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Maps and the Burdens of Belonging: Identity and Resistance in Gurnah's *By the Sea* and Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*

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This article examines the relationship between maps, identity, and belonging in two post-colonial novels set in the Western Indian Ocean region: Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019). Through close textual analysis, I argue that these novels portray maps not merely as static remnants of colonialism but as dynamic artefacts that both reflect and shape post-colonial identities in nuanced ways. I highlight how these novels depict maps as having a degree of agency, capable of both oppressing and offering pathways to self-discovery for post-colonial subjects. By highlighting the themes of naming, representation, and identity concerning maps across both texts, I argue for a coherent cross-reading of the plurality and contestation inherent in the post-colonial reading of maps.

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Introduction

In Abdulrazak Gurnah's novel *By the Sea* (2001), the protagonist Latif Mahmud grieves the loss of his family's material possessions, emotionally framing Saleh Omar, the antiquarian, as an 'assassin' who takes over the family home through duplicitous business dealings.[1] The reader will most certainly ask: whose assassin? Mahmud answers that Omar is the assassin of their lives, as the antagonist removed Mahmud's family from their possessions and ended their lives as they knew it. Omar's word choice conveys an exaggerated sense of tragedy regarding their forfeited property. This reaction reveals an underlying logic that closely intertwines the family's possessions with their identity, positioning the confiscation of such objects as deeply damaging to their sense of self. Yet, paradoxically, these possessions are simultaneously deemed 'debris' by Mahmud, carrying connotations of uselessness that belies their purported centrality (Gurnah, 2002: 101). As belongings of inhabitants of Zanzibar, who have accumulated global goods from generations of overseas trade, the material objects in the family home constitute oceanic flotsams from around the world. Omar, the so-called 'assassin', deals in this very merchandise as an antiquarian. Thus, Mahmud's emotionally charged rhetoric of 'assassin', followed swiftly by the contradictory 'debris', elucidates paradoxical associations between materiality and identity, demonstrating how the former's loss can profoundly undermine the latter, as well as the intricate feelings and attachments that physical objects carry. In this article, I focus on a particular kind of material object: maps. I examine the complex relationship between maps, identity, and belonging in two post-colonial novels from the Western Indian Ocean region: Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* (2001) and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* (2019). Through a close textual analysis of these novels, I argue that maps function as multifaceted artefacts that reflect and profoundly shape post-colonial identities.

This article focuses on maps as critical objects of analysis because of their multifaceted roles in colonial and post-colonial contexts. Originally tools for navigation, maps evolved into instruments of racial and regional classification during the colonial era and continued to exert influence in post-colonial spaces. Despite outliving their primary navigational function, colonial maps persist in racialising the Indian Ocean region. The novels examined do not reference specific historical maps, but instead use various cartographic objects to illuminate characters' emotional and psychological experiences within the Indian Ocean world. This approach allows for the exploration of the complex interplay between geography, race, and colonial legacies in

[1] The novel first appeared in 2001, but all references in this article are to the 2002 Bloomsbury edition.

shaping individual and collective identities. By doing so, the novels position maps as potent yet ephemeral artefacts that play a crucial role in the characters' understanding of themselves and their place in the world.

Before beginning my analysis, I offer a brief introduction to the novels. *By the Sea* follows the story of an academic, Latif Mahmud, who is settled in England. He is introduced to a refugee named Saleh Omar (antiquarian in Zanzibar), who has recently arrived in the UK. Mahmud is surprised to learn that Saleh has arrived in the UK using his father's name. As they spend time together, sharing tea and stories, they both reveal unpleasant shared histories of their families before and after the Zanzibari revolution and their experiences post-exile. Their dialogues excavate suppressed memories of loss and displacement conditioned by Zanzibar's fractured decolonisation. This article focuses on Saleh Omar's story in which he uses maps extensively to recount his experiences.

The Dragonfly Sea traces the life of Ayaana, born from a socially ostracised affair between Munira and an unnamed father in Kenya's littoral zone. Under the wing of Muhidin, a widely travelled sailor who has returned home, Ayaana's maturation interweaves her emergent identity with the rich Swahili poetic traditions Muhidin immerses her in, from Islamic verses, to Arabic and Persian poetry, to Bollywood songs that eerily prefigure Ayaana's ancestral ties with Ming-dynasty Chinese seafarers along the coast. While initially incongruous, her consequent odyssey to China for advanced studies crystallises the Indian Ocean's fluidity as a conduit of cross-cultural fusion and fragmentation inscribed through the centuries into East Africa's littoral communities.

