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Abdulrazak Gurnah's fictions of the Swahili coast: Littoral locations and amphibian aesthetics[1]

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Michael Pearson has remarked that a 'history of the ocean needs to be amphibious, moving easily between land and sea'. This article takes up his challenge within the field of literary studies, while drawing also on his notion of 'littoral society', as it engages what it describes as an amphibian aesthetic in the oeuvre of the Zanzibari–British novelist Abdulrazak Gurnah. It argues that the oeuvre inscribes the layered and ambivalent histories of the Swahili coast – the entanglements produced by the monsoon regime; the slave trade; Portuguese, Omani, German and British imperial designs; independence and the Zanzibar revolution – through a dual orientation fostered by the littoral. From the vantage point of the beach it presents nuanced reflections on the act of telling stories about Indian Ocean Africa that emphasise implication rather than transcendence and which are articulated through perspectival shifts and novelistic dialogism.

Keywords: Abdulrazak Gurnah; Indian Ocean; Zanzibar; slave trade; beach; ambivalence

Michael Pearson has remarked that a 'history of the ocean needs to be amphibious, moving easily between land and sea' (2003, 5). This article takes up his challenge within the field of literary studies, while drawing also on his notion of 'littoral society' (2006), as it engages what it describes as an *amphibian aesthetic* in the oeuvre of the Zanzibari–British novelist Abdulrazak Gurnah. In the process, it aims to contribute towards the critical elaboration of 'an Indian Ocean poetics' (Moorthy and Jamal 2010, 3).

Much of Gurnah's oeuvre is set in various specified or unspecified towns along the East African coast.[2] Many of the novels enact a 'memory of departure' (Gurnah 1987) from Stone Town – the town in which Gurnah was born and raised – or shuttle between it or other coastal towns and the north Atlantic island where he has resided since his departure from Zanzibar in 1968. *Paradise*, his fourth novel, establishes an alternative counterpoint, mapping instead the caravan trade route between the Swahili coast and its hinterland. Littoral locations are throughout focal, not simply as the 'patch of ground on which [writers] do their work' (Gurnah 2004, 354), but in the particular ethical and aesthetic challenges they surface.

Historians Greg Dening and Pearson have begun to forge a resonant vocabulary towards critically conceptualising the littoral and the beach. For Pearson (2006, 356), the littoral is a transitive, threshold site characterised by 'permeability' and coastal commonality. Dening (1980, 149, 158) emphasises the 'endless ambiguity' and 'ambivalence' attending the idea of the beach. Convening encounter, these mutable strips between land and sea are suggestive of 'another side to the story' (Dening 1998,

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126). As novelist, Gurnah corresponds with and enriches this body of work through a fictional idiom that is distinctly amphibious in orientation.

Tracing the decline of the coast, and particularly Zanzibar, from cosmopolitan entrepôt to its postcolonial condition as 'a tumble-down raft floating on the edges of the Indian Ocean' (Gurnah 1996, 151), Gurnah issues a Janus-faced critique of imperial rule – whether external or endemic to the Indian Ocean – and, simultaneously, of the postcolony. Suggesting the limits of postcolonial theory and its regimes of recognition in approaching these littoral states with their entangled relations and layered histories,[3] the amphibian aesthetic his oeuvre advances is more appropriately calibrated to the Indian Ocean 'interregional arena' (Bose 2006, 3). Reeling from the violence unleashed by the bounded identities produced or lent substance by European imperialism and the foreclosure of this 'world of lost possibilities' (Callahan 2000, 56) by the independent nation-state, the fiction is resolutely anti-nostalgic; the mood infusing it being instead the melancholia that attends ambivalent loss.

Writing on the coast…

Composed of city-states 'threaded together […] like the beads of a rosary', the East African coast was elaborated over a millennium or more as 'a zone of interaction between two cultural streams, one coming from the African interior and one from across the Indian Ocean, from which emerged a synthesis, the Swahili civilisation, that at every step betrays its dual parentage' (Sheriff 1987, 8). In *By the Sea*, Gurnah presents a précis of its history, telling of the 'thousands of […] traders from Arabia, the Gulf, India and Sind, and the Horn of Africa' who 'had come to our part of the world with the musim, the winds of the monsoons':

> They had been doing this every year for at least a thousand years. In the last months of the year, the winds blow steadily across the Indian Ocean towards the coast of Africa, where the currents obligingly provide a channel to harbour. Then in the early months of the new year, the winds turn around and blow in the opposite direction, ready to speed the traders home. It was all as if intended to be exactly thus […]. For centuries, intrepid traders and sailors […] made the annual journey to that stretch of coast on the eastern side of the continent, which had cusped so long ago to receive the musim winds. (Gurnah 2001, 14–15)

The Swahili coast, as this quote emphasises, is stitched into the Indian Ocean world by the 'monsoon regime', the 'deep structure' that governs sail-travel across it (Pearson 2003, 47, 13). 'Monsoon winds', notes Pearson (1998, 51), are 'a unifying source around this ocean. All sailing ships must dance to the same tune, their voyages dictated by the prevailing, invariable, winds'. The enforced annual layovers when the ocean is 'closed', to quote the eminent sixteenth century Arab navigator Ibn Majid (1971), foster an 'inter-regional intercourse' (Sheriff 2001, 3) of deep and sticky relations out of which emerges the Swahili culture.

