Knowledge and Mapping in Gurnah's By the Sea

This is part of a larger project on expertise, knowledge, and professionalism in British and postcolonial literature, and I would welcome feedback and suggestions.¹

Abdulrazak Gurnah’s 2001 novel By the Sea is one of the Zanzibar-born author’s most celebrated works. The narrative touches on East Africa, the Middle East, and Europe directly and indirectly, a common feature of Gurnah’s fiction. By the Sea also explores some issues that, if not unique in Gurnah’s writing, are less prominent threads running through his other novels. Two features of the novel that I argue are both significant and under analyzed are officialdom and expertise; I also see these as feeding into each other. Officialdom and bureaucracy in the novel are of interest, particularly protagonist Saleh Omar’s encounters with Kevin Edelman, the immigration official who takes him aside upon his arrival in England. However, the connection between officialdom and expertise, and the role of these two factors in the transnational, postcolonial conditions of living portrayed in Gurnah’s novel has not been sufficiently explored. I am especially interested in how expertise intersects with knowledge and mapping in the novel.

An examination of authenticity in expertise in Abdulrazak Gurnah's By the Sea, this presentation will argue that By the Sea depicts an ambivalence about professional experts, creators of maps who are imagined alternatingly as summarizing colonizers and as authentic keepers of cultural knowledge. It is only by looking beyond state-sanctioned narratives and summarizations that Saleh and Latif are able to come to terms with their own history and future.

Recounting the novel’s complex and multi-layered plot is an imposing task. Narrator Saleh Omar, an elderly refugee from Zanzibar, arrives in England under the name Rajaab

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Shabaan Mahmud, under advice to reign an inability to speak English. Detained by an immigration official named Kevin Edelman, Saleh is transported to temporary housing shared with other refugees after uttering the single word “refugee.” Rachel, a legal adviser for a refugee organization, eventually finds a flat for Saleh and also gets him in contact with an area expert in London. As it turns out, not only do Saleh and this expert, Latif, know each other, the two have a storied past in Zanzibar.

A bitter, cross-generational family dispute is at the heart of the narrative’s history. Through a sequence of events too lengthy and convoluted to summarize here, Saleh once obtained a promissory note for Latif’s family home as security on a loan for Hussein, an Omani trader. When Hussein departs and never returns with repayment, Saleh is forced to take the home. It is at this point that Saleh’s and Latif’s perspective on the situation separate. Latif’s view, fostered by his mother and father, is of Saleh as a cruel exploiter who delighted in victimizing his family. The full story, however—and the history behind it—is more complicated, involving in part years Saleh spent in state detention as a result of Latif’s mother’s influence on a state official. The threat of a return to detention prompts Saleh’s flight to England, setting in motion the events of the novel. Only after Saleh and Latif meet and commit to extended retellings of each of their histories to the other do the two arrive at an understanding and reconciliation which by the end of the novel seems to establish the two as a connected, borderline familial pairing. An implied forthcoming romance between Latif and Rachel seems to open a path to a postcolonial citizenship for Latif that stretches both forward to a future settlement in English society while also stretching backward through Saleh to his Zanzibari past.
Saleh is enamored of maps, even as he recognizes their role in colonial dominance. Recalling the history of British colonialism in East Africa, he uses mapping as a paradigm for understanding the project: “New maps were made, complete maps, so that every inch was accounted for, and everyone now knew who they were, or at least who they belonged to. These maps, how they transformed everything” (15). Saleh recognizes the kind of synthesis mapping promotes, so that “it came to pass that in time those scattered little towns by the sea along the African coast found themselves part of huge territories stretching for hundreds of miles” (15-6). It is difficult to discern Saleh’s feelings initially, because he clearly states his love for maps yet describes mapping here as a part of the colonial project of defining and simplifying people and places. This diagnosis is also found in James C. Scott’s *Seeing Like a State*, which in part is occupied by a concern with the kinds of local knowledge which were glossed over and tempered by large-scale colonial projects. Scott’s book grew out of a desire to understand “why the state has always seemed to be the enemy of ‘people who move around’”; the resultant “efforts at sedentarization” came to look like a given “state’s attempt to make a society legible, to arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions” (Scott 1, 2). Here, then, simplification is seen at two levels: a simplification of society (or a view of society) and a simplification of what the state itself does. The issue of legibility is crucial: control of the population is contingent on understanding a population, preferably in the simplest way possible, as in a demographic map which designates that population visually and spatially. Indeed, as Timothy Mitchell notes, “power over persons was . . . reorganized as a power over space, and persons were merely the units arrayed and enumerated within that space” (Mitchell 90).
With this idea of simplification and spatial arrangement in mind, it is revealing to look at a specific example of mapping in action. I have in mind here Saleh’s account of his first encounter with a map, which took place in a classroom. Saleh described how the teacher “began to draw a map on the blackboard with a piece of white chalk...[and] as he drew, he spoke, naming places, sometimes in full sometimes in passing...Sinuously north to the jut of the Ruvuma delta...and then all the way to China. He stopped there and smiled, having drawn half the known world in one continuous line with his piece of chalk” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 37). At least two features of this passage are significant and relevant to the purpose of this presentation. First, the importance of names and naming should not be understated. This is territory Gurnah has explored elsewhere as well, such as in the story “Bossy,” which features two young Zanzibari characters naming various objects and places on a nearby unpopulated island, acting out a kind of colonial exploration and discovery. The crucial element here is that this use of names is also a necessary component of mapping, which typically involves labelling for the purpose of making an area legible and simplified. Beyond Saleh’s teacher naming these places, it is worth considering the act of his drawing them in one continuous line; this is evincing a totalizing mastery as he demarcates and summarizes “half the known world” with one smooth and contained motion. Perhaps less convincingly, I might also throw in that the narrative identifying the specifically white chalk on the blackboard is further support for this being an image of specifically colonial knowledge, as the white marker lays out the boundaries of “dark” colonized locales.

