THE SPACES OF THE DESERT IN NADINE GORDIMER'S *THE PICKUP*

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Abstract - As Nadine Gordimer's readers and critics know well, her entire writing, both during apartheid and in its aftermath, is crossed throughout by the theme of place/s and by the conflation of place and being. With *The Pickup* (2001), her novel "on exile and displacement", in her own words, she fully enters a transnational ground in which most effectively places are dialectically connected with spaces, with the desert space being given a crucial role in the 'geo-semantics' of the novel. Actually, it figures as a third main character besides the two protagonists Julie Summers – the white, young South African daughter of a well-off family of European descent – and Ibrahim ibn Musa, the Arab illegal migrant living in hiding in post-apartheid underground Johannesburg. One may say that Julie and Ibrahim's different ways to relate to the desert will qualify their diverging destinies.
Not only is the desert given as a living, material, and anthropic/cultural reality but it discursively surfaces at various points of the novel. In particular it is invoked by Ibrahim through the names of 'his' pre-Islamic poets of the desert Imru' al-Qays and 'Antara ibn Shaddad; then, through the "Chapter of Mary" in the Koranic XIX S*ura* Julie feels particularly attracted to, in which pregnant Mary is said to reach, alone, the desert to find a shelter where to conceive. It is also invoked in Julie's giggling dismissal of interest in the "charades in the desert" – "imperialism in fancy dress"– of adventurous Hester Stanhope and T. E. Lawrence. So, the textual 'spaces' of the desert in *The Pickup* are various and they significantly add to the semantic and symbolic density of the novel.
Necessarily, the desert space in *The Pickup* cannot be approached if not contrastively, as, in Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, the par-excellence "smooth" space opposed to the newly "striated "space of post-apartheid Johannesburg with its legacy of racialized and criminalizing policy of space. Their geo-philosophical spatial grammar turns out to be fruitful also when its qualifying distinction between "migrant" and "nomad" is applied, respectively, to Ibrahim and Julie, once the couple is in the first's postcolonial Islamic home-village, in an unnamed Saudi Arabian region. Here, Julie's encounter with the desert, as well as with Ibrahim's family and community at that, is given as non-exotic and non-orientalist. The present essay, in fact, rejects the frequent quasi-orientalist critical reading of the desert as an instrumental stage for Julie's self-refashioning. Rather, it approaches it as the unboundable, unmappable, and "deterritorialized" palimpsest of ever-reforming traces – the opposite of the violently hyper-territorialized space of the apartheid regime, as well as of the new politics of closure and separateness of post-apartheid Johannesburg. Julie never exoticizes her relationship with the otherness of the desert, which, above all, invites an anti-hypostatic concept of place and belonging. At the root of her nomadic desire is no mystique of the desert, but the tragic history of her native country.

Keywords: Apartheid, Desert, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Nadine Gordimer, *The Pickup*

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> Writing has nothing to do with signifying – It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

It is by now a critical truism to say that the entire writing of Nadine Gordimer, the white Jewish South African Nobel-prize winner – who lived all her life in Johannesburg – is crossed throughout by the theme of place: the politics of place, the conflation of place and being during and after apartheid, when the new democratic South Africa's opening of its frontiers to the external world has meant a constant and problematic flow of economic migrants, especially from the rest of the continent, and especially to the city of Johannesburg. With *The Pickup* (2001), she fully enters a transnational ground in which, one might say, places are most effectively intertwined with spaces and existential 'directions', thanks, in particular, to the 'participation' in the novel of the desert, a third protagonist besides Julie and Ibrahim, whose divergent destinies can be read through their relationship with it.

Very briefly, the main lines of this novel on "exile, displacement" (Gordimer-Kossew 2001b, p. 61), in terms of places/spaces: this is the story of the encounter in post-apartheid Johannesburg of Julie Summers, the young white daughter of a wealthy member of the old and new South African elite, with Ibrahim ibn Musa, an illegal Arab immigrant working in a garage under the name of Abdu, who happens to fix Julie's car when this breaks down in a traffic jam. Soon the two become lovers and start living together in her cottage. They often meet with her multi-ethnic, multicultural group of friends at the L.A. café. When Abdu receives the order of deportation, Julie decides to follow him to his unnamed Saudi Arabian Islamic desert village. There, while Ibrahim 's time is mainly absorbed in a bureaucratic nightmare to obtain visas to migrate again, Julie encounters the desert, and starts a new life in his extended family and village community. Two visas for USA are finally granted thanks to Julie's mother mediation, but only Ibrahim leaves, as Julie has decided to stay in 'his' place.

1. In the newly striated space of Johannesburg

We are not only children of our time but of our place (Gordimer 1999d)

The motifs of place/location and direction are announced from the very beginning, at a para-textual level, by the epigraph taken from a poem by Anglo-South-African William Plomer, "Another Country": "Let us go to another country…/The rest is understood/Just say the word". As soon as the novel starts, its Baudelairean flair of '*invitation au voyage*' disappears into the traffic jam in the southern, chaotic quarter of Johannesburg, where Julie's car is stuck (its battery has failed) among the mounting cursing in English of white drivers and the insults in Zulu from black ones, insults whose tenor she may easily catch though this largely spoken Bantu language is foreign to her. Surrounded by these "clustered predators round a kill", Julie "throws up her hands, palms open, in surrender". "There. You've seen. I've seen. The gesture", the narrator tells us, adding "You won't remember it, you won't know what she is". But s/he knows, and is going to show "*where* it was *heading* her *for*, and what. Her hands thrown up, open", (4, my emphasis)[1]. The insistence of the text on space deictics is continued in the L.A Café by Julie's friends, once she has joined them and told about the drivers' rage: "All they care about is getting *there* […]. And *where* is they think they are getting to" (6, my emphasis).

