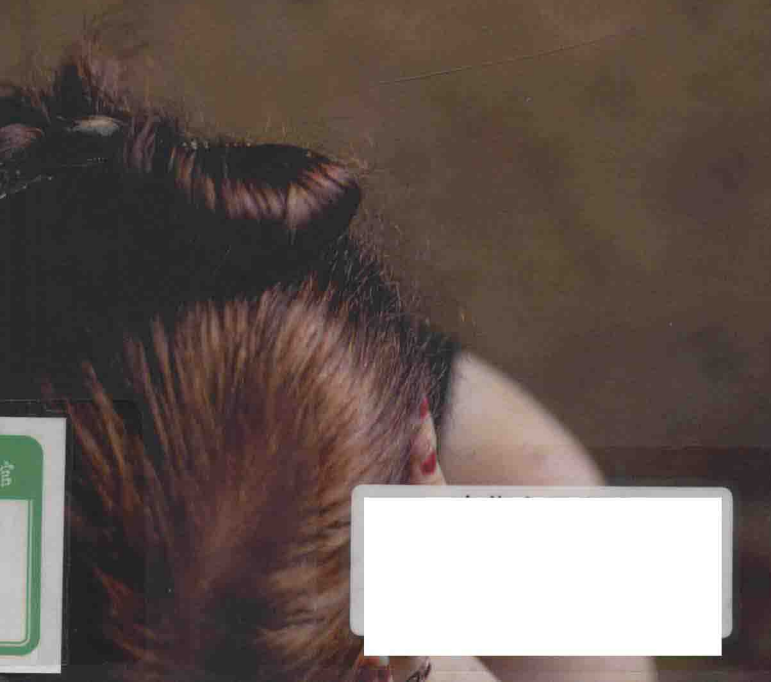


PIETRO DEANDREA

NEW SLAVERIES IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH LITERATURE AND VISUAL ARTS

THE GHOST AND THE CAMP



New slaveries in contemporary British literature and visual arts

The ghost and the camp

PIETRO DEANDREA

Manchester University Press

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To my beloved father,
Francesco Deandrea (1933–2012),
and his silent teachings.
And to my enslaved neighbours:
may I never fail to see them.

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Introduction

Appeals to the past are among the commonest of strategies in interpretations of the present. What animates such appeals is not only disagreement about what happened in the past and what the past was, but uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms, perhaps.

Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993: 1)

As the world map is being redrawn after 1989, postcolonial studies has done little to keep pace with the changing forms of imperialism as an actual set of strategies and developments.

Timothy Brennan, 'The image-function of the periphery' (2005: 107)

1.1 Crossing the 2007 bicentenary: Transatlantic memory and the slaves of globalisation

Can we hope that the *sans-papiers* and their supporters in this country (and in all other countries) will establish a Museum of Illegal Immigration, so that the memory of those detained and deported, of those who fought and resisted with success, will not be forgotten, will not be annihilated, will not be vaporized?

Steve Cohen, *Deportation Is Freedom!* (2006: 153)

The year 2007 marked the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade. The same year saw the publication of *Chords of Freedom*, J. R. Oldfield's investigation into the construction of the memory of transatlantic slavery. Examining a long history of monuments, commemorations and museums, Oldfield brings to the fore Britain's tendency to celebrate itself as a champion of civilisation which put an end to the abominable trade. The gradual dismantling of this view, according to Oldfield, is a quite recent phenomenon related to the rising importance of multiculturalism: 'since the 1980s the dominant discourse has been disrupted and, to some extent, replaced by

overlapping narratives that, in turn, reflect broader cultural and political changes within British society' (Oldfield 2007: 2).

