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“A Flight from History”? Nadine Gordimer’s Congo Journey

Abstract: The aim of this article is to shed light on Nadine Gordimer’s political convictions in the context of the decolonization processes in the Belgian Congo (later the Democratic Republic of the Congo) in the years 1960–61. The article begins with a brief overview of Gordimer’s political views. It is argued that while Gordimer’s stance in the early 1950s had been that of liberal humanism (an influence that came to her also from the reading of E. M. Forster), by the end of this decade she began to question its relevance in South Africa. As a result, she decided to redefine both her political and artistic views, trying to forge a vision that would be more attuned to her position as a white writer in postcolonial Africa. This attempt is visible in her essay “The Congo River” (1961), at whose centre lies an ambivalence: while Gordimer welcomes the political transformation in Congo with cautious optimism, she also demonstrates a tendency to de-emphasize the country’s colonial history by focusing on the natural habitat and describing it as an ahistorical space. This notion of nature is, to a large extent, a repetition of the colonial vision of the natural environment, which Gordimer unwittingly perpetuated, creating her own example of the socioecological unconscious.

Keywords: Nadine Gordimer, travel writing, postcolonial ecocriticism, colonial depictions of nature, the Democratic Republic of the Congo

1. Gordimer’s perception of Africa in the early 1960s

In February 1960 Nadine Gordimer visited two countries on the brink of independence: the Belgian Congo, which four months later would become the Republic of the Congo (Léopoldville), and the adjoining Republic of the Congo, at the time still part of French Equatorial Africa. Inspired by this trip, she wrote two manuscripts—“Towards the Heart of Darkness” and “Africa 1960: The Great Period”—which she later reworked into “The Congo River” and published in the American magazine *Holiday* in May 1961. In this long and fascinating essay, Gordimer de-

scribes her journey up the Congo River from West to East Africa, all the way to the Ruwenzori Mountains on the border between the Republic of the Congo (Léopoldville) and Uganda. Enraptured by the country's lush forests and fascinated with the customs of its native inhabitants, Gordimer—a political tourist,¹ if ever there was one—almost forgot that she was travelling through the country in the midst of a historic political transition: at the time of her visit, the Congolese delegation had just returned from a conference in Belgium, during which the Belgian government, under pressure from the leaders of Alliance des Bakongo (ABAKO), the Congolese National Movement (MNA), and eleven other political parties, scheduled the first democratic elections for 30 June 1960. While the country was not yet prepared for such a swift transition of power,² the political mood was at once defiant and celebratory: Gordimer recalls reading the inscription “Vive le Roi M. Kasavubu³ et l'Indépendance” scribbled on one of the barges on which she travelled. “And whenever it caught my eye”, writes Gordimer, “there was brought home to me the realisation that Africa, however troubled it may be, has never been more interesting than it is in this decade; it may never be so interesting again” (“The Congo River” 171).

Gordimer's interest in Africa was not confined to the late 1950s and early 1960s; as she explains in “The Congo River”, two periods in the country's history fascinate her in particular:

The Africa the nineteenth-century explorers found ... and the Africa I had seen emergent in the city life of Stanley Pool are in living coexistence though centuries apart. These are the two great periods of the continent; the colonial Africa that came between them was the dullest, despite its achievements and historical necessity. (171)

A question worth asking is why Gordimer did not dwell on the colonial history of the Belgian Congo, concentrating instead on the recent (for her) postcolonial period and on the history of the 19th-century exploration of the country. Through this question we can seek to understand better her political development in the late 1950s and early 1960s—a time in which she redefined her views and reconsidered her role as a writer and public intellectual.

This article will continue with a brief overview of Gordimer's political convictions in the late 1950s. It was in this decade that she began to question her belief in liberal humanism and, at the same time, seek a different perspective—both

¹ Gordimer perfectly fits the description of the political tourist, as defined by Maureen Moynagh—“The political tourist belongs to a particular category of traveller, one who seeks to participate in or manifest solidarity with a political struggle taking place ‘elsewhere’ in the world” (3).

² As Martin Meredith writes, the Congolese had no experience at organizing local or general elections; they also had no trained cadres to run a newly formed state (101). Meredith notes that, faced with the strong independence movements in Congo, the Belgians decided to make a gamble: in the Belgian gamble—*le pari Congolais*—the Belgian authorities “would provide Congolese politicians with the trappings of power while purchasing enough goodwill to enable them to continue running the country much as before” (101).

