

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Substantive Gaps and Indian Ocean Entanglements: Reading Abdulrazak Gurnah

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I first encountered Abdulrazak Gurnah when I read his novel *Desertion* (2005). The novel's ungroundedness—that is, its attempt to fill in the silences and gaps of historical and personal narratives and memories with imagination—was unsettling. Because within this ungroundedness, I realized, was a meditation on the substantive gaps that writing attempts to fill. As Rashid, the narrator of *Desertion*, writes a story that is filled with elisions, stitched together with what he knows and remembers, with letters from his brother Amin, and with his imagination, one soon comes to understand that this story is both possible and impossible because of the interplay between what is known and what is unknowable. Thus, Gurnah's writing is an encounter with the considerable intersecting histories, inventions, and epistemes that crystallize at the site of the African continent—a continent that is both marked and haunted by the Atlantic and Indian Oceans and embedded in global economies of exchange and expropriation. Across Gurnah's novels, it is the Indian Ocean littoral of the African continent, its islands, and its proximity to the Arab Gulf, Persia, and the Indian subcontinent that are the focus of stories about journeys, individual intimacies, and the changing nature of state power. It is here, within these stories, that Gurnah grapples with elisions, silences, and the unknowable. In this way his novels unravel narratives, experiences, and representations of Africa, which, as Achille Mbembe notes, emerges in the world as “incomplete, mutilated and unfinished, its history reduced to a series of setbacks in its quest for humankind” (1). With Gurnah as a guide, the journey through the history of the Indian Ocean littoral, its trades, its occupations, its colonization, its revolutions and expulsions, and its leaps toward a globalizing modernity all demand that we see

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anew those places that have become knowable through the accretion of narratives, imaginaries, and silences.

It is undeniable that the *longue durée* of Indian Ocean trades, including slavery, and the cosmopolitan cultures engendered by these trades have been fruitful critical avenues for reading Gurnah's body of work. Gurnah himself was born in Zanzibar in 1948 and exiled in the 1960s during the oppression and persecution of citizens of Arab origin. Thus, the histories of trade and empire specific to the Indian Ocean littoral form the backdrop against which Gurnah's work narrativizes the everyday lives of people—their intimacies, families, and communities—and the changing matrix of local and global power. In *By the Sea* (2001), for instance, the narrator enumerates how traders from “Arabia, the Gulf, India, and Sind, and other traders from the Horn of Africa” have been coming to the Indian Ocean for trade “every year for at a least a thousand years” (14). The narrator also details how the Portuguese, Omanis, British, Germans, and French have all shaped the time and space of the Indian Ocean littoral. Across Gurnah's twelve novels personal histories, dramas, and tragedies intersect with those of empire, depicting both the material and the imaginative geographies that are disassembled and re-membered by global mobility and temporality from an Indian Ocean center.¹

Described as an “interregional arena of human interactions” by the historian Sugata Bose, the Indian Ocean is a central point of departure for Gurnah's novels. It is therefore unsurprising that the Indian Ocean littoral, and the Swahili Coast specifically, has been the focal point of literary analyses of Gurnah's work.² In her reading of Gurnah, Meg Samuelson examines how the interplay of water and land functions as an idiom in Gurnah's novels, and she proposes “amphibian aesthetics” as a term to describe how Gurnah's narrative worlds straddle both water and land (511). If we consider the amphibian as able not only to straddle water and land but also to breathe in water and on land, then an amphibian aesthetics, while framed as a binary, is in actuality a tripartite model where imaginaries and epistemes in water, land, and air overlap.

While in my own work this model of water, land, and air allows a reinterrogation of the unthought spaces of Black mobility, in this essay I will use it to posit how Gurnah's novels complicate the intersection of Indian Ocean trades and exchange economies, slavery, colonialism and postcolonial nationalism, and global transit and mobility. I navigate Gurnah's body of work by attending to its grappling with the entwinement of blackness and Africa, its motif of silence, and its overlapping geographic imaginaries.

