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Narrative Pathways to the Environment

On Erin James's Econarratology

Erin James: *The Storyworld Accord. Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives*. Lincoln / London: University of Nebraska Press 2015 (= Frontiers of Narrative Series). 308 pp. USD 60.00. ISBN 978-0-8032-4398-9

Goals and Structure

The Storyworld Accord is an ambitious and timely project, seeking to bridge three disciplinary divides within literary and narrative studies: first, the divide between narratology and ecocriticism, two fields that (as James writes in the introduction) "despite many possible points of dialogue, [...] have thus far said little to one another" (p. 3). The second divide addressed by the book is internal to contemporary narratology: it separates contextualist and cognitive theories – i.e., approaches to narrative that focus, respectively, on the interaction between narrative form and socio-historical context, and narrative form and readers' cognitive-level processing of stories. Third, James's book is part of an ongoing effort to cross-fertilize ecocriticism with postcolonial studies.

This last dimension of James's project offers a way into the book as a whole. Ecocriticism is well known for its bias towards realistic (and often nonfictional) texts that engage with the environment at the level of theme and content. But the toolbox of ecocriticism is of limited utility when dealing with narratives that *do not* overtly thematize the environment. James suggests that a shift from questions of content and subject-matter to questions of formal choices and strategies can help ecocriticism come to terms with these narratives. This is where narrative theory comes into play: "focusing on structures – narrative structures in particular – opens up ecocritical discourse to a set of texts that had previously been illegible to ecocritics" (p. 14). Among these texts is a wide array of postcolonial narratives that explore humans' relationship with the environment more subtly, but no less insightfully (claims James), than canonical Western nature writing. The book's four central chapters are devoted to works by authors from two postcolonial regions: the Caribbean (and specifically Trinidad) and Nigeria. These works are Sam Selvon's *A Brighter Sun* (1952) and *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) in chapter 2; Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy* (1985) in chapter 3; V. S. Naipaul's Indian travelogues, *An Area of Darkness* (1964) and *India. A Million Mutinies Now*

(1990), in chapter 4; and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), along with its two sequels, in chapter 5.

Contextualist and Cognitive Approaches to Narrative Space

The focus on two geographical areas allows James to demonstrate the flexibility of her self-styled 'econarratological' approach without sacrificing the overall consistency of the corpus. Quoting Susan Lanser, Ansgar Nünning, and Gerald Prince (among others), James positions her book in a relatively recent tradition of 'contextualist' narratology that looks at the intersection of narrative strategies and historical or ideological factors. James's reconstruction of the socio-cultural context from which her case studies (and their authors) originate is always informative and nuanced, and genuinely adds to the narratological analysis. Though James's commentary touches on several narratological topics (from free indirect discourse to unreliable narration), spatiality remains a focal point throughout. The underlying assumption is that the representation of narrative space reflects "site- and culture-specific information" (p. 29), and is – therefore – an important test bed for a contextualist, econarratological analysis. The emphasis falls on the subjective experience of space, which – James argues – narrative is uniquely able to encapsulate and convey. Stories are thus ideal tools to capture the inextricable link between a culture's beliefs, the natural setting in which its members live, and their subjective perception of the world. In this way, James opens up the notion of 'environment' to human experience and action, going against the grain of dualistic distinctions between nature and the human world: the environment is not a passive backdrop separate from human subjectivity, but it is deeply intertwined with cultural meanings and – ultimately – with our own experiencing bodies. This shift is consistent with theorizations of the notion of 'place' in human geography, though James – unlike other narratologists who have recently turned to the spatial dimension of narrative (Easterlin 2012, chap. 3; Caracciolo 2013) – does not specifically foreground this concept.

More importantly, however, space serves as the lynchpin between James's contextualist agenda and recent work in cognitive approaches to narrative. This aspect of the book's argument deserves special attention. James leverages the notion of 'storyworld' – introduced by David Herman in *Story Logic* (2002) – to call attention to the psychological activity through which readers turn a narrative text into a mental model that they update in the course of their engagement with the story. Spatial references are particularly important to storyworlds because they ensure a certain degree of coherence in the mental model, which becomes a semiautonomous ontological domain (hence the 'world' metaphor). In chapter 2, for example, James makes good use of Herman's distinction between topological and projective spatial references in narrative – i.e., spatial representations that offer a bird's-eye view of the storyworld or that, on the contrary, project the reader into specific locations. Equally interesting is chapter 4, where James

builds on Stacy Alaimo's (2010) materialist account of the body to argue that the representation of olfactory sensations in narrative may be more effective than vision in inducing a feeling of immersion in storyworlds (p. 155).

