



# CMDS Newsletter

Centre for Migration and Diaspora Studies

School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London

The CMDS aims to foster and promote a supportive research and teaching environment for scholars concerned with issues of migration and diaspora, drawing on the skills and expertise of academics situated in disciplines such as anthropology, history, development studies, politics, religion, music and art history. The Centre covers Asia and Africa, as well as issues of migration and diaspora in Europe, the Americas and the Caribbean.

## Updates

Details of all our activities are available on the CMDS website at [www.soas.ac.uk/migrationdiaspora](http://www.soas.ac.uk/migrationdiaspora)

Lectures given as part of the CMDS joint seminar series are available as podcasts [www.soas.ac.uk/migrationdiaspora/podcasts/](http://www.soas.ac.uk/migrationdiaspora/podcasts/) and webcasts [www.soas.ac.uk/migrationdiaspora/webcasts/](http://www.soas.ac.uk/migrationdiaspora/webcasts/)

You can now keep up to date on news and events hosted by the SOAS CMDS by becoming a Member/Associate Member.

If you would like your article, updates, news or reviews to feature in the next issue of the CMDS Newsletter, please send the details through to Ruby Casey-Knight [rc52@soas.ac.uk](mailto:rc52@soas.ac.uk)

## Editor's letter

Welcome to our first CMDS Newsletter. Over the past few years, the Centre for Migration and Diaspora Studies at SOAS has flourished, which is a reflection of the depth and breadth of the migration and diaspora expertise amongst our staff and students. The Centre now hosts a busy calendar of events, including a series of workshops, seminars and public lectures, as well as film screenings. In addition, we also have two forthcoming exhibitions, which we are co-organising, one on the history of South Asian theatre in Britain, the other an oral history project on Ugandan Asians in the UK. The Centre is also involved in a multi-partnered research project with a Marie Curie Initial Training Network grant, entitled 'Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging (CoHaB). Our two Marie Curie Early Stage Researchers, Špela Drnovšek Zorko and Nydia Swaby have written an article on our most recent CoHaB conference for this opening issue.

One of the reasons the Centre has thrived is because of the activity of our creative and energetic postgraduate student members. This newsletter is a result of a number of them coming together to create a space for reflection and critical engagement with their migration and diaspora related activities and learning experiences, as well as their experiences whilst conducting research in the field. Many thanks to all of the people involved for the work they have put in. We welcome any contributions, comments, or ideas for subjects for future discussion from across the disciplines for our next newsletter. We are particularly interested in hearing about diverse forms of engagement with migration and diaspora related issues, including art projects, and would also value responses to contemporary public debates on migration. In addition, we ask you to send us news of academic talks and reviews of migration and diaspora related books.

I hope you enjoy our first newsletter, and look forward to hearing from you for our next edition

Parvathi Raman

Chair, SOAS Centre for Migration and Diaspora Studies

## **“Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging”, International Conference ITN CoHaB: (September 22-24, 2013)**

In 2011, the SOAS Centre for Migration and Diaspora Studies, along with five partner institutions, was successful in securing a major research grant to provide training in migration and diaspora studies. The project, which is funded through a £3.2 million grant from the Marie Curie Initial Training Network, is entitled CoHaB, Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging. This multidisciplinary network brings together doctoral and postdoctoral researchers at the universities of Münster, Mumbai, Stockholm, Oxford and Northampton, with SOAS represented by PhD students Špela Drnovšek Zorko and Nydia A. Swaby. The aims of CoHaB complement the Centre's approach to foregrounding research from various disciplines.