J. M. Coetzee has written that "as a writer, Gordimer is at her most powerful in such epiphanies: gestures or configurations of bodies in which the truth of a situation emerges starkly and completely" (Coetzee 2007, p. 254). Here, the gesture reveals Julie's substantial surrender to her own 'unfamiliarity' with her homeland, which is what, however, will make her receptive to an eventful meeting with an-other place, space, country.

In conversation with B. El Guabli and J. Jarvis, co-founders of the "Desert Future Collective", a network of scholars and artists focussed on the poetics and politics of desert spaces, F. E. Robles comments on an essay by the Tohono O'odham poet Ofelia Zapeda ("Where the Wilderness Begins"), in this way:

[1] Henceforth, the page number/s of the quotations from *The Pickup* 2001a will follow between round parentheses.

> Zapeda's insistence on the futility of controlling the desert as a requirement for living in it speaks to the astonishing fullness of the desert and points to a mode of understanding and inhabitation that isn't about comprehensiveness and control. […] This is a fundamental rejection of the desert as an emptiness or a black slate that can be filled in with whatever we'd like. Deserts are *not* what we want them to be. (El Guabli, Jarvis, Robles 2022, p. 41)

The tenor of these words is crucially close to what I see as Gordimer's approach to the space of the desert and, broadly, to space in this "astonishing" (Coetzee 2007, p. 251) post-apartheid novel. Astonishing, indeed, it is not only for the reason given by Coetzee, that is, Gordimer's "sympathetic" and "intimate" way to introduce the reader to the lives of ordinary Muslims. It is astonishing especially in that it maintains an authentic respect for the desert's "full", not empty, otherness, for its own material and cultural dimensions, usually lost to Western outsiders, thus definitely avoiding risky orientalist nuances in Julie's encounter with it. In Deleuze and Guattari's terms[2], it safeguards the absolute "smoothness" of the desert space, its radical unmappability, while pointing at the strong charge of existential and symbolic implications involved in that. In point of fact, as underlined by N. Brazzelli,

> [t]he 'spatial' question presents us with a material, physical dimension while, at the same time, concerning the imaginary and symbolic sphere. […] Places are in fact the symbolic context we elaborate in order to act in the world, they are constantly interpreted and re-interpreted and vary continuously; far from being fixed entities, they can assume contrasting meanings. (Brazzelli 2015, pp. 27, 35, my translation)

How contrasting the 'meanings' invested in the desert by the two protagonists can be, will be duly dwelt on, and at that point the distinction between "migrant" and "nomad" given in *Mille Plateaux* (1980) by Deleuze and Guattari[3] will turn out to be particularly useful.

As suggested by the above-quoted lexicon, I will be often drawing on the geo-political/geo-philosophical grammar of that book, in ways that will hopefully take care not to fall into rigid binarisms that, besides being Deleuze's *bête noire*, would be definitely alien to Gordimer's art. In particular, the misuse of their concept of the "nomadic" approach to space may easily lead to what R. Krishnaswami (1995) has called the "mythology of migrancy", which dematerializes the migrant figure and celebrates displacement as in-herently creative and emancipatory. Therefore, with El Guabli's cautionary call in mind, I am going to "read the desert" in *The Pickup* "with Deleuze and Guattari and *not* through them" (El Guabli 2022, p. 46).

Necessarily, in this novel the desert, which plays a crucial role in its semantic economy, cannot be approached if not contrastively, by bearing in mind the post-apartheid space(s) of Johannesburg, and, consequently, the legacy of the colonial and apartheid space politics in South Africa. Furthermore, the desert meant as a cultural/imaginary space is evoked at various points in the text, in ways that significantly contribute to its semantic and symbolic density.

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[2] G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et Schizophrénie* (1980), *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) in the English translation by B. Mussumi here used for textual references. "Striated "and "smooth" spaces are different modes of human spatiality, though the authors do not give them as an oppositive binarism. The fundamental difference is that smooth space has no boundaries, is never pre-determined, is unmapped, thus offering the possibility of dis-orientation, of "nomadic" freedom. On the other hand, striated space is 'institutional', already mapped and pre-oriented, built on pre-determined tracks whose meanings are already given. Smooth and striated are two ways of relating to the world, but they may intersect one another all the time. (cf. ch.14, pp. 474-500)

[3] The nomadic subject moves in the smooth space, the sedentary one in the striated space, though the same subject can cross both of them. The nomadic subject is not to be assimilated to the migrant. The first follows lines of fugue that are unclear, roaming and is driven by a process of deterritorialization. The migrant, on the contrary, aims at becoming sedentary, at inhabiting a new striated, organized space, a space already 'given': the migrant's movement is instrumental, it follows a logic of need and /or usefulness aimed at reaching a point of arrival in which it is possible to reterritorialize him/herself. The nomadic line, on the contrary, is the line of fugue and the nomad is the par-excellence deterritorialized subject. Nomadism and sedentariness are two existential, philosophical ways of being-in-the-world. (cf. pp. 380-387).

