Sacred Shores?

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I

Early in 2020, when Covid-19 was becoming regarded as a virus that could not be contained by countries or within regions of the planet, Giorgio Agamben offered some provocative claims about the nature of the pandemic that it produced. Whereas many analysts and observers swiftly arrived at something like a consensus – that the virus demanded intensified population control and heightened state authority in many of the world's nations – Agamben's strikingly different conclusion was that 'frenetic, irrational and entirely unfounded emergency measures' were being introduced, with a 'state of panic' manufactured by the media and state institutions.[1] This 'disproportionate' response, he proposed, needs to be seen as another manifestation of the exceptionality that is essential to governmental rationality.[2] Rather than a health emergency that justifies the suspension of social norms and the urgent introduction of extraordinary forms of regulation, the Covid-19 pandemic instead allowed states once again to step outside of established political and juridical order and introduce new legislative measures to preserve their professed sovereign right to rule. As he continued to write about the virus in the early months of 2020, Agamben sought to correct what he saw as misreadings and distortions of his claim that coronavirus was being instrumentalised by the agents of political power. What persists in these interventions, however, is an incredulity towards the abandoning of ethical and political principles that followed the spread of the virus. The question on which he 'has never stopped reflecting' is 'How can it happen that an entire country, without noticing it, politically and ethically collapsed in the face of an illness?'.[3]

Agamben's intervention largely results from his assessment of the epidemiological data that shaped the Italian government's response to the spread of Covid-19. This data, he claimed, indicated that the virus would seriously affect only a very small number of those infected by it. What makes the Italian government's measures disproportionate is that, although resulting in 'a benign outcome in the large majority of cases', the virus 'produces an authentic militarization' of daily life and the spaces in which people move.[4] This association of the virus with the regulation of life has been the focus of many responses that inevitably followed Agamben's claims. His assessment of the pandemic has resulted in him being described as 'a coronavirus *truther*' whose 'reliance on philosophical abstractions, just as the material world deteriorates around him, is his intellectual ruin'.[5] For Slavoj Žižek, it is Agamben's rendering of biopolitical power as monolithic and absolute that needs to be questioned. 'The measures necessitated by the epidemic should not be automatically reduced to the usual paradigm of surveillance and control', Žižek writes, and if such a reduction is to be avoided then the contestation of State power that has often followed the introduction of official measures cannot be neglected.[6] Because the virus 'has made more starkly clear the need for control over power itself', any analysis of the events of 2020 and beyond must recognise the emergence of social movements that deny both the idea of the nation as a uniform – functionally authoritarian – field of subjectification and perceptions of the State's circumscribed autonomy.[7] Provoking resistance and revealing that power is both biopolitical and geopolitical, 'the threat of viral infection has also', Žižek insists, 'given a tremendous boost to new forms of local and global solidarity'.[8]

In setting out these misgivings, Žižek gestures to the objection, repeatedly levelled against the social ontology that is formulated in at least the early volumes of Agamben's *Homo Sacer* series, that power cannot be understood as fully operative and only as the animation and management of life. Jean-Luc Nancy takes up the second of these objections in his rejoinder to 'The Invention of an Epidemic'. In addition to disputing the levels of mortality that Agamben associates with Covid-19, Nancy's response also reasserts his long-held aversion to the idea that control is primarily biopolitical.[9] 'We must be careful not to hit the wrong target: an entire civilization is in question, there is no doubt about it', he writes, 'There is a sort of viral exception – biological, computer-scientific, cultural – which is pandemic'.[10] The pandemic, in other words, needs to be approached not only in relation to increased governmental regulation of bodies, but as a situation that exposes how power extends beyond sovereign rule and is activated in domains that are not reducible to the body. Agamben 'fails to note that the exception is indeed becoming the rule', Nancy writes, but this rule has become established 'in a world where technical interconnections of all kinds (movement, transfers of every type, impregnation or spread of substances, and so on) are reaching a hitherto unknown intensity that is growing at the same rate as the population'.[11]