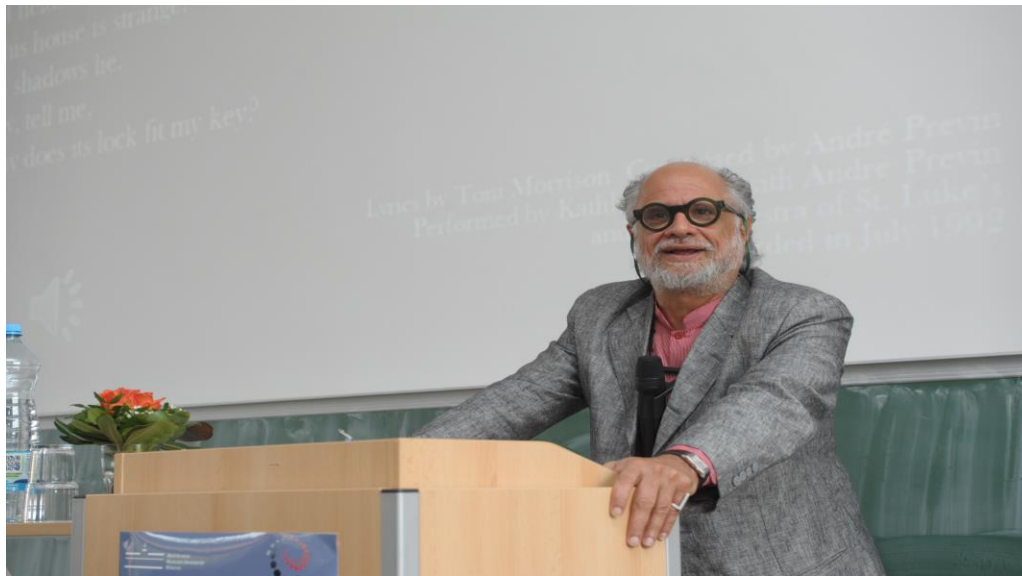
As an essential part of the CoHaB project's outreach activities, the first major international conference on Diasporic Constructions of Home and Belonging was held at the University of Münster on 22-24 September. Over the course of two days, fifteen panel sessions delved into topics ranging from 'Gendering Diasporas, to 'Intra-National Diasporas: The Home Within', and '(Re)negotiating Exile'. The first keynote was delivered by Prof. Homi K. Bhabha (Harvard University), who spoke about what makes diaspora possible and what makes diaspora difficult. In his eloquent paper entitled 'Living Side By Side: On Culture and Security', Prof. Bhabha began at a point of intimate foreignness. He challenged us to think of proximity to strangers at home, and of the central role of temporality in granting space to strangers. Drawing on Du Bois' 1946 call for an alliance of the "quasi-colonial" – the exploited, the discriminated, the invisible, and the ignored – Prof. Bhabha highlighted the *besideness* of new global solidarities, which would inhere in living the foreign at home. Invoking a quote from [Toni Morrison's Home](#) and artist [ZarinaHashmi's miniature blueprints](#), he called for a recognition of the "translational metaphoricity of home."

On the second day of the conference, keynote speaker Dr Amitava Kumar (Vassar College) read excerpts from his book *A Rat's Guide to Provincial Life*, and Dr Pnina Werbner (Keele University) presented a critical response to Rogers Brubaker's approach to diaspora. CoHaB coordinator and Chair of British Studies at Münster Dr Klaus Stierstorfer delivered Dr Ihab Hassan's (University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee) reflective paper entitled 'Extraterritorial: Exile, Diaspora, and the Ground Under Your Feet' in Dr Hassan's absentia. The conference concluded with a plenary session chaired by Oxford coordinator Dr Elleke Boehmer, and featured CoHaB Advisory Board members Dr Kachig Tölölyan (Wesleyan University) and Dr Avtar Brah (Birkbeck). As scholars who have made major contributions to the way we theorize diaspora and push the boundaries of diaspora studies, Dr Tölölyan and Dr Brah skilfully encapsulated the various questions raised during the conference.

In Spring 2015, the Centre for Migration and Diaspora Studies will host the CoHaB network's final major event, inviting speakers from across disciplines to speak on the inherent transdisciplinarity of diaspora studies. More information will be forthcoming as planning for the event gets under way.

Audio recordings of the 2013 CoHaB conference are available on the website at [www.itn-cohab.eu/conferences](http://www.itn-cohab.eu/conferences).

Špela Drnovšek Zorko and Nydia Swaby (SOAS)



(Photos by Sarah Koska. Top: Prof. Homi K. Bhabha. Bottom: Prof. Khachig Tölölyan, Prof. Elleke Boehmer, Prof. Avtar Brah.)

## Deconstructing detention in Britain

**SUMMARY:** Detention and borders are cultural and historical constructions which criminalise and traumatise migrants. They can, and need to be, deconstructed, says Nath Gbikpi, reporting on a recent detention conference in London.

