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Contemporary Slavery in the UK and Its Categories

Pietro Deandrea

an infernal order such as National Socialism was, exercises a frightful power of corruption, against which it is difficult to guard oneself. It degrades its victims and makes them similar to itself, because it needs both great and small complicities. To resist it a truly solid moral armature is needed ... But how strong is ours, the Europeans of today? How would each of us behave if driven by necessity and at the same time lured by seduction?

Primo Levi

In *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), Primo Levi voiced the possibility of Auschwitz repeating itself. His concern took solid shape only a few years later, shortly after his death, in Yugoslavian concentration camps. More importantly for the present volume, Levi's warning echoes disquietingly at the beginning of the 21st century: new forms of slavery have been spreading in Europe and particularly in Great Britain, where an extremely deregulated labour market creates a terrain which is conducive to various forms of exploitation and imprisonment.

This essay focuses on some creative responses to the phenomenon.¹ After attempting to give a full picture of the strategies and *topoi* employed in fiction and non-fiction, it moves to two case-studies from art forms—photography and drama—which are not limited to the written word. The main intention here is to emphasise the specificities that photographs and plays can offer in the narration of contemporary British slavery. In the light of these primary texts, the final part of the essay takes into consideration how categories such as “Subaltern” or “Black British” might be conceived of differently, from the peculiar perspective of new forms of contemporary slavery.

Investigative and fictional writing

The first works tackling the issue were published in the first half of the 1990s, beginning with the sociologist Bridget Anderson's *Britain's Secret Slaves* (1993). This research into the lives of migrant domestic workers unveiled a scenario going well beyond simple exploitation, and made up of physical and sexual abuse within the walls of wealthy Middle Eastern families and British former expatriates. The ensuing scandal and parliamentary inquiries revolved around the fact that this gaping void in human rights sprang from the utter absence of *legal* rights for the category in question.²

One year later, Ruth Rendell's *Simisola* was published. Declaredly inspired by *Britain's Secret Slaves*, it conferred fictional prominence on two tropes which Anderson's work seemed to point to. The first is the ghost, because the existence of enslaved migrants often carries spectral connotations: Chief Inspector Wexford finds out very little (almost nothing) about the murdered migrant's identity, thus leaving a conspicuous investigative and ethical void at the centre of the novel. The second trope is represented by the prison, inasmuch as every respectable private house becomes a potential place of detention.³

These two key images have become recurrent motifs in the first decade of the 21st century, when the subject of new forms of slavery has increased its presence in literature. Moreover, these more recent works further develop the pattern of fruitful influences between fiction and non-fiction initiated by Anderson and Rendell. For example, investigative works such as L.

¹This is an updated, longer version of my article “Nella civile Inghilterra: come si racconta la schiavitù moderna,” *L'indice dei libri del mese* 27(1) January 2010: 7.

² See Deandrea 2009a: 402-6 and Deandrea 2009b: 665-66.

³ See Deandrea 2009a: 406-12 and Deandrea 2009b: 673-75.

Waugh's *Selling Olga* (2006) and R. Gupta's *Enslaved* (2007) reveal appalling case histories which resonate in Chris Abani's novella *Becoming Abigail* (2006), where the eponymous protagonist is brutalised and animalised in a London backyard for exploitative purposes, and re-affirms her spectralised identity by obsessively branding her own body.⁴

Along the fiction/non-fiction axis, the influence has certainly worked both ways. In order to recover the stories of enslaved victims, often struck dumb out of shame, Gupta and Waugh resorted to something which Anderson had attempted, albeit limitedly: they reported the testimonies in the victims' first person, in an attempt to re-compose their broken personalities, their physical presence. This gave markedly fictional tones to their journalistic/sociological writing.⁵

Another illuminating case showing a sharing of vision and languages on the issue was represented by the journalist Hsiao-Hung Pai and the film director Nick Broomfield. A *Guardian* journalist of Taiwanese origins, Pai joined the army of Chinese labourers incognito. She also produced Broomfield's film *Ghosts* (2006),⁶ based on a similar technique: clandestine filming allowed a detailed reconstruction of the environments where undocumented workers lived and toiled. Broomfield's documentary-like faithfulness was enhanced by his employment of non-professional, ex-migrant actors. Thus Pai and Broomfield were able to document the particularly hard conditions in which these people lived (blackmailed and assaulted by triads, persecuted by the British police, with an insufficient knowledge of the English language), which position them on the bottom rung of British society. Both journalist and film director throw into relief two fundamental facts. First, the labour of these people is not to be seen as an anomaly:

The British economy thrives on this army of workers [...]. Businesses survive on and make profits on their cheap, flexible labour. Every time we pick up a pack of skinless chicken breasts or a bag of washed lettuce, we may be unknowingly colluding with the system that exploits them. Doing jobs no locals want to do, for wages and working hours no locals would accept, they are producing social wealth for a country that permanently excludes them.

