

## Playing at Home: An Ecocritical Reading of Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*

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**Abstract:** In Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*, Julie Summers follows the man she loves to his homeland, an unnamed desert country; leaves her comfortable cosmopolitan life behind; and finds a sense of place. Although the text superficially presents a simple love story its narrative tone undermines Julie's quest and troubles her easy adoption of a new home. This article draws on South African ecocritical and postcolonial approaches to explore the ways in which Julie's privilege informs her relationship with her environments. Namely, this article is interested in showing how the novel subtly questions whether a return to the land is possible in a context of legacies of apartheid and realities of globalisation in which land is never neutral (if it ever was). *The Pickup* is framed by questions of citizenship tied to place and presents a critique of the restorative power of the pastoral.

**Keywords:** postcolonialism, ecocriticism, environment, South Africa, Nadine Gordimer, *The Pickup*

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As the landscape of African ecocriticism opens up, South African writers such as Nadine Gordimer, J. M. Coetzee, and Zakes Mda are being recognized for their locally influenced contributions to a broad range of environmental issues, from animal rights to environmental health. Historically, South Africa has had a mixed relationship with mainstream environmentalism as many South Africans have either critiqued or simply denounced the movement as a myopic Western ideological import (McDonald 1). Nevertheless there has been a strong tradition of grassroots environmental justice activism that represents South African-

identified environmental issues (McDonald 2). The land itself is a highly politicized site and is the subject of much political rhetoric as well as real policy. One of the first actions taken by the post-apartheid government, for example, was the Restitution of Land Rights Act (Walker 5). It is therefore no surprise that South African writers have engaged deeply with issues of land, race, and home in their works for generations.<sup>1</sup> Gordimer's *July's People* (1981) is a prime example of a text that draws attention to the racialization of space through the fictional inversion of apartheid politics. In *The Pickup* (2001), Gordimer exports this preoccupation with land, legitimacy, and home outside of South Africa's borders and even outside the idea of nation itself. The novel follows the unlikely love story of Julie Summers, a successful, privileged young urbanite in South Africa, and Abdu, a mechanic who services her broken-down car. Throughout the course of the text, Julie and Abdu relocate to the desert in his country of origin, where it is she who eventually wants to put down roots while he continues his quest for emigration. The text both celebrates and critiques Julie's decision; Gordimer's ironic narrative creates sympathy for Julie's naïveté at the same time that it undermines her. It invites self-identification from the reader while simultaneously demanding self-reflection. At the centre of the text is Julie's desire to assert herself, which develops from a youthful dismissal of her bourgeois upbringing in Johannesburg to her radical decision to settle in a place where such easy privilege is largely unthinkable and only distantly attainable.

Although the novel is, at its heart, a social commentary that explores love and friendship in the context of intimately held prejudices, Julie's attention is ultimately captured not so much by a person as by a landscape. The quiet of the desert opens a space for Julie to construct herself anew, and she repays this openness through a plan to invest in the land by financing a rice paddy in the lush green oasis. In this reading of *The Pickup*, I argue that the virtues of Julie's plans are called into question through the use of an ironic narrative voice. The irony often appears in instances where Julie's confidence seems to overreach her experience. In so doing, I read *The Pickup* as a text that draws critical attention to the figure of the white tourist/settler and her ability to intervene unprob-

lematically in a place she once deemed exotic. The constant suggestion that Julie is not actually forming a home but is instead playing at home is both a statement about Abdu's lack of trust in her as well as a signal to the reader to remain skeptical. The improbability of the success of her rice-paddy project suggests that Julie's actions, though genuine and well-meaning, are at bottom naïve and self-serving. I read this treatment of Julie as the text's critique of mal-development writ-small: poorly-conceived green projects designed from the outside may be little more than attempts to address the personal malaise of those on the "have" side of globalisation. This analysis draws on the intersections of postcolonial studies and ecocriticism and puts Gordimer's text in dialogue with questions of ecological imperialism and globalisation by examining it as what Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin might call a spectral pastoral.

## I.

In 1984, during apartheid and before the first major anti-globalisation protests, Gordimer published a review of Coetzee's *The Life and Times of Michael K*. Her piece, entitled "The Idea of Gardening," provides an interesting starting point for a discussion of *The Pickup* because it offers an ecocritical critique of his text that in some ways lays the foundation for questions she raises in her own novel. In her review, Gordimer praises the perfection of *Michael K* while probing its narrowly constructed vision of salvation. The main character, the intellectually challenged and impoverished Michael K, eventually tires of running away from the war that has seized his country and finds some peace and comfort (along with occasional brutality) on the farmlands where his mother grew up. His salvation rests in his decision to turn away from his socio-political reality and towards the land (gardening). Gordimer, who was deeply involved in anti-apartheid politics at the time, seems to see in this turn Coetzee's dismissal of a political solution to the racial conflict in South Africa. The two writers have long been known for their different approaches to politics. This is evident when, in the same review, the overtly political Gordimer speculates that Coetzee chose allegory as a form for his first two novels in order to "hold himself clear of events and their daily, grubby, tragic consequences." In the same way, Coetzee