Across Gurnah's novels an image of Africa emerges that muddles and complicates the binary between Black indigenes and White colonizers, offering instead a narrative steeped in epistemological erasure and impositions that continue to structure and create new forms of violence.³ Gurnah's novels do not flinch from ceaselessly interrogating how the racialized body accrues meaning through mobility. If the African body is, as Hortense Spillers argues, made to “*mean* via the power grammars of capture” (14), then these grammars of capture, which, according to Mlondolozzi Zondi, include “colonialism as well as the Arab, [Persian,] and transatlantic slave trades” (258), must in the case of Gurnah's novels include Indian Ocean trade, slavery, colonialism, and global transit. Across Gurnah's novels Africanness and blackness, entanglements of bodies and their meaning in language, become further emmeshed in the relations among Indian Ocean trade, economies of exchange, and transit. In Gurnah's novel *Pilgrims Way* (1988), for instance, there is an unsettling of the entwinement between Africa and blackness when two African characters originating from the continent must negotiate their relationship with each other and thus with the continent. One of these characters, Karta, touts a pan-African, transnational blackness, because he identifies blackness with geography (by being born on the continent), while the other, Duad, emerges from a complicated relation to the African continent (and thus to its blackness) because he is “a bit of this and a bit of that” and suffers from the deployment of a postcolonial nationalist rhetoric of exclusion. Duad's racial indeterminacy means that “he is by default marked as *not* African and thus susceptible

to retributive violence” against those who have orchestrated and participated in the enslavement of Africans; he also imagines a separate zone of existence for himself and those like him (Mirmotahari 20). By unsettling the suturing of Africa and blackness, Gurnah’s novels offer us an opportunity to interrogate the particular matrix of race produced in the Indian Ocean. Emad Mirmotahari in his reading of *Pilgrims Way* (1988) argues, and I agree, that Gurnah’s subsequent novels, such as *Paradise* (1994), *By the Sea*, and *Desertion*, show how “historical conflicts” are “retooled by the modern nation-state” (21). I want to go further to suggest that Gurnah’s novels reveal an accretion of historical and personal unfolding that complicates (not unravels) blackness and Africanity. It is tempting to interpret such oppositional conceptualization of blackness in the context of Africa as the core of Gurnah’s novels; however, such readings must be treated with greater nuance. While Duad might perceive himself as having a distinctive relation to blackness and Africa, when he finds himself beyond the context of Africa, such personal and historical specificity erupts, replaced by a global racial structure. Within this global context, blackness overlaps with Africanness, especially when one’s body cannot pass racially.

In precisely these moments, when language must contort itself to simultaneously obfuscate and reveal the unstable yet fixed discourse of race that deploys phenotypes as its visible coherence, Gurnah’s novels reveal the difficulty of untethering blackness from Africanness. Through characters like Salim and Saleh, in *Gravel Heart* (2017) and *By the Sea*, respectively, Gurnah unravels the illusion of ethnicity or religion as the marker of racial difference. For instance, when Salim falls in love with a British Indian woman, Billy, her family, on discovering their relationship, demands that she end it. The final scene of the relationship’s unraveling depicts how the specificity of one’s racial identity diminishes in the wake of global anti-blackness. It exemplifies what Frantz Fanon identifies as “the epidermal racial schema” (92), which David Marriot explains as the process whereby “racist society projects onto the black body feelings and values . . .

whose significance is one of disfiguration, in which the very surface of the body, its skin, becomes a metonym for a certain historicity of hatred” (67–68). When Billy relates to Salim that her family “used that word freely: a nigger is a nigger however nice he is” and goes on to offer, “I had thought religion would be the issue” (Gurnah, *Gravel Heart* 147), she stumbles on “negrophobogenesis,” whereby Salim’s body, its Africanness and its blackness, becomes dislocated from its peculiar experiences and histories and thus imbricated in the larger historical and social structure of blackness (Marriott 66).

