

“Ah, what an age it is, when to speak of trees is almost a crime:” national landscapes and identities in the fiction of Nadine Gordimer.

Jemima Middleton MDDJEM001

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Abstract

In this study, I will explore the ways in which Nadine Gordimer engages with the natural world in three of her novels: *The Conservationist* (1974), *July's People* (1981), and *No Time Like the Present* (2012). I argue for the importance of the relationship in her work, between the natural landscapes of South Africa and the responsibility of the author in 'meaning-making.' This is a literary study that brings elements of postcolonial ecocriticism into play. In particular, I will explore *how* and *why* she chooses to "speak of trees" at all. Gordimer demonstrates that there is a definitive agency in the non-human world that presses against the reductive binary of 'human' versus 'natural' environments. Her fiction highlights the fact that flattening the natural world into a series of symbols is overly simplistic and does not engage sufficiently with the political: a responsibility that she takes upon herself. In this study I will be arguing that Gordimer achieves a profound political meditation by creating meaning from a variety of natural landscapes, making use of images rather than symbols.

I am particularly intrigued by the ways in which Gordimer imagines the landscape as a series of sign systems, whose various shifts and changes reflect and illustrate wider systemic shifts in South Africa. In the novels that I will examine, Gordimer demonstrates, by way of physical, visceral engagement with various landscapes, that historical and contemporary systemic shifts must be taken into account in order truly to understand the complexity of national identities in her country. The image of the trees ties poetry, politics and the environment together, in particular to witness a distinctive shift in political sign systems, and the identity crises that occur as a result.

In *The Conservationist*, Gordimer takes issue with misplaced obsessions with autochthony and heritage, whilst simultaneously investing in the lexical field of botanical names and a fine delineation of literary ecology: the novel both takes apart and preserves a sense of how the landscape can be entwined in a cultivation of identity. In my examination of *July's People*, I will consider the matter and poetics of the interregnum via the question of "the bush": the environment, landscape and ecosystem contained or in fact uncontained by this term are at the heart of the shift in sign systems that plays out in the novel. The bush in *July's People* is a heterotopia: an 'other' place that signifies many different meanings, but simultaneously signifies, in the novel, a *shift* in an entire system of signs. In my final chapter, on *No Time Like the Present*, I will be continuing to examine the 'language' of trees in Gordimer's work—particularly noting the terminology of trees and plants to signify, and add value to the study of identity and the indigenous versus the alien

Contents

Introduction

National Landscapes and Identities in Gordimer's fiction3

Chapter 1

"The Trouble with Roots:" Authentic Identity and Claims to the Earth in
The Conservationist.....16

Chapter 2

"The real fantasies of the bush:" Shifting Patterns of Meaning in *July's
People*.....29

Chapter 3

Writing the Alien in *No Time Like the Present*.....46

Conclusion

Gordimer's Cultivating of Identities in the "Plain Dirt Sense".....62

References.....69

Introduction

Ah, what an age it is
When to speak of trees is almost a crime.
For it is a kind of silence about injustice.”¹

Being here: in a particular time and place. That is the existential position with particular implications for literature. [...] Brecht wrote of a time when ‘to speak of trees is almost a crime.’ Many of us have had such despairing thoughts while living and writing through such times, in such places. [...] Some of us have seen our books lie for years unread in our own countries, banned, and we have gone on writing. Many writers have been imprisoned. Looking at Africa alone- Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Jack Mapanje, in their countries, and in my own country, South Africa, Jeremy Cronin, Mongane Wally Serote, Breyten Breytenbach, Dennis Brutus, Jaki Seroke; all these went to prison for the courage shown in their lives, and have continued to take the right, as poets, to speak of trees.²

In her essay, ‘Turning the Page,’ (published 1992, taken from her lecture, ‘Writing and Being,’ 1991) Nadine Gordimer quotes from Bertolt Brecht’s 1959 poem, ‘To Posterity,’ for two reasons: it reminds the reader of the problem of censorship, and it highlights the question of what the writer ‘should’ be writing about. In his poem, Brecht defends the concept of ‘speaking of trees’ during an epoch of political and social strife: simultaneously, he criticizes silence, and the denial of the injustice of the “dark ages” in which he is writing. The poem also carries a caution, reminding the reader to make the most of that precious commodity, “time [...] / Which on earth was given me,” and warns against looking “upon nature with impatience” (Brecht, 1959:173).

In this study, I will be examining the ways in which Gordimer engages with the natural world, and I will explore *how* and *why* she chooses to “speak of trees” in her work. In ‘Writing and Being,’ Gordimer uses Brecht’s poem as a platform from which to posit her own opinion of the writer’s true purpose: to conduct an

¹ Bertolt Brecht, 1959. ‘To Posterity,’ in *Selected Poems*, trans. H. R. Hays. Grove Press: 173.

² Nadine Gordimer. [1991] 1992. ‘Turning the Page: African Writers on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century.’ *Transition*. No. 56. pp. 4-10. Indiana University Press on behalf of the Hutchins Center for African and African American Research at Harvard University.

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“exploration of the particular meaning that being has taken on in his or her time and place” (Gordimer, 1991:5). This cultivation of meaning is linked intrinsically, as I will argue, to Gordimer’s engagement with a variety of South African landscapes. Crucially, she demonstrates that there is a certain agency in the non-human world that presses against the too-simplistic binary of ‘human’ versus ‘natural’ environments. It is too reductive to harvest meaning from the landscape through a series of symbols. Her earlier work conveys a subtle and yet shrewd engagement with the meaning-making of the natural world, and its inscrutability, resulting in a complex and far-reaching commentary, and a profound political meditation. As this study will show, Gordimer’s final literary contributions, in their more schematic, binaristic engagements with the natural world, highlight the necessity for a very careful exploration of the capacity of the South African landscape for meaning-making, and the avoidance of ‘speaking of trees’ in a purely symbolic sense.

I am particularly intrigued by the ways in which Gordimer imagines the landscape as a series of sign systems, whose various shifts and changes reflect and illustrate wider systemic shifts in South Africa. I will be using Gayatri Spivak’s theory of sign systems to examine the various landscapes of Gordimer’s novels, particularly noting how landscapes- notably the South African bush, farm, and post-Apartheid suburb- are imagined as spaces in which there occurs, repeatedly, a “breaking and relinking” of an existing “ ‘continous sign-chain.’”³

In JM Coetzee’s, *White Writing* (1988), he asks the question “is there a language in which people of European identity, or if not of European identity, then of a highly problematical South African-colonial identity, can speak to Africa and be spoken to by Africa?” He also describes this ‘Africa’ as “a land of rock and sun, not of soil and water [...] The landscape remains alien, impenetrable, until a language is found in which to win it, speak it, represent it [...] English carries echoes of a very different natural world.”⁴ In this study, I will be arguing that Gordimer engages with both of Coetzee’s main points: that of a “highly problematical South African-colonial identity” (which encompasses, in her later work, a highly complex post-Apartheid identity as well), and of the desire to find a language with which to speak to the

³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 1988. ‘Deconstructing Historiography.’ In *Selected Subaltern Studies*. ed. Ranjit Suha. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press. 5. Spivak is referring to Nietzsche’s use of the term, which can be found in Friedrich Nietzsche. 1969. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Tr. Walter J. Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books. 77, 80.

⁴ J.M. Coetzee. 1988. *White Writing*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Sandton: Radix. 8.

landscape of Africa, to render it less ‘alien.’ In Gordimer’s work, I will argue, the “soil and water” are integral to any engagement with the South African landscape, and South African identity. The concept of a ‘national landscape’ is highly problematic in a country whose systems of signs and their meanings is constantly shifting. Svend Erik Larson outlines the problems of the so-called “functions of a national landscape,” all of which are difficult to reconcile in a South African context:

The national landscape, in its material-symbolic complexity, serves four basic ideological functions in the makeup of national identity: (1) it gives *unity* to people and place, (2) it provides this unity with a *unique* character, (3) it provides people and place with a common *origin*, (4) it *naturalizes* that unity and that origin.⁵

This theory is undone by Gordimer, whose work demonstrates, by way of physical, visceral engagement with various landscapes, that historical and contemporary systemic shifts must be taken into account in order truly to understand the complexity of national identities in her country. As the Comaroffs point out in their study, “identity struggles” in South Africa are tied inherently to issues of land, because of a persistent grammar of “essence, of innate substance,” a sense of a *natural, natal* link between humans and the earth.⁶ This rhetoric renders the ‘formula’ for a ‘national identity’ redundant in a country whose ‘identity’ is neither singular nor static.

In one of Pablo Neruda’s poems from *Canto General* (1950), singled out by DeLoughrey and Handley in their study, *Postcolonial Ecologies* (2011), there is a striking image of a tree inscribed with the bodily trauma of repressed and subjugated people: “nutrido por muertos desnudos,/muertos azotados y heridos [nourished by naked corpses,/corpses scourged and wounded]...sus raices comieron sangre/y extrajo lagrimas del suelo [its roots consumed in blood,/And it extracted tears from the soil.]”⁷ The struggle that links environment to man, and which implies the agency of nature as witness to historical trauma, “foregrounds an ancestral relationship to place and the challenges posed by its discursive recuperation” (DeLoughrey and Handley, 2011:4-5). The fight for justice inscribed on Neruda’s tree is inscribed in a different manner

⁵ Svend Erik Larson. 2005. ‘The national landscape – national identity or post-colonial experience?’ *European Review*. Vol.13. Issue 02. 297.

⁶ Jean Comaroff & John Comaroff. 2001. ‘Naturing the Nation: aliens, apocalypse and the postcolonial state.’ *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3. 634.

⁷ Pablo Neruda, 2000. *Canto General*, trans. Jack Schmitt. Berkeley: University of California Press, 478/71, 478/72; DeLoughrey and Handley, 2011: 4-5.

in the “writing of trees” that Gordimer refers to: she also quotes Mongane Wally Serote in her lecture, describing him as “the South African poet and fighter for justice and peace in our country.” Poetry can be inscribed with trauma, just as the landscape is.

Here, the ‘trees’ stand for more than just ‘ephemera’ to Gordimer: they represent a fight for a particular kind of *justice*, but they are also silent, nonhuman witnesses to the fight, and the struggle. There is an undeniable connection between the human and the natural, beyond a simplistic metaphorical level, and I would argue that particularly in a South African context, “everything about human history” as Said says, “is rooted in the earth” (Said, 1994:5), as trees are. Justice- environmental, political, social- as a matter of necessity, may have to begin with imagination, with poetry: “if there is anything that radically distinguishes the imagination of anti-imperialism, it is the primacy of the geographical in it. [...] Because of the presence of the colonizing outsider, the land is recoverable at first only through imagination” (Said, 1994:77).

Said’s assertion, and Gordimer’s trees, also point towards a crucial relationship that reappears throughout the latter writer’s fiction: the relationship between humans and the natural world. Gordimer uses the language and rhetoric of nature to explore many aspects of this relationship, from the “cultivation” of identity in terms of gardening, to the responsibility of man towards planet Earth, to the problem of conservation in South Africa and to the link between the ‘nature’ and the human ‘Other.’ The image of the trees ties poetry, politics and the environment together, in particular to witness a distinctive shift in political sign systems, and the identity crises that occur as a result. In this thesis I will be arguing for a better understanding of the ways in which Gordimer’s work inhabits the environment to enable a rethinking of social and political justice: the tree is not simply a metaphor (although its symbolic capacity will prove very useful). It is a tool for a more profound, metaphysical engagement with the writing of both the human and the natural. The language and rhetoric of environment is intertwined with the language and rhetoric of injustice and repression; but more than that, the environment plays an active role in Gordimer’s texts. Not only is the human described in terms of nature, but nature is a narrative substrate in itself, operating in various ways across the three novels that I will be examining.

I will be looking at three of Gordimer's fictional works, primarily, with reference to some of her other writings and speeches. The literary analysis of these works- *The Conservationist* (1974), *July's People* (1981), and *No Time Like the Present* (2012) - will be carried out with the aim of highlighting Gordimer's engagement with shifting sign systems, and the various ways in which she deals with cultivation of identity in relation to the theme of justice. Gordimer's characters engage with the environment in varying ways, and the environment 'engages back': Gordimer places her characters under duress, either under the threat of great change, during the process of change, or following a great change. The resulting confusion of social identities is both reflected in and directly linked to the environments in which the characters find themselves. I will be looking at these environments as they are imagined in Gordimer's fiction- from the farm, to the bush, to the leafy suburb, these locations serve a far greater purpose than mere scenic apparatus.

Before elaborating on the structure of this thesis, it is worth explaining a few of the key terms that will appear throughout. This is a literary study, but it makes use of the concerns of a range of 'crossover' disciplines, and in particular, it refers to the methodology of ecocriticism in certain ways. The terms 'ecocriticism' and 'environmental justice' are heavily weighted and potentially ambiguous. They also carry the risk of arriving on the scene with a distinctly Western entourage of theoretical backing. As a body of work, ecocriticism, the working definition of which can be broken down to "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996:xviii), has been a predominantly Western discipline in that it seems to ignore texts emerging from the global south, and the rhetoric is frequently American or European in character and in origin. It is important here to make the distinction between this type of theoretical methodology and the type that falls under the label of *postcolonial* ecocriticism. The former tends towards an ahistorical and apolitical methodology that risks ignoring histories of 'Othering,' repression of minorities and the 'unrooting' of marginalised peoples. Caminero-Santangelo and Myers refer to this as "first-wave ecocriticism" that "has a tendency to erase histories of indigenous peoples, of colonial conquests, and of migrations that disrupted notions of wilderness and rooted dwelling" (2011: 4). It is essential, methodologically, that any ecocritical analysis must conduct a conversation between the environment and history, in order to avoid this erasure: "the decoupling

of nature and history has helped to mystify colonialism's histories of forced migration, suffering, and human violence" (DeLoughrey and Handley, 2011:4).

Furthermore, there is in the existing body of ecocritical work an overly aestheticized treatment of nature that ignores any potential agency in the environment and acknowledges simply its existence within literary works for its own sake, in what has been described as an "escapist pastoral impulse," to echo the earlier descriptions by Nadine Gordimer herself (Huggan & Tiffin, 2009:11). The categorising and canonising of nature is equally unhelpful: it disregards the historical marginalising of both the natural world and the communities of people living within it: "the romanticization of nature as a space of simplicity, innocence, and peace that Raymond Williams notes as characteristic of 'the country' no more slowed the process of ecophobia than did the notion of 'the Noble Savage' slow the genocide of colonized peoples in the New World."⁸

Gordimer is scathing about the romanticization of the African landscape, in particular, and she recalls her childhood confusion at the disparity between reality and representation: "I suppose it is a pity that as children we did not know what people like to talk of as 'the real Africa' – the Africa of proud black warriors and great jungle rivers and enormous silent nights, that anachronism of a country belonging to its own birds and beasts and savages which rouses such nostalgia."⁹ As Kathryn Wagner points out, "the [Gordimer] family lived near perpetually smouldering coal dumps which aroused in the young child 'the idea of Hades'" (Wagner 78), a far cry from the Edenic images that she saw in so-called ecocritical representations of her country. In Gordimer's fiction, she undermines consistently the misguided, 'sentimentalising' of the South African landscape: "the real fantasies of the bush delude more inventively than the romantic forests of Grimm and Disney" (Gordimer, 1981:195).

These ecocritical habits have led to what Camino-Santangelo describes as "ecoparochialism" and "spatial amnesia" (Nixon, 2005:236): such limited methodology simultaneously privileges and even legitimises colonial and imperial practices, whilst ignoring the idea of nature and environment as active in meaning-making. The earlier quotation from Said, and the excerpts from Gordimer's Nobel

⁸ Simon Estok. 2011. *Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: Reading Ecophobia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 7.

⁹ Nadine Gordimer, 1954. 'A South African Childhood: Allusions in a Landscape,' in *The New Yorker* (30), 16 October: pp.128-9.

lecture enable us to see that it *is* fruitful and in fact necessary to examine place and time together, because time is *written* on the land, so we are obliged as literary critics “to foreground a spatial imagination made possible by the experience defined geographically, [...] environmentally, in terms of wilderness or urban settings; genealogically, in linking communal ancestry to land; as well as phenomenologically, connected body to place” (DeLoughrey and Handley, 2011:4). I would go as far as to agree with DeLoughrey and Handley in describing the landscape and environment, particularly in South Africa, as ‘witness’ to history, endowing it with greater agency and authority within the discourse of ecocriticism. This takes the concept of the natural environment to a more profound discursive level; to control, destruct and repress environment and landscape is to conduct the same acts of injustice towards “collective memory” (DeLoughrey and Handley, 2011:8). Without a historical approach to ecocriticism, we lose the significance of this fact: “histories embedded in the land” are our tools with which to construct methodologies that examine “impact of empire and the anticolonial epistemologies it tries to suppress” (DeLoughrey and Handley, 2011:4).

