

# The national landscape – national identity or post-colonial experience?

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The paper sets out to analyse the mechanisms and functions of the national landscape as a cultural invention through literature, underscoring how literature, more than other media, most clearly articulates its conflictual complexity, being both descriptions of and reflections on identities. The national landscape is part of a more general story of how place and identity are interconnected. Through analyses of texts by Nadine Gordimer, John Michael Coetzee, André Brink and the Danish romanticist and scientist Hans Christian Ørsted, it is suggested how the European reflection on national identity in relation to landscape and language from the period of nation-building in the 19th century is both repeated and criticized in the emerging new nations of the post-colonial era. On the one hand, the parallel between European and non-European reflections helps us to deconstruct the naturalized homogeneity of national identity in Europe and invites us to criticize the attempts to reduplicate this simplicity in the conception of identity in post-colonial conditions.

## Through the park

Nadine Gordimer's short story 'The Ultimate Safari'<sup>1</sup> is told in the first person from the perspective of an 11-year old black girl. A war is looming over her village in Mozambique, and her family tries to escape, together with 200 other villagers. After a strenuous journey, led by a local guide, the family arrives in another village where people speak their language, and they settle down as refugees.

The shortest way to safety runs through the Kruger Park, in South Africa. The girl does not know when she is inside or outside the park. She is simply crossing a familiar landscape with its plants, rivers and animals. Dangerous maybe, but *known*. '[...] it was like the bush we'd been walking through all day [...] I didn't know we were away' (Ref. 1, pp. 145, 151). In the new village she cannot help

being ‘surprised to find they speak our language; [...] That’s why they allow us to stay on their land. Long ago, in the time of our fathers, there was no fence that kills you, there was no Kruger Park between them and us, we were the same people under our own king, right from our village we left to this place we’ve come to’ (Ref. 1, p. 151). She knows, however, that the Kruger Park is something special: the real threats are not so much the animals, but the fences, police, wardens and laws forbidding trespassing or finding food on the terrain. From fear of being captured, her group does not even have the time to wait for her grandfather who has disappeared in the dark. The park, she notices, is made for white people, and she knows that some of her folks ‘used to leave home to work in the places where white people came to stay and look at the animals’ (Ref. 1, p. 145).

She does not understand why this is so, but she does register that the Kruger Park *does* something to her people and to herself. It separates people of the same language. It turns her land into a white people’s place and, most notably, it changes her people’s position: although their ‘country is a country of people, not animals’, they have to ‘move like animals among animals’ (Ref. 1, pp. 145, 146). In their new village, ‘some white people came to take photographs of our people living in the tent – they said they were making a film’ (Ref. 1, p. 152). They are but animals among animals, inborn elements of a wild landscape, or they stand out as objects of entertainment or of foreign people’s political agenda. When they cross the park they are forever displaced – ‘There is nothing. No home’ are the grandmother’s final words to the white film crew (Ref. 1, p. 153). The park is not just a slice of land, but a decisive physical and cultural barrier.

The girl’s limited capacity to explain her insights does not allow her to reach this conclusion. But Gordimer gives us a key to read her quasi-innocent discourse. The motto of the story is taken from a newspaper advertisement: ‘The African adventure lives on ... you can do it! The ultimate safari or expedition with leaders who know Africa (Travel advertisement, *Observer*, 27 November 1988)’ (Ref. 1, p. 143). This short description, addressed to white tourists, also covers, ironically, the girl’s experience of *her* ultimate safari. Thereby, the short story acquires a double structure revealing its critical dimension. The vague perception the girl has of what is going on underneath the surface is contrasted to the motto’s clear display of the organized ‘Disneyfication’ of the wild landscape that turns it into a profitable tourist industry, displacing local people, or reducing them to props in the scenic wilderness in a way that makes this process invisible to those that, like the girl and her family, are part of it.

