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The *Karoo*, *The Veld*, and the Co-Op: The Farm as Microcosm and Place for Change in Schreiner, Lessing, and Head

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The *Karoo*, The *Veld*, and the Co-Op: The Farm as Microcosm and Place for Change in
Schreiner, Lessing, and Head

by

Elana D. Karshmer

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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with a concentration in literature
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, Arthur I. Karshmer, PhD.

A loving and indulgent father.

A devoted husband to my mother.

Those who knew him understood his commitment to family, to friends, to enjoying life,
and to doing his part to making the world better.

His memory is a blessing and a source of peace.

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ABSTRACT

The farm novels of southern Africa can be considered microcosms of gender stereotypes and racial attitudes. Reading these novels using post-colonial, Marxist, and feminist theory is especially useful in thinking about how these novels reflect female writers' perspectives about the success of the imperialism in Africa and the lasting effects of colonialism on gender and race relations. In addition, these novels provide insight into colonialism, allowing each author to comment on the effect of imperialism on both the colonized and those who take up the colonial project.

This dissertation examines novels by three female African writers: *The Story of an African Farm* by Olive Schreiner, *The Grass is Singing* by Doris Lessing, and *When Rain Clouds Gather* by Bessie Head. Written at different stages of colonial power, each novel represents agrarian life in southern African colonies that share similar cultural, historical, colonial, and racial attitudes. These novels can be interpreted as building on and challenging the concept of the *plaasroman*, a genre central to the South African colonial experience.

In addition to discussing how these novels undermine traditional forms of pastoral literature in order to comment explicitly on those forms' failure to account for the farm experience in southern Africa, this dissertation applies postcolonial, Marxist,

and ecofeminist criticism to delve into issues of postcolonial identity, racism, and the role of the farm as both a microcosm and a catalyst for change.

INTRODUCTION:
LOCATING POSTCOLONIALITY AND THE FARM

The *Plaasroman*: A Brief Introduction

Growing out of the literary tradition of the *plaasroman*, or Boer farm novel, the farm novels considered in this dissertation both owe a debt to the genre and challenge the notions of that style. Of primary importance to the genre – and necessary, according to J.M. Coetzee, who writes extensively on the subject of the *plaasroman* – for inclusion in the genre, is association with Boer farm culture in a way that is inseparable from Boer village life. Although Coetzee mentions Olive Schreiner’s novel *The Story of an African Farm* (hereafter *SAF*), in his study, he is quick to point out that her work is “too far outside the insular patriarchal culture of the Boer farm to write of it with true intimacy” (*White Writing* 63). Like *SAF*, the other two novels under consideration – Doris Lessing’s *The Grass is Singing* (from now on *GIS*), and Bessie Head’s novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* (hereafter *RCG*) – also discuss life on the farm, but without dealing specifically with issues pertaining to Boer life. Thus, although some features of these novels overlap with the *plaasroman* genre, making comparison useful, the differences in how these works present life on the farm and interactions between whites and native Africans under the changing political systems in place during their production suggest they

comprise a new form of literature that is critical of imperialism, reproachful of colonialist practices, and evocative of a more open and inclusive society.

The idea that the *plaasroman* as a genre might not be representative of the lived reality of farm life in South Africa is one that Coetzee hints at in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. Tracing the genre back to the farm novels of Boer authors like C.M. van den Heever, D. F. Malherbe, Jochem van Bruggen, and Johannes van Melle, Coetzee makes two important points about the genre that need to be considered. First, he asserts that unlike Boer writers who felt a connection to the African landscape because they were among the first to colonize the land and develop a new language that was related to yet distinctly different from the language of the colonial power, the British felt no such link to Africa. Further, he contends that in order to maintain “the mystique,” “the special status” promoted by English colonials that their language was “spoken correctly only in southeast England, and the only by a certain social class,” English farm novelists avoided creating an overly broad sense of community with those outside of their circle (Coetzee, *WW* 8). While maintaining their distance from native Africans, they also avoided unnecessary familiarity with Boer colonials, ensuring that they saw their experience of life in the Cape Colony as different from their Boer counterparts. In *Washed with Sun: Landscape and the Making of White South Africa* Jeremy Foster argues that Afrikaner nationalism—which informs the literature written by and about Boer farm life—“invested *rural* rather than urban locales as loci of white belonging and cultural identity,” drawing on “constructed cultural memory to mediate feelings of potentiality and idealism” (254, original italics). This

traditional Boer culture, or *boernasie* as Coetzee calls it, is reflected in the *plaasroman*, but not in works by Anglo writers who do not share this heritage and do not have a similar history of farming the South African land.

