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"Towns of Unquestionable Insignificance" in Caryl Phillips' *A Distant Shore*

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Unlike many of his novels, Caryl Phillips' 2003 *A Distant Shore* not only features England as a setting but specifically a provincial England. While his more recent *In the Falling Snow* (2009) portrays a middle-class black protagonist in cosmopolitan London, *A Distant Shore* explores the more isolated small towns and villages of the north. The novel's protagonists—Dorothy, a retired schoolteacher, and Gabriel/Solomon, a former soldier and asylum seeker from an African country resembling Liberia or Sierra Leone—both live in the new suburban development of Stoneleigh at the top of a hill near the (fictional) village of Weston.[1] This village is itself near a larger unnamed town/city in northern England where Dorothy was born. The vibrancy and commotion of the city is nowhere to be found in these places; rather they are characterized by a stagnant stillness which is matched by Phillips' turn to a more "realist" prose style. Other towns in the novel, like the one inhabited by Dorothy's ex-lover Mahmood, are similarly isolated; like the other characters, he lives in a "place where if, on a Saturday afternoon, one happens to turn on the television set as the football results are being read out, towns of unquestionable insignificance will be freely mentioned, but Mahmood's small English town will simply not exist" (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 179).

This essay explores the geography and figuration of English provinciality in *A Distant Shore*. English provinciality has not typically been considered an appropriate object for postcolonial studies; indeed, if anything it is an anti-object, insofar as England is taken to be only the origin and not also the object of colonization. It has likewise not prominently featured in British literatures of mobility and migration, the work of Phillips included, and is in fact associated with the opposite of mobility. However, *A Distant Shore* illustrates the necessity of extending postcolonial critique to unlikely places in order to consider the contingency of place itself and the way it is formed by colonial practices. English places can be thought of as "small places," using Jamaica Kincaid's term; they are marginal to national culture as the result of active political and historical processes (Kincaid). Moreover, for a writer like Phillips to use a narrative of migration to focus on English provinciality shows how this operation of power inheres in the very split between global and local, province and metropole, or roots and routes, through which places acquire particularity.

As such, Phillips uses the provincial setting to explore not only how political conflict *seems* to follow from place (instead of the reverse), but also how different individuals and groups can be both marginal and actively marginalize others. Several critics of the novel argue that the geography of Weston and Stoneleigh can be read allegorically, but focus on the marginalization of Dorothy and Solomon in relation to the hostile, majoritarian Weston. For example, Allesandra Di Maio argues that Weston "stands metonymically for England" and the community is "symbolic of the nation" (Di Maio 257). Similarly Petra Tournay-Theodotou reads the geography of Weston/Stoneleigh as "miniature spatial allegories of the nation at large," claiming that "the division between the two communities thus encapsulates the tension between a conservative, essentialist Britain with its inability to accommodate change, on the one hand, and the demands of a society in flux, on the other" (Tournay-Theodotou 296-297). These critics and others emphasize the challenge that a globalized modernity, which they find particularly (and problematically) in the figure of Solomon, presents to a localized and essentialized nationality which in turn strikes back at the former with hostility and violence (Ledent, "Of, and Not of").[2]

However, villages like Weston are not places untouched by time, indicative of a stable rural much less national identity, but in fact have continually changed as the result of various planning policies, the deployments of speculative capital and alterations in political structures in the postwar period. Much like colonial spaces, towns like Weston have thus been *produced* as the other of Britain's supposed progress, and this active and on-going production of marginality is naturalized and absorbed by *place* itself in national discourse. In a sense, English identity is provincialized in relation to a British metropolitan center in which certain imagined cultural and economic elements of the former are appropriated while a parochial, ethnicized nationalism is disavowed. This double structure constitutes a split and joined national identity; however, this is only valid insofar as it does not allegorize either Stoneleigh or Weston nor imagine that an English identity exists or existed prior to a colonization (temporally, spatially, or structurally). Instead, these places and the relationships between them and to other places are constituted *through* colonial processes. The provincial is postcolonial because it is constructed relationally.

The character of Weston's marginality lies, somewhat ironically, in its "unquestionable insignificance" (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 179). Phillips' exploration of insignificance is in striking contrast to the scope and stakes of novels like *Crossing the River* (1993) and *The Nature of Blood* (1997), which take up themes of genocide and deep historical trauma. Indeed, the insignificance of Weston is dramatized even within *A Distant Shore* when Phillips describes the horrors of war that Gabriel experiences before he immigrates as an asylum seeker, where he later changes his name to Solomon. In this novel violence is etiolated and faded, as the northern English countryside becomes the end of the world. What is instead produced is a deadening stillness and banality in a novel where the climatic event (Solomon's murder) is

revealed in its opening section, similar to how Dorothy states that the "policeman and policewoman came to tell me about Solomon as though they were enquiring about an unpaid parking ticket" (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 52). Weston is a place that requires one to re-spatialize the geographies of imperialism and neo-imperialism *without flattening them*. Place is produced relationally, and its character of distinction and naturalness is acquired through that variegated production, which is always one guided complexly by implicit and explicit ideologies.

That these relationships of power are complex and many times contradictory requires one to think about sociality as shaped by different kinds of marginalization. In this case, the working-class residents of Weston exhibit a virulent racism but are also stigmatized as post-industrial remnants with no function in the contemporary economy. They are, for example, represented through Dorothy's increasingly unreliable narration as uncivilized, murderous brutes. Without denying the racism of this town, Dorothy's unstable and problematic narration also allows Phillips to hint at the historical and political processes that created economically and geographically marginal villages like Weston in the first place. These figurations of the rural community and its youth are not to be taken as literal at every point, but are rather the figural projections of a character (Dorothy) with a collapsing psyche that has been steeped in the (many and conflicting) stereotypes of English working-class rurality. On the other hand, the same is true of the collapsing community of Weston, which projects *its* violence on the racialized and gendered bodies of Solomon and Dorothy. Through this ironic juxtaposition at the level of narrative, Phillips provokes a consideration of the structural and historical aspects of communal violence in all its multivalent complexity. In doing so, the novel illustrates contemporary forms of *ongoing* violence and oppression that characterize neoliberal Britain.

