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Strange Encounters: Nationhood and the Stranger in Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore*

[H]ave you not observed that it is characteristic of a well-bred dog to behave with the utmost gentleness to those it is used to and knows, but to be savage to strangers ... it is a trait that shows real discrimination and a truly philosophical nature ... for the dog distinguishes the sight of a friend and foe simply by knowing one and not knowing the other.

(Plato, *The Republic*, trans. D. Lee, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970: 111)

In this paper I wish to explore the novel's multiple constructions of the stranger based on race, gender, religion and class, predominantly in the figures of the two protagonists Dorothy, an aging white English woman and Solomon, an African refugee. This discussion will be linked to an analysis of the construction of places and spaces (the neighborhood/ the village) as miniature representations of the construction of the nation. The analysis will hence revolve around various kinds of dis-placement – both spatial and psychological - presented in the novel.

“England has changed. These days it is 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, 2003: 3).¹

These opening sentences of *A Distant Shore* are of immediately programmatic value for the entire novel as they introduce several of the novel's main concerns such as England as a society in flux, the question of belonging and un-belonging, the use of the key term 'stranger' and the irritation these issues provoke in Dorothy. This opening concisely summarizes the destabilization of the experience of home that contemporary societies are currently undergoing. In her extremely enlightening study entitled *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000), Sara Ahmed describes these changes to the once familiar space of home as follows: “there is always the possibility of an encounter with strangeness at stake, even within the home ... homes do not stay the same as the space which is simply the familiar. There is movement and dislocation within the forming of homes as complex and contingent spaces of inhabitation” (88). Dorothy's disturbance with the changes and her general mental instability aptly reflect the current 'disturbed' state of the British nation. In addition to reading Dorothy as an allegory of Britain as suggested by Benedicte Ledent, I wish to argue that the depictions of the old village of Weston and the 'new development' of Stoneleigh represent miniature allegorical spatial constructions of the present anatomy of the nation at large. In this

reading, the village and/or neighborhood function as a representation of the nation on a small scale as a “tiny, underdeveloped nation” (Hess/ Morris, 1975: 16).

To begin with, the contrastive use of the adjectives ‘old’ and ‘new’ suggest that the existing village represents the old England with its old ways whereas the ‘new development’ suggests developments, a change and a departure from old ways. Furthermore, the location of the “new houses on the hill” and “on the edge of Weston” (3) captures its detached and marginal location on the periphery of the center, Weston. I am deliberately employing colonial discourse here as the village also comes to represent Britain’s desperate effort to hold on to its glorious colonial past, which is illustrated in its unwillingness to “give up its name and identity” (3) and in the addition of ‘Weston’ to ‘Stoneleigh’ on letters “as though the former civilizes the latter” (3). The spatial construction together with the implied wealth of the inhabitants of the new development moreover suggests its economic superiority whereas the village with its high rate of unemployment represents the nation’s general decline as an economic power. Class and an accompanying sense of inferiority on the part of the villagers thus also come to play an important role in the division of the two communities. This segregation becomes particularly evident when one of the female villagers refers to the new settlers as “the newcomers, or posh so-and-sos” (5) and Dorothy in turn refers to the woman as “vulgar” (5) thus making the wish for social distinction a mutual one with Dorothy registering: “So our village was divided in two” (4). In the context of my suggested allegorical reading of the village and the new development as representative of Britain, 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. In the novel this division is furthermore emphasized by the use of the ‘us’/‘them’ dichotomy employed as much by Dorothy in her first person narrative as by, for example, the owner of the pub.