The number of migrants held in British immigration removal centres, also known as detention centres, is exponentially growing; meanwhile the conditions in these high-security prison-like centres are worsening. The last 20 years have seen a tenfold increase in the number of detainees: from 250 in 1993, they were 28,909 in 2012. As recently reported on openDemocracy, we are simultaneously witnessing a growing number of litigations against unlawful detention, and have already seen four judgements ruling breaches of article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (violation of inhuman and degrading treatment) for the detention of individuals suffering from mental health conditions. Furthermore, the UK is one of the few European countries not to have a time limit on detention, and, according to the UN Refugee agency UNHCR, the country that detains the most migrants for the longest time periods.

It is the urge to react to this situation that motivated the student group SOAS Detainee Support Group (SDS) to organise a recent conference, which took place in London on the 26th and 27th of April. Regrouping academics, legal practitioners, students, activists, but also, and refreshingly so, ex-detainees, asylum seekers and refugees, some of the questions addressed in the conference were: 'what are the arguments for an end to detention?', 'what are alternatives to detention?', 'are alternatives to detention at risk of co-optation by the government?' and 'does change happen by incremental reform or does that only normalise the very practices one wants to contest?'

The conference started with a sophisticated historical reconstruction of the practices of detention by SOAS Dr Parvathi Raman. Her speech highlighted how detention dates back to at least the 12th Century and is based on the idea that those seen as a threat to society should be excluded from it. With the introduction of the 1920 Alien Act in Britain, migrants became 'detainable' on the same rationale: the image of the 'detainable' became constructed in opposition to the 'good citizen'. Dr Raman situated the increasing use of detention in the wider neoliberal discourse, which promotes the need to control populations and constrain individual liberty in favour of economic profit. In this context, detention is seen as a noble practice, one on which the government prides itself before its citizens.

Dr Raman concluded by calling for a discourse that has as its centre our common humanity rather than our differences. The main message of the speech though was that detention is a historical and cultural invention, and as such, is neither inevitable nor a given.

Liza Schuster from [City University London](#) followed Dr Raman's analytical approach, pointing out that borders too are cultural and historical constructions. Taking the stage with a slide reading 'Be realistic, demand the impossible, freedom for all', Schuster argued that freedom of movement is possible; and that borders too can be deconstructed. Borders are hugely costly on an economic level, she showed (the UK Border Agency budget in 2010 was [£2.41 million](#)), and also damaging on a psychological, physical and emotional level. Freedom of movement would not only allow a more effective and sensible investment of money, but also, on a more humane level, recognise the political nature of human beings, based on their right and capacity to choose. Freedom of movement would also enhance social justice, while decreasing inequalities. While it could potentially cause a levelling down of the economic wealth of the West, Schuster argued that, comparatively, it would be a great improvement to overall global development. Her talk reminded me that we need to look at the consequences of freedom of movement for all, and not only for 'us', as is shamefully most often the case in discussions of migration.

After a night of poetry, music by the group [Music in Detention](#), and Ugandan food prepared by the [Confidence and Community Cooking Initiative](#), on Saturday participants looked at the winning arguments and techniques to react to and contest current British practices of detention and border control. Four speakers talked about the arguments for ending detention, from social, legal, medical and economic perspectives.

Stephen, an ex-detainee, spoke about the emotional disruptiveness of detention. 'Detention is a prison', he said, 'a polite word to say prison'; it criminalises and traumatises migrants. Starting with the premise that access to legal advice is access to justice, Alison Pickup, a barrister from [Doughty Street Chambers](#), then drew attention to the situation of detainees without legal representation. This, she explained, was the case for [a quarter of all those detained](#) in 2012: they could not know whether their detention was lawful, or how to get out of detention. In fact, as she explained, one in five detainees who were in detention for more than 6 months never applied for bail because they did not know whether they were eligible for it. Finally, as Pickup explained, detainees without legal advice cannot know whether their removal directions could be challenged.

Frank Arnold, one of the founding directors of Medical Justice, now working with Medact and The Helen Bamber Foundation, then argued that detention is medically unsustainable. Health care in detention, he said, is 'frequently inadequate, often unethical, regularly damaging to health, occasionally lethal'.

