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## **“The other is the neighbour”:** The limits of dignity in Caryl Phillips’s *A Distant Shore*

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This article examines Caryl Phillips’s *A Distant Shore* (2003) in light of his claim that, in ‘the new world order’ consideration must be afforded to ‘the dignity which informs the limited participation of the migrant, the asylum seeker, or the refugee’. Dignity here relates to the ambivalence that surrounds the question of belonging, and, after Emmanuel Levinas, of accepting responsibility for the Other; both in terms of the resistance to otherness implied by maintaining a dignified appearance, or saving face, and the dignity conferred by the acceptance of ‘the Other as the neighbour’. After Giorgio Agamben, I take ‘the camp’ as a motif in Phillips’s novel, both of a space where dignity is utterly denied, and of Europe’s racially-formulated practices of exclusion. I read the actual and deterritorialized presence of the camp as signifying a limit, commensurate with Phillips’s sense of the limitations on the refugee’s participation in the new world order, and Agamben’s assertion that the refugee is a limit on the concept of citizenship, in order to examine what limits dignity, and places dignity at the limits.

Keywords: Caryl Phillips; Giorgio Agamben; Levinas; refugees; the camp; dignity; biopolitics; homo sacer; non-place.

In the titular essay of his most recent collection of non-fiction, *A New World Order*

(2001), Caryl Phillips concludes with the following statement:

The old static order, in which one people speaks down to another, lesser, people is dead. The colonial, or postcolonial, model has collapsed. In its place we have a new world order in which there will be one global conversation with limited participation open to all, and full participation available to none. In this new world nobody will feel fully at home. [...] In this new world order of the twenty-first century we are all being dealt an ambiguous hand, one which may eventually help us to accept the dignity which informs the limited participation of the migrant, the asylum seeker, or the refugee (5-6).

Phillips’s claim anticipates and attests to a democratisation of discourse, in which no participant(s) will be able to claim dominance. This new world order represents the opening up of formerly closed conversations about power and control, disposing of the old Eurocentric model in favour of a world ordered around movement, in constant (and productive) flux—where “nobody will feel fully at home”. In spite of these large

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claims, however, Phillips does not over-reach in his assessment of the condition of the migrant. His assertion that in the twenty-first century everyone will be dealt an ambiguous hand does not homogenise; while he looks forward to a better appreciation of “the dignity which informs the limited participation of the migrant” in the global conversation, he does not suggest that what actually imposes these limits is the same in every case. In a fluid world order, it will likely remain the case that some will feel more at home than others.

The purpose of this essay is to investigate Phillips’s claim in light of his novel *A Distant Shore* (2003), in which he addresses the issues of dignity and its limitations through the relationship between Dorothy, a retired teacher of music who is suffering a breakdown, and her neighbour Solomon, an African living clandestinely<sup>1</sup> in England. Please note that, to avoid continually making a cumbersome distinction between Solomon/Gabriel, I will simply use the name that is appropriate to the point in the novel under discussion. Both characters feel a sense of alienation in Weston, the small Northern village to which they are both recently arrived. The fact that each is also preoccupied by a sense of personal dignity and the limitations imposed upon this by their experiences as alien, provokes some important questions; about the extent to which dignity (or its absence) informs the participation of the migrant in the new world order Phillips describes; and about what limits this participation (and therefore limits dignity/places dignity at the limits)?

Issues of place and dignity linked in the novel by a mutually ambivalent relationship with the question of what it means to belong; as is clear from its opening lines, *A Distant Shore* is a novel in which sense of place is a central theme: “England has changed. These days it’s difficult to tell who’s from around here and who’s not. Who belongs and who’s a stranger” (3). The issue of who belongs is complicated by

the suggestion that England has changed, and the corresponding ambivalence surrounding the distinction between stranger and resident. Dignity in Phillips's novel covers a spectrum of behaviour, from simple decorum to instances of (de)humanization; yet a constant feature is that assertions of dignity represent the recognition of the presence of the outsider within a place that has become host to "the limited participation of the migrant" (*A New World Order*: 6); whereas the denial of dignity is the articulation of that limit.

