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Dignity and Hope versus Humiliation and Despair

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GHOST WORKERS and the Territorial Imagination: Globalization, Irregular Migrant Labour and Cinematic Practice: A Case Study

John Berger called migration the quintessential experience of the twentieth century and there is every indication that this will be no less true of this century. The Brazilian photographer, Sebastiao Salgado, referred to those who have taken flight from their countries of origin or have been caught up in zones of conflict as 'globalized people'. His book, *Migrations* (2000), contains a vast number of images of people either on the move or trapped in arenas of violence. These images of a new diaspora, mainly taking shape in the poorest regions of the world, but also in Europe and the USA, help to document, in committed and dramatic fashion, labour, human movement and political economy. In a sense, the photographs contribute towards a framework for a newly emergent public imaginary, perhaps even a 'global' imaginary. In similar fashion, it will be argued that a number of recent cinematic fictions which deal with 'undocumented' migrants and people smuggling might also be used as resources for a narrative understanding of the new 'global civilization' brought about since 1990 by the combination of economic and cultural global capitalism and the mass migration of peoples across the world. Two recent films, released in the period from 2002 to 2007, will form the basis of the analysis. They are *My Migrant Soul* – a documentary about the death of a Bangladeshi migrant worker in a detention camp in Malaysia – and *Ghosts* – a dramatic fiction based upon the death of 23 Chinese 'irregular migrant' cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay, Lancashire.

Together, these films form part of a new story that is still in the process of construction, a narrative of profoundly changing spatialities produced by globalization and territorialized in global cities. The movement of people across borders (the underside of the movement of capital, goods, and information) has contributed to the scale of spatial and socio-economic inequality found in these cities.

If, as has been argued, over the past twenty years or so globalization has meant 'the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole' and 'the "global" increasingly exists as a cultural horizon within which we (in varying degrees) frame our existence', then how can narratives enable us to interpret and understand this? In particular, a response is needed to the neo-liberal economic 'genre of discourse' that has come to dominate the narration of the global, silencing other voices and foreclosing alternatives. As globalization in its current form extends its power and domination, offers itself as the model to which all others must conform, what part can cinematic narrative play in producing versions of the 'global' which are dialogical, unconditional, inherently ethical, resistant to appropriation, and openly engaged with the distant and the different?

The challenge facing any counter-hegemonic moment is to bring into accessible narrativity the primary conditions of its alternative practice, those elements which

can contribute to meaningful agency and empowerment. Neoliberalism proposes a 'global' world outside of which it, at times, seems as if it will be impossible to dwell, and it is a proposal which is gradually being sedimented in the contemporary cultural imaginary. It is this symbolic repertoire, and the stories that circulate from it, which sustain global capitalism ideologically, and that the emergent narratives, including stories not yet told or tellable, seek to challenge and resist.

The films, in their very different ways, tell the stories of the 'illegal', the undocumented – included in this category are those who have been refused asylum but remain in the host country. But each of the figures in these texts is also a carrier of stories, their own interleaved with others; stories which unfold and add layers in the context of the narrative process, to a point where they become 'documented', identifiable, subjects of value, rather than subject to value. All are commodified and humiliated, their bodies traded or raided, at some point, and there are no easy resolutions but the very fact of their being storied is *an act of witness itself, a movement towards the claiming, or reclaiming, of human dignity*. The focus in all the films is on the global pressures that drive migration (for example, 46.9% of the people in Africa live in extreme poverty – on less than \$1 a day), and on providing an inline of the lives of those who are the cause of 'moral panics' in the western media.

The films are, in all senses, about finding a language other than that which already forms the basis of existing representations: *the always already narrated*.

Together the films constitute an emergent, alternative narrative in which the 'modern geopolitical imagination' is subject to question. In the process a re-mapping is taking place, with the migrant as the symbolic focus of a shifting in the boundaries of imagined national, and, perhaps ultimately, global communities.

The films try to give space to some kind of agency and voice to the complex and multiple 'event' of political and economic migration, as part of a counter-hegemonic narrative gradually finding articulation within civil society – part of, what Paul Routledge calls, 'anti geopolitics'. My concern is with the ways in which the films challenge 'the representations imposed by political and economic elites upon the world and its different peoples that are deployed to serve their geopolitical interests'. The films are part of a conjuncture in which stories are beginning to be told which confront the representational and symbolic repertoire which sustains the corporate and financial interests of global capitalism ideologically through its re-scripting of global spaces. Above all, they can perhaps be seen as resources for transforming the experience of humiliation into human dignity.

