

# “Now, Little Ship, Look Out!”

Suvendrini Perera

We have left the land and have embarked. We have burned our bridges behind us. [...] Now, little ship, look out!  
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

In Isaac Julien’s film installation *WESTERN UNION: Small Boats* (2007), we face the in-between in its multiple dimensions.<sup>1</sup> Julien’s images of Libyan migrants, “clandestines” as they are called, who have voyaged to contemporary Sicily, are layered with strong visual echoes of the transatlantic slave trade, and at the same time layered against the visuals of Palermo in Luchino Visconti’s 1963 film, *The Leopard*. What links these three historical phases is the topic of adaptation, the struggle to become new people, and of being between histories, between times, between places, between elements, bound up in the movements of humans, goods, and capital. An emblematic image of a figure looking out from the slave dungeon on the West African coast speaks of the possibility, at least, of the movement from darkness into the light, from the confinement of land to the open sea, with all its unknown promises and terrors.

This is the exhilaration and warning that animates the Nietzschean epigraph I have chosen for this chapter. The same epigraph is also one of the points of departure in Paul Gilroy’s foundational text, *The Black Atlantic*,<sup>2</sup> with its re-mapping of Western modernity from the vantage point of the Middle Passage: the instant of embarkation, the leaving behind the limits of the known, and those bearings that signify the border between land and sea. The passage speaks of terror, but also of possibility in the instant of being unmoored, of casting away, in all its ambiguities.

The frameworks I have been working with for the last few years center on the ocean as a space through which bodies move and are transported, on the technologies that enable this movement, and the shifting geographies, economies and ecologies these movements in turn produce.<sup>3</sup> The ocean becomes visible not simply as a surface, capricious, unknowable, elemental, over which these operations take place, but as made up of multiple historical and political currents and flows; of ecologies of complex media; oceans as characterized by depths as well surfaces, as sites constituted by sedimented layers, by spectral genealogies, iconographies, and epistemologies as well as constituted by changing geographies, within which multiple forms of the traffic and movement of labor and commodities take place.

1 <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1382?locale=en>

2 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

3 Suvendrini Perera, *Australia and the Insular Imagination: Beaches, Borders, Boats and Bodies* (New York: Palgrave, 2009).

Julien, whose early work focused on the Afro-American diaspora has more recently begun to imagine voyaging across time and across place. *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) is an immersive film installation whose starting point was the scandal of Morecambe Bay 2004, in which twenty-three Chinese migrant laborers from Fujian Province drowned in the rising tides as they picked cockle off the coast of northwest England. In Julien's installation, Mazu, the sea goddess of the southern China, floats between scenes of past and present, threading together these historical and contemporary voyages for survival, an aspiration summed up in the term *better live*, with its multiple resonances—as in "better live than dead," or the perennial aspiration of migrants, on move in search of better lives.

The installation centers on a poem that Julien commissioned from Wang Ping:

We know the [death] tolls ...  
 We know the methods: walk, swim fly,  
 metal container, back of a lorry, ship's hold  
 We know how they died: starved, raped,  
 dehydrated, drowned, suffocated, homesick,  
 heartsick, worked to death, working to death  
 We know we may end up in the same boat.█

The installation puts contemporary African and Chinese migrants who are looking for better lives in the same boat, locating them within the framework of the movement of global capital, despite their historical differences. The title, *Western Union*, alludes to the disembodied mobility of capital across space, seemingly free of the complicated business associated with the movement of bodies, in all their materiality: the intractable corporealities that must be squeezed into the holds of boats, stacked into the cavities of airplanes; their inconvenient need to inhale and exhale, and their unrelenting routines of ingestion and excretion; the inconvenience of bodies that are given to drowning, freezing, starving, suffocating, and infinite other ways of not arriving, of failing to comply with the aspiration/injunction, "Better Live".

I begin with this discussion of Julien's work to introduce the notion of the passage as a process. My interest is in the processes and the modalities of illegal passages, or flights, and the media and technologies that enable them—what I have elsewhere termed "survival media."

