



**HAL**  
open science

## Bare Lives. Introduction

Jean-Michel Ganteau, Christine Reynier

► **To cite this version:**

Jean-Michel Ganteau, Christine Reynier. Bare Lives. Introduction. *Études britanniques contemporaines - Revue de la Société d'études anglaises contemporaines*, 2017, 53, 10.4000/ebc.3728 . hal-03284565

**HAL Id: hal-03284565**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03284565>**

Submitted on 12 Jul 2021

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## Introduction

Jean-Michel Ganteau and Christine Reynier

---



### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ebc/3728>

DOI: 10.4000/ebc.3728

ISSN: 2271-5444

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée

Brought to you by Bibliothèque Interuniversitaire de Montpellier



### Electronic reference

Jean-Michel Ganteau and Christine Reynier, "Introduction", *Études britanniques contemporaines* [Online], 53 | 2017, Online since 01 October 2017, connection on 12 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ebc/3728> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ebc.3728>

---

This text was automatically generated on 12 July 2021.



*Études britanniques contemporaines* est mise à disposition selon les termes de la Licence Creative Commons Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International.

---

# Introduction

Jean-Michel Ganteau and Christine Reynier

---

- 1 The idea of a SEAC conference on ‘Bare Lives: Dispossession and Exposure’ owes much to a theoretical brand of the *Zeitgeist* that sets great store by the notion of biopolitics. Over the last few years, in great part thanks to Giorgio Agamben’s influence in the field of contemporary philosophy, the figure of the *homo sacer* as the emblem of total exposure has been given pride of place in theoretical and critical literature (Agamben). A spate of articles and books have been devoted to the subject, among which Thomas Lemke’s acclaimed *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction* (Lemke). Of course, such an interest in the subject has percolated into the fields of cultural studies and, more importantly for the readers of *Études britanniques contemporaines*, into that of literary studies, as emblematised by the 2014 publication of Anne De Boever’s *Narrative Care: Biopolitics and the Novel* (De Boever). The origins of such a sustained interest are to be traced back to Foucault’s oeuvre, and more particularly into a series of lectures that he delivered at the Collège de France in 1978-1979, the bulk of which was published in 2004 (Foucault 2004). Extracts from Foucault’s lectures on ‘The Birth of Biopolitics’ had previously been circulated, some of which after being translated into English, as is the case with the entry in Peter Rabinow’s collection *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth* (Foucault 1997).
- 2 The interest in biopolitics is a new one and has mobilised a great deal of attention in the community of literary scholars, in recent years. Admittedly, such a move is not merely due to a series of editorial events, but to a more general inclination to engage with ethical and political issues, a tendency that has seized hold of literary studies ever since the acclaimed advent of what is known as the ‘Ethical Turn’. *Études britanniques contemporaines* and the SEAC have contributed in no small part to this ethical turn in literary studies, which initially owed much to the tutelary figure of Emmanuel Levinas and his ethics of alterity. The wide circulation of his work and ideas spawned a myriad studies at the turn of the century, paving the way for the appearance and/or importation of other brands of ethical criticism addressing sundry corpora: postcolonial studies, gender studies, feminist studies, among others. Those fields share theoretical bases and are not strictly delineated, in that they contribute to shifting the at times tenuous dividing line between the ethical and the political, thereby examining

'the shores of politics', in Rancière's words. Following on this, and complementing the brief list of theoretical sub-fields initiated above, it may be said that the related figures and concepts of dispossession and exposure—whose presence looms large in the title of this issue—have recently garnered impetus and visibility thanks to the emergence of sibling fields, like trauma studies, the ethics of care, precariousness studies, disability studies and vulnerability studies. Such research areas and methods are consubstantially compounded of the ethical and the political and they have wielded great influence in the study of contemporary British literature in the last few years. Now, among the scholars that have tilled those fields and whose debt to Foucault has been explicit and fruitful feature two figures whose presence irrigates the articles gathered in the present issue, i.e., Judith Butler and French philosopher Guillaume Le Blanc, whose work has been essential in importing Butler's findings in France. It may be said that, with Agamben, they provide the main pillars on which the bulk of the following articles are fashioned.

