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In Every Holt and Heath: Spatial Counter-Actions in Contemporary British Literature on Migrants

Abstract I: Nell'occuparsi della letteratura sui migranti nella Gran Bretagna della globalizzazione contemporanea, questo articolo prende in esame le forme di segregazione spaziale che imprigionano questi nuovi schiavi – siano essi rifugiati, richiedenti asilo o 'migranti economici'. Nello specifico, il contributo si concentra sulle forme *istituzionali* degli spazi di detenzione, mettendone in luce le affinità con le forme di sfruttamento illegale. Opere come *The Bogus Woman* di Kay Adshead e le raccolte sul tema dei rifugiati come *Refugee Tales*, *Over Land*, *Over Sea* e *A Country of Refuge* mettono all'indice le modalità in cui i migranti vengono brutalmente detenuti e come forme più subdole di detenzione indotte dalle istituzioni siano disseminate nel territorio; allo stesso tempo, queste opere propongono azioni di contrasto che cercano di re-inventare gli spazi in questione. Su questo aspetto conclusivo, l'articolo identifica quattro strategie principali: meta-letteraria, metaforica, re-immaginativa e riappropriativa.

Abstract II: Focusing on the literature on globalisation's migrants in contemporary Britain, this article examines the forms of spatial seclusion imprisoning these new slaves – be they refugees, asylum seekers or 'economic migrants'. More specifically, the contribution concentrates on the *institutional* forms of spatial imprisonment, highlighting their similarities with illegal exploitation. Works like Kay Adshead's play *The Bogus Woman* and collections on refugees such as *Refugee Tales*, *Over Land*, *Over Sea* and *A Country of Refuge* point to the ways in which migrants are brutally detained and at how subtler forms of institutionally-induced detention are disseminated through the country, while proposing counter-actions which aim at reimagining contested spaces. On this final aspect, the article identifies four main strategies: meta-literary, metaphorical, re-imaginative and re-appropriative.

New forms of slavery induced by migratory phenomena have been spreading in Britain since the early 1990s¹. In August 2017 the National Crime Agency reported that more than 300 policing operations were underway throughout the country "with cases affecting every

¹ The use of the term 'slavery' in this context is supported by a substantial bibliography on the topic, and it is based on the United Nations 1948 new definition of slavery: "slavery is any form of dealing with human beings leading to the forced exploitation of their labour" (Anderson 1993: 11).

large town and city” and trafficking “so widespread that ordinary people would be unwittingly coming into contact with victims every day” (Casciani 2017: n.p.).

On a global scale, critical and creative literature on these new slaveries often refers to their invisibility and consequently has recourse to the trope of the ghost. Benjamin Skinner, for instance, writes: “Slavery is the greatest human rights challenge of my generation. [...] But in the first couple of weeks in any new country that I visited, my greatest challenge was finding a single slave” (2008: xvii). In the British context, this invisibility is produced by series of illegal sites of detention including private homes, brothel-flats, agricultural fields, factories, building sites, homes for the elderly, means of transportation and beaches, to mention a few. All these places where human trafficking thrives are related to Britain’s illegal labour market, which in turn rests on the highly unregulated features of the British labour economy. As a consequence, literature on the issue witnessed the emergence of the trope of the concentration camp – and all those sites may be seen as forming a “concentrationary archipelago” (Deandrea 2015: 16-17). As Giorgio Agamben writes, “We must learn to recognize it [the camp] in all of its metamorphoses” (2000: 44). Great Britain is crisscrossed by a diversity of internal borders segregating migrants from other sectors of society: Étienne Balibar (2004: 1) identifies, within European countries, a proliferation of borders, transversal to the national space rather than located at its confines.

This article is concerned with the legal and institutional forms of imprisonment detaining migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in contemporary Britain, operated by a series of criminalising governmental policies which produce effects similar to illegal forms of trafficking and detention. Through an analysis of some literary works on the subject, the following pages highlight the spatial boundaries which constrain the lives of these migrants and the ensuing impact on their identity. The final section focuses on some artistic forms of counter-action which share a drive to reclaim spatial freedom. Some of the works analysed were produced in the wake of the media-amplified ‘refugee crisis’ of summer 2015 and benefited from the participation of renowned authors who took a great interest in the issue.

Institutional Detention

First performed and published in 2001, Kay Adshead’s *The Bogus Woman* has enjoyed constant popularity in the following years, testifying to the undiminished urgency of the issue of criminalised migrants². The play is a monologue delivered by a single actress who acts out more than forty roles including the protagonist, an African human-rights journalist who flies to London to escape those who exterminated her family and then brutally raped her. Having arrived on forged documents, she is sent to one of Britain’s infamous detention centres:

YOUNG WOMAN (*astonished*):
Campsfield Detention Centre.