Postcolonial ecocriticism purports to rectify the limited scope of this type of ahistorical methodology by emphasising a historicisation of ecological practice and the hand-in-hand approach to the study of environmental and human (in)justice. As Huggan and Tiffin point out, the imperial system was central to the defining and redefining of ecosystems across the world, as it “indirectly offered the first big push to control of the natural environment” whilst “the world was becoming smaller, mappable, predictable and less diversified” (Estok, 2011:7). It is, therefore, impossible to speak about one type of injustice without acknowledging the other (and, by implication, the “Other”):

Once invasion and settlement had been accomplished or at least once administrative structures had been set up, the environmental impacts of western attitudes to human being-in-the-world were facilitated or reinforced by the deliberate (or accidental) transport of animals, plants and peoples throughout the European empires, instigating widespread ecosystem change under conspicuously unequal power regimes. (Huggan & Tiffin, 2009:6)

Postcolonial ecocritics demand an “aesthetics committed to politics” (Cilano and DeLoughrey, 2007:84; Huggan and Tiffin, 2009:11) that acknowledges “the socio-political origins of environmental issues” and avoids the woefully “apolitical

tendencies of earlier forms of ecocriticism (Huggan & Tiffin, 2009:11). Even more importantly, for the purpose of this thesis, this “new-wave” of ecocriticism acknowledges the agency of environment in the understanding of social and political injustices: it is not restricted to the aesthetics of nature, or even nature as symbolic backdrop, but to the land and the earth “as self-standing agents, rather than support structures for human action, in the world” (Buell 1995; Armbruster and Wallace, 2001; Huggan and Tiffin, 2009:13). As I will argue in the case of Gordimer’s work, postcolonial ecocritics emphasise the importance of “drawing attention to [the environment’s] social and political usefulness, its capacity to set out symbolic guidelines for the material transformation of the world” (Huggan & Tiffin 2007; 2009:13).

Ecophobia is a term that is worth mentioning, if only to point out how unhelpful it is with regards to this study, because of its focus on the South African landscape. As a concept, ideology or attitude, ecophobia is defined as “contempt for the natural world” (Estok, 2011: 1). It is the rhetoric as well as the behaviour that emerges from the discourse of ecophobia which is useful in part, in that it mirrors and reiterates the rhetoric and sets of behaviours associated with social anxieties and fears, ‘Othering’ and ideological, social injustices such as xenophobia, sexism and racism. In the case of South Africa, racism and xenophobia have arguably overtaken ecophobia in terms of priority and national politics: a fact that is an example of environmental and human injustice in itself. Macdonald points out that, historically, “flora and fauna were often considered more important than the majority of the country’s population” (2002:1). In my analysis of Gordimer’s novels, I will examine the complex relationship between the idea of ‘heritage’ and particular plants and trees, that signify specific South African identities, with some problematic consequences. The rhetoric of conservation and of biological heritage in South Africa can be compared with the rhetoric used in the discourse of autochthony and exclusion, indicating a reversal of the theories of ecophobia that Estok alludes to in his writing.

In the eighteenth century, ‘conservation practices,’ such as the establishment of forest reserves, were carried out ostensibly with an agenda of protection and sustainability, but in fact “ a more manipulative and power-conscious interest in constructing a new landscape by planting trees or, conceivably, marking out reservations” (Grove, 1995:280, DeLoughrey and Handley, 2011:12).) The ‘mappability’ of the land was exploited: by implication, the spatial mutability of the

land's inhabitants was, as well. As Larson reminds us, this obsession with mapping the land has carried over into more contemporary conservation practices and into preoccupations with abstractions like 'heritage' and 'legacy:' "the attitude to, and the use of, the landscape in preservation and production are heavily influenced by invented European traditions construed in order to back-up the nation-states at home and, later on, to naturalize the colonies as genuine parts of these nation-states" (Larson, 2005:295).

And so there emerged a system of environmental injustice in South Africa with a historical tendency to be biased in its preference towards "the privileged." By the 1990s, by all accounts, conservationist practices tended to endorse the idea of "protecting nature"¹⁰ for the wealthy, and white. Those who did not fit into this category, i.e. the poor, and the African, were removed and excluded from such areas. The fears and anxieties I have referred to already, about the "Other," found their way into the rhetoric and policies of land distribution, because of a specific notion that "Africans were perceived as environmentally destructive competitors" (Carruthers, 1988:219, Khan, 2002:18). Thus, the "ideal protected natural area [...] catered to mobile, affluent visitors [...] from which the indigenous people were excluded" (Khan, 2002:18): this is the definition of environmental *injustice* (as well as systematic racism and xenophobia) in South Africa. There is, furthermore, the question of international image: Carruthers and Nixon¹¹ point out that the case of the Kruger National Park is one which highlights the efforts by the Apartheid government to 'show off their green fingers': "confronted with international condemnation when apartheid was imposed in 1948," the Park was the government's "primary showpiece—as evidence that South Africa belonged to the community of civilized nations" (Carruthers, 1988:86; Nixon, 2011:171). In this study, my examination of the bush will take into account very different historical significations of this South African biome, that is tied explicitly to political and racial factors: Njabulo Ndebele's essay on 'game lodge culture' will be particularly useful for this analysis. I will explain, by looking at different definitions of 'the bush' in a South African context, how this

¹⁰ Farieda Khan. 2002. 'The Roots of Environmental Racism and the Rise of Environmental Justice in the 1990s.' In *Environmental Justice in South Africa*. Ed. David A. McDonald. Athens: Ohio University Press; Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press. 17.

¹¹ Rob Nixon. c2011. 'Environmentalism and Postcolonialism.' In *Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa*. Ed. Byron Caminero-Santangelo & Garth Myers. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.

particular landscape is in itself a site for many layers of significance: it “emerges as a complex sign of the relation between physical surroundings and cultural identity” (Larson, 2005:295). The different ways that Gordimer’s characters engage with the bush reflect and expose shifts in sign systems and cultural identities, and as a space it can act both as “sanctuary and trespass” (Nixon, 2011:160) a point that is extremely poignant in the novels that I will examine. The bush is a “contradictory, lucrative, historically troubled space that both promises encounter with the ‘timeless’ Africa of charismatic megafauna and risks reinscribing the society’s dominant culture of nature as racially exclusive and inimical to political transformation” (Nixon, 2011:159-60).

So, just as first-wave ecocritics fell into the bias of a Eurocentric focus, so too did the conservation ideology of South Africa, and by the 1990s it had met with a global discourse of marginalisation and repression: the legacy of colonial society, “with its tendency to idealize and preserve the natural environment” and dehistoricize it, “formed the foundations” of the systematic and ideological repression of the majority of the country’s population (Anderson and Grove, 1987:4-5; Khan, 2002:18). There are two major points that stand out from this: the ‘Other’ became more than simply ‘different,’ he became ‘foreign,’ a “migrant[s] in the land of [his] birth” (Khan, 2002:21); and the areas to which the ‘foreigner’ was confined were “bleak, hostile environments” which further perpetuated the binary that applies to both man and nature, of the preserved, protected and privileged versus the undesirable, repressed and inferior. The land is far more than a space: it is integral to identity and justice, sustenance and mobility. As Frantz Fanon has noted, “for a colonized people the most essential value, because the most concrete, is first and foremost the land: the land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity.”¹²

So, then, how to delve into this world of the human and the natural, in Gordimer’s work? As I have asserted, I will be examining, in three chapters, the following texts: *The Conservationist*, *July’s People*, and *No Time Like the Present*. I will be looking at what Said termed “the search for authenticity” (1993:273) conducted variously by the characters of these novels, as they grapple with their identities in a changing and evolving, modern South Africa. In the vein of ‘authenticity,’ I will also be looking at the concept of the ‘indigenous,’ and the ‘alien,’ in nature and in humans: seeking out the “frightening refugees, signs of a dislocated

¹² Frantz Fanon. [1961] 2004. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press. 9.

locality” as Gikandi describes them in ‘Between Roots and Routes’ (2009:23). I will be tracking that “well-established colonial trope of the topographically and socially elevated white male communing in solitude as the monarch of all he surveys” (Nixon, 2011:171) and exploring the ways in which he manifests himself in Gordimer’s uniquely constructed literary modernities. In amongst all of this, there are the trees: those silent witnesses and subtle agents in the midst of the political and social upheavals of Gordimer’s fictional worlds. They are sites where “cultures of labour, militarism, tourism, and nature converge and interpenetrate;”¹³ they impose over human beings at the convergence of key frontiers: in ‘The Ingot and the Stick,’ Gordimer describes “a magnificent wild fig tree thrust, like a tower, through the structure” at the Mozambican border.¹⁴ This invasion of nature into a man-made boundary is striking: the wild fig tree seems, in Gordimer’s image, to undermine the political and social construct of the Mozambican border, that straddles two countries with turbulent, traumatic histories. In their collective capacity as the megaflores of game reserves and wilderness bush areas, trees play a key role in the cultural and racial implications of South Africa’s environmental (in)justice.

How is “the bush” imagined as both alienating and comforting, simultaneously removing a character from his ‘natural’ environment whilst wiping away the inscription of history and trauma by enshrouding itself in the discourse of leisure and tourism? How does an area of “spiritual renewal,” the “last great hope of monochromatic nostalgia,” (Nixon, 2011:169-171) become a place of terror? How does nature become threatening, provoking anxieties and insecurities, like the fig tree in Roly Dando’s garden in *A Guest of Honour* (1971), with its “big flowers sluttish with pollen [...] poinsettia oozing milk secretion [...] beaten slimy by the rains” (Gordimer, 1971:18).

There is, in existence, a certain amount of scholarship on the writing of landscape in Gordimer’s fiction. Kathrin Wagner praises the “compelling metaphors of white settler exile and alienation” in Gordimer’s novels,¹⁵ and her use of the “landscape as indicator of [the male protagonists’] potential for redemption [...] a

¹³ Nixon refers here to an enormous baobab tree at the northern end of Kruger Park, which “served for decades as the primary recruiting station for tens of thousands of Mozambican men who were certified, dipped in disinfectant and carted off to the mines” (172).

¹⁴ Nadine Gordimer, 1990. ‘The Ingot and the Stick, The Ingot and the Gun. Mozambique-South Africa.’ *Frontiers*. London. 61.

¹⁵ Kathrin Wagner. 1994. *Rereading Nadine Gordimer*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 74.

symbol of their search for an inner wholeness and integration with Africa.” However, she also points towards the “relative decline of landscape as a private ‘icon,’ and its reduction to “mere scaffolding [...] a symbolically-laden backdrop” (Wagner, 1994:85-6). Clearly, I do not agree with this demotion of landscape and environment in Gordimer’s fiction: I prefer to side with Cooke, who argues that in her later novels, in fact, “the landscape ceases to serve as a background in which the characters attempt to read ‘outward signs,’” becoming “a living force- the moving force- in her fictional world.”¹⁶

In the first chapter, I will focus on the idea of roots, heritage and legacy in *The Conservationist*. The central protagonist, Mehring, is a rich, white businessman who has purchased a farm outside of Johannesburg. His anxieties and fears about his place on earth, and his identity as a man as well as a father and lover, are linked inexorably to the landscape, to the very willow trees on his property, and, of course, to the corpse of a black man discovered on his land at the beginning of the novel. Mehring’s existential, introspective and haunted engagement with the environment and his own conceiving of justice are underemphasised in existing critical scholarship on this novel: his preoccupation with the soil, and of constructing his own heritage and legacy render this a tragic story. Gordimer predicts a great systemic shift in signs that Mehring cannot read, and refuses to accept.

In my second chapter I will be looking at the idea of the ‘interregnum’ in a spatial and temporal sense, in conjunction with *July’s People*. By spatial, I mean I will be referring to “the bush” as a specific and yet ambiguous place given over to the concept of the interregnum as it is represented in this novel. By temporal, I mean that the story takes place at an apocalyptic moment of war, a predicted end to Apartheid with an unknown conclusion. The story takes place within the depths of the South African bush: the Smales family have had to flee their white, suburban enclave in Johannesburg to seek refuge with the family of their manservant, July. As the families encounter one another in an explosion of racial, temporal and spatial roles, so too do the wider politics of the country as one regime overcomes the other. Bam Smales, in his embodying of this interregnum, this ‘no-man’s-land’ between one place and time and another, is an intriguing point of focus for my study, as his engagement with the environment, and with the ‘character’ of the bush, is extremely revealing and

¹⁶ Cooke, J. 1985. *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: Private Lives, Public Landscapes*. Louisiana: Louisiana University Press. 131.

poignant. The breakdown of one type of ‘modernity’ in this novel and the potential shift towards another has at its heart the issue of environmental and human justice.

My final chapter will explore issues of indigeneity and the alien in Gordimer’s final novel, *No Time Like the Present*. Unlike the other two novels, this is an urban story that nonetheless reiterates my concern for the historicization of both the human and the natural, and its post-Apartheid context locates this concern in a more contemporary and still relevant (perhaps even more relevant, given the recent outbreaks of xenophobic attacks in this country) setting. In the novel, a mixed-race couple is finally able to live in relative peace following the end of Apartheid, during which they were very much a part of the Struggle. Once again, the space of ‘the bush’ becomes important, as it is the spatial as well as temporal marker of the couple’s previous, covert life, and as they settle into this ‘new South Africa,’ they are faced with many of the same identity crises and anxieties about ‘roots’ and ‘legacy’ that we see in the other two novels. The male protagonist, Steve’s, identity as a white man (with a black wife) is a consistent point of discussion, even contention, as the new, young family battles with the hangover of their traumatic past. The environment, both urban and rural, is significant in highlighting the prevalent tensions and concerns of my study; but as I argue in the other chapters, there is constantly an underlying agency in nature itself as meaning-maker within the social and political discourse of the novel, which is overlooked and understated in existing analyses of Gordimer’s work.

Chapter 1.

The Trouble with Roots: Authentic Identity and Claims to the Earth in *The Conservationist*.

This fellow might be in's time a great buyer of land, with his statues, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries: is this the fine of his fines, and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? Will his vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and double ones too, than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures? The very conveyances of his lands will hardly lie in this box; and must the inheritor himself have no more, ha? (*Hamlet*, V.i.95104)

The well-established colonial trope of the topographically and socially elevated white male communing in solitude as the monarch of all he surveys. [...] a 'return' to nature as a white nationbuilding exercise, an individually and collectively elevating pilgrimage of renewal which gets routed through [...] a racially exclusive romantic sublime.¹⁷

Mehring, the white, pig-iron capitalist turned weekend farmer at the centre of Nadine Gordimer's 1974 novel, *The Conservationist*, is a vascillating protagonist, an 'antihero.' The novel emerges into a moment of great impending change in South African history, and this sense of a vast shift in sign systems is at the heart of Gordimer's project in this novel. It is the hybridity of his character, and the problematic cultivation of identity that occurs throughout the novel, that render Mehring a variant of an early-modern tragic figure in many ways. He *is* and *is not*, a 'modern figure.' The term 'modern' is in itself profoundly unstable, which is appropriate given Mehring's continued self-delusion with regards to his own identity. There are contradictions at the heart of his very existence: he woos himself into believing he has formed a relationship with the natural landscape, and has returned to so-called 'roots,' yet his profession and social class mark him as part of an industrial, Apartheid modernity. His desire to distance himself from the crude Afrikaaner world of the white farmer is counter-posed by his obsession with heritage. His rationality, and his increasing inability to read and identify shifts in sign systems, are called into question, and so therefore, more generally, is the white social consciousness of 1974 South Africa: the trees in *The Conservationist* signify far more than the world of

¹⁷ Rob Nixon. 'Environmentalism and Postcolonialism.' c2011. In *Environment at the Margins: Literary and Environmental Studies in Africa*. Ed. Byron CamineroSantangelo & Garth Myers. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press. 171.

Mehring's interiority. Gordimer uses Mehring's problematic, frequently irrational engagement with the landscape to critique a certain 'syndrome' of her contemporary South Africa with regards to land and belonging. The novel takes issue with misplaced obsessions with autochthony and heritage, whilst simultaneously investing in the lexical field of botanical names and a fine delineation of literary ecology: it both takes apart and preserves a sense of how the landscape can be entwined in a cultivation of identity.

The striking use of free indirect discourse throughout *The Conservationist* allows us to witness a certain interiority that veers towards the dramatic 'soliloquy' style, and yet maintains a level of ambiguity that disables any clear-cut impression of Mehring's inner thoughts. It is this stylistic element of the novel that reminds me of early modern male interiority, especially with regards both to a shifting of sign systems, and an engagement with landscape: it is for this reason that I opened the chapter with a quotation from *Hamlet*. In this chapter, I am concerned with self-delusion and inauthentic identity: in Mehring's misdirected evocations of the pastoral and the Romantic in the landscape, Gordimer reflects upon a contemporary white failure to acknowledge a great shift in a political and social sign system. Mehring has been analysed at length as the deluded protagonist of this novel. He is simultaneously described as a symbol of "the sterility of the white community," an "exploiter," "tolerant but no liberal," and a "sexual colonialist."¹⁸ There are aspects of these studies that are useful to my own examination of him as a character, but I intend to take them further by drawing links between Gordimer's own preoccupation with South African roots and the political and social consequences of 'legacy.' In 1995, Gordimer highlighted the importance of a particular type of 'roots':

As a South African citizen who sits on no Commission, I feel vitally concerned to form my own sense not only of the cleansing of the past by confession, but of the connections between the past and what is happening in the present; to follow the roots that travel underground from what is supposed to be a felled, dead tree.¹⁹

¹⁸ Per Wastberg, 2001. 'Nadine Gordimer and the South African Experience.'

http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1991/gordimerarticle.html

¹⁹ Nadine Gordimer, 1995. 'Violence and Mr De Klerk's Line of Duty' *New Left Review*, www.newleftreview.org.