Marginal Geographies

A Distant Shore begins in the first-person voice of Dorothy, expressing a somewhat commonplace sentiment: "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. It's disturbing. It doesn't feel right" (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 3). Many critics of the novel have read this opening statement as one suggesting the disappearance of a stable, homogenous English identity in the face of postcolonial, transnational migration, and thus the context for the racism and xenophobia directed against Solomon by the "backward" village. For John McLeod, this racism is certainly not new, and "actually not a lot has changed in England," while for Di Maio, Weston represents "an England that has yet to come to terms with the fact that its million non-whites have contributed to the shaping of its national identity, and which is a part of a larger Europe" (McLeod 10; Di Maio 251). The status of both *England* and *changed* in this reading is straightforward: "England" is a stable, national topos and "changed" refers to non-European

immigration; the latter relies structurally on the former's stability in some sense, the idea that at least part of England "has not changed" and has resisted being a point of "globalized intersection" (Ellis 6). *England has changed* would thus seem to be a simplified, almost clichéd echo of Margaret Thatcher's infamous concern that Britain should "finally see an end to immigration lest [British people] feel rather swamped by people with an alien culture" (qtd in Brown 61).

In this novel, however, Dorothy's statement has a more ambiguous and complicated geography. She continues:

> Three months ago, in early June, I moved out here to this new development of Stoneleigh. None of the old villagers seem comfortable with the term "new development." They simply call Stoneleigh the "new houses on the hill." After all, our houses are set on the edge of Weston, a village that is hardly going to give up its name and identity because some developer has seen a way to make a quick buck by throwing up some semi-detached bungalows, slapping a carriage lamp in front of them and calling them "Stoneleigh." (Phillips, *Distant* 3)

Dorothy's opening in fact contains no reference to transnational migration. Instead, despite the fact that she is from the unnamed larger town closest to Weston, Dorothy is herself the newcomer to this provincial northern English village, moving out to spend her retirement in an Old England-themed cul-de-sac. In this context the middle-class residents of Stoneleigh are the agents of change, the strangers who do not belong, and yet it is Dorothy who is "disturbed" by a vague, unspoken, residual change in England. Dorothy is troubled by the ambiguity of her position: she cannot tell who belongs and who is a stranger, because she herself belongs *and* is a stranger.

What is produced instead is a geography in which, as Phillips has indicated, no one feels at home (Phillips "Conversation"). However, this *includes* the residents of Weston who, rather than representing the majoritarian essence of old-Englishness, are in fact economically, geographically and culturally marginal, particularly in the North.[3] Rather than existing since time immemorial, provincial identity has indeed been *created* as the "other" of capitalist progress, and as Doreen Massey shows, the unevenness of the British economy has only increased since the 1980s (Massey 121). Villages like Weston have been continually "giving up" their identities and recreating them; correspondingly, rural social identity is not undifferentiated and static but heterogeneous and always subject to change. In reading this passage, Josiane Ranguin recognizes that the "faultline here is not race, but class," but argues that the division is only a result of a close-minded defense mechanism on the part of the villagers and that "Stoneleigh is an allegory of England, class barriers acting as social frontiers" (Ranguin 206-207). However, even this reading fails to recognize that though close-minded, the residents are also in a marginal position with regards to Stoneleigh, unable to stop the building of a new suburban development that seeks to dissociate itself from the supposedly less sophisticated working-class village. "Stoneleigh" in fact attempts to reproduce an imaginary rural England of the past while ignoring the bleak realities of the contemporary place. In this way, place is dehistoricized.

Together, these readings of *England has changed* naturalize the city-country dynamics presented in the novel, where cities like London represent flux and progressive change and small country towns represent only anachronism and xenophobia. That is, they assume that *place* produces politics, when instead the reverse is true: politics and history produce place. In this sense, England has always been changing, and there have always been those to lament the change; indeed, Raymond Williams notes that this is a primary structure of feeling in English literature.[4] As many have noted, the idea of a rural "country" existing autonomously from urban "towns" is a demonstrably simplified and false construction, and yet one that persists in the British imaginary. Rather, rurality and urbanity are continually produced in relation to each other and to other spatial formations and scales.

The geography of Weston is specifically post-industrial: Dorothy refers to "Mrs. Thatcher closing the pits," when discussing Weston, and indeed coal mining and its demise under Conservative Party policies are critical to understanding social change (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 4). Northern England in particular suffered drastically not only from agricultural competition but from the collapse of energy prices and many lost battles with the state. Weston does not straightforwardly represent "old England, with its old ways" and "well-established identities" (Tournay-Theodotou 296; Gabrielle 310). Rather, as part of the coal mining community, Weston is a part of what Margaret Thatcher called an "industry [that] had come to symbolize everything that was wrong with Britain" (qtd in Parker 8). At the same time that the state was responding to riots in cities over structural racial prejudice and unemployment, Thatcher and her cabinet were referring to northern English miners—who were and are a strong Labour constituency—as "the mob" and the "enemy within" (Beynon 5).[5] Tournay-Theodotou argues that "Weston's/Britain's security and well-being have been shaken with the closing down of the coal pits and the high rate of unemployment. Nevertheless, the community holds together, but is challenged beyond endurance when the posh neighborhood is established, as it represents an alternative that holds up the mirror to their dire existence" (Tournay-Theodotou 300). This reading ignores the profound class and geographic marginalization of places like Weston in contemporary Britain. In fact, the interests of "Weston" and the British state were never fully aligned, and they diverged further during the erosion of the welfare state and the deregulation of energy markets, and after the 1984 strike, mining communities were and are viciously split between those who went on strike and those who did not.[6]

