

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Worldmaking from the South and “By the Sea” in Abdulrazak Gurnah’s Fiction

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The recent recognition extended to Abdulrazak Gurnah’s fiction by the Nobel Prize in Literature is cause for celebration: this understated yet profound oeuvre is finally finding the wider readership that it deserves. In locating its work “in the *gulf* between cultures and continents,” however, the motivation for the award overlooks its distinctive coastal orientation (“Abdulrazak Gurnah: Facts”; my emphasis). This orientation is both critical to Gurnah’s worldmaking from the south and perplexing to north-centered frameworks. That the premier global literary prize has thus far been presented to only fifteen writers from the south over its entire history of more than 120 years is illustrative of the myopic and distorting nature of these frameworks.¹ This is not a new concern, though it remains a persistent one. This essay does not rehearse again the complaints it has elicited, besides to note the methodological importance of attending to the alternative lenses afforded by Gurnah’s fiction. Instead of tracing north-south or center-periphery axes, his novels home in on coastal situations that center the south and offer notably complicated perspectives on “the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee” (“Abdulrazak Gurnah: Facts”)—as well as on the world at large.²

Littoral locations feature prominently across Gurnah’s oeuvre (see Moorthy; Samuelson, “Abdulrazak Gurnah’s Fictions” and “Coastal Form”). One of the novels emphasizes them in its title, *By the Sea*, and this phrase recurs repeatedly across the oeuvre. It refers at times to a generalized proximity to the ocean by which characters who have traversed the “gulf” between Africa and England are able to rehome themselves in the world. But the shore that acts as beacon to Gurnah’s worldmaking is more specifically what is described in *By the Sea* as “that stretch of coast on the eastern side of the continent,

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which had cusped so long ago to receive the musim winds" (37). The African Indian Ocean littoral—including the island of Zanzibar from which he hails—not only is Gurnah's most consistent setting but also enjoys a paradigmatic status in his writing.³

The preposition by which his most explicitly coastal novel articulates a state of contiguity to the sea is equally expressive of the sea's compositional agency. The sea is not simply *there* in this fiction. More than ubiquitous backdrop, it pushes insistently to the fore as the medium through which a particular worldliness has been achieved. Flooding into the "cusped" coast of eastern Africa with its currents and winds, it is shown to have sedimented modes of habitation in the "scattered little towns by the sea" that Gurnah's oeuvre positions as exemplary (*By the Sea* 15). His fictional worlds are similarly composed from interelemental dynamics as much as from the stuff that fills them out—the "material objects" manifesting the "lateral networks" within the south that constituted Zanzibar's Stone Town and others along the eastern African coast (Gurnah, "Nobel Lecture"; Hofmeyr, "Complicating Sea" 584).

By the Sea is particularly suggestive on this point as a preoccupation with the "beautiful things" fashioned from histories of circulation and exchange diffuses into a fragrance that transports the story southward (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 22). While detained at Gatwick airport by an immigration official whom he recognizes as the "gatekeeper" of Europe (31), the narrator of the first and final parts of this novel recollects the prior passage of his now-confiscated casket of incense:

The man I obtained the ud-al-qamari from was a Persian trader from Bahrain who had come to our part of the world with the musim, the winds of the monsoons, he and thousands of other traders from Arabia, the Gulf, India and Sind, and the Horn of Africa. They had been doing this every year for at least a thousand years. In the last months of the year, the winds blow steadily across the Indian Ocean towards the coast of Africa, where the currents obligingly provide a channel to harbour. Then in the early months of the new year, the

winds turn around and blow in the opposite direction, ready to speed the traders home. (14–15)

The contemporary bordered state evoked in the Nobel committee's image of the "gulf between continents and cultures" is thus elegantly counterpoised with the *longue durée* of what the Zanzibari historian Abdul Sheriff terms "dhow cultures," with reference to the lateen-sailed vessels that have traversed this ocean since antiquity, crafting distinctly cosmopolitan societies along its shores.