Weston is described as a village struggling to define itself; while the residents are able to refer to their recent efforts to protect their identity by resisting "a move to change the name of Weston to Market Weston" (3), it remains a "village [...] divided into two" (4); both because of the poorly integrated new housing development, Stoneleigh, and also its divided sense of itself—Dorothy remarks that "[t]he only history around these parts is probably the architecture. The terraces on both sides of the main road are typical miners' houses [...]. However, these houses have all long since been replumbed, and the muck has been blasted off the faces of most of them so that they now look almost quaint" (4). This detachment from its heritage is compounded by Weston's sense of inadequacy, in contrast with the "the German town [...] bombed flat by the RAF, and the French village [...] where] Jews [...] were all rounded up and sent to the camps" (4) with which it is twinned; "I can't help feeling that it makes Weston seem a bit tame by comparison" (4). Combined with these disaffections, the changes that make it "difficult to tell who's from around here and who's not" identify Weston as suffering a clear case of what Paul Gilroy has called "post-imperial melancholia", a syndrome he defines as rooted in the nation's inability, "to face, never mind actually mourn, the profound changes in circumstances and mood that followed the end of Empire and consequent loss of imperial prestige" (98).

Such a condition results in a preoccupation with “even a partial restoration of the country’s long-vanished homogeneity” (95). As the references to German and French towns whose identity is marked by their war experiences demonstrate, England’s post-war decline is intimately associated with the disorientation of incursive cultural heterogeneity, and consequent longing for the past; Gilroy notes that continual references to the anti-Nazi conflict illustrate,

how the nation remade itself through war and victory but can be also understood as a rejection or deferral of its present problems. [...] Neither the appeal of homogeneity nor the antipathy toward immigrants and strangers who represent the involution of national culture can be separated from [the] underlying hunger for reorientation. Turning back in this direction is also a turning away from the perceived dangers of pluralism and from the irreversible fact of multiculturalism (97).

As a relic of the old static order Phillips dismissed in his essay, Weston is indicative of at least some of the factors that place limits on the participation of the post-colonial migrant in the new world order. As Gilroy observes, “grudging recognition” that “[t]he immigrant is now here because Britain, Europe, was once out there” has inflicted a burden of definition upon the postcolonial migrant; “today’s unwanted settlers carry all the ambivalence of empire with them” (110).

As Bénédicte Ledent has said, in Phillips’s work, locations “derive their significance from their being suggestive of the character’s experience” (150). In light of this, the reference to “the French village [where] Jews were all rounded up and sent to the camps” is also important; ‘the camp’ operates as a motif in *A Distant Shore*, of a space where dignity (recognition of humanity) is utterly denied. Phillips has written of the Nazi concentration camps before, most notably in *Higher Ground* (1988) and *The Nature of Blood* (1997), as a signifier of racially formulated exclusion in Europe. In fact, in *The European Tribe* (1987) Phillips acknowledges the formative role that awareness of the camp played in the realisation of both his place in Europe, and his

vocation. Describing the experience, as a teenager, of watching a documentary on the Nazi occupation of Holland, he recalls,

I watched the library footage of the camps and realized both the enormity of the crime that was being perpetrated, and the precariousness of my own position in Europe. The many adolescent thoughts that worried my head can be reduced to one line: 'If white people could do that to white people, then what the hell would they do to me?' (66-67).

Phillips's sense of the camp as a pervasive influence, signifying the limits of belonging in Europe, corresponds with Giorgio Agamben's sense that the camp is not a location or a concept confined to its historical use; rather it is, as Agamben formulates in *Homo Sacer* (1998) and *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1999), the ultimate expression of biopolitical space.

Biopolitics refers to the manner in which biological life is appropriated as a means of legitimising state power. As nations define themselves by birth, anyone born into a nation ceases to simply be, to have a bare natural life, but rather they are transformed into citizens—that is, bodies invested with the right to belong. Taking this as his starting point, Agamben argues that refugees are threatening because they “break the continuity between man and citizen, *nativity* and *nationality*” (*Homo Sacer*: 131), and therefore introduce crisis into the formulation of the nation. The refugee represents a body not invested with any rights to belong, but whose presence threatens the link between nativity and nationality that is the foundation of the nation: “The refugee must be considered for what he is: nothing less than a limit concept that radically calls into question the fundamental categories of the nation-state, from the birth-nation to the man-citizen link” (134). The body of the refugee threatens the way nations see and construct themselves. But it is also true that because the refugee body is not invested with the right to belong and made then into a signifier of the ‘nation’, that they are made vulnerable. In this dynamic of nativity and nationality, the non-citizen refugee remains as an example of bare life, that is life at the extremity, at the

limits, the most basic expression of humanity; and which must be relegated to the limits of the nation—the camp.