Decades after the strike, Weston shows the way in which marginalized people can easily latch onto essentialist and essentializing identities. There are many reasons why the "working-class people from Weston find it hard to accept" not only the people of Stoneleigh but also the idea that "the old ways of identification are no longer valid in a society where…one can be black but nonetheless a British citizen" as Cindy Gabrielle argues (310). Gabrielle notes "these

attempts to preserve a "pure" English/working-class identity and traditional identification patterns at all costs are certainly at odds with the image of England as a nation of progress" (Gabrielle 311). Again, in conflating Weston with English national identity, Gabrielle accepts a static notion of the "countryside" and in turn ignores the way in which a town like Weston can be predominately white and protestant while still being marginal in terms of class and geographic identity. Rather, as Tom Nairn has indicated, it is the contemporary politics of "Britain" that has produced "two Englands: New Labour's 'Roseland,' versus an England not merely 'little' but marginalised where the defeated turn to the political Right, like Duncan Smith's Conservativism or even Nicholas Griffin's British National Party" (Nairn 110). When this politics is ignored, xenophobia becomes naturalized into place, as in the epithetic spatial metaphor of "Little England."

In fact, the British state has considered both diverse urban areas such as Liverpool 8 and white working-class areas to be "problems." It was also less that thirty years ago that Doreen Massey and Hilary Wainwright could report on the solidarity between racially diverse urban groups and provincial mining communities during the strike (Massey and Wainwright 152-153). If such solidarity is *no longer* possible, it is important to ask what historical processes broke apart these previous alliances. Such an inquiry of course does not to deny the very real and extreme racism present in northern England.[7] Instead reading Weston as a spatial allegory for the nation naturalizes a xenophobia and racism that has more complex and dynamic historical causes.

Weston in fact evinces the colonial nature of the nationalist project *itself* and its continual production of local provincialities; in this sense, Stoneleigh is a new imperial front of speculative capital that is making the countryside an object of consumption rather than of production. The rural economy today looks much like the economy overall: dominated by finance and service industries and increasingly unequal (Cherry and Rogers 110). It is also more focused on consumption, with even the Cortonwood colliery in Yorkshire, where the 1984 strike began, having been developed into a shopping centre (Hennock).[8] Increased ease of transportation has meant that many newcomers are able to travel to larger towns for work, leisure or other services; in the novel Weston is only five miles from the "main town" (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 4). By 2000, the majority of the population in English villages worked outside the village, including incoming migrants who bought a country home but kept work elsewhere (Burchardt 188). As a bartender tells Dorothy, implicitly criticizing the new arrivals for not spending time in the village pub, "I expect they need to make some brass to pay off their fancy mortgages" (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 39). Indeed, aside from Dorothy and Solomon, the residents of Stoneleigh are largely absent from the novel, indicating their disinterest in village life.

Longtime rural residents are not just marginalized "passively" by structural changes in the economy, but *actively* by incoming residents

and government policy. There is a shortage of housing in particular (Cherry and Rogers 160). Howard Newby remarks that "resentment among local people has grown at their inability to find housing for themselves and their children. Yet they have also found that the newcomers have frequently opposed the construction of new housing, especially council housing, on the grounds that it is 'detrimental to the character of the village' and detracts from the rural environment" (Newby 233). Thus "posh" developments like Stoneleigh drive class resentment and social alienation.

The middle-class residents of Stoneleigh would have not only financial resources but also experience with bureaucratic power structures, enabling them to exert an outsized influence on local politics and development (Newby 227). They might not only see the countryside as an amenity, but have a specific, highly idealized notion of the countryside, one which does not include the realities of contemporary poverty (Cherry and Rogers 160). For example, Sue Glyptis comments that "in many villages long-established residents aspire to provide better community facilities for their youngsters, but this has been resolutely opposed by incomers who want to preserve their new-found rural paradise exactly as they found it," or at least how they imagined it" (Glyptis 12). Meanwhile the newcomers cast "the indigenous population into the role of rustic showpieces" (Glyptis 11). Government policy tends to yield to these demands, and those of finance capital more generally. This includes areas where the government has *withdrawn* support with the approval of wealthier residents willing to trade state resources for lower taxes, which affects services such as public transportation that the wealthy do not use. As Newby states, "the affluent majority of the rural population has been able to overcome any problems which arise by stepping into their cars and driving to the nearest town, whereas the poor, the elderly and the disabled have been particularly vulnerable to any decrease in the provision of local services, and especially of public transport" (Newby 232). Furthermore, the fact that services have been concentrated in larger villages has the consequence of disadvantaging those who were already the most disadvantaged—the poor and the elderly who lack access to transport (Burchardt 188). In fact, it is possible that Weston is only visible to Dorothy because she lacks a car, and thus must have *some* contact with the pre-Stoneleigh community. Similarly, her relationship with Solomon is in many ways mediated by his access to (and care of) his car.

