

“How Did I End Up Here?”:  
Dynamic Cartography in Dinaw Mengestu’s  
*The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*  
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**Abstract:** This article considers the principle of relation in Dinaw Mengestu’s *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* in order to suggest that the novel brings narrative and mapping practices closer together. I develop this relational reading by connecting Edouard Glissant’s work on the poetics of relation to David Harvey’s conception of relational spacetime and arguing that the novel’s fragmented and elliptical narrative embodies these principles. As a result, it generates what I call “dynamic cartography,” a mode of space-writing characterized by fluidity, mobility, and disjunction. Reading *Beautiful Things* through the framework of relation shows how the text deploys maps and other cartographic ephemera to negotiate and mediate geographical upheavals such as diaspora and gentrification. More broadly, it reveals how the literature of globalization functions as a form of cartography, a representation of space that conditions our understanding of the world. Ultimately, this reading suggests that as space becomes increasingly dynamic and disjunctive, so too do the forms that represent that space.

**Keywords:** Dinaw Mengestu, contemporary novel, cartography, globalization

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The literature of globalization is deeply fascinated by the geographical mobility of the twenty-first-century subject. Recent examples include Taiye Selasi’s *Ghana Must Go*, which traces a family’s movements between Ghana and Boston with detours in London, Paris, and Lagos; Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, whose subjects leave

the Dominican Republic for a better life in New Jersey but continue to find themselves drawn to their island home; and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*, whose protagonist travels from Nigeria to the American East Coast for college and then returns home empowered to conquer new horizons. In contrast to such figures, Sepha Stephanos, the protagonist, narrator, and globalized subject of Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, follows a different trajectory: having fled Ethiopia as an adolescent during the political turbulence of the 1970s, he now lives an increasingly circumscribed existence in Washington, DC's Logan Circle neighborhood. Sepha's attachment to this "fallen" Circle suggests his own path and functions as a metaphor for his nonconformity to the more acceptable immigrant narrative of upward mobility (Mengestu 16). However, the novel balances Sepha's stasis with a formal mode that brings narrative and mapping practices into a relationship with each other and amplifies the rich geographical and spatial motifs of global fiction. In doing so, *Beautiful Things* develops what I term "dynamic cartography," a space-writing characterized by its attention to the fluidities, mobilities, and disjunctions of the contemporary moment.

*Beautiful Things*' dynamic cartography operates through the principle of relation, deepening spatial and temporal elements by placing them in conversation with each other. In utilizing the term "relation" this way, I draw on the respective work of poet Edouard Glissant and geographer David Harvey. Following Henri Lefebvre's groundbreaking work on the social dimensions of space in *The Production of Space*, theorists have generated a rich body of scholarship that addresses topics as varied as the cognitive nature of space, the relationship between geography and gender, and the rhetorical nature of cartography.<sup>1</sup> Although their work attends to distinct questions and circumstances, both Glissant and Harvey highlight the relationship between space and memory, an approach that resonates with *Beautiful Things*' elliptical narrative.

Glissant's elaboration of a "poetics of relation" is most explicitly linked to questions of language and modernity in the Caribbean, but its central concept "is both a philosophical stance, a practice, and a poetics. The main premise of this *poetique de la relation* is that any one situa-

tion, individual, or entity is open, related, and relatable to any other” (Velázquez 184; emphasis in original).<sup>2</sup> Glissant builds on this idea of openness and relatability to write against linearity and toward a “science of inquiry” that “leads to following through whatever is dynamic, the relational, the chaotic—anything fluid and various and moreover uncertain” (Glissant 137). Sepha’s approach—driven by his inquiry “How did I end up here?” (Mengestu 147)—follows this relational methodology and eschews linear approaches in favor of the dynamic and fluid. As a child in Ethiopia, Sepha was exposed to war and violence. This trauma dislocates him and renders him unable to enact the linear trajectory epitomized by his new homeland’s grand narrative: the American Dream. Instead, from his position on the outskirts of Logan Circle, Sepha develops an alternative spatial practice that speaks to the dislocated subject for whom the terms “exile” and “immigrant” do not fully capture the shifting geographies of the twenty-first century.

Harvey’s work on relational spacetime also productively moves the discussion of time and space away from absolute metrics and toward a theory of “space as materially sensed, conceptualized, and lived” (134).<sup>3</sup> Harvey develops this notion of relational spacetime in connection with the work of mathematician Alfred Whitehead, who writes that “the fundamental order of ideas is first a world of things in relation, then the spaces whose fundamental entities are defined by means of those relations and whose properties are deduced from the nature of these relations” (qtd. in Harvey 137). Whitehead’s framework suggests the futility of defining space as singular or existing apart from the network of other spaces, histories, and processes that generate meaning. These relational conceptions of space are useful in reading texts such as *Beautiful Things* because they allow the reader to consider space not only in terms of setting but also as it is constituted by the “disparate influences [that] flow from everywhere to everywhere else” (Harvey 137). *Beautiful Things*, with its interest in spatial processes such as diaspora and gentrification, argues for a more comprehensive and relational understanding of the geography of the globalized city.