³ Joseph Kasavubu, the leader of ABAKO, was the first president of the country in the years 1960–65.

political and cultural—from which to look upon South Africa. An early attempt to form this perspective is visible in “The Congo River”, which will be the main focus of this article. The analysis of “The Congo River” will concentrate both on Gordimer’s treatment of the political situation in Congo and on her description of the natural environment—a topic that features prominently in the essay. It will be argued that the descriptions of the Congo River and the Ituri Rainforest show Gordimer’s attempts to reach beyond the colonial standpoint by demonstrating her support for the political emancipation of the postcolonial Congo. This attempt is, nevertheless, to some extent flawed insofar as her vision of the country relies heavily on colonial views of nature.

2. Gordimer’s political stance in the late 1950s

To begin with, it should be understood that Gordimer’s outspoken interest in Africa was not merely that of a tourist. She was born in South Africa—a descendant of Jewish émigrés from England and Lithuania—and lived in her native town of Springs before moving to Johannesburg in her early twenties. By the late 1950s, she was already an acclaimed novelist and short-story writer, whose works gave many international readers insight into the functioning of apartheid. As Dorothy Driver notes, Gordimer, similarly to Dan Jacobson and Jack Cope, was one of the leading English-language short-story writers in South Africa in the 1950s, a representant of African modernism, with its emphasis on self-reflexivity, irony, and ambiguity. While this tradition was “short-lived” (Driver 389), as in the 1960s writers increasingly turned to social realism and naturalism, it shaped the careers of Gordimer, Jacobson, and Cope. In the early 1950s, Gordimer saw herself chiefly as a short-story writer, influenced by the modernist tradition: as Driver rightly notes, her aim was “not to define herself as a specifically South African writer but rather to set herself on a modernist world stage” (391). Emphasizing that she was “a natural writer” (Bazin and Seymour 9), not one created by political and economic circumstances (the international demand for South African literature, which was generated by the publication of Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* in 1948), Gordimer positioned herself as an author inspired by the English modernist tradition, especially E. M. Forster, who, as she noted in a 1965 interview, “influenced my handling of human relationships and, indeed, my conception of them” (Bazin and Seymour 37). While Forster’s influence was formative and clearly visible in her early works, it became problematic in the late 1950s, when the doctrine of liberal humanism began to be questioned by both white and black writers. Peter Blair notes that Gordimer’s novel *A World of Strangers* (1958), while rooted in Forster’s liberal humanist principles, also ironized the main protagonist’s fascination with shebeen jazz culture, which Blair compares to a “voyeuristic urban safari” (484). Clearly, by the end of the 1950s, Gordimer began to have doubts about the social

and political relevance of Forster's principle of "only connect"⁴ and the liberal notion of multiculturalism, as it dominated in the late 1940s and the early 1950s.

By the late 1950s, Gordimer's belief in liberalism and multiracialism was gradually being undermined by the intransigent policy of the apartheid government on the one hand, and, on the other, the influence of African nationalism, which was increasingly prominent across the continent. Gordimer reacted by distancing herself from her white, middle-class upbringing and by questioning the racist and supremacist values characteristic of her social milieu. In an interview with John Barkham in 1962, she described her political development in the following words: "First, you know, you leave your mother's house, and later you leave the house of the white race" (Bazin and Seymour 9). This gesture of political emancipation was, to some extent, a preparation for what Gordimer saw as both desirable and inevitable: the end of white supremacy and the beginning of a black-majority rule. In this situation, Gordimer predicted, the country's white population would be given a choice: either to leave or to play a secondary role in the country's social and political life. Mentioning Ghana, which gained its independence in 1957, Gordimer noted that the only white citizens who found their place in the country were those who became "foreign experts": "They are living as equals among the Africans, they have no say in the affairs of the country for the Africans to resent and they are contributing something useful and welcome to the development of Africa" ("Where Do Whites Fit In?" 35).

Gordimer felt that if she was one day to assume the role that she imagined for herself and other white South Africans, she would have to redefine herself as a writer and public intellectual by abandoning her cultural Anglocentrism, with its modernism and liberal humanism, and by seeking a mode of writing more attuned to her political situation as a writer doubly marginalized in the sense of belonging to a white minority that remains critical of white supremacist rule. That she did undertake this task is clear from her volume of literary criticism *The Black Interpreters*, in which she argued that to be an African writer, one does not have to meet the criterion of colour, but rather to "look at the world *from Africa*" (Gordimer, *The Black Interpreters* 5) (as opposed to "look[ing] *upon Africa* from the world"). The adoption of this Afrocentric vision was a gradual process that began in the late 1950s and was facilitated by her African travels. "The Congo River", discussed below, is a convincing testimony of Gordimer's determined attempts to transcend the colonial and imperialist modes of perception.