As Michael Shapiro has shown, 'The dynamics associated with "globalization" reconfigure spaces at various levels, provoke cross-boundary flows of people, money, images and ideas, and put pressure on traditional territorial identities, as distinctions between local and global space become increasingly ambiguous'.

In short, the films represent the first steps in challenging – inventing another gesture, as Derrida put it - the dominant vocabularies and image resources circulated and referenced by the state, and its mediating agencies, to anchor its, perhaps limited, power in a culture of entitlement and identity. An anxious state is strategically displacing its insecurities onto the 'always already' displaced and seeking to renew and replenish the weakened territorial imagination of its increasingly alienated citizens.

Although the films derive and distil their narratives from many of the stock tropes of the migrant story, both manage, in Deleuze's wonderful phrase, to tear 'a real image from the clichés'. Unless the image of the refugee or irregular migrant (the terms are often conflated nowadays) in cinematic narrative is able to break through, exceed, the cliché, then there is the danger of the films simply becoming part of a wider, liberal media saturation and 'compassion fatigue': pity the poor immigrant. In the films that will be discussed there is a sense of something which implies a 'beyond of movement', 'an image that never stops growing in dimensions'. These resonate beyond the surfaces of the film's own construction, produce narratives which compel the viewer to trace and extend the meanings into a supplementary story filled with the implications, after-images, and incomplete tales of the originating text. Irregular migrants are seen very much as waste, as surplus, as in/human resources in the neoliberal global economy of consumption. The transnational migrant is disposable, devalued currency, once they have been used to service 'propertied nationals' [in Ginette Verstraete's phrase], whose identities are validated by an inclusive territoriality predicated upon the exclusion of the 'unbelonging'.

Since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990's, described as a turning point in the world's migratory order, patterns of diaspora have changed dramatically. Many of those, particularly in Africa, who had hoped for regime change from rebel or revolutionary movements, have now seen the triumph of free market capitalism and structural adjustment and, with the average income of 48% of those in sub-Saharan Africa less than \$1 per day, have sought by any means to reach Europe – only 500 miles by sea from the North African coast. Many of these will have links with already existing diasporas in Spain, Italy, France and the UK. Some are refugees but many are 'economic' migrants deemed 'illegal' by their intended host countries. Designations of 'legal' or 'illegal' are determined by the economic interests of the countries of potential immigration and they shift accordingly. With the enlargement of the EU in 2004 and 2007, many of the jobs considered undesirable by resident populations because of low pay, long hours and unacceptable conditions are now being filled by those who were 'illegal' before 2004. Nevertheless, legality brings with it certain rights, securities and bargaining power, so there are still a large number of jobs being carried out by so-called 'illegals'. The presence of such work and the demand for cheap and compliant labour has provided an incentive for people smugglers in many countries who charge exorbitant fees and very often supply unseaworthy vessels.

Since 1988, it is estimated that more than 11,000 people have died along the European frontiers or in attempting to reach Europe. These figures are taken from press reports of leading European newspapers and are likely, therefore, to be a conservative estimate. People smuggling implies diasporic chains and links throughout Europe. This is the negative side of diaspora, of course, but the very existence of co-ethnics or co-religionists in the European and Asian diaspora often supplies the motivation for both forced and economic migration. The tragedies of the 58 Chinese deaths in the container lorry at Dover in 2000, and the 23 cockle pickers at Morecambe Bay in February 2004 received prominent attention in the UK media but the majority of those drowned at sea in attempting to cross from North Africa remain totally anonymous. These deaths occur on an almost daily basis and, despite all the fences and border patrols of so-called 'Fortress Europe', will continue while people live in poverty and seek a better life. 57% of the Latin American, and two-

fifths of the developing world, economy is informal, and it is estimated that, by 2020, 75% of the sub-Saharan African economy will also be in this situation.