- 3 This is certainly not fortuitous as what we had in mind when organising the 2016 SEAC conference in Montpellier was working in the wake of the 2014 autumn conference of the SEAC in Paris ('State of Britain') and building up on the findings of the 2015 'LOL' conference and particularly its developments on satire. Readers will find the ethical and political inspiration manifest in these events and in the two corresponding issues of *Ebc* (respectively 49 and 51) to be at work in the present volume. In the following pages, bare lives, in so far as they may send us back to various forms of exposure—anthropological, social, cultural or economic—may direct the reader's or spectator's attention to how norms of visibility are shaped, assigned and implemented, and point to how invisible, voiceless, marginal groups and people, whose very lives are ignored or nearly so, are retrieved from invisibility. This is what British narratives of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have been doing, from Joyce's *Dubliners*, Arnold Bennett's last novels or Rebecca West's first ones to Philip Larkin's poems; from Forster's *Howards End* to *The Other Hand* by Chris Cleave, from Samuel Beckett or Harold Pinter to Sarah Kane or Martin Crimp, not to mention the Angry Young Men, whose work stands in need of reappraisal. Cinema, for example the free cinema of the late 1950s and early 1960s and a great part of the documentary tradition, visual arts and literature engage with 'small lives' (Le Blanc), interrogate humble genres and forms, such as life narratives or (auto)biographies, bare style, modes of writing that may resort, in their drive for sincerity, to the baring devices defined by the Russian formalists and implemented in metafictional production. At other times, dispossession and exposure favour excess and other modes of outrage, or the collaboration of minimalism and excess.
- 4 In the articles gathered here, various aspects of bare lives, dispossession and exposure are engaged with. They are associated with a variety of forms, genres and media, even if fiction assumes pride of place. The first part, 'Spectrality and Hospitality', spans a whole century of artistic production, from Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* to J. M. Coetzee's *The Age of Iron*, through a study of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, with an excursion into drama addressing one of Pinter's Memory Plays. They engage with the way in which the event of spectrality becomes the lever and medium of dispossession. The second part, 'Dispossessed bodies', pushes the *bios* centre stage by examining institutional sites of bodily exposure like the hospital and the asylum, in Ana Hope's *The Ball Room* or Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*. In such pages, the inspiration veers towards disability studies, as is equally the case in the article devoted to Larkin's hospital poems. This part also harbours a piece on the male

body in Andrew McMillan's *Physical* that addresses the poetics of vulnerability and sets great store by the issue of visibility. This naturally leads to the part devoted to 'Voices and (In)Visibilities' with a series of texts representative of Modernism (Leonard Woolf's 'A Tale Told by Moonlight'), the heydays of the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century, postmodern period (Adam Thorpe's *Ulverton*) and more recent productions by A.S. Byatt ('Raw Material') or else Barry Hines, James Kelman and Stephen Kelman. It concludes on a study of Manchester-born photographer Danny Treacy whose work paradoxically flaunts processes of social invisibility and shared vulnerability. The final part, 'Repossessions and re-affectation', addresses the ways in which dispossession and exposure may activate the positive, agentic pole of vulnerability by tapping the resources of the resilience of empowerment. This is made possible through the evocation of Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*, through a foray into the field of contemporary British dystopian theatre, and by repairing to more contemporary texts by Naomi Alderman (*The Liar's Gospel*) and Harry Parker's breath-taking, 2016 début novel *Anatomy of a Soldier* that pushes the thematisation and poetic presentation of exposure to its narrative limits.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- AGAMBEN, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998.
- DE BOEVER, Anne, *Narrative Care: Biopolitics and the Novel*, London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- FOUCAULT, Michel, 'The Birth of Biopolitics', *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth*, ed. Peter RABINOW, New York: New Press, 1997, 73–79.
- FOUCAULT, Michel, *Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France 1978-1979*, Paris: Seuil, 2004.
- LE BLANC, Guillaume, *L'insurrection des vies minuscules*, Montrouge : Bayard, 2014.
- LEMKE, Thomas, *Biopolitics: An Advanced Introduction*, New York: New York UP, 2011.
- RANCIÈRE, Jacques, *On the Shores of Politics*, London: Verso, 2007.