She advocates consistently an understanding of the past, a need for the ‘following of the roots’ in order to comprehend fully the cultivation of identities and the inevitable subtexts (literally ‘sub-terranea,’ ie ‘roots’) that coexist alongside the narrative of the present. *The Conservationist* reflects Gordimer’s growing desire from the 1960s onwards, towards “an identification with a coming African-controlled society, growing from an African history and nurtured by African thought (Cooke, 1978:535). In the novel, the quotations from Reverend Henry Calloway’s *The Religious Systems of the Amazulu* (first published by Springdale Mission Press, 1878) that infiltrate the narrative at key points, function as signs of a specific historical moment “of South African consciousness” (Clingman, 1981:189), into which this novel emerges. The inclusion of extracts from Zulu praise songs grounds the novel in a uniquely South African moment without making an overt political statement. They also serve as an increasingly prevalent system of signs, that points toward tradition (in terms of the culture from which they are drawn) but, more significantly, towards a new South African ‘reality’ that Mehring cannot prevent: “Through Zulu myth, Gordimer gives formal shape to the novel, articulating a different consciousness from that of the public [Mehring’s] rhetoric of South Africa” (Newman, 1981:35). Clingman outlines “two emphatic, but opposing movements in South and Southern African history” (Clingman, 1981:189), domestically and regionally, that are embodied particularly in the characterisation of Mehring. His connection to the country’s capitalist economy, his involvement in the country’s ventures into the international market (his numerous overseas ‘work trips’) and even his name (*Mehring*- more German than Afrikaans), point towards multiple aspects of an evolving social and political system. In 1974, *The Conservationist* was published as the last phase of Apartheid was beginning, amidst events that would, quite literally, change the course of South African history. The white farming communities of Zimbabwe and Mozambique, as well as South Africa, were voicing their fears and seeking protection from the ‘threat’ of increasing black power; labour strikes from 1971-4 exacerbated these white fears; the growing Black Consciousness movement was also building up to the 1976 events in Soweto, so a sense of brewing change certainly underpinned this moment in South Africa’s history.²⁰

²⁰ Stephen Clingman expands upon this historical moment in ‘A Survey of Race Relations in South Africa,’ 1974:108; 326.

The increasingly turbulent, ambiguous political atmosphere is imagined through Mehring's own ambiguous identity: the novel "represents a moment when the imminent downfall of white supremacy seemed absurdly manifest, but the precise means of its achievement were still unclear" (Clingman, 1981:191). The lack of clarity is made all the more apparent as Mehring's own consciousness seems to unravel: "*An awful moment looking at a green light and not knowing what it means*" (Gordimer, 1974:302, Gordimer's emphasis). He loses his grip on the world around him gradually throughout the novel, until he is unable to read even the most simple, familiar system of signs: "He is no longer responding to normal signs [...] He clings to familiar landmarks in an attempt to hang on to his version of reality, picking out bus stops and beer cartons" (Newman, 1981:42). Mehring is the embodiment of the "whites in all the stages of understanding [...] some afraid and resentful, some pretending it is not happening."²¹

In the second extract from Calloway in the novel, the headman addresses the Amatongo and asks "also for children, that this village may have a large population and that your name may never come to an end" (Gordimer, 1974:63). In this chapter, I will be focusing particularly on what I view as the link between the arboreal and botanical imagery in Gordimer's work and a white, South African preoccupation with 'heritage' and 'legacy.' The quotation from Calloway at this point in the novel indicates the overarching theme of 'legacy' that torments Mehring, and foreshadows ironically the painful encounter with his only son later on. I am particularly interested in the ways in which trees in *The Conservationist* serve to illustrate and reflect the shifting in sign system that underpins Gordimer's project in this particular story. This shift, and the refusal to accept the changes that are bound to occur, throw characters into a reassessment of their relations to each other, as well as the cultivation of their own identities *within* the new discursive frame that they find themselves in. I am intrigued by the role that literary evocations of figurative 'roots' and the importance of family and heritage play in the seeking of individual as well as collective identity. By 'roots,' I mean, predominantly, a grounded, stable sense of 'origin.' The term 'autochthony' is one whose etymology allows me to examine it in conjunction with 'roots:' discourses of autochthony bring identity and space together, and require a

²¹ Nadine Gordimer, "A South African Childhood: Allusions in a Landscape," *The New Yorker*, 30 (16 October 1954), 145.

claimant to engage with a territory “by asserting that he or she is an original inhabitant, a ‘son of the soil.’” The word ‘autochthony’ refers to something that originates from the soil, and which is therefore rooted in some way: an autochthonous claim is therefore “a supposedly indisputable historical link” to that soil (Boas & Dunn, 2013:2). In a particularly South African context, it is undeniable that identity cultivation has centred in recent years around a desire to prove a “‘South African connection’ in family backgrounds: claims of autochthony have emerged as a sense of insecurity and vulnerability with regards to roots have increased (Neocosmos, 2006:24). This vulnerability along with an almost feverish desire to cultivate family roots are played upon by Gordimer throughout *The Conservationist*: the Calloway extracts act as a foil to Mehring’s increasingly deluded ‘soliloquys,’ constantly reminding the reader (and the country in general) of the implications of the term ‘autochthony’ for the black *and* white populations.

‘Heritage’ is another ambiguous but weighted term, and it is the duality in connotation of both natural and human elements in this term that I wish to exploit. Laura Rival, in her anthropological study, *The Social Life of Trees* (1998), discusses the arguments of “cognitive anthropologists such as Pascal Boyer or Scott Atran” who insist that in spite of any shifts in cultural or historical meaning, trees, unlike landscape, buildings or other manmade objects, “are mentally apprehended through innate conceptual mechanisms” (Rival, 1998:3). The term ‘heritage’ brings the human and the natural together in a way that allows me to explore the significance of these innate conceptual mechanisms in Gordimer’s novels. ‘Heritage’ may refer to the inheritance of flora, fauna and natural landforms, an area of reference that will become even more crucial in my final chapter on the indigenous and the alien; the term also points towards inheritance between humans of both physical and cultural elements that are handed down from one generation to another.

In *The Conservationist*, the concern of an individual about the legacy that he will leave behind after his death is a microcosm of the concerns of a changing political environment in which claims to land, property ownership and ‘heritage’ itself are being thrown into question. New identities and subjectivities are being cultivated, as a result of a crisis in the sign systems of Gordimer’s contemporary South Africa: but she is perhaps recalling, through her evocations of landscape and particularly of man’s relationship with the earth, the cultivation of a more general subjectivity that goes back to the early modern era. Throughout the novel, a ‘new’ South African

subjectivity is being slowly crafted, whilst the identity that Mehring persistently tries to cultivate slowly becomes obsolete. Questions of legacy, death and burial are raised consistently in conjunction with Gordimer's descriptions and evocations of the landscape: from very early on, any pseudo-pastoral references towards the swaying willows on the farm or the rolling fields are overshadowed with the only partially buried dead black man, whose presence reminds us that "there's something rotten in the state" of South Africa (*Hamlet*, I.iv.67). Mehring is in a crisis, whether he realises it or not (certainly at the beginning of the novel he is oblivious), and his engagement with his environment, his mediations on the landscape, his refusal to confront the presence of the black man's body, and his denial of the increasing agency (both political and domestic) of his black farm labourers all point towards a blind denial of the wider implications of legacy and ownership in his changing country. His determined attempts to construct roots that will 'take' in the earth and ensure his own legacy are undermined throughout the novel.

The tree is used variously in this novel, but most obviously in the setting up of the relationship between Mehring and his son: Gordimer uses the tree to demonstrate the deterioration of the bond between the pair, but also to reveal more about Mehring's attitude towards the farm, and towards his so-called 'heritage.' Unlike the symbolic rendering of familial bonds in the mode of the tree, with its roots and branches, this example shows the tree in a more active role as Gordimer unwinds the relationship between the two characters: "The farm who else is a farm for, but a son doesn't interest him; the whole month of August could have been spent here. Could have planted trees together. One forgets that" (Gordimer, 1974:114).

Mehring's anxiety about his 'legacy' is very apparent throughout the novel, as he is continually preoccupied with who has come 'before' and who will come 'after.' It is clear that Mehring's vision of the future, as idealistic as it may be, predicts a 'handing over' of the farm to the next generation, his plan "to plant another hundred trees," and in particular, "Oaks", a gesture towards a time when the trees have grown and he will no longer be living. As his internal monologue reminds us "You don't plant oaks for yourself but for those who come after" (Gordimer, 1974:172). Mehring uses the activity of tree-planting as a way to try to reach out to his increasingly distant son: "He is acutely, sadly aware that his son is at the farm for only the last morning of a vacation spent in Namibia; he recognizes in his son's anti-government feelings a

growing-away from him as father and a potential moving away from South Africa as a country” (Engle, 1992:104).

There is a constant reassertion of familial relationships and bonds between various characters in the novel that serve to highlight the fragmented and deteriorating qualities of Mehring’s own relationships, with his son and his mistress. Engle lines these relationships up next to one another in a useful manner, to demonstrate how starkly ‘un-rooted’ the protagonist really is: he posits “Mehring the isolate *vs* the three-generation Afrikaner clan from a neighbouring farm” as well as “Mehring the isolate *vs* the four-generation Indian family running a shop” and, most crucially, “Mehring the isolate *vs* the extended quasi-familial, quasi-tribal group of Africans under Jacobus’s headship” (Engle, 1992:95). Mehring is consistently isolated and disconnected from these other groups of characters within the novel, ‘un-belonging,’ and with no potential for the laying down of roots for the future. His own identity as businessman-farmer is tenuous and difficult to believe, his determined development of his botanical knowledge another example of his grasping for roots:

Genus: *Amaryllidaceae*; species *Crinum bulbispermum*. One of the secretaries at the office has been sent out to buy the best book available on veld flowers and from it he’s identified the lilies as the Orange River Lily, *Crinum bulbispermum*, springblooming, favouring swampy ground. It belongs to the amaryllis family, most of whose members are distinguished by the arrangement of the flowers in an umbel subtended by two or more bracts. (Gordimer, 1974:206)

Adding another layer to his ‘farm-owner,’ ‘nature-loving’ identity, Mehring is proud to be able to spout this botanical knowledge but this cultivation of identity is consistently undermined: the sending out of the secretary belittles Mehring’s own supposed agency in this natural environment, as he is constantly having to rely on others to help construct the image of himself as an independent farmer. Nonetheless, Gordimer’s commitment to the botanical reading of the landscape indicates a great respect for the lexicon of conservation and ‘eco-awareness,’ even though she may be ironizing her protagonist at the same time. As Cooke points out, Mehring’s own perceived relationship with the land is highlighted from early on in the novel as somewhat deluded: Gordimer ensures that we read beneath his own self-cultivation “by introducing him as ‘the farmer,’ then undercutting such pretensions by opening the second section, ‘Mehring was no farmer’” (Cooke, 1985:152).

The climactic point of realisation (for the reader) of the extent of Mehring's deluded self-identification occurs during his Romantic-esque meanderings through his farm, dressed in his business suit:

His shoes and the pale grey pants are wiped by wet muzzles of grasses, his hands, that he lets hang at his sides, are trailed over by the tips of a million delicate tongues. Look at the willows. The height of the grass. Look at the reeds. Everything bends, blends, folds. Everything is continually swaying, flowing rippling waving surging streaming fingering. He is standing there with his damn shoes all wet with the dew and he feels he himself is swaying, the pulsation of his blood is moving him on his own axis (that's the sensation) as it seems to do to accommodate the human body to the movement of a ship. A high earth running beneath his feet. All this softness of grasses is the susurrant of slight dizziness, hissing in the head. (Gordimer, 1974:218)

Wagner describes this moment of Mehring's own self-conception as "irremediably arrogant" (1992:84), but I would argue that it is more deluded than egotistical. He is attempting to forge a connection with this piece of land that he owns (for now), and his haphazard recollection of the phrase "fair and lovely place" is confirmation of this. The fact that he knows it is "not his vocabulary" and "only something learned by rote" (Gordimer 1974:218) reinforces the hybridity and indeed the inauthentic nature of Mehring's cultivation of his own identity. The discovery at the beginning of the novel of a dead man consistently mars this cultivation and underpins Mehring's preoccupation with both the living and the dead, although he tries to deny to himself the significance of the corpse on his land. Anxious about his lack of roots, and determined to tie down some of his own, Mehring seems to be more intrigued with those beneath him than those living around him:

all the earth is a graveyard, you never know when you're walking over heads particularly in this continent, cradle of man, prehistoric bones and the bits of shaped stone (sometimes a plough has actually turned one up) that were weapons and utensils. It's all the same. Their ancestors. No one knows who they were, either. No way of making known: the mouth stopped with mud. Doesn't exist unless one happens to know always knows, down here that it's there, all right. Already the new growth of reeds must be eight inches high. (Gordimer, 1974:174)

Mehring's anxiety is clear in this passage: it explains his determination to plant trees, his desire to leave a tangible, visible sign of his existence and ultimately, his desire to repair his patchy relationship with his son. "The mouth stopped with mud" is an uncomfortable image, but a poignant one: it is a grotesque imagining of the

relationship between man and the earth, with connotations of silencing as well as suffocation and drowning. Mehring, 'un-rooted' and disconnected from the other characters in the novel not only his family but his friends, his most recent lover and, to an extent, his farmworker, Jacobus is haunted by the image of the forgotten, unknown and forever-silenced man, buried in the mud on his land. Try as he might, he cannot distract himself with pastoral elaborations from the invisible but omnipresent corpse of the unnamed black man: "No wound to be seen; and simply shovelled under. He looks out over this domain almost with fascination, to think that, somewhere, that particular spot exists, overgrown. No one'll remember where you're buried" (Gordimer, 1974:218). Mehring's engagement with ideas of life after death, and burial, indicate his anxieties and fears about his lack of legacy. Instead of confronting the implications of the dead man, whose claim to the land may go beyond his physical occupying of the space, Mehring pretends he is not there. The conclusion of the novel sees the dead man "reclaiming [his] ancestral heritage" (Cooke, 1985:212) during the traditional burial carried out by the farm workers, as a final trouncing of Mehring's refusal to acknowledge or even to consider the consequences of death: "He took possession of this earth, theirs, one of them" (Gordimer, 1974:267).

Unlike Hamlet, wandering through the wilderness and posing questions about the agency of man, and the consequences of death, Mehring denies both agency and consequence:

This fellow might be in's time a great buyer of land, with his statutes, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries: is this the fine of his fines, and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? Will his vouchers vouch him no more of his purchases, and double ones too, than the length and breadth of a pair of indentures? The very conveyances of his lands will hardly lie in this box; and must the inheritor himself have no more, ha? (*Hamlet*, V.i.95104)

I choose this particular speech as the references to "buyer of land," "recovery of his recoveries" and "the inheritor" are particularly poignant with regards to Mehring's anxieties. Hamlet, as the example of the early modern man, points out that which Mehring fears so fiercely: "the noble dust of Alexander" becomes a stopper for "a bung hole" and "imperious Caesar, dead and turn'd to clay,/Might stop a hole to keep the wind away" (*Hamlet*, V.i.). Shakespeare's famously philosophical protagonist is all too aware of the futility of man's anxieties about legacy and heritage, but he

advocates nonetheless the acknowledgment of death as playing a part in the shifting of sign systems. Mehring, as a 'conservationist' of a dying sign system, refuses to acknowledge either this futility nor this agency. He, and by proxy, contemporary white South African subjectivities, are encapsulated in this "misdirected pastoralism" (Wagner, 1992:85). Mehring's efforts to drive 'conservationist practices' on the farm reflect this (misguided) self-congratulatory communion with Mother Earth, that in turn point towards the Apartheid state's efforts to present themselves as environmentally concerned, to the rest of the world: "the white nationalist regime, confronted with international condemnation when apartheid was imposed in 1948, invoked its caring conservationist ethos with Kruger Park as primary showpiece as evidence that South Africa belonged to the community of civilized nations" (Nixon, 2011:171, quoting Jane Carruthers, 86).

Indeed, the irony of this novel lies in the fact that despite his persistent self-adherence to the land he 'owns,' Mehring's farm seems increasingly to be independent *from* him, "indifferent to both Mehring's needs and his efforts on its behalf" (Wagner, 1992:83). This independent landscape is reflected in the scenes of the farm labourers' substance-fueled parties and traditional rituals: they, too, continue in their daily lives regardless of Mehring's presence or so-called governance of the farm. His own frantic cultivation of his identity, although done subconsciously and only truly visible to the reader, is a reflection of an anxious avoidance of infinite silence, of a lack of legacy: "Mehring, relegated to the status of mere observer of these processes, finds himself as dispensable and ultimately irrelevant as the oaks and chestnuts he begins to plant and which, he understands, will fall to the axes of the meek who will inherit his earth" (Wagner, 1992:83). The agency of the black farm labourers, reiterated by the Calloway quotations that interject the narrative, increase as Mehring's agency diminishes. The land cannot be controlled by him, in the same way that, ultimately, his farm workers cannot be either. He is becoming a stranger in his farm: "you can be at home in a land that is tough and uncontrolled, but nevertheless known to you, useful and readable. The estrangement of whites vis a vis the landscape, Coetzee underlines, is a product of a neglect of this history, a neglect that seems necessary to white identity (Larson, 2005:300). The land is increasingly *unknown* to Mehring, even as he continues to try to read the landscape: it becomes a language in itself, that is inaccessible to him.