My reading of relation in Mengestu’s text has several points of emphasis. First, following Glissant, this reading incorporates the notion of re-

lationship, of two or more entities brought into being by their position in relation to each other. While the relationships between spaces give the novel its cartographical interest, the relationships between characters drive its plot and attest to Sepha's psychological, as well as geographical, dislocation. The most significant relationships in the novel are those between Sepha, his neighbor Judith, and her daughter Naomi, as well as between Sepha and his friends Kenneth and Joe, fellow African immigrants working in DC. Each of these relationships is characterized by deep feeling on Sepha's part as well as his inability to commit himself fully and enter into relation. His awareness of the financial disparity between himself and Judith drives them apart, and in the aftermath of their falling out he writes letters to Naomi but never sends them, even when she writes to him and begs for a response. The relationships between Sepha, Kenneth, and Joe do not fall apart in the same way, but the characters keep each other at a distance and carefully refrain from revealing their vulnerabilities to one another. The novel opens with the three spending an evening together in Sepha's store, an event that has "become a routine" but not a commitment (Mengestu 1). He explains: "Sometimes only one of them comes. Sometimes neither of them. No questions are asked because nothing is expected" (1). These flawed and failed relationships, particularly when considered alongside Sepha's emotional and geographical separation from his family, are further evidence of his tendency to move in circles.

The term "relation" also refers to an act of telling that functions as a corollary to the term "narrative."<sup>4</sup> Sepha's narration is an act of relation. As his story proceeds, its elements do not so much fall into place as float freely and occasionally come into contact in order to deepen the narrative. The novel's plot and pacing heed Glissant's call to "renounce . . . linearity's potent grip" (137), as is evident in the following brief overview. The central plot concerns a series of events that take place between September and May. During these months, the effects of gentrification in Logan Circle become more pronounced, particularly with the arrival of Judith and Naomi, who move into one of the area's crumbling mansions and begin to renovate it. Naomi and Sepha strike up a friendship, and he and Judith embark on a tentative romance. Eventually this rela-

tionship falters and class tensions in the neighborhood increase, resulting in Judith and Naomi's departure. Sepha falls into a deep depression and his already tenuous financial situation worsens. When he receives an eviction notice only a few weeks later, he abandons his store and sets out on a journey across the city that leads him to his Uncle Berhane's apartment in Silver Spring, Maryland. At the novel's conclusion, Sepha returns to Logan Circle and observes his store from a distance. Although the trip to Silver Spring chronologically occurs at the end of the plot, it is narrated in chapters that alternate with chapters detailing the developing relationships between Sepha, Naomi, and Judith. This overarching and central story is also interspersed with fragments from beyond the September-May period. Several of these fragments depict Sepha's friendship with Kenneth and Joe, while others describe Sepha's walks through the neighborhood and the city and his recollections of the events that drove him from Addis Ababa years before.

The nonlinear progression of the story reveals the outcome—although not the events leading up to the outcome—of various plotlines central to the chapters that take place during the fall. For example, it is clear quite early on in the novel that Sepha and Judith's relationship has ended, but the details of that storyline are revealed gradually. Because the passage of time proceeds at different paces in each narrative thread, the storyline seems to speed up and slow down; chapters jump ahead six months in time but detail the events of only an afternoon. The nonlinear storytelling, which takes detours through Sepha's memories and then circles back and picks up the narrative throughline, makes it a temporally relational story as well, with the overlapping and fragmented timelines serving as a corollary to the overlapping and fragmented spaces the novel depicts. These spaces—the intimate interiors of Logan Circle; the streets and monuments of Washington, DC; Uncle Berhane's apartment building in Silver Spring; and Addis Ababa—are explored through Sepha's memory, which resists the linearity Uncle Berhane prizes. This nonlinear and fragmented mode of storytelling foregrounds the act of relation.

In addition to portraying interpersonal relationships and foregrounding narration, the novel enacts relation in its emphasis on dual geo-

graphical processes: diaspora and gentrification. The gentrification of Logan Circle that drives the overarching plot is a particular and local story, but when told through Sepha's exile-immigrant eyes it is contextualized by narrative fragments that reference global issues such as the Ethiopian diaspora and the struggles of post-independence Africa. Both gentrification and diaspora are processes driven by social and economic factors, and both are inherently geospatial. Paul Tiyambe Zeleza writes that diaspora "simultaneously refers to a process, a condition, a space and a discourse" (41). He adds that "[i]t is a mode of naming, remembering, living and feeling group identity moulded out of experiences, positionings, struggles and imaginings of the past and the present, and at times the unpredictable future, which are shared across boundaries of time and space" (41). This account of the phenomenon echoes Harvey's description of relational spacetime; diaspora is tinged with diachronic and synchronic elements that make the disentangling of time and space impossible. The same can be said of gentrification, a process of change over time that is marked by particular moments or events. By grounding the novel in both of these processes, Mengestu reveals how small- and wide-scale circulations of capital, people, and stories are central to the contemporary experience of space.

Critically, gentrification also reveals a disconnect between the representation of space and the experience of space. During his walks in Logan Circle and the surrounding areas, Sepha describes the changes that have occurred as a result of the influx of wealthy newcomers: the restoration of the statue of General Logan, new "Coming Soon" signs displayed in empty windows, and the presence of white faces and moving vans. In other words, the visual and lived experience of the space has changed, but a standard map of the neighborhood would not look any different. The gap between the unchanging map and Sepha's lived experience of the space that surrounds him demonstrates dynamic cartography as well as the problem of representation. As Sepha tracks the changes brought about by gentrification, Logan Circle becomes a space he constructs out of memory as much as a space he experiences materially. In moving back and forth between these histories, spaces, and narrative modes, he maps his own increasing sense of absence from that space.