has held himself aloft of organized politics and distanced himself from institutional alignment. If *The Life and Times of Michael K* espouses this same turn away from the world, and if this is depicted through Michael's commitment to the land through gardening, then we can understand Gordimer's reaction in two ways. First, she believes that political and human solutions to conflict are possible and that one must engage with the source of the conflict openly. Second, she suggests that it is misguided to simply turn away from the world when solutions are not immediately obvious. Seen from the perspective of ecocriticism, however, another set of questions emerges: does Coetzee depict the land as apolitical and neutral? How does this depiction sit with recent developments in postcolonial ecocriticism? How might we understand the land as political, as postcolonial studies has since its inception, and still see it as a source for potential solutions?

Whereas Gordimer sees a frustrating futility in the character of Michael K, Anthony Vital disputes whether the end of the text even professes salvation. Vital argues that Coetzee's novel takes "the rejection of ecology" as its subject (91). He sees the drab yet powerful text as a "warning of what any popular movement (including the environmental justice movement) will need to compromise with, enter into complicity with, as it advances its interests within the current national system" (101). He is careful to state that his argument against the text's presumed ecology is not due to the untenable nature of an ecocritical and postcolonial intersection, but in fact the opposite. Vital reads Michael K's isolation and lack of historical awareness as evidence that he is unable to engage ecologically—his hiding in the garden, though soothing, is merely a flight of fancy. Vital's interpretation of isolation as anti-ecological is perhaps one of the factors that situates him as a leader within the emerging field of African ecocritics who are taking a different approach to the question of "anthropocentrism." As Byron Caminero-Santangelo suggests, rather than follow the path of deep ecology, which seeks to minimize the human effect, African ecocriticism presents "the need to think about the 'anthropocentric' *politics* both of conservation in Africa and of the knowledge on which conservation is based" (701; emphasis in original). As a politically- and socially-based movement,

African environmental studies “bring[s] into bold relief the danger of subordinating human concerns to environmental concerns” (Caminero-Santangelo 701). By imagining the human realm as something separate from the natural realm, *The Life and Times of Michael K* risks leaving the human sphere sorely unchanged and therefore unequipped to make necessary changes to environmental policy. Interestingly, then, although Vital and Gordimer approach the text’s message differently, they both conclude that Michael K’s solution is untenable. I contrast these readings of Coetzee because Gordimer’s character Julie makes a similar move away from the world at the end of *The Pickup*. I will show that, much in the way that Gordimer’s review praises while it critiques, her novel uses an ironic narrative voice to demonstrate that while Julie’s devotion to place is a satisfactory personal solution it is not politically satisfying.

*The Pickup* is not an explicitly environmental text in the same way as, for example, Gordimer’s *The Conservationist* (1974). *The Conservationist* tells the story of Mehring, a white South African man who owns a farm run by black South African men, and the mysterious and haunting death of a black man on the farm. Although Mehring shares the sense of dissatisfaction and yearning for place that the young Julie is beginning to encounter, their lives are worlds apart. *The Conservationist* depicts a parochial, apartheid-era South Africa in which domestic affairs are intense and all-consuming. *The Pickup*, on the other hand, is set in the post-apartheid twenty-first century, and rather than being a farm-owner Julie simply dreams of setting up a farm as a means to make productive use of her trust fund money and invest in a place she has come to love. Granted, Julie’s musing about this dream occupies a very small portion of the novel; however, the idea of the rice paddy plays a key role in the text by creating the imagined possibility of settlement. A postcolonial ecocritical reading of *The Pickup* highlights its concern with the impulse towards establishing a “home” within a globalized world and the role that nature may play in constructing that sense of home. Writing from a postcolonial perspective, Gordimer reinterprets globalisation from the South outwards. Her narrative therefore skirts the more traditional metropolises of America and Europe and instead orbits around the multicultural centres of urban South Africa. Her redefinition of the

centre-periphery (understood through Julie's "reverse" migration from South Africa to the Middle East, as well as Julie's choice of rural over urban) exemplifies Huggan and Tiffin's comment that postcolonial writers "have adapted environmental discourses, which have often been shaped in western (European) interests, to their own immediate ends" (15). Gordimer's South-South focus raises a number of questions about the politics of place.