There is a noteworthy exchange in the novel that sheds further light on Mehring's quest for a legacy, and for the laying down of roots, in a passage that foreshadows Gordimer's later explorations of possession, ownership and identity in a postApartheid context. Mehring's most recent lover teases him for his romanticised notion of 'handing down' the farm to the next generation, the planting of trees and the notion of burial under his beloved willows:

Down there under your willow trees, very simply, sleeping forever with your birds singing to you and Swart Gevaar tending your grave. O Mehring! [...] you are a hundred years too late for that end! That four hundred acres isn't going to be handed down to your kids, and your children's children [...] It'll be worth about as much as those our grandfathers gave the blacks when they took the land from them. The blacks will tear up your bit of paper. No one'll remember where you're buried" (Gordimer, 1974:209)

The 'bit of paper' she is referring to is, of course, his ownership paper, but the image is expressed in the same breath as the scornful description of his willows, and in the context of a desire for stability and rootedness, his rights of ownership are called into question and revealed as being as flimsy as the leaves on the trees. There is a vulnerability to Mehring's so-called roots, despite his continued attempts to plant them. Gordimer, in an interview with Robert Boyers in 1984, spoke of a specific tendency of white South Africans to *need* to assert their claim to land, as opposed to a more innate sense of rootedness on the part of Africans who have a more historically authentic claim:

I think that whites are always having to assert their claim to the land because it's based, as Mehring's mistress points out, on a piece of paper a deed of sale. And what is a deed of sale when people have first of all taken a country by conquest? [...] Blacks take the land for granted, it's simply there. It's theirs, although they've been conquered; they were always there. They don't have this necessity to say, 'Well I love this land because it's beautiful, because it's this, that, and the other.'²²

Gordimer's words are embodied in the character of Mehring throughout the novel, but at the moment when the "two young saplings" arrive, the nonindigenous trees that he has decided to plant on his farm, we are given a clear sense of the pitiful extent of the

²² Gordimer talking to Robert, Boyers, et al., 'A Conversation with Nadine Gordimer,' *Salmagundi*, 62 (Winter, 1984), 331, 6.

deterioration of his relationship with his own ‘family tree,’ as well as his single-minded effort to *plant* himself onto this piece of land. :

Their roots, each in a big fist of soil carefully gloved in sacking and plastic, are on the back seat of the Mercedes. The trees I told you I was going to plant remember? [...] You know that they are? Spanish chestnut. Specially imported variety. A hundred rands each. My present to myself. God knows how they’ll do, but I’m going to have a go. Have you bought yourself roast chestnuts in the streets? That’s the best part of the bloody miserable New York winter (Gordimer, 1974:264)

Interestingly, Gordimer leaves this conversation ambiguous: we are not given the luxury of knowing, for certain, whether he ever tells his son about these trees. It is more likely to be an imaginary conversation “He thought of something to tell his son, anyway” which heightens the sense of isolation and un-rootedness of Mehring, clashing with the subject of the passage which is his planting of the trees in order to create roots themselves. Mehring’s anxiety is a reflection of a need to assert rootedness, a cultivation of an authenticity whose subtext is, inevitably, inauthentic: “he will not allow himself to investigate the bigger roots, visible though embedded in the European earth; the trees must take their chance. Handling them will only make things worse [...] the young trees must not have to compete for nourishment with the root system of some other growth. But the roots don’t yield, and he can’t see where they can come from” (Gordimer, 1974:26870). He is in denial of the subtext, the *subterranea*, the inevitability of the black Africans’ legacy that will be more enduring than his own. Prioritising the choice of location for these nonindigenous trees, Mehring ignores the impending ‘uprooting’ that lurks on the political horizon:

It was difficult to decide where to place the trees. They ought to be near the farmhouse, really a farmhouse as one thinks of one. Two great round chestnuts dark over the stoep on a Transvaal farm. It would be something extraordinary. But on the other hand indigenous trees would be better in such a definitive position, Yellowwood, Eugenia or something [...] The curve where the road from the entrance to the property turns up towards the complex of farm buildings seems right; a sort of dignified approach to where, one day, a farmhouse and its garden would be differentiated from the farm proper, preside over it. –Turn right when you come to the big chestnut trees” (Gordimer, 1974:26970).

This image perpetuates the “failed authenticity project” of Mehring’s that the novel revolves around (Engle, 1992:92). The ‘fantasy’ of his grand Oak trees and his desire to lay down the groundwork of a solid legacy is mocked by the bemused silence of his only companion, Jacobus: spurned by his only son, Mehring is laying down ‘family roots’ that will never come to fruition.

Chapter 2.

“The real fantasies of the bush:” Shifting Patterns of Meaning in *July’s People*

The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms.²³

The white, as writer and South African, does not know his place ‘in history’ at this stage, in this time.²⁴

An interregnum is a period ‘between rulers,’ a state of transformation, potentially fraught with anxiety. In *July’s People* (first published in 1981), we witness a revolution and a subsequent interregnum, but from a distance: a white, middle-class family flees their Johannesburg home as the state of South Africa collapses into rebellion, and they are sheltered in the remote village of their servant, July. The novel is Gordimer’s prediction of the end of Apartheid, and as such, examines the state of the interregnum itself- the resulting anxieties and confused identities, the transformation of roles and the shift from one sign system to another. To use Gayatri Spivak’s terminology, within this space is the potential for a “breaking and relinking” of an existing “ ‘continuous sign-chain.’ ”²⁵ The interregnum is a time “filled with false moves, confused sympathies, mistaken anxieties” (Folks, 1998:116). In *July’s People*, Gordimer presents this interregnum at the periphery, rather than at the political centre, of the revolution itself, and “grasps at ways towards authenticity and justice” (Folks, 1998:116) by setting the scene in the bush.

In this chapter I will consider the matter and poetics of the interregnum via the question of “the bush”: the environment, landscape and ecosystem contained or in fact uncontained by this term are at the heart of the shift in sign systems that plays out in the novel. The bush in *July’s People* is a heterotopia: an ‘other’ place that signifies

²³ Antonio Gramsci. 1971. *Prison Notebooks*, epigraph to *July’s People*, *Selections from Prison Notebooks: State and Civil Society*, ed. And trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. London: Lawrence & Wishart:556

²⁴ Nadine Gordimer, 1990. *Conversations*. University Press of Mississippi 278, 276.

²⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 1988. In *Selected Subaltern Studies*. ed. Ranjit Suha. New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press. 5. Spivak is referring to Nietzsche’s use of the term, which can be found in Friedrich Nietzsche. 1969. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*. Tr. Walter J. Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books. 77, 80.

many different meanings, but simultaneously signifies, in the novel, a *shift* in an entire system of signs. Gordimer presents the crisis that Spivak refers to, during which a “functional change in a sign system” can take place (Spivak, 1988:4). What is crucial, however, is the acknowledgement of the existence of a “space for change,” without which such a shift could never occur. Gordimer uses the bush to illustrate this space, and the removed vantage point, away from the ‘crisis,’ allows her to highlight the individual and intricate changes in signification that occur within the overall systemic shift. Karen Ramsay Johnson refers also to Spivak’s rhetoric of sign systems and chains of signs, to explore the various names and name-changes across Gordimer’s novels, particularly *Guest of Honour* (1970) *Burger’s Daughter* (1979) and *A Sport of Nature* (1987).²⁶ However, it is worth re-looking at this concept, because the litany of naming in *July’s People* extends beyond the characters’ names. By examining the use of the bush as the space of the interregnum, and combining Spivak’s theories with Foucault’s conception of *heterotopia*, a new level of significance is revealed with regards to the landscape of the novel, and as a result, the ‘landscape’ of the interregnum itself.

In ‘The Essential Gesture,’ Gordimer highlights the importance of “the re-establishing of meanings”²⁷ in the methodology of writers who engage critically with society. Johnson points out that this methodology is very apparent in Gordimer’s work: in her fiction, she uses signs and signifiers to undo the belief inherent to a system like Apartheid, “that any name or label can express the essence of an individual or group, or, more basically, that any individual or group has such an immutable essence (Ramsay Johnson, 1995:117). This “discursive displacement” (Spivak, 1988:5) re-assigns meaning by way of names (of characters, places, objects, trees and plants) to indicate a shift from one system of signification to another. In the interregnum, this is a distinctly political project, reflecting a systemic shift from a regime of suppression to a regime that offers (but does not necessarily guarantee) change. Spivak and Johnson both allude to Valentin Volosinov’s theory of the sign, which is useful for this study as it emphasises the importance of the link between

²⁶ For detailed analysis, see Karen Ramsay Johnson, 1995. “What the Name Will Make Happen:” Strategies of Naming in Nadine Gordimer’s Novels.’ *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*, 26:3, July.

²⁷ Gordimer, *The Essential Gesture*, 295. *The Essential Gesture: Writing, Politics and Places*. Ed. Stephen Clingman. London: Penguin, 1989. . The Essential Gesture." *The Essential Gesture*. 285-3

social crises and the potential for a systemic shift *that is indicated by the shifting of individual signs*. This link is crucial in *July's People*. Voloshinov explains:

The inner dialectical quality of the sign comes out fully in the open only in times of social crises or revolutionary changes. In the ordinary conditions of life, the contradiction embedded in every ideological sign cannot emerge fully because the ideological sign in an established, dominant ideology is always somewhat reactionary and tries, as it were, to stabilize the preceding factor in the dialectical flux of the social generative process, so accentuating yesterday's truth as to make it appear today's. And that is what is responsible for the refracting and distorting peculiarity of the ideological sign within the dominant ideology.²⁸

One way of illustrating Volonishinov's theory of the re-assigning of meaning is in the main character of the novel, July. His name is the convenient nickname, relating somewhat arbitrarily to a Western calendar month, by which he is addressed by his employers, the Smales family. As a 'sign,' the "inner dialectical quality" of July's name "cannot emerge fully" until the moment of crisis, and of change. Once the Smales family flees their suburban home to hide in July's village in the bush, they become aware that his name was, simply, a nickname: his real name is Mwawate. As the Smales' grow accustomed to their life sheltered in the bush with July's community, their servant's name is just one of many signifiers of a systemic shift:

- How many you got there by Mwawate's place? - One eye closed, hands in position, taking aim. Of course, 'July' was a name for whites to use; for fifteen years they had not been told what the chiefs subject really was called. (Gordimer, 2012:146)

Ramsay Johnson makes a pertinent point about this (1995:126), but she does not focus on the space of change within which such sign shifts takes place. For her epigraph to *July's People*, Gordimer chose Gramsci's formulation of the interregnum, which points in particular towards the idea of a state of 'in-between-ness,' in which "the old is dying and the new cannot be born." As Nasser Mufti points out in his essay, 'Reading the Interregnum' (2013), Gramsci's interregnum is an evolving state of being, not experienced "at a standstill of the law" (Mufti, 2013:65). Gordimer's novel approaches the notion of the interregnum, then, as a process rather than as a fixed state: in this chapter I suggest that the bush, as the setting of this novel, is

²⁸ Voloshinov, V. N. *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. Trans. Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1986. 23-24.

central to this particular process, a notion that has been overlooked in the existing scholarship on this text. To this end, I agree with Mufti's assertion that "Gramsci's formulation of the interregnum resists beginnings and endings [...] involving a simultaneous departure and arrival of two distinct eras" (Mufti, 2013:65).

I wish to take it further, however: Gordimer is keen to point out that the interregnum is not static, just as the bush is not. It is a living and breathing space, "a terminal past and embryonic future" (Mufti, 2013:65) living in co-existence, unknowable and yet visceral and transformative. The term "bush" is to be understood in this thesis in a specifically South African context. It is a word that encompasses a great deal- environmentally, politically and socially- as I will explain throughout this chapter in particular. In *A Dictionary of South African English* (1991), there are several definitions and variants of the term that are worth examining as I try to get to grips with the careful and intriguing ways that *Gordimer* understands and 'writes the bush' in her novels. Fundamentally, the term 'bush' pertains to "both bushy and wooden country"²⁹ which is predictable: similarly, "bundu" and "bushveld" also describe "wild open country" or a "thorny or scrubby nature" (*DSE*, 1991:56; 57-8; 59). As a biome, then, its characteristics are relatively straightforward. There are, however, several other important connotations that the *DSE* deems significant.

Immediately following the initial definition of 'bush' is a reference to the bush *Army*. In this context, the term 'bush' is described as being "used of the Operational area of the *border* (q. v.) usu. Sig. terrain out of camp" (*DSE*, 1991:57). It is worth noting this, because in each of the three novels that I am concerned with, the bush is used variously to signify proximity to, or shelter from, conflict. Borders, boundaries and territories (whether they be 'homes' or 'warzones') are frequently mapped out by Gordimer according to the natural, wilder South African terrain: the bush.

The word 'bundu' has been absorbed into wider, colloquial use in relation to many slang phrases about the bush. The term "bundu-bashing" is an example of this-it is a phrase that refers to "travelling over very rough or difficult country." To add another dimension to this characterisation of the type of 'country,' "bundu" is also specified as land "*remote from civilization*" (*DSE*, 1991:56, my emphasis) through which intrepid travellers can expect to find adventure. It is also set apart from

²⁹ Jean Branford & William Branford. [1931]. 1991. *A Dictionary of South African English*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press. 57. Hereafter referred to as *DSE*.

‘civilised,’ ‘urban’ and, presumably, ‘modern’ landscapes. In another definition of “bundu,” an example is drawn from *Drum* magazine that illustrates this dichotomy, and which provides an alternative human identity tied to the bush that contrasts the image of the ‘bundu-basher’ hurtling about in pursuit of adventure: “He can work in the big city for the wife and children he left in the bundu. *Drum* 22.1.73” (DSE, 1991:56).

The image of the bush as a place ‘remote from civilisation,’ is then compounded (but also contradicted) by the notion that the bush is a place of gathering, for lessons to be learnt, for decisions to be reached. The concept of *bosberaad* and organisations such as ‘Veld-and-Vlei’ (a now outdated “Adventure School” started in 1958 “for developing self-reliance and toughness in boys of school age”) are just two examples of the utilisation of the bush-space for practical meetings and fraternal bonding (DSE, 1991). The term *bosberaad* comes from ‘bos’ meaning ‘bush’ in Afrikaans, and ‘beraad’ meaning ‘council.’ The *bosberaad* is essentially a strategy meeting, that takes place outdoors, in so-called ‘neutral’ territory. The concept implies a few, somewhat problematic ideas: that the ‘wild’ and ‘rough’ terrain of the bush can provide an appropriate setting may be true, but why? Is it because it is free of the ‘modern’ distractions of the urban space? What is it about the bush that is presumed to be ‘neutral’ and ‘un-modern’? Can it truly be so?

In her short story, ‘The Ultimate Safari,’ Gordimer also uses the bush as an imagined space of shifting identities and signs, which is useful as I embark on my analysis of *July’s People*. In this story, a young Mozambican girl escapes her village with some of her family, in order to flee the ravages of civil war. They travel on foot through the Kruger National Park, and this journey highlights, through the eyes of a child, the many layers of political and social signification that the bush has the capacity to hold: “To get there we had to go through the Kruger Park. We knew about the Kruger Park. A kind of whole country of animals [...] We knew about the Kruger Park because some of our men used to leave home to work there in the places where white people come to stay and look at the animals.”³⁰ This story demonstrates the power of the bush as a particular biome, a South African space, that, for the young girl, “does something to her people and to herself. It separates people of the same

³⁰ Nadine Gordimer. 1991. ‘The Ultimate Safari.’ In *Jump! And Other Stories*. Cape Town: David Phillip. 36.

language. It turns her land into a white people's place and, most notably, it changes her people's position."³¹

This distinction between the bush as a place of leisure compared to a place of 'home' (one that is less 'civilised' or at least 'profitable' than the city) is important because it points towards a key social, and indeed racial, distinction that is picked up on by Gordimer repeatedly. The bush is not a place of leisure for all: neither is it a place of dwelling for all. How or what the bush is 'used' for depends very much on social and political factors relating to the individual South African. In *July's People*, the exact location of the narrative is not specified, but Gordimer's use of the term 'bush' is revealing in its vagueness as well as its explicitness. It works within the novel in a complicated manner: it is both a 'place' and a 'non-place,' living and breathing as part of the narrative as a substrate, rather than existing as a mere backdrop. I have found Foucault's conception of *heterotopia* useful in trying to understand the significance of the bush-space in *July's People*. In an article entitled 'Of Other Spaces,' which was translated in 1997, from a lecture that Foucault gave in 1967, the distinction between a *utopia* and a *heterotopia* is explicated. What is useful here, is the paradoxical state of the heterotopia as both a 'real' and 'unreal' space:

Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces. There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places- places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society-which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. *Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality [...]* I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.³²

Viewing the bush as a heterotopia, *July's People* is underpinned by a very clear, emphatic statement about a particular South African time, culture and space.

Gordimer acknowledges the bush as a powerful political and social indicator: a sign in

³¹ Svend Erik Larson. 2005. 'The national landscape – national identity or post-colonial experience?' *European Review*. Vol.13. Issue 02. 294.

³² Michel Foucault & Jay Miskowiec. [1967] . 1986. 'Of Other Spaces.' *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1. 22-27 Johns Hopkins University Press. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/464648>. Accessed: 18-01-2016 12:08 UTC. 24. My emphasis.

the chain. What I am arguing for, is an acknowledgment of not only the part that the bush plays as a sign of its own, but its capacity, furthermore, to reveal other signs as they are shifting. It is, however, also important to note that the bush does *not* feature in this novel merely as a counter-site to a *modern* space. *July's People* does not set the bush up as a foil to the Smales' previous, 'civilised' space. It serves as a narrative construct that places the space of the interregnum, and the implications therewith, under a magnifying glass.