In his analysis of preservation policies in Africa, especially in Kenya, Roderick Neumann reads the British park authorities’ precept that parks are ‘to be reserved as natural habitats both for game and human beings in their primitive state’ as an instance of these authorities trying to prove the reality of the European dream of

a pristine Eden (cit. from Neumann,<sup>2</sup> p. 160). Neumann also points to the contradiction between the eradication of traditional land use practices (especially the use of fire) that are prohibited inside the park but supported outside by 'the government's development schemes' (Ref. 2, p. 161). This contradiction became detrimental for nomadic people like the Masai, who repeatedly had to cross the new boundaries, ironically – as Neumann says – widening 'the symbolic and ecological gap between the landscapes of production and consumption'. With the term 'ironic', Neumann both grasps the actual conflict in relation to the landscape and the simultaneous subjective experience of it, a simultaneity developed more subtly in Gordimer's story stressing the problem of identity and belonging.

Thus, between the advertisement's motto and the girl's story, the real landscape lies with its people, parks, animals, tourists, wildlife preservers, bandits, villages etc. This landscape emerges as a complex sign of the relation between physical surroundings and cultural identity, and of the interwoven levels of consciousness rendered to us through the ironical twists of the story. In a sense, the landscape becomes the main character: at the end of the story the girl, now 11 years old, hears her grandmother remark that they will never have a home. She decides to go back to her home, as maybe her lost mother and grandfather will be there. With the landscape as medium, the text lays open the ambiguities of what it means and what it takes to belong to a place, a theme that on a larger scale is essential in nation building.

Gordimer's story was written during the new nation building period of South Africa, but it reflects, in specific historical conditions, a universally important relationship between landscape and cultural identity. It seems a valid enterprise to redefine the landscape stripped bare of its layers of dispossessing colonization and domestic repression, and redefine its meaning in support of the unity of the new nation. This redefinition grows out of a dream that the identity of a people, the nature it inhabits, and the democracy it craves, can be seen as interchangeable, a dream reflected in the naturalizing metaphor of the Rainbow State. However, such an attempt, easily justifiable as it may seem, has a history that is far from utopian. It is mainly the history of the European nation-states. The actual borderlines between African states reduplicate by and large the boundaries as they exist between the major European nation-states; the imported democratic ideals are derived from European theories; and the attitude to, and the use of, the landscape in preservation and production are heavily influenced by invented European traditions construed in order to back-up the nation-states at home and, later on, to naturalize the colonies as genuine parts of these nation-states.<sup>3,4</sup> Therefore, the parallel between South Africa and Europe in the process of nation building is highly relevant.

### Nation building

From the late 18th century on, and even more so after the Napoleonic wars, many European countries were engaged in a process of nation building. Feudal empires – like that of Denmark – were crumbling. Economic advantages and disadvantages shifted drastically among the European regions. The outline of a new urban-industrial area became visible on the horizon. New secular ideologies redefined collective and individual identities with new conceptions of language, ethnicity, religion, social power, education, and so on. A century later, after the ‘Great War’, a new group of nation-states came into being, and yet another group followed upon the collapse of the Soviet Union. Still, the political and ideological components remained very much the same: the same logic and the same pitfalls occurred in new contexts, which allowed for repetitions of the same conflicts.

The national landscape played a fundamental role in the formation of national identities, both on a collective and an individual level. In the national ideologies growing out of Romanticism, especially in the German realm, language and landscape were the basic constituents of national identity, the former defining and expressing the latter, presenting it as the natural foundation of the nation. Of course, landscapes existed before they were invented as national landscapes, and before nationalism emerged as a dominant geopolitical ideology. They were there as God’s nature, as an artistic creation, especially in painting, or as regions submitted to a feudal order governed by a common law, as a German *Land*. But as national landscapes, with a major impact on national identity, they were a later invention, emerging between the French Revolution and the Vienna Congress as a response to a complex historical transition. The national landscape is an important component in the traditions invented to support the building of the nation-state.<sup>12, 13</sup>