⁴ I am referring to ch. 22 of Forster's novel *Howards End* (1910).

3. Exploring "the new past"

Clearly evident in "The Congo River" is Gordimer's continual emphasis on change seen from the political, social, and historical perspectives. Adopting a stance of detachment, Gordimer becomes a figure that Stacy Burton pertinently describes as "the [travel writing] genre's quintessential figure—a solitary observer" (112), who "takes the vexed temporality of modernity as its subject, seeking to witness the present as it becomes past and read signs of possible futures" (89). That the present was rapidly becoming the past was evident to Gordimer both during her journey to Congo and in the process of writing her account; on the second page of her narrative, she makes the following comment: "Perhaps, while I am writing, the new past, so recent that it is almost the present is disappearing without trace as the older one did" ("The Congo River" 158). The Belgian occupation of Congo—"the old past"—was superseded by the turbulent years of 1959 and 1960—"the new past"—only to give way to an equally dynamic and unpredictable present. In July 1960, the country was riven by internal conflict, as the Katanga province, led by Moïse Tshombe, declared its independence. The country's Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, struggled to retain power, seeking to obtain support first from the United Nations and then the Soviet Union. Lumumba would be executed in January 1961, but this act, supported by the United Nations and the United States, did not bring stability to the country. From 1961, the country was led by Colonel Joseph Mobutu, who became the country's president in 1965 and remained in office until 1997.

When writing about politics, Gordimer's main task was to convey the attitude of hope connected with the postcolonial processes in Congo (and across Africa) without losing the quality of political good judgment, characteristic of her essays. Striking a balance between hopefulness and realism is her aim throughout "The Congo River", but nowhere is this visible more clearly than on the last pages of the essay, which concentrate on the triumphant arrival of Moïse Tshombe, the president of the secessionist state of Katanga (Tshombe would later become the prime minister of the country in the years 1964–65). Tshombe, recently returned from a conference in Brussels (in January 1960) during which the country was granted its independence, is described as "a beamish, very young-looking man" (Gordimer, "The Congo River" 185) who exudes authority and courage, embodying the hopes and aspirations of his jubilant countrymen. Gordimer sounds a note of caution when she mentions Tshombe's companions: "[T]he faces of [unknown] white men", representing the imminent danger of neocolonialism and "a mountainously fat chief, holding a fly whisk with the authority of a sceptre" ("The Congo River" 185), who embodies the dangers of internal conflicts and tribal warfare. Gordimer leaves her readers with this image, conveying her attitude of ambivalence towards the newly independent country. An astute political commentator, she also iden-

tifies other challenges faced by the country, such as the scarcity of qualified personnel and the lack of political experience in the running of a democratic country.

While Gordimer emphasizes political change and supports the independence claims of the Congolese, she seems uninterested in the colonial history of the country. As a result, her writing about the Belgian occupation of Congo often proves perfunctory. This tendency is at its clearest in the references to two figures: Henry Morton Stanley and Joseph Conrad.

4. Exploring “the old past”

If, as Steve Clark writes, “[t]he chief fascination of the contemporary travel genre lies in [the] project of formulating an acceptable, or perhaps less culpable, post-imperial voice” (10), part of this immense project includes confronting the imperial voices that have shaped a given region. In the case of Gordimer’s essay, the two primary imperialist voices that emerge in her vision of Congo are those of Henry Morton Stanley and Joseph Conrad. As Mary Louise Pratt notes, the two men, with their experience of “Euro-expansionism, white supremacy, class domination, and heterosexism” became “principal architects of the often imperialist internal critique of empire” (206). What may be surprising is that despite Gordimer’s anti-imperialist stance, she looks upon Stanley not as a colonizer and exploiter but as an explorer, whose “genius of adventurousness” (“The Congo River” 166) was nevertheless tainted by his mercantile attitude to the continent and its inhabitants. Stanley is mentioned in the context of his famous 1886–89 mission to rescue Emin Pasha, the Governor of Equatoria in the Sudan—an expedition that Joseph Conrad condemned as “the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience” (qtd. in Meyers 79). What Gordimer neglects to mention is the death and destruction that Stanley’s expedition left in its wake,⁵ choosing instead to view him as an adventurer.⁶

The references to Conrad are less ahistorical than those to Stanley: after mentioning what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin describe as “the orthodox modernist reading of Conrad’s novella [*Heart of Darkness*]” (160),⁷ Gordimer goes on to

⁵ As Jeffrey Meyers writes, “Stanley burned villages, killed unarmed Africans, inflicted severe lashings, beat some porters to death, executed deserters, captured Africans, sold them as slaves, and served them as human sacrifice to starving cannibals” (78). Tim Youngs writes about the imperialist aspect of Stanley’s expedition, noting that by coming to the rescue of Emin Pasha, Stanley was “secretly acting for Leopold [II], who wished to annex Equatoria to the Congo Free State” (162).