Dr Arnold, during his career, witnessed four deaths due to failures to diagnose brain tumours, TB and serious heart conditions. Failures to adequately examine detainees mean that torture survivors are frequently unlawfully detained.

Psychologically, detention re-traumatizes torture survivors, and has been found to constitute inhuman and degrading treatment for the most vulnerable. Other major pitfalls of health care in detention include the blocking of 999 calls and ambulances being turned away, depriving detainees from their right to a second professional opinion. In this respect, Frank Arnold argued that doctors have a dual loyalty towards their employees and their patients, where the one towards the former exceeds the one towards the latter. This, he said, goes against medical ethics.

Finally, Meena Venkatachalam, from the consultancy company Matrix Knowledge, demonstrated that detention is economically unprofitable. Her organisation conducted a research project answering the question 'what are the economic benefits of an early release as alternative to long term detention - i.e. more than 3 months - for migrants who are eventually released anyway?' Starting from the fact that the cost of detention per day per person is £110, while the cost of release under Section 4 - which is a system of asylum support, including accommodation and living expenses, available to refused asylum seekers and former detainees - is £12.66; and that payouts for unlawful detention costs in average £7.5 million per year, they found that over five years, the benefit of releasing detainees under section 4 would be of £377.4 million. This, she said, is the most conservative finding, since it does not take into account mental health, self-harm and other arguments that would make the case against detention even stronger.

The arguments for an end to detention are endless. But how do we get there? Expanding on his recent article on openDemocracy, Jerome Phelps spoke to conference participants about alternatives to detention. Detention, he argued, is in crisis in the UK, not only for the growing number of unlawful detention litigations, but also, and in line with Schuster's and Venkatachalam's arguments on the cost of detention, for the inefficient and wasteful use of public money it represents (£75 million a year are spent on the detention estate); and the number of migrants who, after having been detained for 24 months or more, are ultimately released (57%). To be able to implement change, he said, NGOs need to engage with the state and its priorities; to show to the government that it can meet its priorities, and those of migrants, without detention.

Not everyone agreed with this position. For Adeline Trude, from Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID), any alternative based on case management schemes for example, that is schemes where migrants are released to community-based support, where they receive a variety of services including legal advice and welfare support, would only coerce more people that would otherwise not be detained.

The solution, Adeline argued, lies in addressing current problems rather than finding alternatives. Lisa Matthews, coordinator of [NCADC](#), was even more sceptical of the idea of alternatives to detention. Speaking about alternatives to detention, she said, risks normalising the very practice that one wants to contest. A discussion of alternatives, many participants felt, is thus only good insofar as it opens a space to contest the practices of detention themselves.

Notwithstanding the atmosphere of dialogue and respectful confrontation of the day, we didn't find one best solution for ending practices of detention, and many questions ultimately remained open. Yet we certainly all agreed that we are all working towards a common goal, and that we need all actors, with their different approaches, to work together to create a movement with a common strategy. While academics can deconstruct common assumptions and researchers provide data to construct arguments; practitioners can act 'here and now', as Trude said. Campaigners can raise public awareness; and refugees can make their voices heard. One ex-detainee stated, for example, that improving the conditions in detention is extremely important; and those of us who think that fighting for improving the conditions in detention will only normalise the practice should probably put their pride aside and listen to those who are in fact affected by detention. Again, and it never hurts to repeat it, cooperation and dialogue are key.

I myself came out of the conference with the painful realisation that I had come to accept detention, to accept borders. I had started to act and think in terms of improving the conditions of detention, and the living conditions of migrants more generally, but forgetting the broader picture. For me, a key message that came out of the conference was not so much that we will soon see a future without immigration detention; I believe we will probably not. Rather, that we need to constantly challenge all our assumptions; that it is morally wrong to detain non criminals like criminals; that the difference that we see between citizens and migrants is constructed, and can, and need to, be deconstructed. Only then we can hope for a future without detention...and a future without borders.

