the rise of the French far-right in this overseas department, a highly revealing symptom of the island’s complex postcolonial politics. Although certainly echoing the hostile immigration policies implemented at the national level, the postcolonial conundrum in Mayotte produces its own set of political and social exclusions that shape undocumented migrants’ everyday life experiences. Indeed, local Mahoran elites are at the forefront of advocating for ever-increasing restrictions and harsher migration control, in the context of the relatively fragile inclusion of Mayotte within France. The precarious position of the Mahoran elites within a configuration of power imbued in coloniality brings about the puzzling consequence of recent but significant support for the French far-right.

**Postcolonial Politics of Migration: The Rise of the Far-Right in a Muslim and Black French Department**

The far-right party of Marine Le Pen, former National Front (Front National, now Rassemblement National), obtained 27.28 percent of votes in Mayotte (22.85 percent nationwide) in the first round of the 2017 presidential election and 42.85 percent in the second round (36.14 percent at the national level). In some of the southern cities on the island, the score even reached a large majority, such as in Bouéni, where 65.63 percent of voters in the second round voted for the National Front. During the campaign, Marine Le Pen was warmly welcomed by Mahoran people, and the Muslim *cadi* (judges) even organized a prayer for her victory (Ponchelet 2016). The situation appears incongruous at first: an overwhelmingly Black and Muslim population displaying support for France’s most well-known far-right party, one that constructed much of its identity on the basis of an anti-immigrant discourse and the defense of an exclusive definition of “Frenchness” as rooted in Christian values. Yet, strangely, in the midst of the Indian Ocean, Le Pen’s discourse appealed to those Mahorans who see their “Comorian cousins” (a phrase I heard repeated several times by Mahorans) as the main source of the island’s socio-economic problems. The production of a small elite whose interests lie in the reproduction of postcolonial inequalities is in itself a consequence of the coloniality of power, as the attitude of the emerging bourgeois classes in many countries of the post-independence era illustrated (Fanon [1961] 2002).

This anti-immigration resentment translates into concrete forms of exclusion and marginalization that are part and parcel of the death-worlds (Mbembe 2019) of Comorians in precarious socio-legal situations in Mayotte. Parallel to the rise of the far-right, several instances of forceful evictions of Comorians from makeshift housing, by Mahorans who claimed rights over the concerned parcels of land, took place (Hachimi Alaoui et al. 2020). Myriam Hachimi-Alaoui, Élise Lemercier and Élise Palomares demonstrated that the 2016 “informal” evictions (i.e. led by Mahoran citizens, while others are conducted by the French authorities), while they
supposedly targeted undocumented Comorians, in practice also affected many documented Comorians who then became unable to renew their permits because they had lost an address, which represents a necessary condition for the permits’ renewal (Hachimi Alaoui et al. 2019). Against the background of the many “décasages” (house evictions) that took place in 2016 and afterwards, the French far-right has made significant inroads in Mayotte.

In parallel, the long struggle that has been necessary to achieve the administrative status of “department” (finally granted in 2011), and the ongoing disadvantaged socio-economic conditions the population faces, testify to the relatively uncertain inclusion of Mayotte into the French ensemble and maintain the Mahoran elites in a precarious relation to the “metropolitan” power. I argue indeed that the coloniality of power that continues to characterize this relation fuels into the virulence of some of the Mahorans’ exclusionary politics. The far-right is a tempting option in that it offers to further the island’s carving out from the region. In 2018, Mayotte saw demonstrations to “save the 101st department of France” from what a Mahoran journalist qualified as “State-sponsored colonisation” (Roger 2018b), meaning the French state’s permissiveness towards Comorians. Demands listed in an open letter initiated by a right-wing Mahoran parliamentarian (affiliated to the political party Les Républicains) and signed by a handful of party members (Collectif 2018) testifies to this dominant feeling of insecurity as to the island’s status:

It is time that the state fulfills its duty of protecting freedom and security; that it also retakes the initiative of defending national sovereignty, objectively flouted by a demographic submer- sion too often fueled by the laissez-faire of Comorian authorities; that it raises its awareness again of the strategic, economic, and scientific stakes in this part of the Indian Ocean and of the Mozambique canal, that Mayotte guarantees to France. Because Mayotte is a chance for France. (My translation)

The pervasive threat of being reassessed at some point by a French government as no longer worthy of formal inclusion weakens Mahoran elites’ position and structurally limits their political claims. Following this logic, support for Comorians’ fundamental rights, such as access to regularization procedures, exacerbates this deeply entrenched insecurity while what seems to be at stake is no less than Mahorans’ belonging to the French nation. The conflict that opposes migrants’ rights NGOs and Mahoran activists illustrates this point. A metropolitan officer from a migrants’ rights NGO observes:

Since the décasages [forceful evictions of Comorians from their makeshift houses by Mahorans] we’ve really been labeled as one, if not the main, narrow-minded metropolitan NGO that pisses the Mahorans off by calling them racists and that doesn’t understand the local situation . . . and that, as a consequence, we somehow indirectly advocate for those who want Mayotte to be Comorian and not French.