With *The Pickup*, we have said, Gordimer enters a transnational territory. In so doing, she chooses the space of the world periphery. From Johannesburg, where the first part of the novel takes place, we move to an unnamed, very poor desert village in an unnamed Saudi Arabian (Gordimer-Kossew 2001b, p. 61) region. In both geographical locations, as underlined by I. Dimitriu, not only does she "imbue the locality with significant global resonance", but by moving from one 'periphery' of the world to the other, "she offers a skilful way of exploring new post-apartheid issues at home through a 'distant reading' of the local, particularly of the politics of identity and belonging, or […] home and exile, or emigration and immigration" (Dimitriu 2006, p.166). These issues have very much to do with the violent legacy of apartheid's encroaching the sudden opening of the new South Africa to global economy and to migration from the rest of the continent and from elsewhere.

Interestingly, in a 1963 essay of hers entitled *Great Problems in the Street*, Gordimer had already used the image of the desert, to depict "the gap between the committed and the indifferent" whites in South Africa. This gap, she writes, is

> a Sahara whose faint trails, followed by the mind's eye only, fade out in sand. The place is not on the map of human relations; but, like most unmapped areas, there is a coming and going that goes unrecorded; there is a meeting of eyes at points without name; there is an exchange of silences between strangers crossing one another far from the witness of their kind – once you are down there on your own two feet you find the ancient caravan trails connecting human destiny no matter how much distance a man tries to put between himself and the next man. (Gordimer 1963, p. 53)

As shown by quotations from the novel given further on, if one compares that 1963 metaphor of the desert with the way in which the same is given representation in *The Pickup*, one can see how the emphasis still falls on the trackless space (plus the motif of the exchange of silences, that will return). However, while in the past it had been given as an unmapped space hopefully to be soon crossed, now its unmappability is positively given as the elective space to be for Julie, who has left behind "the house of the white race". In an interview Gordimer had once described her own political awakening as a white leftist activist in the apartheid regime in these terms: "First […] you leave your mother's house, and later you leave the house of the white race" (Gordimer-Barkham 1990, p. 9). In her important study on the politics of place in South African literature, R. Barnard comments on these words by throwing light on the fact that the white South African house was "the quintessential colonial space", an "ideological enclosure", or "an ideological apparatus in very much the Althusserian sense of the term", and that "apartheid was, from its very inception, mobilized around the idea of housing – that is, of racially separated housing" (Barnard 2007, pp.48-49). At the core of the state of exception called apartheid were space policy, space relations; it was, in fact,

> [a]n extreme and therefore starkly illuminating instance of the territorialization of power. […] Indeed, without such territorial devices as the black township and the Bantustan, and the policing of the spaces by means of forced removals and the pass laws, apartheid would have been impossible to implement. (Barnard 2007, pp. 5-6)

In the apartheid city, "[n]ot only the native, but every sub-category of native was relegated to a specific zone of the city, circumscribed with barbed wire fences, and check points, and presided over by barracks and police stations." Natives invariably underwent "the daily violence, terror, and humiliation of inspection and identity verification". In this quintessentially striated space, as one might define it, "to be a criminal, it was sufficient to merely not know one's place in the world" (Bremner 2004, p. 460).

What kind of legacy could all this leave in the hands of the Rainbow Nation? In 1990, having in view the demise of apartheid, Gordimer wrote:

> We know we have to face the kind of legacy, in terms of human relations, apartheid is leaving us. There is, there will be, an aftermath […] which won't evanesce because of these legal victory over oppression. Just as there are people physically maimed by the struggle between white power

> and black liberation, there is psychological, behavioural damage that all of us in South Africa have been subject to in some degree, whether we are whites who have shut eyes and electronically-controlled gates on what was happening to blacks, or whether we are blacks who have been transported and dumped where the government wished, tear-gassed and shot, detained, forced into exile, or have left to join the liberation army […]. Violence has become the South African way of life. […] And the prevailing emotion among whites is fear. (Gordimer 1999b, p. 140)

In 2004, at a short distance from *The Pickup*'s year of publication, the scholar and architect Lindsay Bremner interrogates post-apartheid Johannesburg and what she ascertains is that, the geographies of apartheid having given in to permeable urban spaces open to social 'contamination', a new politics of closure has taken their place and new techniques of exclusion and separateness have emerged. An entire security industry has been empowered and the space of the city reconfigured. The tree-lined white suburbs, with their English-sounding names, have reacted to increasing acts of black violence and assault through the re-enforcement of their boundaries and the deployment of security technologies. The result of all this is that, in her own words, "[t]he primary spatial/architectural figures" of the new Johannesburg are the boundary wall and the house. […] the boundary wall, with its smooth, closed surfaces, repulsive electromagnetic fields and tight, guarded opening, has become the ubiquitous ordering element of the new city" (Bremner 2004, p. 464-65). Our mind immediately goes to Gordimer's description of Julie and Ibrahim's driving through controlled and walled space to enter the security gates of her father' house in the northern White Suburbs for a Sunday luncheon.
Of course, post-apartheid Johannesburg is not only violence and fear for Gordimer. A. Mbembe and S. Nuttall invite us to take into account also its vital, if messy, "manyfold rhythms, typical of a metropolis" (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004, p. 460) and in *The Pickup* expressions of this new vitality and private freedom are certainly not lacking, if we only think of Julie and her L.A. friends' multiracial meeting occasions and their partying in run-down white houses turned into night-clubs, for instance.