Amongst other things, Oldfield studies how monuments in Bristol and Lancaster began to turn public attention towards the African victims of the trade (78–81), and how some slavery museums have involved Black communities in their activities with the aim of including multicultural perspectives in the conception of their own exhibitions (121). When dealing with the monument *Captured Africans* by Kevin Dalton-Johnson (erected in October 2005 in front of the Custom House in Lancaster), the book dwells on the mixed reactions it received:

Not everyone has welcomed the appearance of *Captured Africans*, some preferring to *throw a veil over* Lancaster's slave past as if it were best *forgotten*. Nevertheless, such responses and the *anxieties which lie behind* them should not blind us to the significance of what has been happening in Lancaster. In a city that remains predominantly white, STAMP [the Slave Trade Arts Memorial Project] has been instrumental in shaping a new agenda that has less to do with the moral triumph of British anti-slavery than with the voices of the *forgotten*, the slaves themselves. (80–1; italics mine)

If Oldfield's language alludes to a disquieting resurfacing of the repressed, when reflecting on the same monument Alan Rice (involved in the STAMP project) has recourse to images that are explicitly spectral; he quotes James E. Young, who writes that memorials of the Holocaust are meant not to reassure or console but to '*haunt* visitors with the unpleasant, *uncanny* sensation of calling into consciousness that which has been previously – even happily – repressed' (Rice 2007: 331; italics mine).¹ Commemorations of the slave trade can certainly be related to Gothic elements from an obscured past, and transatlantic slavery often presents itself as a ghost haunting contemporary Britain. The coming of the 2007 bicentenary seemed to shape the image of Britain's present as enveloped in a spectral aura.²

Even though these cultural critics deal mainly with how transatlantic slavery is remembered and commemorated as a thing of the past, they sometimes end by pointing to what is happening in Britain today. Inevitably, their studies of memory hint at the relationship between remembrance and present life, and this is true not only for the descendants of the African diaspora. Oldfield (2007: 63) narrates the late recovery of the figure of abolitionist Thomas Clarkson and the tablet embedded in the floor of Westminster

Abbey in 1996, not far from the statue of William Wilberforce (who had long dominated the arena of the memory of transatlantic slavery):

every effort was made to ensure that the memorial campaign was inclusive rather than exclusive, and that it linked Clarkson to the ongoing struggle against slavery and oppression, particularly in the Third World. ... [the committee] included two representatives of Anti-Slavery International: ASI, for its part clearly regarded the committee's work as an important means of establishing foundations (not least, in terms of raising public consciousness about slavery) from which it might 'leap into the twenty-first century'.

The campaign for the Clarkson memorial, then, acted as a linkage between the memory of slavery and awareness of present and future slaveries – and it did so in the mid-1990s, the period immediately following the publication of the pioneer texts on new forms of slavery in Britain (see Chapter 2). Oldfield's passing references³ point to a global context scarred by contemporary versions of slavery, without significant comments – as this is not within the scope of his volume – on the new forms of slavery scarring Britain today. Alan Rice's essay on Dalton-Johnson's *Captured Africans* moves closer to the issue, when he reports that the artist was clear about not limiting the significance of his work to the past:

Well, it's just a fact that black people could be treated like that, and if it could happen then, it can happen again now. The reason why we need to have a memorial is so it isn't repeated – it operates on that level. ... [W]e live it every day, the way we are treated brings it all back, what our ancestors went through, even though it's not the same degree. (Rice 2007: 330–1)

Following Paul Ricoeur,⁴ Alan Rice comes to the conclusion that memorials can 'speak to their future contexts as much as to the past they commemorate, to a future-oriented responsibility', and in order to demonstrate their potential significance he mentions the Morecambe Bay tragedy, an event of key significance for this book (see Chapter 4.1). Rice also reports what the artist Lubaina Himid said during the launch of the STAMP project – a warning about the ghosts of slavery who are still haunting Britain: 'If you are going to honour the dead who have been ignored, suppressed or denied when in peril in the past, you must do it because as a city you want to show that you would do differently now, that you would be able to defend those people now' (Rice 2007: 325).

Slavery *now* is precisely the subject of this volume, in which I take up the challenge of analysing the literature and the visual arts regarding new forms of slavery in Britain. The book assigns a central place to this phenomenon, which in texts such as Oldfield's and Rice's is present only in embryo and beneath the surface.