*This report was first published in OpenDemocracy (<http://www.opendemocracy.net>) on May 27 2013 (<http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/nath-gbikpi/deconstructing-detention-in-britain>)*

**Nath Gbikpi** is pursuing an MSc in Refugee and Forced Migration Studies at the University of Oxford and holds a BA in Development Studies and Politics from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). At SOAS, she has been involved with SOAS Detainee Support Group ([SDS](#)) for over 2 years, including one year as a visiting coordinator.



## **Exiles: the Ugandan Asian Story**

The reign of Idi Amin – Uganda’s infamously brutal dictator – was stained with human rights abuses and political and ethnic persecution. From 1971 to 1979, Amin ruled Uganda with an iron fist, killing or expelling his political opponents and enemies. In the summer of 1972, Amin gave Uganda’s Asian population of 55,000 people just 90 days to leave. This community, who had been in East Africa since the late 1800s, were left with nothing and forced from the only home most of them had ever known. Some 27,000 who held British passports came to the UK, settling in both London and Leicester.

To commemorate the 40th anniversary of this expulsion, the Asian Centre Wood Green’s Exiles: The Ugandan Asian Story project will span generations giving younger descendants of the refugees the chance to record interviews with those who lived through this event. The Exiles Project explores the heritage of Ugandan Asians – to recognise and celebrate the cultural contributions of the community and to create resources enabling audiences to learn about this under-reported aspect of London’s history. It will preserve the stories of those forced to rebuild their lives and businesses afresh and trace the contribution they have made to UK life in the four decades that have elapsed, looking at literature, commerce and cuisine.

The project aims to research, record and create a community archive documenting the Ugandan Asian heritage from their time in East Africa to the present. Heritage workshops and community events will run in London, engaging with both the wider Asian and non-Asian community in the building of the archive and the exploration and understanding of the heritage. After the first major exhibition at the Royal Geographical Society, the exhibition will tour local schools, colleges and community venues throughout London. The material collected during the project will be stored for future reference at the London Metropolitan Archive.

As a student in Migration and Diaspora Studies, I get a lot of questions from friends and even other students about what a “Diaspora” is and why it is important to study. Being involved in The Asian Exiles Project has provided an interesting look into the realities of what it is to be a Diaspora, a community, a people. How do you define yourself? How do you see yourself, your community, your ‘nation’? In the complicated and sad story of Uganda’s Asian community is a perfect example of the complex and complicated layers that make up the world we live in.

Uncovering and understanding this ‘hidden’ history is interesting for me – both personally and academically. Having lived in East Africa for 3 years, I was constantly intrigued, and quite honestly, confused by the existence of the Indian presence there.

I hadn't heard about this community until landing in Africa, and it was surprising to find that an entire society and history existed that I didn't know anything about. And now, visiting Hindu temples in North London, where most of the people I meet are from East Africa or researching their arrival, puts a new spin on this story. The complicated experience of this group reinforces the need to explore the intricate layers that help to form our own identities, cultures, and communities.

At SOAS, there is a lot of emphasis on exploring and redefining history to include the voices of those previously silenced or ignored. The Exile Project is a great example of how recording the narratives of alternate and under recognised voices can deepen our understanding of the world we live in and strengthen the narrative that is our global story.

Danielle Botti

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## 19 Princelet Street

On January 26, the MA Migration and Diaspora Program visited the internationally acclaimed Migration Museum at 19 Princelet Street. Formerly closed to the public, MA Programme Student Representative Linda Reland reached out to the directors of the museum to allow over 20 SOAS students, both on the MA Migration and Diaspora Studies Program and from other academic disciplines, to visit this amazing organizing which has been said to “symbolize both the old and new”.

19 Princelet Street occupies a space in East London that has always known change. Futhermore, that which looks “new”—the corporate building—is, too, old. Susie Symes explained that London has been a place of globalization, innovation, trade, commerce, wealth, and mixing of people since the days of the Romans. Diversity has always been, and that—the global and corporate edging the local and domestic—has always been.

The house was built on a green field in 1719 by Samuel Worrall, an English builder and carpenter. It was lived in as a private house for many years, including by the refugee Huguenot family of Peter Abraham Ogier. They were part of the over 500,000 Protestants who had escaped fatal persecution in France. As the area changed in character, towards the end of the 18th century, many small attics where extended and their attic windows were made larger to let more light in for weavers who came to occupy the garrets. This practice was not only an act of being a good host, but also helped extend the working day for the attic dwellers because the attic level was the first to experience daylight and the last to get dark at the end of the day. The building was altered again the 19th century with a new wide door and arched windows.