“How did I end up here?”

One of the novel’s pivotal scenes embodies this melding of narrative and mapping practices. In it, Sepha makes his way from Logan Circle to Silver Spring. In a building filled with other Ethiopian immigrants, he visits his Uncle Berhane’s apartment and goes through Berhane’s papers. Seated on the floor, surrounded by letters and documents, he notes: “The bedroom is a wreck now. I’ve forgotten the importance of maintaining order. The letters are scattered around me in a semi-circle that begins chronologically and dissolves into carelessness” (Mengestu 126). Sepha realizes he has always struggled “to maintain structure and order” and ventriloquizes Berhane, who exhorts him to “[b]egin from the beginning . . . begin there, and then you can move on with your life point by point” (126). However, Sepha is uncomfortable with this linear approach. Instead, increasingly bewildered, he has only questions: “How did I end up here? . . . Where is the grand narrative of my life? The one I could spread out and read for signs and clues as to what to expect next [?]” (147). Sepha’s choice of words conjures up a specific image: he does not envision a narrative to be opened up and read like a book, but a document to be spread out and read like a map. Sepha’s conflation of narrative and map suggests that he sees his life through a cartographic rather than chronological lens. However, as he knows all too well, the cartography of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is far from stable and has contributed to his inability to trace his own trajectory. The mapping of this period is characterized by dynamism and disjunction; it offers possibilities for increased mobility but deepens rifts between those who can access that mobility and those who are shut off from it.

Through scenes such as these, which resonate with other spaces and moments Sepha inhabits, the novel develops a relational narrative mode that weaves together the threads of dislocation, absence, and encounter. In doing so, it posits a new model for approaching contemporary narratives of immigration and exile. In contrast to stories of increased mobility, *Beautiful Things* reveals Sepha to be “stuck between two worlds” (228), unable to locate “signs and clues” from his past to guide him forward (147). Sepha expresses his desire for a grand narrative, for a clear direction. As the novel makes clear, however, his story is one of

disruption and dislocation; it does not follow a distinct path that can be traced on a map. The trauma of his departure from Ethiopia, followed by his father's death at the hands of the military regime, severs his connection to his family and home. His years in Washington, DC are characterized by half-hearted attempts to better his situation that are ultimately frustrated. His journey from Ethiopia to Washington is glossed over entirely, an elision that illuminates Sepha's confusion over how he ended up there. Indeed, the novel's fragmented and circular narrative lacks a clear beginning and ending and mirrors Sepha's trajectory. The novel is comprised entirely of interstitial moments; it attempts to map the space that opens up between beginnings and endings. Other elements of the story are also strangely absent, including several of its characters: Berhane is referred to often but never appears, while Naomi appears primarily through a retrospective narrative lens. Rather than a grand narrative that begins at the beginning, Sepha's story circles around absence and loss, both sentimental and spatial.

As he sits on the floor of Berhane's apartment and relives the trauma of his father's death, Sepha experiences the paradoxical geography of the exile, a figure defined by such absence and loss, who may "wander the world yet always end up in the same place, because he carries with him, in his mind, his past and the city from which he has escaped physically but can never escape psychologically" (Weiss 10). Sepha's psyche and his body occupy different locations, and as a result he is unable to trace his narrative. Throughout the novel Sepha occupies multiple physical, psychological, and national positions. Sepha is both immigrant and exile, two geographical conditions with critically different emphases. The narrative of the immigrant is one of arrival and occupation, a story of acclimation and in some cases even assimilation. In some respects, Sepha, with his modest shop and dreams of expansion, is a classic version of the immigrant eager to capitalize on the promises of the American Dream. At the same time, however, his forced departure from Addis places him in an exilic state, a narrative often organized around departure and a sense that the home space has been lost. Many contemporary versions of exile involve a degree of autonomy. Caren Kaplan, whose *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses*



*of Displacement* theorizes the ubiquity of terms such as exile and immigrant as critical metaphors, argues that the modernist trope of exile privileges a Euro-American framework in which “middle-class expatriates adopted the attributes of exile as an ideology of artistic production” (28). In other words, these privileged figures leverage the “shock . . . of displacement” into “significant experimentation and insights” (Kaplan 28). This relatively autonomous and westernized model contrasts significantly with Sepha’s exile; in addition to the geographical differences, Sepha was too young and traumatized by guilt over his role in his father’s death at the time of his departure from Ethiopia to maintain any sense of agency in the transition or use it to claim artistic privilege. Because Sepha’s narrative does not fit neatly into the category of immigrant or exile, he is doubly dislocated and unable to occupy fully the space in which he finds himself.