## Critical Genealogies

Faced by the daily toll of deaths in the Mediterranean, the European Union recently sought to dissociate itself from the violence in which illegal migrants are caught by invoking a selective history of the slave trade, and to take on the mantle of abolitionism. In this narrative, migrants and refugees became subjects whom the EU aspires to "rescue" from their traffickers by the use of military force, by "bombing the boats."█

This EU narrative echoes the stance taken by the Australian government. For at least the last decade, Australia has managed to combine the rhetoric of "saving lives" with ever more hardline military tactics of deterrence and punishment. Implicit in Australia's actions is the same rationale articulated by the European Union: that is, one that places states in the role of opposition to that of demonized "people smugglers" as the contemporary heirs of slavers, whereas, in fact, states themselves are deeply implicated with those they term people smugglers. In place of this self-serving, selective, and ahistorical narrative adopted by the governments of Australia and Europe, what can be learned from critical genealogies of the Atlantic slave trade, focused on the technologies, practices, and artifacts of a traffic that, in the movements of empire, labor, capital, and value that it set in place, is constitutive of today's geopolitical, economic, and globalized racial order? Even as we refuse to gloss over or ignore the specific forms of horrific violence inflicted on those abducted and forcibly rendered into slavery, how can we consider its connection with people now impelled into flight by starvation, war, and insecurity, forces produced by these same logics of empire and colonization? "Choice" or "agency" as deployed by the group of academics who protested the EU position are, I submit, inadequate terms in which to describe the forces that drive many people into desperate acts of escape. Rather, many of those now in flight explicitly invoke the conditions produced by these same forces of colonization and empire in the age of the slave trade as responsible for their present dislocation and dispersal.

Martina Tazzioli notes in a recent commentary in the journal *Radical Philosophy* that knowledge production about the movements of illegalized migrants is

4 Cited in Andrew Shiue, review of *Ten Thousand Waves*, by Issac Julien, *Cinevue*, accessed June 1, 2017, <http://www.asiancinevision.org/review-isaac-julien-ten-thousand-waves/>.

5 See the response to the EU statement by over three hundred scholars of migration on the site *Open Democracy*. See the

letter, "Twisting the 'Lessons of History' to Authorise Unjustifiable Violence: The Mediterranean Crisis," May 20, 2015, at <https://www.opendemocracy.net/beyond-slavery/twisting-%E2%80%9Clessons-of-history%E2%80%9D-to-excuse-unjustifiable-violence-mediterranean-refugee-c#.VVxltHK9kj8.twitter>.

couched largely in the mode of enumeration—of counting (border deaths in particular), of sorting (for example separating the “genuine refugees” from the bad “economic migrants”), and channeling; and through the entwined, not opposite, technologies of security and humanitarianism, where surveilling/monitoring on the one hand and rescuing/protecting on the other operate within a governmentality that encompasses states, transnational bodies, and NGOs alike.<sup>6</sup> Apart from such forms of knowledge-making, how might critical genealogies of transportation, trafficking, the enforced and violent movement of bodies, and the technologies that enable them, reframe an understanding of contemporary refugee passages?

In a stirring piece on slavery’s afterlife, Stephen Dillon identifies the artifacts of contemporary punishment and imprisonment—such as manacles, shackles, bars, coffles, the holding pen, the barracoon—as forms in which slavery leaves its marks in the present on racialized bodies. In Dillon’s words, a “necropolitics of slavery haunt the biopolitics of neoliberalism” and its landscape of incarceration and impoverishment of racialized populations; indeed, the logics and technologies of slavery “not only haunt but also possess the present.”<sup>7</sup> Is it possible to extend Dillon’s argument from the prisons of settler colonies in North America to globalized economies, and their complex relation to illegalized passages and the traffic of peoples; to the drag and pull of cheap labor and human capital to the fringes of the global north, their imbrication in global orders of value and waste, war and peace, living and dying? In the technologies of transport, trade, exchange, warehousing, corralling, enclosing, detaining, punishing, and killing that make up today’s illegalized passages, slavery’s pasts seem to be reflected back as if in some submarine mirror. In such returns, today’s desperate migrations sound the possibilities of untapped historical depths, even as they track new geographies across the frontiers of the global north.