In considering this dramatic change in the world's migration order, I am using the term DIASPORA in the wide, inclusive sense used by Khachig Tölölyan, the editor of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*. He sees the journal as covering the 'semantic domain' that includes the terms immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest worker, exile community, overseas community and ethnic community – "the vocabulary of transnationalism". As we know, 'irregular migration' has increased exponentially in the past twenty years or so, partly because of the extensive growth of conflict in different parts of the world and a radical transformation in patterns of inequality, but mainly, of course, because nation-states are constantly changing the rules about who can legally cross their borders. We also know that, historically, migrants have been a force for dynamism and change and have contributed to diasporic formations in many parts of the world. Two classical examples are the Jewish diaspora produced by persecution and flight from oppression, and the overseas Chinese migration generated by trade and voluntary displacement. Other formations have followed one or both of these models but today's global flexible labour market has produced a new challenge for existing diasporas as new, and often 'irregular', migrants enter different countries. As Zolberg has argued, 'exit constitutes one of the most effective weapons the weak can wield against oppression or exploitation'.

Oppression and exploitation continue to 'push' migration and the demand for cheap labour still exercises its traditional 'pull' factor. However, because many diasporic communities – however unstable and conflicted their origins – today have a relatively settled place in their 'host' nations, the influx of 'irregular' co-ethnics can present problems of recognition and acceptance. If you are a resident and citizen, one of the 'included', you do not necessarily want to risk 'contamination' by contact with those deemed 'illegal', even if they share a country of origin. Hence, the 'irregular' migrant is *in* but not *of* what is, increasingly becoming, a fragmented and fractured diaspora. Diasporas cut across static, territorial boundaries and effectively questioned the logic of nation-states but in order to function they had to operate within the codes and laws of this same logic. However, as the films under discussion attempt to open up spaces for the images and voices of the 'irregular' to be seen and heard, it is worth bearing in mind something that Derrida said in respect of the *san papiers* (undocumented migrants living in St Bernard's church in Paris). They lack 'papers' which govern rights under a particular, determinate law constructed to 'manage migration' in the interests of the labour needs of a nation-state; a nation-state indifferent to the poverty of many nations in the developing world or to oppression which produces demands for asylum:

All the most urgent questions of our time, everywhere that...millions of 'undocumented immigrants' (san papiers), of 'homeless (san domiciles fixes), call out for another international law, another border politics, another humanitarian politics, indeed a humanitarian commitment that effectively operates beyond the interests of Nation-States [Derrida in Thomson, p. 100]

It might be argued that the practice and experience of diaspora is precisely that which effectively operates beyond the territorial imaginaries of the nation-state and upon this example a new international law could be modelled which reflects the currencies of globalisation and a potentiality for a cosmopolitan sense of humanity. I say this because once, those who are now living in transnational, diasporic

communities, were also like those 'growing sections of humankind [who] are no longer representable inside the nation-state' [Agamben] today. The 'no longer representable' are what Agamben refers to as *homo sacer*, bare humankind excluded from the polity, depoliticized and living in 'zones of exemption'. One of the functions of the films I am discussing is to make 'representable' these excluded. What I do not have time to consider is something that will be familiar to many of you – the ways in which the nation-state defines itself against a real, or imagined, enemy, binds its citizens by processes of exclusion of 'others', non-people, and exercises its sovereignty through this mechanism. Thus, in Agamben's terms, the irregular migrant is subject to the 'force-of-law' in the state of exception but actually exists outside the sovereign law. Value, meaning, worth and dignity (distinction) are all distributed within the field of sovereignty whereas the irregular migrant is subject to humiliation, abuse and detention (in some cases) in a 'zone of indistinction'. S/he is included only by means of exclusion. A new border politics, sensitive to ideas of responsibility and belonging which are postnational and cosmopolitan, would render obsolete the words of a poem by Mehmet al Assad, an asylum-seeker:

*That which you are denying us
We should never have
Had to ask for*

The words are a 'challenge to the boundedness of territory' which, I would claim, is the original motivation for diaspora.