Sepha attempts to mediate this dislocation by imbuing his narrative with a deep register of geographical realism. In a monograph addressing issues of dislocation in contemporary American fiction, Aliko Varvogli writes:

Mengestu’s first novel was an immigrant novel, but it was also a Washington D. C. novel. Its vivid descriptions of streets and neighbourhoods and the lives that were lived in them made this an important novel about the nation’s capital, and the ways in which its characters interacted with their environment gave the novel a texture that is rarely found in the immigrant novel. (119)

Varvogli’s discussion highlights the difficulty of defining this text according to any singular metric. It shares an emphasis on geographical realism with texts such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which was written “with an encyclopedic memory and a map” (Bulson 81), and Karen Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange*, which “began as a map, a spreadsheet developed in Lotus” (Mermann-Joswiak 5). However, this geographical realism is balanced by a modernist narrative style that employs formal experimentation in its intersecting and fragmented timelines that heighten the sense of loss at the center of the text.

In addition to the multiple generic spaces occupied by *Beautiful Things*, a blurb on the novel's cover from the *New York Times Book Review* that describes it as “[a] great African novel, a great Washington novel, and a great American novel” demonstrates another register of the text's multiple positionalities (Nixon). The novel's geographies, whether textual or metatextual, cannot be disentangled. The texture Varvogli describes is the result of such intertwined geographies and further indicates *Beautiful Things*' investment in the relationships between subject, space, and story. The novel's juxtaposition of scenes of Logan Circle in the midst of upheaval with Sepha's memories of Addis in upheaval implies that, despite its ostensibly timeless monuments, Washington, DC is just as unstable as Sepha's hometown. The two cities emerge entangled in Sepha's consciousness, both equally subject to the pressures of dynamic cartography.

This cartographical mode moves away from absolute frameworks of linearity and locatability and toward a framework of processes and flows. However, while the novel demonstrates both the dynamism and disjunction of contemporary spatial experience, its preoccupation with space is initially most evident in its aforementioned geographical realism. The novel not only names actual Washington, DC locations, but it also contains a level of cartographic detail such that the reader can visualize a map of Sepha's movements. For example, as Sepha describes his neighborhood he names the other streets that intersect with Logan Circle, including Rhode Island Avenue, Vermont Avenue, and 13th Street. He explains that each “hits the circle like the spoke of a bicycle wheel” (Mengestu 73). This description employs an elevated perspective; Sepha describes the streets as they would look from above or on a map. The use of this cartographical perspective reinforces the notion of Sepha as a dislocated subject always experiencing his surroundings at a remove. Ultimately, this geographical realism acknowledges the significance of absolute, mappable space, but also contrasts with the other spatial modes in the text in order to present a more comprehensive geography. These varied geographies rub up against each other and generate a kind of spatial tension that contributes to Sepha's stasis. The scene in Berhane's bedroom reveals Sepha's circular trajectory, which is the result

of his inability to reconcile multiple identities and positions. This scene’s explicit rejection of linearity in favor of inquiry also exemplifies the operation of relation in the text.

Sepha’s desire for a geographical narrative and a map of his own story resonates with several other moments in the text that foreground maps and other cartographic elements. Read in relation to each other, these scenes demonstrate the connection between narrative and cartography. Sepha’s interest in the storytelling function of maps is evident from the scene that opens the novel, in which he spends an evening with Kenneth and Joe making wry jokes about their experiences as African immigrants in the United States and playing a favorite game. The game is inspired by an outdated map of Africa that Sepha keeps hanging in his store. The premise is simple: “[N]ame a dictator and then guess the year and country” (8). Sepha explains: “We’ve been playing the game for over a year now. We’ve expanded our playing field to include failed coups, rebellions, minor insurrections, guerrilla leaders, and the acronyms of as many rebel groups as we can find—the SPLA, TPLF, LRA, UNITA—anyone who has picked up a gun in the name of revolution” (8).<sup>5</sup> Sepha describes what happens after the game begins:

Kenneth walks over to the map of Africa I keep taped to the wall right next to the door. It’s at least twenty years old, maybe older. The borders and names have changed since it was made, but maps, like pictures and journals, have a built-in nostalgic quality that can never render them completely obsolete. The countries are all color-coded, and Africa’s hanging dour head looks like a woman’s head wrapped in a shawl. Kenneth rubs his hand silently over the continent, working his way west to east and then south until his index finger tickles the tip of South Africa. . . . With his other hand he draws a circle around the center of Africa. He finds his spot and taps it twice. (7)

Kenneth’s quasi-reverential approach to the map and Sepha’s acknowledgment of its nostalgic resonance in spite of its cartographical inaccuracies contrast with the lighthearted tone of the conversation and game and add a layer of irony to the proceedings. The game trades on the

continent's notoriety abroad—a reputation that is often highlighted by the Western media at the expense of other narratives—and thus echoes the trio's tendency to ironically embrace their position as a racialized, stereotyped representation of “the dark continent.” It posits the continent as a space of continual remapping, as the coups the three friends quiz each other on signify both failed and successful attempts to redraw border lines. The scene also implicates those who know little of African geography and even less of the skirmishes that drive the game. The map epitomizes the irony that permeates the novel's opening scene and is far more layered, meaningful, and complex than it may initially seem.