Emma Hunt explains that "[w]hile Gordimer's apartheid-era fiction looked at the stark demarcation of 'white' Johannesburg from the black townships, *The Pickup* shows a world divided instead between people able to move freely between countries and those who enter them illegally to work in menial jobs at the edges of global cities" (105). Protagonists Julie and Abdu represent these opposing poles. Beyond the edges of global cities lie pockets of undeveloped or fallow land, and Gordimer's text explores the meanings of such spaces. The greenscapes of the veld provide something of an escape for the lovers in ways that emphasize the divisiveness of the city and suggest new possibilities for equality. Finally, the text wanders farther afield still as the action moves out of the country altogether. As Hunt notes, *The Pickup* is "unusual amongst Gordimer's works for the fact that its protagonist does not return to South Africa at the end of the novel" (112). Instead the text moves to an unspecified location in the Middle East, thus indicating the author's attempt to create "links across the developing countries rather than with the North" (Hunt 112). Gordimer begins with the familiar tale of the South African setting out abroad for education, career, or travel and asks what that might look like if such a person were to land not in the "West" as they had planned, but farther outside of the predictable metropolises. The novel, published in 2001, presciently anticipates the centrality of the Middle East to the twenty-first century map. Importantly, however, although the Middle East may be Julie's final destination, it is not so for Abdu. By the novel's end he has finally secured a visa for the United States and is determined to forge his own future there. Yet this is not the America of wild open spaces or cities paved with gold. Abdu is not making an upward move but a lateral one. He is headed to Chicago where he will work as a mechanic—rather than as an economist as his

training qualifies him to do—and share a cramped basement apartment with two cousins. Gordimer’s text puts no faith in the cosmopolitanism of the modern city as a place where anyone can fit in and in which all can succeed. Instead, the text forwards a notion of belonging that “does not require citizenship, but responsiveness to the specificities of place” (Hunt 120).

*The Pickup*, however, endorses neither cosmopolitanism nor place-based environmental consciousness. It thus draws our attention to the ways in which all places, no matter how natural or how far they appear to be from centres of power, are rife with the power struggles that mark a globalized world. By troubling Julie’s “green dream” (of community, land ownership, and productive farming), the novel eventually produces what Huggan and Tiffin describe as a spectral pastoral—a pastoral which is “always aware of the suppressed violence that helped make its peaceful visions possible, and [is] always engaged with the very histories from which it appears to want to escape” (85). Despite the text’s global scope, it represents Julie’s yearning for the pastoral and contains those very ironic elements of the genre outlined by Huggan and Tiffin. They argue that although the pastoral is “unamenable to postcolonialism” (85), postcolonial critics and writers have long been “invested in the pastoral mode” (84). A main reason for this continued investment, they argue, is the “utopian dimension” (84) of pastoral which offers visions of more socially and ecologically harmonious futures which simultaneously recall an idealized past. Drawing on Raymond Williams’ work, Huggan and Tiffin contend that the pastoral can either disguise or open up dialogue about the “crisis of ownership” rife in post/colonial settler nations (85). Coetzee explores the limits of the pastoral in white settler South African prose in his *White Writing*, in which he shows that the crisis of (black) ownership was especially troubling in a place where original inhabitants had been so recently displaced from their homes to create the very farms on which they labored for others. Huggan and Tiffin thus present South Africa as “an *anti*-pastoral space, a site of barbarism and degradation, a space repeatedly explored in white South African literature, in which pastoral values and romantic myths have always co-existed uneasily” (98; emphasis in original). In *The Pickup*, Gordimer, who

earlier explored the rude innards of the pastoral in *The Conservationist*, transports a character with nostalgia for the pastoral through the prism of globalisation where her desire is refracted onto the desert landscape. This pastoral is spectral in the sense that it is ironically aware of its own dangerous predecessors (South African narratives of the “return” to the farm and Orientalist depictions of the desert<sup>2</sup>) and also because it represents the way in which the spectre of maldevelopment creates suspicion about the motives of the moneyed and highly mobile. In her need to attach herself to a positive project and address the lingering nostalgia for land that informs her relationship with her environment, Julie does not possess the “eco-cosmopolitanism” that Ursula Heise calls for in her *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*. In fact, Julie exchanges her cosmopolitan view for a rooted view of place, which she sees as corrective.

## II.

*The Pickup* first establishes the city as Julie’s natural habitat. Our initial image of Julie is when her car breaks down in the middle of a busy street. The scene is depicted through an animal metaphor reminiscent of the Africa presented in nature documentaries: “Clustered predators round a kill. It’s a small car with a young woman inside it” (Gordimer, *Pickup* 3). The transformation of the crowd from humans to predators is a signal that the whole city is animated and even animalistic. This is the city as a jungle, a metaphor that Gordimer exploits to its extremes. Even the cars are beasts: “She feels hot gassy breath. Steel snouts and flashing teeth-grilles at her face” (6). Gordimer’s invocation of animalistic language treads perilously close to the much-maligned colonial literary representations of Africans as less-than-human. It has been many years, however, since Achebe took Joseph Conrad to task over his racist representations of speechless African men in his (in)famous *Heart of Darkness*; Gordimer’s use of language plays with the dangerous legacies that fuel(ed) both structural and personal racisms. Although the scene threatens to undermine Julie’s cultivated image as a woman in control, it ultimately highlights her mastery of the city, her natural habitat. Although she feels inept relinquishing her car to “[o]ne of the unemployed black men who beg by waving vehicles into parking bays,” she



is also described as “expert” at knowing how much to tip the same man (Gordimer, *Pickup* 3). Her purchasing power quickly overcomes the failings of her car and her position as a seemingly independent woman is re-established.