Seen in this historical context, a more complicated reading of Weston develops. Its geographical development has produced an "alarming degree of social polarization…between those who had chosen to live in the countryside…and those who had been stranded in rural areas by social and economic forces over which they had no control and which were frequently reinforced by public indifference to their plight" (Newby 223). Aware of their own poverty due to its juxtaposition with extreme wealth, socially alienated, and without a future, the youths of Weston come to more closely resemble their counterparts in urban council estates. These are also the ideal political

conditions for the kind of racism and xenophobia that Solomon in particular faces.[9] This racism is, importantly, not the result of an unchanged, quintessential English provinciality encountering difference for the first time, but the result of only the most recent political-economic shifts in a long and checkered history of rural change. Obviously, racism in Britain is neither new nor confined to provincial areas but is also situational: the parameters of its expression and conditions of its possibility change over time and are expressed in *place.* The idea that place is stable and not given over to epistemic or economic change indicates an inability to think in structural terms about race and the operation of power.

Naturalizing Place in "A New Development"

Weston includes traces of all the elements indicated above, including closed mines, derelict commercial rail infrastructure, a nearby town as a center of shopping and employment, but also fields and more pastoral areas. Yet, in the text, these places do not appear to be the result of the above political history. Instead, the figuration that the text gives us mimics the operative dynamics of place in national discourse insofar as their overtly historical aspects are concealed. *Place* absorbs ideology, history, politics into its apparent primary naturalness, which conceals how the class and race dynamics of Weston have evolved from state policies and structural economic changes.

Stoneleigh, with its gaudy suburban cul-de-sac and "plenty of satellite dishes," attempts at the same time to resemble a supposedly quintessential English village for middle-class retirees, who seem to show little interest in understanding the actual history and circumstances of Weston (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 5). In fact history appears, when it does appear, as the result of changes that took place long ago and have little relation to the contemporary period. Dorothy notes that "the only history around these parts is probably in the architecture," especially the "typical miners' houses" that face the noisy main road and which "now look almost quaint" (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 4). These museum-like traces of history bear no direct relation to the present but are instead reified as objects for consumption, as in the "estate agents's bumf about 'Stoneleigh,'" where, referring to Weston's sister towns,

> it says that during the Second World War the German town was bombed flat by the RAF, and the French village used to be full of Jews who were all rounded up and sent to the camps. I can't help feeling that it makes Weston seem a bit tame by comparison. Apparently, the biggest thing that had ever happened in Weston was Mrs. Thatcher closing the pits, and that was over twenty years ago. (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 4)

The initial presentation of the town's history here is filtered through an advertisement for the new development with the invented name "Stoneleigh." With a flat affect, violent histories become commodified history, exciting events that lend drama and character to place as it

might be conceived for tourists. Here, too, Weston falls short, being only able to claim an economic injustice that also seems part of its distant history, despite being a product of Thatcher's relatively recent reign. The novel alludes, along these lines, to various derelict structures of this advertised ruined history, from the village architecture to old railways, which Dorothy describes as "some kind of monument now" (Phillips*, A Distant Shore* 18). All of this history, as history, thus seems barely relevant to the contemporary time of the novel. Change, in a phrase such as *England has changed*, here is spatialized, producing an opacity that also restricts some of Phillips' characteristic anamnestic impulses. Nevertheless, using a discontinuous narrative, place is imbued with its violent material conditions of possibility.

Specifically, Weston is mediated through the unreliable narration of Dorothy, a character who is both producer and a victim of gendered social marginalization. It is in fact through the narrative of a collapsing psyche that Phillips is able to present not only the contradictions of her personality, but also the contradictions of a working-class town that can be simultaneously a victim of internal colonization (and the attendant class condescension from figures like Dorothy) and at the same time ruthlessly and murderously racist.

After being forced to retire, Dorothy "saw a drawing of Stoneleigh in the local paper and she bought her bungalow over the phone. Somehow the phrase 'a new development' sounded comforting" (Phillips*, A Distant Shore* 236). Stoneleigh could easily be a development produced by a company such as McCarthy & Stone, whose website offers middle-class buyers a choice of properties spread throughout Yorkshire (including the town of Market Weighton). McCarthy & Stone advertises the many amenities available to transplants: "Yorkshire is home to numerous attractions, comprising of ancient castles, World Heritage Sites, mining museums and galleries," and additionally, "tranquil gardens and innovative breweries can also be found in the region" (Stone). Similarly, Stoneleigh is conceptually "a distant shore" for Dorothy, an escape, despite the fact that she finds herself in a "bungalow at the top of the hill in this village that is five miles outside her home town" (Phillips*, A Distant Shore* 236). The bungalows of the new development offer themselves as a resolution, a place to spend a relaxing retirement.[10]

This is a bleak place, however, incapable of providing such a resolution. The text introduces itself by way of its setting in Weston/Stoneleigh, as just after Dorothy declares that 'England has changed' she notes that "our village is divided into two" (Phillips*, A Distant Shore* 6). Descending into Weston, she notes:

> I was surprised by how busy the main road was, with big lorries thundering by in both directions. It took a good while before there was a break in the traffic and I was able to dash across. As it turned out there was not much to see, except housewives sitting on the front steps sunning themselves, or young kids running around. Doors were propped wide open, presumably because of the heat, but I didn't get the impression that the open doors were indicative of friendliness. People stared at me like I had the mark of Cain on my forehead, so I pressed on and discovered the canal. It's a murky strip of stagnant water, but because I was

> away from the noise of traffic, and the blank gawping stares of villagers, it looked almost tolerable. The skeletal remains of a few barges were tied up by the shoreline, and it soon became clear that the main activity in these parts appeared to be walking the dog. In the fields, the cows and sheep moved with an ease which left me in no doubt, that, despite the public footpath that snaked across the farmer's land, this was their territory. (Phillips*, A Distant Shore* 6)