The traders and sailors who beached on that coast, continues Gurnah's *By the Sea*,

> brought with them their goods and their God and their way of looking at the world, their stories and their songs and prayers, and just a glimpse of the learning which was the jewel of their endeavours. And they brought their hungers and greeds, their fantasies and lies and hatreds, leaving some among their numbers

> behind for whole life-times and taking what they could buy, trade or snatch away with them, including people they bought or kidnapped and sold into labour and degradation in their own lands. After all that time, the people who lived on that coast hardly knew who they were, but knew enough to cling to what made them different from those they despised, among themselves as well as among the outlying progeny of the human race in the interior of the continent. (Gurnah 2001, 15)

The layered and entangled societies that ensue on the littoral are thus presented as forged out of often-violent exchange, and establishing themselves and their place in the world by setting themselves in relief against those of the interior.

The precarious position struck between continental hinterland and maritime foreland is thrown off kilter by successive waves of imperial intrusions that the novel presents in shorthand:

> Then the Portuguese, rounding the continent, burst so unexpectedly and so disastrously from that unknown and impenetrable sea […]. They wreaked their religion-crazed havoc on islands, harbours and cities, exulting over their cruelty to the inhabitants they plundered. Then the Omanis came to remove them and take charge in the name of the true God, and brought with them Indian money, with the British close behind, and close behind them the Germans and the French and whoever else had the wherewithal. (15)

Ousting the Portuguese to claim sovereignty over the coast, the Omani Sultanate eventually relocated its centre of rule from Muscat to Zanzibar Stone Town in 1832, where it remained until independence in 1963, although increasingly as a puppet-regime following the scramble for Africa that drew it under British 'protection' from 1890. While at odds over the slave trade, the two powers conspired in amplifying and concretising a discourse that pitted a 'civilised' coast with 'foreign' infusions and orientations against a 'barbarian' or 'savage' hinterland.

Adopting the 'new maps' that carved the continent up between European powers ('every inch was accounted for, and everyone now knew who they were, or at least who they belonged to'), the postcolony completes the unfinished work of empire while inverting the binary of coast versus interior. 'Those maps', Gurnah's character bemoans, 'how they transformed everything', turning 'geography' into 'biology' (15). Colonial cartography and the census join hands, producing discrete groups and constructing hierarchies of rule that solidify identity and stop up permeable categories.[4] The 'new maps' also divide the Swahili coast into discrete states extending into the interior, shattering the coastal continuum and yoking together groups that had maintained distinct orientations:

> those scattered little towns by the sea along the African coast found themselves part of huge territories stretching for hundreds of miles into the interior, teeming with people they had thought beneath them, and who when the time came promptly returned the favour. (15–16)

Here Gurnah presents an aetiology for the violence of the Zanzibar Revolution that follows hot on the heels of independence and culminates in the formation of the United Republic of Tanzania in 1964.

In the nation-building era, '[t]he coast, with its history of regionalism and cosmopolitanism, was either ignored or treated as a threat to the "African" identity of

the new states' (Gilbert 2002, 21). As Engseng Ho (2006, 305), writing of another Indian Ocean littoral, puts it:

> In the aftermath of decolonization, the identification of the new states with single nations made the creole, transnational commitments of diasporic communities untenable. The new, independent nation-states broke the diasporas straddling them into two: citizens and aliens.

Reflecting on how, following the massacre of Arabs and Indians during the Revolution, 'whole families of people of Omani descent' were 'rounded up' and incarcerated until they could be transported 'home' (Gurnah 2001, 221), the narrator Saleh Omar admits:

> In truth, they were no more Omani than I was, except that they had an ancestor who was born there. They did not even look any different from the rest of us, perhaps slightly paler or slightly darker, perhaps their hair was slightly straighter or slightly curlier. Their crime was the ignoble history of Oman in these parts, and that was a not a connection they were allowed to give up. In other respects they were indigenes, citizens, raiiya, and they were sons of indigenes. (225)

Thus does independence and its bloody aftermath surface the tensions festering within an ostensibly cosmopolitan society:

> We liked to think of ourselves as a moderate and mild people. Arab African Indian Comorian: we lived alongside each other, quarreled and sometimes intermarried. Civilized, that's what we were. In reality, we were nowhere near *we*, but in our separate yards, locked in our historical ghettoes, self-forgiving and seething with intolerances, with racisms, and with resentments. And politics brought all that into the open. (Gurnah 1996, 66–67)

Challenging the picture of inter-ethnic harmony that has attached itself to the coast, Gurnah inscribes what he elsewhere (2004, 361) describes as a 'fragmented' society already at 'full stretch' and engaged in a 'complicated balancing act' that renders it 'vulnerable' to colonial incursion. His oeuvre is attuned to the predation on young men in port cities, of women's lot in an exchange economy that transacts them to extend trade networks, of those brought from the interior as slaves, and of the foundational binary of 'savage' versus 'civilised' that shapes the coastal–interior relationship. At the same time, it is drawn to the variegated social world of the Swahili coast, recording a way of life that often seems more generous than that which followed, and celebrating a cultural porosity that stands in contrast to the bordered worlds established and maintained by colonial- and nation-states. As such, it registers the passing of a convivial coastal culture with an undeniable yet ambivalent sense of loss, recognising always the other side of each story.

The most consistent structure of feeling that the coast elicits in Gurnah's fiction is thus melancholic. Writing on the coast, he suggests ways of engaging melancholia beyond the Freudian binary that would cast it – against the healthy and productive response of mourning – as 'pathologically bereft and politically reactive' (Eng and Kazanjian 2003, 5). Seeking alternative ways of constituting melancholia, David Eng and David Kazanjian (4) propose that '[w]hile mourning abandons lost objects by laying their histories to rest, melancholia's continued and open relation to the past finally allows us to gain new perspectives on and new understandings of lost objects'.

'Avowals of and attachments to loss', they suggest moreover, 'can produce a world of remains as a world of new representations and alternative meanings' (5). It is, I suggest, such a transfiguring representational world that Gurnah begins to surface through his amphibian aesthetic.