² In her “Author’s Note” (2015) to the play’s latest edition, sixteen years after its first publication, Adshead writes: “And still, victims of the most horrendous crimes [...] are still being locked up as criminals [...] still [...] I am so glad my play is being seen again in this fine new production, but very sad indeed that the story it tells is more resonant than ever” (Adshead 2015: n.p.).

A tangled tower
of twenty foot high razor wire
secretly coils all the way
from Oxford

(*Very anxious*) Where am I?
How long will I be here?
What happens next?
What happens now?

YOUNG WOMAN AS GUARD:
Shut up
little nigger woman (Adshead 2001: 23).

Quite clearly, the young woman finds herself jailed, indefinitely and abusively. The use of prison-like spaces as destinations for non-criminal migrants constitutes a widespread practice in contemporary Britain. On their visits to a detention centre, Marina Lewycka writes that “the furniture was bolted to the floor and there were bars on the windows” (2016: 86), while Ali Smith recounts having to go through four security checks:

after she’s searched me from head to feet, the woman will unlock a door and we’ll go into a waiting space and the woman will open another locked door on the other side of the room which will open into a yard with a razor-wire fence so high and encircling such a tiny yardspace that it would pass as a literal example of surreality (2016: 57).

Understandably, the protagonist of *The Bogus Woman* expresses anxiety at her imprisonment, exacerbated by the institutional and inhuman practice of indefinite detention. In David Herd’s words:

a person who is not [...] charged with any crime can be detained for months or years, pending their removal. At the recently closed Dover Immigration Removal Centre, for example, the longest period of detention was over four years. Pending is the word. We are deep, here, within the lexicon of suspension (Herd 2016b: 135).

This might seem to lie beyond the spatial analysis offered in this article. On the other hand, given that indefinite detention is not permissible under British criminal law, the dilemma expressed by Herd is crucial:

how is the institution of the removal centre legal? Or, rather, since, in conventional terms, it plainly offends legal principles, what relation does such a site have to the law? The answer is that it seems to stand just outside: subject to the law’s authority but not governed by its defining protections; a setting where different rules of sovereignty and temporality apply (2016b: 138).

Herd's question points to Agamben's concept of "state of exception" (Agamben 2005) and to Balibar's vision of transversal borders. The scenario is further complicated by the institutional practice of arbitrary and punitive transfers of detained migrants:

YOUNG WOMAN:

Following his
complaint
about the food
the day before

the Gambian
is being
'bumped out'

forcibly removed
to Winston Green
or
Rochester
or Reading gaol

on some
trumped up
charge (Adshead 2001: 55).

Here there are evident similarities to other illegal forms of imprisonment composing the fluid, ever-shifting concentrationary archipelago of British new slaveries, aimed at stifling any form of solidarity and collective reaction. In the case of Chinese sexual slaves, for instance: "The Misses get rotated each week, sent to different parlours. [...] Swapping, I discovered, is standard practice in the sex trade" (Pai 2008: 102).

The workers implementing the system, as Adshead writes, are used to behaving abusively, if not in a racist manner:

YOUNG WOMAN:

(*Whispers*) Group 4
Prison for Profit
wardens
ex army
hired to brutalise
in twelve-hour shifts
at four pounds an hour (Adshead 2001: 23)

G4S, which has had to face numerous scandals because of its abuses of power, also profits from the US and Israeli detention systems (Solombrino 2017: 79). Multinational private companies dealing with security management represent the opposite facet of Balibar's

transversal borders restraining globalisation's migrants: they easily cross national boundaries, and thus provide an example of what Laleh Khalili defines as "imperial isomorphism" (2010: 415).

Disseminated Detention

In *The Bogus Woman* the period of the protagonist's detention is later replaced by a different sort of captivity:

YOUNG WOMAN

I have at last been granted

Temporary Admission.

If I break conditions

I can be deported

at any time. [...]

I cannot

change address

without permission.

I must report weekly

to the police station

and the

Department of Social Services

to receive

my thirty-pound food voucher.

Of course,

I cannot work (Adshead 2001: 97-98).

All these rules, whereby one cannot even make use of public transport, gradually drive the Young Woman to a state of 'managed' destitution, against which she will resort to prostitution. The constant threat of detention and deportation – or "deportability", as defined by Nicholas De Genova (2002: 438-439) – may be conceived of, psychologically, as a torturing prolongation of indefinite detention. As Ali Smith writes: "And being out of detention, and knowing they can put you back in detention? It is all like being in detention. Detention is never not there" (Smith 2016: 55).