A contrast is drawn here between the busyness of the main road and the stillness of the town. Weston is a place that most people move through and from which some people never move. It is sonically elaborated through the noise of the traffic passing through, perhaps in part from the other middle-class residents exiting the town in their cars. On the other hand, the main road that facilitates this traffic hinders Dorothy's own movement, and the town itself is marked mostly by slight, banal activity such as walking dogs and sitting, a stillness connotative of the villagers' isolation and one that continues into the canal which will later be the site of Solomon's murder. Like the locals' "blank" opacity, this pastoral landscape, with its stagnant water and skeletal boats, is also uninviting to Dorothy, preventing her from entering and exploring. Instead, she must retreat to her home, even though this landscape, animals and all, is supposed to be an object of consumption and peace for people like Dorothy (hence the public path).[11]

Dorothy's experience with Weston is continually blocked, mediated by conflicting desires of association and segregation. This division is partially a class division; as Dorothy says, "we're the newcomers, or posh so-and-sos, as I heard a vulgar woman in the post office call us" (Phillips*, A Distant Shore* 5). As is typical of Dorothy, she notes on the one hand a justified class resentment felt by the villagers for the people on the hill that negates any attempt she may have for association, while on the other hand seeking to disassociate herself from the common vulgarity of the villager. The dynamics of this local geography are such that they seem to place incompatible, distant elements in an unbearably claustrophobic space producing both connection through proximity and extreme disconnection through conflict.[12] This is repeated formally in a narrative that evokes Dorothy's increasing subjective retreat from reality as well as that reality's objective hostility, thus producing ambiguity as to whether the people of Weston really are so uniformly hostile or if Dorothy is projecting a stereotype onto them. As Newby observes, "for those newcomers who moved to the countryside in order to seek the social intimacy of a happy and integrated community life, the reserve (and worse) of the local inhabitants may have been a disappointment" (Newby 224).

In the aftermath of Solomon's death, Dorothy walks by the canal, wondering where *exactly* they found his body, and finds the small-town landscape again difficult: "It's been raining heavily so the towpath has turned muddy, and the odd puddle has formed here and there…You seem to spend as much time looking at your feet as you do trying to take in the scenery" (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 41). For people like Dorothy these types of spaces are meant to be tranquil, idyllic

areas worthy of consumption. Instead the canal is abandoned, and the lack of people does not signal a tranquil peace but rather ominous suspicion and submerged violence. For Solomon and Dorothy, these are not places of safety. Indeed, the deep, historical violence that haunts Phillips' other novels returns here as well, but through place and landscape in particular, for example in several bus scenes where Dorothy "sits passively, soporifically watching the world barrel past" (Warnes 42). Dorothy turns to the landscape outside the bus due to her sociophobia, but these landscapes offer little escape, and do more to signal a growing tension or crisis for Dorothy herself. Before Dorothy knows that Solomon has been murdered, she thinks:

> I was standing on the bus going home when I felt it in my blood that something was wrong. It wasn't just the sight of burly, unemployed men sitting in the seats reserved for the handicapped and the elderly that was disturbing me, there was something else. I stared out of the window at the town's terraced houses, great stripes of them arranged in narrow, ramrod-straight streets which, as we made our way into the countryside, finally gave way to a desolate landscape of empty fields over which the sun now hung ominously low. (Phillips*, A Distant Shore* 44)

Typically for Dorothy, the bus offends her, specifically the unemployed men not respecting the rules of mannered society. It is, in fact, their disrespect for the space of bus that makes Dorothy turn away. Her disdain for her fellow passengers recalls Margaret Thatcher's (most likely apocryphal) statement that "a man who, beyond the age of 26, finds himself on a bus can count himself as a failure" (Johnston). It also recalls Thatcher's not-apocryphal privatization of bus systems: the communal, public space of the bus is one also of public withdrawal and privatization. For example, Peter Ambrose remarks that "government policy has been very much to reward 'successful' regions…by increased infrastructural investment, and not to spend money on incentives to attract new industry to those less-successful parts of the country, the parts where old traditional industries are in decline. By its pattern of support, or rather non-support, for public transport it has shown that it has very little interest in the more isolated rural areas" (Ambrose 187).

Similarly, when Dorothy is finally forced to retire as a teacher she witnesses an argument between a man with a bicycle and the driver of her bus to her new home in Stoneleigh, and "she looks away, ashamed and puzzled. It is one thing to be frustrated by rules, but it is another thing to flout authority in such a vulgar manner. These are not happy times for anybody" (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 213). Dorothy's lack of a car forces her into this public space, but rather than community, what this space provides is only further disagreement and conflict. Taking offense at the non-community of the bus she looks away, but her gaze can only rest on the monotony and homogeneity of cheap consumer culture: "the bleak scene of unappetising fast-food places, an RAC stand, rows of unused telephones and neon-lit petrol pumps" (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 213). In fact, this 'landscape' contains all that which has threatened the economic stability of the postwar countryside: cheap, imported, processed fast-food, the availability of easy transport (automobiles), and oil, whose cheap availability in a neoliberal,

globalized economy helped put an end to the coal industry. Thus, inherent in both the apparently neutral space of the bus and the mediated landscape outside is a political economy that emerges obliquely through the narrative.