While terminologies of “haunting” and “afterlife” are widely used in writings on slavery’s role in the present,<sup>8</sup> critical genealogies of sea trafficking also reflect back on our still-unfolding understandings of the era initiated by the Atlantic slave trade. Michelle Wright critiques the use of “middle passage epistemologies” as promoting a static understanding of today’s diasporic complexities.<sup>9</sup> Can thinking “middle passage epistemologies” in the context of contemporary globalized diasporas forced by war, displacement, grinding poverty, hunger, and impelled by global demands for labor and human capital, reflect back on our understandings of the former?

## Disposable Lives

In the spectral genealogies with which I began, lives are weighed in the balance and found disposable, valueless. A story cited in a 2015 article published in the *Guardian* tells of a woman aboard a passage across the Mediterranean begging for water for her child to drink. The Captain of the boat responds to her plea by flinging the infant into the sea where, he said, there was plenty of water.<sup>10</sup> Other incidents tell of asylum seekers being dropped into the sea far from the coast, directed to sink or swim, or abandoned on boats without food or water as the crew make their escape. In the Bay of Bengal in 2015, as many as eight thousand Rohingya refugees from Myanmar were stranded in the Bay of Bengal and along the edges of the Indian Ocean, left to drift or die, with Thailand, Indonesia, and Malaysia adopting turn-back policies for boats that Australia itself had put in place some years ago. These covert and overt policies are directly implicated in the avoidable deaths and deliberate killings of refugees and illegal migrants.

As the historian Marcus Rediker writes, “The slaver is a ghost ship sailing on the edge of modern consciousness.”<sup>11</sup> Such accounts have prompted a number of commentators to recall the case of the *Zong* massacre in 1781, a notorious incident in which slaves were thrown overboard by the crew when the ship ran out of drinking water on the middle passage between Accra, in what is now Ghana, and Jamaica. After arriving in Jamaica, the ship’s owners made an insurance claim for their lost property, that is, the lives of potential slaves. The case became notorious and is often taken to have inspired J. M. W. Turner’s famous painting, originally known as *The Slave Ship*. The *Zong* incident represented a landmark case in which the value of slave lives as property was first brought before the law.

- 6 Martina Tazzioli, “The Politics of Counting and the Scene of Rescue: Border Deaths in the Mediterranean,” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 192 (July/August 2015).
- 7 Stephen Dillon, “Possessed by Death: The Neoliberal-Carceral State, Black Feminism, and the Afterlife of Slavery,” *Radical History Review*, no. 112 (Winter 2012): 115.
- 8 See Ian Baucomb, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Dillon, “Possessed by Death”; Saidya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2007); and Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

- 9 Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press 2015).
- 10 Philip Hoare, “The Sea Does Not Care,” *Guardian*, April 21, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/21/the-sea-does-not-care-wretched-history-migrant-voyages-mediterranean-tragedy>.
- 11 Rediker, *Slave Ship*, 14.

It is against the backdrop of the *Zong* that Saidiya Hartman writes of the contemporary relationship between death, profit, and capitalism:

Today we might describe it as collateral damage. ...Death wasn't a goal of its own but just a by-product of commerce, which had the last effect of making negligible all the millions of lives lost. Incidental death occurs when life has no normative value, when no humans are involved, when the population is in, effect, seen as already dead. Unlike the concentration camp, the gulag, and the killing field, which had as their intended end the extermination of a population, the Atlantic trade created millions of corpses, but as a corollary to the making of commodities. ...Death was simply a part of the workings of the trade.<sup>12</sup>

The lives of the cockle pickers of Morecombe Bay are part of this same pattern of the "workings of the trade," disposable lives tossed in the tidal movements of global labor. Their unfinished passages are caught up in capital's unpredictable ebbs and flows. Julien's *Ten Thousand Waves* compulsively restages their unfinished passages in that instant between their dreams of return and their inundation.

