

Book Review

Popular Spaces: Space, Race, and Gender in Four Post-Apartheid Novels by Nafeesa Tarajee Nichols

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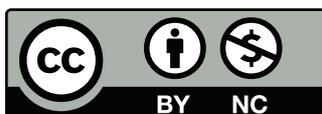
Review by *Nicklas Hällén*

Nichols's dissertation *Popular Spaces* is a comparative study of four South African novels published a little more than a decade after the fall of apartheid, which deal thematically with black urban life in Johannesburg. Nichols studies how the four novels construct space: how they represent the intersection between urban space and the shifting mechanics of power – which determine who has and who does not have full access to specific kinds of spaces, how black women's ways of moving through certain spaces is represented or ignored – and how the novels imagine new forms of spatial politics. This is a highly relevant topic and one that allows Nichols to explore topical and interesting issues related to political dynamics of social relations in democratic (but far from socially equal) post-Apartheid South Africa.

Space is a notoriously complex concept since it refers to something that is concrete and at the same is one of the most prevalent metaphors in English and many other (perhaps most, or all) languages. It is for example the main metaphor in most ways of conceptualising time. Nichols focuses specifically on how popular culture is involved in producing space, by creating opportunities for characters in novels to act in certain ways or negotiate their relations to people around them, for example. She does not accept a simple dichotomous relation between popular culture and elite culture, or the tendency to see popular culture

as primarily raw material for anthropological observations and therefore offers a sophisticated and complex theoretical approach that is both interesting and impressive. She does this partly by using the concept of the “kwaito aesthetic”, inspired to an extent by researchers studying the popular musical genre kwaito. She should however be credited by developing this concept as a useful and interesting concept within literary studies, which is one of the major contributions of her dissertation.

Nichols argues very interestingly that music creates space, and seems to mean that it does so by altering the social “dynamic” between people. In other words, if the configuration of relations between people changes, space is created. Needless to say, in this context space is at least to some extent metaphorical. The word is however obviously used as a metaphor when Nichols writes that characters in a novel are “symbolic of the white racist pathology which does not want to welcome black South Africans into a space that has historically been reserved for white South Africans: purchasing power in the global economy” (185), or about how the revaluation of “the possibilities and implications of and for popular culture” centres on “the literary space” (207), and how black popular culture that does not invite a hegemonic gaze “defamiliarizes” and therefore shifts the dynamic of the “space” of this popular culture (209).



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Methodologically, Nichols reads for the silences of works, and studies ways in which certain perspectives and experiences are absent or underrepresented in the representation of everyday life in some of the novels she studies. This allows her to discuss the ways in which the hierarchies of social-political reality in post-apartheid South Africa continue to render black female subjectivity metaphorically invisible. It is less clear, however, to see how Nichols's purposes are benefited by her tendency to read the four novels as products of theoretical thinking about South African society. Though she also at times discusses them as cultural commodities and works of literature in a more traditional sense, this perspective leads to some blind spots in her analysis. For example, Nichols writes in the introduction that her main method is close reading. However, the ratio between close reading and

what I would like to call extrapolation in Nichols's analysis of passages from the texts is at times unevenly balanced toward the latter. As I use the word here, extrapolation refers to the tendency among academic writers to substitute textual analysis for the intellectual exercise of connecting meaning extracted from the texts with concepts developed in theoretical literature. The effect of this tendency is that the reader is left to do some of the interpretive work while the writer moves ahead and discusses how the passage s/he discusses can be understood through concepts used in academic literature about the spatial politics of urban life, for example. Nevertheless, Nichols's dissertation is a promising contribution to the field of African popular culture and will be of value to students of urban culture, popular literature (especially African chick lit) and music.