Particularly melancholic is his observance of the end of the musim trade, terminated by decree under the new post-revolutionary government that saw Zanzibar cede its position as dhow terminus to attach itself instead to the mainland. 'Among the many deprivations inflicted on those towns by the sea', reflects a narrator in *By the Sea*, 'was the prohibition of the musim trade' (Gurnah 2001, 16).[5] In his fiction, musims are boisterous periods in which 'crowds of sailors and traders thronged the streets' (Gurnah 2005, 176), enlivening sleepy seaside towns. Yet, even so, he notes that the entanglements and transfusions occurring along the coast are as much a sign of betrayal and abandonment as of conviviality.

For instance, the character Hussein in *By the Sea*, who introduces a note of 'polyglot good humour' (Gurnah 2001, 87) into a Zanzibar household during his sojourn between the incoming and outgoing monsoons, ultimately debauches the son of his host and steals his home. Similarly, the sailor-trader Azad in *Desertion* remains on the Swahili Coast for a season while his captain returns to India to gather their next consignment of goods; purportedly electing to settle, he marries a local woman, Rehana, only to abscond on the next monsoon, abandoning her into a state of loss without closure. On the other hand, we encounter figures like Rehana's father, Zakariya, who arrives from India as a seasonal trader but decides to live out his days in Malindi, rejoicing in the family he establishes with a Swahili woman and proclaiming his sense of at-home-ness on this coast where he lives 'in the house of God, dar-al-Islam' (Gurnah 2005, 62).

By the Sea, as signalled in its title, advances this notion of Indian Ocean littoral societies participating in 'an overarching unity' (Pearson 1998, 69), inscribing this commonality of culture along a coastal strip now cut across by the borders of five countries. Showing up the artificiality of the borders drawn by European powers and adopted by the nation-state, Gurnah presents a continuum of culture and traces an arc hospitality in the coastal journey undertaken by Saleh Omar from Stone Town and his friend Sefi Ali from Malindi after they complete their studies in Makerere:

> Being back on the coast was like being at home, or more than that, like recognizing that here I had a place in the scheme of things. […] Back on the coast, I felt part of something generous and noble after all […]. Everywhere we went we were treated like sons of the family, and shared whatever hospitality was available. (Gurnah 2001, 175-176)

This 'overarching unity' extends beyond the Swahili coast to that of the wider Indian Ocean Rim. In *The Last Gift*, the sailor Abbas recalls how, in 'different places in the world, except England, I kept meeting people who thought they knew me' (Gurnah 2011, 254). Stepping ashore in Durban, he finds his way to 'the Indian part of the city and immediately felt comfortable there. The cafés and the food were familiar. The buildings reminded me of my home, as had buildings in Bombay and Madras and even Colombo' (254). Similarly, in Port Louis, where the sights remind him of 'home […] the look of the houses, the fruit in the market, a crowd outside a mosque. I could not stop seeing the similarities' (259).

However, as Pearson (1998, 8) points out, the 'claim that littoral people have some commonality of life and society' potentially 'set[s] them off from their own landed interiors', and has informed the vexed historiography on the Swahili coast, and

its relation to its hinterland. In his own readings of this coast, Pearson contests the position that perceives it as 'cut off from the interior', finding instead that 'there were intricate connections between coast and interior'. Rather than aligned with either its maritime forelands or its continental hinterland, the coast, he suggests, is best imagined as a hinge linking and mediating relations between the two (14, 105). Gurnah's amphibian aesthetic with its bifocal lenses elicits a similar conception of the coast as neither 'foreign' nor 'native', but rather as troubling these very categories (cf. Pearson 1998, 42).

In *Port Cities and Intruders*, Pearson reveals the political damage wrought by histories of this coast that stress its difference and separation from the interior and emphasise its foreignness. Under new nationalist governments, the Swahili were consequently 'seen as essentially foreign, Arab descendants of slave traders and collaborators with colonial powers, whether these were Omani or European' (Pearson 1998, 17), and treated accordingly. Gurnah certainly often presents the coast as a comprador space, but at the same time refuses to disentangle it from the hinterland even as members of the coastal society manufacture their difference from the interior under the ideological sway of the Omani sultanate. In its presentation of the trading towns through which Aziz's caravan passes on its journey into what is today the Democratic Republic of Congo, *Paradise* also makes the point articulated elsewhere by Pearson (1998, 20) that 'the Swahili are in no way unique either in an African or a world context. The self-contained, isolated village, much beloved of past anthropologists, is either a myth or at least very unusual', even as coastal port cities display a more self-conscious cosmopolitanism.

Yet, from the outset, Gurnah's oeuvre establishes a unique and particular coastal sensorium – one that is again deeply ambivalent as it comes to suggest, simultaneously, cosmopolitanism and commodification. He writes of towns by the sea in which the 'taste [of salt] was always in the air', 'lin[ing] the nostrils and the ears' as 'wind from the sea washed over' its inhabitants (Gurnah 1987, 6, 8). 'The smell of the sea and the harbour', notes a source cited by Pearson (Murphey quoted in Pearson 2003, 32), 'is a symbol of [port cities'] multiple links with a wider world'.

The vector of the connections between foreland and hinterland forged in the coastal emporium is symbolically presented in the coin that appears in the opening scene of Gurnah's first novel, *Memory of Departure*. Hassan, the child-protagonist, asks his mother for 'bread money', which she extracts from a knotted handkerchief in her bodice: 'The coins she put in my hand were warm from her body, and felt soft and round without edges' (Gurnah 1987, 5). That this coin warmed by the body of the mother is meant to suggest the commodified relations elaborating the coast and mediating its contact with the interior becomes evident as the protagonist, still carrying his shillings to the Yemeni shopkeeper, reflects that '[i]n years gone by, the slavers had walked these streets. Their toes chilled by the dew, their hearts darkened with malice, they came with columns of prime flesh, herding their prize to the sea' (6).

