

Dustin Crowley, *Africa's Narrative Geographies: Charting the Intersections of Geocriticism and Postcolonial Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)

Over the past few decades, owing to what has been called the 'spatial turn' in literary and cultural studies, scholars have paid greater attention to matters of space, place and mapping in their approaches to criticism. Postcolonial studies was among those fields in the forefront of this spatial turn, which makes sense considering the degree to which battles over land, territory and distinctive places – whether in terms of direct conquest or of ideological representation – lie at the heart of colonial and postcolonial discourse. Until recently, however, there have been few critical studies that aimed at connecting postcolonial studies with the expressly geocritical or spatial approaches to literature that have emerged in connection with geocriticism, literary geography or the spatial humanities. Dustin Crowley's *Africa's Narrative Geographies: Charting the Intersections of Geocriticism and Postcolonial Studies* addresses these overlapping and mutually reinforcing critical practices, while also providing analyses of key works of modern African literature. It is a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarship involving spatial and postcolonial approaches to literary studies.

Crowley's geocritical study eschews traditional geographical labels that had functioned to make the *local*, *regional* or *national* into static containers in which more significant events just happened to occur. Rather, in his own words, this book develops 'a model for understanding spatial dynamics in more flexible, conditional, and relational ways, allowing us to interpret and evaluate the complex geographic relationships and alternatives portrayed in African literature' (3). Published by Palgrave Macmillan in the *Geocriticism and Spatial Literary Studies* series edited by Robert T. Tally Jr., *Africa's Narrative Geographies* draws upon works of Bertrand Westphal, Andrew Teverson, Sara Upstone and Edward Soja, among others, to envisage how real and imagined geographic relations are key components to understanding the dynamics of culture and imperialism. Crowley relies on the geographical positions of African literature to understand the differential relationship between the gazing and gazed-at cultures. Crowley's research analyses and extends the works of five eminent African authors in a quest to decipher the spatial and social structures operating at global and local scales.

In Chapter 1, "My Black Land": Senghor's Construction of "Africa", Crowley analyses Léopold Sédar Senghor's essentialist treatment of Africa through his poetry of *négritude*. Senghor's attitude to *négritude* can be defined as a union of the cultural and ideological values with its expression dispensed through the works and lives of black Africans. Through his poetry, Senghor communicates with the social spaces of Africa and investigates their cultural and geographical estrangement from European spaces. Rife with suggestions to subsume Western habits into African literary expression, *négritude* seeks 'to recuperate racial blackness from colonial machinations' (31). Using a geocritical frame of reference, Crowley captures the pervasive agony of the black man in the white world, as Senghor's language of poetry (French), imagined in another language (African), is replete with metaphors of Africa's homogenisation in

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the global context. Senghor's 'Africa' as a place is essentially conditioned by a 'fundamental continental commonality' (43). The outcome denies the conflicts of racial and cultural suppositions that pervades the broader and more nuanced African experience. Crowley reads his desire for a pan-African fraternity as somewhat simplistic and proposes a composite framework that would allow for social and cultural heterogeneity.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o's anti-imperialism is the focus of Chapter 2, 'Place and Scale in Ngugi's "Universal Garden"', where Crowley finds that Ngugi's approach accommodates local/global tendencies alongside individual/community sentiments based on kinship and communal resistance, which thereby enables writers to construct new relationships and identities without having their roots planted solely in the traditional community. Crowley observes that Ngugi's vision of Africa is predicated upon community consciousness; divisive units such as place, ethnicity and nationalism, as well as natural and artificial boundaries between them, are compromised to include the marginalised populations. Ngugi's narratives also explore forms of psychological imprisonment that forbid political involvement. With emphasis on *Wizard of the Crow*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *The River Between* and *I Will Marry When I Want*, Crowley seeks to understand the interconnections between the global and the local. The unification of culture, ethnicity, race, place and scale is what he calls a *glocal* response. Ngugi's works represent the struggle of emplacement in a colonial realm that naturally displaces individuals and communities from the pre-colonised culture. This tension is unlikely to be resolved by mapping out geographies of imperialism due to Ngugi's inclination to engage in complex and shifting glocal forces.