Several times in the text the narrator fixates on Julie’s embodied response to the chaos of the city: “She throws up hands, palms open, in surrender” (3), an action referred to as “the gesture” (3) in the novel. Julie’s gesture is a mixture of frustration, defensiveness, and assertion and suggests her active participation in the life of the city. The narrator relates the gesture with significant formal detachment. After a description of the action, Gordimer breaks the line and inserts blank space on the page, representing a change in tone and, more importantly, point of view. The text then shifts to the second-person perspective and addresses the reader directly: “There. You’ve seen. The gesture. A woman in a traffic jam among those that are everyday in the city, any city. You won’t remember it, you won’t know who she is” (4). The commentary draws attention to Julie’s gesture of uncertainty, which runs as an undercurrent beneath her confident exterior much in the same way that her encounter with Abdu eventually undermines her tidy understanding of the world. More importantly, this metanarrative provides insight into Gordimer’s writing style: the reader and narrator are drawn together conspiratorially as if sitting together in a theatre watching Julie on a screen.

Julie meets Abdu in the garage and is quick to establish herself as an equal to him. She takes care to keep pace with him as they walk because “she did not like to walk ahead of the garage man as if he were some sort of servant” (7). Gordimer’s use of the term “garage man” and the narrator’s adoption of Julie’s perspective form a passive commentary on Julie—she is so deliberately non-racist and non-classist that we are made aware almost immediately of the possibility of racism and classism in their interactions. This quiet irony dominates *The Pickup* and eventually insinuates itself into our understanding of Julie. Even in this initial encounter, however, it is clear that she is out of touch with the man’s values. Determined that he not view her as someone of her father’s class (a wealthy man who lends his daughter his Rolls Royce), she projects an image of a materially-carefree, principled young person. She laughs off

questions about car maintenance, downplays her borrowed luxury car, and invites Abdu out to coffee near her friends, on her territory, without a thought to his comfort. His silence often incites reprimand from the narrator in a voice that seems, at times, to speak for Julie's (or the reader's) self-consciousness by contrasting a doubtful tone with Julie's air of certainty: "Perhaps he wasn't going to speak again: it was patronizing, after all, this making free encounters out of other people's lives, a show of your conviction of their equal worth, interest, catching the garage mechanic in the net, EL-AY Café" (11).

The first half of the novel allows us to see Julie in the environment that she has come to master: the upwardly mobile cosmopolitan city, a signpost of the New South Africa. Julie and her friends see themselves as part of a liberated group of people who recognize power differentials and try to subvert them by reinventing themselves as individuals who reject the previous generation's hierarchies. Their hangout is the L. A. (EL-AY) Café, a site referred to in the novel as "The Table" (23). The narrator describes the café and Julie's friends in bohemian terms; they are ambassadors for a casual multiculturalism that sees past the petty differences that divide people. "The Table" represents "all that the city had not been allowed to be by the laws and traditions of her parents' generation. Breaking up in bars and cafes the inhibitions of the past has always been the work of the young, haphazard and selectively tolerant" (5). The group is depicted as more of a family than a circle of friends, a detail which highlights, at least in Julie's case, the desire to create one's own family—"elected siblings" (23)—outside of the rigidly defined structures of racial and class inheritance. As someone with nothing to lose (because she is assured of a soft place to land), Julie is free to choose her friends, and her heterogeneous group is indicative of her desire to make a statement about inclusivity. On a personal level, it is a marker of her openness as a human being and her kindness as a friend; read on a socio-political level, however, her approach to friendship reveals a pattern of self-congratulatory attempts at post-racism designed to signify her "cool" social status. As Julie begins to see her world, her city, through the eyes of Abdu, the "grease-monkey" (129) who fixes her car, she starts to feel oddly displaced and unsettled. "Abdu," the titular

pick-up whose real name is Ibrahim ibn Musa, is in fact a university graduate who is living illegally in South Africa on an expired visa. His citizenship status makes him vulnerable in the city in ways that Julie can only comprehend intellectually. For Ibrahim, being a stranger in South Africa involves physically hiding and strongly guarding his views and identity for fear of being outed in any way. For Julie, the experience of being an outsider involves an exploration of herself rather than concealment. Julie is described as “the one with the choices. The freedom of the world was hers” (115).