Particular landscapes or landscape uses – such as, say, a certain type of forest and forestry – were not regarded as simple facts shared by nations belonging to the same climatic zones, but were turned into symbols of national specificity – most often a specific superiority – with an impact on national character and thereby on national identity. And landscapes are strong symbols, because whatever meaning they acquire they are also always out there in their undeniable material presence – you walk in them, you live off them, memories of them are inscribed in your body as well as your mind. Painters and writers received standing ovations when they gave artistic form to this idea in visual or verbal expressions and, later on, their imagination materialized in concrete landscapes like natural parks, nature reserves or preserved cultural landscapes (cf. Neumann<sup>2</sup>). It is, however, important not to forget that, in Europe, the national landscape was amalgamated with a national ideology before democratic constitutions and institutions were established (in the US they occurred simultaneously). Although the national

landscape has been and still is appreciated as an integral and indispensable part of the cultural identity of democratic nations today, it does not necessarily contribute in an unambiguous and positive way to the process of democratization, but harbours other conflicts. Considering how the latest development in Europe re-enacts the ambiguities and intricacies of the early nation-building period of Europe, there might be a lesson to be learned also outside Europe, by nations established in post-colonial conditions, in analysing the mechanisms and functions of the national landscape as a cultural invention. This is all the more so because many of the basic ideas prompting the cultural and political development of new nations outside Europe have a European origin. Literature, more than the other media, most clearly articulates this conflictual complexity, offering both descriptions of, and reflections on, identity from several perspectives.

### The functions of the national landscape

The national landscape, in its material-symbolic complexity, serves four basic ideological functions in the makeup of national identity:

- (1) it gives *unity* to people and place,
- (2) it provides this unity with a *unique* character,
- (3) it provides people and place with a common *origin*,
- (4) it *naturalizes* that unity and that origin.

The national landscape tends to present the actual state of affairs as a unity that is the outcome of a linear and almost purposive process, a historical destiny, and not as a partly unforeseeable historical process of fragmentation and break-up. It tends to disguise the actual conflicts and contrasts in the national setting, especially the fact that nations tend to form after the breakdown of older structures, and often with a reduced geographical territory. Finally, in naturalizing the national identity, the landscape removes change due to human intervention from the definition of national identity and sees the nation as an essentialized 'thing' (see Žižek,<sup>5</sup> p. 201). The national landscape sets national identity apart from the history it is part of (*nation* and *nature* are the same word). On the surface, the national landscape is an active and creative force in the formation of an identity for all members of a nation, but it is, nevertheless, more correct to see it as a reactive and partly repressive force, hiding actual conflicts and legitimizing historical boundaries on a quasi-natural basis.

Considering the standard image of Denmark as a prototypical homogeneous nation, a brief example might illustrate my point. Hans Christian Ørsted, one of the leading scientists of his day, noted for his investigations into electromag-

netism, was deeply involved in the national issue in the first half of the 19th century. In 1836, he naïvely defined and defended ‘Danishness’ as follows:

What is Danishness? Like any national character it includes, first of all, everything that defines the human being; but what makes this character a special Danish character is, naturally, the totality of the features that are more frequent in our people than in others. [...] The Danish land has a friendly nature, the enormous only reveals itself in sky and sea, and the horrifying is almost absent; [...] Surrounded by this nature the people have lived and developed for centuries: how can we not notice a correspondence between them? I think nobody can easily deny that the Dane is good-humoured, easy going, modest, disinclined to violence and wiles, rarely passionate.<sup>6</sup> (50f, my translation)

Surprising as it may seem, these lines were written after Norway, well over three times larger than present-day Denmark, was forcibly separated from the Danish kingdom, after 700 years, by the Congress of Vienna, and this because of Denmark’s alliance with Napoleon. This was after national bankruptcy in 1813 and after the king’s refusal to accept a limited sort of constitution in 1836, the very year of Ørsted’s paper. Thus, the national landscape was used to reduce historical complexity to natural simplicity. The national landscape confused the basic national agenda, giving priority to an imaginary unity over the conflicts and changes that constituted the real political agenda of the nation: health, education, urban and industrial development, new class structures, political participation, and so forth, which grew out of the economical and political processes of the 19th century.

Ørsted continues:

If anybody asked me what enables me genuinely to write in Danish I would give him almost the same answer that I would give if he had asked me what enables me to be a genuine Dane in the very essence of my being. I would simply tell him thoughtfully to follow his nature: when a Dane, born and raised among Danes and having his life among Danes, follows this precept, he will automatically become genuinely Danish; only by artificiality will he deviate from true Danishness. (Ref. 6, p. 53, my translation).