In Chapter 3, 'Imagining the Global Village: Bessie Head's Narratives of Migration and Boundaries', Crowley continues to question the relationship between local particularity and a more global vision. One conspicuous feature that Crowley addresses is how Bessie Head's local village narratives explore society and culture at large within the limited scope of Botswanan villages posing as microcosmic Africa. Head employs a logic that would argue that, 'in order to belong to a place, one must deconstruct the boundaries of that place – boundaries that may operate in exclusive or repressive ways, but that may also have an important role in defining that place to begin with' (75). Head's fiction is suffused with colours of rural life, tranquillity and fulfillment, and her novels have the power to 'transform shattered lives and broken social structures, especially for women and outsiders' (79). Her protagonists echo her reflection of places as sites of healing and belonging. Crowley describes her multiscale understanding of geographical boundaries in the local and global scale with respect to the expansive Botswanan villages. In her works, place has a significant role in terms of thinking actions and relationships with the characters in the face of unforgiving conditions. Again, physical geography determines Head's society and culture, and Head uses her fiction to conduct modes of protest. Head's vision to embrace a globally inflected, egalitarian village is entrenched in her geographic imagination of a wider African perspective.

Chapter 4, 'Cosmopolitan Somalia: Place and Identity in Farah's *Maps and Links*', outlines Nuruddin Farah's visionary writing, which re-establishes a sense of communal Somali identity, grounded in the cognition of place and a sense of homogeneity. Farah's quest to

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construct collectivity foregrounds involvement in collaborative activities by linking together through shared activities, thus creating boundedness and stability. Postmodern in his approach, Farah aspires to disintegrate a 'nationalist or clan-based narrative of identity and belonging' (103) in favour of a cosmopolitan ethos. Crowley asserts that Farah's novels censure limitations imposed by colonial geography, while expressing unbridled admiration for unrestricted boundaries and dissolved distinctions. With copious reference to *Maps* and *Links*, Crowley explores Farah's representation of place. Crowley asserts that Farah compromises imagined emplacement by envisioning a cosmopolitan Somalia, a place where inclusive identity is linked together though place.

In Chapter 5, 'Half Slum, Half Paradise: Abani's Global Cities', Crowley examines Chris Abani's treatment of global urbanity, which complicates the perception of mobility, hybridity and victimisation associated with cities. Crowley discusses Abani's endeavours to link cities, otherwise distant from one another, and to then inscribe them within the common experience of urbanity worldwide. Crowley observes that the shared dynamics of globalisation and urbanisation that shape Abani's cities also dominate the experiences of the characters who populate them. *GraceLand* and *Becoming Abigail* suggest ways in which migration is seen as a way Africa's urbanity is relationally constituted through its exchanges with the rest of the world. Abani applies postmodern subjectivity to all global cities accompanied by his realisation that metropolitan mixing is a part of common urban experience. Crowley maintains that this sentiment renounces the challenges and oppressive conditions of clan and nationalism within the African nation. At the same time, the experience of rootlessness and communal breakdown presents a threat to the ethical dimension of urban dwelling.

Crowley's conclusion offers a speculative discussion of the ways that geocriticism and ecocriticism may be productively bridged in postcolonial contexts. Pointing to the immense social, political and environmental challenges facing Africa's diverse cultures, Crowley argues that any ecological approach would benefit from the geographically informed critical study made available by spatial analysis, while noting that this geocritical approach, in turn, must be attuned to the environmental factors affecting space and place in the African context. Postcolonial criticism, in Crowley's view, thus brings spatial and environmental theory to bear on the wide range of cultural artefacts representing and shaping Africa today. *Africa's Narrative Geographies* offers an excellent example of the sort of work Crowley has in mind, and it is a good place for readers interested in African literature, postcolonial studies and spatial literary studies to begin.

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Gables (1851), William Faulkner's *The Sound and The Fury* (1929), and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Nandi holds bachelors and master's degrees from West Bengal State University and Rabindra Bharati University respectively in India. She also works in postcolonial theory and British literature.

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