Two critical points – neither acknowledged by Agamben in 'The Invention of an Epidemic' – are made by Nancy here. First, states now routinely and continuously invoke the notion of exceptionality, rather than doing so episodically (following periods in which order is seen to be regular and normal). Second, this intensification is to be attributed not to specific governments or the coercive rationalism that they promote in order to manage populations. Such an unceasing exceptionality instead needs to be situated in the context of an 'ecotechnical' production that intensively renders the world (rather than just social and biological life) manageable so that it can be controlled, but also in ways that are allowing it to die.[12] Although Agamben does draw attention to the limitations on movement that were imposed by the Italian government early in 2020, he considers neither how these restrictions relate to the regulation of geopolitical space that operates between and outside of national territories nor how such a transterritorial systematization is fundamental to efforts to subdue the world as well as its populations. Indeed, such a neglect for the processes of movement and exchange continues to be evident in Agamben's attempt to recast and clarify the intervention that he made in 'The Invention of an Epidemic'. The question on which he 'has never stopped reflecting' relates not to the reshaping of global and planetary life by the pandemic. Rather, it would seem that he is concerned only with how exceptional power is being exercised, and how politics and ethics have collapsed, within a particular country.

II

One notable feature of the Covid-19 pandemic has been the substitution of one anxiety about transfrontier movement by another, with fears about the unregulated flight of people to the Global North almost entirely replaced by nervousness about a virus that refuses to be controlled by the mechanisms that regulate national borders. Indeed, the near closure of borders by many national governments, and the dramatic reduction in travel that has followed, suggests a moment in which debates about forced migration and refugeeism no longer apply. Not only providing separatist, nationalist and neonationalist groups with an opportunity to announce the failure of globalization and victoriously proclaim the return of the sovereign nation, Covid-19 during 2020 and 2021 also largely erased migration and refugeeism from everyday ethical and political discourse about how borders are to function.

Challenging this erasure in the first instance means addressing the ways in which the virus has intensified the mortally dangerous conditions already experienced by migrants and refugees. Žižek notes that these people 'simply have no place they can call "home" in which to withdraw in self-isolation', asking 'How can you insist on social distancing among thousands confined to a refugee camp?'.[13] This absence of 'home' and the inability to forge or experience modes of safe interaction suggests that Agamben's now very familiar concept of 'bare life' is as relevant to the moment of Covid-19, and the severe strictures that have been placed upon migrants and refugees following heightened border securitisation, as it has been to pre-pandemic flight. Developed in his nine volume *Homo Sacer* series to describe the figure ('sacred man') or population that European modernity is prepared to kill or let die, bare life is formulated by Agamben to supplement Aristotle's and Hannah Arendt's division of life into *zoē* and *bios*. 'The Greeks had no single term to express what we mean by the word "life"', Agamben writes at the opening of *Homo Sacer*, 'They used two terms that, although traceable to a common etymological root, are semantically and morphologically distinct: *zoē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form or way of living proper to an individual or group'.[14] Bare life is the form of existence that fits neither category. Set apart from or denied complete entry into the domestic spaces of home, city and nation, this '*life exposed to death […] is the originary political element*'.[15]

Not recognised as fully human, having no rights, no claim to citizenship, or even protection by the law, and yet a necessary presence and essential to the functioning of sovereign power, this 'set aside' or 'sacred' figure has become a major presence in migration studies. In recent years, the idea of a politicised bare life has shaped responses to what is often described as the 'European refugee crisis'.[16] Referring to the movement of refugees to Europe after 2011, Peter Hitchcock proposes that 'The exceptional and punitive measures of the EU during its migrant emergency would seem to fit that obscure element of Roman law, Homo Sacer, so neatly that Agamben could just as well use this example as that of his actual focus, the state of exception that is the Holocaust'.[17] Daria Davitti notes that although Agamben's writings have informed work in forced migration studies, 'his theory remains controversial and perhaps not fully understood'.[18] Its value, 'as part of the broader interrogations on the relationship between biopolitics and crisis', is to be found in the recognition that both state and international law fail to safeguard refugees despite their movement across national and international spaces in which legal protections otherwise apply.[19] Following the 2015 European Agenda on Migration, she writes, European states and the EU have transformed their borders into 'liquid' spaces that are

> characterized by non-linear (externalized and outsourced) enforcement infrastructures. These are both physical infrastructures (such as corridors and spaces of confinement and connection through which refugees are 'managed') and borderline legal infrastructures aimed at avoiding international obligations (such as concepts of 'safe third country' or forced return measures through agreements aimed at readmission).[20]