I mentioned earlier Saleh’s ambivalence about expertise, though. To turn to that point, take the scene where Latif is first described to Saleh (but not by name) as an “expert on [Saleh’s]
area” who has agreed to help with his immigration case (65). Saleh has an immediate and clear negative, even angry reaction to this news. He sarcastically repeats the term “my area” several times while imagining this person’s professional activities, in a passage worth quoting at length:

“someone who has written books about me no doubt, who knows all about me, more than I know about myself. . . . He will have slipped in and out of my area for decades, studying me and noting me down, explaining me and summarising me. . . . An expert in my area, someone who has written books about me no doubt, who knows all about me, more than I know about myself. He will have visited all the places of interest and significance in my area, and will know their historical and cultural context when I will be certain never to have seen them and will only have heard vague myths and popular tales about them. He will have slipped in and out of my area for decades, studying me and noting me down, explaining me and summarizing me, and I would have been unaware of his busy existence” (Gurnah, By the Sea 65, emphasis original).

Saleh’s description is reminiscent of the district commissioner at the end of Achebe’s Things Fall Apart, who reflects on protagonist Okonkwo’s hanging body that “one could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter, but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate” (208-9). For any reader, these plans to summarize Okonkwo’s story, which has richly filled the pages of Achebe’s two hundred-odd page novel, should be enraging. Similarly, Saleh’s immediate reaction to this proposed expert visitor assumes the expert to be an outsider, potentially even a kind of colonizing force.

However, Saleh changes his tune when he is told that the expert is Latif Mahmud, someone he knows of and who is not only an expert on his “area,” but from it as well. “[T]hat
was something.” Saleh thinks, “not a stranger who came to summarize us, but one of our own” (67). It is noteworthy, though, that Saleh seems to take the word “area” more or less literally, as a space rather than merely a subject. My argument is that this reflects his interest in maps, which designate, define, and summarize areas, which leads to the claim that Saleh’s view of expertise relies on a kind of authenticity. The colonizing English expert, no doubt, will merely summarize him. Latif, in contrast, will map his—their—area in the proper way, like the maps that “say something back” to Saleh and give “shape” to the limitless world (Gurnah 35).