The ‘camp’ and the ‘refugee’ both represent a kind of limit-concept; both Phillips and Agamben<sup>ii</sup> express a sense of the camp as signifying a limit—the limit—commensurate with Phillips’s sense of the limitations placed on the migrant’s participation in the new world order and Agamben’s assertion that the refugee is a limit on the concept of citizenship. This convergence presents the camp as a deterritorialized force of exclusion, in which the refugee within the space of the nation nonetheless signifies its limits; this is the burden of definition imposed on the postcolonial migrant: that they are made the incarnation of a deterritorialized border. The emergence and influence of the camp as the materialisation of a condition of bare life represents therefore, in *A Distant Shore*, both the factor that limits dignity and also the limit at which the presence of dignity is accepted. Catherine Mills has said that Agamben’s theorization of the camp is the starting point of a reconsideration of ethics “sought in a terrain *before judgement*, a terrain in which the conditions of judgement are suspended through the indistinction of the human and the inhuman” (np). In a moment strongly reminiscent of Levinas’s insistent remark that “the other is the neighbour” (“Ethics and Politics”: 294), Solomon introduces himself to Dorothy, in their first meeting, as her neighbour (56). Building on the Levinasian sense of an ethics before judgement, this article will also ask one final question of Phillips’s novel, which consolidates the link between place, belonging and dignity; to what extent does their shared sense of dignity make possible a realisation of the humanity and proximity of the other, as the neighbour?

## Dignity

The first section of *A Distant Shore* describes, in Phillips's words, a "cautious friendship [...] forged by degrees; painful degrees" (*Dublin Quarterly*, np), and what marks each guarded move closer towards each other is Dorothy and Solomon's shared preoccupation with the preservation of dignity in the face of rejection. There is a crucial difference, however, in the way they interpret dignity. When he arrives in England for the first time, literally washed up on the south coast after crossing the Channel hanging from the side of a ship, Gabriel's first thought is "that there is no dignity to his predicament" (149). Dignity is equated with the acknowledgement of his humanity; its absence, in the face of the most extreme deprivation or rejection, demonstrates the dehumanising conditions to which many irregular migrants are subjected. However, for Dorothy, dignity is more a matter of saving face; her relationships with three men in the novel—Brian, her estranged husband; and Mahmood and Geoff, both married men with whom she has affairs—each carry a common theme: "Her story contains the single word, abandonment" (203). Yet, in particular, her persistent efforts to maintain a dignified façade despite the diminishing of her relationship with Mahmood demonstrate her preoccupation with appearances: "She is relieved that he still seems amenable to eating first, for to dispense with the etiquette of the shared meal would be to abandon dignity. However, 'dignity' is a word that Mahmood seems to be increasingly unfamiliar with" (198). The latter sentence, qualifying the notion that each party is complicit in the preservation of dignity, reveals an undercurrent of racial prejudice in Dorothy; the relaxation of his eating habits contradict her notion of proper behaviour and make the illusion of a romantic tryst harder to maintain, but carry also a disquieted sense of cultural difference that is reminiscent of Gilroy's post-imperial melancholia: "These days he



eats quickly, often with one hand (always his right hand), and he makes noises that alarm her” (198).

In addition, Mahmood’s noisy openness about bodily functions—Dorothy is also alarmed when “she hears the undignified thunder of urine cascading directly into the water and not against the side of the bowl” (210)—suggest to her a lack of self-control. By contrast, what first suggests to Dorothy an affinity with Solomon is his evident self-containment:

His car is parked out front in its proper place. It’s clearly second-hand, but it’s always carefully washed and clean. The other day I saw him take a cloth to it and go at the body-work as though he was buffing up a piece of brass. I’ve thought about asking him why he takes so much trouble over a car, but there’s no point because it fits in with how he behaves about everything. The way he dresses, or cuts the lawn, or combs his hair with that sharp razor parting. Everything is done with such precision. Like most folks up here, he keeps himself to himself, but unlike most of the folks up here, he lives by himself. Like me, he’s a lone bird (14).