### III.

From the gritty downtown of the city, the text moves in and out of green-spaces and imaginary places before finally settling in the desert. Julie and Ibrahim visit “the veld” (33) on the weekends and luxuriate in the small intimacies of dating. These liminal spaces represent idealized zones of inbetweenness where neither Julie nor Ibrahim has explicit advantage of place. This rapprochement is marked by their sharing of simple activities (walking, reading, gazing) and more so by Ibrahim’s willingness to speak, a practice he unnervingly avoids when Julie’s friends are near. Away from the cloying group in the quiet of the fields and parklands, Ibrahim shares anecdotes of his previous life. He is a man with an economics degree who now makes do with knowledge he gleaned about cars from his uncle when he was just a young boy. The greenspace means something different to each of them, however. Julie embraces the myth of getting away from it all. She is eager to participate in the romanticization of the veld as a place apart: “She laid a slack hand on his smooth throat and marvelled, to him: To hear silence. We never do” (34). Julie buys into “the idea of wilderness” and its “promise of a renewed, authentic relation of humanity and earth” (Garrard 66), an idea that postcolonial ecocritics have deliberately worked against. Such discourse about the “pristine nature” of Africa has often served to disempower and dispossess indigenous Africans from their land while at the same time reinforcing the notion that only Western-based environmentalism rightly speaks and acts for the land (Caminero-Santangelo and Myers 7). Yet the ritual getaway to wilderness spaces has become a culturally important act for

young people in Julie's circle. When they go camping in large groups, Ibrahim once again becomes a quiet, and judging, observer. However, when it is only the two of them, Ibrahim speaks up against the illusion of the place. "To him," we learn, "this was not silence, this lullaby of distant traffic she took for it! Silence is desolation; the desert" (Gordimer, *Pickup* 34). Ibrahim's realism is a foil to Julie's lightness. She is content to adhere to the illusion of wilderness and ignore the reality of the nearby highways. By speaking of the distant din of traffic, Ibrahim introduces the idea that they will not find peace in place.

During the desperate rising crisis of *The Pickup* Julie and Ibrahim visit lawyers and contact immigration officials in a bid to secure his status in South Africa. This is a tense period in the text as Julie is reluctant to access the help her family connections can afford her and Ibrahim is frustrated by Julie's apparent ignorance of the mechanics of the world. In searching for a solution, a poet friend hands Julie a slip of paper on which he has written part of a William Plomer poem:

Let us go to another country  
Not yours or mine  
And start again.  
To another country? Which?  
One without fires, where fever  
Lurks under leaves, and water  
Is sold to those who thirst?  
And carry dope or papers  
In our shoes to save us starving?  
Hope would be our passport,  
The rest is understood  
Just say the word.  
(Sorry, don't remember how it ends.) (81)

The poem, part of which serves as the novel's epigraph, suggests that love, or love-making, can create a new space of possibility for such a coupling. It forwards the idea of love as another country where lovers can be together. The poem also speaks to the geo-political realities love faces in a globalized world, where connections between people can be

easily made and thwarted by travel and immigration policy. Literally, the poem opens the possibility that Julie will leave South Africa with Ibrahim in order to search in earnest for this other country.

Julie is cautioned against a romantic relationship with Ibrahim in explicit and subtle ways throughout the text. The garage owner who employs Ibrahim, for instance, reflects that “[a]s a white father of daughters himself, it was a shame to see what she was doing with this fellow from God knows where, nothing against him, but still” (31). Julie strongly suspects that the garage owner is the very man who alerts authorities to Ibrahim’s location. When Ibrahim’s lawyer, Mr. Motsamai (a friend of Julie’s influential father), suggests that they are out of options, Julie reads harsh judgment in his expression: “A flush of resentment: *he’s not for you*, that’s what he’s really saying: the famous lawyer is one of *them*, her father’s people and their glossy [wives] comparing the purchase of Futures and Hedging Funds sitting here in his corporate palazzo, it doesn’t help at all that he is black” (80; emphasis in original). Whether this judgment is real or imagined, Julie continually constructs social barriers to her union with Ibrahim that make deserting her home for his seem like the only way to prove people wrong. Julie’s father views her relationship with Ibrahim as another juvenile attempt to distance herself from him: “*You lack consideration for what you do, indirectly, to your family, I suppose I’ve spoilt you. . . . You’re nearly thirty. And now you come here without any warning and simply tell us you are leaving in a week’s time for one of the worst, poorest and most backward of Third World countries, following a man who’s been living here illegally.*” (97; emphasis in original). He is frightened by the prospect of what life might be like for Julie in Ibrahim’s country. In his shock and his desire to sting his “spoilt” child, he lashes out at her by using her feminism against her and invoking racist stereotypes of women in non-Western cultures. “[A]s for women,” he lectures, “*you, you to whom independence, freedom, mean so much, eh, there women are treated like slaves. It’s the culture, religion*” (98; emphasis in original). His parting words echo Plomer’s poem darkly by transforming this utopic “other country” into a Hell on earth: “*You are out of your mind. What more can I say. You choose to go to hell in your own way*” (98; emphasis in original). The idea that the “new country”

might not be the emancipatory place she dreams of reflects a pessimism that Julie cannot tolerate. Instead she leaves South Africa with all the optimism of a tourist.