By the time the house was leased to the Jewish Friendly Society, the house was about 150 years old. The Society had been setup by a small group of Polish and Russian Jews. Over what had been the back garden, the Friendly Society built a place of worship. That day when we walked in to the large back area we walked into the internationally acclaimed installation Suitcases and Sanctuary. Suitcases and Sanctuary features the work of local school pupils, aged 9 and 10, who worked with actors, artists, poets, and historians to imagine being earlier arrivals who over centuries created our multicultural society. The Paul Hamlyn Foundation supported this educational project and exhibition.

Upstairs we read poems and explored exhibits revealing the experiences of the French Protestant Huguenot, Irish Catholic, and Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe. We felt the complication of “old” and “new” reading the reasons for anti-migrant sentiments. The migrants were accused of driving down wages and driving locals out of the job. This refrain has been repeated through history and used to other nearly every group of newcomers.

We descended to the basement where the first Anti-Fascist meeting in London took place with Jewish, Irish, migrants of colour, and poor working class whites. On that Saturday, we walked through the lives of Caribbean, Somali, and Bangladeshi migrants. Their hopes, wishes, dreams, and fears were revealed to us through boxes with images of dreams beautifully adorning the exterior hiding images and newspaper snippets of reality inside. Their reasons for leaving home were communicated to us through telephones attached to old suitcases, designed for us to understand the calls to people back home that may have never happened and the feelings of missing home.

Upstairs we walked into Leave to Remain, a deceptively simple, haunting, wry exhibition by three artists who arrived as refugees: Gonkor Gyabo of Tibet, Suzana Tamamovic of Yugoslavia, and Margareta Kern also of Yugoslavia. This exhibition challenged us to unpack our own stereotypes surrounding migration, especially how we viewed migrants and how we perceive ourselves. Gyabo's work "Soft Touch", a large Union Jack pillow covered in sharp pins is literally a stab at notion that British people erroneously or delusionally believe that they have a "soft touch" when it comes to migration, refugees, and minorities and their issues. Tamamovic's contributions were poetic and eerie messages sprinkled on the walls, fixtures, and furniture of the space all expressing various feelings of longing, missing home, frustration with the UK, and the introspection of personal growth in a foreign place. Finally, Kern interviewed random people in the UK about migrants and asks exhibit viewers to match the responses to the picture of the responder. This exercise helps us see our own stereotypes about people.

This trip was important for students interested in migration, to Britain and elsewhere. We learned about the experiences of the migrants who found themselves in this unique area of one of the most cosmopolitan cities on Earth. We were challenged to place ourselves within the larger phenomenon of global movement when we were asked where we are "from" and how we view ourselves. Furthermore, we were challenged to examine our role in the construction and maintenance of discourse and the corresponding theatre surrounding international migration to Britain.

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## Notes from Fieldwork

I arrived in Paris by train on September 3 with an overstuffed suitcase and the contact information for three men I had never met. My Parisian friend had been subletting a room from them over the summer and had negotiated my stay on their couch while the two of us looked for an apartment. This, my friend said, was preferable to staying at his parents', where I would have to climb seven flights of stairs to reach their 9 square metre spare room—a former 'chambre de bonne' commonly found in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Haussmann-style buildings. The three French men, all recent college graduates, were wonderful and hospitable. I wish I could say the same for the Parisian housing market.

My friend and I searched for an apartment for four weeks, during which I spent my days checking online listings, visiting flats with as many as ten other applicants at a time, and waiting for agencies to never return my phone calls. Paris is experiencing a housing shortage exacerbated by—depending upon who you ask—foreign buyers seeking vacation homes, landlords who illegally lease short-term holiday rentals, an estimated 40,000 vacant properties, and an increase in property value since the crisis. Thus, landlords have their pick of potential tenants and may accept dozens of applicant files before selecting the best candidate.