⁶ It should be added, nevertheless, that Gordimer makes a more general, ironic comment about the agents of Leopold II, who “brought ‘civilization’ to the river in the 1880s” (“The Congo River” 166).

⁷ Referring to the Congo River, Gordimer writes, “It leads to what Joseph Conrad called the heart of darkness; the least-known, most subjectively described depths of the continent where men have always feared to meet the dark places of their own souls” (“The Congo River” 163).

add that Conrad's description of the Congo and of the forest is a projection of his "horror" at the cruel exploitation of the country by the agents of Leopold II: "The inviolate privacy of the primeval forest became a brooding symbol of the ugly deeds that were done there" ("The Congo River" 166). By contrast to her interpretation of Conrad's novella, the forest in "The Congo River" does not function as a reflection of the corruption of the white man but rather as an Edenic ahistorical and pre-political space. This is evident already at the beginning of the essay, when having described the abandoned colonial town of Banana, a slave port founded in the 19th century, she first comments on the rapid nature of political change in the country (the comment about "the new past" and "the old past" discussed above), before going on to describe a nearby fishing village. The inhabitants of this village, writes Gordimer, are "unaware not only of the past but even of the passing present" ("The Congo River" 158), as they go about their days making fishing nets, in the awesome vicinity of "the squat monsters of baobab trees" ("The Congo River" 159). Living a modest but self-sufficient existence which, as Gordimer emphasizes, cannot be described as poor, the villagers live in a place safe from the tides of history: "They were living in a place so guileless and clear that it was like a state of grace" ("The Congo River" 159). In Gordimer's eyes, the villagers inhabit a space of ahistorical purity; they are as clean of history as if they were free of the taint of sin. Gordimer emphasizes that while those native inhabitants of Congo live their lives outside of the course of history, they nevertheless should not be considered technically and culturally inferior. Commenting on her journey down the Congo River, she notes that she "stopped thinking of the people around me as primitive, in terms of skills and aesthetics" (Gordimer, "The Congo River" 166). Gordimer's aim here is to create the image of a world apart from both Western conceptions of Congo (as backward and primitive) and the recent political developments in the country.

5. Nature as an ahistorical and apolitical space

To cast more light on Gordimer's treatment of nature as a de-historicized space it is worth considering it against the background of Western views of nature, specifically wilderness. As J. M. Coetzee observes, the concept of wilderness is deeply rooted in the tradition of Judaism and Christianity: "In one sense, the wilderness is a world where the law of nature reigns, a world over which the first act of culture, Adam's act of naming, has not been performed" (51). As it evolved in Judaism and Christianity, wilderness came to signify "a place of safe retreat into contemplation and purification, a place where the true ground of one's being could be rediscovered, even as a place as yet incorrupt in a fallen world" (Coetzee 51). Greg Garrard also writes about wilderness in terms of purification: in his view, wilderness is connected with the promise of a more authentic relationship between man

and nature: “a post-Christian covenant, found in a space of purity, founded in an attitude of reverence and humility” (59).

The creation of wilderness as a space in which to seek sanctity (in the Judeo-Christian tradition), or harmony and authenticity (in its secular version) comes at the cost of erasing history from this image of nature. As William Cronon has famously argued, the concept of wilderness is “a product of the very history it seeks to deny” (109). “In virtually all of its manifestations”, writes Cronon, “wilderness represents a flight from history” (109). Cronon’s argument about nature and history has inspired Garrard, who describes wilderness as “ideological in the sense that it erases the social and political history that gives rise to it” (71). The ideological dimension of nature is also emphasized by Timothy Clark, who argues that “‘nature’ functions deceptively as the essentially political notion of a condition supposedly prior to human politics” (32).⁸