(Pai 2008: 246)

Secondly, their works brought to light a myriad sites of actual exploitation and imprisonment, besides private houses: factories, building yards, farmlands, restaurants, detention centres and would-be-tourist beaches: an extremely diverse and ever-changing concentrationary archipelago, as elusive as the neo-liberistic economic system which creates and perpetrates it. Its most emblematic example is constituted by sex slaves forced to shift around a network of brothel-flats on a weekly basis (Pai 2008: 172).

The publications mentioned so far represent only a part of the interest in the topic shown by fiction and non-fiction in recent years, possibly kindled by the Bicentenary commemorations of the abolition of the Slave Trade (2007).⁷

Photography: Dana Popa

The photographic exhibition *Disposable People: Contemporary Global Slavery*, which toured Great Britain between 2008 and 2010, came precisely out of a dissatisfaction with the celebrating mood dominating the 2007 anniversary. As its curator Mark Sealy said, the

⁴ See Deandrea 2009b: 675-79.

⁵ See Deandrea 2009b: 668-73.

⁶ The film narrates the story of the Chinese cockle-pickers who drowned in Morecambe Bay in February 2004.

⁷ In fiction, one could mention works such as Chris Cleave's *The Other Hand* (2009), Marina Lewycka's *Two Caravans* (2007), Ian Rankin's *Fleshmarket Close* (2004), Rose Tremain's *The Road Home* (2007). In cinema, Stephen Frears's *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) and Ken Loach's *It's a Free World* (2007) tackled the theme, too, using more conventional languages than Broomfield's.

“national focus on the 1807 Act had the effect of glossing over the political realities and legacy of slavery today” (Sealy 2008).

Sealy was also involved in another project, more apposite to the scope of this essay: the award-winning exhibition *Not Natasha*, by the Romanian photographer Dana Popa,⁸ is concerned with sexual slaves sold in the UK, and touches on tropes and key images similar to those detected in literature so far. “Natasha is a nickname given to prostitutes with Eastern European looks,” says the first of Popa’s short captions which alternate with the photos in the exhibition catalogue (Popa 2009: 6); and the following one adds, “Sex-trafficked girls hate it” (8). The volume also contains longer captions (such as a victim’s description of a gruesome gang rape, 18) and a final two-page-long report; but the short ones prove, I think, extremely effective in their horrifying swing between hinting and hiding. See, for instance, “‘I was twelve years old. I don’t want to talk about it.’ Alina” (32). In a way, their form may be seen as reflecting the fragmentary nature of the pictures: these enslaved women are often portrayed as veiled, screened, filtered by cracked window-panes, half-covered in darkness or showing a limited part of themselves, with their faces turned or hidden. Their broken, hard-to-recompose personalities are made emblematic by a close-up of Clarisa’s forearm covered in self-inflicted scars (26-27). Popa’s approach towards her subjects conveys several facets of the new slavery linking with the abovementioned written literature: the hidden, ghostly existence of new slaves; their claustrophobic sites of exploitation—sometimes represented without their victims in all their desolation, at other times taking the outside view from the window, as in a Soho street where businessmen are strolling (10-11). Page 67 shows Elena’s face covered by long hair combed forward on the front; it is a wig which her pimp allowed her to wear.



Dana Popa, photograph from *Not Natasha* (2009). Courtesy of the artist.

Next to it, on page 66, the caption only says “Why do you have to dig up my life again?”

⁸ The exhibition toured England in 2009-2010. I personally visited it at the Photofusion Gallery in Brixton, London, on 28-7-2009.