Running beneath the layers of irony and ignorance swirling around the map is a bittersweet narrative of loss and encounter. The map allows the trio to stage an interaction with home; the reverential way Kenneth runs his finger over its surface suggests a deep sense of connection. Although the game invokes chaos, violence, and dramatic political unrest, the map is a comforting symbol, a two-dimensional image with clear borders and the veneer of stability. Sepha acknowledges its inaccuracies but does not replace it with a new one, preferring the nostalgia of an out-of-date document. This nostalgic map thus serves a narrative function for the three by providing a mediated interaction with their shared histories that allows them to reflect on their own routes.

As they sip their scotches and find their inhibitions loosened, the trio no longer needs the map to mediate this connection. Sepha notes that “[i]nvariably, predictably, our conversations find their way home” (9). As they discuss home, Kenneth objects to Joseph's suggestion that their memories, “like a river cut off from the ocean . . . will slowly die out” (9). Kenneth continues:

‘I can't remember where the scar on my father's face is. Sometimes I think it is here, on the left side of his face, just underneath his eye. But then I say to myself, that's only because you were facing him, and so really, it was on the right side. But then I say no, that can't be. Because when I was a boy I sat on his shoulders and he would let me rub my hand over it. And so I sit on top of a table and place my legs around a chair and lean

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over and I try to find where it would have been. Here. Or there. Here. Or there.’ As he speaks his hand skips from one side of his face to the other. (9–10)

The gesture echoes the earlier moment when Kenneth traces his hand over the map, suggesting that both the map and the scar prompt a desire for connection to a distant place and time. Like the map, Kenneth’s father’s scar is an inscription on space that, due to the passage of time and vagaries of memory, resists being located. Kenneth’s desire to remember and map the scar on his father’s face anticipates Sepha’s desire for a grand narrative thread. Both Kenneth and Sepha are unsettled, dislocated, and searching for something permanent to help orient them. The map and the scar allow for nostalgic reflections on the past and cover up old wounds. In dwelling on these inscriptions, *Beautiful Things* moves away from an understanding of space as two-dimensional and toward an understanding of space as constructed out of experience and through relation.

Another element of Sepha’s story driven by an encounter with a map is his relationship with Naomi. Sepha explains that, during her early visits to the store, their “first few tries at conversation were awkward and painful” (27). On a subsequent visit, however, “she walked straight over to the map of Africa” (27), which led to a conversation about Sepha’s family and his past. Again, the map serves a mediating function that allows stories and histories to emerge. The scenes with Naomi in the store also highlight the temporal frames at work in Sepha’s retrospective narration, compounding a sense of relationality as the shifting tenses and layers of narrative framing alter the meaning of certain moments. For example, Sepha describes the following scene in which Naomi enters his store: “Once inside, she took a swipe at a piece of hair that had fallen in front of her eyes, and as she stood there in light gray slacks and a frilly button-down blue shirt, it was possible to see for a second at least one of the women I imagine she’s going to become” (25). His statement is explicit about how the experience of time is often not absolute and the future can impede on the present. Sepha looks at Naomi and sees a future, or futures, for her; Naomi’s future selves intrude on

Sepha's vision of his current reality. However, the structural frame of the moment is also relational: Sepha narrates it from his position the following May, and thus he is recalling his leap into the future from a nearer future. There is a temporal ambiguity, then, in the phrase "I imagine." Is this Sepha in the store with Naomi imagining her future, or is it the Sepha of several months later, knowing he has lost Naomi and projecting her future lives that do not include him? The reader's inability to answer this question infuses the novel with a deep ambiguity and it becomes increasingly clear that the narrator is unlocatable with relation to the temporal unfolding of the story's events. Many scenes throughout the text play with the dual narrative voices of Sepha in the moment and Sepha the retrospective narrator.

This disjointed temporality occurs in a later passage that is once again centered on the relationship between Sepha and Naomi. The two are reading out loud in the store and Sepha reflects: "I thought about how years from now I would remember this with a crushing, heartbreaking nostalgia, because of course I knew even then that I would eventually find myself standing here alone" (103). The sentence can slip by, but a careful reading reveals its temporal layers. Sepha the retrospective narrator tells the story of a past self who is projecting a future self beyond the awareness of the retrospective narrator. The "eventually" of the statement has already come to pass, yet it is also timeless. Such moments enhance the relationality and entangledness of the story as well as the sense of loss at its center. The novel is thus layered temporally as well as spatially and formally as well as thematically. The layering and retrospective narration also gesture to the dynamic at work in the final set of spaces the novel engages, which both, although they exist on different sides of the globe, are invoked through memory.

The temporal layers that shade certain moments in the Logan Circle portion of the text introduce a sense of distance between the events of the novel and the narration of those events and posit a relationship between memory and space. In the sections of the novel that details Sepha's journey to Silver Spring, the narrative engages memory more explicitly. In this plot thread Sepha relives the events that led up to his flight from Addis Ababa. Silver Spring, where he spent his first few years after ar-