With the 'European refugee crisis', the relationship between power and space has changed. No longer the static places (the camps) to which modernity consigns marginalised populations, the zones of indistinction that Agamben describes in *Homo Sacer* have become transitory to ensure the transience of those who would otherwise gain access to legal protection: 'EU borders have essentially become liquid borders, in that they have (at least partially) lost their spatial and territorial significance as well as their legal and political

meaning'.[21] The management of bodies therefore persists as the strategy that would ensure political order, even if this strategy is enacted by non- and quasi-governmental agencies and occurs in places that have become fluid. Indeed, Davitti suggests, modernity must make its borders liquid if the EU and European states are to continue to place migrant groups both at the edges of juridical responsibility and still within reach of the law.

However, both Agamben's formulation of 'bare life' and its association with migration and refugeeism need to be questioned in several ways. Increasingly, challenges to Agamben's thinking have focused on problems with the notion of 'life' that shapes the concept of 'bare life'. For Krzysztof Ziarek, 'The (re)turn to the notion of 'life' (*bios*) so prevalent today appears not to take into consideration the long-standing critique of the notion of life in phenomenology'.[22] In particular, this return fails to address the technical production of life: technicity, Ziarek writes, is 'the operative momentum of the opening and disposing of the world that makes large swathes of existence available to biopower and its formative infiltrations and regulatory investment'.[23] In the first volume of *The Beast & the Sovereign*, Jacques Derrida too questions Agamben's understanding of 'life', describing some of the conclusions reached in *Homo Sacer* as 'difficult to sustain' and claiming that his account of *zoē* and *bios* can only frustrate his determination 'absolutely to define the specificity of modern politics'.[24] Derrida's objections relate largely to philology and political history. First, he proposes that the distinction between *zoē* and *bios* is not absolute for Aristotle in the way that Agamben asserts: even for 'the Greeks' biological life was placed alongside qualified life, and this means that the concept of bare life lacks the novelty attached to it by *Homo Sacer*. Second, because Aristotle recognises that unqualified life – mere biological actuality – is confiscated in the name of political order, the concept or functioning of regulated life cannot be regarded exclusively as a feature of modernity. Biopolitics, Derrida writes, 'is an arch-ancient thing (even if today it has new meanings and structures) […] and bound up with the very idea of sovereignty'.[25] Although *Homo Sacer* is concerned to highlight modernity's archaic conceptual, legal and political roots, and to trace sovereign power's ancient foundations, what troubles Derrida is that it is possible to establish modernity as a distinctive mobilising of bare life only by neglecting the presence of the biopolitical in Greek thinking.

Much of *The Beast & the Sovereign*'s response to *Homo Sacer* is focused on this question of periodisation and, consequently, on the issue of whether 'bare life' can help us to decipher the workings of contemporary politics. However, Derrida does not conclude merely by claiming that *Homo Sacer* is historiographically confused. Instead, he closes his response by reflecting briefly on the idea that a founding event (the capturing and controlling of *zoē* by *bios*) initiates modernity. 'The fact […] that there is neither continuity of passage nor interruption or mere caesura', Derrida writes,

> that the motifs of what passes and comes to pass [*passe et se passe*] in history belong neither to a solid foundation nor to a founding decision, that the passage has no grounding ground and no indivisible line under it, requires us to rethink the very figure of the *threshold* (ground, foundational solidity, limit between inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, etc).[26]

This principle of separation for Derrida must be challenged, though not only because biopolitical power neither follows a linear process of emergence and intensification nor operates unvaryingly in a tradition of thinking in which Greek notions of life evolve to sustain sovereign power. Regardless of whether Agamben's periodisation rests on either 'a simple diachronic succession' or a 'simple synchronic simultaneity', the notion of a historical

moment that is present to and for itself – that is distinctive, self-contained and undivided – can be proposed only if history is conceived in terms of episodic ruptures.[27] What such a model disregards, Derrida writes, is the 'eventness' that initiates and interrupts, but cannot be incorporated into, a political and juridical period.[28]