This suggests the more practical reason behind Popa's particular strategy, namely the need for extreme delicacy in the face of women who, after having been reduced to an inhuman state, are scarred by shame and fear of reprisals: "I had to be both discreet and protective," the author writes (91). The extreme difficulty encountered when trying to narrate, "dig up," recompose the victims' lives is shared with other authors already mentioned, such as Waugh and Gupta.⁹

Another common feature with Popa is their determination to describe the geographically wide, globalised frame of the new slave trade, which includes Soho and the UK only as a destination point. Just like Waugh began her investigation in Chisinau, Popa visited and photographed Moldova, "the poorest country in Europe, and the main exporter of sex slaves for the whole continent" in 2006 and 2007 (90). There she captured "the ghostly emptiness of the places where a while ago the missing women used to be a natural presence" (91), with their dignified, albeit crumbling, poverty. As Mark Sealy writes, in *Not Natasha* viewers are faced with "the ongoing misery of those who have been left behind to wait"; where the violence of poverty meets the violence of exploitation,

it is not enough to talk about the actual victim [...]. None of this makes sense unless we take time to analyse the cultural and economic conditions that make it possible for women's lives to be seen only in terms of their potential for exploitation.

(Sealy 2009)

Not Natasha proves photography to be as effective as literature to achieve this aim.

Drama: Clare Bayley

Just like in Popa's photography, in Clare Bayley's play *The Container* (first performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2007) the characterising features of artistic form are aptly employed to narrate new slaveries. The action is set in a freight container driven from north-western Italy to the north of France. Two Somali women, a middle-aged Afghan businessman, a young Afghan woman and a young Kurd are the illegal immigrants travelling inside it, sharing the wish to reach England and begin a new life. They are completely at the mercy of the Turkish "agent"—and utterly helpless, left in the dark about their whereabouts and the progress of their journey:

AHMAD. Can you hear something?
JEMAL listens.
JEMAL. Nothing. I can't hear anything.
A pause. JEMAL gives up and sits down.
FATIMA. Why have we stopped?
Nobody answers her.
You. Rude man. Why have we stopped?
JEMAL. I'm not the fucking tour guide, am I? I don't fucking know why we stopped.
FATIMA. Don't listen to him, Asha. You see? Always so rude. And bad language, too.
The doors are opened. The sudden light is dazzling. They all melt back into their hiding places.
MARIAM enters.
She stands, trying to see in the darkness, her hand over her mouth and nose, because of the smell in there.
She retches. The doors are closed behind her. AHMAD emerges.
AHMAD. Where's the agent?
FATIMA. Where's the food?
JEMAL. Do you know where we are?
The truck starts moving.

(Bayley 2007: 4-5)

⁹ See Deandrea 2009b: 672-73.

This quotation shows how the characters' situation is bound to create tension among them, which in the course of the play is further raised by the pregnant Mariam being sick again, by everybody's inevitable need to empty their bowels inside the container (11), and by the secrets each of them hides (Mariam's pregnancy is not the only one). During their impassioned dialogues, they sometimes reveal parts of their personal stories, signalling a background of poverty, violence and war not far from Popa's photographic subjects: Mariam's husband was a teacher beheaded by the Talibans in front of his class of girls (31); Somali Fatima and Asha crossed the Mediterranean by boat and lived in a refugee camp (12-14). The Kurdish Kemal's story is significant of how Kafkaesque the life of an undocumented migrant can be:

FATIMA. What did you do that they made you leave England? Eh? You a man with bad secrets. You said it yourself. You a liar.

JEMAL. Yeah, I'm a liar.

I come from Turkey. My parents ran away from Turkey when I was a little kid. They ran away because the Turkish police came to get my dad one day. He was out when they came. That was our piece of luck. So we left the country that night. We managed to get to England. I grew up there. I went to school there. I met my wife there. But she's not British either.

Then suddenly the British say, it's safe to go back to Turkey now. Turkey is safe for Kurds, they say. Turkey is almost Europe now.

But the prisons are still full of Kurds.

What is there for me there? Nothing. There's nothing. It scares the shit out of me. They'll lock me up just because I left. There's no life for me there.

I fought it. I fought it all the way to the High Court. My wife was nine months pregnant and I lost my case. They took me from the court and put me in the detention centre.

And they sent me back.

But this time, I'm going to lie. I'm going to get back into that country any way I can.

I'm going to say I'm from Iraq. I've come all the way from Baghdad, non-stop travel. Clever lying, you see.

I'll keep trying until I get there. (43-44)

The emotional climax of the plot takes place when the agent claims that the truck's driver wants more money. Mariam cannot pay, so sexual exploitation comes into play again, when the agent claims that she can only pay the driver in kind. The moral crux of the matter becomes how much characters can (or, are willing to) risk in order to prevent a pregnant woman from being raped (32-40).