Moreover, in order to guard their investments in a legal system that protects tenants, landlords are now demanding an incredible number of documents from applicants, creating problems for migrants of all socioeconomic levels. Most landlords require that applicants have a work contract, earn three times the rent each month, provide copies of pay checks from the previous 3 months, and have a salaried guarantor with a French bank account. This means that an employed, 45-year-old French citizen with a family will still need to get a financial guarantee from their retired parents if they want to rent a flat. For non-nationals, it means that they either need to find a French friend or family member willing to sign the lease, or have enough personal funds at their disposal to freeze the entire year's rent in their bank account *and* pay the deposit and agency fee (around £9000 for a 20 square metre unfurnished flat).

I quickly learned that both my American parents' and my Spanish partner's financial guarantees were unacceptable; no one wanted to risk pursuing unpaid rent from guarantors outside of France. Although my friend's father agreed to act as a guarantor for both of us, a few agencies rejected us because they wanted *two* financial guarantees. In the end, we presented ourselves as a couple—since our main competition for two-bedroom apartments were other young couples—so that agencies would accept our single guarantor.

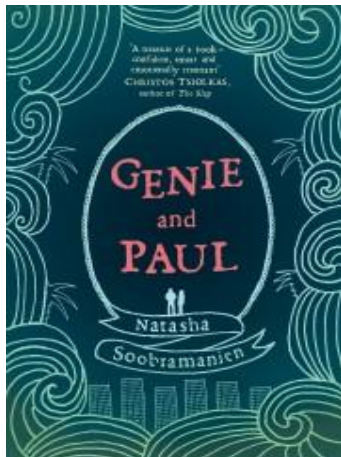
After applying to 13 different flats, we were finally offered a furnished apartment in the 18<sup>th</sup> arrondissement and moved in on October 1<sup>st</sup>. Overall, the rental market has the possibility for discrimination. Although it is illegal to discriminate against someone based upon gender, origin, appearance, disability, sexual orientation or religion, it is nearly impossible to prove that an applicant was discriminated against when there are 30 other files. Elderly applicants are often passed over because landlords are concerned with a law that makes it difficult to evict anyone over the age of 70. Non-nationals are usually out of luck if they don't have a large disposable income or a French guarantor. Some flats are not available to students because it is assumed they will make too much noise. Even foreign diplomats have reportedly had problems finding apartments because of a bad reputation and concerns that they will leave the flat in a poor state.

Of course, all of these issues only apply to individuals with French residency or citizenship papers; migrants with an irregular status in France need to search elsewhere for housing.

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## Book Review



***Genie and Paul*** by Natasha Soobramanien

Following the success of Franco-Mauritian novelists Ananda Devi and Natacha Appanah, Britain has patiently anticipated its Anglo-Mauritian novelist. Natasha Soobramanien, whose debut novel appears on the Guardian Books of the Year 2012 and Foyle's Best Fiction of 2012 lists, is of Mauritian descent and was born and raised in London.

Her novel, *Genie and Paul*, hits all the Mauritian cultural references expected in the story of an immigrant returning to the homeland while telling a very original and specific story exploring the difference between love and dependence.

Its title leads the reader immediately to the quintessential Mauritian story. Bernardin de St. Pierre's *Paul et Virginie* (1788), the story of doomed love in an Edenic paradise, has spawned operas (Kreutzer, 1791 and Massé, 1876), plays (le Seuer, 1794 and Debout, 1992), a film (Péguy, 1924), and a television series (Gaspard-Huit, 1974), along with countless works of visual art. Although through the story, the French St. Pierre grapples with the problems of inequality and exploitation in the plantation culture he saw on his visit to Mauritius, the story's greatest legacy has been to establish Mauritius as an island of romance. Its recent translation into Hindi by Kalpana Lalji (2000), who migrated to Mauritius and undertook the work in order to better understand her new homeland, emphasises the romance to the exclusion of other themes such that the story seems to be the natural precursor to the Bollywood movies which are so popular in Mauritius today. Soobramanien's revisiting of the story brings back the importance of the original's multiple layers. The novel's greatest surprise, for those familiar with St. Pierre's tale, is that its Paul and (vir)Genie are not lovers, but siblings. This is not a drastic departure from the original, in which Paul and Virginie are as close as siblings, having been raised together with only their mothers and slaves for company, and it allows readers to hear echoes of this isolation in the immigrant life that Soobramanien's Paul and, to a less obvious extent, Genie, find so hard to bear.