Unbelonging and the Collapse of Social and Psychic Reality

All of these instances and scenes are of course mediated by Dorothy, and increasingly indicate social phobia verging on paranoia. At the same time, these particular instances and examples, in their singularity and sensuality, point to the general, material conditions of social and psychic violence. Dorothy's narration reinscribes the marginalization of Weston even as she suffers from Weston's marginalization of her. As Stephen Clingman writes, this split is repeated in the form of the novel and its "disjointed spaciotemporalities…in which versions of migrancy and internal exile co-exist but do not fully align, in which nation and narration are far from cohesive, horizontally unified, or identical" (Clingman 51). The disjunctive time of the national, however, does not signal its demise, but rather its transformation in the age of neoliberalism. In the novel, these temporal gaps give Dorothy's narrative its sense of incommensurability, as if the possibility of her existing in Weston was foreclosed from the beginning. Instead, what is explored are processes of social and psychic collapse, in which the postcolonial experience elides into continuing neocolonial operations of power.

This split is perhaps appropriate for the *Daily Mail*-reading Dorothy. Maurizio Calbi observes that the novel "is packed with issues that appear in British daily newspapers … : immigration, child abuse, cancer, violence, the lowering of standards in education, hospital care, and so on" (Calbi 60). He notes, however, that the novel is no mere reproduction of facts; but then, neither is the crudely sensationalist, middle-market *Daily Mail.* In fact, rather than producing sober reporting on Britain's pressing social issues, papers like the *Daily Mail* and Rupert Murdoch's *The Sun* instead peddle in dramatized stereoptypes about what David Cameron and the Conservative Party have recently called "broken Britain," defined by the former as "the slow-motion moral collapse that has taken place in parts of our country these past few generations," due to what he termed "moral neutrality" (BBC "England Riots: Broken Society Is Top Priority - Cameron"). The latter he summarized in a series of pithy phrases: "Irresponsibility. Selfishness. Behaving as if your choices have no consequences. Children without fathers. Schools without discipline. Reward without effort" (Economist "Not So Broken"). "Broken Britain"characterized not just London's "multicultural" ghettos, but all those working-class places and estates that the postwar welfare state made possible.

A place like Weston, with no remaining economic viability except that provided by bourgeois interlopers like Dorothy, becomes stigmatized for its own marginalization (like Dorothy, in her own way). For example, Sandra Courtman writes, "while British cities

might be unequivocally multicultural, racism prevails in all-white villages where the inhabitants have avoided routine encounters with African, Asian, and Caribbean settlers. Tribal law and xenophobia go unchecked in such an enclave" (Courtman 278). The "unequivocal" liberal multiculturalism of cities is, of course, not mutually exclusive with xenophobia, but more problematic is the way in which Courtman suggests that the "tribal" provinciality of northern English villages is simple social fact. Rather, the 'tribal' characterization of Weston invokes a colonial structure of primitivism, in which the north is temporally behind the south according to the new markers of modernity. Weston's xenophobia is not imaginary, but here is naturalized into a spatial configuration whose temporality does not take into account the complexity of historical formations.

Thus the text does, indeed, at times characterize Weston as "tribal," with its residents in fact acquiring a primitive and hostile animality, but rather than consider this a simple representation of social fact, or more problematically allegorically indicative of a "broken Britain," one might be attentive to the construction of this 'brokenness' through the compromised narration of Dorothy. Her sociophobia indicates the complexity and ambivalence within Dorothy and in her narration's tenuous claim to "reality." Her characterizations of the working-class masses in the novel are as sensationalist and subjective as a *Daily Mail* headline but also reveal a subtext of prejudicial violence that would find its full force on the body of Solomon. For example, in the town where she is a teacher,

> at 10:30pm there will be a sudden rush of people from the twin-cinema complex, some making their way home, but most dashing to the city-centre pubs for a final drink. Of course, these new pubs with their security staff, and sawdust on the floor and loud thumping music bear no resemblance to what she recognises as a pub, but mercifully she is under no obligation to enter such hovels. At 11 p.m., when the places finally close, the unwashed rabble will slouch out into the streets, full of drink and spoiling for trouble, but she will be safely tucked up in bed. (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 209)

This is the culture industry's unthinking mob, blindly seeking entertainment that is not that entertaining and in the meantime making altogether too much noise. They represent actual cultural violence and potential physical violence and inspire Dorothy's further retreat to an interior, a home or a mind. Moreover, as a collective subject, they also exist in the text as figuration. In the text this group of working-class subjects are a heterogeneous element, both an overly known cliché but at the same time unknown and opaque; in this way, the novel enacts a fragmentation between incommensurable entities. This violence is undeniably directed toward racial minorities. For example, the patrons of Mahmood's restaurant are

> fat-bellied Englishmen and their slatterns rolling into The Khyber Pass after the pubs had closed, calling him Ranjit or Baboo or Swamp Boy, and using poppadoms as Frisbees, and demanding lager, and vomiting in his sinks, and threatening him with his own knives and their beery breath, and bellowing for mini-cabs and food that they were too drunk to see had already arrived on the table in front of them. (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 180-81)

This overwhelming anaphoric litany evokes the putrid physicality and drunken, racist stupidity of an endless English hooligan mob. It is a masculine violence, in whose wake follows an untidy femininity.[13] They are a collective subject which is aggressive, noisy, messy, ill-tempered and ill-mannered as they demand, vomit, threaten and bellow, and they suggest the presence of an unmediated violence in alarming proximity.