Immersion and the Effects of Reading Narrative

The sense of physical presence in storyworlds is a centerpiece of James's analyses; the assumption is that readers may feel 'immersed' in or 'transported' to storyworlds as if they were realities to be experienced in a first-person way. These phenomena are being actively investigated by narratologists of the cognitive stripe – and it is on this body of work that James draws. In essence, her argument is that readers' immersion in the storyworlds of postcolonial narratives opens up a channel of intercultural communication, exposing readers (and particularly Western readers) to the beliefs and values of the communities on which the text centers. James captures these beliefs and values under Lawrence Buell's (1995) heading of "environmental imagination", suggesting that narratives can familiarize readers with imaginations different from – and potentially contradictory with – their own. Through immersion, narrative is thus able to communicate "what it is like to experience various environments across cultures" (p. 214). Readers can, for example, experience London from the estranged and estranging viewpoint of a group of black immigrants (in Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*), or connect with the perspective of oppressed minorities in the Niger Delta (in Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*). The link between immersion and these novels' political agenda becomes quite explicit in James's analysis: "I suggest that Saro-Wiwa's call to international action in *Sozaboy* is all the more powerful because of the narrative's immersive potential" (p. 120). This call to action is at the root of what James calls a "storyworld accord", and the immersive effects of spatial references in narrative play a particularly significant role in it.

While interesting, this appeal to cognitive-narratological work on immersion is not entirely unproblematic. James appears to conflate two processes that should be carefully kept distinct: the mental modeling of narrative space and the feeling of immersion or physical presence in storyworlds. The former is integral part of narrative comprehension (as James points out); but it is also a highly schematic and largely non-conscious process that has little to do with narrative *experience*: we model storyworlds just as we mentally model the route to the closest supermarket when we're giving directions to someone – but it seems wrong to claim that in the latter scenario we necessarily (or even typically) become immersed in our own mental model of the route. Immersion is an entirely optional phenomenon that may or may not arise in readers' experience, depending on a large number of factors – including the quality of textual cues (Kuzmičová 2012) and readers' predisposition for absorption (Wild et al. 1995). By contrast, James tends to present immersion as an indispensable component of narrative under-

standing, something that readers *must* do in order to comprehend a given narrative: "To understand a narrative [...] we *must* lose ourselves in the same environment and experiences as a narrative's characters" (p. x, emphasis in the original); "[to] interpret a narrative, readers *must* model and imaginatively transport themselves to alternative worlds" (p. 213, emphasis in the original).

Admittedly, the distinction between cognitive-level modeling and experienced feelings of immersion does not invalidate James's argument about the political potential of postcolonial narratives, but it complicates this argument in important ways. Empirical studies of so-called 'narrative persuasion' in social psychology (e.g., Green and Brock 2000) point to a correlation between attitude change in response to narrative and the degree to which readers become involved in the narrative itself: the stronger the involvement (including the immersion), the more likely readers will be to revise their views on a particular topic. But this remains a possibility, not an obligation, and it ultimately depends on readers as well as on the text itself. Conceivably, readers who have the *least* tendency to empathize with a particular real-world situation (e.g., the condition of oppressed minorities in the Niger Delta) will also be the least likely to immerse themselves in a fictional representation of these minorities, thus undermining the effects of James's 'storyworld accord'. These conceptual difficulties call for a more careful examination of the ethical effects of reading fiction – a point that James picks up in the conclusion (in discussing Suzanne Keen's *Empathy and the Novel* [2007]) but would deserve to be explored more systematically going forward.

In this last chapter, we read that storyworlds "can foster respect for comparison, difference, and subjectivity, and that respect, in turn, can foster more sensitive and informed discussions of environments and environmental policies" (p. 208). A lot hinges on the verb 'can', however. Narrative cannot force readers to do anything, as James admits. My sense is that, if narrative does manage to change their views and perception of the environment, it is through more complex routes than the mere feeling of physical presence in storyworlds. To account more fully for narrative persuasion, we'd have to turn to empathy and sympathy for characters and narrative's capacity to generate interest through the instabilities of its progression. James argues that the notion of 'storyworld' reflects the immersive potential of narrative more accurately than the structuralist emphasis on 'story' (cf. p. 209). However, this approach leaves the temporal development of narrative on the sidelines – a problematic move, because narrative's rhetorical power is always tied to the emotional dynamics created by the plot. Just like readers' experience of narrative space, these dynamics and their effects on readers' overall engagement can and should be investigated through the lens of the mind sciences.

Conclusion

It would be unfair to criticize James for not saying more about these other dimensions in what is already a rich and nuanced study. But my feeling is that econarratology will have to delve deeper into cognitive-level responses to narrative and their textual underpinnings in order to fully come to terms with how readers' environmental imagination may be swayed by stories. As Nancy Easterlin writes in a passage quoted by James on p. 31, "ecocritics should give thorough and thoughtful consideration to how and why we construct the world the way we do" (2012, 99). James's book is a first, and important, step in this direction, and the triangulation of postcolonial studies, cognitive narratology, and ecocriticism appears particularly promising. Econarratology stands to make a significant contribution to literary and narrative studies, but only if the insights offered in *The Storyworld Accord* can be extended vis-à-vis a larger corpus and a broader set of theoretical concerns.

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