living in the US, is home to a community of diasporic Ethiopians that remind him of those days and of what came before them. These sections of *Beautiful Things* suggest that spaces are constructed out of memories as much as objects and matter.<sup>6</sup> Harvey proposes that a relational understanding of spacetime allows one to assert the significance of phenomena often overlooked by those who emphasize direct measurement; he writes that “[d]reams and memories cannot be dismissed as irrelevant because we cannot quantify and measure their spacetime” (139). The space of diaspora cannot be measured but it can be sketched out through memories and dreams. In the Silver Spring apartment building, which is full of families who have left their homelands in search of a new life, the memories of what Sepha calls “a vanishing culture” exist in tandem with dreams of a better future, resulting in a space that looks both forward and backward (Mengestu 118). This portion of the narrative also contains significant absences and suggests that the lack of memory or the choice not to recall figures and events is another way of manipulating space. This plot is structured as a journey narrated in fragments throughout the novel and generates a curious tension between the stuck Sepha of Logan Circle and the mobile Sepha who moves through the city. As with many other elements in the text, the relationship between the two figures engenders a more comprehensive understanding of Sepha’s state. As the later Sepha journeys outward, reliving his recent and distant memories, the deeper reasons for his immobilization in Logan Circle become clear; the contrast makes vivid his economic constraints as well as the weight of his past and his “intense sense of dislocation” as a “transnational subject . . . who no longer conform[s] to the older pattern of immigration and assimilation” (Varvogli 120, 93).

As with several other key moments in the text, Sepha’s journey to Silver Spring is prompted by a map. A couple enters his store carrying a tourist map of the city. After chatting with Sepha for a few minutes, the couple decides to walk west on P Street, which Sepha notes is his favorite of the streets that intersect with Logan Circle. He reflects on the “sidewalk cafes and restaurants, three used-book stores, wine shops, flower shops, and cheese shops” and then, when the couple leaves, follows them out of the store (Mengestu 73). The sequence of events and

Sepha's almost tender narration of the comfortable dynamic between the couple suggest that their relationship and the cartographical reminder of the space beyond the Circle jolt him out of his stasis and work in concert to lead him outward. As Sepha follows the couple along P Street to Dupont Circle, he describes the city as he both sees it and remembers it and notes that many landmarks "have obediently made way for newer and better things" (75). The evolving cityscape thus opens a path to memory and demonstrates that particular spaces are shadowed and informed by their earlier iterations.

While Sepha sits in Dupont Circle, a motorcade passes, blaring sirens that remind him of Ethiopia and prompt him to pay a visit to his Uncle Berhane. As Sepha makes this trip, he compares Washington, DC to his hometown:

As a capital city, [Washington] doesn't seem like much. Sixty-eight square miles, shaped roughly like a diamond, divided into four quadrants, erected out of what was once mainly swamp-land. Its resemblance to Addis, if not always in substance, then at least in form, has always been striking to me. As a city, Addis wasn't much larger. Ninety square miles, most of which was a vast urban slum built around the fringes of a few important city centers. The two cities share a penchant for circular parks and long diagonal roads that meander and wind up in confusion along the edges. Even the late-afternoon light seems to hit D. C. the same way. (173–74)

The distinction Sepha makes between substance and form indicates his understanding that space is defined and appraised in terms of numerical, experiential, and relational measures. Sepha understands DC on its own terms but also as it relates to Addis; his experiences in both cities are filtered through each other. His journey out of Logan Circle and into the city pushes him toward an encounter with the distant space of his homeland. Sepha's instinctive comparison of DC to Addis, rather than Addis to DC, suggests that Addis is still his point of departure. Although physically distant, Addis is psychologically immediate: another spatial relationship that cannot be explained in absolute terms.



As the metro travels toward Berhane's apartment, Sepha explains that his uncle “came to D. C. two years before me after having disappeared in the middle of the night without telling a single person” (97). Sepha reflects on his uncle's house in Ethiopia, a “sprawling ranch . . . on the edge of a ridge with sweeping views of the valley below” (96). It is a house Sepha can hardly trust himself to recall. He thinks: “It's difficult to remember that places like that ever existed. They seem conjured, the fictitious dream of a hyperactive and lonely imagination” (96). Sepha's disbelief expresses just how hard he has worked to keep this dreamlike memory at bay and how unwilling he has been to let the spaces of his previous life encroach on the new one he has attempted to build in Logan Circle. It also shows that memory is unstable and that he distrusts spaces that are largely constructed around memories. Sepha's tendency to compartmentalize his memories of Ethiopia functions as a defense mechanism that allows him to move on, but as the memories flood in it becomes clear that even at great distances, the spaces intrude on each other and his psyche. Sepha describes Berhane's estate as suffused with quiet splendor, inspired by a Frank Lloyd Wright design and redolent with the kind of peace that exists with a certain level of luxury and wealth. By comparison, Berhane's apartment in Silver Spring is modest, although Sepha believes “he took as much time preparing its rooms as he did studying the design for the house” (117). The effacement of Berhane's house and life in Addis contrasts with the novel's account of the gentrification of Logan Circle; while one space falls into disarray, another is built up on the other side of the world. These juxtaposed narratives depict a world constantly in flux, with places that disappear or change irrevocably but linger in the memories of those who occupied them.