Here, too, Balibar's vision can apply: Britain's landscape seems to be traversed by a series of ethereal, invisible borders between various categories of people. Commenting on the spatial restrictions mentioned above, David Herd states that their general effect "is to fix a person in a given location, often for months and years on end (over a decade is not at all uncommon) [...] ex-detainees [...] have a deeply compromised relation to public space" (2016b: 36).

The migrant voiced by Abdulrazak Gurnah concludes his story on a similar note: "I have no choice but to live where I am told to live and wait for the next hearing to allow my application to be considered. Do you know what limbo means? It means the edge of hell" (Gurnah 2016: 39). Jerome Phelps aptly declared that, for these people designated as outside the political community, "necropower is to a large extent organized spatially" (2016). Conse-

quently, potential relations with the so-called ‘citizens’ are foreclosed: “We hesitate to relate to them, and vice versa, because the state they find themselves in, while occupying the same geographical space, is so fundamentally different” (Farrier 2012: 58)³. It is this difference in state, we may assume, that makes Adshead’s Young Woman proclaim in disbelief: “This can’t be happening / in England, August nineteen ninety-seven” (Adshead 2001: 63).

Recent history (from autumn 2017 to spring 2018) has shown how these sorts of persecuting restrictions are not limited to globalisation’s migrants, as might be expected. I am referring to the criminalisation of members of the so-called ‘Windrush generation’ (Khomami & Naujokaityte), a migratory wave which tends to be considered by many to be a pacified and well-established sector of contemporary Britain. Amongst other things, the whole affair suggests the aptness of another reflection by Balibar, when he considers migrants to be only the vanguard of a European “recolonization of social relations” mounting to “an exclusion from all or part of social rights on the basis of nationality but, little by little, to an increased vulnerability of all workers” (Balibar 2004: 1)⁴.

Spatial Counter-actions and the Arts

YOUNG WOMAN:

[...] Out!

Out into the courtyard.

Fifty brothers and sisters

spill

suddenly dangerous

into the mean sunshine

The air smelling like freedom

Some will lose their voice

at the injustice of it.

An old man

kicks down a wooden door

finding pots and planks,

and paints

‘prisoner of conscience’

pointing his placard

at the cameras (Adshead 2001: 60).

³ Liz Fekete describes these migrants as “quarantined within an alternative welfare system” (2018: n.p.).

⁴ The Windrush scandal represents the culmination of Theresa May’s infamous Home Office policy of “hostile environment”. Since 2013, it set up a net of controls involving employers, landlords, banks, doctors and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency – thus creating further internal borders: “aliens, at every identity check or internal control, carry the border within them” (Fekete 2018: n.p.).

When the umpteenth abuse by the guards sparks a revolt inside Campsfield, fire and smoke drive the detainees to break into the open, lamenting their situation in the face of people watching them from outside the centre (this is based on real events which were to lead to the trial of the ‘Campsfield Nine’). Their rebellion is far from being a ‘breaking out’, of course. Nevertheless, it constitutes a significant re-appropriation of spaces which have been institutionally negated or restricted to them, as the reaction of Campsfield authorities suggests:

LOUDSPEAKERS:

Please leave the courtyard

I repeat

Leave the courtyard [...].

You are in serious breach of the law (60).

The gesture of the old man, whose desperate energy is reinforced by a phonetic pattern alliterating on [p] and [k], is meant to make his ordeal known to the greater public, thus establishing a connection with the media and society at large and breaking, albeit briefly, the segregated nature of detention centres for migrants and the transversal boundaries identified by Balibar. Ali Smith’s story “The Detainee’s Tale” comes to the same realisation:

On the train home this evening, I’ll think of the moment you say to me, as we’re saying goodbye: people don’t know about what it’s like to be a detainee. They think it’s like what the government tells them. They don’t know. You have to tell them (Smith 2016: 61).

Among the many organisations which fight against immigration detention⁵, Freed Voices is composed of former detainees who work for similar aims: mapping detention back onto the communities from which detainees are usually excluded; raising awareness by campaigning at local and national level. They also produce “psycho-geographic maps” of detention centres “with different colours to represent different emotional states” (Phelps 2016). Their attempt to recreate the experience of detention, then, goes beyond denouncing, describing and analysing, and presents the phenomenon as a wholly human experience – their participation in the making of *Invisible*, a virtual reality film about indefinite detention in the UK, is another case in point (Ben).