However, all in all, the Johannesburg of *The Pickup* is, above all, the city child of the worst aspects of capitalist greed and of one hundred and fifty years of power based on the logic of race. This is the old and newly striated city where Julie has grown up, in those White Suburbs that conflate power and space. That she knows "the mark of Cain" (Gordimer 1999a, p. 134), is conveyed by her feeling of responsibility for her white 'tribe' and anxiety to mark her distance from the house of her father. If the authorial intention may be given due weight, this is how Gordimer presents her 'new' characters to S. Kossew:

> My character is a Muslim from some unnamed Saudi Arabian country living here [i.e. in Johannesburg] illegally and the novel is about what happens to him and to a young white woman who has every advantage, and *the feeling of shame* that such advantage brings in South Africa. (Gordimer-Kossew 2001b, p. 61, my emphasis)

The only surely smooth space that Julie and Ibrahim can inhabit together, while in Johannesburg and until their final separation, is their lovemaking – sex, "with the meaning that Julie, with Gordimer behind her, gives to sex. Words may lie, but sex always tells the truth" (Coetzee 2007, p. 246). That is their 'other country', their other land, in which there is "no possessor and no possessed, but both surrender", in the words of the poem "Happiness", by Borges, that Julie 'adopts'. Only in that space, Ibrahim's defensive "discipline of disbelief" (34) gives in. This geography of loving bodies is integral to Julie's decision to follow Ibrahim to his desert village, because, at this stage, her own place is still where he is: "I'm here! I'm *with* you", she exclaims, excited, spatializing, as it were, their love. Her experience of the desert space will be as much integral to her decision *not* to follow him.

Which places are to be searched by Julie to distance herself from her father's house and its privileges? They are the L.A. Café and her own cottage.

The L.A. (or, in the Arabic-sounding version of her friends, EL-AY) Café, is the multi-ethnic and multicultural meeting place, whose motto is "to be open to encounters", that represents the new inclusive liberty of the Rainbow Nation. Its cosmopolitan name "attempts to carry connotations of California subculture" but, paradoxically, Los Angeles, the name intended by the owner, cannot but evoke "that most glitzy, superficial, policed, and privatized city in the United States" (Spain 2012, p. 757). The narrating voice has no qualms in suggesting the superficiality of this programmatic openness, especially when, facing Ibrahim's predicament, Julie's friends start submerging him with their xenophilic questions, showing "no delicacy about asking who you are, where you come from – that's just the reverse side of bourgeois xenophobia" (14). Their presumption of knowing is highlighted from the start: "*they* telling *him* about his country", a composite of "corrupt government, religious oppression, cross-border conflict" (14). Julie is more interested in what Ibrahim himself has to say. "He's telling them: – I can't say that – 'my country' – because somebody else made a line and said that is it. In my father's time they gave it to the rich who run it for themselves. So whose country I should say, it's mine" (15). Ibrahim cannot feel a colonial casualty become a postcolonial potentate as his 'homeland', and when Julie later asks him for any photograph of his homeplace his curt answer is that there is "[n]othing much to be seen. It's a village like hundreds of others there, small shops where people make things, cook food, police station, school. The houses; small. A mosque, small. It's very dry – dust, dust. Sand" (25). So, Julie's real openness to Ibrahim's otherness receives much light by the contrast with her friends' behaviour. Of course, their patronizing, exotic attitude towards her "oriental prince", as they call him, is bound to become part and parcel of what she will leave behind.

As to her dwelling place, in being a "backyard cottage adapted from the servants' quarters" (8), it is supposed to contribute to her ideological and social dis-identification. However, as observed by R. Fasselt, the narrating voice "ironises the value of Julie's un-homing and re-homing as a means of feeling more at home in the 'new' South Africa. Her cottage appears not so much as a space of connection but as a troubled topography, which merely creates an illusory solidarity with her less well-off friends, as well as with Ibrahim" (Fasselt 2016, p.18). As a matter of fact, this is how Julie will retrospectively consider them: "a doll's house, the cottage; a game, the EL-AY" (164). Still, Julie's hospitality of Ibrahim in her cottage should be seen not only as a strong ideological distance marker but, also and above all, as part of her initial gesture of surrendering that is taking form – in a Deriddean-Levinasian lexicon – as her unconditional, surrendering hospitality to unexpected otherness.[4]

Soon it becomes evident that the two places, the L.A. Café and the cottage, cannot make Julie feel less "responsible for them", for her parents and their world of privilege, no matter how much under siege of fear. She cannot prevent her own hiding in the luxury bathroom of her father's house to vomit her shame, the day she takes Ibrahim for lunch there. This shame is the perfect demonstration of her 'difference', her capacity for becoming. And I completely agree with Fasselt when she writes that "Julie's conception of Ibrahim shifts from otherness understood as the difference that stems from her community's exclusionary practices to otherness that surpasses culturally inscribed difference in the manner of Levinas' 'Other' (Fasselt 2016, p. 21).

As to Ibrahim, his space in Johannesburg is the underground[5], clandestine space of the garage where he exists as Abdu, the "grease-monkey" under constant threat of deportation and xenophobic attacks. He has surrendered his identity, he is nothing. "He is here and he is not here" (37), thinks Julie. Left among themselves, after Julie and her oriental lover have left in search of a possible solution to invalidate the order of deportation, their friends' negative comment is: "Where else is there to go, for her? And for him, there never was anywhere, anyone" (96).