The study of present forms of slavery requires, first of all, some modifications in the definition of slavery itself, given that ownership of a slave is no longer legal. In 1982 the UN updated definitions of slavery to take into account its contemporary forms:

- slavery is any form of dealing with human beings leading to the forced exploitation of their labour.
- slavery is any institution or practice which, by restricting the freedom of the individual, is susceptible of causing severe hardships and serious deprivation of liberty. (Anderson 1993: 11)⁵

This association between forced labour and slavery is nowadays widely accepted. In their pioneer study, Bridget Anderson and Ben Rogaly (2005: 15) showed how, according to international legislation, 'forced labour and trafficking are closely linked'. In turn, the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime includes, amongst forms of trafficking, 'forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery'.⁶ A highly debated aspect of this phenomenon is the purportedly voluntary assent of the enslaved – but in the definition of 'trafficking' included in the abovementioned UN Convention the consent of a victim 'shall be irrelevant' (Anderson and Rogaly 2005: 8).

Two years after Anderson and Rogaly's study, a report commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation explicitly employed 'slavery' as an appropriate definition for such phenomena: 'Human trafficking, for sexual or forced labour purposes, is the most numerically common form of modern slavery' (Craig et al. 2007: 25). The report identified three main features characterising 'contemporary slavery': 'severe economic exploitation ... absence of human rights' and the control over a person by 'the prospect or reality of violence' (1, 12). The report's authors concede that there are many gradations of forced labour, so that the question of where slavery begins constitutes 'a complicated debate' (17). Another complication concerns the documented/undocumented issue: it would be simplistic to affirm that all undocumented migrants are enslaved; what seems certain is that an undocumented status is likely to increase three factors of vulnerability to forced labour, i.e. dependence on recruiters, black-

mailing and isolation.⁷ However, the scenario is further complicated by the fact that documented forms of migration, too, can easily lead to slavery (Anderson and Rogaly 2005: 43–7). In Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* (2010: 420), the Labour MP Fairweather describes this phenomenon thus:

traffickers use regular migration routes and work visas, but then charge fees for arranging work which put the workers into debt before they've even arrived in the UK. Sometimes their documents are removed, they're kept in poor housing and charged a fortune, charged for transport through and from work, Threats, abuse, all sorts of things. ... [being] an illegal immigrant is neither here nor there.

The number of exploited and enslaved migrants living in contemporary Britain is very difficult to estimate; attempts to produce reliable figures have often been contested.⁸ Both the existence of new slaves in today's Britain and the near impossibility of quantifying them remain highly controversial issues, not least because – before and after the 2007 bicentenary commemorations of the abolition of the slave trade – British institutions have often been part of the problem. The date 18 October 2010 was chosen as Britain's first ever Anti-Slavery Day, as part of a long and massive campaign against the lack of action by successive British governments: 'Britain's anti-slavery legislation is now weaker than the rest of Europe's, thanks to the coalition's decision to opt out of an EU directive on human trafficking' (Dugan 2010: n.p.).⁹

Within a European context where economic liberalism and institutional persecution of migrants have contributed to the growth of new forms of slavery, and where state policies on immigration control reproduce, rather than eradicate, illegality, which 'then becomes the *raison d'être* of the security apparatus' (Balibar 2004: 62), Britain is recognised as the country where these changes have produced the worst effects. This is accounted for by some 'systemic features in the UK labour market ... one of the most flexible labour markets in Europe', with its pressures for flexible pay arrangements and working hours, easier hiring and firing, short-term contracts and geographic mobility, conducive to heightened exploitation of those who are most vulnerable to these conditions – that is to say, migrant workers (Anderson and Rogaly 2005: 23).¹⁰