I consider this approach as not dissimilar from the unique opportunity offered by literature and the arts, insofar as they manage to convey the experience of detention in its emotional coordinates. The imaginative force of *The Bogus Woman*, too, is founded on an expressionistic and lyrical monologue, which reaches way beyond simple denunciation, description and analysis. Agnes Woolley aptly considers its poetic and “self-conscious dramatic means” as problematising the overly factual and objective tenets of both refugee docudrama and asylum procedures: the “privileging of historical, rather than emotional, accuracy in

⁵ See, for example, the grassroots campaign These Walls Must Fall, and the many City Councils that have been passing motions against indefinite detention.

asylum narratives is problematic because it fails to account for the ways in which narrative is troubled by trauma" (Woolley 2012: 32-34). In the following paragraphs I intend to focus on other examples of literary attempts to counter-act *spatially* the paradigms of confinement that characterise migrants' lives.

The first type of counter-action may be defined as meta-literary. In Chris Cleave's novel *The Other Hand*, the Nigerian teenager Little Bee laments the insufficient space that she is allowed for the narration of her own story:

They gave you a pink form to write down what had happened to you. This was the grounds for your asylum application. Your whole life, you had to fit it onto one sheet of paper. There was a black line around the edge of the sheet, a border, and if you wrote outside the line then your application would not be valid. They only gave you enough space to write down the very saddest things that had happened to you. That was the worst part. Because if you cannot read the beautiful things that have happened in someone's life, why should you care about their sadness? (Cleave 2008: 315-316).

Against those margins, literature may constitute a counter-narration to dominant practices. In Kate Clanchy's short story "Shakila's Head", a teacher of creative writing works with a class of teenagers that includes many migrants. Shakila from Afghanistan recalls having seen a terrorist who made himself explode in the market of her hometown:

He exploded. You heard it. Boom.
And then the bell rings for a long time, and we flinch from its noise.
Priya says: You need a frame. For your poem. Miss. Give her a frame.
A frame. I have taught them this. Each week, we look at a literary shape, a form, a piece of rhetoric, and they try it out for themselves. I don't suggest what they might write about, just the way they might write it. A frame, I say every week. Try this frame. Never: tell me about [...]. Certainly not: unload your trauma. And still, they tell me these terrible things (Clanchy 2016: 114).

Against the symbolic margins imposed on Little Bee by asylum procedures in Cleave's novel, literature presents itself as having boundary-less imaginative "frames", where narrations and expressions of humanity can be expanded infinitely and freely.

The second type of counter-action is metaphorical. One recurrent image in the literary productions on this topic is, quite predictably, related to the semantic field of the house/home. The poetry collection *Over Land, Over Sea*, produced in the wake of the great 2015 'refugee crisis', is a case in point, given the number of poems structured on house metaphors. Lydia Towsey's "Come In", for instance, is composed of an extended metaphor where the many facets of the home are re-imagined from a migratory perspective. Here are its opening and closing lines:

We are sorry for our neighbours,
those of them that do not know

the way to show a welcome;
they have read the book of doors
but forgotten how they open.

We are sorry for the landlord,
he's always been a problem
and the agents in his office,
need we say they do not act –

[...] I am sorry for our manners,
when we visited you last
the mess we left,
the reason you have had to call today (Towsey 2015: 16)⁶.

The founding image of the home offers here a series of suggestions on the self-centredness of culture, when not employed for one's neighbours' sake (stanza one); on the British government and its institutions (two); and on the colonial policies which produce humanitarian crises (closing stanza).

The two following types of spatial counter-action are based more on the materiality of space. I would call the third type re-imaginative, because it entails a re-conceptualising of existing spaces, in spite of their boundaries, from a different perspective. Roma Tearne's short story "The Blue Scarf" describes the deeply emotional journey of an old Tamil couple from the Swedish village of their exile to Stockholm airport. Thanks to the many flashbacks during their train journey, the reader learns that they had to flee Sri Lanka to escape political persecution. Four years later, their son is about to land in Stockholm with his wife and newborn baby, whom they have never met, but the final *coup-de-theatre* is based on a re-imagining of physical boundaries. After his plane has landed, their son calls them on the phone:

"Papa," he says, his voice tired. "We are here. Our connecting flight is in half an hour".
"Are you okay?"
"We're all fine. You know we can't come out, don't you?"
"We know, don't worry. We just wanted to [...] you know [...] be in the same building
[...] oh here's your mother [...]" (Tearne 2016: 25-26).