The Beast & the Sovereign points to two manifestations of this 'eventness'. The first relates to an issue that preoccupies Derrida in both volumes of *The Beast & the Sovereign*, namely the many efforts to separate human and animal life. Derrida asks, 'Does the animal come under *bios* or *zōē*?', pointing to the Greek definition of the human as *zōon logon ekhon*. According to this early formulation, *logos* (the capacity to speak rather than simply to make sounds) is uniquely possessed by the human species.[29] The anthropocentric tradition that developed subsequently grants an exceptional mode of living to humanity, with both animals and sovereign figures (kings and gods) placed on the other side of the threshold that separates humans from other living beings. As David Farrell Krell observes, there is 'an irresistible and overloaded analogy between a beast and a sovereign supposed to share a space of some exteriority with respect to "law" and "right" (outside the law; above the law, origin and foundation of the law)'. The second 'eventness' is touched on only briefly by Derrida. When he writes that the passage of history is neither linear nor episodic, Derrida also suggests that the ground – understood as both foundational space and spatial separation – interrupts sovereign power. Agamben's distinction between *bios* and *zoē* breaks down partly because he neglects the relationship between the animal and the sovereign (and therefore fails to consider the biopolitical in relation to the zoopolitical). However, Derrida suggests that the principle of separation – and the figure of the threshold – that shapes Agamben's thinking also needs to be approached in terms of geopolitical distinction. When he writes that 'what passes and comes to pass has no grounding ground', Derrida enigmatically invites us to reconsider perceptions of territorial distinctiveness, suggesting an 'eventness' that interrupts the notion of a foundational or grounded attachment to place.

Derrida himself takes up this invitation at the beginning of the second volume of *The Beast & the Sovereign,* where he considers the idea of a world and of things in the world that exist beyond humanity's sovereign gaze. Bringing together Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Martin Heidegger's *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, Derrida registers misgivings about how both appear to affirm a sense of sovereign isolation, one that is 'unique, indivisible and exceptional'.[30] Famously, for Heidegger it is only man that possesses the capacity to form an image or concept of the world, whereas 'the stone is alone in the world' and 'the animal is poor in the world'.[31] Such a taxonomy restages the metaphysical and the anthropocentric concept of the human as both absolutely autonomous and supremely powerful. But, because it associates the human with the stone, this is an unsustainable taxonomy. For Heidegger, Derrida writes,

> [i]t is […] through loneliness, becoming-alone, the endurance of solitude (*Vereinsamung*) that man comes for the first time into proximity with what is essential in every thing, in proximity to the world. […] Solitude of man, question of man as the only living being capable of being alone and approaching the world as such. The stone is not alone.[32]

Ungrounded, indifferent and unaffected, the stone metonymizes a non-world of things that are separate from the world produced by 'man'. And yet, Derrida writes, the stone cannot be wholly isolated. It acts as the bedrock for a system of classification that establishes human life as distinctive, so it must be part of the world that it shares with humans. And, in this

taxonomy, the human is exceptional. Put otherwise, both 'man' and the stone are alone in the world. Like the animal, the stone exemplifies an earth or an ecology that is at once an external foundation for human sovereignty and an entity that shares the world of human solitude.

Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* similarly provides volume two of *The Beast & the Sovereign* with an image of 'man' – of human exceptionality and mastery – cut adrift. Following Rousseau and Marx, Derrida considers how Defoe's novel provides a fiction of an 'absolute political sovereignty' that both guarantees individual autonomy and grounds the nation-state:

> this sovereignty which is absolute because it is pre-political, the hyperbolical, pre-political or ultra-political sovereignty that is the prize of solitude or isolation, of loneliness or of absolute insularity (all of this before Friday), is sovereignty before the nation-state, the sovereignty of the free and self-determined, self-determining individual, that of the citizen without a state or of the citizen before citizenship, or again of a citizen who is, all alone and immediately, the state itself, the sovereignty of the state-of-citizen, of the citizen-state.[33]

Although often regarded as a novel that sanctions the principles of individual and territorial autonomy, Derrida finds in *Robinson Crusoe* an anxious affirmation of these principles. Framing his response to this novel is the question 'What is an island?', which he begins to address but quickly drops in his preliminary remarks on the lectures that comprise the second volume of *The Beast & the Sovereign*.[34] 'Let's leave this question isolated', he writes 'abandon it for a while, leave it floating in the air that is carrying it: we have heard it borne by the wind but we have not yet read it. And let's continue to stroll on the shore where we have just set foot'.[35] For the conceit of this novel to work, the island must be regarded as a secluded and insular place. Crusoe's overcoming of the dangers and depredations of his new home is heroic only if he truly is alone in, and can force his will upon, this solitary place. He does not, of course, remain alone on the island, though it is not the presence of another body that ends Crusoe solitude, but 'a footprint on the sand of the shore' which 'becomes not only a spectral apparition […] but a paralyzing hallucination, a sign come from heaven, a sign that is as menacing as it is promising, uncanny, as diabolical as it is divine: the other man'.[36]