This collective subject is not only male and working-class, but also young. Dorothy's disdain for children may stem, perhaps ironically, from her profession as a school teacher in music, but their unruliness becomes excessive when they become teenagers. At the local pub, Dorothy finds the sound of the canal (where Solomon is eventually murdered) to be briefly "soothing," but this is interrupted by

> some young louts and their girlfriends [who] were braying and chasing about the place. I watched them as they began to toss beer at each other, and then shriek with the phlegmy laughter of hardened smokers…I could now feel eyes upon me, and for a few moments I wondered if some of these slovenly youngsters, with their barrack-room language, weren't pupils that I'd recently had the rare pleasure of teaching. However, I thought it best not to turn and look them full in the face. (Phillips, *A Distant Shore* 6-7)

The youth's shrieks and ('phlegmy') laughter indicates not the joyful promise of children playing but rather degenerate, unkempt beings, already ruined by alcohol and cigarettes and expletives. In this way, the text takes the caricature of "broken Britain's" youth seriously, recreating them as the violent, subhuman collectivity they are supposed to be.[14] When Dorothy feels eyes, it is *all* of them who are turning to her, and she tries to escape their notice as if they were violent dogs spoiling for a fight with a passerby. She does not look them in the face, and in a sense they are faceless; in the novel, they are, with one exception, given no voice or subjectivity but rather exist as objects of Dorothy's fear and disgust.

Calbi, mobilizing Kristeva and Butler, argues that Dorothy's denigration of others is in fact a projection of her own abjection, and that furthermore, this illustrates "the social and psychic process of displacement whereby those who are cast out to the margins acquire a limited amount of power by actively marginalising" (Calbi 59). This analysis could apply just as easily to the teenagers of Weston as it could to Dorothy. Through her narration, the relative incommensurability that constitutes a heterogeneous society is not so much represented as staged — textual presences set into motion. Here the caricature, the cliché, is both untrue and true, imaginary productions of prejudice and real producers of violence. In this way, the text reproduces stereotypes but through a character whose own ethical sensibility and psychological stability are compromised, and in doing so shows how places like Weston can come to be made by a majoritarian discourse.

For Adorno and Horkeimer the savageness *of civilization* is immanent with and constitutive of 'progress' itself. They write that "adaptation to the power of progress furthers the progress of power, constantly renewing the degenerations which prove successful

progress, not failed progress, to be its own antithesis. The curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression" (Adorno and Horkheimer 28). The provincials of postindustrial Weston are not survivals from a previous era, but a necessary excess that enforces the system. Here what is "broken," in all its vagueness, is the excessive production of those who identify and lament brokenness. Dorothy, Solomon and the residents of Weston are all elements that are subject to and selectively reproduce this diffuse ideological machine, and thus are all partially minoritarian relative to each other. As a resident of the new speculative development, Dorothy is an unwitting bearer of "progress" and "regeneration" which requires the identification of ruined, "backward" places. As on the bus, Dorothy repeatedly makes this identification and then turns away; here progress produces regression, which it then cannot countenance. In *A Distant Shore*, the more that Dorothy retreats into herself out of a false prejudice and fear of an exterior, collective barbarity, the more that violent collectivity becomes real.

Stoneleigh thus fails at being "a distant shore," a place of refuge, for Solomon, Dorothy, *and for* Weston itself. If the British nation is unstable, Dorothy's narration shows how the effects of this instability are not distributed evenly, but are brought to bear most painfully on its excessive subjects: Dorothy is no longer needed by the state school system, Solomon/Gabriel is the byproduct of wars for the blood diamonds and minerals which fuel consumer modernity, and Weston is a postindustrial backwater subject to real estate speculation and development. In this material context, Dorothy's psychological collapse provides a narratological device that reveals the multifaceted nature of marginalization in contemporary Britain, in which Gladstonian ideals of 'progress' and 'civilization' continue to implode while the patriarchal violence of colonialism and capitalism advance unabated. Dorothy's abandonment from reality is the only logical and sane response to a reality that has always abandoned her. Phillips, by narrating Dorothy's withdrawal from her own perspective, records both her tentative grasp on reality and that reality's objective insanity.

Provincializing England

Because much of Phillips' writing articulates the bonds of transatlantic intimacy and violence, and historical connection and trauma, Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* is a frequently used paradigm for spatializing the presentation of identity in his writing. Opposing, as Gilroy does, the ossified and reactionary fixity of the local with the trans-spatial, both mobile and connected in historical consciousness, comfortable with cultural admixture and tending toward democracy, many find in Phillips a sense of possibility—realistic and somber, for certain, but also hopeful.

However, *A Distant Shore* yields less easily to this reading, as place becomes less a point of departure and more of a dead-end. As John McLeod writes (specifically regarding Gilroy's more recent work), "the admirable utopian principles of his [Gilroy's] work—

equality, democracy, and freedom beyond the illiberalism of race and nation—at times divert him from a consideration of the ways in which the realities of contemporary Britain simply do not fit his schema" (McLeod 7). That is, the quasi-utopianism that Gilroy finds in Black Atlantic cultures— in particular youth cultures—not only does not recognize the continuance of colonial modes of power in the age of finance capital, but is in fact founded on a spatialization that precludes such recognition. The division that so many critics of *A Distant Shore* have made, between the transnational, Black Atlantic figure of Solomon and the essentially static and reactionary nationalism of Weston, is one in which *place* naturalizes itself as determinative of social and individual identity. What this reading does not—cannot—recognize is the contingency of the relationship between place and identity and the ways in which both can be differentiated, fractured and split. As Jacqueline Nassy Brown argues in her critique of Gilroy, the diasporic community in England is segmented complexly through which an understanding of place is shared. Simply put, the histories of violence that create Solomon as a Black Atlantic subject also subject him to renegotiations of place which interrupt any continuous diasporic identity. Instead, Brown notes that the local is the mapping of "processes, practices and phenomena…[that have] no a priori spatial or social form" (Brown 133). *A Distant Shore* shows how boundaries of affiliation blink in and out of existence within a contested geography. Refracted through the novel, postcolonial theory attends to the violent misrecognition that grounds community in the contemporary moment.