To analyse maps as ephemera, I use Bill Brown's views on objects varying in significance based on their context and lens to understand how maps in these novels symbolise shifting identities. Brown posits that 'however materially stable objects may seem, they are, let us say, different things in different scenes' (2014: 9), an idea exemplified by the character Latif Mahmud's interactions with maps. In the context of postcoloniality, this approach aligns with Graham Huggan's argument that maps are pivotal as they both reflect and perpetuate colonial power dynamics by normalising Western superiority and marginalising non-Western perspectives (Huggan, 1989). Consequently, a post-colonial analysis of maps reveals the underlying power structures embedded within these ostensibly objective records. Such an examination challenges the self-legitimising authority of Western cartography and contests its claims to universality. The process of decolonising maps necessitates identifying and repudiating inscribed colonial ideologies, interrogating how cartography has been used to rationalise colonial expansion, erase indigenous knowledge and territories, and impose Western paradigms on non-Western societies (Lauret, 2011). As this article

engages with the notion of dialogic interactions between post-colonial subjects and colonial objects, specifically maps, a central line of enquiry is: why do post-colonial characters seek dialogue with such colonial objects? In the novels examined, it will become evident that a coherent sense of self eludes the characters and cannot be attained through interpersonal interactions within colonial or post-colonial contexts. The characters' sole perceived pathway to accessing conceptual frameworks and situating themselves within broader epistemologies and discourses appears to lie in communication with the objects themselves. It is crucial to underscore that this 'dialogue' is neither necessarily desired nor, even when desired, egalitarian, as is conventionally understood. However, the term 'dialogue' is deployed here to signify a discursive logic underpinning this interaction. This interaction engenders the construction of important issues, prompting questions that post-colonial subjects lack resources to address. This discursive interplay between objects and subjects constitutes the focal point of my analysis. Furthermore, the terminology of 'dialogue' forms part of a constellation of cognate terms, including hermeneutics, quest, excavation, exchange, and others, each accentuating different facets of this unequal dialogue between colonial maps and post-colonial subjects. Consequently, a critical consideration pertains to the effects of this dialogue on the objects themselves. In this article, I discuss how the implications of this dialogue posit the objects as possessing a degree of wilful agency, capable of not merely transmitting but also receiving meaningful messages.

To analyse the two novels' depictions of cartography and identity, this article begins with an introduction to a framework for exploring colonial mappings in Gurnah's novel, before delving into an extended analysis of the anthropomorphised agency afforded to maps within the narrative. The second section follows a similar structure, initiating with an introduction to situate Owuor's novel within the post-colonial examinations of the politics of erasure underlying cartographic practices. The subsequent discussion in the second section explores the protagonist's quest to resituate her island home within the cartographic record as a metaphor for the broader struggle to rediscover African identities obscured by imperial/colonial mappings. By highlighting the themes of naming, representation, and identity concerning maps across both texts, I argue for a coherent cross-reading of the plurality and contestation inherent in the post-colonial reading of maps.

Conversing with Cartography: Colonial Maps in *By the Sea*

In *By the Sea*, Saleh Omar begins his discussion of colonial maps with a declaration: 'I speak to maps. And sometimes they say something back to me' (Gurnah, 2002: 35). In ascribing conversational capacity to otherwise speechless materials, Omar conveys

more than whimsical personification of these colonial objects. Specifically, he notes that 'they *say* something back' (emphasis my own), suggesting that maps have the capacity to engage in conversation or convey meaningful messages. The use of two distinct verbs — 'speak' and 'say' — highlights this critical difference. While maps lack the physical capacity to speak, their personification enables a dialogue with the narrator. Establishing a dialogue not only involves expressing oneself but also listening to and receiving information, rather than just transmitting it.[2] Thus, the narrator raises questions about what 'speaking to maps' represents. Does this imply a personal connection with the object, deeper engagement with places being mapped, introspective self-discovery prompted by studying maps, or other symbolic interpretations of this anthropomorphised exchange? Additionally, Omar seemingly cannot predict when maps will 'say something back'. Thus, while still objects, maps take on a degree of wilful agency in determining when their voices will interject meaningfully into the speaker's process of contemplation.

Omar's poignant phrasing intimates a gulf between the geographical space Omar inhabits and its external representations by colonial authorities. Omar's assertion is consistent with studies on the impact of colonial cartography and post-colonial studies that claim the centrality of colonial maps to post-colonial identity (Cash and Kinnvall, 2017). Resigned to life within the lines inscribed by colonial cartographers, the post-colonial space can feel wholly unnavigable on indigenous terms alone, leaving no recourse but strained attempts to communicate directly with these colonial objects themselves. When Omar depicts maps 'say[ing] something back', the responsive interjection of these personified cartographies introduces the possibility that resolution may emerge through persistent engagement with the ephemera. Yet his admission that conversational reply comes only 'sometimes' equally suggests the one-sided silence potentially facing those who, like Omar, speak to inherited encodings on maps and find their interrogation unreciprocated by the coloniser's flattened projections of the land they occupy. Saleh Omar continues his discussion on the colonial context of map-making, shifting the discussion to broader histories of cartography in the region and spotlighting how Omar's map interrogations mirror larger post-colonial tensions:

> Before maps the world was limitless. It was maps that gave it shape and made it seem like a territory, like something that could be possessed, not just laid waste and plundered. Maps made places on the edges of the imagination seem graspable and placeable (Gurnah, 2002: 35).