Challenging the *Plaasroman*

Beyond linguistic differences, the *plaasroman*, which Coetzee argues must be written in Afrikaans, this genre preserves without examining too deeply ideas of Boer land ownership, white labor, and colonial authority (Coetzee, WW11). Thus, questions about whether the land annexed for cultivation was really actually free for the taking, whether the work done on white farms was truly done by white farmers, and whether relationships between white farmers and native African workers truly allow for freedom of choice on the part of the natives remain not only unanswered, but neglected within the genre in order to preserve the colonial order. These questions – however ignored or suppressed they may be within *plaasromane* – remain, “till in the end they subvert the genre,” and allow the genre to be supplanted by something new, something that does not obscure the concerns of the group Coetzee calls no longer European, but not yet African (Coetzee, WW11).

Tied to a colonial past grounded in British imperialism, agriculture, and a systemic racism that is both connected to, yet different from the Boer tradition, the cultures reflected in the British farm novels of imperialist and post-colonial South Africa, Rhodesia, and Botswana show a marked departure from the *plaasromane* of the past. Rather than reinscribing the traditional concerns of the Boers, these novels engage

in the work of dissecting elements of the cultures to which they belong while simultaneously reflecting many of the processes and ideologies that undergird the societies that they question. For example, although these novels question the racism that characterizes interactions between white colonials and native Africans, their reliance on and reconstitution of traditional prejudices reflect the cultural forces at work. Rather than accepting these prejudices and castigating the authors for failing to challenge the stereotypes they employ these works suggest that we should think about how the use of those stereotypes, and the stereotypes themselves, allow for a more nuanced reading of the novels and their representations of the cultures that influence them.

Imperialism and Postcolonialism

In his follow up to *Orientalism*, Edward Saïd in *Culture and Imperialism* discusses the concept of imperial culture and the experience of resistance against empire. His understanding of culture includes the practices — that often have aesthetic forms — which have pleasure as a principal goal. Additionally, culture is an idea that has what he calls a “refining and elevating element” (*Culture* xiii). From this model, he suggests, culture can become associated with a specific nation or state, often with some degree of xenophobia that allows for an “us” versus “them” mentality that can lead to hostility or aggression between the two groups (Saïd, *Culture* xiii). In order to maintain these differences, the culture relies on a codes of behavior that oppose “the permissiveness associated with such relatively liberal philosophies as multiculturalism and hybridity,” instead opting to reinforce homogeneity (*Culture* xiii). According to Saïd, novels, as

artifacts of culture, are connected to the imperial processes that shaped the civilization that produced them; rather than ignoring this connection or denouncing the reflections of culture that exist in works of literature, he suggests that readers examine these links, and consider how representations of culture in novels provide for an enhanced understanding of both the novel and the culture (*Culture* xiv).

In addition to considering culture, reading these novels through a variety of theoretical lenses can be helpful in examining how they comment on the colonial project. While *SAF*, *GIS*, and *RCG* were all produced during different stages of colonialism, suggesting that using the term “postcolonial” to describe them all could be problematic, there are two important points to consider. First, in *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffith, and Helen Tiffin assert that the term “postcolonial” can be used to “cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day” (2). This suggests that the idea of postcolonialism can be applied broadly rather than within a specific timeframe. Second, as part of this dissertation, differentiating between colonialism and imperialism is especially important, as *SAF* and *GIS* are used here as examples of anti-imperialist literature. Despite this, the novels share a thematic affinity with *RCG* in their interest in showing the presence of black labor on African farms that the *plaasroman* elides and expanding Coetzee’s conception of the genre. Although imperialism and colonialism are often conflated, the two terms have their own distinct meanings; “imperialism,” Edward Saïd contends, refers to the “practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan center ruling a distant territory,” while

“colonialism,” nearly always a consequence of imperialism, is “the implanting of settlements on distant territory” (*Culture* 9). In other words, imperialism is a policy for overseeing the territory, while colonialism is the practice of that policy. For the purposes of this dissertation, the term postcolonial will refer specifically to the period after colonialism has ended; thus, while *SAF* and *GIS* reflect an anti-imperialist attitude, because the practice of implementation – the colonialism that almost always accompanies imperialism – has not yet concluded, the novels cannot be postcolonial in their ideology. In *Culture and Imperialism* Saïd writes, “in our time [1993], direct colonialism has largely ended; imperialism...lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere...” (9); thus, despite the fact that *SAF* and *GIS* are not postcolonial, they connect with *RCG* in their discussion and criticism of imperialist practices.