As Timothy Bewes suggests, Phillips captures the spectrality of place through a language whose "unreliability" is condition of possibility for any speaking at all, as demonstrated in the third-person limited narration of character who is also collapsing psychologically. That is, the only way for the text to "represent" Weston would be to render it opaque but not unreal, obscured behind the oppressive mirage of "Britain," broken or otherwise. As Bewes writes, Phillips' writing "is about nothing so much as the dialectic of possibility and impossibility, a dialectic that describes and defines the postcolonial situation," in so far as the literal ground of being is consistently staged and withdrawn (Bewes 51). He goes on to say for Phillips' writing, " 'diaspora,' the 'black Atlantic,' and 'postcoloniality' are limited in their critical efficacy as long as they are conceived in positive terms; that is to say, as long as 'diaspora identities' are imbued with an ontology" rather than existing as a "counteridentitarian, negative-dialectical trope" (Bewes 55, 52). Bewes is not referring specifically to *A Distant Shore,* but it is in this novel in particular that features a geography, which, fractured as it is, also fractures the oppositions between roots and routes which structure concepts such as the black Atlantic and postcolonial melancholy.[15]

Phillips accomplishes this through a narration that collapses around its collapsing inhabitants. As Andrew Warnes suggests, the provinciality of the novel forces a different kind of writing from Phillips, wherein narrative elements are "meticulously shrunk, suburbanized, and rid…of any lingering mythic quality. The triptych

format that Phillips favours for almost all his other novels recoils in horror from *A Distant Shore*'s provincial setting, the body of postcolonial theory with which it is associated seeming entirely too sophisticated for the brutish drunken 'strangers'—as opposed to 'survivors'—who litter the unhappy village" (Warnes 41). Yet, it is still the violence of civilization that Stoneleigh brings to Weston that ultimately finds an outlet on Solomon's body. What is formed is mutual non-identity drained of its utopian possibility and dramatic metaphysics, postcolonialism provincialized. This is not, as Loic Waquant writes, "the erosion of a sense of 'place'…[which] exacerbate[s] the experience and effects of deproletarianization and destitution" but rather the fullest conceptual extension of *place* itself (Wacquant 7).

Thus it is the case that postcolonial theory at times relies too much on a notion of place whose untenability is indicated, with strong irony, by Phillips: in naturalizing place, the postcolonial can be too "sophisticated" for the "hooligans" of Weston, remnants of a civilization that has given up on progress but not on savage violence. Phillips presents a place of unquestionable insignificance whose entrenchment is at the same time its character of non-particularity. *A Distant Shore* thus requires the postcolonial critic not only to encounter the neocolonial but to do so without recourse to *place*.

Notes

1. Some time after Gabriel immigrates to the United Kingdom, he moves to northern England and changes his name to Solomon.

2. cf. Bénédicte Ledent, "'Of, and Not of, This Place': Attachment and Detachment in Caryl Phillips' *A Distant Shore*" *Kunapipi* 26.1 (2004).

3. cf. The Economist, "The Great Divide," *The Economist* 2012.

4. cf. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975).

5. Mining and provincial industrial production occurred in many areas of Britain of course, not just in northern England.

6. On the occasion of Thatcher's death, John Burns quoted one post-mining town resident on her legacy: "Mrs. Thatcher? She's not to be mentioned…just don't mention the lady. She set people against each other, she broke up families, and it's still the same today. There are still people who won't talk to each other, who'll cross the road rather than run into somebody they worked with for 30 years." John F. Burns, "As Thatcher Goes to Rest, Miners Feel No Less Bitter," *The New York Times*, 16 Apr. 2013.

7. Of which there are innumerable reports; one example would be the case of Martha-Renee Kolleh in Yorkshire, who felt forced to place a sign on the window of her restaurant stating, "I am a black woman... If you are allergic to black people, don't come in." BBC, "Ossett Cafe Owner 'Warns' Customers She is Black," *BBC* 2013.

8. Mary Hennock remarks: "while work has become more white collar and far less obviously dangerous, it has also become more short-term - call centres are already looking less secure as jobs move abroad."

9. Conditions in which Yorkshire could elect a Ukip MEP who would refer to third-world countries as "bongo bongo land." "Yorks Ukip MEP Denies 'Bongo' Comment is Racist," *Yorkshire Evening Post* (Leeds: Yorkshire Post Newspapers, 2013).

10. Originally, "the bungalow was the peasant's hut of rural Bengal. Subsequently, when it came to mean a house for Europeans in India, the criteria were explicitly racial and cultural." Within England, it would also come to symbolize "getting away from it all" for bohemian back-to-the-landers who were a "small, middle-class minority in a society marked by vast conspicuous consumption of the upper class on the one hand and immense poverty on the other." A.D. King, *The Bungalow: The Production of a Global Culture* (Oxford UP, 1984) 1, 119.

11. Burchardt writes that "by the 1980s rural recreation had become one of the dominant uses of leisure time in rural England." J. Burchardt, *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change in England since 1800* (I.B. Tauris, 2002), 181.

McCarthy & Stone tout the "picturesque towns" and the many walking routes, including the "Malham Tarn Upland Farm Walk [which] is a good option for those that enjoy learning about the local history." McCarthy & Stone, *Retirement Homes in Yorkshire*, 10 Aug. 2014.

12. As Bénédicte Ledent notes, "togetherness is never very far from parting" (154).

13. Referred to here by the pejorative "slattern." The Oxford English Dictionary defines "slattern" as "a woman or girl untidy and slovenly in person, habits, or surroundings; a slut." The novel uses a slightly different spelling. "Slattern, N. and Adj., *OED*.

14. As a figure in British culture they might recall the boys in *A Clockwork Orange.*

15. c.f. Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

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