Solomon’s precise, meticulous nature and his evident strangeness combine to make him an unlikely ally for Dorothy as she pursues her own path apart from the general population of Weston; both are “the sort of person people in Weston feel comfortable talking about” (38, 40). This apparent shared concern for appearances signifies a shift in the definition of dignity as a matter of decorum, and demonstrates one of the ways in which dignity occupies a limit and place of tension in the novel. Whereas Solomon’s dignified carriage of his otherness resonates with Dorothy’s own sense of estrangement, his behaviour, according to standards Dorothy admits are from an earlier era, also acts as a kind of limit on his otherness. It is a performance of what is familiar and reassuring, at least partially obscuring Solomon’s unsettling difference. This is evident in her intolerance for the homeless who “plague the town”. Whereas Solomon’s strangeness is contained by his attention to appearances, the undignified appearance of the destitute (“with their matted hair and their bottles of meths” (12) bears inescapable witness to their alienation, a kind of naked otherness that is far

more disturbing for Dorothy, who always puts on her “day face” (312), than Solomon’s.

However, as I have indicated, dignity occupies a place of limit in the novel in terms of demarcating a boundary, but also in terms of something incomplete or partial. It is therefore significant that Solomon’s precise care for his car only partially obscures his otherness:

There is, of course, one thing that I’ve been meaning to tell him, but I haven’t found the right opportunity. It’s about all this washing of his car. I want to tell him that in England you have to become a part of the neighbourhood. Say hello to people. Go to church. Introduce your kids to their new school. You can’t just turn up and start washing your car. People will consider you to be ignorant and stand-offish. But I’ve yet to find the proper moment to talk to Solomon about the way he flaunts himself in his driveway with that bucket of soapy water and his shammy (16).

While it marks him out as inhabiting an era of dignified behaviour whose passing Dorothy regrets because Solomon is a “proper gentleman” (64), Solomon’s car washing also marks his otherness. In performing this act, he makes himself stand apart from the population of Stoneleigh, and Weston—it is also a sign of his difference. In this sense, the act of washing the car is an expression of the “dignity of the limited participation of the migrant” (*A New World Order*: 6), whose otherness is made to attend upon the maintenance of his dignity. Therefore dignity occupies both a limit and a place of tension in *A Distant Shore*, signifying both the presence and proximity of the Other.

The proximity of the Other is a central tenet of Levinas's ethical thinking, entailing an ethical position which puts first an eradicable responsibility towards the Other: “The Other becomes my neighbour precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility and calls me into question” (“Ethics as First Philosophy”: 83). Levinas's concept of the 'face' is central to his ethical position; it signifies a point of exteriority, exceeding the self, encountered in the presence of the Other. It has a defining relation with Levinas’s

notion of proximity, and responsibility. For Levinas, “the proximity of the other is the face’s meaning” (82); and this proximity is crucially anachronous: “The relationship of proximity cannot be reduced to any modality of distance or geometrical contiguity, nor to the simple ‘representation’ of a neighbour; it is already an assignation, an extremely urgent assignation—an obligation, anachronously prior to any commitment” (“Substitution”: 90). As such, proximity is intimately bound up in an inextricable responsibility for the other that occupies a conceptual “terrain before judgement” (Mills, np). By contrast, Dorothy’s habit of applying her ‘day face’ (312), rather than making proximity possible, imposes distance.

This notion of ‘face’ is especially helpful in reading a particular encounter between Dorothy and Solomon. As she enters the cul-de-sac in which they both live, having missed her bus, Solomon expresses concern for her welfare couched in sympathetic terms:

‘Miss Jones, it is true that sometimes life can be difficult, yes?’ He turns to face me. The dying sun forms a halo around his head and for a moment I find myself more caught up with this image than with his enquiry. Solomon notices that my mind has drifted off, but he simply waits until my mind returns (32).