Apart from reading the village and the new development as powerful spatial images representing the current state of the nation, there is another ‘space’ recurrently mentioned in the novel that invites being read as an allegory. If Benedicte Ledent reads the constant consumption of tea by the English characters as an allegory and “a quintessential symbol of Englishness” (2004: 157) I would like to add to this liquid allegory the spatial one of the pub which appears to serve as a further emblem of home and Englishness. This construction of the pub seems to be the novel’s most striking spatial image to mark the dynamic of exclusion and inclusion. Dorothy’s conservative father, for example, regarded pubs as a “place of refuge” (13) and insisted that “they’re about being yourself” (13) – or as we may wish to add about ‘being English’. Considering that the history of the pub – or the public house – actually goes back to Roman times, this institution can be regarded as yet another ‘quintessential symbol of Englishness’ referred to in the novel. It is therefore not surprising that Dorothy doesn’t feel comfortable to invite Solomon to go to the pub

with her (45) and that Solomon doesn't feel welcome in a pub as he keeps rejecting his Irish friend's Mike's invitations to accompany him to "his' pub" (286). It is also there where Dorothy's conflict of loyalties is played out when she resolves that she doesn't want Solomon to "become a problem in my life" (45). As a drifter between the two spaces, the pub and the new estate, Dorothy is assigned the role of mediator between the two worlds. If one may be tempted to read her pub strolls as an attempt at some kind of assertion of her Englishness, it eventually only exacerbates her rejection of the village community. During a conversation with the landlord following Solomon's murder she stands by him when she openly declares "Yes...He was a friend of mine" (48). In this entire exchange the pub owner shows no true compassion for Solomon's sad fate and is only eager to defend the purity of the village/ nation and the innocence of its inhabitants/ citizens. Even though he does say in passing that he is sorry for Solomon, in the same sentence – that is on the same level - he expresses his worry about the village's reputation (48) and is certain that it can only have been an accident and furthermore asserts that in the village live only "[d]ecent folk committed to their families and their community. We don't have murderers here" (49). In response Dorothy only nods, as she has "no desire to upset his sense of community" (49). The barkeeper's concern for the village's reputation, his alliance with the rest of the villagers, together with the dual reference to community are in fact strongly reminiscent of Benedict Anderson's concept of the nation as an imagined community characterized by a "deep horizontal comradeship" (1991: 7).

In this context it is interesting that Dorothy apparently thinks it more appropriate to take Solomon to the Somalian and Mediterranean Food Hall (18), a choice of place that is diametrically opposed to the English pub. Significantly, this ethnic restaurant is not located in the village but in the presumably more liberal town. However, to read the existence of ethnic restaurants as a positive sign of successful multicultural integration is deceptive. According to Sara Ahmed, "A key aspect of multiculturalism as a policy for managing difference is food and eating [...] difference is valued insofar as it can be incorporated into, not only the nation space, but also the individual body, the body-at-home" (2000: 117). The quasi cannibalistic act of the consumption of strangeness thus allows for a reassertion of control of the consuming native English self or again in the words of Sara Ahmed (in a discussion of bell hooks' article, 'Eating the Other'): "The white consuming subject is invited to eat the other: to take it in, digest it, and shit out the waste. The exotic and strange foods are incorporated into the bodies of Western consumers as that which is different, but assimilable" (2000: 117). By extension, difference that cannot be incorporated, fully integrated and assimilated into the nation or the body through consumption is not valued and hence becomes subject to rejection and in the worst case violence in an effort at keeping the nation space pure, allowing only for a certain dose of consumptive (manageable) exoticism to spice up one's life. In this connection, the description of the rude behaviour and abuse Mahmood, Dorothy's married Indian liaison, had to suffer from his white English customers when he was still

running an Indian restaurant may serve as a further example (202). In fact, the entire episode strongly evokes the behaviour of colonials taking over the conquered space, by defiling it and insulting the owner in an obvious effort at reminding him who is master of the house/nation.

The division of the two communities is mainly communicated to the reader from Dorothy's perspective. Even though Dorothy is gradually revealed as an unreliable narrator and many of her descriptions are coloured by her perception – or even willful construction - as a stranger in her own homeland, there is nevertheless from the beginning strong evidence that her neighbours cannot tolerate difference. On one particular occasion Dorothy imagines that a man from the village “considers me and everybody else in the new development to be interlopers. All of us, disturbing a pattern that has gone on for decade after decade until Stoneleigh came along to make them feel as though their shrinking lives, which were already blighted by closures and unemployment, were even less important than they had hitherto imagined” (29).² One may argue that this quote says possibly more about Dorothy than about the man. However, she conjures up this projection only after several encounters with some of the villagers, which reinforce such a construction. One case in point is that of the - presumably Jewish - female Dr Epstein who according to the barman in the pub would have been much happier had Stoneleigh already been finished: “Up there they might have fit in better, but living down here with us, well, it was difficult for them to mix” (9). Thus, in the context of reading the neighbourhood as a miniature representation of the nation, the people in the ‘new development’ – following the ‘us vs. them’ split – are similarly viewed as unwanted intruders and outsiders on the level of the village as asylum seekers and immigrants are on the level of the nation and thus again the village in nucleo mirrors the British nation at large.