[2] I am thankful to Dr Alexandra Peat for this point.

It is not 'an unheard of thing', because many have attempted to talk to maps before him. Focusing specifically on precolonial dhow trade provides critical insights into how European colonial mapping transformed the region. Maritime navigation in the Indian Ocean region was characterised by distinct technologies available to European sailors and dhow navigators. The Indian Ocean trade before the 15th century was primarily on 'dhows', a 19th-century term for a motley collection of non-European vessels in the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea (Gilbert, 2011). Dhow sailors relied on traditional techniques, such as stellar observation and an intimate understanding of seasonal wind patterns, particularly monsoon. On the other hand, European vessels equipped with rudders and magnetic compasses by the 15th century possessed advanced navigational capabilities that allowed for open sea manoeuvring and precise directional determination. The reliance on seasonal winds was less critical for European vessels due to their technological advantages. The limitations of dhow navigation, primarily dictated by monsoon patterns, shaped perceptions of the world's accessibility. As Omar describes, this made the world appear 'limitless', as certain regions, such as Southern Africa and East Asia (China, Japan, and Korea), remained inaccessible due to insufficient monsoon wind strength. The introduction of European navigational technologies, particularly rudders and magnetic compasses, subsequently expanded maritime reach to these previously inaccessible areas, fundamentally altering the scope of oceanic trade and exploration.

The 'limitless' nature of the Indian Ocean exchange cannot be attributed exclusively to inaccessible coastal regions far away but also to the hinterlands. K. N. Chaudhuri's research underscores the interconnectedness of the Indian Ocean 'basin' or 'sea' (as in the two novels) highlighting factors such as economic exchanges, climate, migration, and shared religion that have contributed to its unity (Chaudhuri, 1990). This interconnectedness is further elaborated by historical scholarship, which argues that port cities like Mandvi, Muscat, and Mombasa shared more similarities with each other than with their respective hinterlands, serving as social hubs within the broader Indian Ocean network (Pearson, 2010; Kresse and Simpson, 2011). Precolonial monsoon-led trade exploited African coasts for resources, establishing trading posts, emporia and commercial networks that facilitated asymmetrical trade relations. This era's trade dynamics, while not as systematic as European colonisation, still significantly exploited Africa through a one-way plunder (Pollard and Kinyera, 2017; Gooding, 2022).

The introduction of colonial maps marked a pivotal change, transforming these regions into bounded territories susceptible to European claims (Mancke, 1999; Zotto, 2023; Gonçalves, 2021). Several key maps, including the 'Nautical Atlas of the World' (1519), Edmond Halley's 'Map of the Trade Winds' (1686), Herman Moll's 'Map of the

East Indies and the Adjacent Countries' (c.1715–1720), and Matthew Fontaine Maury's 'Monsoon & Trade Wind Chart of the Indian Ocean' (1859) not only advanced maritime navigation but also showed the regions and continents as territories of colonial powers. These maps redefined the geopolitical landscape of Asia and Africa, imposing colonial power dynamics and reshaping identities by showing resources and people of different regions as subjects of different European powers, as noted by the narrator in the novel *By the Sea* who states that:

> complete maps [were made] so that every inch was accounted for, and everyone now knew who they were, or at least who they belonged to. Those maps, how they transformed everything. And so it came to pass that in time those scattered little towns by the sea along the African coast found themselves part of huge territories (Gurnah, 2002: 15).

European mapmaking fundamentally 'transformed everything' by delineating bounded territories and locating indigenous communities within broader structures of control.[3] This transformation altered the self-perception of scattered towns on the Swahili coast, which previously saw themselves as distinct entities, but later became part of a larger landmass.

Saleh Omar articulates the point more graphically than the historians mentioned above when he states that 'the people who lived on the 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, 2002: 15). The uncertainties of identity along the Swahili coast arise from its enduring status as a crossroads of the Indian Ocean world. When stating coastal residents 'hardly knew who they were', the narrator spotlights the struggle with self-definition fundamentally shaped by histories of trade, intermixing, and external cultural infusion, as discussed above. Omar also utilises the abstract noun construction 'who they were', emphasising essence of being rather than a contextual role, that is, fundamental rather than situational. Stressing how little coastal Africans 'knew' of

[3] In contrast, non-European cartographic traditions related to the Indian Ocean reflect a rich and diverse heritage across Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. These include representations by West Malaysian communities, detailed maps from Burma, Thailand, and the Malay world, and Islamic cartographers' contributions such as Al-Idrisi's 12th-century maps. South Asian cartography offers examples like Mughal period maps and Jain cosmological representations. The Swahili coast's role in maritime trade is evidenced by stone mosques dating from the 8th to the 15th centuries, indicating well-established trade routes. Unlike European maps that aimed to represent the entire ocean, non-European cartography often focused on particular areas of interest, reflecting local cultures, religious perspectives, and trading interests.