Encountering this footprint, Crusoe immediately loses the solitude that grants him the exceptional self-determination and celestial authority of the truly sovereign subject. It needs to be noted, however, that Defoe's novel in this moment renders space hallucinatory as much as it makes human subjectivity phantasmatic. 'Every form of sovereignty […] appears to be a phantasm, and every phantasm a phantasm of sovereignty', Michael Naas writes, 'the phantasm, for example, of a nation-state that has power, in possession of an origin that is self-grounding'.[37] It is this sense of a self-grounding origin, essential to the operations of nation-state power and to the circumscription of an auto-affective insularity, that is denied by the footprint on the shores of Crusoe's island. Heralding the end of Crusoe's solitary authority, this footprint is also diabolically and divinely significant because it announces an inescapable connection not only to 'the other man' but also to other places. No longer an indivisible limit that encloses a sovereign land, the shore in Defoe's novel becomes a passage rather than a limit, where the outside arrives to end the perception of a grounded territorial solitude. Derrida's misgivings about the status of biopolitics in Agamben's work do not, then, relate only to what he regards as a philologically dubious periodisation of modernity, to a continued separation of human sovereignty from animal life, or to the notion of a functional and

absolute sovereignty. These misgivings also relate both to the geopolitical or ontopological regulation of life and to the interruption of securely situated human life by a ground that does not obey the codes of territorial distribution. It is this sense of an intrusive ground that, Derrida suggests, is missing from the concept of the biopolitical. Certainly, such a sense seems to be absent from Agamben's association of Covid-19 with the intraterritorial and successful 'militarization' of life.

III

If the shore in *Robinson Crusoe* is where place (terrain, land, island) becomes displaced then Defoe's novel needs to be situated in the mythical, intellectual and literary traditions in which littoral spaces are regarded as both geopolitically and biopolitically significant. At the close of *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault reaches for a littoral metaphor to describe the decline of the epoch of 'man', the figure that has dominated European modernity and asserted supremacy in and over the world. If the cultural and conceptual conditions that produced this figure begin to deteriorate then, he writes, 'one can wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea'.[38] The shore is therefore where 'man' might end, though Jacques Rancière notes that the littoral, rather than the consolidated ground of the terrestrial interior, is also a place of beginning: 'legend invariably has the political begin at one boundary, be it the Tiber or the Neva, and end up at another, be it Syracuse or the Kolyma: riverbanks of foundation, island shores of refoundation, abysses of horror or ruin'.[39] For Sofie Fuggle and Nicholas Gledhill, the beach

> constitutes a threat as much as a promise. A threat or menace of erasure, the beach is a space, the space, where survival may well only depend on the elimination of the other. Thought temporally, it represents the moment where all life becomes, if only fleetingly, bare life, *homo sacer*. But it is also the site of potential friendship, allegiances, deals and trade agreements all of which require the appropriation and assimilation as opposed to the elimination of the other. The beach is thus also a dropping off point where the drowned, the shipwrecked and the enslaved all wash up to be handed out new identities, roles and chains.[40]

Beaches, coasts and shores are therefore where social and subjective lives are produced, reproduced and made precarious, but there is also something topologically and territorially unsettling about these places of arrival, assimilation, disavowal and death. However, recent thinking about the relationship between the land and the sea often neglects the extent of these disorientating effects. Suvendrini Perera notes that

> [i]n the last two decades an oceanic turn in cultural and intellectual history has led to a questioning of that distinction [between land and sea], enabling new inscriptions of the ocean as a mobile space of interconnection between peoples, and counteracting the rooted territorialities, bounded demarcations, and sovereignty claims that characterize dry land.[41]