Paradise offers the most extended reflection on the commodified relations that shape the Swahili coast and structure contact with its hinterlands and forelands. Again early in the narrative, we witness a coin slipped into a young boy's hand. This time, the coin is given to the boy Yusuf by the merchant Aziz when he visits their home, located at an intermediary stop on the new railway route between coast and interior. Early, too, comes the information that Yusuf's mother, 'the daughter of a tribesman', was 'exchanged for five goats and two sacks of beans' (Gurnah 1994, 13) and thus entered into wedlock with his father. Later Yusuf learns that the man he has come to

address in familial terms 'ain't [his] uncle'; that when he is taken from his home it is not as cherished relative but rather as a 'rehani, pawned to Uncle Aziz to secure his father's debts to the merchant' (25, 47). Toward the end of his narrative, and the unfolding of self-knowledge it represents, he reflects on how '[t]heir intrigues and hatreds and vengeful acquisitiveness had forced even simple virtues into tokens of exchange and barter' (236). As David Callahan (2000, 66) observes, everything and everyone in the novel are turned 'into potential objects in an exchange economy'.

Although abolished by the time in which *Paradise* is set, the slave trade haunts the edges of this and other narratives in Gurnah's oeuvre. His first novel, as we have seen, remarks in its opening pages on the route taken by slavers 'herding their prize to the sea'; soon after, the narrator makes reference to '[m]y poor fathers and grandfathers, my poor mothers and grandmothers, chained to rings in a stone wall' (Gurnah 1987, 19). Yet readers have already been alerted to the contorted complicities that belie any simply identification with one side or another in the stories that circulate through the town as well as through Hassan's story – stories that claim his own father 'used to kidnap little black children and sell them to the Arabs of Sur' (16). As he acknowledges in a statement that encompasses perpetrators, victims and beneficiaries of the trade, slavery is 'the history that we had been part of' (42).

Gurnah is of course unambiguously critical of this trade in 'people […] bought or kidnapped and sold into labour and degradation' (Gurnah 2001, 15), and keenly aware of the challenges it poses to attempts to recuperate the Swahili coast as cosmopolitan alternative to the divisive colonial and nationalist regimes that would descend upon it. However, he is equally critical of the European fixation on slavery, his oeuvre suggestive of how the abolitionist project culminates in their colonial lordship over the region. At the same time, he registers the ways in which the bitter memory of slavery coalesces into the anti-Arab pogroms of the Zanzibar revolution (that in turn fuels post-imperial nostalgia and furthers Western self-making) while, in the postcolony, the 'past Swahili role in the slave trade is stressed' in order to effect their political marginalisation (Pearson 1998, 27).

As the unnamed narrator of *Admiring Silence* reflects:

> It was not that we did not know these things about ourselves, about slavery, about inequalities, about the contempt with which everyone spoke about the barbarity of the savage in the interior who had been captured and brought to work on our island. We read about these things in our colonized history books, but there these events seem lurid and far away from the way we lived, and sometimes they seemed like self-magnifying lies. (Gurnah 1996, 66–67)

Through such asides does Gurnah summon the spectre of slavery into his oeuvre without contributing to the 'self-magnifying lies' of the colonising culture. The latter's moral crusade, as the novels prompt readers to note, denied the extent to which slaving both changed shape – into more impersonal and brutal forms – and increased in volume as European hegemony extended over the Indian Ocean. Writing on the coast, Gurnah points to the European implication in the trade without in turn using it as an ideological foothold from which to embark on a politics of blame and self-exoneration.[6]

Negotiating rather than seeking to stabilise the muddy ideological field that provides the ground of his fiction, he suggests the extent to which all are besmirched by the trade in human beings. As Hussein – a Zanzibari merchant who has set up shop in Kilimanjaro – points out in *Paradise*: 'the markets were open everywhere, down in the south and on the ocean islands where the Europeans were farming for sugar, in

Arabia and Persia, and on the sultan's new clove plantations in Zanzibar'; all are implicated, including the 'Indian merchants [who] gave credit to these Arabs to trade in ivory and slaves', and the people of the interior, 'eager to sell their cousins and neighbours for trinkets' (Gurnah 1994, 131–132). Even the enslaved themselves are rendered complicit with their condition in that it inhibits their capacity for freedom, suggests *Paradise* (cf. Nasta 2005, 325).

The anti-slavery crusade is in turn presented as the height of colonial hypocrisy. At the dawn of the twentieth century, coastal traders passing through Kilimanjaro report in *Paradise* that '[e]verywhere they went they found the Europeans had got there before them, and had installed soldiers and officials telling the people that they had come to save them from their enemies who sought to make slaves of them' (Gurnah 1994, 72). Yet these self-proclaimed saviours are described as descending on East Africa 'like a plague of locusts', their appetite lacking 'limit or decency' (72) as they impose taxes over and claim possession of everything in their purview. Concludes Hussein: 'They want the whole world' (87). Moreover, while the recently installed German colonial government insists that it 'does not deal in slaves', it is shown enchaining convicts and, after the outbreak of World War I, 'kidnapping people to make them porters for their army' (171, 242). If Yusuf's final act of fleeing the exploitation and injustice perpetrated by the merchant Aziz by joining the German column comprised of askaris and African 'captives' offers a sharp corrective to romanticised portraits of pre-colonial coastal society, his 'smarting eyes' and self-recognition as a 'shit-eater' contextualises and complicates this act (246, 247). What is rendered in the closing sequence of the novel is no more than his exchange of one overlord for another.