As Bernard Waldenfells has observed:

Levinas's reflections on the proximity and remoteness of the other's face are focussed on the crucial motif of trace. The trace 'shines (*luit*) as the face of the other'. [...] The trace of the infinite which 'shines' as the face of the other shows the ambiguous feature of somebody before whom (or to whom) and for whom I am responsible (77-78).<sup>iii</sup>

Solomon's face, as that of the Other turned towards Dorothy, presents her with a trace which identifies him as the neighbour, for whom she shares a responsibility just as he expresses his responsibility in his concern for her welfare. His exteriority, ‘face’, or otherness, are a challenge to Dorothy to go beyond her own alienation, her ‘day face’, something she makes clearest strides towards doing in the way she responds to his murder. But while the ambiguity of the face of the other is not resolved as it is turned towards Dorothy, the nature of her responsibility (in Levinasian terms) is forthright

and clear. Levinas defines this responsibility as,

A responsibility that goes beyond what I may or may not have done to the Other or whatever acts I may or may not have committed, as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself. Or more exactly, as if I had to answer for the other's death even before being. A guiltless responsibility, whereby I am nonetheless open to an accusation of which no alibi spatial or temporal could clear me ("Ethics as First Philosophy": 83).

Similarly, in Phillips's novel the face of the Other is insistent; Dorothy invites Solomon to her house for a cup of tea: "As I turn to walk towards my house, the full glare of the dying sun hits me in the face. Solomon has been blocking out much of its force, but I now squeeze my eyes closed against its powerful light" (33). The trace shining in the face of the Other is unavoidable, even more so when that face has turned away again—as an eradicable memory, as it were.

However, significantly, Levinas is not describing a responsibility in which blame is apportioned; rather, it is a guiltless (if absolute) responsibility. As Simon Critchley has said, Levinasian ethics "is my experience of a demand that I both cannot fully meet and cannot avoid" (22). Thus, Dorothy's partial (and delayed) acceptance of this responsibility must be understood as an inevitable limitation. Initially, having allowed herself to get close to Solomon, she turns away from him. When he reveals he has been receiving abusive letters from people in the village she expresses a nascent responsibility: "I feel embarrassed, as though I am somehow responsible for these people, whoever they are" (40). As if to confirm the complicity of their relationship Solomon also expresses a corresponding sense of responsibility: "Sometimes the behaviour of my fellow human beings makes me ashamed" (43). Yet the result of this exchange is that Dorothy moves away from any intimate proximity with Solomon: "I don't want Solomon to become a problem in my life, but today I get the feeling that this is what he's becoming and it's making me feel awkward" (45). She resolves to restore the distance between them by going away for a night. When she

returns Solomon has been murdered by a racist gang.

The circumstances of Solomon's death identify him as an example of the *homo sacer*, "who may be killed and yet not sacrificed", as defined by Agamben

(*Homo Sacer*: 8):

What defines the *homo sacer* is [...] both the particular character of the double exclusion into which he is taken and the violence to which he finds himself exposed. This violence—the unsanctionable killing that, in his case, anyone may commit—is classifiable neither as sacrifice nor as homicide, neither as the execution of a condemnation to death nor as sacrilege. (82)

The *homo sacer* represents the materialisation of bare life, subject to a delocalised (an act that "anyone may commit") sovereign will. Following Carl Schmitt, whose *Political Theology* (1922) defined the state of exception, Agamben regards this will as determining who is included and who is excluded from the definition of humanity.

The carelessness that surrounds Solomon's death—Dorothy notes, "My friend was found face down in a canal and nobody seems to care" (47)—illustrate how dignity has been stripped from him in death. Dorothy's response to this, while symptomatic of her strained emotional state and ultimately leading to her complete breakdown, also indicates at least a partial acceptance (poised between proximity and distance) of her guiltless responsibility for the Other in death. As Levinas has said, "The other man's death calls me into question, as if, by my possible future indifference, I had become the accomplice of the death to which the other [...] is exposed" ("Ethics as First Philosophy": 83). She takes one of the abusive letters and pins it to the notice board of the local pub, noting with satisfaction that she has "'mailed' it back to them" (63). As she returns to Stoneleigh, she notices the grimy condition of Solomon's car, and observes that "Solomon would never have let it deteriorate into such a state" (63). Her gesture of cleaning his car represents her efforts to restore dignity to the *homo sacer*, and also an expression of sympathy with the otherness (and consequently his bare life) that his repetitive washing of the car represented. Unknown to Dorothy,

Solomon's care for his vehicle is a form of memorialising of Mike, the former owner who showed Solomon hospitality during his first months in England. Her gesture therefore establishes her as part of a chain of gestures that articulate responsibility for the Other.