I want to use a concept taken from Giorgio Agamben's book, *The Remnants of Auschwitz*, to help introduce the films at the level of their *forms*. The concept is that of the *witness*. It is especially relevant to *My Migrant Soul* and *Ghosts*, two films about death and migrant labour. There are survivor testimonies which shape both films but these have at their core what Agamben calls a 'lacuna: the survivors bore witness to something it is impossible to bear witness to'. Of course, I am not comparing these particular tragedies to Auschwitz, but trying to show how two films respond to the representational and aesthetic challenges posed by systemic humiliation and death. In a way, they seek to define an absence: to make us listen to, see what is unsaid, what is unseen. The films occupy a position equivalent, perhaps, to a third party but, at the same time, reflecting upon a person, or persons, who 'has lived through something, who has experienced an event from the beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it'. [AGAMBEN, *Remnants*, p17]. No one was brought to trial for the death of the young man, Babu, in *My Migrant Soul*, and only minor figures were prosecuted after the tragedy featured in *Ghosts*. Agamben says that what precisely concerns the survivor is 'everything that places a human action beyond the law, radically withdrawing it from the Trial' (17). Law, he says, is about 'judgement' not justice or truth. Trials would not overcome the problems represented by the death of 23 Chinese cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay (*Ghosts*) or the death of Babu (in *My Migrant Soul*): 'the law did not exhaust the problem'. Agamben locates, what he calls, 'a zone of irresponsibility..... that is situated not beyond good and evil but, rather, so to speak, before them: the 'terrifying, unsayable and unimaginable banality of evil', [Arendt 1992: 252].

'The survivor's vocation is to remember; he cannot *not* remember', [Agamben, 26].

Testimony, Agamben says, contains a lacuna and he quotes Elie Wiesel (a camp survivor): 'Those who have not lived through the experience will never know, those who have will never tell; not really, not completely..... The past belongs to the

dead....' [Wiesel, 1975: 314]. Primo Levi writes of those – the drowned – the complete witnesses, as the rule, with the survivors as the exception, producing a discourse 'on behalf of third parties' – 'the destruction brought to an end ... was not told by anyone, just as no one ever returned to describe his own death'. We speak in their stead, by proxy. The value of their testimony, Agamben says, lies in what it lacks, 'something that cannot be borne witness to'. Survivors, like the films, 'bear witness to a missing testimony' – bearing witness on the impossibility of bearing witness – they 'have no story'. [p35/36].

If it is not possible to testify from the outside, or to testify from the inside, can film produce a testimonial effect which is 'paradoxically, both inside and outside'? Can film enact the connection between the dead and the living? Agamben argues that the threshold of indistinction between inside and outside perhaps explains the structure of testimony and, I am arguing, 'founds the possibility' of the films. (36) 'This is why what is borne witness to cannot already be language or writing. It can only be something to which no one has borne witness – the sound that arises from the lacuna – the non-language to which language responds, in which language is born'. Hence film is not *about* anything in any simplistic sense but it is the disjunction between two impossibilities of bearing witness: the 'voice of something, or someone that cannot bear witness' – the 'trace of that which no one has borne witness', which the film believes itself to transcribe (39).

The main focus of this analysis will be based upon another concept of Agamben and it is taken from his seminal work, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998). For Agamben the locus classicus of the 'zone of exemption' or the state of exception is the prison camp which, today, we might extend to the experience of the detention camp used in many countries to hold irregular migrants (1500 people are currently held in such centres in the UK). Babu in *My Migrant Soul* dies in such a camp, alongside 33 other Bangladeshi detainees. Arguably, even those irregular migrants who are not part of the detention estate ('zones of indistinction...need not necessarily be marked by razor wire') are nevertheless living, by analogy, in a similar state of exception by the forms of humiliation suffered and their exclusion from rights. They are waste, surplus, the detritus, and the 'no longer human' of our contemporary, globalized world: speechless, invisible, unheard; ex-nominated and ex-communicated.

What is the role of cinematic media? Is it simply polemical or something more complex and subtle? Arguably, their role is to articulate and visualize, to image-in those outside existing regimes of discourse by dint of their exclusion from the territorial imagination

My Migrant Soul (2002) was directed, produced, written, edited and filmed by Yasmine Kabir, a Bangladeshi film-maker. It won five international awards, and was used at the Fair Trade conference in UK, and by Amnesty, Oxfam, and a number of NGO's. The director was motivated by a newspaper article, 'Death of an Exploited Migrant Worker in Malaysia' to contact the family of the worker, Shahjahan Babu, and to work with them to produce the documentary film using extensive interviews with his mother, his sister and his niece, intercut with voice-overs from Babu's audio cassette tapes sent from Malaysia, together with extracts from his letters, snatches of songs and poems, and pictures of him and co-workers from Malaysia. The tapes, the letters sent home to mother and sister resemble the unconscious preparation for bearing witness referred to by Primo Levi [Agamben, 27]. They help to make the tragic experience imaginable.