Reflections from the beach…

Poised between land and sea, ambivalently constituted and abjected by colonial and nationalist orders, the beach offers a complex vantage point in this fiction. From the beach, both the ocean and the interior seem hostile in their enormity. In *Paradise*, for instance, while the caravan trade establishes well-worn circuits of exchange, the hinterland maintains its mystery. As coastal subjects transplanted to the slopes of Kilimanjaro gaze deeper inland towards the great lake, they mentally map the world known to them: 'The east and the north are known to us, as far as the land of China in the farthest east and to the ramparts of Gog and Magog in the north. But the west is the land of darkness, the land of jinns and monsters' (83). And, as we have seen, it is encoded as 'savage' while its inhabitants suffer the depredations of slavery.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the littoral, the sea is equally forbidding, and as often invested with jinns and monsters. While Hassan hears in the ocean crossing that comprises his 'departure' from Zanzibar 'echoes of the groans of the Middle Passage' (Gurnah 1987, 157), those who emerge from the ocean are in the towns by the sea subject to 'terrible suspicions':

> Men who worked at sea spent so long away from decent scrutiny that there was no knowing what perversities they indulged in. And then the sea and all its unruly emptiness had a way of turning minds, making people intense and eccentric, or even strangely violent. (Gurnah 2001, 182)

As Philip Steinberg (2001, 45) notes, the sea in Indian Ocean societies was constructed as a space of trade 'external to society and social processes'; while appreciated 'as a source of imported goods, […] the sea itself was perceived as a

space apart from society, an untameable mystery'. Consistent across Gurnah's oeuvre is the presentation of the ocean as 'indescribably desolate and hostile' while at other times 'so calm, so beautifully bright and glistening, so solid-seeming, and treacherous' (Gurnah 1987, 159); as 'terrifying' in both its beauty and its rage (Gurnah 2011, 251).

Significantly, Gurnah does not only render the maritime perspectives of those involved in the musim trade but also that of the humble fisherfolk who engage this perilous zone in a more quotidian manner. Thus does he destabilise the dichotomy that would associate 'sea' with 'Arab' or 'foreign' and 'land' with 'African' or 'authentic'. For fishermen, as much as for slaves, the ocean is experienced as a '*death pit*' (Gurnah 1987, 9). In the face of its deadly aspect, they summon bravado on shore, 'banter[ing] with merciless ferocity all day long' before they again 'put off to sea in their tiny boats as the sun began to soften' (Gurnah 2005, 180). Certainly, there is no sentimental approach to the sea in the coastal sensibility; wealthy merchants, truant schoolboys, poor fishermen – all are equally subject to its whimsy and ferocity, and enchanted by its treacherous beauty. Zakariya's father in *Desertion* 'drowned on a return musim trip when his ship perished in a storm in the Arabian Sea' (Gurnah 2005, 78); Bossy falls prey to the sea's unpredictable moods while sporting with it in *Pilgrims Way* (1988).

The latter sequence is perhaps the most poignant and symbolically rich one on the sea in Gurnah's oeuvre. Daud, from his English exile, remembers sitting on the pier in Stone Town with his friend Bossy, '*watching the sea beneath us frothing with arms and legs and flashing teeth*' (Gurnah 1988, 131). Here the ocean is malevolent, and thick with the writhing histories of the slave trade. From this memory, Daud approaches another, the traumatic core of which determines his own 'pilgrimage', as he recalls the day he and Bossy took a boat out to sea, relishing the feeling of '*running free in an open field*', from which perspective the town behind them '*seemed the luscious heart of paradise*' (154–155). They dream about fleeing its narrow, contorted streets in search of the opportunities it denies them, but Bossy is held fast by his commitment to his mother and sister. Suddenly, the sail snaps in the breeze, making the boat 'stagger'. Daud is alarmed, but Bossy smiles, telling him it is only the onset of 'Kaskazi', the 'musim' – the northeasterly monsoon, or the season for sailing from India and the Arabian coast to East Africa. As he brings the boat back under control, Bossy explains why he cannot leave his mother and daughter behind and return later to care for them:

> *One of these days, these people that we've been making slaves of for centuries will rise up and cut the throats of their oppressors. Then the Indians will go back to India and the Arabs will go back to Arabia, and what will you and I do? [...] We'll get slaughtered. [...] Who'll care that we belong here more than they do? They will tell us that this is Africa, and it belongs to them, however much longer we've been here than them. There are people still alive who were born into slavery, whose parents were torn away from their land and brought here in chains. What will we do? We'll get slaughtered.* (167)

He then challenges Daud to sail the boat to shore while he swims back. But the capricious sea intervenes, wrecking havoc on their playful plans with its sombre histories. '*Suddenly a fierce squall filled out the sail and I struggled for the tiller. The fierceness of the storm was unexpected',* Daud relates, remembering how he struggled to control the boat. By the time the wind dies, Bossy has disappeared:

> *I could not find him.* [...] *I think of you even now and I still cry for you. I think of you in times of need and I still cry for you. What else is there to say? I managed to reach the land. I don't know how. The wind and the tide took me round the northern headland and dragged me on to land.*
> *You missed the worst, Bossy.* […] *I was beaten by men with sticks and stones. They told me the day had come. They told me this was the day when all Arabs would get theirs.* (175–176)

While expressing the unquenchable, inconsolable grief of the melancholic, Gurnah has here altered the historical timeline, shifting the Revolution of 12 January 1964 to the November onset of the north-easterly monsoon. In the process, he establishes an intimate symbolic connection between the musim trade and the revolutionary repudiation of the entangled histories emergent from the 'interregional intercourse' it had fostered over centuries.