#### IV.

The towns and desert of Ibrahim's homeland form a striking landscape for Julie. Through her interior monologue, the reader witnesses the clash between her expectations and her experience. There are no palm trees, she remarks time and time again (150). If this space is Julie's personal "Contact Zone," to use Mary Louise Pratt's term, then Gordimer is (as always) doing the work of acknowledging Julie's awareness of the historical politics of contact. Julie reflects, for example, that the desert has "no season of bloom and decay. Just the endless turn of night and day. Out of time" (172). Her words suggest a platial anachronism that can be read as the temporal equivalent to the view that wilderness is blank space. To this she adds that "[t]he desert is eternity" (172). Lest we think that Julie has so easily fallen into the Orientalist trap of de-historicizing the Eastern landscape, however, the novel makes evident her dismissal of such an assumption. Julie quite self-consciously distances herself from the stereotype of the British imperial traveler of Pratt's study. She mocks the likes of T. E. Lawrence (of "Lawrence of Arabia" fame) and insists that such fetishization of desert peoples, including the "condescending" adoption of local dress, has "[n]othing to do with her; she wrapped herself in black robes only when it was necessary for protection against the wind" (198). What are we to make of this statement?

Is Gordimer's Middle East Edward Said's "Orient"? Franz Meier takes up this question in his article "Picking Up the Other: Nadine Gordimer's *The Pickup*" in which he tries to unravel the levels of irony and ambiguous narration of East/West relations in the novel. Meier lists several occasions in the text in which the Middle East and the people living there are reduced to stereotypes of the elemental, mysterious other. However, he capitulates:

Granted, most of these descriptions are tainted by Julie's point of view (although Gordimer's very flexible narrative technique

sometimes makes focalization difficult to detect), and the latter quote even shows an ironic awareness of her stereotyping 'Orientalism'. Nevertheless, an uneasy feeling of typifying simplification remains - especially if contrasted with Gordimer's minute and intricate social realism whenever she depicts South African life.

Indeed, this descriptive schism ends up bestowing qualities of the fantastic onto the desert.

Like those travelers who came before her, Julie is awestruck by the desert's vastness and difference. In her new life there—which she thinks of as real life, having reconceived of her time in Johannesburg as “playing at reality” (Gordimer, *Pickup* 164)—Julie rises at dawn to take walks before the heat and winds begin in earnest. Her sudden disavowal of her former life as unreal is not a comment that the reader is likely to take at face value, for we are encouraged to interpret Julie's actions ironically. Still, it is hard to deny that something in Julie is fundamentally affected by the quietness of her new environment. It is to this place on the thin border between the small village and the desert that Julie returns again and again. “The sands are immobile,” the narrator notes, and there is a sense of calm in Julie's appreciation of the stillness. The text demonstrates this calm through the contrast between activity and vast quietness: “She takes a walk, just down the street, accompanied for a few minutes by one of those cowed dogs who know they are despised in this village. . . . She has come to the sudden end of the street: there is the desert” (167). After a year passes, there is a discernible shift in her attitude; the excitement and curiosity of her early days, when she was eager to see the capital, are replaced by this stillness. A passage describing her now ritual early morning walks shows her shedding her past self: “[E]ven with [Ibrahim's niece] she is alone in the sense of not being accompanied by what was always with her, part of herself, back wherever the past was” (198).

Although the desert brings things into focus for Julie, she still lacks something of a purpose. She has found a place in the family, at least, and has grown close to Ibrahim's sister Maryam. The household and

community operate along fairly strict gendered divisions of labour, but at first Julie is not invited or even permitted to participate in the women's activities. Although this means less work for her, it also excludes her from the only available social network—there are no cafés where she can casually indulge in friendly relationships with men and women with the freedom that the city permits. Her inadmissibility into the women's sphere illustrates the intersectionality of gender, race, nationality, and geography; Julie is kept on the boundary of the women's world until the other women learn more about how she will negotiate these differences. Interestingly, Julie is not frustrated but is rather more curious about the limitations placed on her by her gender (which fits, again, into Abdu's claim that for Julie all of this is tantamount to the next big adventure in her life of privilege). Julie does not turn away from the so-called traditional arrangements—she does not suddenly develop a reactionary appreciation for the mobility that her class and race afforded her gendered self in Johannesburg but instead she begins to want to learn more about those spaces she can now inhabit, such as the kitchen and the drawing rooms of neighbouring women. Her invitation into the women's spaces is also an invitation to participate, even in some small degree, in the everydayness of life in the desert town. She is no longer completely set apart, as a tourist would be, from the banal routines of everyday life. However, her outsider status means that while she is invited into that sphere it restricts her less than it does the other women in the family. Her walks are a significant example of this unique independence.