I am intrigued by the 'unknowability' of the bush, of the 'place' (temporal and spatial), of the interregnum, and by the position within that space, of the white, middle-class Smales family who are forced into the roles of refugees at the moment of revolutionary crisis. They are trying, like the "white, as writer, and [/or] South African," of Gordimer's *Conversations*, to find their place in "history, at this stage, in this time." Justice- social and environmental- is the transformation towards which Gordimer's interregnum is steered, but it is consistently hampered by the knowing, and lack of knowing, that stems from the dying past that Gramsci refers to. It is "a form of knowing limited by being linked to and shaped by the life-aspirations, in this distinctive historical moment, of a comfortable, materially professional middle-class (Vital, 2008:91). I will examine the model of the village, as it is constructed within the bush environment, and look at the question of boundaries versus boundlessness in that model. I will also look at how Gordimer characterizes the Smales family next to July's family in terms of their relationship to their natural environment, and examine the stripping down of identities in the face of this interregnum. I will also look at how the white family's previous frame of reference has changed- their relationship with the bush as a place of leisure has shifted so that it is now a necessary place of refuge. This shift in relationship points towards the wider issue of environmental justice in South Africa, and is symptomatic of the explosion of roles that occurs in the interregnum.

In her lecture, 'Living in the Interregnum' (1983), Gordimer lays out some key issues that are central to my examination of *July's People*. She asserts that "in the official South African consciousness, the ego is white." This dominant ego cannot escape itself and its 'separate-ness,' even if it "seeks to abdicate" its own alienation. This is a concern that is evident throughout *July's People*, particularly in the relationships between July and Bam and Maureen Smales respectively. Whether they choose to fight it or not (and Maureen, in particular, tries to fight the unspoken rule of

'separateness' that governs her relationship with July) that separateness continues as an active force in their relationships. Gordimer speaks about the "segment" of white South Africans who do see the need, both to embrace and to contribute to a future that overcomes this problem of racial alienation: "in measure of some sort of faith in the possibility of structuring society humanly, in the possession of skills and intellect to devote to this end, there is something to offer the future." Again, in *July's People*, this is an overarching theme- the family, separated into individual roles, is faced with a future in which those roles must be redefined, and their 'contribution' is suddenly thrown into question: "*how* to offer it is our preoccupation [...] *how* to offer *one's self*." The novel strips the characters of any material objects that may have previously defined them- this is particularly poignant in the character of Bam Smales, the father- to demonstrate the need for whites "to thrust the spade under the roots of our lives." Here in the bush, the Smales are in their own, separate interregnum, but it is a microcosm of the country's state: "the interregnum is not only between two social orders but between two identities, one known and discarded, the other unknown and undetermined."³³ The reality of the bush, very different from the place of leisure that the Smales are used to, is threateningly wild, described in largesse and in abundance: "There was the stillness of unregarded trees and ceaseless water. On the huge pale trunks wild figs bristled like bunches of hat-pins. The earth was sour with fallen fruit; between the giant trees a tan fly-catcher swooped, landing to hover on the invisible branches of a great tree of air" (Gordimer, 2012:179). Unregarded, giant, and made of air: like the fungoid fairy rings, this place is almost fantastical in its presentation, but, as Maureen notes, "the real fantasies of the bush delude more inventively than the romantic forests of Grimm and Disney" (Gordimer, 2012:195). This bush is not conjured from the imagination to suit a fairytale with a magical ending- it is a real, living, breathing environment that only serves to heighten the unknowable and yet fantastical transformation of a political state, "in another time, place, consciousness" (Gordimer, 2012:35). Here in the bush, as in the urban revolution continuing out of sight, "everyone was everyone else's witness, and this bred its own discretion" (Gordimer, 2012:80). It is in this time, place, consciousness, that the white family must figure out how to offer themselves to the new world beyond this interregnum.

³³ Nadine Gordimer. [1982]. 1991. 'Living in the Interregnum,' The William James Lecture. In *Critical Fictions: The Politics of Imaginative Writing*. Ed. Philomena Mariana. Seattle: Bay Press.

Powerless, they must accept the shift in their circumstances, in this new environment: “she watched the bush; her scale pathetic, a cat at a mouse-hole, before that immensity” (Gordimer, 2012:53). The immensity, which is simultaneously the bush and the new order of things- the new system of signs- is fiercely visceral. In a sense, this particular environment *is* the interregnum: it has no beginnings, nor endings, it is boundless and yet creates boundaries of its own. It reflects what the Smales thought they knew- their previous experiences of the bush are significant alone- and it reflects what they know absolutely nothing about now. For Gordimer, there could be no better setting for the culmination of South Africa’s history of separatist oppression: “it’s inevitable that nineteenth-century colonialism should finally come to its end there, because there it reached its ultimate expression, open in the legalized land- and mineral-grabbing, open in the labour exploitation of indigenous peoples, open in the constitutionalized, institutionalized racism” (Gordimer, 1991:259). Land is central to the country’s history of marginalisation- by throwing the interregnum into the bush and rendering it a narrative ‘heterotopia,’ the novel strips the explosion of roles and identities bare, so that the political state is intertwined with the natural, ‘ungoverned’ landscape of the South African bush.

July’s village, where the Smales flee to, is the setting of the novel, but as Gordimer reiterates constantly, this ‘setting’ is more than simply a collection of huts: it is *part* of the bush and the bush is *part* of it. The village is *away* from the violence from which the Smales family has fled, but it is not *beyond* the political environment of Apartheid: it has always existed as part of it, and it continues to exist despite its physical displacement from the immediate eruption of revolution. This is central to the project of the novel, to conduct a ‘run through’ of an apocalyptic end to Apartheid, and the explosion of roles that happens as a result. The village is also intriguing in terms of its presentation in Western anthropology, which, as Clifford argues, has traditionally emphasised the village as “bounded” and able to “represent a culture as whole” (Clingman, 1993:212). I agree with Clifford and Clingman’s point, that this idea of the village as culturally representative is both unhelpful and inaccurate in many ways, particularly in an example such as *July’s People*, as it is the *unbounded* nature of the village, and of the bush itself, which is central to the narration of the interregnum: “July’s village is not separate from, or beyond the bounds of apartheid, because apartheid has always travelled through it” (Clingman, 1993:212).

Boundaries are unclear or, in many cases, non-existent. The lack of a door to the Smales' hut is mentioned in the opening, an immediate, literal 'gap' that signifies the disconnect between the Smales' previous living situation and their current refuge: "no door, an aperture in thick mud walls, and the sack that hung over it looped back for air, sometime during the short night. *Bam I'm stifling*" (Gordimer, 2012:1, Gordimer's emphasis). There is an immediate juxtaposition of the 'closeness' in the stifling air with the 'openness' of the door, offering no protection from the elements outside. This juxtaposition is reflected in and by the bush itself, which is both a shelter and a threatening presence throughout the novel. The 'outside' can come in, there is no privacy, and no enclosed, safe space, the "end of measured distance" (Gordimer, 2012:31) does not refer to a clear boundary at all: "the space is one of uncertainty and vulnerability: the outside can come in through the opening, or the contours and definitions of the known leak out. The thick walls (relatively safe but apertured, open) exist within the circle of July's village; the boundaries of July's village (relatively safe but apertured, broken) exist within the larger context of apartheid" (Clingman, 2012:211). The broken apertures hint at some containment, but there are clear openings to the past and the future: "the village, then, becomes another motif in a broader matrix of the interregnum"(Clingman, 1993:637).

Simultaneously a refuge and a threat, the bush has a life and a character of its own, and one that is in play within the complex set of relationships throughout the novel. The boundlessness is complicated further by the use of specific active verbs and pronouns that distort the agency in the narrative between the human characters and the character of the bush: "Like clouds, the savannah bush formed and re-formed under the changes of light, moved or gave the impression of being moved past by the travelling eye; silent and ashy green as mould spread and always spreading, rolling out under the sky before her" (Gordimer, 2012:31). The "her" could be Maureen, but it could be the "Savannah bush" as well. Seen from the point of view of the displaced Smales family, this alien environment is foreign and strange precisely because it confronts and confuses their previous impressions of the South African bush. Thus the natural environment is as crucial as the man-made huts within it, because there is no fixed barrier between the two 'worlds' as there was for the Smales family before. There is a particular 'knowing' of July's community of their environment which is starkly contrasted with the 'knowing' or lack of knowing, of the Smales family. Their discomfort is evident from the beginning of the novel, their foreign-ness in this

environment clear: but it is particularly because their previous frame of reference has been shattered:

July's home was not a village but a habitation of mud houses occupied only by members of his extended family. There was the risk that if, as he seemed to assume, he could reconcile them to the strange presence of whites in their midst and keep their mouths shut, he could not prevent other people, living scattered round about, who knew the look of every thorn-bush, from discovering there were thorn bushes that overgrew a white man's car, and passing on that information to any black army patrol. If not acting upon it themselves? (Gordimer, 2012:15)

The thorn bushes that hide the yellow bakkie are as crucial as the yellow bakkie itself, to this narrative: this foreign landscape is known and read by its inhabitants in a way that is entirely *unknowable* to the Smales family, it is "the bush that hides everything and is itself hidden" (Gordimer, 2012:58). July's community, and those who live beyond it (the boundlessness of the community is also linked inexorably to the boundlessness of the bush) "knew the look of every thorn-bush," and thus the reality of their hiding in this place seems potentially ludicrous. There is a persistent sense of hiddenness in this expanse of bush, and of the presence of others, simultaneously *there* but unknowable, just as the bush itself is: "There were hundreds of tracks used since ancient migrations (never ended; her family's was the latest), not seen. There were people, wavering circles of habitation marked by euphorbia and brush hedges, like this one, fungoid fairy rings on grass- not seen" (Gordimer, 2012:31). The 'knowing' and 'not knowing' is what separates the Smales family from July's people, because from the beginning of the novel to the end, the white family is thrust into an environment that they simply do *not* know. The necessity of their hiding there is clear, and the paring down of their previous frame of reference for what is 'necessary' and 'comfortable' becomes equally evident as we are given more insight into the lifestyle of their servant's family:

His mother had given up her hut- the trees for the walls and roof-poles felled and raised by him, the mud of the walls mixed and built up by his mother and herself, that was due to have a new roof next thatching season. (Gordimer, 2012:22)

The trees in this part of the bush have been used to form, literally, the framework of the community's existence, but their significance goes beyond building materials:

man and nature are linked by necessity, subsistence and domesticity in this village in the bush. Folks highlights this type of narration of the relationship between nature and humans in July's village as "elemental imagery" which works, as I have argued, to shatter "the Smales' illusions concerning the basis of 'civilized life'" (Folks, 1998:122). Folks points out that the four elements- earth, water, air and fire- form the basis of the novel's structure, a point that is useful in shedding light on what Gordimer is doing with the natural landscape throughout the novel: "references to earth (earthen huts, land, agriculture, mud, dirt), air (the foul air of the hut and the ever-present sky), fire (the hearth fire, the sun), and water (river, rain, drinking, bathing, and laundry water)" (Folks, 1998:122).

Once again these elements are set up in stark contrast to the man-made, materialistic objects that comprise the Smales' previous existence in Johannesburg: their newfound bush existence does not allow for their possessions (Bam's gun, Victor's car game, even their yellow bakkie) to operate in the same way, because they do not fit into this new sign system comprised of the elements of nature. Increasingly, the Smales family is described in terms of their gradual assimilation into this environment: just as the mud huts sink back to mud and the cycle is renewed, the human characters' very bodies seem to merge with the surroundings of the bush at times. When Maureen confronts July and they argue over the ownership of the yellow bakkie, she experiences a moment of triumph in proving him wrong, and this moment is described in terms of the beginning of a bush fire: "The victory burned in her as a flame blackens within a hollow tree" (Gordimer, 2012:89). In another example, Maureen and Bam's relationship is described using the terminology of rock figs that "crack and bind rocks:" Maureen's will power "twisted itself around him [Bam]" so that "he was split and at the same time held together as the wild fig-trees out there in the bush" (Gordimer, 2012:53). The bush thus invades the narrative just as it invades the space that the Smales now inhabit: it is an ever-present force that defines the complex ways in which the human characters relate to one another. Maureen, above the rest of her family, notices this, and witnesses the new system of signs whilst her husband lives in denial of it: "After days of rain hot breath rose from everything, the vegetation, the thatch, the damp blankets of all patterns and colours hung out over every bush or post that would spread them" (Gordimer, 2012:70). This, compared to "back there" in Johannesburg, where "the bush was forgotten" (Gordimer, 2012:70).

The cycle of natural and man-made elements in July's village is central to the existence of the community as they organise "their meagre resources around the bases of nature, letting the walls of mud sink back to mud and then using that mud for new walls" (Gordimer, 2012:31). This is not unexpected- Gordimer is highlighting the difference in the lifestyle of July's family from that of the Smales' - but it is the complete reliance of the latter, privileged family on the poorer community that is important. The power and agency now lies in those so-called 'meagre resources,' and in the family who has lived and is continuing to live, out here in the bush: Maureen Smales is aware, constantly, of her family's vulnerability in their lack of knowing, "across the silent bush in which they had fallen from the fabric of that life as loose buttons drop and are lost" (Gordimer, 2012:146).

How, then, is the "fabric of that life" to be understood, in light of their new surroundings? Once again, the bush is central to the picture of the Smales' past life: an aspect of the novel that has not been emphasised sufficiently. Maureen, Bam and their children are revealed as representative of a white, privileged family through their relationship to their natural surroundings, just as July's family is representative of a poorer, unprivileged, black community. Gordimer uses the landscape to convey the complex political and social environment of the interregnum- but also to explore what came before, and what might transpire afterwards. We come to understand Bam because his frame of reference for the bush collapses in on itself- beginning with the yellow bakkie: "The vehicle was bought for pleasure, as some women are said to be made for pleasure [...] But he defended the dyed-blond jauntiness; yellow was cheerful, it repelled heat [...] - Anything will spot you a mile off, in the bush. -" (Gordimer, 2012:7). Bam's relationship with the bush previous to their fleeing is indicative of a broader, historical issue of environmental justice and exclusion in South Africa. Gordimer's description of Bam's bakkie, "a cheap car-cum-caravan for white families, generally Afrikaners, and their half-brother coloureds who can't afford both" is a direct study of the relationship between South Africans and the bush, determined by race. The bakkie was bought as a vehicle of leisure, one that "more affluent white South Africans" could afford as "a second, sporting vehicle for purposes to which a town car is not suited" (Gordimer, 2012:6). This introduction to the yellow bakkie foreshadows Bam's characterisation throughout the novel, constructed via material possessions that are part of a sign system fundamentally rooted in his relationship with his environment. In Bam's previous life, the bush

played a part in a sign system as a place of relaxation, safari and luxury (particularly for *white* tourists). The politics of the game lodge have been discussed at length by Njabulo Ndebele, and it is worth mentioning here, as he too uses signifiers to read a particular set of values in the environment of the bush:

The towels and toilet paper, the rugs, the bedside reading lamps never fail to convey a sense of hospitality warmly offered, 'far from home.' [...] at night when you finally lock the door and turn off the light to sleep, vaguely grateful that there is a key.³⁴

Ndebele's listing of commodities and conveniences is intriguing, as he picks up on objects that carry similar meaning in *July's People*: "that clean-cut edge is crucial. It indicates the perimeter of civilisation. In the precious clearing you 'unexpectedly' yet gratefully find all the modern conveniences" (Ndebele, 1999:100). The *absence* of "towels and toilet paper" in July's village mean that the bush is lacking in the signifiers of "home" for the Smales family, and indicates a distinct shift in their frame of reference. Not only do they not have a key to provide reassuring security, but they don't even have a door. Far from the "unobtrusive personalised care" and "campfire camaraderie" where "neat green lawns" dictate the cordoned-off area of "civilisation," the Smales are ensconced instead in the "dense, chaotic bush just beyond their trimmed edges" (Ndebele, 1999:100).

Even the Smales' journey into the bush represents a shift from one sign-chain to another. Ndebele points out that part of the safari experience is to feel the "simulation of hardship in the bush, enduring the chill and the bumpy tracks on night drives (Ndebele, 1999:100). At the moment of crisis, the yellow bakkie's significance alters dramatically: "the yellow bakkie that was bought for fun turned out to be the vehicle: that which bore them away from the gunned shopping malls and the blazing, unsold houses of a depressed market, from the burst mains washing round bodies in their Saturday morning garb of safari suits, and the heat-guided missiles that struck Boeings carrying those trying to take off from Jan Smuts Airport" (Gordimer, 2012:10). The shopping malls and Saturday morning safari suits, the airport and the unsold houses- these, like the bakkie, were part of a system of signs that comprised

³⁴ Njabulo Ndebele. 1999. 'Game Lodges and Leisure Colonialists.' In *Fine Lines From the Box*. 2007. Roggebaai: Umuzi. 100.

the white, suburban enclave to which the Smales were used. In keeping with this, previous system of signs, the bush was a place of leisure, “simulated hardship” and relaxed ‘escape.’ The family relied on their “Roberts’ bird book and standard works on indigenous trees and shrubs” in order to “know” the wilderness, when they went camping. Then, “at the end of the holiday you packed up and went back to town” (Gordimer, 2012:179). Maureen “could name the variety of thorn-tree- *Dichrostachys cinserea*, *sekelbos* with its yellow tassels dangling from downy pink and mauve pompoms, both colours appearing on the same branch” (Gordimer, 2012:179). Now, their ‘safe,’ white suburb environment is “gunned,” “blazing,” “burst” and “struck,” and must be replaced by the bush as a place of refuge, a different type of escape. Their current reality, their heterotopia, echoes the simulation (the ‘utopia’) previously experienced, but it is rooted in a new, changed system of meaning.