This gesture also situates Dorothy *as* the Other who is also the neighbour. By expressing solidarity with Solomon in this fashion, she in effect incarnates the otherness he had previously represented. It is significant that she uses her jacket to wipe the car clean, as a symbol of the distance and sense of dignity as decorum that informed her relationship with Solomon; her concern for appearances becomes an expression of the proximity of the Other—and thus a recognition of their dignity. As with the earlier encounter, however, this proximity with the Other cannot be fully tolerated by Dorothy. She leaves the cul-de-sac to visit her parents' graves, where her attempts to reconcile her conflicting feelings about Solomon result in a form of psychic split in which she imagines a conversation with her dead parents:

After a while Mum starts to cry and she asks me what it was about Solomon that made me want to be seen with him. I think for a while, and I then tell her that there was nothing in particular, it was just that Solomon was a proper gentleman. [...] [Mum's] so upset that she can hardly get the words out. Didn't I understand what people would say about me if I were to be seen with a coloured, and particularly one as dark as Solomon? (64).

From its beginning Dorothy's relationship with Solomon has been founded on a tension between a sense of affinity and a half-acknowledged sexual attraction. She acknowledges that Solomon is "a handsome man, which makes me uncomfortable" (16); the anxiety provoked by the possibility of an inter-racial relationship, coupled with the proximity of her gesture of sympathy, make the splitting of her Self the only way Dorothy can acknowledge that, "Solomon was a man who could have made me happy" (65). These conflicting feelings demonstrate the complexity of working out the relation of proximity in Levinas's idea of the other as the neighbour. Solomon's

otherness draws Dorothy to him, and to an awareness of her own otherness, but also provokes anxiety. As she returns home this internal crisis is externalised in another encounter with a group of homeless people. Dorothy sublimates her own inner-contradictions by recourse to racial stereotyping—one of the group “looks and sounds like a gypsy, with her black hair, and her black eyes, and her grimy black hands” (65)—as her contempt for the undignified bare life which she perceives in them turns into violence:

[W]hen she spits in my direction I feel my blood beginning to boil. It’s awkward, for I’m not dressed how I want to be dressed. There isn’t much dignity to a crumpled jacket, but I’m not going to let this stop me from speaking my mind. But I don’t know what to say (66).

Even as she attacks the homeless woman, Dorothy is preoccupied with her appearance, with the indignity of her clothing (unaware of the indignity of her actions). In spite of her racial anxieties, the jacket which she used to clean Solomon’s car remains for her a symbol of (limited) dignity, demonstrating how Phillips’s engagement with dignity at the limit is also an engagement with what puts limits on dignity.

### **Non-place**

The second section of the novel deals with Gabriel’s journey from an unnamed African country to England, in which Phillips further engages with the forces that place limits on the dignity of the migrant. In examining this, I will refer to Agamben’s discussion of the camp, and also to Marc Augé’s idea of “non-place”—space which “cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (48)<sup>iv</sup>—in order to better understand Phillips’s presentation of dignity at the limits.

The notion that drives many of the migrants Gabriel travels with is their idea of England as a place of refuge; one of these migrants, Bright, declares that, “I am an Englishman. Only the white man respects us, for we do not respect ourselves. If you

cut my heart open you will find it stamped with the word 'England'. I speak the language, therefore I am going to England to claim my house and my stipend" (134). The idea of England, however, is contradictory. Said, with whom Gabriel shares a prison cell, asserts, "in England freedom is everything. They can change the law, but you cannot change the culture" (78). Despite his conviction in the power of English justice, Said's incarceration demonstrates that he actually represents a species of bare life, a fact confirmed by the manner in which his death in the cell is received: "Gabriel [...] *turns to face* the warder. 'He's been gone for some time.' The night warder looks shocked, but the doctor is ready to leave. 'I suppose we've got some paperwork to sort out, right?'" (81. My italics). As with Solomon, Said's death is proof of his condition as *homo sacer*, one whose death is of no consequence. When the Other is made a *homo sacer*, no trace of proximity or responsibility is recognised in their face, or acknowledged beyond the most basic bureaucratic duty. Furthermore, Said's conviction that the law represents an exception to the English culture of hospitality and freedom illustrates how the *homo sacer* is subject to the sovereign decision—as Agamben has said, "the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power" (6).