The apartment building that Berhane lives in is brought into being by memory and diaspora. Sepha explains: “There are twenty-eight floors to the building, and of those twenty-eight floors, at least twenty-six are occupied exclusively by other Ethiopians who, like my uncle, moved here sometime after the revolution and found to their surprise that they would never leave” (115). He notes that the building is “an entire world made up of old lives and relationships transported perfectly intact from

Ethiopia” (115–16) and that “[t]he hallways on every floor smell of wat, coffee, and incense. The older women still travel from apartment to apartment dressed in slippers and white blankets that they keep wrapped around their heads, just as if they were still walking through the crowded streets of Addis” (116). The occupants of the building have transformed it into a satellite of Ethiopia; as Varvogli notes, the building represents a “type of dislocation: the Ethiopian community transported almost intact to the American capital” (121). Once inside the building, Sepha enters the elevator, where he overhears “rumors of infidelity, abuse, drugs, unemployment,” as well as a lament that “[w]ith enough time . . . there won’t be any Ethiopians. They’ll all become Americans” (Mengestu 118). Sepha interprets the conversation as “proof of a vanishing culture” (118). Just like Berhane’s house, the decaying portions of Logan Circle, and the DC landmarks that have made way for new development, places vanish but leave traces, lingering behind the veil of memory and accumulating into a different kind of space. Cultures may disappear, but they also resurface in memories, recollections, and dreams.

Only when he is in the apartment complex, a scene that appears more than halfway through the novel, does Sepha remember the details of his flight from Ethiopia. Sitting on the floor in Berhane’s room, surrounded on all sides by fellow members of the Ethiopian diaspora, he finally acknowledges the memories he has tried to ignore for the past twenty years. The story is grim: in the days following the Ethiopian Revolution, soldiers entered the Stephanos house and found pamphlets from a group called Students for Democracy. Although a then-sixteen-year-old Sepha had brought the pamphlets into the house, his father claimed they were his and was beaten and taken away. He never returned. Sepha concludes: “The next day, at my mother’s insistence, I left home. I took nothing with me but a small red cloth sack stuffed with all of the gold and jewelry my parents owned. I pawned and traded each item in order to make my way south to Kenya. By the time I crossed the border, the only items I had left were my father’s cuff links” (130). The cufflinks are Sepha’s sole physical link to his father, but he is able to reestablish an emotional connection as he sits in the apartment and allows his memories to wash over him.

The novel never elaborates on Sepha’s journey from Addis to DC. Yet his trip from Logan Circle to Silver Spring is related in concrete geographical detail, including the exact streets and subway lines he travels. At the same time, as he gets closer to Berhane’s apartment he undergoes a mental journey back to the moment of departure, moving through his memories by noting the similarities between DC and Addis, recalling his uncle’s journey, and finally reliving the terror of his father’s capture. However, there is no explicit retelling of his voyage from Ethiopia to Kenya and then to Washington, DC, a strange absence that punctures the text. The geographical realism that asserts an intimacy with Washington, DC and appears in his comparison of DC and Addis is abandoned when it comes to discussing the distance between these two cities. Sepha’s refusal to describe this period in his spatial narrative creates an abyss between the two places in which he has spent his life. His refusal to narrate that story means that he cannot trace his trajectory across the world, a factor that contributes to his sense of dislocation.

The Silver Spring apartment building is also constructed around absences—the relations who were not able to make the trip, and those who, like Sepha, have moved out and “become American” (118). Berhane’s absence echoes the more disturbing absence of Sepha’s father and raises the question of genealogy, itself a form of mapping. Sepha’s inability to trace the narrative that led him to Silver Spring is compounded by the missing figures in his familial map. Sepha recalls how, in his early years in the city, he would carry on conversations with the memory of his father: “I walked home with my father across the spare, treeless campus of my northern Virginia community college. We talked for hours. . . . I couldn’t have asked for a better listener than my father. We talked and saw more of each other during my first two years here than in all of the years we spent living under the same roof” (176). Distance, absence, and death conspire to create an intimacy that never existed in life or the shared space of their home. As Sepha recalls those early days, he realizes that he “left home for good” when these conversations with his father ceased (177); for him, home is not a location but a relationship. Considering the difficulty Sepha has maintaining relationships, it

is unsurprising that he has been unable to successfully create a home for himself in Logan Circle.

The novel's dynamic cartography is evident in the apartment building, where distant spaces and times of the past infiltrate the present. Sitting in the apartment, Sepha explains: "I could never find the guiding principle that relegated the past to its proper place. I can step in at any moment and see the house exactly as it looked that day, with the midafternoon sun spilling in through the front windows" (127). In a Maryland suburb, a world away from the streets of Addis, Sepha finds himself in his childhood home. Memory can transport particular spaces across distance and time. This portability allows individuals such as the building's residents to create a home space wherever they go but it also threatens to trap them in their memories. Sepha's choice to leave Silver Spring and move to Logan Circle is thus a kind of escape, but the power his past holds over him is evident when he returns. In this scene, the pattern of fragmentation and relation that suffuses the novel reveals the complexity of Sepha's stasis. His visits to Silver Spring and (via memory) to Addis show that he is not just stuck vertically, unable to ascend the socio-economic ladder, but also horizontally. As he notes in the novel's final moments, he is "stuck between two worlds" (228). Reliving his memories brings those two worlds together and moves him out of his static position and toward the inquiry that drives the narrative. However, Sepha's movement is complicated by his unwillingness to explore certain paths and a tentative attitude that ultimately leaves him where he was at the beginning of the text.