As said above, the play's spatial frame constitutes one of its main assets. A note to the text says: "Although this play was written to be performed in an actual container, it could also be performed in more conventional venues" (2). On July 27th, 2009, I had the privilege of being in the (necessarily restricted) audience of one performance of *The Container* directed by Tom Wright at The Young Vic. It took place *in front of* The Young Vic, where an actual container occupied one half of the main road called The Cut. The audience was made to sit inside on makeshift seats, their backs against the walls, extremely close to the actors—never further than approximately four metres from them, and from the physical and psychological suffering being performed. The proximity to the action was enhanced by long spells of complete darkness; the only natural light came with the rare openings of the container's backdoor, whereas lighting was provided by the characters moving their torches. From the perspective of naturalistic verisimilitude, it could be objected that stowaways are usually hidden behind goods which occupy most of the space in the containers (Waugh 2007: 195; Gupta 2007: 174). All the same, the whole context seemed to be reaching towards an extreme realism, for an environment capable of conveying those claustrophobic sensations of entrapment which, as stated above, are present throughout experiences of new slaveries. Not by chance, before

entering the container the audience was ominously warned that anyone could be let out if s/he banged on the door, but no re-admission would be allowed.¹⁰

As other texts have done, *The Container* reminds the audience that the British concentrationary archipelago also includes means of transportation. One cannot help thinking of Levi's descriptions of the trains which crossed Europe taking Jews to the camps (Levi 1989: 85-89), and wondering if Levi could have imagined a concentrationary system so different from the one he experienced, in a civilised nation of the early 21st century. The warning at the end of his last book, though, rings a bell:

It can happen, and it can happen everywhere. I do not intend to nor can I say that it will happen; [...] it is not very probable that all the factors that unleashed the Nazi madness will again occur simultaneously, but precursory signs loom before us. [...] It only awaits its new buffoon (there is no dearth of candidates) to organise it, legalise it, declare it necessary and mandatory and so contaminate the world. Few countries can be considered immune to a future tide of violence generated by intolerance, lust for power, economic difficulties, religious or political fanaticism, and racialist attritions. It is therefore necessary to sharpen our senses, distrust the prophets, the enchanters, those who speak and write "beautiful words" unsupported by intelligent reasons.

(Levi 1989: 167)

Theorising new British slavery: Agamben and Lal

Giorgio Agamben's writings offer some possible theoretical paradigms which could be employed to analyse the British concentrationary archipelago shaped by new slaveries. Starting from classical societies, his *Homo Sacer* is centred on the genealogy of the figure of the prisoner in Nazi concentration camps, seen as someone who was deprived of any right usually pertaining to humankind, and thus reduced to "bare life." Some of Agamben's definitions fit well the new forms of slavery studied here. The concentration camp, for instance, is "the space that is opened when the state of exception begins to become the rule" (Agamben 1998: 168-69): this resonates with the conditions of those undocumented migrants for whom the suspension of human rights has become so common. As I have argued, *their* state of exception becomes normative, systemic, insofar as their imprisonment can take place anywhere while forming a pillar of the British economy. Significantly, Agamben sees the concentration camp as producing a crisis in political structures, being the "hidden matrix [...] of the political space in which we are still living" (166). He also opens up his reflections to the camps in the former Yugoslavia.

This essay looks towards and beyond Agamben's theories, showing how today the concentrationary system has been atomised, vaporised into a myriad of ever-changing, ever-shifting sites, thus embodying the features of trans-national capitalist mobility.

Another thought-provoking reflection on the contemporary forms of the concentration camp is proposed by Vinay Lal. Following Hannah Arendt, he contextualises WWII concentration camps in a wider frame, starting from the genocides committed in the name of European colonialism. But then, he also asks questions about the present and the future:

If Arendt could reach back to the Boer War and to British colonialism in India to describe the origins of that totalitarian form of terror known as the concentration camp, it is just as reasonable to ask what the concentration camp of the future might look like. Is the concentration camp only a thing of the past, or has it metamorphosed into different forms? [...] Has the concentration camp, unmoored from its precise location, shorn of its physicality, freed from its chains, bounded no longer by barbed wires, come to occupy a different space?

(Lal 2005: 230)

¹⁰ For the effect that the play had on the young people to whom it was first performed as part of a school project, see Bayley 2007: ix.