The fourth type of spatial counter-action implies a re-appropriation of traditional British spaces. This is the founding idea at the core of *Refugee Tales*, one of the collections analysed in this article. Its aim – "to call for an immediate end to indefinite immigration detention in the UK" – was inextricably linked with the modalities around which it was produced: a nine-day walk on Chaucer's "Pilgrim's Way" interspersed with narrations emerging from collaborations between established writers and refugees or people involved with immigra-

⁶ See also, from the same collection, Sally Flint's "The Big House" (84); John Ling's "Safe" (88-89); and Carol Leeming's "Song for Guests" (92-93).

tion issues⁷. As David Herd writes in his “Afterword” to the collection, this mobile location along this specific route was chosen in order to re-configure a “culturally charged sense of space” (Herd 2016b: 133). He explicitly calls for a re-making of the individual’s relationship with such spaces:

Refugee Tales was one form of that re-making: the crossing of a deeply national space by people whom the nation has organised itself in order precisely that they be kept from view. [...] Deep within the *Refugee Tales* project is a proposal that the language of national space be re-read, that we read back through to find the expression that gestures outwards (138-139).

This “ethically sustainable” relation to national spaces also implied a reformulation of the *Canterbury Tales*. In his poetic “Prologue” to the volume, Herd quotes Chaucer’s poem while describing the British concentrationary archipelago:

People are picked up and detained.
Routinely and
Arbitrarily
In every holt and heath
Under the sun while
Small fowles maken melodye
And why we walk is
To make a spectacle of welcome [...]
How badly we need English
To be made sweet again (Herd 2016a: vii).

A final example of re-appropriation of traditional spaces is identifiable in the locus of the garden. David Belbin’s novelette *Secret Gardens* is set in Nottingham’s public allotments, “the oldest allotments in the UK” (Belbin 2011: 28). There two teenagers, Aazim (on the run from a deportation raid) and Nadimah (escaping sexual slavery) find temporary shelter:

“Maybe we can stay here forever”, Nadimah says. “We grow things. We catch things. We earn money for milk and bread and stuff to keep us clean. It could be a good life”.
“A good life”, I agree (59).

This bucolic retreat carries utopian features that could hardly stand the pressures of contemporary migration policies. In the context of the British concentrationary archipelago, I felt the temptation to read Belbin’s cultivated garden through the lens of Raymond Williams’ *The Country and the City* (1973): as the umpteenth attempt to recapture a golden age which is irretrievable, if it ever existed; as the latest step of what Williams called “the escalator”, a longing in every epoch for a nostalgic Eden back in time: “Against sentimental and

⁷ This took place in June 2015, thus anticipating the mid-August ‘crisis’. In 2017 the collection was followed by a second volume, *Refugee Tales II*, by the same editors and publisher.

intellectualized accounts of an unlocalised 'Old England' we need, evidently, the sharpest skepticism" (Williams 1993: 10).

On the other hand, the public allotment does not point so unrealistically backwards, in Belbin's book. Things do not turn out as well as Aazim and Nadimah expected, and they resort to escaping again. In the context of globalisation's migrants, we should refer to one of the concluding chapters of Williams' book, "The New Metropolis", where he examines a series of colonial and postcolonial novels and notices how the country / city interaction was expanded on a global scale: "Thus one of the last models of 'city and country' is the system we now know as imperialism" (Williams 1993: 279). Some of his observations on neocolonialism can be taken as perceptive anticipations of the globalisation to come:

It is now widely believed in Britain that this system has ended. But political imperialism was only ever a stage. It was preceded by economic and trading controls, backed where necessary by force. It has been effectively succeeded by economic, monetary and commercial controls which again, at every point that resistance mounts, are at once supported by political, cultural and military intervention. The dominant relationships are still, in this sense, of a city and a country, at the point of maximum exploitation (283-284).

Williams' closing chapter also echoes eco-critical ideas, where he deems it crucial for human survival that "work on the land will have to become more rather than less important and central", even though this idea "can be easily diverted into yet another rural threnody, or into a cynical fatalism" (300-301).

Bearing Williams' warning in mind, *Secret Gardens* may be seen as something other than a nostalgia for an Edenic past, but rather as offering suggestions for the future. Against the transversal borders imposed by the concentrationary archipelago, Belbin's book imagines a site of spatial resistance, a sort of Foucauldian heterotopia⁸ where two asylum seekers reformulate one of the most popular spaces in grassroots British culture, thus calling for a redefinition of national identity. Not by chance, *Secret Gardens* closes on an optimistic note: "Later, I will pick some vegetables. I will make soup for lunch. Tomorrow, if I am still here, I will plant some seeds" (Belbin 2011: 109).

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⁸ Foucault describes heterotopia as "a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy" (1986: 24).

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