As a result of the discussion so far, the ‘other’ characters in *A Distant Shore* are hence constructed as strangers on grounds of race as in the case of Solomon, gender and religion as in the case of Dr Epstein, and even of (gender and) class as is implied in the cases of Dorothy and Dr Epstein. As in many of his other narratives, Caryl Phillips has thus again skillfully interwoven the uncanny quadruplet of race, gender, religion and class into his narrative to lay bare these continued oppressions practiced in British - or for that matter - in European society. It seems noteworthy that already two years prior to the publication of *A Distant Shore*, Phillips expressed in a nutshell the concerns he was later to fictionalize in the novel. In his essay collection *A New World Order* (2001) he registered “a sharp increase in racial violence and acts of intolerance. The homogenisation of Europe opens the door not so much to immigrants, but to nationalists who lament the erosion of racially inscribed ‘traditional’ values” (2001: 245).

Yet, there is more to be said on Dorothy's lucid comments on Weston's economic degeneration and on the effect this has on the self-esteem of its inhabitants. In her book

Sara Ahmed contends that “[i]t is the very potential of the community to fail (or the suppressed certainty that they have already failed as in the case of Weston/ Britain) which is required for the constitution of the community. It is the enforcement of the boundaries between those who are already recognized as out of place (even other fellow residents) that allows those boundaries to be established” (2000: 26; first parenthesis my addition). That is, Weston’s/ Britain’s security and well-being have been shaken with the closing down of the pits and the high rate of unemployment. Nevertheless, the neighborhood holds together but is challenged beyond endurance when the posh neighborhood is established, an alternative to their own lives, holding up the mirror to their dire existence. In order to preserve itself, the neighborhood/ nation has to reject ‘any’body’ – including ‘other’ English people - who might threaten its perceived communal bond. This rejection manifested in social exclusion - or in its most exacerbated form: violence - is thus, ultimately, motivated by a profound fear of failure or even of destruction, (of a veritable Goetterdaemmerung, so to speak). The novel furthermore captures this looming doom in the frequent pictorial references to the setting sun, a powerful image for the degenerate state of the nation.³ The reference to boundaries in Ahmed’s quote recalls recent expansions of the notion of the boundary or border as largely symbolic. According to Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson, for example, “what remains distinctive about locality and community ... is their (people’s) sense of difference and distinctiveness. Community difference and identity ... reside ... in the minds of the people who express them” (Donnan/ Wilson, 1999: 24; my italics). In other words, the perceived difference and ensuing identity formation is constructed, imagined and hence symbolic. However, for all its symbolism and mental fabrication, for the marginalized characters in *A Distant Shore*, these symbolic boundaries are no less real for not being physically marked, since they are clearly real in their consequences.

In the novel, Mr Anderson, “my benefactor” as Solomon comes to refer to him, is at some pains to explain to Solomon what goes on in people’s minds: “There’s an awful lot of you and the system’s already creaking to breaking point. I mean, things are particularly bad if you want to get into one of our hospitals. People are upset.... People think ... [t]hat you have too many children... that you don’t really want to work. It’s in their heads and it makes them mad” (289). To this helpless attempt at explaining prejudice Solomon responds with a disarmingly wise innocence: “Who put it there?” (289). Even though Mr Anderson and his wife prove to be guardian angels for Solomon, in this particular exchange, Mr Anderson can’t seem to help himself but use the distancing device of the plural ‘you’ when referring to Solomon and the implied masses of asylum seekers. In this enumeration of the usual prejudices, the ones referring to the lack of hospital space and the fear of being outnumbered are especially noteworthy as they both imply the threat of extinction, personal as well as national. Yet again, this passage evokes the concept of the imagined community, which needs to protect itself, its members and its space, against the intrusion of others in order to secure its mere survival. The stranger is thus constructed as