Perera cites Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* and Michael Pearson's *Port Cities and Intruders* as formative and 'powerful explorations of oceans as spaces that undo and reshape established national, natural and geographical boundaries'.[42] What needs to be noted is that such an 'oceanic turn' risks maintaining the distinction between two topologies – the land

and the maritime – even as it brings them together in the co-production of social, cultural and economic space. Where the shore is not entirely absent in this oceanic turn, it tends at most to be regarded as a coastal hinterland, a space traversed in the transmarine forging of empires, or a distinctively liminal place where the injunctions of land and sea are disobeyed.[43] Necessary though it is to recognise both the ocean as a place of fluid exchange and littoral spaces as marginalised, it is equally necessary to regard the shore as the kind of threshold that, according to Derrida, demands a rethinking of 'ground, foundational solidity, limit between inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion'. The shore should not be understood as a uniquely unsettling place because it lacks the solidity of dry land. It is, rather, a place where land itself, perceived as a grounded domain and autonomous right of attachment that lies within and is protectively circumscribed by coastal limits, becomes disorientated.

This disorientation of sovereign territoriality is evident in cultural responses to refugee flight in the early twenty-first century, even though landfall is associated with the perverse operations of states that impose detention, removal, or restricted rights of entry on those who seek refuge. 'Even if they reach the shore safely, migrants taking the sea route experience littoral space not as a site of hope and hospitality', Virginia Richter and Ursula Kluwick write, 'but as a zone of deferred transition, of suspension, of waiting'.[44] Such a condition, they continue, can be described as the precarity of *homo sacer*:

> Dislocated and uncertain about their future, those stranded in the reception centres of Southern Europe experience a complete loss of agency and an erasure of social identity which brings them close to the condition described by Giorgio Agamben as 'bare life', a form of existence defined by exclusion from the *polis*.[45]

Recently, aesthetic practices have appeared to endorse such a sense of the shore as a site of personal uncertainty and shared suffering for those who make landfall after journeying precariously across the sea. Some of the most arresting examples of these practices are the installations and other found object pieces produced by Ai Weiwei in response to 'the refugee crisis' in Europe in the early twenty-first century. Drawing on tools of survival to convey the precarity of escape and arrival, Ai in 2015 enveloped the columns of Berlin's Konzerthaus in fourteen thousand cast-off life jackets collected from the beaches of Lesbos. His sculptures representing the Chinese zodiac – 'Circle of Animals/Zodiac Heads' – in 2016 were displayed outside of the National Gallery in Prague, though on this occasion Ai enveloped them in the thermal blankets that are sometimes distributed to those arriving on Europe's shores. *F. Lotus* is a floating installation constructed at Vienna's Belvedere Palace in 2016, comprising 201 rings made from over a thousand discarded life jackets again found on Lesbos. *Tyre,* part of a 2016 exhibition at the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens, is in contrast not a found object that provides Ai with media for art object production. Cast in marble, these tyres are at once substantiation and sublimation, both solid mass and conceptual abstraction. What they are not is an adequate form of life support.[46]

Ian Syson's 2015 poem 'Beach Collection' finds the shore to be marked by the bodies and spectres of those who do not survive the flight to Europe. 'Softly and humbly to the Edge of Europe/The convoys of dead Syrians come', he writes at the beginning of this poem, 'At night they sway and wander in the waters far under,/But morning rolls them in the foam'.[47] Syson's poem despairs at the seemingly interminable passage of these convoys, but more so at how the promise of arrival does not become actualised for many. It is, in other words, a poem that reflects on the injurious regulation of bodies at the edges of European nations and

at the limits of Europe. It is also, however, a poem that hints at the transfiguration of terrestrial and territorial place by the fatal arrival of people who seek refuge. Those who do not survive their journey to Europe become 'Unknown refugee[s]'.[48] Their point of origin, ethnicity and religious affiliation ('Whether as Christians or Muslims, or, God forbid, atheists') are lost to 'bureaucratic finality', with uncomprehending death certificates ('Written with such perplexity, with such bewildered pity') scratching out an inability to log what is happening in these places.[49] The beach, in Syson's poem, is where official documents fail to record attachment and loss of attachment to the ground. Haunted by those it cannot name, the beach is where the state loses its capacity to render the space and constituency of the nation recognisable.