The novel contains stories within stories; some, like the second-generation white Mauritian Eloise's, seem to echo St. Pierre's message about the way money and status changes your fate. The story is, however, primarily Paul's, told through Genie's. Having migrated from Mauritius at age five, Genie views the island as simply the setting of her mother and brother's memories. Neither she nor her beloved half-brother Paul have an easy time of it in London.

When we first meet Genie, she is waking up in hospital after a drug-induced episode. Even though the narrative continues to follow Genie at this point, our insight into her character is always filtered through insights into Paul's. Readers are left unclear as to how, specifically, Genie's life turned to shambles, because in her thoughts and memories which follow, she is a young and innocent, idealising her troubled older brother. Her love for him is deep, but she is also sure that this love is reciprocated: when he does not come to the hospital, she knows something seriously wrong must have happened. When they were younger, Paul had run away—or, in his eyes, run home—to Mauritius, and the two are separated for the first time. When Genie makes her own friend during his absence, her new friend Eloise falls hard for Paul's charming vulnerability upon his return. Instead of establishing her own identity, Genie's world becomes further centred on Paul and his druggie lifestyle.

Paul tries to protect her, but the night before she wakes up in the hospital, she'd taken ecstasy for the first time. Genie understands that Paul must have run away in shame, and she follows him not only to Mauritius, but to Rodrigues. If the forests of Mauritius were the epitome of isolation in St. Pierre's society, Rodrigues is the epitome of isolation for mainland Mauritians today. A smaller, less developed island that is part of the country of Mauritius (which also includes the island of Mauritius and other smaller islands), it can only be reached via Mauritius. As Genie understands it, it is sister island to Mauritius, wholly dependent; through the metaphor of this unequal relationship she comes to realise that although she has tethered her life to Paul's, he has tried, in running away, to untether his life from hers. As to whether she continues to search for him: I leave the ending to readers to discover for themselves.

Soobramanien does an excellent job of describing Genie and Paul's experience as returning immigrants as both incredibly specific to the Mauritius—the smallness of it that makes Paul feel unnaturally powerful, the jarring realisation that so many others who cannot leave choose suicide—and as universal as the love which has made St. Pierre's tale so powerful. Genie and Paul, while protecting each other, each try a different way of dealing with the isolation that immigration can bring: Paul searches outside of their bond for something to connect with, be it his other brother, the community of the nightclub, or a homeland in which he feels his relative presence to be much greater, while Genie uses their bond as a shield and a way to reduce London to a manageable size. It is a novel that is a fitting homage to Mauritian literature and a welcome addition to British literature.

Rashi Rohatgi



## Upcoming Conferences, Workshops, and Seminars

[New Perspectives on Antisemitism and Islamophobia: Racialization and Religion](#), Birkbeck, 2nd December 2013

[Undocumented workers, ethnic enclaves and networks conference](#), 6th December 2013  
London Metropolitan University

[Diaspora and Education](#),  
Centre for Research in Identity, Governance and Society, Department of Geography (CRIGS), Loughborough University, 16th January 2014

[Planned Violence: Post/colonial Urban Infrastructures and Literature workshop](#), King's College, 30-31 January 2014

Workshop on [Transnational migration and global work](#), University of Stockholm, 6-7 March 2014

[Gender and Globalisation: What do Intersectionality and Transnational Feminism contribute?](#), 24th - 26th June 2014, Keele University, UK.

[Causes and consequences of immigration and citizenship policies](#), WZB Berlin Social Science Center, 26th – 27<sup>th</sup> June 2014,

[ALICE International Colloquium](#), Coimbra, 10<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> July 2014

[7th Annual Summer School on Black Europe](#), International Institute For Research and Education, 23-24 July, 2014

## Events and Projects

[Our Day: International Migrants Day 2013](#), 18 December 2013

[Counterpoints Arts](#) is a hub of creative arts and cultural projects exploring refugee and migrant experiences.

The [Still Human, Still Here coalition](#) campaigns to end the destitution of refused asylum seekers in the United Kingdom.