Lal's questions resonate thunderingly within the scope of this essay. He points his finger at economic neo-colonialism, at the invisible genocides committed today in the name of so-called "development" all over the world. It is the limited purpose of this essay to confine itself to a more restricted geographical context—the UK. Its objects of analysis are constituted by some of those who escape from the invisible genocides described by Lal.

Theorising new British slavery and its re-adjustments: "Subaltern"

Given its atomised nature, new slaveries acquire such a heterogeneous, composite shape that other critical categories need re-thinking, if one wants to apply them to the issue in question. This is especially true when it comes down to some of the labels that we, as postcolonial scholars, usually discuss.

One of them might be the category of the Subaltern. Enslaved migrants may easily be seen as fitting the label, as falling into Zygmunt Bauman's definition of refugees as "the human waste of the global frontier-land ... the 'outsiders incarnate'" (2004: 80). The field of Subaltern Studies has been extensively problematised, and some of the crucial points in this debate may be useful in enriching the study of new slaveries. Can the subaltern objectively speak, and with whose voice? Would not scholars risk essentialising an extremely heterogeneous community (Loomba 1998: 231-45; Spivak 1995: *passim*)—a heterogeneity at its utmost in the hyper-fragmented and hyper-multicultural concentrationary archipelago of new slaveries in the UK? The issue of sources is equally controversial, and the Subaltern Studies historian often "makes direct reference or alludes to the sheer difficulty of gaining access to the sources of subaltern history" (Said 1988: vii);¹¹ this involves the supposed opposition orality vs. official histories, too, a pervasive presence in Postcolonial Studies as a whole.

Ania Loomba states that "such questions are not unique to the study of colonialism but are also crucial for any scholarship concerned with recovering the histories and perspectives of marginalised people" (Loomba 1998: 231). At the end of her analysis, she finds Lata Mani's re-phrasing most useful "How can they [subalterns] be heard to be speaking or not speaking in any given set of materials?" (Mani 1992: 403, quoted in Loomba 1998: 245). In the case of new slaveries, though, a further problematising layer needs to be added at an earlier stage. Even though their victims belong to the here and now, given their seclusion and spectralisation, the main obstacle here resides in *finding* the *human* material, and in finding basic data about their spectralised lives. Who are they? Where do they live, where are they imprisoned and exploited? How many of them? In the UK, the number of undocumented workers in the country ranges between 700,000 and one million (Pai 2008: 9, 246), but it is usually believed to be conservatively estimated. Modern slavery is "illegal, dynamic, internationalised and, because of these characteristics, difficult to map"; its figures are unreliable, "a problem that both the police and Home Office acknowledge" (Craig *et al.* 2007: 10, 21). This is the main reason why these migrants are frequently described as phantoms: "The 'ghost population' in Britain: the almost invisibles" (Pai 2008: xix).

Even when these undocumented migrants are physically present, even when they have obtained their freedom, an earlier problematic stage should be tackled: they are not willing to speak out, out of fear or shame for their brutalisation. Between 2007 and 2008 Operation "Pentameter 2," for example, led to more than 500 arrests and the rescue of 167 victims, including 16 children, across the UK, but:

although the Home Office claims that Pentameter 2 is "the most successful of its kind," one major challenge is encouraging the victims to speak out against the traffickers and accept assistance and support

¹¹ See, for example, Pandey 1988: 89-92.

from the authorities. Home Office Minister Vernon Coaker said that many victims, particularly children, resist help and refuse to speak out.

(Anti-Slavery International 2008: 4)

A practical reason to account for this is to be found in institutions, which are extremely (and suspiciously) late in tackling the phenomenon. Only in December 2009 did the UK ratify the European Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings. Around the same time, the London Metropolitan Police Human Trafficking Team faced closure due to lack of funding, but this was averted thanks to pressure from organisations (Anti-Slavery International 2009: 5). Moreover, institutional policies still tend to treat victims as illegal immigrants: a notable case in point is the Vietnamese trafficked children exploited on cannabis farms in suburban homes, who face arrest for drug offences (Anti-Slavery International 2010: 4).

Theorising new British slavery and its re-adjustments: “Black British”

Another category under pressure is “Black British.” In her introduction to this volume, Annalisa Oboe does not eschew the controversy around this wide (over-stretched, according to some) label.¹² She points to the possibility for it to include a variety of minorities, and to the new complexities added by globalised migrations.