The beach – the ultimate limen between land and sea – where Daud searches hopelessly for Bossy to wash up, and where he himself collapses after being beaten by the men with sticks and stones, is rendered as the site where repressed pasts return. When the tide draws out in *Memory of Departure*, the 'sun beat[s] on the green and slimy beach, raising a stench' (Gurnah 1987, 9). This 'stench of ages' is historical rather than ecological:

> In the old days, slaves who had refused conversion had gone to that beach to die. They had floated with the flotsam and dead leaves, weary of the fight, their black skins wrinkled with age, their hearts broken. (16)

An imagery of dismemberment and decay attends the beach, on which weeds wash up 'like sunburnt dreams' and where familiar things return estranged, taking frightening forms: '[a] log of sea-salted wood lies rotting, disembowelled, on the beach, laid open like the belly of a dolphin' (113).

Forging an antithetical aesthetic to that of tourist brochures peddling in images of 'warm golden beaches' (Gurnah 1988, 10) – beaches that are interchangeable in their lack of historicity – Gurnah surfaces on the beach uncanny pasts that continue to haunt the present and reveals the social history of violence and deprivation that seeks to erase such traces. The narrator of *Admiring Silence*, returning from England to visit his family following a general amnesty extended to those who absconded in the wake of the revolution, is distressed by the transformation of the Stone Town seashore, which becomes for him a sign of the extent of degradation suffered by the islanders – and particularly those of the trading class – under their mainland-centred government. What was during 'the time of the English' a 'genteel promenade' and 'mysterious trysting place' is now 'a ditch where crows and fish offal traded unequally' (Gurnah 1996, 186). Yet, as his mercantile metaphor suggests, this degradation is a response to the histories perpetrated on the beach. The lament here, as throughout the fiction, is ambivalent, turning in upon itself as it reviews its position from the other side. Thus, he concludes with self-irony, mocking his own nostalgia even as he articulates it: 'But this was postcolonial reality, where the living space of the people was appropriated from the marginalized elite who had reserved it for their own dramas of sensibility – and the people fished and the crows ate offal' (187).

In the first part of *Desertion*, which is set during a prior era as Britain extends its 'protection' over the coast, we witness the production of the 'golden beach' whose defilement is registered in *Admiring Silence*, and which is shown fashioned out of exclusion and violence. Littered with flotsam washing up on the incoming monsoon

('[p]lenty of traffic down there as well, people have been sleeping on the beach'), the shoreline of Malindi is perceived by its British administrator as covered in 'filth': 'I'll have to put some notices up when they've cleared off. Do Not Litter. Or Off With Your Heads' (Gurnah 2005, 89).

For Gurnah, as for Dening (2004, 13), beaches are thus 'places for special historical insights. In-between places, where every present moment is suffused with the double past of both sides of the beach and complicated by the creative cultures that this mixture makes'. Far from an ahistorical or 'natural' clean slate, the beach is a site of history while it in turn stages amphibian acts of storytelling.

The stories we tell…

Gurnah – a professor of literature at the University of Kent – is a highly self-aware scripter of stories. One of his novels, *Admiring Silence*, tellingly features a woman completing a PhD 'on the shape of narratives' (Gurnah 1996, 33). Rather than studying stories himself, the unnamed narrator trucks in narratives, feeding his insatiable English audience reconstructed histories that centre on Arab decadence or unfold sequences of 'tragic failure' and postcolonial collapse in the wake of the 'orderly affairs' of empire (22, 62). Like this character, Gurnah is attuned to the kinds of stories demanded, consumed and circulated on and by the 'beach' on which he has washed up. As his fictional avatar reflects of the interview panel that grants him a place in an English college: 'I was mostly asked to speak about the horrors of the uprising and its consequences. I did the best I could to make every atrocity as abominable as possible' (82). Yet, complicating the evident moral we might extract from the scene, he concludes bathetically: 'I did not have to try very hard'. In one ambivalent scene, then, he both traffics in narratives of atrocity that bolster imperial nostalgia and British superiority and reinstates the actual horror of the events he embellishes for their ears.[7]

Similarly, while critiquing the slave trade to which this revolutionary violence responds, Gurnah simultaneously shows how stories of such abominations were used to advance British self-fashioning and extend colonial control. Through the narrative counterpoints that inform his fictional structures, he brings the Swahili coast and its layered histories into view from various opposed and/or shifting perspectives. For instance, in *Desertion* we receive the story of the coast through the eyes of its Swahili residents as well as its colonial administrators. In *Paradise*, Hussein reflects on the stories 'they' will come to tell about 'us' as the net of European power is cast over East Africa:

> One day they'll make them [the young] spit on all that we know, and will make them recite their laws and their story of the world as if it were the holy word. When they come to write about us, what will they say? That we made slaves. (Gurnah 1994, 87)

On the other hand, the inland chief Chatu, in an intervention that stands for the view of the interior, counters the merchants' benign representation of trade, presenting it as instead impoverishing and enslaving: 'You have come and brought evil into our world', he protests; 'you have made slaves of us and swallowed up our world' (160). As the phrase 'made slaves' moves from the imagined mouths of future European history-writers to that of the inland African chief, it is 'populated' with different 'intentions' (cf. Bakhtin 1981, np), its monologic meaning cracked open to reveal the

'competing babel' of history, 'successively rewritten and fought over to support a particular argument' (Gurnah quoted in Nasta 2005, 316).

