
Dustin Crowley. *Africa's Narrative Geographies: Charting the Intersection of Geocriticism and Postcolonial Studies*. New York: Palgrave, 2015. Pp. x, 192. €84.29.

Dustin Crowley's *Africa's Narrative Geographies: Charting the Intersection of Geocriticism and Postcolonial Studies* is the seventh title in the pathbreaking series on geocriticism and spatial literary studies published by Palgrave Macmillan and edited by Robert T. Tally Jr. Crowley's contribution revisits the expansive study in postcolonial literature of geographies of imperialism and liberation. He does so in ways that will be recognizable to many experts in the field but also includes new insights and a welcome challenge to any tendency to conceptual complacency within the poststructural thrust of spatial studies in literature.

Crowley positions his book against the heavy influence of "postmodernist and post-structuralist sentiments and assumptions" in geocriticism (3), which privilege notions of indeterminacy, transgression, difference, anti-essentialism, and nomadic identities (he points out the work of Edward Soja, Gilles Deleuze, and Bertrand Westphal, among others). Throughout the book, Crowley demonstrates the downside to this influence in readings of spatial representations in African literature. In the worst cases, we are left with a limited vision of rather abstract spatialities imprinted by abstract deconstructive notions of liberty as destabilization, migration, and hybrid flows or "rhizomatic disorder" (8), and, consequently, predictable and dichotomizing responses to questions of place-related phenomena like nationalism, stability, borders, and locality.

As a corrective response to the poststructural slant and drawing loosely on authors including David Harvey, Doreen Massey, and Lawrence Buell, Crowley proposes a geocritical approach to literature that operates with the three (loosely defined) concepts of scale (local, national, regional, or global), place (as formed by a complex and reciprocal intertwinement of historical, social, and natural conditions and materialities), and space (a catalyst of multiple and ongoing "relational flows . . . of people, materials, [and] discourses" [26]). The book's conjunction of scale, place, and space motivates a

flexible and complex understanding of the production of place and calls for a comprehensive analysis of several shifting, reinforcing, and contradictory aspects and dimensions in the formation and representation of placial realities and geographical imaginaries in literature. One of the strengths of *Africa's Narrative Geographies* is Crowley's attentiveness to and illustrations of how "the nature of place provides the means for both hegemonic control and the challenge to hegemony" (24), which inspires a perspective that precludes any easy dissociation of resistance and liberation from the power to dominate. This perspective is also capable of illustrating globalism, localism, nationalism, antinationalism, etc. as both repressive and liberating place-shaping forces.

After an introductory chapter of thirty pages, Crowley engages his geocritical perspective in readings of a well-chosen selection of literary works by five African authors: Léopold Sédar Senghor, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Bessie Head, Nuruddin Farah, and Chris Abani. The choice of texts represents a diversity of historical and geographical contexts, and while Crowley approaches each writer from a particular angle of concern, all of his readings relate to the central question of literary encounters with "dominant spatialities" and how to "imagine alternative spaces and places of freedom and dignity" (3). Crowley analyses Senghor's *négritude* poetry for its pan-African construction of the continent as a unified place and probes into questions of cultural essentialism and its overlap with homogenising representations of places and geographies. With attention to *The River Between*, *A Grain of Wheat*, *Wizard of the Crow*, and *I Will Marry When I Want*, Crowley examines the place world and spatial imaginaries in Ngũgĩ's narratives for how they bring together international Marxism and anti-imperialism with the particularity of local cultural nationalisms, which forges a literary vision in Ngũgĩ's work of a culturally grounded heterogeneous nation. Interactions between local and global scales are pivotal in the succeeding analyses, too. In discussing Head's *A Question of Power*, *Maru*, and the non-fictional *Bewitched Crossroad*, Crowley focuses on boundaries, migration, and exile. He identifies global humanism as fused with a sense of local emplacement and exilic belonging, which results in a "careful negotiation" in Head's oeuvre "of cosmopolitan openness and, at times, productive boundedness" (28). Crowley proceeds to read Farah's *Maps* and *Links* against the predictable poststructuralist appraisal of fluidity and indeterminacy by paying attention to the "reconstructive" grounding (117), in *Links* in particular, of Farah's cosmopolitan ethos in representations of urban spaces as significantly pervaded by communal and concrete specificity. Finally, Crowley reads Abani's *Graceland* and *The Virgin of Flames* with special attention to how the author works with local (economic and political) inflec-

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tions and manifestations of celebrated postcolonial phenomena like mobility and cultural hybridity, exposing contexts in which they result in undesirable consequences of disconnection and curtailments of “redemptive transformation” (154).

Despite the rich promise of Crowley’s analytical triad of scale, place, and space, the book remains predominantly concerned with the discursive side of representations of place and geographical imaginaries (the historical, social, and political) at the expense of the non-human and natural elements that exist “alongside any sociopolitical constructions” (156). This imbalance is slightly remedied in the book’s concluding chapter, an analysis of the overlaps between geocriticism, postcolonialism, and ecocriticism. Yet the perspectives on non-human elements as place-shaping forces are introduced too late in the book to be incorporated into the main literary analyses. For similar reasons, many readers might find the book lacking in attention to the embodied and sensate side of literary renditions of the place world (the book hardly makes any use of phenomenological place theory). Finally, missing in Crowley’s literary analyses are closer considerations of literature as a particular space of representation, formally and aesthetically. In this connection, the title of the book promises more attention than it gives to reflections on the complexity of narrative vis-à-vis the representation of space, place, and geographical imaginaries in literature. As it is, Crowley’s approach to literature remains mainly thematic and content-oriented while largely neglecting the importance of formal analysis. On the flip side, and in exchange for closer analyses of embodied place relations and aesthetic and formal explorations, the reader gets rich and detailed insight into the historical, social, and political aspects of the matters of place, space, and scales in African literature.

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