The film begins in black and white and re-enacts a process involving Bangladeshi workers engaged by an agency (called Paradise International) and seen in buses preparing them for a migrant journey. It is a process similar to that experienced by Babu. There are also shots of construction sites, hostels, and spectacular, high-rise buildings in Malaysia, one bearing an American flag: the sources and products of global capitalism.

The film turns to colour and uses an asynchronous structure which seeks to stage the progression Babu made from employment at a construction site, through losing his job, having his passport seized and replaced by false documents, to living and becoming casualised and 'sold' from agent to agent. It also charts his living in squalid, overcrowded accommodation, with scarce and poor food, his illness and final death in a detention camp, with 33 fellow Bangladeshi 'illegals'. One of a million plus migrants in Malaysia, half of whom who were (or had been made), 'illegal', Babu had been subjected to exploitation by unscrupulous agents in Bangladesh and Malaysia. He is the 'ghost' in the film, present posthumously through word and image and through the eyes and voices of his family – even though, as Agamben reminds us, 'no one ever returned to describe his own death'. As the director says, his was one of countless similar stories of 'surplus labour' in the developing world 'confronted by the forces of globalisation – a force beyond their comprehension; one that extracted without giving much in return – a case of stark exploitation'. Babu, like so many others, had paid an extortionate fee to get work in Malaysia - a fee which had impoverished his family - but was rounded up as an 'illegal' because he did not have the necessary documents (his passport was held by his recruiting agent and he was given a false identity). Amnesty International found that 71 illegal immigrants died in Malaysian detention camps in a period from 1992-1997.

As Babu said, just before his death, 'In a marketplace, like fish and vegetables, humans are being bought and sold'. A chilling thought, 200 years after the end of the slave trade: 'In the age of globalisation', Kabir says, 'there are many forms of slavery, and this is one of them', 'a personal journey of migration that relied on emotions'. [quotes from Times of India, 28 Dec 2002]. 240,000 Bangladeshis left their homes in search of work in 1993. As Arshia Sattar says [in Info Change film forum], Babu's death in a detention camp in Kuala Lumpur – one of many hundreds of an ever-expanding detention estate in prosperous countries – is treated as a human rights violation, but his plight is symptomatic of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers throughout the world. Sattar asks, 'what are we doing about growing poverty, diminishing avenues of traditional employment and the fact that humans who provide labour are now seen as yet another renewable source? The recruitment agencies that promise better futures and end up being nothing more or less than slave traders for the globalised world economy are also indicted in this system. Surely the issues of migrant labour cannot be seen as local problems, contained within immigration laws and work permits. Since the new transnational economies are supported by migrant (and now 'offshore') labour these are issues that the global community needs to take on and legislate on economic as well as humanitarian terms'.

The story of *My Migrant Soul* is told in, what I call, the *displaced, first person* with the film itself taking the form of a third party. In Babu's words, from one of his last letters, 'This migrant soul of mine no one can recognise. I sail from port to port but do not find the golden boat'. The film is shaped as an epitaph, an obituary and a witness. In joining the diaspora of the poor, Babu has broken up, what has been

called, the birth-nation-state trinity (of sovereignty) and, ironically, it is death which will return him to the land of his birth.