Having delivered this précis of its deep history of entanglement, *By the Sea* proceeds to chronicle the successive waves of empire that have since dashed against the African Indian Ocean littoral. The coastal vantage point here affords an understanding of colonialism as an erosive, recursive, and diffractive process rather than a delineated epoch. Its pernicious expansions and repercussions include the ways in which it has remapped the world. *By the Sea* bemoans the "new maps" that divided a continuous coast into discrete territories, and it underscores how this reduction of the world to "something that could be possessed" reverberates in an injurious equation between "geography" and "biology" (15).⁴ Gurnah's most recent novel, *Afterlives*, registers its backwash in the uncounted dead of a war that spilled across the maps with which Europeans had laid claim to the globe.⁵ Across the oeuvre, this imperial cartography is shown to rebound violently during Zanzibar's shambolic decolonization and to impel what the fiction presents as the bleak and reductive retreat of the postindependence state from the Indian Ocean. Gurnah suggests, moreover, that its recrudescence includes a simplification of the entangled histories of the south in order to render them legible as progressive narratives.

Against such divisive, damaging, and diminishing visions, *By the Sea* offers a coastal cartography that traces a "continuous line" along the curlicues of the littoral. The occasion for the presentation of this worldmaking figure is the narrator's recollection of a classroom scene in Zanzibar in which a teacher relates a story about Christopher Columbus's crossing: "[a]s his story developed, he

began to draw a map on the blackboard with a piece of white chalk.” The chalk stroke starts, as one might expect, from “the coast of north-west Europe” (37). Instead of charting a course across the Atlantic, however, it proceeds to loop around the Mediterranean basin and down the west coast of Africa before rounding the Cape of Good Hope. Subsequently drawn through what the narrator refers to as “the cusp of our stretch of coast,” it continues along the shore from which the traders who visited that coast set out on their annual circular migrations—“the Horn of Africa . . . the Arabian Peninsula, the Persian Gulf, India, the Malay Peninsula”—before reaching “all the way to China” (37).

In contrast to the “new maps” of empire, Gurnah’s coastal cartography thus centers the Indian Ocean, gathering its surrounding landmasses into intricate relation along its littoral. It is here that Gurnah locates practices of worldmaking from the south that are antithetical to the parochial project of Euro-Atlantic world domination launched with the Columbian crossing. The figural stroke of chalk across a blackboard with which *By the Sea* describes its reorienting gesture notably connects its “stretch of coast” to Atlantic and Pacific shores while at the same time underlining the distinctiveness of the Indian Ocean basin. Expressive of its geomorphic singularity, and thus of the worlds it has come to harbor, the outline of that ocean is simultaneously indicative of a capacity to extend into a world in common that Gurnah’s fiction also emulates.

Unlike the Atlantic and Pacific, the Indian Ocean is capped by a landmass traced out in the “continuous line” of *By the Sea*. The alternating winds that engendered its “dhow cultures” are generated from the seasonal warming and cooling of its continental ceiling. This uniquely bidirectional wind system enabled long-distance circular navigation by lateen-sailed craft for hundreds or even thousands of years before such exchanges became possible in the oceans governed by unidirectional winds; its “human shore” is thus, as John R. Gillis puts it, the “oldest” (42).⁶ Significantly, the monsoons of the Indian Ocean not only enabled interregional commerce across its waters but also imposed

extended layovers during which traders were obliged to linger on distant shores. Over time, distinct cultures twisted together in the “scattered little towns” in which they mingled “by the sea,” and families distributed members around the coast. “That was how people lived, with relatives and acquaintances all along the shores of the ocean,” remarks the narrator of Gurnah’s *Gravel Heart* (180).

Though riven with their own tensions and tyrannies, these coastal towns maintained an openness to the world and an orientation toward the unfamiliar that Gurnah retrieves as exemplary in a context of borders and camps.⁷ To return to that teacherly moment in *By the Sea*: it bears noting also that it records how Columbus set sail in “the same year as the fall of Granada and the expulsion of the Muslims from Andalus” (37). Thus registering the foundational insularity of Euro-Atlantic worldmaking, Gurnah’s fiction centers instead “an ocean [that] creates islands of culture along a broader archipelago . . . linked together by the sea” (Gurnah, “Interview” 129).

Presenting worldmaking practices honed on the shores of eastern Africa, Gurnah emphasizes in novel after novel how the traders borne on the northeast winds of the *kaskazi* monsoon were not invited or even accommodated in the little towns “by the sea.” Instead, they simply arrived and “sprawled over any empty space . . . turn[ing] it into a campsite” (Gurnah, *Afterlives*, ch.10). Like the sometimes-turbulent waters that deliver them, they introduce an element of chaos, and may even leave devastation in their wake (as does the incense-bearing Persian in *By the Sea*). But their presence is seen to be as inexorable as the seasons—and as essential to the maintenance and vivification of these shores. The fiction prizes their unchecked mobility and even the ambivalence of what they represent. One of the values it promotes is an ability to live in conditions of complexity that it shows to have been cultivated in coastal towns that accepted imperilment in exchange for an enlivening exposure to other worlds.

