



## Acknowledging the enslaved Other

(Pietro Deandrea, *New Slaveries in Contemporary British Literature and Visual Arts: The ghost and the camp*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2015, 236 pp. ISBN 978-0-7190-9643-3)

by Lidia De Michelis

Over the last decade, the phenomenon of unprecedented mass migration, along with the plight of the world's asylum seekers fleeing from war and poverty and seeking refuge in Europe, has been gaining dramatic momentum. Reverberating throughout populist and media discourses, it has come to be placed frontstage not only in the political and sociological public spheres, but also across multiple literary, visual and artistic imaginaries.

Against the backdrop of the increasing borderization of the outer margins of Europe, and criminalization of migrants and aliens by governments, institutions and the media, the figure of the (undocumented) immigrant has become an ubiquitous and scaring signifier of the exclusionary politics underpinning neoliberal cultural formations and helping to produce and reproduce invisible and exploitable aliens, while serving, alternatively, both self-gratulatory agendas of compassion and menacing discourses of flood, infection, and invasion.

It is beyond the remit of this review to survey the huge and challenging body of academic literature which has taken the Janus-faced issue of mass migration from the South of the world, and securitization and borderization of the North, as its main focus,



exploring these processes through the complementary lenses of political theory, political philosophy, the social sciences, border and migration studies, postcolonial studies, Holocaust and trauma studies, and the psychology of postcolonial subjectivities, to list but a few (names such as Arendt, Agamben, Said, Balibar, Derrida, Bauman, Rothberg, Gilroy, Mezzadra, De Genova, Van Houtum, Caruth, Beneduce, Hardt and Negri – not to mention a rich crop of younger scholars who have recently joined the debate – immediately come to the mind).

It is perhaps more relevant to the scope of this review, which focuses on Pietro Deandrea's cogently humane and compelling monograph *New Slaveries in contemporary British literature and visual arts: The ghost and the camp* (Manchester University Press, 2015), to concentrate on literary and artistic approaches to the topic at issue. In this perspective, studies such as *Postcolonial Asylum: Seeking Sanctuary before the Law* by David Farrier (2011), or *Contemporary Asylum Narratives: Representing Refugees in the Twenty-First Century* by Agnes Woolley (2014), may provide meaningful precedents and terms for comparison within the disciplinary terrain of British studies.

Pietro Deandrea's particular strength consists in having moved beyond the now widely researched theme of the importance and pervasiveness of asylum-seekers and refugees (taken in their dual capacity as distillations of otherness, and symbolic and discursive tropes) in the construction of the European imagined community and the policing of its geo-political and cultural borders. By explicitly linking their figures, life stories and representations, on the one hand, to the historical realities and narrative genres of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slavery and the continuing re-enactments of the dispositive of the 'camp', and, on the other hand, to the current horrors and naturalization of multiple forms of new slavery, Deandrea throws into sharp relief historical roots, economic rationales and the perversely invisible ideological scaffoldings upholding the reproduction of 'wasted lives' (Bauman 2004) and expendable subjectivities.

Deandrea's main purpose is to expose the network of invisibility and confinement constitutive of new slavery in Britain under conditions of globalization and neoliberal conjuncture while shedding light, at the same time, on its ability to seamlessly infiltrate (and sustain) the everyday structure and logics of 'respectable' lives.

In his review of the book, David Farrier (2016: 2) has perceptively described Deandrea's understanding of new slavery "as a mode of proximity; an index of the nested, involute quality of life in a globalized world" which is characterized by the category of "uncanniness". This dimension, and the twin theoretical perspectives informing Deandrea's interpretive approach to his subject matter, are announced in the subtitle of the book, *The ghost and the camp*, which draws attention to notions that are recurrent tropes in defining both slave and neo-slave narratives, and ethical-philosophical analyses of the dehumanizing logics and spectral productive regimes of the concentration camp and of its endless reproduction, in the present, of ever changing forms of spaces of exception.



Deandrea's focus is explained poignantly in a thoroughly researched and convincing Introduction, which, far from merely weaving together the main interpretive currents and threads cohering the different themes at issue, advances original critical paradigms, questions inflated or now controversial theoretical stances and definitions, and passionately argues for a committed line of criticism that acknowledges the "potential function of literature (and consequently of literary criticism): namely to recompose, albeit imaginatively, what reality is constantly disrupting, to offer a humane vision where humanity is denied" (Deandrea 2015: 9).

While engaging thoughtfully with a number of relevant theorists and overtly endorsing David Farrier's multidisciplinary approach which argues for "going beyond the divisions erected between discursive formations, and redrawing lines of engagement" (Farrier 2011: 16; in Deandrea 2015: 27), Deandrea underlines the unique role of literature and art "as the most powerful means to make the living feel three-dimensionally" (Deandrea 2015: 8).