Alongside (and commensurate with) this economic system, Britain has also distinguished itself for its increasing criminalisation of migrants, leading, amongst other things, to punitive administrative

detention, a practice which has constantly increased;¹¹ as far as the neglect of basic human rights in its detention centres is concerned, Britain has again played a leading role (Bosworth and Guild 2008: 703–12; Fekete 2009: 150).¹² This kind of policy has certainly increased migrants' vulnerability to potential exploitation (Fekete 2009: 23), but in some cases it has also created official forms of slavery: there have been asylum seekers turned 'into a pool of forced labour as a price for their being given a roof over their heads', where 'local authorities are specifically designated as an agency that can contract for' this (Cohen 2006: 136).¹³ Unsurprisingly, the outsourcing of detention centres to multinationals¹⁴ has exacerbated the conditions in which the detainees live: several complaints of maltreatment were addressed to G4S, which has contracts worth £4.6 billion with the British government (Casciani 2011: n.p.), while in Yarl's Wood removal centre, run by SERCO, migrants were made to work for 50p an hour (McVeigh 2011: n.p.). Another form of institutionally induced exploitation has to do with the asylum policies aiming at the destitution of both claimants and failed asylum seekers, constraining them to an 'enforced non-productivity'¹⁵ that leaves them vulnerable to extreme poverty and consequently to exploitation (Farrier 2011: 86, 97–8); this accounts for the occasional inclusion of asylum seekers in the category of new slaves in the chapters that follow. One case worth mention here is the Turkish character of Senay in Stephen Frears's film *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002), since her sexual exploitation results from her pending application for asylum.¹⁶

Since the early 1990s, this outcome of globalisation has been variously studied and defined. Étienne Balibar (2004: x, 9, 43–4), for instance, underscores the existence of a virtual European apartheid. In this regard, Zygmunt Bauman's *Wasted Lives* (2004) is perhaps one of the most widely read attempts. He also articulates an extended analogy between these human beings (economic migrants and asylum seekers) and rubbish: he defines refugees as 'the human waste of the global frontier-land ... "the outsiders incarnate", the absolute outsiders' (Bauman 2004: 80). Although it is undeniable that today's slaves are cheaper and more disposable than in past forms of slavery (Bales 2005: 9), Bauman's analysis of the rejects of globalisation can be applied only partially to the object of this book. Bauman stresses how we consider refuse disposal sites and urban ghettos or asylum camps off-limits – in other words, how we tend to reject human and non-human waste by avoiding and

distancing them. However, as the following chapters will show, one of the main features of British new slaveries consists in their being disseminated throughout the country, potentially everywhere and thus potentially contiguous to any 'respectable' citizen, who indeed is far from living, as Bauman writes, in a 'comfortable, soporific *insularity*' (Bauman 2004: 27; italics mine). De Genova (2002: 422) makes clear how the services provided by migrants lead to a state of inseparability among the undocumented, documented migrants and citizens, in a 'quite intimate proximity'.

In the following pages I argue for a more composite imagery, and more fitting critical paradigms, to understand British new slaveries and their specificities. Terminology-wise, I opted for using '*new slaveries*' and '*new slaves*' (rather than the more blandly chronological but equally widespread 'modern-day slavery' or 'contemporary slavery') in order to emphasise the changed features of this phenomenon. In doing so, I was encouraged by the titles of some signal publications, such as Kevin Bales's *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (1999)¹⁷ and Christien Van den Anker's *The Political Economy of New Slavery* (2004); compared to them, my employment of the plural form is designed to underscore the diversity of the phenomenon.

One final note regarding terminology, which anticipates my reflections on naming in Chapter 2.2 and 3.1. The widely employed label 'illegals' is here avoided because of the disparaging connotations that it carries, and the hierarchical exclusion that it implies (Gunning 2011: 142); as Georges Bensoussan writes (2002: 65), words can lower our moral vigilance. The definition 'undocumented' is preferred: in comparing the language of British immigration controls to Big Brother's self-justifying propaganda, Steve Cohen (2006: 28) avers that *undocumented* 'helps politically to stand Newspeak on its head. It describes rather than derides, and unites rather than divides'.¹⁸ This choice is meant to pay homage to those migrants who occupied the church of Saint Ambroise in Paris in 1996 (Balibar 2004: 48–9), whose protest against French restrictive laws included their rejection of the term 'clandestine' for the less disparaging '*sans papier*'.¹⁹