At the end of the novel, Sepha returns to Logan Circle. As he makes his way, he says, "I can't help but think of what I'm doing as going home. 'I'm going back home.' I say the words out loud as I turn left on Massachusetts Avenue" (174). He begins to speak to his father again, explaining that he has "dangled and been suspended long enough" (228). That the journey has led Sepha to consider Logan Circle home is encouraging and suggests that his confrontation with his past has begun to heal the rupture caused by his earlier trauma. However, the final passage, in which the distinct temporal and narrative threads converge, sounds a note of uncertainty. Sepha is no longer narrating the story from a future

position, but relating it in the moment. As he approaches the Circle, he remarks: “Right now, I’m convinced that my store looks more perfect than ever before. I can see it exactly as I have always wanted to see it. Through the canopy of trees that line the walkway cutting through the middle of the circle is a store, one that is neither broken nor perfect, one that, regardless of everything, I’m happy to claim as entirely my own” (228). The irony woven through the various narratives threads emerges once again as Sepha’s words are undercut by his and the readers’ knowledge that the store no longer belongs to him. The novel ends with Sepha imagining his perfect store from a distance. It is only through his loss of Judith, Naomi, and perhaps even the store itself that he can access this sense of relationship to it.

The ambiguity of the ending places the reader in the position of either filling in the narrative and constructing an alternate conclusion to Sepha’s story or accepting the uncertainty of his final position. It is possible to envision Sepha borrowing enough money from his uncle and friends to pay his overdue rent and convince his landlord to overturn the eviction, allowing him to continue working toward that grand American Dream. However, it is also possible to read Sepha’s final comments about his store as a break with reality. An earlier scene revealed that the store had likely been looted in his absence, and thus in addition to being under an eviction notice, Sepha’s store is far from perfect or unbroken. Sepha’s deliberate refusal to engage this possibility has a desperate note that can lead the reader to conclude that Sepha will act on suicidal tendencies he previously confessed to feeling (142). Both options are logical responses to the text.

However, it is possible to treat the novel as something other than a puzzle to be put together or a hidden message to be deciphered. If one reads the final passage exactly as it is presented, without attempting to push the narrative further than it is willing to go, the conclusion makes clear that in those final words, Sepha creates a fictional space for himself, telling himself a story in which the store looks like it does in his dreams. Rather than any triumph or tragedy, the novel suggests that Sepha is still distanced and dislocated and that his tendency to escape into fiction now operates not just by reading books in the store but in his practice

of everyday life. This ambivalent ending demonstrates how the contemporary experience of space, fluid but also full of unsettling disjunctions and dislocations, can engender stasis as well as mobility. Sepha remains suspended in his own geography of relation, telling a spatial story that ultimately encircles him.

In embodying the relationship between story and space, *Beautiful Things* shows how space is constructed from the experiences, memories, and relationships of those who move through it. The novel juxtaposes the nostalgic map of Africa and the tourist map of Washington, DC with the maps in Sepha's head to work against linear depictions of space that expect it to conform to two- or three-dimensional artifacts. Instead of linearity, the novel embraces inquiry and relation and demonstrates that narrative and cartography operate similarly. This is a story of spaces changed through processes such as diaspora and gentrification, and the unsettled aspects of those processes are embodied in the text's shifting and fragmented plots and timelines. *Beautiful Things* reveals the inherent dynamism and disjunction of contemporary spaces and in so doing demonstrates how the form of the novel itself becomes dynamic as it represents such spaces.

## Notes

- 1 Soja, Massey, and Harley are key figures in these respective areas, and their work, along with that of others, has been useful in developing spatially oriented literary criticism. See Soja's *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*, Massey's *Space, Place, and Gender*, and Harley's *The New Nature of Maps* for representative samples.
- 2 For a discussion of the evolution of Glissant's thinking on relation, see Britton.
- 3 Harvey distinguishes three forms of space in relation to time: absolute space and absolute time, relative space-time, and relational spacetime. He writes: "Absolute space is fixed and immovable. This is the space of Newton and Descartes. Space is understood as a preexisting, immovable, continuous and unchanging framework (most easily visualized as a grid) within which distinctive objects can be clearly identified, and events and processes accurately described" (134). Absolute space is the realm of quantifiable distances and measurements. Relative space-time, "mainly associated with the name of Albert Einstein . . . is preeminently the space of *processes and motion*. Space cannot here be understood separately from time. History and geography cannot be separated" (135; emphasis in origi-

- nal). Relative space-time engages multiplicity, circulation, and perspective (135). One implication of this shift from absolute to relative is that “[m]easurability and calculability become more complicated” because “[t]here are multiple geometries from which to choose” (135).
- 4 I arrived at this reading of relation via Velázquez’s articulation of the “*contelation*,” which she defines as a “theory of storytelling” that “challenges the totalizing and totalitarian regime of History and assigns to the *contour* the task of creating a legitimating space for underlying histories to emerge” (184; emphasis in original).
  - 5 These acronyms stand for, respectively, the Sudan People’s Liberation Army, the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front, the Lord’s Resistance Army, and the União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola, or National Union for the Total Independence of Angola.
  - 6 Olopade’s “Go West, Young Men” offers a materialist reading of *Beautiful Things* and draws out connections between the novel and Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* to argue that both are “treatise[s] on the ways in which space, money, and time intersect as multiply generated geography to speed or stop the inevitable project of self-imagining” (134).

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