The fragile position of the Mahoran people has thus led to virulent rejection of local mobilities that used to be the norm in the archipelago (Geisser 2016). As a consequence, it has become politically impossible to adopt a different discursive framing within Mahoran politics than a clear anti-immigration stance. And yet support for the far-right party cannot be entirely equal- ized with simple xenophobic rejection of Mahorans’ neighbors as a threat to their own precarious inclusion. Chamsia, a Mahoran woman engaged in Femmes Leaders, a local association that describes itself as the heir of the ‘chatouilleuses’, a women’s movement that defended Mayotte’s maintenance under French administration, made her support for Marine Le Pen very clear, arguing that her position is a radical stance that uncovers the hypocrisy of French governance towards Mahoran people:
In the past we've been slaves physically and we are subjected to psychological slavery up until now so it's better we vote for Madam Le Pen, at least then we know we enter a regime of... how can I say? ... full racism. ... I think even the justice system in Mayotte, they hit us in such a way so that we understand ... [referring to the sums some Mahorans who forcefully evicted Comorians from their properties were sentenced to pay], so that we regret we wanted to resemble you [metropolitans/Whites]. Because our first mistake is to say that we're fully French. And this, some don't bear it. So it's not Madame Le Pen who's racist, it's everyone. No one accepts that I'm equal due to my skin and not only my situation.

While full of anger and frustration at what she perceived as the unfair treatment of Mahorans on their own island, Chamsia did not entirely buy into the far-right's rhetoric. She continued:

We wanted to be with France because France colonized us, it's France that has defeated us, that has beaten us up, that has mistreated us, do you realize? Seeking to stay with your persecutor [bourreau]... On top of that today they're mocking us, the prefect, judges, they don't have a clear conscience. And organizations such as [name of a migrants' rights NGO], they come here to defend the others to our detriment.

Defending migrants’ rights in the midst of Mayotte's postcolonial conundrum has become a tightrope endeavor. Chamsia explains here how Mahorans feel towards white and metropolitan migrants’ rights activists, who by defending undocumented Comorians’ rights along the same lines as they do in the “metropole,” are perceived in this postcolonial periphery as acting against the interests of Mahorans since Comorians are overall cast as representing a threat to Mayotte's full integration into France. And yet support for the far-right only emerged in recent years and its significance should not be overstated. In the first round of the 2012 presidential elections, Marine Le Pen only received 2.77 percent of Mayotte's votes, hinting at the malleability of this conjunctural alignment of interests.

**Conclusion**

Through the case study of migration governance and of its gendered implications at a French periphery, this article has foregrounded some of the necropolitical dimensions of the postcolonial liberal politics of migration control. It has sought to highlight the concrete ways in which necropolitical power operates for people with a precarious administrative status in Mayotte, particularly women. The frequent arrests of people with a file pending at the prefecture or the removal of children by making unverified connections to adults, in disregard of the conditions dictated by the law and despite the documentation of these practices, illustrate the liminal status of French “overseas territories”. I then explored the gendered implications of such necropolitics by focusing on the production of illegality from the perspective of Comorian women. The very difficult regularization of their administrative status, owing both to legal “exceptions” designed for Mayotte and the exclusionary practices of the state administration locally, degrades the conditions for life by exacerbating and entrenching their socio-economic marginalization. The constant risk of arrest and massive forced removals furthermore engender dangerous border crossings, each instance exposing the passengers to the risk of death. Studying the necropolitics of migration control in Mayotte leads finally to an analysis of the underpinning dynamics of these (post)colonial relations of power and notably the precarious position of the Mahoran elites, their support for harsh anti-migration policies and consequently for the French political far-right. The case study of “unauthorized” migrations between the Comoros and Mayotte is one among many examples of the repercussions of colonial borders drawing on contemporary
mobilities. Its specificities invite further critical exploration of the collusion of interests between postcolonial elites and former colonial powers in the implementation of ever-increasing restrictions to mobility.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

This article stems from research conducted in the framework of the EU Border Care project led by Prof. Vanessa Grotti and funded by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no. 638259). I thank the PI for making this research possible. I would also like to thank Martin Lemberg-Pedersen for organizing a stimulating and incredibly rich workshop in Copenhagen in December 2019 that led to the special issue to which this article contributes. I equally thank all guest editors of the special issue, Martin Lemberg-Pedersen, Clayton Boeyink, Kate Pincock, and Laura Rosanne Adderley for their careful reading of the initial draft and very helpful comments. My deep thanks also go to the anonymous reviewers for their stimulating comments.

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**NOTES**

1. While the term “overseas department” continues to be widely used and is the formal denomination of five French overseas departments, it must be noted that this terminology in itself has a legacy imbued with colonial relations between the “metropole” and its colonized territories. Here, I therefore use the categories “overseas” and “metropole” in inverted commas.
2. In this postcolonial periphery, processes of racialization operate at various levels: while Comorians embody the non-citizen Others, Mahorans, as Black and Muslim, are themselves far from enjoying an equal position to metropolitan Whites (see, for instance, Girard et al. 2022).
4. In 1995 the French government introduced a visa requirement for Comorians to travel to Mayotte.
6. On the topic of state-led eviction, NGOs point to the fact that while those who are undocumented are forcibly removed, those who have French residency permits find themselves on the streets without any accommodation solution. See, for instance, “Délogements et destructions d’habitations à Mayotte, l’état hors la loi,” https://www.lacimade.org/presse/delogements-et-destructions-dhabitations-a-mayotte-letat-hors-la-loi/.
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