their own identity illustrates a loss of internal self-recognition and also implies that they intensely felt this lack of self-knowledge. According to Omar, no nonchalant sense of self existed for the people on the East African coast, but rather an uneasy awareness of blurred lines between cultures left unresolved. Even so, we can analyse deeper here as well — what drove this 'clinging' to markers of distinctness? Fear of cultural loss to stronger foreign influences? A longing to assert uniqueness despite the stereotypes of others? This visceral 'clinging', almost for survival, colours Omar's self-perception in darker, more insecure tones than a mere prideful embrace of difference might have conveyed alone. The designation of inland residents as 'outlying progeny' in contrast to coastal inhabitants reveals a dichotomy wherein these individuals, possessing ancestral ties (across Asia and farther parts of Africa) conducive to engaging in Indian Ocean trade, also engendered social divisions with African communities living in the same region, as the latter lacked similar external connections. In fact, historians have used linguistic evidence to claim that Arab, Persian, and South Asian presence in the region created a 'coastal African civilisation' (Pouwels, 2002: 415). This 'progeny', as Saleh Omar calls it — and to which he himself belongs — becomes, as a consequence of racism, almost exiled in its distance and dissimilarity from continental kin. It is worth noting that in Arabic, Saahil means coast and Suwaahili means coastal, from which the name of the language and the region comes. The English term 'progeny', by contrast, confines identity formation to biological lineage, while the use of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' effectively excludes coastal Africans from being recognised as members of 'interior African communities', despite their shared heritage.

As material artefacts of empire stored in specialised libraries and archives, maps mediate historical knowledge and collective memory. Yet their vestigial circulation in atlases and books also hints at the resilience of imperial spatial logics in regional politics and self-understanding. As an antiquarian, Omar directly engages with maps' complex legacies as he collects the atlases of colonial farmers leaving Zanzibar on the eve of independence. Maps operate as both geographic tools and ideological projections of European superiority in the Indian Ocean. Reckoning with these multifaceted objects remains an interpretive challenge. How should Saleh Omar read them today — as neutral reflections of historical space or as politicised impositions of foreign conceptual schema? Omar comments on this question:

> [...] and because they were unflattering, they seemed truer than the stories we told ourselves. I read about the diseases that tormented us, about the future that lay before us, about the world we live in and our place in it. It was as if they had remade us in ways that we no longer had any recourse but to accept, so complete and well-fitting was the story they told about us (Gurnah, 2002: 18).

He analyses how colonial narratives and mapping practices intertwined to profoundly shape indigenous self-perception and collective identity construction along the Swahili coast. It is important to note here that, in Omar's view, maps were 'truer than stories', and maps did not simply (mis)represent people as discussed above but also 'remade' them. While conventional wisdom often portrays maps as objective and factual representations of reality, Omar's reflection challenges this notion by suggesting that maps, like stories, can serve to define them. He echoes the assertion of J. Brian Harley, who states that maps are not 'inert records of morphological landscapes' but rather 'refracted images contributing to dialogue in a socially constructed world' (Harley, 2009: 129). As Omar poignantly recounts, exposure to unflattering colonial dialogue evoked a sense of truth and accuracy lacking in the community's self-mythologising accounts. Although problematic, the completeness afforded by embeddedness within broader colonial spatial schemas resonated more than localised cultural narratives. This reaction reveals the interplay between maps, racialisation, and internalised self-conceptions. As the passage suggests, Swahili communities had previously portrayed themselves as interconnected yet independent. However, colonial mapping and its associated spatial biologisation — assigning specific racial identities to particular geographical areas, thereby creating a spatial representation of human populations based on perceived racial differences, such as Blacks in Africa and Arabs in the Middle East — directly challenged this vision. The geographic location became indelibly linked to social categorisation and was subsequently assigned inferiority when we read that 'geography became biology in order to construct a hierarchy in which to place the people who lived in their accessibility and primitiveness in other places on the maps' (Gurnah, 2002: 35). Omar's assertion that 'geography became biology' asserts that spatial location has historically informed constructions of race and hierarchy in colonial contexts. Specifically, colonial authorities strategically employed cartographic representations to advance the premise of African inferiority — a permanent, heritable condition encoded onto both bodies and landscapes.