In addition to making explicit his own self-positioning as a literary scholar who is engaged with social reality and 'bringing to light' what has been silenced and obscured, in line with the best practice of Cultural Studies Deandrea advocates the need to tackle the increasing reproduction and dissemination of (invisible) borders "with an opening up of critical confines" (Deandrea 2015: 191). He does so, first of all, by questioning established definitions and qualifying his own use of particular words, being fully aware of their power to channel thought or impose a prohibition on it.

These definitions, to name but a few, include the widely accepted interpretation of current "slavery" as "an association between forced labour and slavery" (Deandrea 2015: 4), human trafficking, and the choice of the term "new slavery" over "modern-day" or "contemporary slavery" in order to underline the totally 'new' nature of the manifestations and shapes of this phenomenon and its connections with the flexibility and precariousness of the British labour market, exposed as one of the most deregulated in Europe (Deandrea 2015: 5). Even more important in its ethical resonance is the author's decision to replace throughout the term "illegal", charged with connotations of irregularity and guilt, with "undocumented". This, according to Steve Cohen (2006: 28, in Deandrea 2015: 7), "helps politically to stand Newspeak on its head. It describes rather than derides, and unites rather than divides".

Deandrea's most original contribution in terms of theory, however, consists in the formulation of the new interpretive model of the "concentratory archipelago" (Deandrea 2015: 17). After exploring the connections (and differences) between transatlantic slavery and the dynamics of memorialization which informed the celebrations of the bicentenary of the abolition of the British slave trade in 2007, and the critical literature inspired by the event, Deandrea turns his attention to the avenues and modes of human trafficking in contemporary Britain. He indexes them to the extreme flexibility of the UK's labour market, the outsourcing of immigration detention centres, deportations and controls to multinationals, the contiguity



between practices of exploitation and the civil erasure of undocumented workers, itself facilitated by the dispersal of these manufactured “non-persons” across the whole country and their systemic exclusion from the borders of citizenship.

Focusing on the recurring trope of the ghost, which connects the traumatic legacies of slave and neo-slave narratives to the institutional spectralization of today’s enslaved, and/or undocumented migrants (who, as Deandrea notes, are “often described as phantoms”, 2015: 11), the author proceeds to test his point, in a paragraph meaningfully entitled “Troping new slaveries: Ghosts of postcolonialism, Marx and deconstruction”, against the theoretical debate sparked by Derrida’s influential *Specters of Marx* (1993) and its argumentative fallout on postcolonial criticism.

The image of the ghost, again, provides a useful link to a second paragraph devoted to the “troping of new slaveries”, focusing on “Holocaust studies and the concentration camp”. While acknowledging the unique and exceptional nature of the Holocaust and the Nazi camp, Deandrea (2015: 15) invites to “envision this tragedy not as an event circumscribable to a past but as something constantly lurking in our contemporaneity, albeit in modified shapes”, and embraces Primo Levi’s reflections on the Holocaust, in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1986), as being “prophetic” about “what might still happen” (Deandrea 2015: 15). In this regard, David Farrier comment that “*New Slaveries* is an effort to trace ‘the concentration camp of the future,’ in Primo Levi’s phrase” (Farrier 2016: 2) is particularly fitting.

The joining of these two main ways of ‘troping’ into a single interpretive line proves to be particularly rewarding. In answering his research question about the ways in which the camp has changed over the years, Deandrea (2015: 16) notes how “in today’s Britain the concentration camp has been atomized, vaporized into a myriad of ever-changing, ever-shifting places”, coming to “embod[y] the dynamic features of transnational capitalist mobility”, and giving birth to the cultural and disciplinary formation that Deandrea calls “concentrationary archipelago” (2015: 17). Drawing on David Rousset’s notion of the “concentrationary universe” (1946), and Solzhenitsyn’s “gulag archipelago” (1974), the author moves on to highlight the dual foundation on which his own definition rests: “the tangled network that this volume attempts to unravel, an ever-moving matrix that emerges as extremely unstable”, “constantly unravelling and re-forming, while being part of a long history” (Deandrea 2015: 17).

In this perspective, building on Said’s concept of “Traveling Theory” (1983), the author further advocates the need to embrace a notion of “theory in the making” (2015: 18), building on the unique insight of postcolonial studies but going beyond issues of localization and theoretical boundaries. For “Britain’s concentrationary archipelago”, *New Slaveries* maintains, is not amenable only to the Third World, “and is not simply locatable in any ghetto, or nation’s heart. It is more varied in its origins – and it is ubiquitous in its dispersal, by virtue of the proliferation of borders transversal to the nation rather than at its margins, as theorized by Etienne Balibar (2004: 1)”



(Deandrea 2015: 191). As to the modes of location and dispersal of refugee camps and immigration detention centres, which are among the most conspicuous forms of 'concentrationary archipelagoes', the author does not shun distancing himself from influential scholars such as, for example, Marc Augé, describing as "perplexing" the latter's "assimilation of refugee camps to non-places where circulation is accelerated": in his own view, he concludes, "the new forms of concentration camps are integral to non-places, and sustain them from their spectral positioning of non-places" (Deandrea 2015: 185).