The bakkie is, at first, their only point of ‘knowable’ reference: “the vehicle was driven right within the encirclement of a roofless hut. Red as an anthill, thick clay walls had washed down to rejoin the earth here and there, and scrubby trees pushed through them like limbs of plumbing exposed in a half-demolished building. The vehicle flattened the tall weeds of the floor and a roof of foliage, thorn and parasitic creepers hid the yellow paint” (Gordimer, 2012:14). The bush becomes both shelter and hiding place, but the boundary between what is man-made and what is natural is blurred, menacingly. The descriptions of a ‘floor’ and a ‘roof’ hark back to the known, comforting sign system of the Smales’ previous life, but, as I have already examined, these boundaries and references soon become obsolete. Similarly, Bam’s shotgun represents his previous relationship with the bush, as it signifies his leisurely pursuits in that environment and indeed, the leisurely pursuits of similarly privileged, white middle-class men: “he went trapshooting to keep his eye in, out of season, and when winter came spent his weekends in the bush, within a radius of two hundred kilometres of his offices and home in the city, shooting guinea-fowl, red-legged partridge, wild dug and spur-wing geese” (Gordimer, 2012:6). The proximity of this pursuit to the relative safety of “offices and home” is important, because it is so far-flung from the remote space of July’s village, in this new and unknowable area of bush. Now, Bam must use his shotgun to hunt warthog for necessity, rather than for fun, and the newfound urgency of the activity complicates and distorts his previous identity as a care-free, man of leisure.

Indeed, without the vehicle and the shotgun serving their previous roles as markers of privilege and whiteness, Bam is lost, “an architect lying on a bed in a mud hut, a man without a vehicle” (Gordimer, 2012:118). Folks highlights the “contrastive examples” that contribute to the stripping of, in particular, Bam’s identity: “house versus hut, pets versus animals as food, sports (Bam’s bird-hunting) versus hunting for survival (warthog hunting), eating versus feasting, wilderness as hobby (camping, birding and botanical manuals) versus real wilderness, suburban trash (orange plastic bags) versus useful objects (rope, containers) bathed flesh versus body odors” (Folks, 1998:120). In this way, Folks puts words to the binaries of suburb-bush, then-now, that Gordimer’s characters experience but cannot voice, throughout the novel. Bam, especially, battles with the vocabulary of this place, removed from the frame of reference that he has been accustomed to, and unable to put *this* place, into words:

He struggled hopelessly for words that were not phrases from back there, words that would make the truth that must be forming here, out of the blacks, out of themselves. He sensed for a moment the great drama hidden in the monotonous days, as she was aware, always, of the yellow bakkie hidden in the sameness of bush. But the words would not come. They were blocked by an old vocabulary, ‘rural backwardness,’ ‘counter-revolutionary pockets,’ ‘failure to bring about peaceful change inevitably leading to civil war...’ (Gordimer, 2012:155)

The truth that must be forming is as unknowable as the bush itself, the monotonous days reflected in the boundlessness, the “sameness,” of the environment they are hiding in. He realises, but cannot rectify, the disconnect between “back then” and “now,” knowing that he cannot use the old, comfortable phrases but unable to find a vocabulary with which to replace them. When he discovers that his shotgun has been stolen, he regresses to complete silence, robbed of his voice as this last vestige of his identity disappears. This identity encompasses his role as Father and as Husband, and it is through Maureen’s eyes that we witness this total breaking down: “He lay down on his back, on that bed, the way he habitually did; and at once suddenly rolled over onto his face, as the father had never done before his sons. [...] She looked down on this man who had nothing, now. There was before these children something much worse than the sight of the women’s broad backsides, squatting” (Gordimer, 2012:176).

To return to the quotations I began this chapter with, I would like to conclude that the bush, fittingly, provides the potential for the end to this interregnum, just as it provided the space for its enactment. Bam Smales is reduced to a shadow of his former self, having been robbed of his material possessions, he “does not know his place ‘in history’ at this stage, in this time” (Gordimer, 1990:178;176). Maureen, however, seeks that place, and by running towards the sound of an approaching helicopter at the end of the novel, she is reaching towards an end to the space ‘in-between’ that has been their refuge. She runs through the bush, and climbs the roots of a “huge fig-tree,” but more poignantly, she is crossing “the landmark of the bank she has never crossed to before” (Gordimer, 2012:194). She cannot see what is ahead of her because she is running through thick bush, but the sound of the helicopter confirms that there is *something* there. The bush has enclosed them, but it is, naturally, boundless, and she breaks out of her interregnum at the end of the novel by accepting this boundlessness, running towards an unknown fate and embracing whatever awaits on the other side. The affirmative action that she takes is in stark contrast to the passive resignation of her husband, who cannot forge his own identity in this new space. The arrival of the helicopter interrupts the “unreal time” of the bush and of the interregnum, to propel Maureen (and the white ego itself) into “an insistent but unknowable future” (Clingman, 2009:637). This ending brings the revolution of the outside world to the bush, so that the two environments meet- we are left with no resolution, because by nature the end of an interregnum is *unknowable*, but inevitably, and despite its “morbid symptoms,” as Maureen realises, it must be met. The bush, and subsequently, the interregnum that South Africa must inevitably face, is both demystified and mystified at the same time, through shifts in patterns of signification. The bush provides a space for the functional change in sign systems that reflects a wider systemic shift, being brought about by the revolutionary end to Apartheid.

Chapter 3.

Writing the Alien in *No Time Like the Present*

In an essay entitled ‘Time We Became a Bit More Neighbourly’ (2000), H. Radebe refers to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s comment on immigration: “A nation, like a tree, does not thrive well till it is engrafted (sic) with a foreign stock.”³⁵ In this chapter, I will be looking at Gordimer’s final novel, *No Time Like the Present* (2012), in light of the concept of the nation, like a tree, requiring the enrichment of ‘a foreign stock.’ I will be continuing to examine the ‘language’ of trees in Gordimer’s work- particularly noting the terminology of trees and plants to signify, and add value to the study of identity and the indigenous versus the alien. *No Time Like the Present*, the last novel Gordimer wrote, is about cultivating individual identity after a collective identity has shifted- the novel is set in a suburb in post-Apartheid South Africa and at its centre is a married couple adapting to life in peace-time. Having participated in the Struggle as comrades, Jabu (a black woman from KwaZulu Natal) and Steve (her white husband, from a Jewish family), were part of a community living in the bush in Angola, in united defiance of the Apartheid state. Now, living in a suburb previously restricted to white inhabitants, they are trying to establish their place in this new time, and this new space. They are witnesses to the forging of a new, national identity for the country, a concept that is complicated by increasing outbursts of xenophobia and fear of so-called ‘aliens.’

The novel tackles the problematic definition of ‘indigenous identity,’ and ‘foreign stock;’ the narrative makes use of scientific and biological jargon to endorse a type of ‘cross-cultural fertilization’ in society. This jargon roots the narrative constantly in an ecocritical milieu, entangling, as usual, the human with the natural. I wish to look at the various environments of the novel, especially the contrast of the bush and the suburb. I also wish to examine the jargon I have referred to, with regards to the physical appearance and familial relations of the human characters, which are so often described in terms of trees and plants. I am concerned, in this chapter, with the figure of ‘the alien’ in Gordimer’s text- I aim to demonstrate that the natural

³⁵ H. Radebe, ‘Time We Became a Bit More Neighbourly,’ *The Star*, 16 March 2000, 636.

environment in her narrative is central to her examination of the alien, and the 'Other,' in South African literature, society and politics.

The term 'alien' was formalised in South African legislation in the 1937 Aliens Act: this act referred specifically to Jewish immigrants but from then onwards, the term 'alien' became "synonymous with 'unwanted immigrant'" (Neocosmos, 2006:29). The earlier Land Act, and Immigration Act, of 1913, essentially rendered black South Africans foreigners (and subsequently, 'aliens'), in their own country, as their movements were restricted and they were defined as "non-citizens subject to the same legislation which governed entry to the country by non-South Africans" (Peberdy & Crush, 1998; Neocosmos, 2006:29). In the 2000s, xenophobic attacks against Africans from neighbouring countries have mimicked the literal 'alienation' of 'non-citizens' (as termed by law) in a tragic recollection of the alienation of the black communities during Apartheid. 'Alienation' is a broader term that refers to a feeling of exclusion and distance, both physical and figurative, but Harry Garuba has a particularly useful argument about "alienation" that proves useful for this study.³⁶ He refers to the dichotomy of 'rural' and 'urban' which is relevant for my examination of different spaces of the novel.

Garuba refers to nationalist African literature in which colonialism has been portrayed as alienating African populations, both epistemologically and spatially (Garuba, 2008:180). This 'spatial' alienation finds itself in the "division between the rural and the urban" (Garuba, 2008:180). Garuba explains, referring to Achille Mbembe's essay, 'The Aesthetics of Superfluity' (2004) that the typical African binary of urban-rural/modern-traditional is "rooted in the binarist logic of colonialism" and it is a binary that is tackled in Gordimer's novel. Whereas, as Garuba asserts, the rural has been portrayed as a space of "cultural homogeneity [...] anchored in relations of blood and 'natural' forms of kinship- [...] a collective identity," the urban space does not allow for "such singular, collective identity [...] and other forms of sociality beyond those based on the bonds of blood and shared cultural beliefs and practices have to be cultivated" (Garuba, 2008:183-4). This cultivation has provoked a sense of alienation in the urban space, that is far greater

³⁶ Harry Garuba. 2008. 'No-man's Land: Nuruddin Farah's Links and the Space of Postcolonial Alienation.' *Literary Landscapes: From Modernism to Postcolonialism*, pp.180-197.

than that of the rural space. The question, then, is whether Gordimer is subverting this normative model that Garuba attributes to the modern, nationalist literature of Africa, or is she drawing attention to it? This chapter will examine the mobility and cultivation of identity of the main characters in *No Time Like the Present* and pose the questions: 'who is 'alienated;' how; and why?'

The questions of 'how,' and 'why,' come into play with regards to the terminology as well as the 'act' of alienation, and what intrigues me is the way that the rhetoric of 'aliens' in the natural environment frequently echoes that of the human environment. Anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff present an argument for this, using the specific example of the fynbos in the Western Cape.³⁷ Their article describes the 'apocalyptic' scene of the fires on Table Mountain in 2000 during which the fynbos was badly burnt, but moreover, it points towards the rhetoric of 'alien invaders' in the natural environment as indicative of a wider set of social and political concerns about foreigners: "aliens-both plants and people- come to embody core contradictions of boundedness and belonging. And alien-nature provides a language for voicing new forms of discrimination within a culture of 'post-racism' and civil rights" (C&C, 2001:627). The Comaroffs' analysis of an epistemological shift is comparable to Garuba's descriptions of post-colonial alienation, and it is particularly useful for my study of *No Time Like the Present*. The title of Gordimer's novel introduces the issue: in this time, and place, in post-Apartheid South Africa, individual identities must be cultivated or re-cultivated and the question of who does, or does not 'belong' becomes a new social preoccupation:

A transfiguration of the modernist political subject: a move away *from* a sense of belonging in a homogenously imagined community of right-bearing individuals *towards* one in which difference is endemic and irreducible [...] *from* a stress on citizenship based on 'deep horizontal fraternity' to which all other connections are secondary *towards* one in which each national is a 'stakeholder' vertically rooted, like homegrown plants in soil, in body corporate [...] *toward* the primacy of autochthony. (C&C, 2001:649)

Although the Comaroffs' argument is referring to the Western Cape, their analysis highlights two main points that this chapter, and this entire thesis, is concerned with.

³⁷ Comaroff, J. and Comaroff, J., 2001. 'Naturing the Nation: aliens, apocalypse and the postcolonial state,' *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3, September. Hereafter referred to as 'C&C.'

Firstly, following the end of Apartheid, individual and collective identity in South Africa went into a state of flux, and the cross-over period between ‘before’ and ‘after’ is the subject of Gordimer’s last novel. When identities and social roles are called into question by a change in a political and social system, questions are posed about “national integrity;” people ask “what might nationhood and belonging *mean*” (C&C, 2001:631). Secondly, the “charged references” in the case of the Table Mountain fire form part of an “anxious public discourse” (C&C, 2001:631): fears and anxieties about identity are aptly reflected in the public reaction to the fire. Not only do the rhetoric of the natural and the political go hand in hand, the former is a means of highlighting the process of identity cultivation and meaning-making itself:

The passage across frontiers, among plants as among people, illuminates all the contradictions of openness and closure, of regulation and deregulation, of otherness and indigenisation: *is the jacaranda, ‘almost the national tree,’ a naturalized South African? Or a hateful interloper?* (C&C, 2001:650)

I will examine Gordimer’s text, bearing in mind the theories and arguments of critics such as Garuba and the Comaroffs. The jacaranda tree is, among other arboreal examples, a motif that appears in *No Time Like the Present*, and it demonstrates clearly the symbiosis of nature and politics in Gordimer’s writing. Through these motifs, we witness the human tendency to attach significance, and meaning, to certain elements of the natural environment. These elements, subsequently, form part of an evolving individual identity. When Jabu and Steve, a mixed race couple, visit their potential new, suburban home in *No Time Like the Present*, Gordimer outlines the *difference* in the pair’s cultural, familial backgrounds, through their contrasting impressions of the tree at the bottom of the garden:

They were pleased to walk out and find shrubs beyond that half-hid the wall that was overhung with shade from a neighbour’s tree Acacia. – But she was not interested in the identification. As a kid given every advantage he was taken to plant nurseries with his father and learnt to match botanical names to certain trunks, leaves and bark. She had learnt on walks with her grandmother in the forests of Zululand what wild fruits were safe and good to eat.” (Gordimer, 2012:11)

Here, it seems that Gordimer is referring to the binary that Garuba diagnoses. Steve’s upbringing, in a white, privileged family, which featured botanical identification

lessons from his father, sets him apart from Jabu in her more functional, first-hand experience of the forests of KZN. Both characters are reminded, upon looking at the tree, of lessons handed down to them from a previous generation: the different agendas of these lessons reflect the different social climate in which they were brought up. They reflect multiple, varied ‘heritages.’ Steve sees the “modest representation of the setting of the house he grew up in” as manifested in the “rockery with aloes in flower, a jacaranda tree, a neat mat of lawn either side of a path” (Gordimer, 2012:10). These motifs of his upbringing enable Steve to envision his ‘settled’ future here, the creation of a new, family identity with Jabu. There is an irony to this future, as the suburb is an environment that would have been previously out of bounds for this mixed-race couple:

Not only the *ware* Boer suburb has transformed in accordance with political correctness as an expression of justice. The suburb of fine houses, many with fake features of the various Old Countries from which the owners came, that had been in well-off white ownership has also undergone invasion, if not transformation [...] there is no longer any law to prevent any black who can afford such a stately home from acquiring it. (Gordimer, 2012:132).

The “fake features of the various Old Countries” and the “invasion if not transformation” are often evidenced in the trees and plants that are so appealing to Steve. The jacaranda is an ironic contemporary symbol of Pretoria, and by implication, of the type of suburb that Steve and Jabu move to- it is ironic, because it is not indigenous to South Africa, but has become assimilated into its national identity. In an article entitled ‘Only the Truly Patriotic Can Be Trusted to Smell the Roses’ (2000), K. Bliksem mocks the iconography of the jacaranda tree in a parody that links it explicitly to racial identity and even uses the term ‘alien’ to dismiss the tree’s ‘legitimacy’ as a national symbol:

Doubtless there are gardening writers who would not think twice about sounding off in blissful praise of something as innocent [...] as the jacaranda tree [...] But [...] you may be nothing more than [...] a racist. Subliminally that is [...] Behind its blossoms and its splendid boughs, the jacaranda is nothing but a water-hogging [...] weed-spreading alien.³⁸

³⁸ K. Bliksem, 2000. ‘Only the Truly Patriotic Can Be Trusted to Smell the Roses,’ *Sunday Independent*, February 22.

To Steve, the jacaranda is a defining feature of the kind of stable, settled neighbourhood that he grew up in, and which he'd like to move to with Jabu. He has endorsed the idea of a move to a new neighbourhood, emphasising the more peaceful atmosphere- "He says the streets are quiet" - and he refers to the "old trees there." Jabu picks up on this reference as one of the "trappings of outdated life, come back subconsciously" (Gordimer, 2012:6). Steve's wistful description of the trees (that signify, to him, a longstanding and reassuringly *rooted* neighbourhood), only serves to remind Jabu of the "privileges of the white suburb where he grew up." However, she has her own 'tree memory' that is both visceral and emotional, embedded in the natural features of her childhood neighbourhood:

Only when she slows the car for the safety of the children who recognise it, leap alongside calling out Jabulile [...] does the entire familiarity of the place of origin come to her as if she were pinching peaches from the tree before they were ripe, being pulled along wild tumbling rides on the fruitbox sleds of the boys" (Gordimer, 2012:83).

Jabu's 'muscle memory' of her childhood peach-pinching is another example of the meaning-making of trees in this novel. When Jabu and Wethu, their domestic helper and family friend, return to Zululand, the vegetation they pass as they leave their urban surroundings to return to the comfort of home, recalls the 'home-identity' that Steve's "old trees" served for him: "We're nearly home. -And Wethu's composure half-woke to her habitually tired smile along with some low sound of assent, as if every huddle of trees, wave of sugar cane under the wind was landmark of a personal map" (Gordimer, 2012:137). The "huddle of trees" is a visible symbol of Wethu's return home: Gordimer highlights it as a *landmark*, but its significance goes beyond the visual. It points towards the concept of 'roots' and 'family,' as well as 'heritage,' which are all central to Gordimer's study of identity in this text.

