

**Leetsch, Jennifer. *Love and Space in Contemporary African Diasporic Women's Writing: Making Love, Making Worlds*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021. Pp 282. UK £101.86, US \$149.99 (hardcover). ISBN 9783030677534.**

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Using a tripartite structure, Jennifer Leetsch describes and analyses diasporic novels, poems and performances along the axes of space, love and textuality in her new book *Love and Space in Contemporary African Diasporic Women's Writing: Making Love, Making Worlds*. Leetsch is an expert in Anglophone literature and cultural studies who explores contemporary (diasporic) literature, culture and digital media from a feminist as well as a postcolonial perspective. Her focus in this study is mainly on female authors stemming from West/East Africa and the Caribbean. The introduction outlines why Leetsch has chosen Adichie, Oyeyemi, Smith, Patel and Shire for her analysis: their texts combine space and love in fruitful ways. They renegotiate socio-political, affective and ethical issues, thus transforming conditions of belonging in multiple sites (2-3).

Literature is a worldly force that impacts on the creation of the world, Leetsch proposes (1). Creating new worlds is, therefore, one aspect of literature. Once imagined, those worlds become a real possibility. Leetsch ponders over strategies that reconfigure post-colonial discourses. If, and when, the two realms of space and love fuse, they invite readers to rethink/reimagine paradigms that surround space, love, belonging and longing. Such unexpected re-conceptualizations of love are made possible by mapping spaces. Furthermore, Leetsch argues that her chosen texts constitute innovative ways of writing that draw attention to (migrant) women, who often are, and have been, excluded or muted. Her selection offers readers perspectives on love in contemporary African diasporic women's writing. Ultimately, these works problematize conventional depictions of desire and love by demonstrating that "writing the world" (2) can be done in more fluid and inclusive ways. Hence, we encounter an intriguing entanglement of the affiliative formation of worlds and love. The existing tension between everywhere and nowhere, home and displacement, is addressed (2). Leetsch's chosen diasporic writers share a desire to process totally rearranged spaces of the global present.

After introducing be/longing, she analyses the novel *Americanah*, in chapter two. Readers of the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* may already be familiar with Leetsch's interpretation of Adichie's novel in her article "Love, Limb-Loosener: Encounters in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*" (*JPRS* 2017). Even though this article has a similar structure and some of its content overlaps with her chapter "Routes of Desire: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie," in her book Leetsch adopts a broader African female diasporic perspective, focusing more on worlds and space.

In her 2017 novel *Americanah*, Adichie explicates the difference between African and American culture. *Americanah* tells the story of a young Nigerian woman, Ifemelu, who immigrated to the US, where she is confronted with being different. Leetsch's analysis shows that the text intertwines the personal with the political, jumping between disparate geographical spaces. Love and corruption in Nigeria, and racism in the US are addressed. The love story follows geographical, affective and textual routes of desire. We encounter an intricate interplay of longing and belonging. African, European and American spaces are connected (31). Love crosses borders and occasionally leaves cultural divides behind. In the section "Returns and Romance: It's just a love story" (57), Leetsch deepens the critique that lies at the heart of *Americanah*. The happy end extends beyond the confines of the text through a blog that escapes the boundaries of the novel. Conceptualizing love through space and vice versa, and through be/longing, facilitates complex but extremely important explications of love. Advocating for love means continuously questioning how assumptions about love are structurally and materially perpetuated, Leetsch suggests. Only then can love defy power systems and rupture everyday being (9).

Certainly, this also holds true for Smith's trilogy, which features in chapter three: "London lovers: Zadie Smith." Implicated deeply in the scripts of gender, class and racial power relations, again we encounter love as inherently politicized. Geographical spaces, affective and relational encounters, migratory, as well as diasporic urban identities and affiliations, are the themes that Leetsch examines. They shed light on sexual/intimate and romantic relationships. Readers will probably concur with her argument that the above novels constitute new ways of loving and being loved in our global 21<sup>st</sup> century world. Traditional topoi are interwoven into textures of love. Leetsch offers an interesting analysis of Smith's 2000 novel *White Teeth* that includes references to the poetry of Grace Nichols, too. Affective geographies illuminate how literary cities could result in us creatively reimagining the world. 'City spaces' are replaced by performative acts of 'worlding'. However troubled places might be, they radiate into the rest of the world (128).

Gothic antecedents are propelled into the postcolonial space of contemporary Britain in the fourth chapter, titled "Longing Elsewhere: Helen Oyeyemi." Leetsch analyses Helen Oyeyemi's 2009 novel *White is for Witching*. She writes that postcolonial variations of the gothic take up a narrative form that pays attention to how borders are shored up and how distinctions between home and not-home are maintained (142). Oyeyemi "messes up good old fairy tales (137), which is apparent in *White is for Witching*. Leetsch discusses imaginaries of love in the sub-section "Queer Desire, Queer Belonging: A Vampire in Love." She suggests that Oyeyemi's novel creates its own queer vampiric love story, which refuses to adhere to the established world order and to the persecution of difference. Through the trope of the vampire other homes and worlds are no longer out of reach when they slowly begin to capture our imagination. This enables both queer love and 'unhomeliness' to find a home elsewhere.

Innovative texts of love and worlds are presented in chapter five, “Opening World(I)ds: Warsan Shire and Shailja Patel.” Leetsch reads their works as entangled accounts of diaspora, traumata and female resistance. Oceans are supplemented with digital and performative spaces. We notice that the watery space of different oceans, which forms the last figuration that Leetsch examines, is another crucial space.

*Love and Space in Contemporary African Diasporic Women’s Writing: Making Love, Making Worlds* is a well-researched book, which will be of interest to scholars, students, and researchers of African diasporic literature, gender and love studies. Drawing on numerous diasporic writers, Leetsch guides readers into different worlds. She considers several configurations of love. Heterosexual romance between a woman and a man in *Americanah*, non-heteronormative family constructions in *White Teeth*, concealed homoerotic desire between two females in *NW*, obsessive friendship amongst women in *Swing Time*, and more explicit erotic desire in *White is for Witching*. These different formations of love make their appearance in Patel and Shire, too, even though love is more reparative in their works. They use displacement for their exploration of sexuality, desire and love (203). Emotionally, her study is not easy to digest. Slavery and traumata echo through oceanic imagery, and through haunted, deserted or destroyed spaces. But oceans also connect people and countries. A traumatic space may turn into a loving place, a home of (be-)longing. Through intimate physical acts, networks and affiliations, new spatial imaginaries are being created, or reactivated, in our internal and external worlds.

Leetsch’s book makes a significant contribution to understanding the impact of colonialism and migration on women’s writing. It offers timely, alternative perspectives that could broaden discussions about racism, African diaspora and black romance/love in the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*. Her scholarly work, engaging style, carefully selected quotes/passages written by major authors, thoughtful analyses, critical reading of seminal works and literary expertise lend credence to her arguments. Of course, Leetsch is not the only author who has written a book that concerns itself with African diaspora. However, more recent publications of African diasporic female writers do not especially address love and its link to space. Moreover, they do not focus on critical love studies, cultures of migration, diaspora and refuge that can be imagined as other worlds. Hence, the current book offers a novel perspective by systematically connecting all these areas, which will be of interest to readers of love studies. Finally, in spite of the preponderance of trauma, loss, racism and violence, the reader may nevertheless experience the connective power of love and reparative worlds.

## References

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