Coming to the body of the work, the Introduction is followed by four extremely varied and dense chapters (numbered from 2 to 5), devoted, respectively, to a study of migrant domestic workers, the re-tropeing of the figure of the ghost and the dispositif of the concentration camp in twenty-first century British culture, the mapping and representation of "the British concentration archipelago in cinema, photography and drama", and the projection of these processes of spectralization and enslavement in selected dystopian narratives.

Throughout the book, Deandrea thoughtfully picks and combines the scholarly insight and critical paradigms on which his arguments rest in a very productive way, which affords him particularly flexible and effective tools for a rewarding and original approach. In the second chapter, for instance, the findings of Bridget Anderson's *Britain's Secret Slaves* (1993), a pioneer investigation into the deprivation of rights imposed on many foreign domestic workers in several 'respectable' affluent British homes even before the 1990s, provide the shocking factual foundations for Deandrea's perceptive and problematizing reading of Ruth Rendell bestselling crime novel *Simisola* (1984), while endorsing, at the same time, a view of the so-called 'popular' as participating in a continuum with the social and the literary.

In accord with the same methodological approach, Chapter 3 relies on two meaningful investigative reports on new slaveries in order to highlight the multiple facets and sensitivities underpinning, along with plays and films, four acclaimed novels which tackle the contiguous grounds of refugees detention and human trafficking from extremely varied perspectives and leveraging on different genres (Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail*, 2006; Chris Cleave's *The Other Hand*, 2008; Marina Lewycka's comic narrative *Two Caravans*, 2007; and Ian Rankin's crime novel *Fleshmarket Close*, 2004).

Chapter 4 places frontstage the visual arts, providing a very convincing investigation of Nick Broomfield's claustrophobic 2006 film *Ghosts*, which memorializes the tragic death of the Chinese cockle-pickers infamously drowned in Morecambe Bay in 2004. Another section discusses Dana Popa's photographic exhibition *Not Natasha* (2009). These two parts combine a powerful analysis of contemporary processes of spectralization with a stress on the fact that new slaves do not always belong to conventionally 'postcolonial' ethnicities (being Chinese and Eastern European). Another section of this chapter focuses on a cluster of short plays



that, each in its own way, explore the harsh experiences of migration and modalities of travel of the trafficked and the undocumented.

Chapter 5, focusing on dystopias, analyses Alfonso Cuarón's film remediation (2006) of P. D. James' *The Children of Men* (1992), highlighting the way in which the director has stretched some aspects of the original in order to foreground issues of migration and arbitrary detention. It is worth noting how this same film has also been interpreted (Stratton 2011) through the cultural trope of the 'zombie' in conjunction with Agamben's notion of the 'camp', which is of course reminiscent of Hanif Kureishi's vindication of the figure of the migrant, following the disquietingly xenophobic European elections of 2014, as someone to be rescued from a condition entailing "no face, no status, no protection and no story", whose "foreign body", like a zombie's, is "unslayable" and "eternal", an endless signifier of terror and invasion (Kureishi 2011, online).

This same chapter includes one of the most engrossing sections of the book, Deandrea's insightful and passionate reading of Kazuo Ishiguro's "unforgettable alternative-history novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005), the story of a generation of clones raised for organ donations" (Deandrea 2015: 26), which the author approaches as a richly metaphoric text that suggestively "gestures at issues relatable to the Holocaust, colonial forms of subjugation and a wide range of contemporary atrocities" (*ibidem*). Farrier (2016) has rightly underlined this section as a "signal reading", where Deandrea's primary and vibrant commitment to the values and workings of literature come to the fore in all its richness and strength. So much so that *Never Let Me Go*, in its ability to seam together the tropes of the ghost and the camp, along with the documentary by Sylvain George *Qu'ils reposent en revolte* (2010), and the novels *Fleshmarket Close* and *The Other Hand*, is resumed in the Conclusion, which draws on Agamben, Levi, Camus and recent postcolonial approaches in order to argue once more for that 'bridging' of critical perspectives which alone can provide an effective civil and humane approach to the "systemic exceptionality" (Deandrea 2015: 194) of new slaveries and their representations across media and modes.

To conclude, this is a convincing, dense and courageous work, with a strong potential to actually succeed in promoting the author's understanding of literature and literary criticism as a force for reflection and truth. This reviewer has adopted *New Slaveries* in her BA Course in English Literature and Culture at the University of Milan, and found it a very useful source of critical and topical suggestions, indeed inspiring in its ability to invite the students to engage in further research.

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