The “stretch of coast” to which this fiction is repeatedly drawn thus offers a model that is exemplary precisely because it is both flawed and fragile.

“[Y]ou couldn’t get anything much more complicated than the coast of East Africa where I grew up,” Gurnah tells the interviewer Susheila Nasta, before elaborating on the delicate negotiations required to sustain such a heterogeneous society (Gurnah, “Abdulrazak Gurnah” 360). His fiction condemns a “politics of decolonisation” that “could not tolerate these divided loyalties,” demanding instead a “commitment to nation and continent” (*Gravel Heart* 180) that resulted in a turn away from the Indian Ocean and the “prohibition of the musim trade” after independence (*By the Sea* 16). This renunciation of the complicated orientations of the littoral south is, Gurnah suggests, among the afterlives of an imperial worldmaking that sought to belittle and contain the coast in its “new maps” and which now revises its turbulent histories into linear narratives under the guise of an emancipatory discourse.

As he observes in his Nobel Prize lecture with reference to the aftermath of the Zanzibar Revolution:

A new, simpler history was being constructed, transforming and even obliterating what had happened, re-structuring it to suit the verities of the moment. This new and simpler history was not only the inevitable work of the victors . . . , but it also suited commentators and scholars and even writers who . . . were viewing us through a frame that agreed with their view of the world, and who required a familiar narrative of racial emancipation and progress.

(“Nobel Lecture”)

“It became necessary,” he concludes, “to refuse such a history.” His fiction performs this refusal by registering “the achievements and the tendernesses that had made life possible” in those towns by the sea, while at the same time exposing their “cruelties” and “lies.”

The novels are eloquent on the dangers of “pared-down polarities and uncluttered certainties” (Gurnah, *Desertion* 222). Rejecting a postcolonial turn that they understand as the re-turn of worldviews imposed from the north, they extend instead the insights afforded by coastal situations, resisting the temptation of ascending to “firmer ground” in favor of retaining a “capacity for complexity”

(Gurnah, “Conversation” 161). The perspectival ambivalence brought forth by littoral locations is heightened by contiguity to an ocean that, as Isabel Hofmeyr has demonstrated, “complicates binaries” (“Universalizing” 722). As the site of “contradiction,” the Indian Ocean places pressure on simplifying frameworks and exacts instead analyses that avoid “the pitfalls of both anticolonial and colonial approaches” (Hofmeyr, “Complicating Sea” 590).

Giving form to the confounding perspective described by the coastline of *By the Sea*, Gurnah’s novels reflect lessons learned in Zanzibar as a classroom writ large. In interviews and essays, Gurnah remarks on how the instruction he received in a colonial school was complicated by an education in the mosque, the Koran school, the streets, and the home: “what I was learning in these other places was at times flatly contradictory to what I was learning at school” (“Writing” 60). Appreciating that “[o]ut of it came a way of accommodating and taking account of difference, and of affirming the possibility of more complex ways of knowing,” his fiction values and emulates the “dynamic process” of “dealing with contradictory narratives” that this education demanded (60).

The African Indian Ocean littoral not only provides a historical context for this process but offers its own object lessons of complexity in coastal dynamics that muddle simplifying dichotomies and challenge easy comprehension. A scene set on a cargo-laden vessel in *Afterlives* is illustrative. One of the characters, Hamza, is returning to the small town in which he had lived before the European war swept across eastern Africa. The nahodha (boat captain) makes a “cautious approach into harbour” at a crepuscular hour that underscores the liminal nature of the shore before deciding rather to pass the night in “shallow water”: “[t]he tide was out and he was not sure of the channels, he said. It was after the kaskazi monsoon and in the period before the winds and currents turned south-easterly. Heavy currents at that time of year sometimes shifted the channels” (ch. 8). Like the interelemental dynamics that render the coast far more intricate than a mere dichotomy of land and

sea, there are various connected parts to this story, many of which remain obscure. Certain undercurrents are familiar from an earlier novel, *Paradise*, but the expertise learned from repetitive reading remains limited by shifting channels: that Hamza’s story overlaps with that of Yusuf in *Paradise* does not reveal much beyond the insistent iterability of the effort to maintain self-possession in the face of an imposed marginalization.