a figure of danger, who transgresses perceived boundaries and engenders fear in the 'native'. As a result, the enforcement of violence becomes 'justified'. Following Sara Ahmed, the discourse of stranger danger becomes a "mechanism for the justification of acts of violence against those who are already recognized as strangers" (2000: 37). This justification applies with special force to the vindication/ defense of Solomon's murderers offered by the owner of the pub in the scene discussed above. (In keeping with the colonial reading previously suggested, Weston/ Britain is thus constructed as the center from which other beings - that is marginalized, strange bodies - have to be expelled as they constitute a threat to identity and home.)

It is only shortly after setting foot on English soil that Solomon becomes acquainted with the dynamic of stranger danger when he is accused of the rape of a young white English girl. If according to studies on civil violence the ultimate violent strangers are figured as either immigrants or men of color (Ahmed, 2000: 36) with cultural difference as the prime source responsible for the fear of crime, this allegation against an individual that is doubly stigmatized is not surprising. The case is, however, further complicated by the fact that the alleged victim is still almost a child. Again following Sara Ahmed, "the discourse of stranger danger also involves the figuring ... of the vulnerable body, the one who is most at risk. Here, 'the child' becomes a figure of vulnerability, the purified body that is most endangered by the contaminating desires of strangers" (2000: 34). Based on this explanation, the episode begs to be read as an allegory. Keeping in mind the traditional identification of the land/ country/ nation with the female body, it is not only the innocence and virginity of a girl child that is at risk from the proximity of strangers but it is the moral purity of nation space itself that is under attack, that is violated by the uncontained sexual desires attributed to the black man.

The 'strange encounter' that receives most of the attention in the novel is undoubtedly the relationship between Dorothy and Solomon. With its reversed chronology the novel very cautiously develops this budding relationship between two people who "do not fit" (Ahmed, 2000: 24), whose common bond is chiefly based on the mutual recognition of their loneliness and their shared inability to deal with painful memories. What draws these two individuals together is thus their common experience of alienation and 'strangeness' (Ahmed, 2000: 88) which results in the creation of what Sara Ahmed calls a 'community of strangers' (2000: 84), a common bond with another person who has shared a similar experience of (dis)-placement – be it physically or psychologically. It is however not only with Dorothy that Solomon shares a common bond. When considering the cast of characters he encounters in Britain, in fact, almost every person who does him a good turn is strictly speaking a stranger and as such a member of the community of strangers. It is thus not surprising that Solomon strikes up a friendship with Mike, his "Good Samaritan" (293), who as an Irishman is himself a stranger in England. Even Mr and Mrs Anderson are not 'fully' English for they retire to Scotland, the place where

Mum is originally from. As Solomon's "sole desire was to be safe in England" (279), it is these 'other' strangers, who provide him with a feeling of safety. (In his first encounter with Mum Solomon significantly realizes that "there was something about this small elderly woman that made me feel safe" (277).) Caryl Phillips seems to have deliberately constructed a palette of characters that are not English but different in their own ways in order to show how a similarly marginalized position in society promotes a deeper understanding and sympathy for the plight of another stranger.