Julie's walks to the edge of town mark the start of her growing ecological and platial consciousness. Her appreciation for the sparse landscape is a meditative process that takes her away from the human-built environment but also makes the human life of the village seem all the more precious. The openness of the landscape certainly provides both the time and space for Julie to see and appreciate her social environment. In this way, the desert can be read through Arturo Escobar's conceptualization of place. He writes that we need to “recogniz[e] that place, body, and environment integrate with each other; that places gather things, thoughts, and memories in particular configurations”



(143). The desert is not simply a metonym for difference but is a physical, psychic space that reconfigures the way Julie thinks about her place in the world. The value of family and community begin to take shape for her against the silhouette of the shifting sands. Moreover, Julie begins to see her role as one of shaping the local environment.

According to Heise, this type of place-based reflection often drives environmental consciousness. She writes that “in spite of significant differences in social outlook, certain features recur across a wide variety of environmentalist perspectives that emphasize a sense of place as a basic prerequisite for environmental awareness and activism” (33). Throughout her analysis, it is clear that “the rhetoric of place has proven . . . enduring for environmentalism” (48), from phenomenological understandings of nature to environmental justice advocacy that frames the environment as a place of lived work. She suggests that this sense of place is often characterized by “spatial closeness, cognitive understanding, emotional attachment, and an ethic of responsibility and ‘care’” (33). A key characteristic of Western environmentalism that is reflected in *The Pickup* is the “insistence on individuals’ and communities’ need to reconnect to local places as a way of overcoming the alienation from nature that modern societies generate, as well as long-standing ambivalences about the global” (Heise 28–29).

Certainly, as Heise demonstrates, one of the limitations of such a place-based environmentalism is that it stands in opposition to expressions of modernity such as globalisation and postcolonialism, both of which have been preoccupied in many ways with the processes of movement, mobility, and interconnectivity on a grand scale. Keya Ganguly argues that postcolonial studies has perhaps over-emphasised mobility. “Culturalist explanations that favor the liminality of subaltern experience,” she writes, “seem to be the current trend” (4). This focus has meant that the mundane experience of stasis (of staying-put, for however long) has often been overlooked. The current interest in deterritorialization and its alienating effects on people’s relationships with place and environment has perhaps only served to reinforce the lore of the local, or what Heise calls a push towards “reterritorialization” (53). Heise ultimately proposes “an eco-cosmopolitan approach

[which] should also value the abstract and highly mediated kinds of knowledge and experience that lend equal or greater support to a grasp of biospheric connectedness” (62). How, then, does Gordimer’s text fit into Heise’s scheme? Is *The Pickup* a narrative of deterritorialization followed by reterritorialization? On the surface, the text appears to represent Julie’s transition from a seemingly content, settled cosmopolitan woman to an unsettled person suddenly made aware of the instability of the world through her relationship with Ibrahim, and then back to a contented person through her rediscovery of self through community rooted in place. However, as I demonstrate above, the text presents two stories simultaneously: the happy story of roots and re-discovery and the unsettling story of Julie imposing herself on a place. Can Julie, who has made important strides to fit in (namely through her participation in fasting for Ramadan), be read as a member of the local movement, touting community sustainability, or is her vision for the desert merely a token of “ecological imperialism” writ small? Her repeated words “I dreamed green,” which are finally realized when she visits the oasis and sees the rice paddy, can be interpreted as either indulgent or selfless. Julie has no farming experience and very little knowledge of desert ecology or agribusiness. Her ability to help with or succeed in her endeavour seems unlikely, despite her means for financing it. Julie’s situation also has implications far beyond the text. Her story echoes voluntourism, ecotourism, and other ecological fads. Julie, I argue, represents the loaded promise of the local (understood as an ecological concept) as both personal and political solutions to the feeling of placelessness in the globalized world. Gordimer achieves this sense of unmet promise through her novel’s ironic tones, which make it difficult to tell whether Julie has actually embraced a new subject position or is indeed just playing at home and life. Certainly her immersion into the culture and social circles, as well as her developed appreciation for the ecology of the place, suggest that she has begun to look at the town from the bottom-up, yet the text’s constant undermining of her intentions leaves us to wonder whether she can sustain this newfound position.