As Susheila Nasta (2005, 315) notes of *Paradise* in commentary suffused with quotations from Gurnah: 'the novel is not simply concerned with countering the standard – and incomplete – narrative of European colonialism, a history that typically sees "European intervention" in the 1890s "as a benign deliverance" of the "Africans from the Arab slavers"' – as indeed it is presented by the British administrators of *Desertion*. 'Instead, it aims to examine how such a history came to be constructed, by exposing parallel ways of seeing the past that existed simultaneously with it', 'contest[ing] the comfortable notion of that "benign" European intervention by "showing the [full] complexity of what went on before – without *forgiving it*"' (315). Rather than producing 'a counter-discourse', she concludes, his fiction 'seeks to unravel the ambivalences engendered by such histories, which are situated at the threshold of a complex network of affiliations' (319).

On this ambivalent, amphibious threshold there is a constant contrapuntal movement. Each critique presented is cast adrift, allowing it to beach and be reviewed on another shore, from another perspective. As Iain Chambers (2008, np) puts it in his study of the Mediterranean, to write from beside the postcolonial sea is

> to unhook a particular language and its explanations from the chains of authority, allowing it to drift, navigating ambiguous waters toward another shore from where the locality and provincialism of its previous home can be delimited, if never completely abandoned.

The narrator of *Admiring Silence*, in bringing his story to an ambiguous, open-ended conclusion, suggests that this is an effect of the quality of words themselves: slimy signifiers that land ashore only to cast off again on another story:

> This is not a fairy story, or a confession, or a tract of redemption, resolution or sublimation, and I am happy to concede that what I think I understand is overcome with dispute as I [sic] soon as I put it into words. Words are like that. Pregnant, sly, slippery, undiminishing in their rereadings as they make their ritual voyage into memory. (Gurnah 1996, 216)

The typographical error – 'overcome with dispute as I soon as I put it into words' – serves here to emphasise the point, presenting the slippery quality of the word, and its 'population' with the 'intentions' of others, as Mikhail Bakhtin would say.

Throughout Gurnah's oeuvre the mode of narration is dialogic, enumerating the perspectival shifts that take place on the beach, elaborating the syncretic and synthetic cultures elaborated thereon and mimetically reproducing the polyphony of the port city. It is, after all, surely no coincidence that Bakhtin, theorist of novelistic dialogism and social heteroglossia, of relational meaning that is always in process, should have spent his formative intellectual years in the port city of Odessa – 'a city in whose streets mingled several different cultures, each with its own language' (Holquist 1990, 1) – nor that he should have lived and worked in an environment as ethically complicated as Gurnah's Zanzibar.

In its often episodic nature (cf. Callahan 2000, 63–64), *Paradise* and the other novels comprising this oeuvre refuse, moreover, to advance an all-encompassing narrative vision or to articulate a sense of wholeness; instead, the impression is of fragments of stories washing up on the beach. This amphibian aesthetic – constructing

stories out of flotsam and jetsam – fulfils the authorial claim that 'one of the ways fiction convinces is by suggesting that behind the surface lies an imaginatively more complex world which its construction in the narrative approaches but does not quite convey' (Gurnah 1993, 156–157).

Rejecting what he terms 'bluntly authoritarian' narrative voices that do 'not involve negotiation or dialogue' (157, 151), but seek to construct social unity in the mirror of narrative totality, Gurnah produces a literary discourse that is in an inherent and ongoing state of negotiation. In contrast to the 'complete and well-fitting […] story they told about us' (Gurnah 2001, 18), his amphibian aesthetic surfaces the 'fault lines in Indian Ocean public spheres' to which scholars such as Isabel Hofmeyr (2010, 725) seek to draw attention in a shifting global order.

In his refusal to 'sentimentalise the African past' (Jacobs 2009, 82), and that of the East African littoral more specifically, or to engage in a politics of blame, Gurnah offers a 'corrective to some of the critical pieties that postcolonial studies have inherited from their early history as a discourse of opposition and local witness' (Callahan 2000, 56). In particular, he points to the limits of their dichotomous vision. In *Desertion*, for instance, Rashid, during his studies in London while the Zanzibar revolution plays in his absence, finds that he starts

> to say black people and white people, like everyone else, uttering the lie with increasing ease, conceding the sameness of our difference, deferring to a deadening vision of a racialised world. For by agreeing to be black and white, we also agree to limit the complexity of possibility, we agree to mendacities that for centuries served and will continue to serve crude hungers for power and pathological self-affirmations. (Gurnah 2005, 222).

These neat binaries are elsewhere decried by Gurnah (2004, 359–360) as 'powerful but nonetheless crude […] fictions' generated to compose unified nations and crystallising into essentialist positions that come to determine who counts as an 'African'.

Immersed in a binary worldview fed by apartheid and civil rights, Rashid is

> drawn away from the complicated cruelties that were happening at home. They could not be inserted into this conversation, with its pared-down polarities and uncluttered certainties, and I was only able to suffer them in silence and guilt when I was on my own. (Gurnah 2005, 222)

To some extent, Gurnah's oeuvre can be read as an ongoing struggle to escape the stranglehold of silence imposed by both his confounding history and the damaged narratives propagated by the new leaders of post-revolution Zanzibar. The latter, as Amid writes in the notebooks he will later dispatch to Rashid in exile, 'want us to forget everything that was here before, except the things that aroused their rage and made them act with such cruelty' (247). Resolute in accounting for – and being accountable for – these things, while simultaneously remembering the other things they suppress, the oeuvre is engaged in both 'illustrat[ing] and contest[ing] depictions by Indian Ocean scholars of apparently idyllic premodern East African societies' (Moorthy 2010, 73).