Yet, as Omar's cartographic pursuit indicates, embracing the coloniser's tools also facilitated renewed connections with the continent — realigning the spatial awareness of coastal communities to inland communities/territories long obscured behind oceanic worlds, in line with Edward A. Alpers's claim that the establishment of a unified 'African' identity is a 20th-century phenomenon (Alpers, 2003). However, negative consequences arose from this refashioned continental unity as well as under the post-colonial (anti)racial paradigm. In Saleh's analysis, Swahili communities faced a complex reconfiguration of their identity during the post-colonial period. Newly

categorised under the broad geographic designation of 'African' — a label shared with inland groups — the Swahili were confronted with accusations of complicity in slave trade practices and humanitarian crises occurring in the interior. This abrupt shift compelled them to assume responsibility for events in regions that had previously exceeded their conceptual purview. However, this geographic classification as 'African' stood sometimes in tension with their ethnic designation as non-African (e.g., Arab or Indian), reflecting the sometimes complementary and sometimes competing epistemologies of territory and ethnicity that underpin colonial administrative practices. This tension exemplifies the intricate interplay between spatial, religious, and racial categorisations in (post-)colonial governance, where geographic proximity could be at odds with perceived ethnic distinctions. Such contradictions in the post-colonial epistemologies not only reshaped Swahili self-perception, but also had profound implications for their position within the broader colonial social hierarchy and their relationships with other groups in the region.

In January 1964, the Zanzibar Revolution took place which replaced the constitutional monarchy in place with a short-lived communist government and subsequent merger with Tanzania. During this revolution, the commander John Okello's supporters massacred Arab and Asian communities (Ibrahim, 2015). In the novel, Saleh Omar also faces the wrath of the military dictatorship and is arrested with these 'Arabs' because he has acquired the house of a local drunk-turned-priest (Latif Mahmud's father) from a Persian trader to finance his business. Thus, ironically, in the very act of reconciling the spatial dislocation from the African interior both physically and psychologically via dialogue with colonial cartographies, Omar now risks experiencing post-colonial violence flowing directly through newly forged connective pathways to 'inland' peoples and those with links 'outside'.

Ultimately, by essentialising geography into biology — transforming location into racial identity itself rather than mere landscape — colonial ideologies embodied by colonial maps burdened the culturally hybrid Swahili coast with painful dilemmas of affiliation along Africa's complex coastal frontiers in ways enduring into the present: to bond with or disentangle from the conflicted continental 'African' identity? Should they embrace or retreat from the double-edged unifications encoded into the inherited cartographic relics of colonial authorities? Saleh Omar is not faced with a mere choice but a persistent struggle. He has been denied loans by European bank managers, who, influenced by the biologisation of maps, believe that Africans are not fit for business:

> [T]hey always refused us loans. [...] When I say us, I mean any merchants or businessmen who were not Indian. [...] I merely state here that [they] did not think us trustworthy or talented in business, so they always refused loans, to my knowledge (Gurnah, 2002: 167).

As the passage illuminates, the painful implications of racially weaponised cartography permeate mundane yet vital spheres like Omar's merchant business dealings. When European bankers refuse him loans due to ingrained doubts of 'African aptitude', prejudices inscribed onto maps actively constrain livelihoods and economic mobility along the coast itself, which continued to circulate after colonisation. Did bank managers exploit cartographically engrained stereotypes as convenient excuses to favour Indian merchants already known as stable clients? Alternatively, had the inherited symbolic language of geography-as-biology infused the cultural air until even well-intentioned lenders were influenced by biases without conscious intent? Omar leaves this dynamic unresolved — the *why* is not relevant to his reality of recurrent rejection. Still, he is forced to constantly make his observations more precise by adding phrases such as 'I merely say this' or 'to my knowledge', but he can never forcefully assert his cartographic racialisation.

These racialised observations of his (cartographic) identity continue to haunt Omar when he decides to leave Zanzibar to seek asylum in the UK. His baggage is examined thoroughly at immigration and he comments, 'a hermeneutics of baggage that is like following an archaeological trail or examining lines on a shipping map' (Gurnah, 2002: 7). Having chosen not to speak at immigration, he closely observes this dialogue that immigration authorities have with his baggage and describes it in detail. The striking metaphor of the refugee's baggage inspection as 'hermeneutics' implies a focused interpretation aimed at seeking meaning. This metaphor is profoundly revealing, especially when considered in light of his previous imprisonment within colonial maps' inscribed 'readings' of African identity. According to Emily Ridge's analysis, baggage and luggage symbolise entities that resist change and adaptation (Ridge, 2017: 73). In this context, baggage signifies the impossibility of assimilating this Zanzibari man into British society. Furthermore, like his very being, his luggage must be decoded by immigration authorities, raising the question: is he truly from where his passport indicates? The comparison with the 'archaeological trail' evokes layered excavation through strata of artefacts (i.e. his luggage) to scrutinise his identity. Likewise, mapping shipping routes illustrates the immigration authorities'

attempts to map connections between his ports of call, piecing together the voyage undertaken. Applied to Omar's baggage, this forensic cartography also seeks to know his provenance and objects that betray his origin's veracity; immigration takes away the ud-al-qamari in his bag, which has its origins in Southeast Asia, for further inspection because it does not go with his 'African' self. Together, these metaphors evoke how, for the refugee Omar, examination turns selfhood into excavatable artefacts and observable evidence. Like colonial cartographers, the new cartographers, that is, immigration authorities, wield interpretive power over Omar's identity in branding his narrative as genuine or fraudulent. Even in escaping Zanzibar, Omar remains vulnerably pinned by others' maps.