But to what extent can the literature on new slaveries in the UK fall under that umbrella? Certainly it does not apply easily, for strictly geographical reasons. First, a good number of its authors (such as Broomfield, Rankin, Rendell, Tremain) are white Britons, or they are not from former British colonies (Popa). Second, the victims they write of have, in many cases, very tenuous links with the history of British colonialism (like the migrants from Eastern Europe); some of these people are, to say the least, far from fluent in English, due to the very language barriers which are a decisive factor in making them third-class citizens (Craig *et. al.* 2007: 17). Third, some of these works are not even set within British borders; sometimes, as in Bayley’s *The Container*, Britain is only evoked as an object of desire.

All these provisos present critical specificities which require reflection. Hardly, it seems, could the literature on new slaveries be called “Black British Literature” strictly speaking. A more acceptable term may be represented by “multi-ethnic”, in the light of a recent collection of essays, *Multi-Ethnic Britain 2000+* (2008), which proposes to go beyond the centrality of ethnic factors in order to investigate, amongst other things, artistic representations of immigration and asylum by authors including canonical, white names (Eckstein *et. al.* 2008: 14).¹³ This perspective is bound to offer a fruitful contribution to the theoretical work on new slaveries.

On the other hand, there exist evident elements of continuity with issues and *topoi* pertaining to Black British studies, to the point that the two fields appear intricately connected.

First of all, white British authors writing on the phenomenon trigger a process of self-interrogation on how Britain’s identity is affected by new slaveries.¹⁴ Historically speaking, this self-questioning may be seen as a continuation of the late 18th- early 19th-century debate on abolitionism, involving the effects of slavery on traders and on the Christian principles of British society.

Second, the image of the spectre representing an alterity which haunts Western monolithic social and ideological constructions surfaces in Postcolonial and Black British Studies, too. In Italian academia, for instance, Cimitile (2005) and Del Villano (2007) employ this trope to

¹² See also Giommi 2010: 37-41, for the history of, and debate on, “Black British”.

¹³ Interestingly, the volume shares a de-centred approach with the present one, being the product of a 2007 Freiburg conference where most speakers were non-British, just like the 2010 Padua seminar which resulted in this collection.

¹⁴ As for the Janus-faced doubleness of the migrant/native relationship exposed by new slavery, see Deandrea forthcoming.

analyse, respectively, representations of Atlantic slavery and the fractures of Western thought in the field of Anglophone literatures.

Third, if the international nature of this phenomenon makes it impossible to be strictly contained within British (and “Black British”) realms, one should also keep in mind how the confines of Black British Studies have already been enlarged in recent decades and increasingly studied with an emphasis on transnational and diasporic scenarios, as in Paul Gilroy’s theorisation of the Black Atlantic and a number of subsequent revisions of his proposition, such as Oboe and Scacchi’s *Recharting the Black Atlantic* (2008).¹⁵ For the scholar working on new slaveries the greatest challenge would consist, I believe, in focusing on specificities, and unravelling the common strands while delving into such a fractioned and diverse universe. In any case, studying new slaveries implies following in the wake of this opening up of critical confines. Giorgio Agamben is again significant in his interventions, when he focuses on the pivotal exception constituted by the figure of the refugee as a development of the concentration camp prisoner:

If the refugee represents such a disquieting element in the order of the nation-state, this is so primarily because, by breaking the identity between the human and the citizen and that between nativity and nationality, it brings the ordinary fiction of sovereignty to crisis. Single exceptions to such a principle, of course, have always existed. What is new in our time is that growing sections of humankind are no longer representable inside the nation-state—and this novelty threatens the very foundations of the latter. Inasmuch as the refugee, an apparently marginal figure, unhinges the old trinity of state-nation-territory, it deserves instead to be regarded as the central figure of our political history. [...the refugee is a] limit-concept that at once brings a radical crisis to the principles of the nation-state and clears the way for a renewal of categories that can no longer be delayed.

(Agamben 2005: 28)

The final case in point here is Philippe Lioret’s film *Welcome* (2009). This French movie is about an Iraqi-Kurdish migrant stuck in Calais, who desperately resorts to swimming over to Dover in order to reach his girlfriend. When he is finally stopped by a coastguard boat, and is swallowed by the waters in his attempt to escape the law, images of the Transatlantic Slave Trade inevitably come to mind. We are talking about another kind of crossing, another sea-route, other national identities, a single victim—but the connections with Black Britain are intense. It becomes incumbent upon us to reflect on them.

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¹⁵ On the importance of the Diaspora category, see Di Maio 2010: passim.

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