Lucidity seems to cut through the gloom when an apparently straightforward allusion is made to Joseph Conrad’s infamous depiction of Africa as Hamza’s focalizing gaze follows the road that “ran out to the darkness of the country” (*Afterlives*, ch. 8). But it is complicated by the chiaroscuro of light and shadow that Hamza first discerns along the quay, as well as by the partial homage that this very scene pays to that in which the *Nellie* anchors in the Thames, awaiting the turn of the tide in *Heart of Darkness*. It is complicated further by the later revelation that the house at the end of the shoreline road past which Hamza’s focalization travels en route to the interior is one in which he had spent his childhood bonded to a merchant in the caravan trade. Instead of complementing the English imperial narrative with a fulsome account of Arab slavery, however, Hamza’s story remains hazy and incomplete. As he tells an interlocuter who seeks to piece together his history in that town: “[y]ou want me to tell you about myself as if I have a complete story but all I have are fragments which are snagged by troubling gaps” (ch. 12).⁸

Earlier, when disembarking on the quayside after the boat has been lifted by the incoming tide, Hamza is grateful that none of the crew inquire after his limp, “because sympathy in such situations required disclosure in return” (ch. 8). An ebb and flood of accounting and withdrawal thus structures Gurnah’s narratives as they cusp to cradle the injuries of the south without rendering them available to the facile appropriation that the narrator of *Gravel Heart* witnesses among student campaigners in England: “[t]hey were fortunate people who desired to own even the suffering of others,” he finds; “any injustice in the world seemed to be theirs to claim” (108). Observing the troubled silences of

his roommates (one of whom had been a child soldier in the Biafra war, the other classified Coloured in apartheid South Africa) without seeking to penetrate them, he appreciates that “[e]verything is complicated and questions simplify what is only comprehensible through intimacy and experience” (107).⁹

Drawing readers closer to the shores of these stories from the south, Gurnah cautions against taking possession of them with clarifying “new maps” or even through an extension of sympathy that distances its object instead of inviting intimacy. Yet, while underlining their singularity, the chalk stroke of his fiction does not fixate on immutable difference. Instead, it pays tribute to a particular cusp of coast on which the local and the foreign elaborately interfused—while extending also to other shores in an embracing vision that is ultimately planetary in reach. The coast is again a paradigmatic figure: the intertidal zone is the only ecosystem that occurs in every region of this terraqueous planet. While Hamza awaits the turning tide in *Afterlives*, the narrative point of view drifts from the darkening interior back “[o]ut to sea” where “the sky filled with stars”; as the moon rises, we are told, “it submerged the whole world in its unearthly glow” (ch. 8).

NOTES

1. Included in this count is Patrick White of Australia, which is in the Southern Hemisphere but not part of the geo-economic grouping of the Global South.

2. Compare my reading of littoral settings in Gurnah’s fellow Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee’s “literatures of the south” (“International Author”); see also Lavery’s study of Indian Ocean fictions as “centralis[ing] . . . the south” (1), and Hofmeyr on the Indian Ocean as a “complicating sea.”

3. Among the ten novels that Gurnah has published to date, *Dottie* is the exception that proves the rule: featuring his most wholly displaced protagonist, the narrative is centered in England. In an interview with Claire Chambers, Gurnah identifies “the coast of East Africa” as “the terrain [he’s] interested in writing about” (“Interview” 125).

4. See also the critique presented in Mbembe’s “African Modes of Self-Writing”; my reading of Gurnah’s fiction finds inspiration also in Mbembe’s subsequent commentary on borders as devices of “necropolitics” and “insulation” (*Necropolitics*; “Thoughts”).

5. The narrative backdrop includes the East African Campaign of World War I and the prior parceling out of the continent by imperial cartographers: “That was how that part of the world was at the time. Every bit of it belonged to Europeans, at least on a map” (Gurnah, *Afterlives*, ch. 5).

6. See also the histories of the Indian Ocean by Campbell; Pearson.

7. See also Mbembe’s conception of “decolonisation” as “a radical openness of and to the world . . . as opposed to insulation” (“Thoughts”).

8. The “trip to the interior” to which Hamza refers elliptically in *Afterlives* (ch. 12) receives more extended treatment in *Paradise*, but the presentation is equally equivocal (see Samuelson, “Abdulrazak Gurnah’s Fictions”).

9. Compare again the motivation cited by the Nobel Prize committee, which recognizes Gurnah “for his uncompromising and compassionate *penetration* of the effects of colonialism and the fates of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents” (“Abdulrazak Gurnah: Facts”; my emphasis).

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