Sea, Maps, and Identity: Cartographic Threads in *The Dragonfly Sea*

Like Gurnah's novel based in Zanzibar, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's novel *The Dragonfly Sea* highlights the profound impact of the ocean on the islanders of Pate Island in Kenya. The sea has 'chisel[l]ed' the island (Owuor, 2019: 8), implying that its influence is woven throughout the island's history and culture and has given an identity to the place. In this novel, the sea serves as a means of understanding and mapping the world. The protagonists' experiences of the sea inform their perception of the world, which shapes their understanding of themselves and their place in it. The protagonists' continued reliance on maps underscores the importance of navigation and exploration in their journey from the Swahili coast as they encounter diverse cultures and landscapes. These exchanges not only include colonial encounters but also pre-, post-, and paracolonial exchanges that include the arrival of Asian traders and the exchange of goods and ideas, which have left a lasting imprint on the island. However, as in *By the Sea*, the relationship with maps is neither apolitical nor ahistorical. The child protagonist looks at the map for the first time and finds that her island is missing from it:

> On the map she looked at, there was no place marker for Pate Island. No colo[ur]r brown or colo[u]r green to suggest her own existence within the sea. So she wanted to know about places that could be rendered invisible. Muhidin told her that the best and biggest mountains of the earth lived under the sea, unseen (Owuor, 2019:43–4).

Through the lens of cartographic erasure, this passage encapsulates the young protagonist's struggles to orient her identity amid invisibility — both of her home island and, metaphorically, of herself. The absence of Pate Island from the classroom map, devoid of any denoting labels or demarcating colours, triggers a disquieting sense of non-recognition, as though her very home has been overlooked at sea. Her teacher and adopted father, Muhidin, explains this inadequacy by invoking the metaphor

of the unseen 'mountains living under the sea', underscoring maps as superficial two-dimensional projections in her school, unable to encapsulate the submerged topographies. He alludes to the volcanic Réunion and Maldives crests in the Indian Ocean, which, although sequestered underwater for millennia, eventually ruptured violently through volcanic eruptions to form islands, as we know them today (a fact also confirmed by geologists Bachelery et al., 2016). Ultimately, Muhidin argues no island geography can truthfully be distilled on a flat surface, given its exposed terrain merely represents the observable superficies undergirded by far vaster geological histories still 'made invisible'.

This absence is, however, very hurtful to the child protagonist because 'belonging required a map' (Owuor, 2019: 66) and, thus, geographical facts cannot explain away the erasure. The maps give people not only a piece of land but also the ability to name the regions around them. Later, when she is studying nautical sciences in China, her classmates debate the names of the *Indian* Ocean. Her Indian classmate underlined the 'Indian' in the name to others — 'It is not for nothing that the ocean is called Indian' (Owuor, 2019: 288) — to ultimately claim the whole of the ocean for themselves. Ayaana insists on 'Ziwa Kuu', the Kiswahili name, an Indonesian classmate on 'Ratnakara' (289), and the Chinese professor ends the discussion by shouting on top of everyone else 'The Western Ocean! You are in China' (289). Consequently, being on maps not only enables representation but, more importantly, highlights the ability to name — and for one's names of places to be accepted in the wider world. If she cannot find her island on the world map, who will respect her legitimacy to rename the ocean?

This question has two major consequences for our discussion. First, this observation not only intimates the intrinsic correlation between mapping and perspective but also underscores the inherent subjectivity embedded within cartographic representations. Despite the semblance of objectivity often attributed to maps, they are unavoidably shaped by the specific viewpoints from which they are constructed, masquerading universally in their presentation. It is evident that the passage, along with the discourse surrounding the act of naming, engages with the ocean from diverse vantage points, reflecting varying perspectives and interpretations. Second, the issue at hand extends beyond the colonial era, encompassing post-colonial dynamics as well. As noted by the author of *The Dragonfly Sea*, these dynamics have 'split into nation-states and cultural attachments' (Owuor, 2019: 289), which swiftly adopt imperial characteristics. This phenomenon is exemplified by the Chinese professor's insistence on universal acceptance of Chinese nomenclature, illustrating how post-colonial power structures can replicate colonial patterns of cultural dominance. The consequences of this interaction go beyond only naming — Ayaana soon realises

the Chinese interests in the Swahili seas are also domineering. She recognises that the vessel she was aboard to travel to China was engaged in the illicit importation of wildlife from Africa, and consequently, her highly publicised voyage to China (replicating Ming-dynasty travels between the two regions) served as a strategic diversion to deflect media attention from this unlawful trade. Ayaana ultimately abandons her struggle for post-colonial solidarity among Indian Ocean countries, as she is 'overcome by the languidness of the present, the silenced and ruined who inhabited the present' (Owuor, 2019: 290). She observes that the ocean is now discussed in Mandarin and English — the languages of domination — rather than in Kiswahili, Gujarati, Malay, or Kipate, the languages of seafarers. This shift underscores that modern nation-states continue the imperial project of territorial control and rarely intend to return to cosmopolitan precolonial and paracolonial trade networks.[4]