In *A Distant Shore* the idea of England as it is articulated by migrants is presented as a non-place; Augé uses the example of "Albanians camp[ed] in Italy dreaming of America" to illustrate how "certain places exist only through the words that evoke them, and in this sense are non-places" (95, 94). Similarly, Bright, Said and Gabriel's dream of "England", constructed around the resonance of the word and its residual value as a signifier of past colonial values, is revealed as false, as a non-place, by their actual experiences in an England that is itself subject to "(t)he cultural disorientation that accompanies the collapse of imperial certainties" (Gilroy, 125).



Bright and Gabriel initially find shelter in a derelict house, prompting Gabriel's astonishment: "England was not enduring a period of war, so why would somebody flee from a grand house like this?" (160). They encounter a place hostile to strangers, where alienation is endemic: "To Gabriel's eyes, English people look unhappy, and he notices that they walk with their heads down as though determined to avoid one another" (163). It is not the place they anticipated arriving in: "This is not the England that he thought he was travelling to, and these shipwrecked people are not the people that he imagined he would discover" (176).

The journey which takes Gabriel to England seems to move through a series of anonymous, non-relational non-places, in which his identity is gradually effaced. At no point does Phillips give an indication of where the migrants are, or where they enter Europe, compounding the sense of anonymity. This is further illustrated by their methods of travel. While looking for a way to cross the Channel into England, several migrants jump from a bridge on to the roof of a passing train; although Gabriel refuses this as too dangerous, he nonetheless elects to take an equally hazardous trip clinging to a ledge on the side of a ship. It is interesting to note that both trains and, especially, ships are identified by Michel Foucault as examples of what he calls heterotopias, "counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places" (np). Amongst their other functions, heterotopias describe a set of relations, even if what they expose are "all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned". Significantly, Augé has described heterotopias as a species of non-place (112). He declares that, "non-place designates [...] spaces formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure), and the relations that individuals have with these spaces" (94). By

having Gabriel cross the Channel clinging to the outside ledge of a ship, literally at the limit of or margins of the ship (which is, in Foucault's words, "the heterotopia par excellence"), Phillips illustrates how, in the case of irregular migrants, the relation described or designated by the non-place is fundamentally one at the limit; bare life at its extremity.

Both the criminalisation Gabriel is subjected to in England (as a result of allegations that he abused a girl who helped him, a charge he denies) and his experience of the refugee camp in Northern France (unnamed, but almost certainly based on the Red Cross Refugee camp at Sangatte, given that Phillips smuggled himself into Sangatte in 2001 in order to write an article for *The Guardian*) demonstrate that "the camp", as a signifier of biopolitical reality, is active in the arranging of irregular migrants as the materialisation of bare life. Agamben defines the camp as "the pure, absolute, and impassable biopolitical space" (*Homo Sacer*: 123) whose influence is the creation of bare life. He also calls it a "dislocating localization" (175), a description that is founded on multiple paradoxes. The camp represents a permanent space dedicated to the impermanence of its inhabitants; a place where the rule of law is defined by its suspension; where those who don't belong are accommodated. It is an expression of the capacity of the political border to reproduce itself. As the disorderly presence of the Other is contained by the camp, the orderly continuity of the nation is maintained, defining therefore the limits of the nation. Consequently, as we identify the influence of the camp as placing irregular migrants at the limits of the nation, we can see how *A Distant Shore* also describes how the Other is appropriated by the sovereign powers to define the limits of their own influence—making the Other into a limit or boundary, against which they define

themselves. Thus Phillips can be said to be tracing what places limitations on dignity, and also taking the measure of existence at “the limit”.

This can be observed in Phillips’s own act of smuggling himself into the Sangatte camp, as an exploration of the limitations of gestures of sympathy. Phillips states that, because “journalists are not permitted to enter the camp, [...] I try to affect the demeanour of a resident” (*The Guardian*, np). In doing so, he is able to bluff his way in, placing himself, however briefly, in the place of the other (*as* the Other), a similar gesture to that which Dorothy (belatedly) makes when she cleans Solomon’s car. Both are an attempt to bear witness to the effaced condition of the Other; yet as such, the limits of such a gesture are immediately apparent. As Primo Levi has acknowledged, witnessing is an inevitably limited activity; for Levi, “the survivors [...] are not the true witnesses” (63). Building upon this, Agamben notes that testimony “contains a lacuna” (*Remnants of Auschwitz*: 33):

The value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks; at its centre it contains something that cannot be borne witness to. The ‘true’ witnesses, the ‘complete witnesses’, are those who did not bear witness and could not bear witness (34).