While Salim might seem like an isolated case, in *Paradise*, for instance, the language of the interior and the savage reveals a racialization that is rendered opaque in language. The traders in *Paradise* use the designation *savage* to denote a plethora of different religious, cultural, and social beliefs, as well as racial difference. For example, when the procession of traders and their porters encounters “two beaded warriors,” Mohammed Abdalla, who handles the hiring of porters and guards for the merchant, Uncle Aziz, turns and points to the warriors and says, “Savages . . . worth ten of any of you” (59). Later, when Yusuf, the novel’s protagonist, who is sold by his father in repayment of a debt; Hamid, in whose care Yusuf remains while Uncle Aziz travels to the interior; and Hamid’s friend Kalasinga visit another friend of Hamid’s, Hussein, a young woman comes to purchase something in Hussein’s store. Once she leaves, Kalasinga begins to sexualize her: “Oh these savage women, did you smell the cow dung? Did you see those breasts?” (85). As a designation, *savage* is malleable enough to encompass what Zakiyyah Jackson calls plasticization—that is, the simultaneous casting of Black(ened) people as “sub, supra, and human.” Jackson further explains that these “operations of simultaneously being everything and nothing . . . construct the black(ened) humanity as the privation and exorbitance of form” (35). Extrapolating from Jackson’s theorization of plasticization, the repeated use of *savage* in *Paradise* is not solely a designation of beliefs and culture; it is a designation of blackness. It is a designation whereby two warriors are interpellated through the language of economic value

and thus made recognizable within the terms of an economy of exchange, and women's bodies are atomized into structures of desire. Gurnah shows, perhaps even demands, through repetition, an attention to the formation of race and blackness that is simultaneously a revelation of historical continuums and a particularity that dislocates and unmoors.

We also glean the operations of substantive gaps in Gurnah's novels through the central motif of silence. When people encounter each other in Gurnah's novels, the act of communicating must be mediated through language, which is often insufficient. Gurnah tells Nisha Jones that people like his characters Nyundo, in *Paradise*, and Saleh, in *By the Sea*, "just grope towards each other's meanings" ("Abdulrazak Gurnah" 38). The linguistic insufficiencies of Gurnah's characters are buttressed by a historical one that Gurnah describes as "the weight of inflexible historical evidence passed down through generations" (39). Silence becomes entangled with global transit, whereby crossing a border involves documentation that tells a coherent, legible narrative to the state and its deputized actors. Negotiations between migrants and the state are exemplified in the protagonist of *By the Sea*, Saleh, who arrives at Gatwick airport seeking asylum. Saleh is advised not to let anyone know he can speak English and thus during an interview with a border official he remains silent, while responding to the accusations of unbelonging in his thoughts. This exchange, which I have elsewhere read as a kind of "semiotics of the powerless" (Kumavie 7), describes how those denied access to the category of global citizens must use whatever resources are available to them, including silence, to gain access to the country of their destination. However, in novels such as *Admiring Silence* (1996) and *The Last Gift* (2011), the decision to speak or not to speak signifies more than the ability to gain access to a state. The unnamed narrator in *Admiring Silence* emigrates from Zanzibar to the United Kingdom and lives with an English woman named Emma. He does not return home to Zanzibar for seventeen years, and his only way of staying connected to home is through the stories he fabricates. These stories are

prompted by his desire to belong to Emma's family and be accepted by them. As Kimani Kaigai notes, silence in Gurnah's *Admiring Silence* and *The Last Gift* unsettles demands that migrants tell stories that are "absolute[ly] intelligible" (129). While the migrants are often roped into making their experiences intelligible to the deputized actors of the state, there is often a lacuna between the self-narrativization and silence, creating a narrative technique whereby the reader has access to the interiority of characters and to the lacunae in their self-representations.