Trees, as well as their fruits, leaves and roots, are active 'meaning-makers:' "The Mkize roots there had long ago been dug up and transplanted to more industrialised parts of the country" (Gordimer, 2012:245). In this further example, the 'Mkize' family's physical move from one area to another is described explicitly in terms of uprooting, from the earth, just like a tree or plant: it is a reinforcing of the importance of individual as well as collective, cultural frames of reference. The

Mkizes, Wethu, Jabu and Steve each have their own cultural frames of reference, and Gordimer makes use of the trees as symbols, but beyond that, they form part of the memories of the characters and, as a result, are integral to their individual identities. When Steve and Jabu arrive in their new suburb, there is a clear disconnect between the idyllic tree-memories of childhood, and this new, “*ware*,” suburb:

Anyway, it meant that they bundled Sindiswa and a couple of bottles of wine into the car and took the freeway to an exit unfamiliar. It debouched on streets brooded over by straggly pepper trees drooping their age and what must be jacarandas, but not in bloom, whose roots humped the pavements.” (Gordimer, 2012:7)

The “straggly pepper trees” and “jacarandas, not in bloom” are the reality they are faced with: not quite the sturdy, “old trees” that Steve had promised, but the symbolic remnants of a set of privileges now rendered obsolete. The roots that still ‘hump’ the pavements are there, but visible, above the ground, exposed. This new neighbourhood’s identity combines what is past, with what is new: the natural surroundings combined with the urban, previously white suburban enclave, are more than merely a backdrop for the characters’ gradually changing lives. As the young family tries to establish itself in this new South Africa, cultivating their newly legal mixed-race-couple identity whilst simultaneously returning to a sense of ‘normality’ following their years of struggle, the emblems of a confusing cross-over period, the signs of white privilege that have decayed and been left unattended and neglected, are littered throughout the scene.

The confusing cross-over is an emblem for the entire novel, and it is rooted in this new suburb. Despite their varying childhood upbringings, the comrades have a shared history from their part in the Struggle in the bush, one that “will be misinterpreted by people who haven’t known they may be dead in the first next day” (Gordimer, 2012:64). Jabu clings to this identity for much of the novel: “But so far the most definitive self comes from the Struggle. Whatever that means now. It’s not something to talk about even to him. It’s not left in the bush camp or the desert or the prison, it’s the purpose of being alive; still a comrade” (Gordimer, 2012:56). The brotherhood of comradeship, the “kinship of prison and bush [...] was a meaning of their lives that could not be erased” (Gordimer, 2012:124). But in the aftermath of the Struggle, this shared history becomes confused, and the old signifiers of identity

(from the trees, to the type of house, to the environment) come into play once more. The group of people living together here have to learn to define their identities, individually and collectively, in an entirely new space. Previously, their relationships were defined by their collective involvement in the Struggle, in the bush: now, living in a previously off-limits, whites-only suburb, their relations are inevitably altered. Firstly, the bush itself has taken on a new significance, at least for the younger generation- it has its own environmental identity that has to be redefined in 'the present': from a historical place of Struggle, it is now a place of leisure. Just as *July's People* tackles the environmental justice issue at the heart of the characterisation of the bush, *No Time Like the Present* highlights the cultural significance of the bush as place of shelter versus place of leisure (that could only be enjoyed by some). Just as the middle-class suburb has become accessible for characters such as Jabu, to live with her family, the bush as a space has become accessible for black *and* white families to enjoy on holiday: "Used to be a luxury only white children had, the Kruger Park; while blacks were barred entry, except for warders and camp servants" (Gordimer, 2012:384). Gordimer reminds the reader of the shifting of sign systems that renders the bush this new, accessible space, no longer the restricted "brief bright kingdom" in which the black man "apologises for his existence," as Rustum Kozain evokes in his poem, "Kingdom in the Rain" (2005).

The comrades- Steve, Jabu and their neighbours- who had been involved in the Struggle, share a sense of irony and amusement at their children's perceptions of the bush as a place of 'fun,' as it is so alien to their own experiences of the bush during Apartheid: "He and Steve take, grinning privately: 'our Africa' shared in *Umkhonto* bush camps- but this, something other, their children ought to have now outside the animal prison of a zoo: a sense of the birthplace they share with animals" (Gordimer, 2012:385).

The 'birthplace they share' is a reminder of the collective access that now applies, to areas of environmental wilderness. Previously, these areas would have been designated as places of leisure (barred to black visitors) or places of refuge and war-time accommodation. When Steve's son begs to "go camping again," Steve reflects on "another wilderness of bush Over There," all too aware of the change in significance that is symptomatic of the functional change in sign systems of the entire country: "just as the bush that has been his adventure holiday place here is not the Angolan desert, bush" (Gordimer, 2012:409). Steve and Jabu's son "knows the bush

as happy adventure, that's a small gain," and it renders the Struggle worthwhile in some way. This reflection on the innocence of the new generation of South Africans, assigning values to their natural environment without the knowledge of the Struggle that has allowed them to do so, is key to Gordimer's set of preoccupations in this novel.

So, out of the bush and into the suburb: the significance of the environment is clear- the *cartography* of the suburb is so alien, compared to their previous living space of the bush, that the characters must each redefine their relationship with the environment in order to redefine their relationships with each other. Previously, their space was defined by "back-and-forth in the bush, guns and cell walls" whereas now their space is defined by, among other materials of urban life, "coffee-vending machines" (Gordimer, 2012:64). Steve wonders, in this new space, "whether he really wants to prolong in some way the intimacy between comrades that was survival in detention or the bush" (Gordimer, 2012:11). In this new cartography, no longer united by the bush as a place of war, each must interpret the elements individually:

When the Suburb gets together each in this trusted company can unburden frustrations, unforeseen situations, unexpected successes of their piece of the jigsaw, argue where it will fit in to make the map of the new life. Not everyone sees the same cartography, anyway. These are the mountains to sweat your way up- no, these are the cesspits still to be drained of the shift of the past, no, they're the green fields in the dew. (Gordimer, 2012:254)

Gathered around a braai, these families no longer relate to each other using the frame of reference of "detention cells," "comradeship of danger," "the presence of death eavesdropping always close by in the desert, the bush" (Gordimer, 2012:8). In the backyard of a middle-class home in a middle-class neighbourhood, in the shade of an acacia tree that subtly recalls the wilds of Angola where they dwelt before, the characters have "their experience of life define[d]: *now* is everything after" (Gordimer, 2012:8). Even the activity of the *braai*, a Sunday afternoon activity for white middle-class families, enjoying their gardens and sharing stories over the fire, reiterates the problematic cross-over from the Struggle in the bush, to the comforts of suburban living. The Comaroffs describe this activity as "domestic food fests" and "the stuff of a hallowed cultural practice" which are, ironically, fuelled (literally) by "combustible alien trees" such as the "Australian rooikrans" (C&C, 2001:642), further complicating the levels of symbolism in such a scene. One of the characters,

Peter Mkize, lost a brother during the Struggle: he was dismembered and burned “at a *braaivleis* by drunken white South African soldiers.” The memory is recalled horribly by Steve as he watches Peter “expertly turning chops and sausages on the charcoal grill,” hoping that the memory of his brother’s horrific death will “not come back to him as he flips over the spitting sausages for the comrades” (Gordimer, 2012:8). Throughout these suburban scenes, the novel asks the question, “a normal life [...] what is that? In what time and place?” (Gordimer, 2012:216). This new ‘time and place’ requires a redefining of identities, there’s “Outer Space on Earth between our people, and the others” (Gordimer, 2012:216), and the environment of the suburb, as contrast to the bush, is key to this redefinition period.

Continuing in her literary use of the environment to reflect and characterise the human relationships in the novel, Gordimer describes these relationships frequently by using tree and plant ‘terminology.’ She also explores the *differences* (in appearance, familial relations and personality) between her characters by using a distinct set of images that adds another dimension to the tree language in her novel: it also introduces another key theme of the text, of exclusion and belonging.

A key example of this is in the relationship between Jabu, and her father. For Jabu herself, returning ‘home’ means returning to “her Baba,” her roots. The father-daughter relationship in *No Time Like the Present* is presented repeatedly by the author in the genealogical terminology of a tree, whose roots and branches cannot easily be severed from its ‘trunk.’ Baba is the central ‘trunk’ of Jabu’s family tree, and her connection, her *rootedness* to him and the ideals he stands for, is emphasised:

Yes her Baba. What Baba thinks in every decision for every move she makes in her life, the life he propagated and that is deep in her being as Sindiswa and Gary Elias were embedded in her womb; it matters to Jabu. It’s not a question of influence; between her and Baba, his comrade wide and her Baba there is an identity. Final one? (Gordimer, 2012:232)

This deeply-rooted love, “which that other love, woman and mate, has not supplanted” (Gordimer, 2012:238), becomes increasingly difficult for Jabu as her “multiple identities [...] her convictions, ethics, beliefs” begin to migrate away from those she cherished *with* her father; but it is constantly reiterated that the relationship links not only Jabu’s father to her, but “her children who are also the headmaster’s, the Church Elder’s, the grandmother’s, the aunts’, by lineage and blood children of

KwaZulu” (Gordimer, 2012:364). Jabu, unlike Steve, whose family tree is blurred into broken relationships with estranged siblings and aloof parents, is ruled by the “cultural authority of the natal,” and her husband “would never, in his valiant efforts to learn isiZulu from her, reach this” (Gordimer, 2012:84). This natal pull, the father-daughter relationship, the genealogy of their Zulu family tree, defines Baba himself and forms “the fundament of his being, his identity, ancestral and present” (Gordimer, 2012:379).

By exploring the ‘natal’ relationship, Gordimer is adding to her examination of the redefining of different types of relationships in the novel. The meaning-making in this novel is far more schematic than we see in her earlier work: there seems to be almost an excess of signification, to the point that it begins to overpower the signs themselves. Furthermore, Gordimer increasingly seems to inscribe the binary that Garuba problematizes, between the rural and the urban. We have seen the redefining of the comrade relationship from the bush to the suburb; the father-daughter relationship is another that has to be redefined in the wake of this ‘new place,’ this ‘new time,’ and it is done so in the language of roots and trees. But between the characters of Jabu and Steve themselves, there is a redefining of identity that makes use of a more explicitly biological, scientific set of images. This does not negate the natural environment’s role in the novel: in fact, it strengthens its purpose. The imagery of the biological make-up of the characters is reflective of a contemporary, national obsession with the biology of difference, indigenusness, and the ‘alien,’ that is tied inexorably to the natural environment in multiple ways. It all points towards a redefining of identities that is happening during a period of confusion and cross-over, just as I have argued so far. Steve may be

white, but that’s also not as definitive as coded in old files. Born in the same past era, a few years before her, he’s a white mix- that was of no significance as long as the elements were white. [...] Actually his mix is quite complicated in certain terms of identity not determined by colour. His father was a gentile, secular, nominally observant Christian, his mother Jewish. (Gordimer, 2012:2)

There is an overall sense of hybridity, of a compound (enhanced by the scientific and technical jargon- “coded,” “elements,” “definitive”) to describe Steve’s ‘components:’ they are all part of a biological system of signs. Jabu’s blood is “mixed,” she shares her skin colour with “a whole population” but Gordimer

attributes her appearance and biological make up to “nature’s arbitrary intriguing decisions to pick this bone structure or that, which nose which flesh-line of lips to perpetuate from this or that different progenitor” (Gordimer, 2012:19). Jabu and Steve are both ‘hybrid forms:’ their union allows for an even greater hybridity, as “she is a woman- wife, that legal entity- to a man of the pallor of colonialism” (Gordimer, 2012:238).

Alongside this hybridity, however, lies the potential for exclusion: Steve is irreconcilably *different* from Jabu, there is a “juxtaposition in opposition, whites and blacks” from which he cannot escape: “ ‘we’ excluding him, her man, from its solidarity identity” (Gordimer, 2012:127). Jabu’s relationship to her ‘trunk,’ her Baba, is inaccessible to Steve, “the attachment, not in sense of emotion but of a history alive in the present which he cannot claim to share with her and Baba” (Gordimer, 2012:238). The “knotted liens of nature” (Gordimer, 2012:240) that tie Jabu to Baba, are “liens he didn’t have” (Gordimer, 2012:240), a fact that is unchanged by the collective identity of those involved in the Struggle. Gordimer uses the word *liens* deliberately to play on ‘lines’ here, emphasising the binding (and in fact ‘legal’) terminology in the relationship.

In *No Time Like the Present*, it is reiterated that the ‘indigenous’ or ‘autochthonous’ claim to cultural identity in South Africa is highly problematic. Unlike Australia, where “both peoples” have “ancient claims of origin to the same territory,” the white communities of South Africa “have no such claim, no common origin with local aborigines- unless you accept the palaeoanthropologist discovery of the origin of all hominids in The Cradle of Man, the site in this African country” (Gordimer, 2012:285). There is a need for the acknowledgment of this inevitable hybridity, and a need for the avoidance of exclusions. Dominic Head describes Gordimer’s keenness to “pursue the positive potential of hybrid forms in her discussions of South African literary culture” and for her advocacy of “cross-fertilization”³⁹ in literature and in society in South Africa in general. The implication, in *No Time Like the Present* and in Gordimer’s writings on hybridity of literature, is that cross-fertilization and hybridity bring enrichment of character and help to defeat anxiety about the ‘divergent’ or ‘alien’ in literature, society and politics. Speaking at the University of Witswatersrand in 1967, Gordimer described the “mockery” that

³⁹ Dominic Head, 1994. ‘Gordimer and South Africa: themes, issues and literary identity.’ In *Nadine Gordimer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 4.

was South African literature, that silenced writers such as Mphahlele, Nkosi, La Guma, Brutus and Modisane. She insisted that there was a great need in South Africa “for cultural cross-fertilization in the national literature” (Head, 1994:5). Thus, she argues against an obsession with indigenesness, but simultaneously pushes for an acknowledgment of African creativity- hybridity, according to Gordimer, is essential: “the failure to build on this integration of cultural origins and current situation- of self and other- is the key issue” (Head, 1994:8).

In another interview from 1981, Gordimer refers to “our fathers’ culture- white culture imported from Europe” which “wasn’t indigenous; [...] all it did was to harm black culture.” She asks the question, “can we now strike roots in what has been debased by us?”⁴⁰ In 1984, Gordimer’s vision of this cross-fertilization is outlined even more clearly, as she “identifies fully with [...] a hybrid between the rich pre-colonial oral tradition of South Africa and the imported indigenous European tradition, [...] committed to the ‘truly new indigenous culture’ that would result”⁴¹ A blend of cultures, then- we see this at the heart of *No Time Like the Present*, but we also see the dangers of exclusion and the obsession with the exact definition of a ‘truly new indigenous culture.’

So far, this chapter has examined the ways in which the environment acts as meaning-maker as well as symbol in *No Time Like the Present*- I have looked at the contrast of the suburb and the bush; and at the complex redefining of identities within those spaces. I have also looked at the terminology of biological ‘difference’ as it manifests in the novel’s tree imagery. Ultimately, these themes and issues within the novel point towards the wider concept of ‘belonging’ and exclusions: what, or who, is ‘the alien?’ Hybridity, blending of ‘indigenous’ with ‘non-indigenous,’ is central to the novel, and the post-Apartheid setting reveals the ugly remnants of a separatist, decidedly ‘unblended’ body politic. In amongst the characters that are redefining their roles in this new, democratic state, Gordimer presents an atmosphere of increased tension. The terminology used to describe the physical differences between Jabu and Steve expands to apply to the wider community, and the climax of this comes in several outbursts of xenophobia. A new type of exclusion, this behaviour is analysed throughout the text as symptomatic of an obsession with indigenesness: “that’s the

⁴⁰ Edmund Morris. 1981. ‘A Visit with Nadine Gordimer,’ *New York Times Book Review*, 7 June. 27.

⁴¹ ‘An Interview’ in *Momentum: On Recent South African Writing*, edited by M. J. Daymond, J.U. Jacobs and Margaret Lenta (University of Natal Press, Pietermaritzburg, 1984), pp.32-4 (33). In Dominic Head, 1994. *Nadine Gordimer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 10.

cause of what's happening. Not 'irrational fear or dislike of the Xenos, strange, foreign or different.' Familiar, African, black-like-me" (Gordimer, 2012:206).

The question of what is *meant* by 'foreign' is also brought to light in this text, as there are instances when Jabu and Steve are united in their equal foreignness: "He and she are the foreigners here. Even she. Black skin isn't enough" (Gordimer, 2012:194). The pair investigate the meaning of 'xenophobia' and their multiple findings reflect the complexities of such human behaviour, particularly in a context that emerges from a collective battle *against* separatism and exclusion: "'Xenos. Indicates the presence of a reference to that which is strange, foreign, different. From Greek, Xenos, stranger.' 'Xenophobic. Characterised by fear of foreign persons or things.' 'Xenophobia. Intense or irrational dislike of people from other countries'" (Gordimer, 2012:205). In the novel it is presented at one end of a spectrum of anxieties about identity, indigenosity and 'the alien.'