By engaging with those who exist at the limit (*as* a limit to what is considered human and inhuman) Phillips inevitably comes up against the limits of his own capacity to witness, limited by the paradox that he must “bear witness in the name of the impossibility of bearing witness” (34).

Both Levi and Agamben identify the *Muselmann* as the complete witness, the one who did not survive to bear witness. In the camp jargon of Auschwitz, *Muselmann* referred to those whose extreme degradation had led them to concede utterly to the rule of the camp which posited them as inhuman; so called, because they shivered in a manner suggestive of muslims at prayer.<sup>v</sup> It is upon encountering a contemporary version of the *Muselmann* in Sangatte that the limits of Phillips’s capacity to bear witness to the camp are most clearly illustrated:

In the gloom, an Afghan squats on his haunches and contorts his body into a twisted sculpture that describes misery. Cars, many with British plates, flash by, but the man does not move a muscle or blink his eyes. (*The Guardian*, np)

Like the *homo sacer*, the *Muselmann* occupies an extreme threshold of distinction materialised by the camp; if, as Agamben asserts, “the camp, as the exemplary extreme situation, [...] allows for the determination of what is human and inhuman”, then the *Muselmann* “marks the threshold between the human and the inhuman. [...] There is thus a point at which human beings, while apparently remaining human beings, cease to be human. This point is the *Muselmann*, and the camp is his exemplary site” (*Remnants of Auschwitz*: 48, 55). The Afghan *Muselmann*, utterly passive to the inertia of his predicament, silently articulates the political subjugation of the migrant as “the limit-figure of the human and the inhuman” (Mills, np); conversely, Phillips’s position as witness is limited by the fact that he is not, in this instance, subject to the limitations of the camp. The *Muselmann*’s silence imposes a corresponding silence on Phillips. The article concludes with Phillips looking on at “the stream of hunch-shouldered refugees walking with grim determination in the direction of the mouth of the tunnel. And I silently wish them all good luck” (*The Guardian*, np). His silence acknowledges the limitations of his testimony; that which limits participation in the new world order, Phillips suggests, is endemic, consolidating his prediction of a single “global conversation with limited participation open to all, and full participation available to none” (*A New World Order*: 5). Yet, in attempting to make such a gesture, he also suggests that it is by approaching and engaging with these limits that a greater (if partial) understanding of the terms of the conversation will be achieved.

*A Distant Shore* is a powerful examination of the situation of the irregular migrant in the new world order, made all the more so by its “powerful uncertainty” (Scott, 169). Even where the novel shows gestures of seemingly extraordinary

hospitality—the Andersons who take Gabriel into their home—in virtually every case, Phillips also shows us their limits, such as Mike’s expressions of racial prejudice (290-291). In spite of this it remains a novel that is ultimately committed to the notion that it is at the limits that we can encounter “the dignity which informs the limited participation of the migrant”, and also committed to the idea of the Other as the neighbour, and the responsibilities this entails; a sentiment articulated by Solomon, when he is offered the job as night-watchman in Stoneleigh:

The house in which I live is at the far end of the street, and it is smaller than the other houses. [...] I am familiar with this village, and this area, but now it is to be my home. I am to be the night-watchman, and my job will be to watch over these people (280).

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<sup>i</sup> Gabriel, who takes the name Solomon Bartholomew, represents one of the many migrants to the UK who feel their only option is to remove themselves from the processes of legitimisation which place on them a burden of proof beyond their capacity to provide. This is illustrated in the exchange between Gabriel and his legal advisors, one of whom argues, “I’m only trying to establish dates, not state of mind” (113).

<sup>ii</sup> Agamben has asserted, “if the camp consists in the materialisation of the state of exception and in the subsequent creation of a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter into a threshold of indistinction, then we must admit that we find ourselves virtually in the presence of the camp every time such a structure is created” (*Homo Sacer*: 174).

<sup>iii</sup> See also Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise Than Being, or Beyond Essence*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981 [1974], 12.

<sup>iv</sup> It is significant that Agamben has called the camp a “non-place” (*Remnants of Auschwitz*: 48).

<sup>v</sup> Agamben notes that the most likely inspiration for the phrase was in the literal meaning of “muslim” in Arabic, i.e. the one who submits unconditionally to the will of God. (45)

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