The beach is also a place of geopolitical transformation in *Exit West,* Mohsin Hamid's 2017 novel in which two characters – Saeed and Nadia – leave their unnamed home city because it is sliding quickly into the turmoil of civil unrest, interethnic conflict and random violence. Refusing the codes of realism, *Exit West* offers an uncanny narrative of escape: passing through a secret portal in their city, Saeed and Nadia are strangely transported to Europe's shores.

> It was said in those days that the passage was both like dying and like being born, and indeed Nadia experienced a kind of extinguishing as she entered the blackness and a gasping struggle as she fought to exit it […] Saeed was emerging, and Nadia crawled forward to give him room […] They embraced without getting to their feet, and she cradled him, for he was still weak, and when they were strong enough they rose […] and they looked and saw a stretch of sand and gray waves coming in, and it seemed miraculous, although it was not a miracle, they were merely on a beach.[50]

This first appearance of miraculous travel can be read as part of *Exit West's* broader exploration of the relationship between refugee flight, displacement and technology, with this novel's portals functioning as a metaphor either for the magic of digital connection or for the loss of 'hereness' experienced by migrants.[51] As Michael Perfect notes, 'Unsurprisingly, the doors in *Exit West* have, thus far, been one of the most frequently commented-on aspects of the novel'.[52] However, such a focus on the mode of travel neglects the uncanniness of arrival in this moment, and specifically perception of the beach as somehow escaping its mundane appearance as merely sand and waves. Saeed's and Nadia's arrival is figured not as an encounter with Europe as a grounded destination or land. Rather, *Exit West* suggests both that Europe's frontiers are unrecognisable and that the idea of Europe as an auto-affective territoriality is implausible.

IV

Testifying to the hazards associated with taking flight overseas and to the European beach as a place of postponed transition, these visual and literary texts register the shore as a place where life becomes indeterminate and endangered. Further, they suggest that it is in littoral places that the association of land with absolute insularity and exceptional sovereignty also loses its potency. Just as Crusoe's sense of autonomy is, according to Derrida, interrupted by the 'paralyzing hallucination' that he experiences on the beach, so these texts find the shore to be a shifting terrain that unearths perceptions of both *terra firma* and rightful attachment to the land as nation or region. It becomes a place that disturbs what Elizabeth A. Povinelli

describes as '*geontological* power', or '*geontopower*', a 'set of discourse, affects, and tactics used in late liberalism to maintain or shape the coming relationship of the distinction between Life and Nonlife'.[53] For Povinelli, one of the spaces that this power seeks to capture is 'the Desert', not defined narrowly as 'the ecosystem that, for lack of water, is hostile to life', but standing 'for all things perceived and conceived as denuded of life – and, by implication, all things that could, with the correct deployment of technological expertise or proper stewardship, be (re)made hospitable to life'.[54] Attracting the colonising attentions of a power that is driven by the impulse to convert non-living ground into productive space, the desert is a place that 'late liberalism' discovers but cannot, ultimately, capture and control. Allowing us to 'conceive of the once presupposed but now trembling architecture of geontological governance', the Desert 'holds on to the distinction between Life and Nonlife and dramatises the possibility that Life is always at threat from the creeping, desiccating sands of Nonlife', Povinelli writes.[55] One manifestation of the Desert is the beach. This place might not be, as is the case with other forms of the Desert, where material extraction is undertaken to confirm humanity's right to treat the world as a resource. It is, however, both where land becomes commodified as enclosed territory and where the insular life of Europe and its nations is devitalised.

Povinelli's formulation of 'the Desert' recalls other efforts to shift the critique of power away from the analysis of biopolitical control. '[D]oes biopolitics any longer gather together under its conceptual wings what needs to be thought if we are to understand contemporary late liberalism?', she asks.[56] But it is not only the 'desiccating sands' of the Desert (or the beach) that demand another assessment of the operations and inoperability of power. For Povinelli, 'the Virus' too functions in ways that cannot be explained by the concept of biopolitics. The Virus is the 'figure for that which seeks to disrupt the current arrangements of Life and Nonlife'.[57] Neither fully and intelligibly alive nor fully inert, it 'copies, duplicates, and lies dormant even as it continually adjusts to, experiments with, and tests its circumstances'.[58] Unlike the Desert, which is regarded as an inert space awaiting capture and resource extraction, the Virus is not a life that can be recognised by the agents of biopolitical control. One expression of the Virus is Covid-19. Not a pathogen seized by governments that seek out new instruments for social control, or the alibi for what Agamben describes as the 'militarisation' of daily life, this virus is instead the expression of historical efforts to extend the regulation of life across worldly space and of a deeper historical drive to regulate the planet itself. 'The catastrophe of climate collapse, toxic exposure, and viral pandemics are not *à venir* – they are not on the horizon coming toward those staring at it', Povinelli proposes, 'These are the ancestral catastrophes that began with the brutal dispossession of human and more-than-human worlds and a vicious extraction of human and more than human labor'.[59] The catastrophe of this viral pandemic is, then, inseparable from the catastrophe of forced migration, and this systemic condition functions in ways that cannot be understood either as the confiscation of *bios* in the service of operative sovereign rule or as the preservation of grounded authority and autonomy.