There is a great deal of scholarship on xenophobia across Africa, particularly as it occurs after a distinct political and social shift, from a repressive regime to a democracy: "From Rwanda, DRC, Kenya and Cote d'Ivoire, 'sons of the soil' have been killing people they portrayed as 'invading aliens' seeking to grab power and land" (Boas & Dunn, 2013:14). The terminology of xenophobia and autochthony discourse is inevitably tied to 'the soil' and thus the natural environment is, by nature of the rhetoric itself, central to the concept:

Political liberalisation leads, somewhat paradoxically, to an intensification of the politics of belonging: fierce debates on who belongs where, violent exclusion of 'strangers' (even if this refers to people with the same nationality who have lived for generations in the area), and a general affirmation of roots and origins as the basic criteria of citizenship and belonging. (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh, 2000:423; quoted in Boas & Dunn, 2013:21)

If we compare the language and rhetoric of xenophobic attacks in South Africa's recent history with that of scenes from *No Time Like the Present*, and with that of the "war against aliens" on Table Mountain, there are clear parallels. Following the destruction of fynbos in the mountain fires, the Minister for Water Affairs begged the public to see that "we are all in this together, [...] for alien species do not respect lines

drawn on maps.”⁴² Even Thabo Mbeki, president at the time, accused alien plants of “stand[ing] in the way of the African renaissance.”⁴³ Wethu’s explosion of anger against the unnamed Zimbabweans from the newspaper reports in *No Time Like the Present* is also indicative of the dangerously indiscriminate nature of xenophobia that can spread as a result of fear:

That rubbish, they must voetsak back to Mugabe, they are only here, come from that place to steal take our bags in the street, and shame, shame, look what they do to Mr Jake, they wanted to kill him to get his car, it’s only God’s will he’s still alive to see his children grow up, he can’t walk quite right I see him there in the road, eish! They tell lies why they come here, the young ones are just tsotsis, Wonke umuntu makahlale ezweni lakhe alilungise! Everybody must stay at their own country to make it right, not run away, we never ran away, we stayed in KwaZulu even while the Boers the whites at the coal mine were paying our men nothing not even for the children school, and getting sick, sick from down in the mines, we stayed we were strong for the country to come right- If those people don’t get out, we must chase them-” (Gordimer, 2012:204)

These examples all reflect fear- this fear is rooted in the loss of heritage, of national identity. It is also about a fear of the loss of individual identity: “heritage,” both collective and individual, is feared to be “at risk” (C&C, 2001:629).

Overall, this text is an intriguing but rather ambiguous offering at the end of Gordimer’s career. What it does remind me, however, is of Larson’s problematic definition of a ‘national landscape.’ *No Time Like The Present* highlights Larson’s point about the impossibility of this definition, which suggests that in theory, national identity “gives unity [...] a unique character [...] a common origin” and “naturalizes that unity” (Larson, 2005:297). What Gordimer does in this text is to highlight the reality of the “actual state of affairs,” which is constantly shifting. The language and rhetoric of exclusion and belonging in this text also highlights a sense of disillusionment on the behalf of the author, looking out at the landscape of her country after one of its greatest systemic shifts. The confusion of cultural identities, the newfound fears and anxieties about the ‘alien,’ all remind her as an author (and in turn, us as her readers), that the shifts continue, and that a unified national landscape

⁴²Address to International Symposium on Best Management Practices for Preventing and Controlling Invasive Alien Species, Kirstenbosch (Cape Town), 22-24 February 2000.

⁴³ Message from President Mbeki, read by Valli Moosa, Minister for Environmental Affairs and Tourism, at the International Symposium on Best Management Practices for Preventing and Controlling Invasive Alien Species, Kirstenbosch, 22-24 February 2000.

is practically impossible. Without an acknowledgment of the historical shifts that have taken place, “actual conflicts” are hidden and the true identity of the landscape will remain locked in a language that, as Coetzee suggested, cannot easily be spoken.

Conclusion

Gordimer's Cultivating of Identities in the "Plain Dirt Sense"⁴⁴

You are either running away from your inevitable place, or you are taking it on. By place I don't mean a predetermined place; your place depends on the role you take in society. But the fact is that you have a role; [...] You are consciously or unconsciously creating a position in your society.⁴⁵

Land, to Gordimer, is central to South Africa's history of marginalization. The above quotation highlights both her belief in the responsibility of the author to 'take your place,' and the prerogative of the human to cultivate one's identity in society. To Gordimer, the earth is central to this cultivation of identity, as is an understanding of her country's traumatic history: reading the landscape reveals "the presence of the threat not only of mutual destruction of whites and blacks in South Africa, but of killing, everywhere, by scorching, polluting, neglecting, charging with radioactivity, the dirt beneath our feet" (Gordimer, 2010:403). In her novels, her characters are constantly "either running away" from the inevitable or "taking it on" as they cultivate their identities in particular times and spaces.

In this study I have argued for a more careful reading of Gordimer's frequent engagement with the South African landscape. To be more specific, I have demonstrated her repeated imagining of spaces for change: in writing the bush, the farm, the rural village and the leafy suburb, Gordimer makes use of an ecocritical approach to highlight an authorial responsibility for "re-establishing meanings." She acknowledges consistently these spaces' capacities for accommodating the systemic shifts of history *and* of the future to come; her examining of various environments illustrates various systems of signs and by placing *The Conservationist*, *July's People*, and *No Time Like the Present* in conversation with one another, an over-arching systemic shift can be observed. By beginning in 1970, and culminating in 2012, this thesis has enabled me to track the functional change in sign systems occurring

⁴⁴ Gordimer, Nadine. 2010. 'The Idea of Gardening.' (Originally written in 1984). In *Telling Times: Writing and Being*. London: Bloomsbury. 402.

⁴⁵ Stephen Gray. 1981. 'An Interview with Nadine Gordimer.' *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 22, No. 3. pp. 263-271. University of Wisconsin Press. 267. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208279>
Accessed: 12-05-2015 09:18 UTC

throughout South Africa over this period, as imagined by Gordimer through an ecological lens.

I have commented in each chapter on the closely observed litany of naming and signifying, one that is at its most detailed with regards to plants and trees. In each novel, Gordimer draws awareness to botanical and scientific knowledge, which in itself carries meaning along the chain of signs: it simultaneously privileges a certain *type* of knowledge whilst highlighting the significance that that knowledge carries in terms of political and social identity. All three novels contain references to Latin names, and the scientific identification of plants:

Genus: *Amaryllidaceae*; species *Crinum bulbispermum*. (Gordimer, 1974:206).

She could name the variety of thorn-tree- *Dichrostachys cinserea*, *sekelbos* with its yellow tassels dangling from downy pink and mauve pompoms (Gordimer, 2012:179).

As a kid given every advantage he was taken to plant nurseries with his father and learnt to match botanical names to certain trunks, leaves and bark. (Gordimer, 2012:11).

This litany of naming crosses over into the series of signs throughout each novel that relate to the natural environment. From individual trees to the bushveld as an entire biome, these natural elements play key roles as narrative substrates as well as symbolizing the struggles for identity that lie at the heart of each story. The ubiquitous Spanish Chesnuts that Mehring is determined to plant in *The Conservationist* serve to remind the reader of his increasingly deluded self-identity as a preserver of a non-existent heritage; furthermore, his preoccupation with non-indigenous, European trees as a fitting status symbol for his farm sets the scene for the increasing awareness in Gordimer's novels of the significance of the foreign 'Other,' and the alien in both ecology and politics in South Africa. The fig tree towards which Maureen Smales runs at the end of *July's People* signifies a moment of crossing over to a new space, a new time: the "cage of roots let down into the mud" are no longer an aesthetic sign of the bush as a place of leisure, but now act as a ladder for her to climb (Gordimer, 2012:194) and thus help to complete the shift from one system of meaning to another, as the novel reaches its climax.

In *No Time Like the Present*, the Acacia and Jacaranda trees serve similar narrative and symbolic roles in reflecting the confused and complex identities of Jabu

and Steve as they negotiate their newfound liberty following the end of Apartheid. Their different upbringings and cultural backgrounds are mirrored in their different reactions to the trees in their neighbourhood- a neighbourhood that is, in itself, an imagined space of change. The trees in these novels both signify and bear witness to great systemic shifts, but are also “hidden from the just and unjust of marauding history” (Gordimer, 2010:403), and are arguably more resilient and enduring than the human characters who relate to them.

The purpose of these, and many other signs linked to the natural landscapes of the novels, is to reflect an over-arching systemic shift in the political and social status of South Africa. Examining these three novels in particular, and in chronological order, has allowed us to witness the various stages of this over-arching shift. Furthermore, the focus on the *linguistic* element of this shifting of sign systems reflects a concern of Gordimer’s with the linguistic system of Apartheid itself, in which signs and signifiers were manipulated to create an entire lexicon of oppression. In playing with this idea of signs and meanings, Gordimer is “exposing the real meaning of the South African government’s vocabulary of racist euphemisms-such terms as ‘separate development’, ‘resettlement’, ‘national states’, and its grammar of a racist legislature” (Gordimer, 1989:14) in order to imagine an overall shifting of signs throughout these three novels.

In *The Conservationist*, there is a constant sense of brewing change, that Mehring cannot accept or refuses to see. The reader can see the approach of social and political change: both the change and Mehring’s denial are witnessed by the silent but active response of the landscape and by the black characters whose agency increases throughout the novel. The Calloway quotations that intersperse the narrative act as the roots that Gordimer asks us to “follow,” in order to understand the past and, more importantly, to accept what is coming.

In *July’s People*, we can see a literary realizing of the ‘space’ imagined and foreshadowed in *The Conservationist*. The crisis is enacted, there is a subsequent re-assigning of signs and their meanings, and an explosion of roles occurs. Any previous frames of reference are collapsed, causing an entire systemic shift. Gordimer’s characters are defined, again, by how they have previously related, and how they are now relating, to their environments’ systems of meaning. In *No Time Like the Present*, a strange reversal of this ‘sign-chain’ occurs: this is a post-apocalyptic imagining of space, that has to deal with the hangover of a systemic shift, but in turn

deals with the fact that shifts *will keep occurring*. It is a novel that deals also with the sense of disillusionment that can arrive once a political regime has been upended, but this new space has failed to meet the expectations that come with great change. If we look back, this disillusionment, that has manifested in a range of confused identities, has in fact been present throughout the earlier novels: Mehring as an industrialist-farmer, who cannot garner his own son's interest in his farm; Bam Smales as a privileged city man who must now hunt for much-needed food rather than for sport; Maureen Smales as a white Madam and mother who must now ask her ex-servant for her own right to possessions; Jabu and Steve as previous Comrades who must now work out how they feel about a newly-governed (and potentially corrupt) country, very much altered since the Struggle.

In terms of their relationships with each *other*, the characters' familial ties are frequently described in terms of a biological system of signs. Particularly with regards to parents and children, there is an invasion into the narrative of a vocabulary that emphasizes the physicality of trees, roots, vines and branches. The weaving of the arboreal language into the very ties that bind the characters seems to advocate fluidity and cross-fertilisation, and the need to understand and follow roots. However, in her preoccupation with fluidity, and the problematic cultivation of identity, Gordimer also highlights the terminology of 'foreignness' and the 'alien' in the political discourse of her country: "Gordimer's thinking reflects a cosmopolitan critique by reflecting the historical interconnectedness and the overlapping geographies of all groups. This is not an erasure of difference, but the recovery of shared space."⁴⁶ In each of the novels, "historical interconnectedness" and "overlapping geographies" are juxtaposed with a sense of 'foreignness' asserted in the cross-cultural and cross-racial encounters between characters, but the terminology of 'foreignness' infiltrates the narrative in other ways. I have already mentioned the biological terminology used for both plants and humans; the language of xenophobia and of indigeneity are also weaved explicitly into the stories (of *The Conservationist* and *No Time Like the Present* in particular) to tie in with characters' obsessions with their 'roots' and 'legacies.' Likewise, throughout each novel the searching for, digging up and transplanting of

⁴⁶ Eleni Coundouriotis. 2006. 'Rethinking Cosmopolitanism in Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist*.' In *College Literature*. No. 33.3. 2.10.1353/lit.2006.0035 URL https://muse.jhu.edu/login?auth=0&type=summary&url=/journals/college_literature/v033/33.3coundouriotis.html. Accessed 14.29. 28.01.16.

roots imagines figuratively a distinctly South African anxiety and preoccupation with identity before, during and after the end of Apartheid. Gordimer uses the subtle but effective terminology of roots to add substance to this sense of anxiety, particularly as the concept of roots links to ‘autochthony’ and a link to the earth: she presents over and over again the tensions between a sense of entitled heritage and more historically *authentic* claims to the earth.

This anxiety manifests also in a fear of silencing, a theme that crops up particularly in the male cultivation and loss of identity in *The Conservationist* and *July's People*. Mehring's visualization of the dead man's “mouth stopped with mud” (Gordimer, 1974:174) is an unsettling reflection of his own fear of silence after death: the earth, for him, carries the potential to silence, and thus cancel any continuation of legacy. Ironically, the dead man's agency is entirely underestimated, as he manages to do exactly what Mehring fails to, in reclaiming the earth at the end of the novel: “the one whom the farm received had no name. He had no family but their women wept a little for him. There was no child of his present but their children were there to live after him. They had put him away to rest, at last; he had come back. He took possession of this earth, theirs; one of them” (Gordimer, 1974:322). In *July's People*, Bam Smales eventually runs out of words and phrases that he can use in his struggle to identify with the “sameness of bush” that he now finds himself in, not nearly the same environment as the bush he knew before: “But the words would not come. They were blocked by an old vocabulary” (Gordimer, 2012:155).

With regards to space itself, this project has sought to identify the very nature of Gordimer's imagining of environments in her novels. Particularly in regards to the space of the bush, the sense of what it *means* to use the South African landscape as more than just a backdrop, has been central to my thesis. I have argued that the bush, in Gordimer's novels, is a heterotopia, and is particularly poignant with regards to her preoccupation with the ‘interregnum.’ *July's People*, entering into a South African moment of imminent change in the 1980s, predicts the figurative ‘space’ of the interregnum but imagines it very much in terms of a physical, tangible state of being. The bush serves as an appropriate ‘in-between’ space, both a ‘place’ and a ‘non-place’ and with the capacity to encompass a wide range of political and social tensions.

In her 1984 review of J.M. Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K*, Gordimer problematizes the author's engagement with the South African landscape, as she

argues that whilst she and Coetzee may share certain agendas, they reach separate conclusions: “Here is the concrete expression, through the creative imagination, of political debate about the future of South Africa under black majority rule: whether or not it should take over what has been the white South African version of the capitalist system.” This question is central to the novels that I have discussed in this thesis, and has ultimately led me to examine what happens when there is a systemic shift; how identities re-align themselves; who will, and who will not, foresee and accept this shift. The contentious issue in *Michael K*, for Gordimer, is the implied endorsement of the type of behavior we see in Mehring, and in Bam Smales: a denial of changes in signs, and of the necessity of revolution. Gordimer singles out the protagonist’s dogged pursuit of growing his pumpkins as a reflection of white South African avoidance of revolution: she is deeply unsettled by Coetzee’s apparent hero, who represents “those who ignore history, not make it.” Making history, creating meaning for one’s time and one’s place within that history, is central to Gordimer’s project, and she uses the landscape to show the dangers of denial and anxieties about change, rather than to suggest that the South African landscape is more important than the humans that inhabit it.

In *No Time Like the Present*, we witness a re-imagining of the bush, now that the major changes have actually taken place, and the revolution is, for all intents and purposes, over. The characters refer *back* to the space of the bush, it takes on a new significance in this altered system, and the result is unsettling. Ironically, as unknowable as the bush may be, it acts as a more stable memory for Jabu, Steve and the other Comrades and is an easier point of reference in their various attempts to cultivate a new identity: in a post-Apartheid suburb, they find it far more difficult to work out how they relate to their environment.

To what end, then, does Gordimer engage with the South African landscape in such an implicitly political way? Unlike Coetzee in *Michael K*, she makes use of various South African landscapes in her novels in order to engage *with* political revolution, and to conduct a profoundly political meditation on her time, and her place. As a writer, she advocates very clearly a need “to speak of trees,” in a manner that does not merely symbolise, but acknowledges history, and acknowledges the need for change. In her review of *Michael K*, she describes the protagonist of the novel “all along, dying” but nonetheless “growing.” The character’s decision not to leave his farm to join the guerilla band is “because enough men had gone off to war

saying the time for gardening was when the war was over; whereas there must be men to stay behind and keep gardening alive, or at least the idea of gardening; because once that cord was broken, the earth would grow hard and forget her children” (Gordimer quoting Coetzee, 2010:403). To me, this sentiment is what lies at the heart of Gordimer’s own literary project: not because she agrees, but because she is determined that a desire to stay behind and keep gardening alive will not blinker her contemporary white South Africans from the reality of political revolution. Her final, scoffing comment on Coetzee’s novel is a projection of her own agenda, in that it underlines her main concern about the failure of white South Africans to comprehend the measures, ethically necessary, for a more just system: “Beyond all creeds and moralities, this work of art asserts, there is only one: to keep the earth alive. [...] Hope is a seed. That’s all. That’s everything. It’s better to live on your knees, planting something...?” (Gordimer, 2010:403). This sentiment runs through the novels I have looked at- she is cautioning the Mehrings and the Bam Smales’ of the world:

Only an emphasis on such features in their non-exclusive co-presence and complexity, in contrast to the natural autonomy of the landscape, can make the landscape part of a democratic vision of national identity.⁴⁷

So, she is arguing: a writer must not privilege the landscape over the political, but rather use the landscape in order to address and *engage with* the political. A greater understanding of the history of the land in South Africa, that acknowledges the racial boundaries and restrictions of the past and the implications of these restrictions now that political and social systems have shifted: this is Gordimer’s self-assigned role. We must follow the roots, but acknowledge that they, like the trees that are still standing a century later, are witness to a history of marginalized and silenced identities, an unjust system: once that system has shifted, so too do the signs in the ‘chain,’ and, Gordimer’s novels allow, through a distinctly ecocritical perspective, the chance to read these features in their co-presence, as they change, and acknowledge that the fluidity of South Africa’s history, reflected in the landscape, must be reflected in the identities that emerge from it.

⁴⁷ Svend Erik Larson. 2005. ‘The National Landscape- National Identity or Post-Colonial Experience?’ *European Review*. Vol. 13. Issue 02. 302. DOI: 10.1017/S1062798705000426. URL: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S1062798705000426

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