My argument is that the flexible labour market policies of the UK and other European economies are producing a new form of diaspora (perhaps *incipient* or *emergent* might be better terms) as well as presenting new challenges to already existing/settled diasporas in countries of immigration. My focus has mainly been on the UK. However, the film *Migrant Soul* shows how marked shifts in migration regimes have impacted upon exploited workers in Malaysia specifically but also elsewhere in the newly industrializing countries. We see the conspicuous contrast between icons of wealth (buildings) and the lack of security, poor and humiliating living conditions, unsafe and exploitative working conditions of the migrant. Initially legal, Babu has his passport confiscated, replaced by false papers which virtually enslave him to the 'gang masters', deprive him of any actual or potential rights and prevent him from seeking redress or justice. Poet, musician, son, brother, uncle, he is forced by poverty into a stripped identity, reduced to the single dimension of illegal worker. Unsentimentally, the film uses a range of techniques – epistolary and audio – to humanize and contextualize what would otherwise be yet another migration statistic. It is a love story as well as a story of transnational mobility; it is about the lived experience of migration and the pressures and motivations which produce it: strategies of survival. Both of the films are located within accelerated migration flows since the late 1980s, especially what has been called transmigration or transnationalism in which 'migrants construct and reconstitute their lives as simultaneously embedded in more than one society' [Projecting Migration, p5]

As has already been said, diasporas have historically been developed from either forced migration (the classic example is Jewish) or voluntary migration (the classic example being Chinese). Today, the distinction is still clear in cases of war, repression and evident persecution, but globalisation has blurred the distinction in respect of poverty and life chances. The latter are clearly motivations in *My Migrant Soul* and *Ghosts*. Remittances, as you know, are a key feature of any diasporic community, as is increasingly circular migration and transnationalism. Historically, diasporas have been characterised by a 'myth' or vision of return whereas costs, transportation, shifting cultural practices and persistent problems in the 'homeland' often prevented this. Today, new forms of affordable transport, new electronic modes of communication and satellite technologies have enabled circularity and transnationality to flourish. These, in turn, are changing the nature, shape and condition of diaspora – even definitions perhaps.

Some existing diasporas – e.g. Polish or Chinese – may have difficulties in responding to their new, ethnically affiliated compatriots. They may also be divided by language use or region (Hong Kong Chinese predominate in the UK). The settled may not wish to accommodate or network with 'illegals' for example.

EU migrant workers (since 2004) are shown to have a complex mix of intentions – many see themselves as short-term, others wish to settle, some are undecided. Those from China (with capital-raising as the primary motive) featured in *Ghosts*, clearly see themselves as returning once they have accumulated sufficient funds. Their choices are circumscribed anyway by their irregular immigration status.

Whether 'legal' or 'illegal', many in the new diasporas are forced to work in informal employment. Deregulated labour markets produce flexible and casualized labour – low wage sector, unregulated/unprotected work and the so-called informal economy.

Global conditions and global/local networks – diasporas - enable migration and are, perhaps, the driving force of immigration. People smuggling is one, perhaps rather dramatic, example of such networks and this can lead to ethnic segmentation and ethnic enclaves through labour recruiters. As can be seen from the films under discussion, this leads to 'marginalisation of undocumented immigrants and the weakening of patterns of solidarity within ethnic communities', [Vastie, p11]. It becomes difficult for diasporic communities and networks to support the undocumented because of restrictive policies, thus social capital is limited and isolation experienced. Disembedded and unable to mobilize any resources from diasporic networks, with no refuge or protection from hostile locals or exploitative work patterns, or the corruption of co-ethnics, the irregular lack any ability to establish authority over their circumstances or future and often display classic symptoms of abjection. They are very low in the hierarchy of opportunity, part of a docile and compliant workforce, with almost no agency and no bargaining power.

There is a central contradiction in the UK which impacts upon the experience of diasporas and that is the growing needs of a *flexible labour market* combined with the desire to closely monitor the employment of migrants for immigration control purposes. [RUHS & Anderson, Compas]

Not only the undocumented suffer from this contradiction as many legal immigrants also find themselves in low-wage occupations: including hospitality, agriculture, food processing and catering. These include the informal sectors of these occupations and the formal also. There are obvious advantages to any employers of undocumented labour, especially as the penalties for breaches are so low, inspection extremely under-resourced and chances of being caught are limited. The undocumented worker is a compliant worker; he/she will perform and not complain – work long hours in poor, unsafe conditions, with low wages, especially if they have false documentation or somebody else's papers. To its extreme embarrassment, the British government announced yesterday (Monday, 12 November) that 5000 irregular migrant workers were employed in its own security authority industry!!

Labour market flexibility means: flexibility in real wages; working practices and recruitment practices (hiring and firing); minimum wage, although the latter is often flouted. The employers of low-level work are the main beneficiaries.