Despite Saleh’s lionization of what he perceives as Latif’s authentic expert knowledge, Latif himself is far from enamored of the profession in which he presumably applies that knowledge. A professor of poetry, he nonetheless alerts the reader early in his own narrative that they are essentially empty: “I abhor poems,” he reflects. “I read them and teach them and abhor them. . . . They say nothing so elaborately, they reveal nothing, they lead to nothing. . . . Give me a lucid bit of prose any day” (74, my emphasis). Latif’s preference for prose over poetry’s apparent lack of meaning curiously leads him not only to dismiss the genre itself, but his own value as an expert. When Saleh teasingly mentions the quote that so disturbed him before learning Latif’s identity—“‘Rachel said you were an expert in our area’”—Latif responds with self-directed venom: “I’m not an expert on anything, he said, sneering at himself. I teach English literature” (Gurnah, By the Sea 151–2, emphasis original). Latif’s naming of specifically English literature as the subject matter he teaches recalls his earlier anxiety about going to meet Saleh, when, like Saleh, he was unaware of the other’s identity: “Would they tell me, or think to themselves, how English I had become, how different, how out of touch?” he wonders. “As if it
was either here or there whether I had or not, as if it proved something uncomplicated about alienation” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 73).

Latif’s lack of faith in his knowledge not confined to the narrative present, either. In the portion of the novel he narrates, Latif recounts his travel to the German Democratic Republic for his education. After arriving, he has a realization about the boundaries of his own knowledge, and reflects: “I knew nothing about Dresden or a multitude of other Dresdens. They had been there for all these centuries despite me, ignorant of me, oblivious of my existence. It was a staggering thought, how little it had been possible to know and remain contented” (Gurnah, *By the Sea* 122). It is crucial here, I think, to consider that the boundaries of Latif’s knowledge is a barrier to both with and without: he knew nothing about a multitude of places, yet the subpoint of his observation is that they also know nothing of him. It is not only his own lack of knowledge but the lack of recognition on the part of these locales which makes Latif feel so minimized. Later, after befriending a young East German man and his mother, he remarks to them: “I don’t know anything. . . . Or been anywhere” (131). It is tempting to see this as a kind of double entendre alongside Latif’s view of poetry: what he really knows best is “nothing”; however, as a young man he had not yet studied the subject.

Latif and Saleh both struggle with the view--or lack of a view--that European culture has of them, a conflict well-established by the accounts of each of their educations. Interestingly, by the end of the book Saleh’s perspective of knowledge, despite being the older man with first-hand experience of both a colonial education and victimization at the hands of state power, seems to be more hopeful than Latif’s. I think that the explanation for Saleh’s relatively positive outlook lies in the twisting, uncertain narrative of the novel, which slowly unravels a history
which is only fully revealed by the mutual exchange of stories by Saleh and Latif. Between the two of them, it is Saleh who has access to the more complete version of the story, which he has the opportunity to relay in detail to Latif. Gurnah himself comments on the kind of narrative encouraged by colonizing culture, saying in an interview that: “What the colonial cultures and people think about those accounts of them is not important because the focus, the emphasis has been in Europe, in the West. So what’s known by the West constitutes knowledge, it doesn’t matter what those ‘others’ think they know” (Gurnah, Interview 358). However, Gurnah sees this primarily a remnant of the past. Today, he goes on, “‘the story of our times’ can no longer be sealed in a controllable kind of narrative. The narrative has slipped out of the hands of those who had control of it before. These new stories unsettle previous understandings” (Gurnah, Interview 358). This “unsettling” of previous understandings is precisely what is on display in By the Sea. Crucially, though, the unsettling is aimed not at the knowledge of colonizing states, but at Latif himself. If he claims to know nothing as a student in Germany, and to study the nothingness of poetry in his professional life, he might nonetheless be seen as grasping control of his own narrative and history both in Zanzibar and Europe. And perhaps Saleh looks to Latif as a new generation who has come to terms with that history and is also still young and able to embark on a new narrative.

There are a number of unexplored issues tangential to this presentation that must go unexplored here, such as the encounters with state power in the form of Edelman and the detention camps, and Gurnah’s own authorial identity. I have tried to shed some light on the function of mapping and knowledge itself in By the Sea, arguing that it is only by mutual,
cross-generational recognition and sharing of knowledge that Saleh and Latif come to terms with the instability inherent in the knowledge of histories and cultures.

Works Cited