In some of Gurnah's novels these individual contentions with the demands for legibility become extended to encompass the extensive and complex global history of the Swahili coast in the Indian Ocean. Encapsulating Indian Ocean trades and empires, European imperial expansions and wars, and postcolonial impositions of unified identities, the complexities of the Indian Ocean are reflected through narrative elisions, silences, and gaps. Gurnah himself describes writing, in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, as showing "what can be otherwise, what it is that the hard domineering eye cannot see, what makes people . . . both the ugliness and the virtue . . ." ("Nobel Lecture" 4). On the one hand, the otherwise emerges in Gurnah's depictions of the global circulations and encounters generated in the Indian Ocean, as well as through the interfacing and intermingling between individuals, communities, and histories that is present in bodies and languages. On the other hand, this otherwise emerges through how silences are fashioned, and whose lives were erased, changed, or valorized to forge a contemporary existence out of the Indian Ocean's complex pasts. Michel-Rolph Trouillot cautions that the *longue durée* of cultural globalization is silenced when we restrict its temporality and that "the particularity of the narrative of globalization when it touches culture-history is a massive silencing of the past on a world scale, the systematic erasure of continuous and deeply felt encounters that have marked the last 500 years of human history" (6). While Gurnah's novels uncover the silence of global flows and cultures that have blossomed in the Indian Ocean for thousands of years, they also

complicate their poetics of silence. Through characters who refuse to narrate their stories or those who take imaginative liberties with self-narrations, silence is never simply a refusal to vocalize.

In Gurnah's most recent novel, *Afterlives* (2020), the narrative structure itself creates silences and gaps in the novel. In the transition from part 1 to part 2, the narrative focus shifts from Ilyas, who as a young boy is stolen by German colonial troops, educated by a German farmer, and later joins the German askari, to Hamza, who is enslaved as a young boy and escapes to be part of the German askari. Even though the later story returns to the port city where Ilyas and his sister, Afiya, live, Ilyas's life after he joins the askari remains unknown to his sister and friend, Khalifa, until the end of the novel. Indeed, the transition from Ilyas to Hamza brings to the forefront of the novel what had hitherto hovered on its periphery: the German occupation and colonization of East Africa. Hamza's drafting and training as part of the askari introduces the reach and violence of European imperialism and its reliance on soldiers from Africa and elsewhere in the empire. The term *askari*, which is believed to be borrowed partly from the Swahili *askari* and partly from the Arabic *askari*, refers to an African soldier. In East Africa and Yemen, the word also means soldier or police officer ("Askari"). The word denotes and obscures empire, and in *Afterlives* it also masks the metonymic operation in which *askari* meaning African soldiers used for the purpose of empire becomes *askari* meaning an African soldier or police officer. In this way, these soldiers are erased from imperial narratives of conquest. A poignant illustration of this dynamic is Ilyas, who after years of service to the Germans and their aspirations for colonies in East Africa is sentenced to a concentration camp to which he is accompanied by his only surviving son. Ilyas's erasure, his opacity, haunts the novel and its characters with its silence. Although Hamza cloaks himself in silence, hiding his enslavement as a child, his escape to join the German askari, and his injury and return to the unnamed town where he was enslaved, he is able to eventually tell his story to those with whom he forms a family, Khalifa and Afiya. Ilyas's story, however, is

accessible only through a picture, official documentation, and the stories of others. These narrative silences and gaps, whether personal decisions or an imposition of empire or migration, suggest that silencing is a fact of being.

In some of Gurnah's novels, an overlapping of geographic imaginaries reveals the gaps of territoriality, where silence becomes imprinted onto landscape and other demarcations of space. In these novels, imaginaries of space are "complicated and multifaceted," encompassing not only the surface of the earth but also the aerial and the chthonic (Elden 35).⁴ Consider Saleh in Gurnah's *By the Sea*, who describes himself as living "in the murk of the lower air where you'll find the time servers and the fantasists who'll believe anything and defer to everything, gullible and spiritless throngs that crowd and pollute the narrowing spaces where they congregate." Indeed, Saleh provides a kind of map of the air in order to locate himself in the lower air. The upper air is, according to him, "always full of agitation because God and his angels live there and debate high policy, and flush out treachery and rebellion. . . . The middle air is the arena for contention, where the clerks and the anteroom afreets and the wordy jinns and flabby serpents writhe and flap and fume as they strain for the counsels of their betters" (3). To locate himself within the strata of air space, Saleh reveals how cosmology reflects the ethno-conditions on land. As Sylvia Wynter points out, all cultures have mapped their "descriptive statements or governing master codes in the heavens," which have in time become adapted as the truth (271). She goes on to state that "all such knowledge of the physical cosmos, all such astronomies, all such geographies . . . had still remained adaptive truths-for and, as such, ethno-astronomies, ethno-geographies" (271). As Wynter poignantly notes here, such statements reflect the particular ethno-constitution of their inventors. With Wynter in mind, we might consider Saleh's statement as an attempt to script into being a descriptive statement to encapsulate his geographic (earth-writing) and geopolitical relation to the divine, by locating himself in the lowest strata. But if we read this as a geographic pin used not to locate but rather