GHOSTS (2006)

A dramatised fiction (with documentary style elements or features) which is constructed around the imagined 'back story' of the drowning of 23 Chinese cockle pickers in Morecambe Bay on 5 February, 2004.

The film was directed by the internationally renowned documentary maker, Nick Broomfield, based upon the story by a Taiwanese investigative journalist, HSIAO-HUNG PAI, who worked under cover as an undocumented worker.

In China, as you know, there has been very extensive internal migration – the majority of which is rural to urban migration, with several million living illicitly in the cities. The rapid but very uneven economic boom of recent years, mainly in the South East with its proximity to Hong Kong, has left many stranded in the rural economy, while some in the city may also seek to emigrate. Both tight exit controls and increasing immigration restrictions in the UK make emigration a perilous journey.

Broomfield uses the story of one female migrant, Ai Qin, from Fujian province, a young, single, parent, to structure his narrative around. Most of the characters are played by non-professional actors, some playing themselves. Ai Qin, herself, was an undocumented migrant in the UK for eight years.

The film uses a number of documentary techniques – hand held cameras, plus low and natural lighting. It opens at the end, so to speak, with the tragedy itself of the workers caught on the cockle beds at night by the rising tide. There is a sense of anxiety and fear – of being beaten up by white residents and competing workers. They are working at night and in appalling weather conditions because the ghosts (white locals) will not accept such conditions.

The film opens in silence and the sense of a vast space of land and the seascape – bleached of objects and light. The human figures are diminished by the sheer scale of the framing. This is a metaphor that runs through the film, of people being humiliated, reduced in scale – Agamben's *homo sacer*, bare life. The working conditions are bleak and isolated. The workers are engulfed by the sea, marooned on the white van, with desperate cries for help but voiceless in the sense that they do not even know the telephone code for the emergency services.

This isolation and sense of claustrophobia is a motif running through the film. We see the workers crowded into their living accommodation, cramped, narrow, with no space. They are enclosed, with no means to go out and also fearful of being exposed, *sans papiers*. The transport that takes them to work and the workplace itself reinforce this idea of containment and separation – the state of exemption - and echoes the enclosures experienced by Ai Qin on her journey concealed in lorries (it also evokes the 58 Chinese suffocated to death in a lorry at Dover in 2000).

They are separated by their status, their distance from home, and their language. They are a diaspora within a diaspora, excluded from and by the existing UK Chinese diaspora.

Controlled by their recruiter, Lin, by the agency, by their false documentation and by their indebtedness to money lenders in China (Ai Qin's journey cost \$25,000), they submit to exploitative rents, low wages and long hours. They are in a no exit situation, virtually enslaved and completely voiceless. Because work in food processing and agriculture is casual, temporary and seasonal, they are tempted by the higher wages and non-seasonal nature of cockle picking work. It is made clear to Ai Qin that it is that or a massage parlour in London – one pace away from prostitution. All of this is seen against an early scene of light, colour and sound in Ai Qin's hometown, as she sings as she rides her bicycle with her infant son on the back. As a small town worker, earning £30 a month and a son to maintain on her own, she is driven to migrate by the prospects of earning lots of money. This economic reality breaks up the harmonious scene and on her return to China we see that her son, now five years old son, does not know who she is (this was actually Ai Qin's real experience filmed). Her journey is traced by plane, road, and sea and by means of a map. In Belgrade, she is seen in a container lorry, sealed in with other 'illegals' of many different nationalities. The particular/the individual story opens up on a wider and symptomatic narrative.

She is met by a Chinese gang master in London, treated roughly and is forced to accompany him. She is given a mattress in a room with five other people (there are

14 in the house), one small bathroom, and charged £25 a week rent. She is sold a work permit, issued to someone else, for £250, and is paid £100 for a 40-hour week in food processing; food destined for Sainsbury's. It is made clear that the middlemen are simply small-time 'brokers' and that the real power lies elsewhere, especially in the supermarkets. Each worker is 'bricked in' by their homeland loan indebtedness – all had come to provide a better life for those at home.

The film operates on the basis of a set of representative sequences – accommodation, workplace, personal anxiety, local abuse, and a police raid – each designed as a symptomatic snapshot.