Gordimer’s de-historicized treatment of nature is at its clearest in her descriptions of the Congo River and the Ituri Rainforest. The Congo is described by Gordimer as “a vast environment”, which, on reaching the Livingstone Falls, becomes “all muscle” (“The Congo River” 157, 159). Deeper into the continent, at the Pool Malebo (Stanley Pool) Gordimer describes “the vast and lazy confidence of the great river” (“The Congo River” 161). As Gordimer travels over 2,000 miles into the country and reaches Kisangani (Stanleyville), she is taken by the Wagania fishermen to their fishing grounds in the Boyoma (Stanley) Falls. Seated in a large pirogue, she is scared by “very fast and evil-looking rapids” (“The Congo River” 170), admires the fishing skills of her navigators, and, returning downstream to Kisangani, observes the bustling life of “a modern port preoccupied with political fervour” (“The Congo River” 171). Feeling the disjunction between the country’s rapidly (and turbulently) unfolding present and the ancient fishing customs of the Wagania people in which she herself participated (if only by virtue of travelling with them on their pirogue), she makes a comment that gives the fullest insight into her treatment of the natural environment:

The Congo, like that other stream, of time, is neither past nor present, and carries both in an immense indifference that takes them to be one. There is no old and no new Africa to the great river; it simply bears a majestic burden of life, as it has always done. (Gordimer, “The Congo River” 171)

Gordimer’s perception of the Congo is that of an immense and formidable river that enables history to unfold but refuses to be historicized. Africa, as perceived from the perspective of the river, is outside of historical time and the same can be said of the people who depend for their existence on the river—here I mean not only the Wagania fishermen but also the African traders, who, balancing ex-

⁸ This pre-political and pre-historical colonial view of nature is clearly reflected in Stanley’s account of his expedition in Congo. In ch. VII of *In Darkest Africa*, he describes the forest surrounding the Congo as “waiting the long expected trumpet-call of civilization—that appointed time when she shall awake to her duties, as in other portions of the earth”.

pertly on small boats, sell their wares to the white people travelling on a ship up the Congo. Such people are, for Gordimer, part of the wilderness surrounding the river, visible only if they choose to emerge from the forest: as Gordimer travels on the boat to Kisangani, she observes the banks of the river, noting that "the wilderness was inhabited everywhere, though it often seemed empty to our eyes" ("The Congo River" 164).

Gordimer's tendency to de-emphasize the colonial history of the country is visible in her treatment of all native inhabitants of Congo, including animals. Later in the essay she relates a visit to the town of Gangala-na-Bodio (in north-eastern Congo), which in colonial times was an elephant-training station. By the time Gordimer visited the station in 1960, most of its white personnel had fled to Sudan, leading her to predict (quite rightly) that she would be "one of the last visitors to go there" ("The Congo River" 176). The visit makes for a welcome interlude in her journey through the Ituri Rainforest, giving the travellers both a thrill of excitement (in an amusing episode Gordimer describes her terror at being charged by an infant elephant) and a rare chance to observe the life of the captive animals. Gordimer, enthralled by "the majestic charm of elephants", takes this opportunity to ride one of the animals, noting that they were so tame that they "showed no remembrance of the freedom from which they once came" ("The Congo River" 176, 178). Gordimer reports her satisfaction at being "accepted" by the elephants: "[T]hey accepted me as one of themselves; it was a kind of release from the natural pariahdom of man in the world of beasts" ("The Congo River" 178). In reporting this episode, Gordimer glides over the colonial history of animal exploitation first in the Congo Free State and later in the Belgian Congo. What she omits to mention is not only the domestication of animals for work, but, more importantly, the mass killing of elephants for ivory, which continued uninhibited into the 1920s.⁹

While Gordimer chooses history to provide the framework for her essay, she does not dwell on the 19th-century explorations up the Congo in any detail, mentioning Stanley's expeditions only to provide an undemanding and anecdotal context for her journey. This is evident in her description of the Ituri Rainforest, in which she mentions Stanley's journey through the jungle, during which he "walked for 160 days, almost without seeing the light" (a clear reference to Stanley's 1886–89 expedition; "The Congo River" 178). This lack of even the most basic contact with the outside world appeals to Gordimer, in whose eyes the forest, with its "inter-necine existence", is outside of time ("[E]ach minute sealed off from the next" ["The Congo River" 178]), constituting an existence wholly self-enclosed with a life of its own (in the same passage she compares the forest to "an enormous house", noting that it is "as noisy as a city" ["The Congo River" 178]). The impact of nature on history is, both literally and symbolically, corrosive: concluding her descrip-

⁹ As Huggan and Tiffin write, "[T]he Congo continued to offer more or less open season for ivory hunters well into the 1920s" (165).

tion of the rainforest, Gordimer describes the sight of abandoned cars (“[R]ecent American and Continental models” [“The Congo River” 180]) that are rapidly being grown over by plant life, soon to disappear under the foliage.