The argument is simple, its consequences are complicated: national identity unifies outer nature, the landscape, and inner nature, genuine Danishness, in a complete balance that works all by itself, and the two ‘natures’ find a common means of expression, the national language, which in turn confirms their unity. Explicit hostility toward foreigners and foreignness, or toward a perceived lack of balance between inner life and outer landscape, is downplayed, but xenophobia and distrust of ‘un-Danish’ behaviour are part and parcel of the words and logic of the argument.

A pragmatic attitude to language was predominant for centuries in Denmark. For a long time, the Danish empire was the legitimate home of several languages

– Danish, Norwegian, German, Icelandic, Faeroese, and the languages of its small colonies in the West Indies, Africa and India, not forgetting Greenland. It was of no major concern that over the years several kings and ministers spoke better German than Danish, as long as they performed their duties. But gradually, and especially from the Danish Law of 1685, and later through the Royal Academy of Science from 1742, Danish was programmatically shaped into a modern language of administration, science, commerce and art. Thus, the ground was laid for the Romantic conception that the Danish language expressed essential Danishness, making others ‘artificial’, as Ørsted says. The hidden message is that national identity was present in a germ-like state before the nation itself came into being. Nurtured now by the realized nation, it grows and develops, not the other way round. Therefore, if you move to another nation and learn its language, values and customs, the acquired national identity will always remain external to you (see Ref. 7, p. 71).

Pogrom-like attacks on Jews, almost unheard of in Denmark before, took place in Copenhagen in 1819. An anti-German wave culminated in two disastrous wars in the middle of the 19th century. The propaganda around such and other events was heavily loaded with references to the non-Danishness of these groups, considered foreign to the soil and language, independent of how long they had actually lived here, and how well they spoke Danish. When applied today to the integration of immigrants and refugees and other ethnic issues, the excluding effects of the naturalized notion of identity are quite obvious. Despite the critical position it assumes, one cannot avoid hearing an echo of the entire logic of the nationalist argument as one dimension of the author’s ideological projections into the mindset of the black girl-narrator of ‘The Ultimate Safari.’

### **In the veld**

In a brief sequence from André Brink’s *An Instant in the Wind*<sup>8</sup> we find a marked contrast to both Ørsted’s and Gordimer’s texts (cf. Coetzee,<sup>9</sup> Gräbe<sup>10</sup>). All history, memory, subjectivity is taken out of the landscape when Elizabeth, a white woman of Cape Town, is fighting her way through a completely foreign location in the far away hinterlands of the Cape region with a runaway slave:

Separate objects on the road caught her attention, absorbing her completely so that she became oblivious of motion altogether. A thorn tree stump with all redundant bark and softness stripped by the wind and sun, reduced to pure wood, a bare hard pattern of indestructible grain. A rock formation corroded through centuries, all sandiness and flakiness destroyed, terrifying and beautiful in its utter stillness its refusal to be anything but itself. [...]

For long stretches she would wander on with her head bowed scrutinising the ground immediately in front of her feet, looking for wagon trails cut into the hard

soil, flattened branches, discarded objects. Something, anything: the barest sign to reassure her that she'd really passed that way before.

But there was nothing. Not the slightest indication or admission by the landscape that it acknowledged her, that it was aware of her. [...] Nothing. Just nothing. (Ref. 8, p. 160f)

This experience is echoed in the exiled grandmother's remark in Gordimer's text: 'There is nothing. No home.' Without human invention and inventiveness, without human decisions and human history, there is no human identity, neither national nor individual. To be born in a place is not enough. Identity does not grow from the ground like plants, as Ørsted would have it. Brink insists on the naked materiality of the landscape that requires our activity if we want to belong there and shape an identity, an activity that does not follow an already prepared programme but evolves while it unfolds.

The emptiness of the landscape is a common feature in white South African literature. The land is a place of constant confrontation, fear and fighting, not an embracing and welcoming harmonious setting. In his *White Writing*,<sup>9</sup> J. M. Coetzee points to a general attitude to the landscape in the farm novel or *plaasroman*:

Africa is a land of rock and sun, not of soil and water [...] The landscape remains alien, impenetrable, until a language is found in which to win it, speak it, represent it. It is no oversimplification to say that landscape art and landscape writing in South Africa from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth revolve around the question of finding a language to fit Africa. [...] Is there a language in which people of European identity, or if not of European identity, then of a highly problematical South African-colonial identity, can speak to Africa and to be spoken to by Africa? [...] Many English-colonial doubts about identity are projected and blamed upon English language itself, partly because, as a literary medium, English carries echoes of a very different natural world. (Ref. 9, p. 8)

This is another version of Ørsted's argument, only turned upside down: landscape and language are separated, and no collective identity in relation to the landscape is possible. *Plaasromans* in Afrikaans – and in English, with Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) as the first and most important example – tell about the fight against the land, a fight that begins anew every day. The land is never completely cultivated.

