

# Gender, Power, and Place in Anglophone South African Writing

Nivesjö, Sanja. 2020. *Dis-placed Desires: Space and Sexuality in South African Literature*. PhD diss. Stockholm University: Department of English. (266 pages)

**IN HER PHD** thesis, *Dis-placed Desires: Space and Sexuality in South African Literature* (2020), Sanja Nivesjö asks us to contemplate what she calls ‘the messy, entangled, mutually constitutive relationship between notions of space and of sexuality’ (244) in South African writing in English over nearly a century, from 1920 to 2010. She chooses seven novels for her ‘diachronic perspective’ (242): Olive Schreiner’s *From Man to Man* (posthumously published 1920), R. R. R. Dhlomo’s *An African Tragedy* (1928), Bessie Head’s *The Cardinals* (posthumously published 1993), Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist* (1974), J. M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), and Damon Galgut’s *In a Strange Room* (2010). Each ‘offer[s] alternative viewpoints [...], slantwise perspectives, queer takes,’ and is able to ‘formulate alternative understandings of sexual expression or of spaces’ (230), she writes.

Schreiner and Dhlomo’s novels, published in the 1920s when South Africa, newly united as a dominion in the British Empire, was grappling with the effects of capitalization and large-scale migration to modernizing cities, are discussed in chapter 1. Nivesjö addresses

discourses of black peril, propriety and hypocrisy, national and racial mythologizing, and the fascinating revaluation of the valences of the urban *and* the rural we encounter in these novels. Both texts, she writes, 'are concerned with urbanity and urbanization and its corrupting effects on sexual relations' (89), but both also 'question the possibility of the rural space as a container for the future "family" of the nation' (90).

The second chapter focuses on a single text, Head's *The Cardinals*, written in the early 1960s against the backdrop of that moment's dramatic acceleration of apartheid's spatial segregation, and considers how Head claimed a voice for herself amidst the overwhelmingly male *Drum* generation. Head also 'does not shy away from exploring how gendered and sexual biases and oppressions operate [...] within cultures of those oppressed by the apartheid system' (130).

A third chapter considers the place of the farm and the frustration of constructions of whiteness, figured through questions of inheritance and filiation, in what are arguably Gordimer and Coetzee's most significant works of the 1970s. Nivesjö makes a strong case for the exemplary way in which each used 'sexual and reproductive imagery and themes in relation to the space of the farm' (134) to offer their trenchant critiques of whiteness and interrogation of the 'relationship between the (white) family and the nation' (144).

In the final chapter, Nivesjö compares two very different texts – Galgut's and Mpe's. In her accounting of them, these are each concerned with 'mobility'—whether from rural area to city, within the city, outside South Africa, or elsewhere in Africa or the world—under postapartheid conditions. Mpe's text offers a counterpoint to Dhlomo's, also revisiting the question of horizontal violence examined in relation to Head. Mpe's protagonists raise questions about the relative virtues of city and country. The discussion of Galgut builds on that of whiteness in chapter 3, and of mobility (as well as property and propriety) in chapter 1. Galgut's protagonist escapes from localism but discovers that, despite his whiteness, he feels inextricably African. Both texts cast light on the meaning of cosmopolitan identity, but also on the position of the queer

subject—or the subject with a diseased body—of the nation constructed as a family. These remain books for our times, in multiple ways.

Nivesjö's theoretical frames are threefold, drawn from theories of the social construction of space, from Michel Foucault (in particular his discussion of the way in which sites organize the operation of power), and from the queer phenomenology of Sara Ahmed. In particular, Nivesjö nuances Ahmed's discussion of heteronormativity's privileging of the straight line (to enforce compulsory orientations) extremely effectively, offering insights that speak powerfully to the South African situation. Race complicates Ahmed's metaphors in South Africa, since apartheid privileged *white* heterosexuality, and profoundly *disrupted* straight family life for black South Africans. Queer South Africans of all races were universally, but differentially, disadvantaged. The point made here is that norms are always contextual.

Both Foucault and Ahmed give Nivesjö ways to think of space as metaphor, and sexuality as space or site. Nivesjö offers us a range of 'sites' in and through which sexuality serves to complicate the subject's relation to dominant narratives in apartheid- and post-apartheid-era South Africa. These include actual geographical spaces, such as the city, rural areas, and 'nature' as wild space, but also the body itself, 'leaky' or contained, always gendered and subject to particular class- and race-specific rules. Further, in relation to metaphors of space, Nivesjö asks us to think about mobility *in* and *between* spaces, as well as movement as both literal (representational) and metaphorical, movement in narrative space, towards endings, most of them (in these novels at least) involving *incompletion*, stasis, frustration of genealogical inheritance, and death.

Here of course the question of genre is germane, and at moments in each chapter, Nivesjö attends to the ways in which these texts operate within—but also strain at the limits of—a range of genres, in so doing also exploring the ways in which space and sexuality are co-constitutive of their own limits and possibilities in relation to generic expectations. Lauren Berlant (a theorist not invoked in the thesis) tells us that genre is a way of organizing affect. Nivesjö thinks instead about the links between genre and the operation of desire. In the texts she considers,

'[d]esire breaks out of a normative forward-driving narrative mold and instead stalled, interrupted, [...] or strangely directed desires lead the narratives to queered ends' (240). As she observes, then, temporality is always at stake in representations of the co-constitution of sexuality and space: sexuality involves temporal performance or endurance; space is present to us as time-bound experience, and phenomenality is temporal.

Nivesjö's dissertation considers specifically anglophone South African writing and one wonders what insights might have emerged from a more comparative approach. The dissertation is not always as clear as it might be about its use of the terms gender and sexuality, and some of its insights could have been sharpened or augmented through engagement with other of Foucault's work, most especially his writing about heterotopias. Despite these demurs, this is an excellently researched, bracing, and entirely convincing dissertation, which deserves a wide readership.

**ANDREW VAN DER VLIES**  
**QUEEN MARY UNIVERSITY OF LONDON**

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