to describe one's dislocation in a place that figures in the imaginative landscape as a site in proximity to heaven (Europe as the land of milk and honey), then Saleh's situating of himself in the lower air is his attempt to delineate his life from the life of abundance and wealth that Europe seemingly embodies.

These overlapping geographies are not limited to Europe. In novels like *Paradise*, which follows the young protagonist Yusuf, who is indentured to a merchant for the debts of his father, eastern Africa itself is shown to be a landscape of conflicting and overlapping geographic imaginaries. When Yusuf joins the merchant on his trading journey to the interior, the many sultans and communities they encounter, all with their unique customs and approaches to trade, reveal the differing groups that are organized under colonial rule, and later into post-colonial nation-states. Throughout Yusuf's travels, German colonial incursion is a kind of specter, which reveals the primary organizing framework of colonialism that Mahmood Mamdani aptly calls "define and rule" or "represent and destroy," as Jodi Melamed reminds us. According to Mamdani, by using solely origin to determine indigeneity, geography instead of histories of migration and mobility became a way for colonial rule to fix groups within geographic locations and then to define territory through such fixity (47). While Mamdani's focus is not the Indian Ocean littoral, it nonetheless reveals how the plethora of peoples, languages, and political organization that forms the setting for Gurnah's novel *Paradise* becomes reduced to a colony and later a nation-state. Such inventions of complex geographic and migratory identities as monoliths are fundamental to colonialism, where overlapping geographic imaginaries fix landscapes into properties and territories to be claimed by competing European states.

Gurnah's novels excavate what lies underneath the surface of narrative, uncovering gaps and revealing elisions, and offering these up for scrutiny. This dedication to excavating the stories and lives that exist beneath the surface of land and water, history, and the present is evident across Gurnah's oeuvre. In announcing the 2021 Nobel Prize in literature, the Swedish Academy stated that the prize was awarded

to Gurnah "for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents" ("Prize Announcement"). This overview, while adequate, raises questions about what constitutes the "effects of colonialism" and its relation to slavery, settler colonialism, genocide, resource extraction, and global anti-blackness. Indeed, across Gurnah's oeuvre colonialism is complicated by individual aspirations and actions that reveal its entwinement with ongoing migratory circulations that are the outcome of centuries-old migrations, and later of postcolonial state coercions and expulsions. New and experienced readers of Gurnah's novels will, I hope, realize that the tensions and substantive gaps examined here allow the framing of new questions, and the (re)mapping of critical avenues for engaging blackness, silence, imaginative geographies, and so much more.

NOTES

1. I draw here on Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's theorizing of memory and re-membling in *Something Torn and New*.
2. These include, but are not limited to, Helff; Samuelson; Steiner; and Datta. Samuelson, for instance, describes Gurnah's novels as depicting the binaries that characterize the lives of those living in the Indian Ocean littoral, whose existence is interwoven with the region's exchange economies (502).
3. In his essay "Writing and Place," Gurnah posits that he writes from neither the "liberating" nor the "isolating" position of estrangement but rather from a position of nuance, a position from which he can deal with "contradictory narratives . . . even if by its very nature it is a process first undertaken from a position of weakness" (27). Gurnah's process of translating contradictory, and at times opposing, narratives into an imaginative landscape where multiple versions of events can exist simultaneously might emerge from a "position of weakness"; nevertheless, this process becomes in his novels a nuanced position in which to develop his explication of blackness.
4. For a close examination of the aerial and chthonic, see Cooper.

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