Coetzee shows that white South African literature, whether in English or Afrikaans, is silent about non-white views of landscape and people. In this literature the actual work put into the landscape by black labour over the centuries is made invisible. And there is no manifest knowledge of the African experience, which constitutes another dimension of the ideas of Gordimer's girl-narrator, that you can be at home in a land that is tough and uncontrolled, but nevertheless



known to you, useful and readable. The estrangement of whites vis-à-vis the landscape, Coetzee underlines, is a product of a neglect of this history, a neglect that seems necessary to white identity.

The problem of neglected history in relation to the landscape forms a telling parallel to the decisive difference between European and non-European nation building. The territorial boundaries and democratic institutions of post-colonial states are the imported effects of the colonial and post-colonial period. They are not bound to local history, literatures, languages or education, and cannot therefore serve functions identical with those their counterparts perform in the European nation-state that has been used as a model. The European nation-state model presupposes a pre-existing history, which in an embryonic form is actualized in the nation-state.<sup>7</sup>

In *The Black Man's Burden*,<sup>4</sup> Basil Davidson points out that there were self-governing kingdoms in Africa that might have served as the basis for the development of local national democracies. They were not simply neglected by the colonial administrators, negotiation with them was actually actively refused. In his chapter on 'Shadows of neglected ancestors', Davidson's example is Ufia in present-day Tanzania. He notes that 'Africa's problem in becoming independent from colonial rule was not to modernize its own institutions [...] but to suppose there had been none, or none of any relevance.' (Ref. 4, p. 75; cf. Ref. 3). From the European perspective, the germ of a nation could only grow in Europe, and only be exported when fully grown and dressed up in ideological European garments. His point is that without an active relation to some relevant local basis, any 'official' nation-state or democracy will remain an empty shell, a formal structure. In this context, landscape as supposed pristine wilderness, untouched by humans, and especially not owned by humans, is open both for exploitation and for preservation in the image of the European dream of wild nature beyond the all too cultivated landscapes at home.<sup>2</sup>

### **A lesson to be learned?**

The interaction between nature and history is, on the one hand, part of a national identity because the interactions between human actions and natural processes constitute cultural processes. On the other hand, this interaction transcends national borders in today's world of international conventions and practices in landscape preservation. In this context, the African experience, in all its cruelty and complexity, will be an antidote to the naïve re-emergence of traditional nationalism in Europe with all its naturalizing propaganda reinforcing the role of the national landscape as a non-democratic or even anti-democratic ideological device. Its public appeal has always been great, and easy to communicate, but its long-term effects have often been to remove human actions, history and

democracy from our interaction with each other and our environment, ending up satisfying only the ultimate safaris of the international tourism industry.

In marked contrast, the descriptions of landscapes in modern literature, at their best, express the historically determined double experience of foreign dream and indigenous reality, local use and foreign influence. Only an emphasis on such features in their non-exclusive co-presence and complexity, in contrast to the natural autonomy of the landscape, can make the landscape part of a democratic vision of national identity. Belonging to a place is a matter of decision, not a matter of natural origin; a result of a democratic process, not of its natural foundation. Working with literature, in its open and complex articulation of the relationship between landscape, nation and identity, offers an occasion to reflect on this obligation. It is a way of making differences work (cf. Ref. 11).

The lesson to be learned? The post-colonial experience may teach us to remember that our own national landscapes have been shaped as an integral part of our colonial past and it may therefore open our eyes to the inborn foreignness in the identities that goes with our landscapes. The national experience, on the other hand, may teach new nations how to avoid the dangerous and all too easy repetitions of naturalizing identities through landscapes as they occur in new post-colonial nations. Texts such as those of Brink and Coetzee, and to a lesser degree Gordimer's, may offer this insight to both Europeans and non-Europeans.

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