By extension, Ayaana's own self-conception remains an ongoing charting between the continuing imperial expressions and her response to these hegemonic discourses. These responses include attempts at uplifting the cultural heritage of Pate Island's community against broader erasure — the elderly songs, the bequeathed spice, and flower cultivation by Ayaana's mother symbolising adaptation, the songs of the sea, and so forth (Kosgei, 2022). Ayaana and her adopted father and teacher, Muhidin, aim to regain their place in the Indian Ocean trade through the Swahili perspective, which has been overshadowed by dominating European colonial and contemporary post-colonial Asian voices. However, this search for their place — however broadly it may be understood — is not only motivated by an impersonal discursive desire to represent an assertive Africa more clearly in the Indian Ocean region. Ayaana and Muhidin's quest is, rather, a profoundly personal search for their identity, motivated by their emotional trauma of being orphaned. Their parents were lost (or escaped) to the turbulent crosscurrents of this exchange — Ayaana's father promised marriage to her mother, but soon abandoned her once she was pregnant to move to a far-off destination along the many coasts of the ocean. Muhidin's family perished on a ferry, and he was given as a 'punching bag and indentured servant' to his distant relatives (Owuor, 2019: 9). Thus, the protagonists' exploration of the Indian Ocean region and its seafaring traditions stems from a profound desire for self-knowledge. This quest is intrinsically linked to their recognition of the region's history of unequal exchanges, which they view as crucial to comprehending their own fragmented upbringing and identity.

Here, I also underline the use of the word 'quest' — search, pursuit, hunt — for their origin in the novel. Unlike Saleh Omar in *By the Sea,* these characters are not content to accept a geo-ethnic identity imposed on themselves because they belong

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[4] As noted by Dilip Menon in *Ocean as a Method*.

to the sea-faring community known for its travel and interaction all along the Indian Ocean. Living in a world temporally separated from European colonisation as well as spatially — by choosing to study in China and not looking to migrate to Europe — Ayaana looks eastward to the pre- and paracolonial contacts. A DNA test proves that she is indeed a descendant of the Chinese seamen lost along the Eastern coast of Africa. However, the contours of this new identity remain unclear and inexplicable. For example, Ayaana notes that, 'she did not have the lexicon, and she knew the fear of an inability to explain, to reclaim, and possess. She tried to speak of the poetry of sea lives, of the ceaseless ebb and flow of her people to other worlds — as traders, seekers, and teachers — as navigators, shipbuilders, archivists, and explorers — and their return' (Owuor, 2019: 289). Her description evokes the theme of the sea as a significant site of intellectual and creative engagement, and at the same time reflects the struggle to articulate the experiences and endeavours associated with the sea. The mention of 'the poetry of sea lives' and 'the ceaseless ebb and flow of her people' conveys a sense of interconnectedness and continuity, while the various roles attributed to '*her* people' (emphasis my own) highlight the need to underline the important engagement of Africans with the ocean. Her enumeration of diverse and multifaceted roles played by Africans — 'traders, seekers, and teachers; as navigators, shipbuilders, archivists, and explorers', encompasses both practical and intellectual roles. To her horror, however, her classmate reduces this long and important enumeration to one word: 'slaves' (Owuor, 2019: 289). As the post-colonial dynamics of identity evolve, much like Saleh Omar's experience of racialisation and exclusion from Indian Ocean travel, the protagonists of this novel also emphasise the necessity of embarking on a quest — a prolonged and arduous search for answers. This quest underscores the enduring impact of colonial and post-colonial frameworks that continue to shape and constrain identities and mobility within the region. A good illustration of Muhidin's prolonged engagement with the sea is as follows:

> He dredged dark nooks in port cities, buying, bartering, stealing, and scrounging for maps and riddles. He scoured arcane notions, hoping to signpost existence. Destination: certainty. In this quest, Muhidin rubbed skin with both man and matter, and, finally, they, not the sea, would rip the fabric of his being (Owuor, 2019: 9–10).

In this passage, Muhidin's quest for maps and riddles transcends mere geographical exploration, embodying a profound search for identity and existential purpose. Having experienced early familial loss and subsequent servitude (Owuor, 2019: 9), Muhidin seeks maps and riddles to orient a sense of self that human relationships have failed to provide. The text's emphasis on Muhidin's methods of acquisition — 'buying,

bartering, stealing, and scrounging' — underscores the vital importance he ascribes to these artefacts. In this context, maps evolve beyond their utilitarian function as wayfinding tools to become totemic objects imbued with the power to unlock deeper truths about Muhidin's environment. This shift from the utilitarian function is underscored by the juxtaposition of maps and riddles, emphasising that interpreting a map is akin to solving riddles. By 'scour[ing] arcane notions', Muhidin engages not only with geographic space but also with the cultural ideas, histories, and knowledge systems originating from the diverse corners of the Indian Ocean world — Persian poetry, Quranic Arabic, and Bollywood.