Gazing at Turner's painting, the visual theorist Nicholas D. Mirzoeff, too, reflects on that instant of suspension between the living death of the slave ship and the moment of fleeting freedom from it: "In turbulent water, an African body thrown off the slave ship is suspended between life and death, between the beginning of enslavement and a temporary freedom. The fish, birds and the sea monster Typhon swarm around them. What if, I wonder, they are not eating but trying to support them, to keep the weighted body at the surface? These little fish and gulls are not flesh eaters. Those are the slavers."<sup>13</sup>

## Oceanic Ecologies

Let us end by staying in this state of suspension, the in-between of life and death, slavery and freedom; remaining within the incomplete passage by referencing the work of an artist whose point of departure is the disposable body, flung into the water as worthless, excess, and without value.

The series *Watery Ecstatic* by the African-American artist Ellen Gallagher draws on the myth or slave oral tradition of Drexciya, the undersea continent peopled by the unborn babies of slaves who were tossed or fell overboard during the Middle Passage. The dying women gave birth in the water, where their children formed a new population under the ocean's surface, comingling with fish, bones, weeds, and coral. The layers of waste and sediment eventually accumulate and spread out underwater to form an invisible land of the lost and

drowned, *merpeople*, eventually connecting all the continents under the sea. In Gallagher's images of this unseen world in the depths of the ocean, a ghostly, fragile, and exquisite community lies hidden among seaweed, fish, coral, and other marine life. Gallagher enjoins us to consider movements under the surface, in the unknown depths, after the moment of casting out; to think about the voyage as a continuation of movement, not as salvage of that which was cast away as waste, but of the making of another order of value, as potential for something other, for other lives.



Fig. 2  
Ellen Gallagher, *Watery Ecstatic*, 2007

The myth of Drexciya reminds me of the narrative of Amal Basry, an Iraqi refugee, one of the few survivors of *SIEV X*, a boat mysteriously destroyed on its way to Australia. As more than three hundred of her fellow passengers drowned

12 Hartman, *Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*, 31.

13 Nicholas D. Mirzoeff, *How to See the World* (blog), August 29, 2015, <https://wp.nyu.edu/howtoseetheworld/2015/08/29/auto-draft-73>.

around her, Basry stayed afloat in the water for twenty-three hours, clinging to the body of a dead woman, fending off the sharks, speaking to the dead and dying, recording everything she saw, like a camera in the water. In the months and years after her rescue, Basry returned again and again to how she witnessed three infants who died in the moment of their birth, being born and dying as their mothers drowned in the water, floating, in their death, like dead birds in the water. She bore insistent witness to the scene in the water, to the dead woman and the floating infant bodies, to the people she saw just before the boat sank, people whom she witnessed writing letters to the angel of the ocean which they then cast into the water, shortly before they themselves were cast into it. Although she survived, Amal never left this scene in the water. In her narrative, documented by the author Arnold Zable, she addresses her interlocutor: "My brother, I am not like I was before [...]. I think I lost something in the ocean I want to go back to the ocean. I want to ask the ocean, what did I lose? Is there something the ocean has to tell me?"<sup>14</sup>

Against the necrogeographies that block and terminate refugee passages, I want to consider these as traces of oceanic ecologies in which the expendable bodies of the drowned and castaway interpenetrate with oceans, in all their complex affectivities and charged materialities, in watery "corpo-graphies," to borrow Joseph Pugliese's beautiful phrase. Refugees write letters to the angels of the ocean, or entrust the waves with messages in bottles. Oceans, invested with these poetics of hope and survival, become custodians for refugee stories and bodies, living and dead. In these fragile, watery zones of other lives, the ocean is not only a death zone. Through motley, evolving tactics, through contingent media of survival, refugees re-world the submarine, the seascapes and border geographies through which they move. They fashion new points of transition and embarkation, sound new depths, make other passages.

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14 Arnold Zable, *Violin Lessons* (Melbourne: Text, 2012), 148.