A further characteristic that draws Solomon and Dorothy toward each other is their common obsession with decorum and manners. In *A Distant Shore*, the English are frequently portrayed as rude, uncivilized and ill-mannered - or at least perceived as such by the novel's two protagonists whereas they both appreciate the polite behaviour in each other. This need for courtesy and respectability seems at once to compensate for their estrangement from their surroundings and to provide them with a sense of dignity and self-esteem. This insistence on manners also serves to further emphasize how remote their fellow-citizens are from anything like civilized or simply human behaviour.⁴ Dorothy significantly says towards the end of the novel: "after all, without manners we're no better than animals" (311). As in many of Caryl Phillips's other narratives, this need for respectability goes together with an impeccable use of the English language. Solomon's refined diction in particular recalls several other black male characters in Phillips's previous work, especially Cambridge in the eponymous novel, Rudi in *On Higher Ground*, and Othello in *The Nature of Blood*. For Phillips, proper use of language and personal refinement appear to be inextricably linked as a sign of the degree to which a person is civilized. He makes this very clear when in an interview he declares that, "Language is vital and precious. It dignifies us" (Turner, 2003: 3). Similar to the characters mentioned above it appears that in terms of manners and eloquence Solomon finds himself on a reversed civilizing mission. This reversal becomes especially evident when after already having received several items of hate mail one day dog mess is introduced through his letter-box. In response, Solomon summarizes such conduct as "savage" (300), a term that applies even more forcefully to his later cowardly and brutal murder. In short, as a further sign of illustrating the present condition of Britain, the novel unveils the allegedly civilized nation as its exact opposite and in contrast represents those who are commonly viewed as 'savage' as the ones who exhibit civilized behaviour. It thus shows that those prejudices that are usually projected onto the unwanted 'others' are part of the nation's own "mental condition" (292).

Ultimately, *A Distant Shore* is another clear testimony to the author's political agenda of letting the subaltern speak. In an article written for *The Guardian* entitled "The Silenced Minority" on the power of the far-right in Flanders he says: "Mr Phillips's multicultural society works only if there is a reciprocal exchange and, hopefully one day, a commingling, of narratives. [...] Having authority over our own story, and the means to

tell it, is the most potent weapon that any of us are able to utilize against the corrupt vision of the far right” (2004: 6-7). By taking on the task of the story-teller, giving Solomon and Dorothy a voice, Phillips saves their stories - which are representative of so many other ‘small’ lives - from oblivion. *A Distant Shore* can thus also be described as a narrative of resurrection, talking from beyond the grave in Solomon’s case and from beyond reason in Dorothy’s, setting a narrative monument in their memory.

By way of conclusion, with its close scrutiny of today’s Britain the novel provides a powerful commentary on the nation’s present condition by drawing a very bleak picture. Equally do the fates of the novel’s two protagonists – death and mental collapse respectively – provide little hope for Caryl Phillips’s vision of a functional multicultural society. However, they have at least attempted what Sara Ahmed calls an ethical communication which for her is about “a certain way of holding proximity and distance together: one gets close enough to the others to be touched by that which cannot simply be get across. In such an encounter, ‘one’ does not stay in place, or one does not safely stay at a distance (there is no space which is not implicated in the encounter). It is through getting closer rather than remaining at a distance, that the impossibility of pure proximity can be put to work, or made to work” (2000: 157). Hence, the only glimpse of hope for the future of the nation, its accommodation of change and its acceptance of strangers can be detected in the portrayal of the delicate friendship formed between Dorothy and Solomon, two vulnerable and - for the time being - sadly defeated characters.

Yet, despite the tragic defeat suffered by his characters Phillips himself demonstrates an undaunted determination to continue his fight against racism and nationalism – and on this note of resolve I would like to conclude my paper – “as long as there remain people who are incapable or unwilling to uncouple nationality from race, then my continued presence has virtue in so far as it might serve to confound, or perhaps even, educate such people” (Phillips, 2001: 304f.).

Notes

1. All further page references are given in the text.
2. The use of the term 'imagined' in Dorothy's comment yet again recalls Benedict Anderson's notion of the 'imagined community'. He refers to the nation as "imagined because in the mind of each member lives the image of their communion" (6). The key terms 'imagined', 'mind' and 'communion' clearly capture a state of mind which leads to a position of prejudice and of preconceptions of the other.
3. See for example: "As the sun began to set" (7), "the dying sun forms a halo around his [Solomon's] head" (32). The second quote can in addition be read as a bad omen anticipating Solomon's violent death.
4. For example, Dorothy is not only annoyed at the hooligans and homeless but also complains about ill manners in her pupils and her liaison Geoff or at her neighbour's banging on her door "for it suggests bad manners" (20) and at her piano student's sitting at the piano "without any sense of propriety" (21).

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