This quest has the potential to 'rip the fabric of his being', indicating the transformative and potentially destabilising nature of confronting fundamental questions of existence and identity. Bereft of social moorings, he invests these maps with the power to reorder understanding of his place in the world. As Muhidin scrutinises territories represented on these maps that are, in contemporary times, obscured in the crevices of imperial narratives, he works to resituate his own ongoing self-conception in relation to these rediscovered (and non-colonial and non-imperial) geographies, stories, and ways of knowing edged out of hegemonic discourse. Thus, he invites the obvious question: will he finally find the island where he will at last belong? Will he, like Sinbad before him, find the mountain of Sapphire and finally retire as a rich seaman?

Critical debates around post-colonial cartography, counter-mapping, and indigenous formulations of place emphasise maps' political and sociocultural implications beyond simple directionality (Huggan, 1989; Lauret, 2011). Similarly, for the orphaned Muhidin, maps represent not only possibility and agency but also a means of locating oneself in dialogue with marginalised pasts. Muhidin's quest ends in Alexandria, where a vendor 'avoided contact with [his] skin' (Owuor, 2019: 10) and called him Abd (slave) (10). With a heavy heart, he returns to the place where he was born — Pate Island — as his quest remains unanswered: 'As for the yellow-brown parchment [an old map] Muhidin breathed on, today he was certain of only two things: all it offered was that he had it, and, like everything else he touched, it was crumbling before he could decipher it' (Owuor, 2019: 14). The 'yellow-brown parchment' map that Muhidin physically handles intimates the document's antiquity and the promise of obscured non-colonial wisdom that can purportedly be unlocked through deciphering it.

Yet the map's advanced age also conveys its material fragility, as Muhidin witnesses its gradual disintegration. This deterioration functions as a metaphor evidencing both the ephemeral nature of human understanding and the relentless forward momentum of temporality that, according to Muhidin, continues to deny Africans on the East

African littoral an equal control and right of navigation of the Indian Ocean. Indeed, although the parchment chart's contents remain illegible to Muhidin at this moment, breathing life into its fibres and contours remains essential. He continues to touch this map to seek a tactile connection between his skin and the surface of the image as if creating a sensuous interaction that signifies possession of the represented space. Hence, in handling the map, Muhidin grasps the possession of not only the physical artefact, but also the conceptual territory denoted therein; the protagonist hopes that the simple fact of having the map will offer answers to his quest and, ultimately, a sense of belonging. However, the document crumbles in Muhidin's hands, even as he seeks to resituate himself through it, illustrating how marginalised groups often struggle to locate themselves and their histories amid the lacunae of hegemonic cultural narratives literally inscribed onto maps. This metaphorical crumbling highlights the difficulties in reclaiming and redefining identity against the backdrop of dominant exclusionary historical narratives, illustrating the broader struggles of post-colonial identity formation.

Conclusion

In examining Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea* and Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea*, this article has explored the multifaceted role of maps in shaping post-colonial identities within the Western Indian Ocean. Both novels utilise maps not merely as remnants of colonial imposition but as dynamic artefacts that encapsulate the complex interplay between geography, identity, and resistance, and consequently require engagement in post-colonial terms.

In *By the Sea*, Gurnah illustrates how maps serve as a medium for characters like Saleh Omar to engage with their colonial past. The novel portrays maps as possessing a degree of agency capable of both oppressing and offering pathways for self-discovery. Omar's interactions with maps highlight the enduring impact of colonial cartography on post-colonial identity formation, as he grapples with the imposed racial and geographical boundaries that continue to shape his reality. The novel underscores the tension between the imposed colonial narratives and the characters' attempts to reclaim their identities within these constraints. Gurnah's *By the Sea* and Owuor's *The Dragonfly Sea* both explore the significance of maps, but they do so through distinct lenses. While Gurnah uses maps to engage with colonial histories, Owuor employs them as instruments in the protagonists' quest for identity. *The Dragonfly Sea* highlights the erasure and invisibility of certain geographies, such as Pate Island, from colonial maps. This omission reflects broader post-colonial struggles for representation and belonging. Ayaana's journey across the Indian Ocean to China is characterised by

her encounters with diverse cultures and histories. Her efforts to assert her identity against dominant post-colonial narratives mirror a wider quest for recognition and agency within the contemporary Indian Ocean world. Thus, both novels engage with the symbolic power of maps to reflect and shape identities, highlighting their role as contested sites of meaning. By presenting maps as both oppressive and liberating, the novels invite readers to reconsider the complex legacies of colonialism and the ongoing quest for identity and belonging in post-colonial contexts.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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