## V.

The final critique of Julie's project lies in the fact that the rice plantation she visits is not the neutral agricultural project that she imagines but is instead a façade for a small arms-dealing operation. When Julie is discussing her improbable plan with Ibrahim she defiantly states that the man whose rice paddy she saw "obviously makes money," to which Ibrahim replies, "Not rice money" (Gordimer, *Pickup* 216). "He makes money alright," he tells her, "and do you know how? Do you? He is a smuggler, he calls it import-export, he's a go-between in arms sales for a crowd of cronies over the border" (216). At this disappointing revelation she catches herself and asks, "[W]hy should I be so shocked at this story[?]" (216). Such dealings occur everywhere, she reasons, and guesses that her father and his ilk were likely trading more than just "Futures." She speculates on whether some of her father's friends may have been involved in "the sale of diamonds in Angola" (217). The corruption of Julie's green dream, linked abstractly to the procurement of blood-diamonds, speaks to the co-option and corruption of nature through capitalism and militarism.<sup>3</sup> This realization shatters the myth that the desert and the oasis exist outside the scope of the world. The fact that the paddy is a cover for a violent trade instantly connects the desert to the world that Julie hoped she had escaped. The spectre of the world's dark machinations taints her nostalgic pastoral vision of a desert landscape. By linking the land with the sale of small arms, Gordimer complicates the idea of a simple return to the land. Apart from merely mocking Julie's naïveté, the revelation that the paddy is a front for arms smuggling taints the idea of such a return by implying that no land is ahistorical or apolitical.

Finally, the truth about the farm provides a jarring contrast with the beauty and pleasure that Julie experiences there: "[T]he intoxication of green . . . the twittering sensation of a great company of birds clinging, women into the green as they fled" (210). As usual, the headstrong Julie is prepared to overlook the truth that Ibrahim provides her, saying "[i]f we had a concession it wouldn't have anything to do with all that. . . . Just growing rice" (217). Despite her firm belief, Ibrahim's words sully her dream and cast doubt on the idea of nature as an oasis. It seems

that the “new country” Julie envisioned may simply be a replication of the same old country in new forms. Her desire to create a new space that reflects her vision of nature as a site of rejuvenation outside of the everyday is nothing more than a mirage. The site is instead deeply entrenched in the politics of place and is firmly divorced from the idea of the pastoral as paradise.

In the final pages of the novel, Julie reverses the gesture she makes at the beginning of the text, when she was caught in the traffic jam: “Her hands are up, palms open, fingers splayed, holding him off. No. It’s not that. I’m not going” (248). Whereas at the novel’s opening this gesture is meant to imply frustration and helplessness as Julie-the-prey is surrounded by Johannesburg traffic, at the end of the novel the position of her hands signifies the acquisition of control. This is the moment when Julie makes it clear that she will not be moving to America with her husband but will instead stay on with his family in the desert to live out her dream of opening and running a rice concession. The family goes along with the story that she is merely staying behind until Ibrahim is settled in the US, but it is clear that this is a fabrication designed to allay awkwardness. In commenting on the “ambiguous ending” of the novel, Meier remarks that “Abdu’s prospects in the States seem anything but promising and Julie’s dream of a rice plantation in the desert is based on a camouflage enterprise for an arms-smuggling business. Gordimer would not be herself if her utopias did not show ironic twists.” The novel trades on ambiguities throughout and ultimately refuses to condone or condemn Julie’s decision to remain in the desert and invest herself in the development of local agriculture.

But, as Gordimer asks of Coetzee’s text, “is there an idea of salvation that can be realized entirely outside a political doctrine?” “Beyond all creeds and moralities,” she writes, Coetzee’s “work of art asserts, there is only one: to keep the earth alive, and only one salvation, the survival that comes from her.” However, in the final lines of her review Gordimer reveals her suspicion about this investment in the restorative powers of the land: “Michael K is a gardener ‘because that is my nature’: the nature of civilized man, versus the hunter, the nomad. Hope is a seed. That’s all. That’s everything. It’s better to live on your knees, planting

something . . . ?” This final ellipsis and question mark (reminiscent of *The Pickup*’s slippery narrator) echoes the cautiousness with which Julie’s green dream is presented in Gordimer’s novel. Ultimately, the text suggests that although staying put may fulfil Julie’s personal sense of place, her turn towards the land is not a politically satisfying solution.

## Notes

- 1 See Coetzee’s *White Writing* as well as Vital, Slaymaker, Caminero-Santangelo and Myers, and Graham.
- 2 Dannenberg reads Gordimer’s text as a reversal, and a final refusal, of the desert romance tradition. Dannenberg rightly argues that if we read Julie’s decision to remain in the desert village primarily as a response to the romance genre we can understand her as a radical female character who asserts and establishes her own counter-generic role.
- 3 For a comprehensive look at the impact of war on the environment, see *The Environmental Consequences of War*, edited by Austin and Bruch. For an analysis of the interconnections between colonialism, capitalism, militarism, and environment see Curtin’s *Environmental Ethics for a Postcolonial World*.

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