[4] Here the reference cannot but be to J. Derrida's concept of "unconditional hospitality" (*Of Hospitality*) and to E. Levinas' concept of "the Other" (*Totality and Infinity*).

[5] Cf. Mbembe and Nuttall 2004, p.364: "In Johannesburg, the underneath of the metropolis is akin to the world of extraction – the underground city of gold mining, with its own syntax, its arteries, its darkness, and the crucial figure of the *migrant worker*".

Out of dire need, Ibrahim is the one prepared to go anywhere ("I go where they'll let me in", 12). But how about Julie, indeed?

Julie surprises everybody, besides herself, when she buys the two air tickets: another, powerful gesture, of the kind loved by Coetzee. Ibrahim, at the Café, had once broken his usual silence to state, starkly, that "[t]hat is how it is. You have no choose – choice– or you have choice. Only two kinds. Of people" (21). There are those who can "relocate themselves" – like Adrian and Gillie, the white couple celebrated at the Summers' Sunday luncheon, who, "out of fear of the pitchforks and the AK-47s of the rebellious poor and the handguns of the criminals" (48), are leaving South Africa and moving to Australia, preceded by their more-than-welcome capitals; or even like Julie, at that. And there are those who cannot, like Ibrahim. Throughout the novel, the authorial voice never stops conveying this bare truth and Ibrahim's 'necessitated' life. He has no choice, also, but to marry Julie, if she is to follow him in his village. Julie's dizzy excitement in travelling towards this unnamed village tellingly contrasts with Ibrahim's feelings, that are those of a humiliated and rejected returnee, who has failed again to enter the "real" (as he deems it) world. From now on, the difference in their ways to relate to the domestic space of Ibrahim's extended family, to the social space of the village community, and, more to our point, to the space of the adjacent desert, may be summed up as the distinction made by Deleuze and Guattari between nomad and migrant, and between their elective spaces.

2. The desert, the nomad, the migrant

> The chosen home is the very opposite of a root. It indicates a disengagement, a wandering [errance] which has made it possible […] (Levinas 1979).

We have seen how the desert and his village do not raise in migrant Ibrahim any nostalgic longing: they are dust, sand, with no prospect for his future. However, this is not the whole story, as far as his relation to the desert is concerned. It is through one of the narrator's rare incursions into his interiority that the desert is firstly invoked for the reader, as a cultural/literary space. This interior monologue conveys his frustration at his poor English, at not being able to translate lines by his favourite poets Imru' l-Qays and 'Antara ibn Shaddad to Julie, who has been complaining about his refraining from teaching her Arab words, especially Arab love words. This intense passage puts the reader wishing to follow this textual clue in contact with the hidden poetic nature of Ibrahim. In point of fact, the poet-king al-Qays (501-544) and 'Antara (525-615), the legendary son of an Arab king and an Ethiopian slave, are celebrated pre-islamic "desert poets", who embody the culture of the desert. Their formally refined poetry is evocative of the Bedouin culture, its myth and values. It celebrates the desert hero, valiant in war, able orator and generous host in peace time. Love in this poetry is often lost love, due to the destiny shared in common by all Bedouins, who, out of necessity of their nomadic life, must continuously move from a water point or pasture to another in the desert. More particularly, the language of their erotic lines is quite free, quite explicit in celebrating the body of the loved one[6]. This astute sleight-of-hand of Gordimer's has the power to re-signify the word 'desert' in connection to Ibrahim, to mean civilization in its own terms, thus making non Arab readers aware of their ignorance and desirous to know. It effectively offers us a glimpse of the "infinite archive of Arabic and Islamic literary heritage […] the geographic extension from the Maghreb to Arabia [being] nourished by a rich poetic and cultural tradition that sustains a local Saharan imagination; a Sharan *ummah* of sorts" (El Guabli 2022, p. 31).

In a Deleuzian perspective, the seeming paradox is that the real nomad in the novel is Julie. In fact, Ibrahim's movements /direction are, as it were, overdetermined by his need to find a place out of extreme poverty, frustration, thirst for personal realization (he has a degree in economics, would

[6] For this cursory listing of motifs I have drawn on *I Cavalieri, le dame e i deserti. Storia della poesia araba* by F.M. Corrao 2017.

like to work in the computer science field) in the world that keeps on rejecting him. Furthermore, the experience of migrant life he has accumulated so far has made it impossible for him to stay in his 'home'/place of origin, as demonstrated by his rejection of his uncle's proposal of inheriting the latter's profitable business in the village, to the bitter disappointment of his family. Migrant life has changed him irreversibly.

So, Ibrahim does not belong to his place any longer, as much as Julie does not belong to hers. However, while the first is looking for a new place in the striated Western/ized centres of global economy and while his movements are instrumental to his reaching that aim, the latter instead, coming from her newly striated and territorialized homeland, is driven by a deterritorializing desire. Ibrahim's place, that he is determined to leave behind, meets her nomadic desire through her experience of the desert space, to the point that she simply cannot even think of putting an end to it. In addition to this, Julie's decision is reinforced, rather than complicated, by her parallel, new experience of family life and village community, which allows her to maintain some kind of reterritorialization. It may be useful here to underline that when Deleuze and Guattari warn against seeing any stark binarism in approaching their two spaces, they are also warning against thinking that one can't do without any form of striated space, any striated existential dimension (shall we say 'home'?), hopefully not meant in a rigidly closed sense. In their geo-philosophy striated and smooth spaces and the two modes of living them (nomadic and or sedentary) always coexist. What is more, as frequently pointed out by them, for there to be a nomadic approach to space there is no strict need to physically move. Now, the two 'warnings' effectively help us to understand Julie's choice.