It is worth adding that a similar corrosive relation between nature and history is described in Gordimer’s short story “The African Magician”,¹⁰ inspired by Gordimer’s journey to Congo. The story is narrated by a woman, who, together with her husband and other passengers, mostly from Europe (specifically France and Belgium), travel up the Congo River from Banana to Stanleyville (Kisangani). As is the case in “The Congo River”, a considerable part of “The African Magician” is devoted to the description of the Congo and the surrounding forest: at the beginning of the story the woman writes about “the towering, *indifferent* fecundity of the wilderness that the river cleaved from height to depth” (Gordimer, “The African Magician” 129, my emphasis). “Indifferent” is a word that recurs in Gordimer’s account of nature in Congo: in a description of the Congo, quoted above, the river is presented as outside of time, defined by its “immense indifference” (Gordimer, “The Congo River” 171) to the human categories of the past and the present. In the story, the indifference of the Congo and nature in general is emphasized especially in the description of the traces of the past: “a weathered red brick cathedral” and “a crumbling white fort” (Gordimer, “The African Magician” 136), both evidence of the rapidly fading colonial legacy of the country. As we learn, the fort, erected by Arab slave traders, was built on the site of a village demolished to make way for the building. In the description of both the cathedral and the fort, the focus is on nature as symbolizing life: the past is “dead under the rotting, green, teeming culture of life” (Gordimer, “The African Magician” 136). Once again, the description is reminiscent of “The Congo River”, especially of the indifferent river, “bear[ing] a majestic burden of life” (Gordimer, “The Congo River” 171). Clearly, Gordimer is juxtaposing culture with nature, history with life, completion with continuity. In this view, nature represents life, which may bear the traces of the past, but at the same time transcends history. By the same token, the Congo is the site of the political—the narrator of the story describes children emerging from the forest and yelling “depenDANCE!” (Gordimer, “The African Magician” 134) to the passing cars.

6. Gordimer’s socioecological unconscious

What Barbara Korte argued in the wider context of travel writing—the fact that “accounts of travel are never objective; they inevitably reveal the culture-specific and individual patterns of perception and knowledge” (6)—is also true in Gordimer’s context. Her perspective was that of a white writer seeking to reach beyond her ra-

¹⁰ The story was published first in *The New Yorker* (15 July 1961), and later in the collection *Not for Publication* (1965).

cial and social identity in an attempt to create an anti-imperialist and anti-colonial vision of Africa. In the attempt to forge this vision she alluded to pre-colonial times by describing nature as a space untainted by colonization, and, to some extent, outside of history (“indifferent” to it). Gordimer’s political agenda in the essay is two-pronged: she describes political changes in a mood of cautious optimism, signalling her hope for the country’s independent and peaceful future; at the same time, she views the natural environment as a space free from the burden of history (uncorrupted by colonization), whose inhabitants live in a self-enclosed world, though not unreceptive to the political changes in the country. Gordimer’s aim was to describe a country facing a challenging but promising future; nevertheless, by describing the natural environment as inhabited by tribes untouched by history (“innocent” of it) she reached towards the past, perpetuating the colonial stereotype of nature as an ahistorical space. This colonial vision of nature, reproduced unwittingly by Gordimer, can be seen as an example of the socioecological unconscious:¹¹ an ideologically conditioned failure of vision with respect to her surroundings. This ambivalent and problematic attitude is proof of the fact that, while Gordimer did undertake the “valuable change of attitude” (36), which she wrote about in her article “Where Do Whites Fit In?”, she was not immune to the colonial modes of perception, which she sought to challenge.

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¹¹ I am referring to Byron Caminero-Santangelo’s notion of socioecological unconscious, as defined in his study *Different Shades of Green: African Literature, Environmental Justice and Political Ecology* (2014). Caminero-Santangelo coined the term on the basis of Lawrence Buell’s environmental unconscious, defined as “habitually foreshortened environmental perception” (qtd. in Caminero-Santangelo 112–13). Caminero-Santangelo’s contribution to Buell’s ecocritical approach is to point to the close connection between ideology and the environment: “There is no nature and no concept of it that can be separated from the shaping influence of ideology” (114).

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