Its ambivalent, dialogic representational mode appears not only in the staged contests between conflicting narrative voices, but also finds its way into the speech of single characters, as apparent in a long internal monologue by Abbas in Gurnah's

most recent novel, *The Last Gift*. Reflecting on how to tell the story of the Swahili coast, Abbas admits ruefully:

> They keep catching us out in our lies, our betters, hardly listening to the stories about our tolerant, smiling, harmonious ancient civilisations. That is what I would like to have told my children if I had spoken about that little place. That we all lived together in peace, in a forbearing society built as only Muslims know how, even though among us were people of many religions and race. I would not have told them about the rage that lay just under the surface waiting to break, or the rough justice the children of the enslaved planned to inflict on their sultan and on everyone else who mocked and despised them. I would not have told them about our hatreds, or about the way women were treated like merchandise, how they were traded and inherited by their uncles and brothers and brothers-in-law. I would not have told them how enthusiastically the women themselves performed their worthlessness. And I would not have told them about our tyrannical ways with children. Why are we such a lying, deceitful rabble? (Gurnah 2011, 243)

Gurnah cuts a path through this 'competing babel', in the process managing to speak the unspeakable without setting it up in isolation as a new inviolable truth. He does so by crafting his stories from a state of implication, symbolically squelching through littoral mud rather than standing aloof on the mountaintop of moral rectitude and transcendence. From this vantage point, he is able to dredge up a critical voice that avoids the shrill tones of Rashid's college friend Sundeep, who, at least in part modelled on VS Naipaul, becomes a successful writer of 'stylish and satirical novel[s]' about post-independence Africa, including 'an irreverent comedy about post-imperial absurdities' (Gurnah 2005, 224). 'Sundeep', Rashid reflects, 'has found a subject in Africa, and in his books he returns there again and again, but what he writes about the people there is intolerant and needlessly scornful, something of an exhibition' (225).

In contrast to the certainties of Sundeep's books, that free the author to float omnisciently above the messy terrain of history, Gurnah and his characters suffer themselves to inhabit the unstable and ambivalent amphibian position. Whereas Gurnah ends his first novel with a character at sea, in flight from the island yet longing for 'solid ground' beneath his feet, his oeuvre consistently denies its protagonists both this sense of stability – with its implications of grounding and rootedness, of ideological certainty and of staking a claim – and the ability to shake the coastal sands off their feet. Instead, their gazes shifting inland and across the waters and their toes sinking into the unpredictable and unsteady zone that divides and connects land and sea, they draw readers toward their ambivalent apprehensions as they return obsessively – in body or dream – to the salt-encrusted stone towns stretching along this coast.

Notes

[1]An early version of the argument developed in this article was presented at the workshop 'Development, Geopolitics, and Cultural Exchange in the Indian Ocean' hosted in Stone Town in May 2011 by the Zanzibar Indian Ocean Research Institute and the Indian Ocean as Visionary Arena Research Network. I am grateful to the organisers, funders and participants for the opportunity to receive feedback on it, as well as to the National Research Foundation of South Africa, which provided funding towards its preparation. A companion piece to this

article, which focuses on the novel *By the Sea,* is forthcoming in a special issue of *English Studies in Africa* devoted to Gurnah's fiction (cf Samuelson forthcoming).

[2] The exception is his third novel, *Dottie*, which is set entirely in England.

[3] See Nasta (2005) on the controversy surrounding *Paradise*'s shortlisting for, and failure to win, the Booker Prize, which is related to its refusal to present the expected conventional postcolonial position.

[4] As Sheriff (2001, 10) says of the 1948 British colonial census of Zanzibar, which distinguished between Shirazi, Arabs, Indians and Africans: '[t]o the children of the Indian Ocean nothing was more natural than the unity of their oceanic world. By trying to box them into neat nationalities, the British were trying to impose their conceptions of the nation state in place of the wider unities of the Indian Ocean World'.

[5] Moorthy (2010, 98) elaborates: 'The new postcolonial Zanzibari government severed all trade and cultural links with the Indian Ocean world, through the banning of musim trade and the undermining of entrepots, in an ultimately failed bid for fiscal self-sufficiency through the pursuit of disastrous agrarian policies. The motives ostensibly are ideological, as they attempted to force conventional postcolonial notions of nationalism, of unitary language and culture, and native claims for land, on a mobile polyglot littoral society'.

[6] Pearson (1998, 160–162) notes 'the increased demand for slaves and for ivory' under Omani rule, yet observes that the period during which they established themselves as the overlords of the Swahili coast 'saw the rise of England as the dominant industrial, commercial, and military power in the world'; '[m]uch of what the Omanis did in east Africa was courtesy of, or influenced by, the interests of western powers, and especially of Britain', he concludes: 'The huge rise in the slave trade was a direct consequence of a demand based on western prosperity and policies. The trade began to flourish from around 1780, resuting from the need of the French plantation owners in Bourboun (now Reunion) and Ile-de-France (now Mauritius) for slaves to grow sugar to meet the demand in Europe. Subsequently, the main trade was to Brazil, once the trade from west Africa had been blocked by the British. Again, the impetus came from European demand for Brazilian sugar. Similarly, once the trade in the Afrasian Sea was declared illegal, slaves continued to be used in plantations on Zanzibar, to grow cloves, again for the European market, and on the Swahili coast, to produce foodstuffs'.

[7] This 'postimperial melancholia' that reveals itself in 'xenophobic responses' (Gilroy 2005, np) is prevalent in the England of Gurnah's fiction and stands in contrast to the melancholia that infuses it, suggesting the need for a more carefully calibrated analytics able to distinguish between a melancholia that paralyses its subjects and perpetuates violence and another that cracks open categories, surfaces ambivalences and demands an ongoing reckoning with the past.

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