The deep impact these two new spaces have on Julie's existence is made possible by her ways of relating to them, ways that avoid the self-serving and mystifying screens of exotic narcissism. An adjective often used by the narrating voice in depicting Julie's attitude is "respectful". In point of fact, she shows a genuine, trustful respect for the otherness, of people and spaces, she has plunged herself into, and for the hermeneutic opacity engendered by it. She shows a constant effort at 'translation' in an interplay of wished-for proximity and respectful distance that prevents a-critical assimilation or rejection. The encounter of Julie with the desert has nothing exotic in it. The desert is, first of all, a living, material reality, the sudden appearance of an absolutely un-striated space, completely open, with no boundaries, no tracks, a space not even finalized to the human presence: "[i]t was bewildering to her: come to a stop. At the end of the street there must be another street. A district leads to another district". Her first impact with anthropic traces in it is almost anthropocenic – "the mounds of detritus unravelled, tin cans rolled away, spikes of glass signalling back to the sun"; then, "nothing. Sand. No shapes. No movement" (131). At this initial stage Julie is not able, yet, to perceive shapes and movements: they will come with her following "little expeditions into the desert" (132) that are so distasteful to Ibrahim.

She soon experiences the desert at different times of the day, at dawn and at sunset, with different temperatures, different lights and winds. Always "no horizon [is] to be made out", but on what she had taken to be "immobile" sand she can now perceive "black marks and spots" (167) in the distance, one of them growing into "a woman enveloped in black, herding a small straggle of goats", coming "near enough to vision" and, then, "taking her goats in another direction, in search of a pasture" (168): a female Bedouin. Julie gazes "not over [the desert], *taken into it*, for it has no measure of space, features that mark distance from here to there" (172, my emphasis). She also has the chance to experience the internal desert space of an oasis full of sounds, with palms, birds, a heron, and the "intoxicating green" of "the slender silky reeds" of the rice being grown there (210-211). Sometimes she takes with her Leila, Ibrahim's little nephew, sometimes they walk a short way into the desert, hand by hand, then sit on the sand, sifting it through their fingers.

In Spain's words,

> Gordimer's decision to follow [Julie and Ibrahim'] s story is fraught with danger. Stripped of her densely woven, difficult and profoundly self-aware prose style, the novel could be easily recast as the worst and most dangerous kind of Orientalism, a privileged Western woman finding

> enlightenment in a cinematic desert, like Deborah Winger's turn as Kit in Bernardo Bertolucci's adaptation of *The Sheltering Sky*. (Spain 2012, p. 764)

This danger is definitely foreign to Gordimer. In her encounters with the desert Julie keeps distance in proximity, she respects its absolute spatial otherness without even attempting to domesticate it. She has no mystique of the desert and of its inaccessibility; she never uses words such as 'mystery'. Her gaze is not the self-empowering, self-referential gaze of the exoticist, and the desert does not become the stage for escapist fantasies of hers or for a re-fashioning of her self. Her gaze is certainly neither that of the spiritual tourist, too, whose introspective contortions often "justify inertia and morbid self-involvement" (Huggan 2001, p.191).
Let's carefully listen to the text:

> […] *this was not the place of questions to be asked of oneself or answered*. […] even with the child she is alone in the sense of not accompanied by what was always with her, part of herself, back wherever the past was. The books she had ordered and that […] had come from the capital, made her giggle or abandon half-read – that woman Hester Stanhope, and that man Lawrence, English charades in the desert, imperialism in fancy dress with *the ultimate condescension of bestowing the honour of wanting to be like the people of the desert*. Another game, another repertoire like that in the theatre company of the EL-AY Café, but with serious consequences, apparently, for the countries where the man had been. *Nothing to do with her; she wrapped herself in black robes only when it was necessary for protection against the wind.*" (198, my emphasis)

Quite a dense passage, the political thrust of which should not go underrated as it shows how much aware Julie is of the orientalist tradition inherent in European colonialism and imperialism, that vogue of masquerading imperial power through exotic performance and aestheticization that had in the desert its elective stage. Here Julie, and Gordimer behind her, show a Saidian impatience with the British agent-orientalist T.H. Lawrence and, before him, with the nineteenth-century adventurer and eccentric Lady Ester Stanhope, "the Circe of the desert", in Lamartine 's metaphor reported by Said. (Said 1978, p.177). No matter how much they could "fantasize" about their insider knowledge of Arab culture and language, their unconventional assertions of closeness to it – both were widely known for wearing the Bedouin desert clothes – in the end functioned as exotic assertions of "imperial culture […] reconfirming itself to and for itself" (Said 1995, p.194). Perhaps here Gordimer may have also had in mind the vogue of the desert romances flourished in Europe. Lady Stanhope, in fact , must have been a strong source of inspiration for the creation of the heroine figure of the desert romance, the English amazon crossing the desert clothed as a male Bedouin, who infallibly gets raped, seduced and, finally, converted to marriage (in this order) by the seemingly Arab sheik who, in the very end, infallibly reveals himself to be a nobleman of British descent grown up among the Bedouins.[7]