As the Chinese workers leave their small market town in East Anglia for Morecambe Bay, they embark on a journey against a green landscape, with romantic music; both illusory signifiers of transition to better conditions. They arrive to find squalid accommodation and only two small rooms to accommodate them all. However, there is one more, fleeting sign of a beautiful seascape, with a rainbow and clear light marking a new beginning they hope. It is only a prelude, however, to the final tragedy on the cockle beds where they are allocated the poorest stretch of beach to work, paid little for their collections and harassed and bullied violently by white locals, themselves at the lower end of the hierarchy of employment opportunity.

Twenty three workers died, a small number survived. A closing caption tells us that the victims' families were struggling to pay off their debts in China – up to £500,000 between them. A final caption says 'Most Chinese illegals will never see their families again'. Their lives will remain cheap and invisible, ghosts in the flexible labour machine.

Most of the survivors and three rescuers were arrested and questioned by police for a month. Lin Liangren – the gang master - was jailed for 14 years. The Gang Masters Licensing Act of 2004 will do little to alter anything.

As the *Guardian* review aptly put it, the film gives the sense of 'being inside looking out'. 'Looking out', maybe, but unable to make contact with others in the Chinese diaspora. It was only after the tragedy that Min Quan, the Chinese Monitoring Project in the UK, became involved. The Chinese community, otherwise, was mainly silent. One Chinese artist told Hsiao-Hung Pai: 'They were responsible for their own deaths – who told them to be smuggled here!' That is why we cannot make any assumptions about homogeneity or solidarity in any specific diaspora and why, in the current state of globalization, diaspora studies needs to address itself to issues that I raised earlier in quoting Derrida: cosmopolitanism, hospitality, transnational legislation and, above all, the recognition that nobody is illegal and that human dignity is a non-negotiable, international right.

I make no apology for ending with a series of quotations from Agamben's 'The Camp as the *Nomos* of the Modern' as these stress the urgency of the issues raised by both films that '*the camp is the space that is opened when the state of exception becomes the rule.*' Just to repeat an earlier point, the camp is not necessarily a space enclosed by barbed wire, but one inhabited by people reduced to bare life, a spatial condition outside the normal order: the poor, the disinherited, the excluded. As Agamben argues tellingly, 'In the modern era, misery and exclusion are not only economic or social conditions but eminently political categories'. In other words, humiliation is a political issue and Babu and the Chinese cockle pickers were poor, miserable and excluded mainly because they lacked agency, rights or bargaining power – all

political factors. The nation-state wants to create an undivided people ('British jobs for British people', the Prime Minister said recently) by eliminating totally the people that are excluded, those whose presence can no longer be tolerated. Logically, if there are no excluded, then there can be no inclusion anxiety. Agamben argues convincingly that the entire population of the developing world is being transformed into 'bare life' and it is that bare life that seeks entry, by any means, to the developed world which, in turn, refuses, humiliates and excludes it.

As Dirk Hoerder argues, in his magisterial book *Cultures in Contact* (2002), new migration systems have arisen in recent years because of the gross inequalities and disparities between advanced capitalist societies and the 'developing world' and from migrant decision-making in the context of internationalized, segmented and increasingly 'flexible' labour markets in structures of, what Hoerder calls, 'global apartheid'. As I said right at the beginning, the challenge for diaspora studies is to make sense of the rapid moves back and forward between societies of origin and receiving societies, and virtual communication between movers and persisters (irregular or otherwise), which allow migrants to operate effectively across cultural spaces, to obtain a 'transnational or transcultural social competence' and bring about the potentiality of a belonging beyond the nation, of multiple identities and transcultural everyday lives. Seen positively, diasporas can be seen as the advanced guard of a 'democracy to come' (Derrida) based upon free mobility, traversing identities, and travelling diversity in which the territorial imagination gives way to the global imagination, the global imaginary I mentioned in the opening paragraph: 'Why should a person who can walk on either of two roads cut himself from one – and leave only one? What if that single one is cut off as well?' (Mr Ang, an Overseas Chinese in Malaysia, cited in Nonini: 'Shifting Identities, Positioned Imaginaries: Transnational Traversals and Reversals by Malaysian Chinese')

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