Notes

1 Agamben, 'The Invention of an Epidemic'.
2 Ibid.
3 Agamben, 'A Question'.
4 Agamben, 'The Invention of an Epidemic'.
5 Owen, 'States of Emergency'.

6 Žižek, *Pandemic!*, 76.
7 Ibid., 75.
8 Ibid., 75.
9 See, for example, Nancy, *The Creation of the World or Globalization*, 93-5.
10 Nancy, 'Viral Exception'.
11 Ibid.
12 Nancy, *Corpus*, 89.
13 Žižek, *Pandemic!*, 122.
14 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 1.
15 Ibid., 88.
16 Anna Ball documents of some of the problems associated with the idea and discourse of 'the contemporary refugee crisis' in Europe, including its perception as exceptional and a challenge faced by Europe. See Ball, 'Biopolitical Landscapes of the "Small Human"', 448ff.
17 Hitchcock, 'Exceptional Biometrics', 120.
18 Davitti, 'Biopolitical Borders and the State of Exception in the European Migration "Crisis"', 1174.
19 Ibid., 1174.
20 Ibid., 1176.
21 Ibid., 1178.
22 Ziarek, 'The Way of World', 4.
23 Ibid., 4.
24 Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign* Volume 1, 316, 325.
25 Ibid., 330.
26 Ibid., 333.
27 Ibid., 333.
28 Ibid., 333.
29 Ibid., 337.
30 Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign* Volume 2, 7.
31 Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, quoted in Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign* Volume 2, 6.
32 Derrida, *The Beast & the Sovereign* Volume 2, 30.
33 Ibid., 21.
34 Ibid., 3.
35 Ibid., 5.
36 Ibid., 46.
37 Naas, '"Comme si, comme ça"', 8.
38 Foucault, *The Order of Things,* 387.
39 Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, 1.
40 Fuggle & Gledhill, 'Introduction', 3.
41 Perera, *Australia and the Insular Imagination,* 3.
42 Ibid., 3.
43 See, for example, Bentley, Bridenthal, & Wigen (eds), *Seascapes* and Bowring, Vance, & Abbott, 'Architecture and Design', 15-35.
44 Richter & Kluwick, 'Introduction', 12.
45 Ibid., 12.
46 On Ai Weiwei's work produced in response to refugees arriving in Southern Europe, see, for example, Barry, 'Art and materiality in the global refugee crisis' and Eckermann, *Ai Weiwei: Bare Life*.
47 Syson, 'Beach Collection'.
48 Ibid.

49 Ibid. Notable also is that Syson prefaces his poem 'With apologies to Kenneth Slessor'. Selectively citing and rewriting Slessor's 1957 'Beach Burial', Syson's poem translates events (the death of both Allied and Axis soldiers at El Alamein in 1941) recorded by its precursor. The poem's meditation on fatal littoral space is therefore translocative, with the beach conceived not as a local to itself but as the site of more fundamental reconsideration of the relationship between space and nationhood.

50 Hamid, *Exit West,* 98.

51 See, for example, Naydan, 'Digital Screens and National Divides in Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*' and Moutafidou, 'Space "in Time" for Them'.

52 Perfect, '"Black holes in the fabric of the nation"'.

53 Povinelli, *Geontologies,* 4.

54 Ibid., 17, 16.

55 Ibid., 16.

56 Ibid., 4.

57 Ibid., 19.

58 Ibid., 19.

59 Povinelli, 'The Virus: Figure and Infrastructure'.

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