To stress my point: there is nothing, in Julie's relationship with the desert, that might evoke British/Western adventurous orientalism, neither has she anything to do with the dense literature using the desert as the figurative space in which to stage the crisis and re-birth of a sick Western Ego, in quasi-metaphysical, primitivist or even libidinal registers[8]. The desert, to Julie, is no stage for her self. And the book she wants to read is the Koran in English she has been able to order through internet. Facing "the splendidly intricate calligraphy of inscribed verses from the Koran" on a poster sold at a stall at the market, she asserts: "I want to know." This assertion is met with "a little snort of a laugh, and a gentle push to move on" (126) by Ibrahim, who would like Julie to remain his own migratory 'talisman', the white Western wife with the right connections, that marks his own distance from a place he is determined to leave with her (and, also, through her) as soon as possible. Orientalism is something Julie giggles off and that we, too, should be careful to avoid, as well, when dealing with her relationship with the desert. Her problem is that Ibrahim is not that careful.

[7] For a reading of *The Pickup* as a radical reworking of the desert romance tradition and its heroine, developed in the late colonial fiction of the early twentieth century, see Dannenberg 2008.
[8] See Tynan 2020, chap.2, in particular his dealing with the desert in T.E. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, D.H. Lawrence.

In spite of Julie's repeatedly asking him to speak to her in his own language, he stubbornly never teaches her words in Arabic, not even small love words, and T. Zulli is right when she observes that "Julie's great concern with language, while eliciting closeness to her husband's family, promotes her estrangement from him" (Zulli 2016, p.162). The fact is that in order to remain that talisman she must not become hybridized, as it were. But Julie wants to learn his language because it is the language of his people, of the place, one and the same thing with their culture. She is no "tourist", no "adventurer", – as Ibrahim would have it, thus showing his substantial will *not* to know her. Instead, Julie's real wish and will "to know" is exactly what bars viewing any exotic attitude in her, since, as explained by T. Todorov, the more one knows about the other the more one curtails the distance or remoteness necessary for one's exotic fantasy about it, with its mystique of mysterious inaccessibility. (Todorov 1993, p. 265). Julie does not cherish remoteness because she has no presumption to know already or urge of identification (in the xenophilic way of her L.A. Café friends), without really learning.

The space of Ibrahim's family and village community is, of course, a space striated by the Islamic culture shown in its pervasive practices and in its substantially shared ethos. Julie's relationship with this domestic and social space, too, is non-exotic and non-orientalist, in keeping with her relationship with the desert space: she moves in the first, the narrating voice tells us, "with no reservation of the self". Gradually but solidly, humbly but definitely not mimically, she participates in an un-prejudicial exchange of convivial hospitality that, given the Islamic gender-separation of spaces, is played out especially among women. She participates in the daily weaving of a social and affective texture, a continuous cultural translation that is linguistic but also gestural, mimical, with moments of embarrassment and tension as much as of surprise and mirth. There is no attempt at assimilation, but respect for opacities and differences, and rejection of any binary conceiving of cultural difference. Through her interstitial agency, Julie is able, for example, to have girls, as well as boys, and women as well as young men attend her much-requested English classes.[9].

So, Julie understands and respects the women's use of the veil, but she wears it only when the wind is so strong as to raise the sand. She fasts with the family during Ramadan, only to break it to make love to Ibrahim. Though being a non-believer herself, she willingly accepts the Islamic marriage feast organized by the family for them because she values the good intentions behind it.

It is impossible, here, in describing the relational life of this extended and inclusive family, not to resort to the concept of "rhizome" (Deleuze-Guattari 1987, pp. 3-25), defined in opposition to that of the originary, totalitarian "root" and fascinatingly redeployed by É. Glissant in his *Poetics of Relation*, when he describes identity as relational identity and relational space as a "multilingual" space where one "gives-on-and-with rather than grasps" (Glissant 1997, p. 144). The second part of *The Pickup* is full of small gestures of 'suture' between Julie and her 'others', which build relations where freedom is freedom *for* (not *from*) the other. This is a micropolitics of hospitality that passes through the host and guest's willingness to speak the other's language, even on the part of Ibrahim's mother. And this rhizomatically striated space becomes 'family', and 'home' for Julie.

In her wish to know and share, Julie asks Maryam, Ibrahim's younger sister, about her mother's most cherished verses from the Koran, those the latter recites by heart. She is told that they are "the Chapter of the Merciful", "the Chapter of Mary", "the Chapter of the Prophets". Here, another fascinating textual presence of the desert space is offered to us because Julie immediately gets absorbed in the nineteenth *Sura*, in which she reads of how virgin Mary, after receiving Gabriel's annunciation, "*went apart from the family, eastward*/ and took a veil to shroud herself from them […]/And she conceived him, and retired with him *to a far-off place*" (144-145, my emphasis).

That far-off place is the desert (in other editions of the Koran that is the word actually used), where, alone, she gives birth to Jesus and where the dates of a palm nourish them, thus saving their lives.