## ABSTRACTS

This introduction traces back the conditions of emergence of the concept of bare life, from Foucault, though Agamben to more contemporary followers like De Boever and Lemke. It also takes pains to contextualise the emergence of the notion within the framework of the ethical turn in literature and theory and connects it with related items like dispossession, that have become influential thanks to the works of Judith Butler and Guillaume Le Blanc, among others. It then goes on to give a brief evocation of the articles published in the volume.

Cette introduction retrace les conditions d'émergence du concept de vie nue, de Foucault à Agamben, mais aussi De Boever ou Lemke. Elle prend par ailleurs soin de contextualiser cet avènement dans le cadre du tournant éthique qui a caractérisé la critique et la théorie littéraire

au cours de ces dernières décennies. Elle établit un lien entre la vie nue et des notions afférentes comme celles de dépossession, qui ont été vulgarisées sous la plume d'auteurs tels que Judith Butler et Guillaume Le Blanc. Elle se termine sur une brève évocation des articles publiés dans ce volume.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Agamben, bare life, Butler, dispossession, ethics, Foucault, homo sacer, Le Blanc

**Mots-clés:** Agamben, Butler, dépossession, éthique, Foucault, homo sacer, Le Blanc, vie nue

## AUTHORS

### JEAN-MICHEL GANTEAU

Jean-Michel Ganteau is Professor British Literature at the University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, where he is Vice Chancellor for Research. He is the editor of the journal *Études britanniques contemporaines*. He is the author of two monographs: *David Lodge: le choix de l'éloquence* (PUB 2001) and *Peter Ackroyd et la musique du passé* (Houidiard 2008). He has co-edited several volumes of essays with Christine Reynier: *Impersonality and Emotion in Twentieth-Century British Literature* (PULM 2005), *Impersonality and Emotion in Twentieth-Century British Arts* (2007), and *Autonomy and Commitment in Twentieth-Century British Literature* (PULM, 2010), and *Autonomy and Commitment in Twentieth-Century British Arts being* (PULM 2012). He has also co-edited three volumes of essays with Susana Onega, *The Ethical Component in Experimental British Fiction since the 1960s* (CSP 2007), *Trauma and Ethics in Contemporary British Literature* (Rodopi 2011), *Trauma and Romance in Contemporary British Literature* (Routledge 2012), *Contemporary Trauma Narratives: Liminality and the Ethics of Form* (Routledge 2014). He has published many articles on contemporary British fiction, with a special interest in the ethics of affects in France and abroad. His study entitled *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction* was published in the Routledge Contemporary Literature series in 2015.

### CHRISTINE REYNIER

Christine Reynier is Professor of British Literature at the University Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, France. She has edited books and journals on Woolf and published *Virginia Woolf's Ethics of the Short Story* (Palgrave Macmillan 2009). She has written extensively on modernist writers, such as Ford Madox Ford (*Word & Image*, 30:1,13 May 2014), Rebecca West (Ebc 49) or Daphne du Maurier (Ebc 45). She is the co-editor, with B. Coste and C. Delyfer, of *Reconnecting Aestheticism and Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2017) and with J-M. Ganteau, of *The Humble in 19<sup>th</sup>- to 21<sup>st</sup>-Century British Literature and Arts* (Montpellier: PULM, 2017).