[9] This is given, I think, by the author as an example of what she means with her ideal of "cultural globalization", "the ethic of mutual enrichment without consideration of material profit" that is able to "value the differences, bring them into play across aesthetic frontiers and thus disprove the long-held sovereignty of national and political divisions over the development of the human potential" (Gordimer 1999c, p. 209).

Interestingly, this is a *Sura* which, for its title and its contents, links with the existing Christian tradition, thus interrelating, rather than dividing, the two religious cultures. Then, Maryam is the only female name appearing in the Koran. I think one can legitimately put these subtle authorial clues together with Mary's leaving of her family to enter, alone, the desert, to configure out of them a possible reason behind Julie's affective 'appropriation' of that *Sura*, i.e. that the chapter possibly evokes her own "leaving the house" of her parents and her own nomadic, solitary encounter with the desert. As to the motif of maternity, it will be soon retrieved.

Gradually, Julie receives various "signs of recognition" of her becoming part of the family and part of the village life. She gets a silent recognition, too, by the Bedouin child of the desert with her goats:

> There was one morning when they were discovered close; close enough to be advanced to. The woman turned out to be hardly more than a child – perhaps twelve years old. For a few moments the desert opened, the two saw each other, the woman under her bushveld hat, the girl-child a pair of keen eyes from a small figure swathed against the sun.
> She smiled but the other responded only by the eyes' acknowledgement of a presence. The encounter without word or gesture became a kind of daily greeting; recognition. […] The dog lost fear of her. […] it did not accompany her if she went farther than a few yards into the desert; it came to the stump as part of the dregs of the village, to forage the rubbish tossed against the traces of someone who had tested the limits of habitation and been overcome. (199-200)

The experience of the desert space cannot but involve a keen awareness of human contingency and finitude. The desert may overcome, is dangerous; it tests the possibilities of human dwelling. More broadly, it "puts our conceptions of place and belonging into question" and "forces us to rethink the very concept of place, to the extent that the latter has arisen as a form of sedentary or rooted being" (Tynan 2020, pp. 2, 11). Coming from South Africa, Julie receives deep confirmation of her thirst for a non- or even anti-hypostatic, anti-reifying view of human dwelling: of how our 'place', our belonging are not pre-given and fixed 'essences'; of how they should not precede and overdetermine us, in the same way as home building should not depend on the lottery of birthplace or on the nation's borders. The desert experience of absolute smooth space without boundaries, unmappable, with no gap between inside and outside, or of an "outside where nothing covers anything, non-protection, the reverse of a retreat, homelessness, non-habitation, layout without security" (Levinas 1998, p. 179) can also be an empowering anti-hypostatic experience. As repeatedly highlighted in Deleuzian geo-philosophy, only smooth space is open to the unexpected, to the still unthought-of in its disorienting force: "[l]e déplacement dans l'espace et le déplacement dans la pensée s'interprenètrent pur donner lieu à une deterritorialization qui n'è jamais métaphorique" (Antonioli 2003, p. 27). That is, only the encounter with the smooth space allows the "line of fugue", another Deleuzian concept, that "introduit une dimension imprévisible et unconnue […] ligne de fuite sur laquelle seulement une vrai rupture est possible" (Antonioli 2003, p. 29).

In Julie's destiny, this line of fugue is her final decision, brought about by the desert itself, "to stay": "I'm not coming to America […] Her hands are up, palms open, fingers splayed, holding him off. […] I'm not going", "I'm not going back there" (South Africa), "I don't belong there". Julie's gesture and the interplay of space deictics that we saw at the outset of the novel return, this time to signify resistance to Ibrahim's will, and the here-and-now rather than the interrogative where-to. "I'm staying here": for how long? The novel won't tell. The reader is "always aware that Julie still has the power to choose to leave whenever she wants to, while Ibrahim does not" (Kossew 2005, p.2). She might take another route in the next future, or she might go on living nomadically here, in this desert village[10]– perhaps with the child she will have conceived, if my reading of the clues sown in the text are given a possibility. Let's think of her fascination with the "chapter of Mary", of Ibrahim's mother

[10] Cf. S. Clingman 2009, p. 236: "there may be a way in which her version of translocation is ultimately more nomadic than Ibrahim's, despite the fact that she will remain behind in the desert. Here we can understand the nomadic less as a matter of physical or literal journey, and more as a matter of approach."

intimations to her son about Julie's "wish to have a child" (58), of her "dreaming green" after her visit to the oasis, and, above all, of the novel's closing with Khadija (her sister-in-law)' s tapping at her door, "dangling a bunch of dates […] conspiratorially", soon after Ibrahim has left (268). It is difficult not to link this final image with that of the Koranic Mary and her just-born son in the desert, fed by the dates generously falling over them from the desert palm under which they have found refuge.

Is Julie mad? as Ibrahim asks her, furious at her decision and forgetting that this very question had been addressed to himself when he had rejected his uncle's profitable economic offer meant to dissuade him from migrating again. Deleuze speaks of "becoming" as a subversive, mad present, an untimely move towards an unmapped future[11]. So, in a Deleuzian sense, yes, she is mad. This madness is one with the plot and character implausibilities some critics have found in the novel, which, instead, "function *as part of* the text's effort *to chart new imaginative territory*" (Winkiel 2009, p. 52, my emphasis), which is what Nadine Gordimer has always aimed at in her writing.

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[11] The philosophical motif of "Becoming-mad" especially appears in his *Difference and Repetition* and in *The Logic of Sense.*

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