The Effects of Legislated Racism: Exploitation, White Supremacy, and the Beginning of Apartheid

One of the hallmarks of imperialism in the South African colonies (South Africa, Rhodesia, and Botswana) was the legislation of white supremacy through the enforcement of an array of practices within these areas. Barbara Bush argues that, despite the “liberal, moderating traditions of nineteenth century British liberalism” (133), under which slavery in the Cape was abolished in 1838, South Africa in the twentieth century moved towards a segregationist state. With the accelerated development of a white African economy, native Africans in the colonies experienced

an increasing level of control; the processes developed by the British to facilitate their entry into the global economy “resulted in the reorganisation of agriculture into larger farms, depopulation of the countryside and the creation of a ‘poor white’ class, intensifying economic competition” between whites and blacks (Bush 134). The establishment of sugar plantations and increased industrialization led to the introduction of Indian laborers and an influx of Europeans, introducing a more diverse white labor class and increasing the divide between white labor and black labor. Competition between these groups served to codify differences rather than encouraging solidarity, reinforcing racialized identities and ensuring a more concentrated type of oppression.

The laws and practices meant to keep white settlers in power and to ensure they had the labor force necessary to ensure economic success in South Africa led to the exploitation of native African workers. In “Estranged Labor,” one of the *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Karl Marx argues that within a political economy “the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities” (106). As property-less workers on farms run by white settlers, native Africans increased the wealth of their employers, working land that was acquired without regard for its true ownership, and contributing to their own devaluation by creating more value for property owners (Marx, *Estranged* 106-107). Under the capitalist economic system that reinforced and advanced the imperialist enterprise, workers were dehumanized and estranged from their labor. These feelings of alienation would eventually lead to a violent uprising geared toward reestablishing a more humane

society that was not reliant on, and that did not emphasize, racial differences between colonizer and colonized and that did not exploit native Africans for profit or to maintain political control.

Inequality and the Farm

The connection between exploitation and the potential for uprising is easy to see in both *SAF* and *GIS*. Both novels present farm life under white rule, where work is done by black laborers but white settlers benefit from the work that is done. *SAF* is set in the *karoo*, a dry region in the interior of South Africa, and *GIS* takes place on the *veld*, or grasslands, of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe). While both works at least acknowledge that native Africans are essential to the farming process – unlike the *plaasroman*, which has been criticized for not only remaining silent about the work done by black workers, but eliding their presence altogether (Coetzee, *WW* 5) – they are largely silent when it comes to the concerns and motivations of native African characters. Native Africans do not feature prominently in *SAF*, although the presence and behavior of such characters does lead to some interesting interpretations of Schreiner's views of race and racial interaction. And while native Africans are relegated primarily to supporting roles in *GIS*, the focus on African men as house servants reflects the importance of maintaining class distinctions by employing domestic help within the white settler community, and suggests that men employed in domestic work were generally seen as insignificant since their positions provided them with unrestricted access to the family's personal lives and interactions – a fact that seemed not to disturb most settlers. As Ian van der

Waag contends, domestic servants had “an intimate knowledge of the family, and [were] unobtrusive but always at hand” (13). Since the household was “the primary place where race, class and gender [came] together under one roof” (Van der Waag 8) it makes sense that this would be the setting within which racial, class, and gender prejudices would begin to be challenged and reconsidered.

Although each novel includes native African characters, each represents different degrees of concern for and interaction with them. *SAF*, for example, is only minimally concerned with representing native Africans as individuals and showing these characters’ internal thoughts and emotions. In this novel, the white characters take precedence, and although there are a couple of instances where native characters challenge expectations, there is no analysis of the possible motivations. These characters are referred to by tribal affiliations or by racist epithets, never by names. The native Africans in *GIS* as well are not fleshed out fully, and still reflect the colonial baggage of the time, but this novel does allow for the potential of agency among these characters, and rather than referring to them only by racialized terms for their tribal affiliations, Lessing does give some of them names. *RCG*, on the other hand, features native Africans almost exclusively, and recognizes the individuality of each character in the novel – native or colonial. While *RCG* includes native characters with clear motivations, the novel’s inability to fully grasp how its tendency to favor modernization over tribal practices in every situation is one of its limitations.

Unlike *SAF* and *GIS*, *RCG* does not take place in a white settler society, but in a farming co-op in newly independent Botswana. While the economy of Golema Mmidi is

dependent on native African workers, the fact that the workers are creating something for themselves and not for a white employer allows the novel to comment on other aspects of the colonial project. There is, of course, the specter of colonialism lingering in the presence of George Appleby-Smith, the Briton who patrols the district, in the colonialist practices carried out by Matenge and Sekoto, and in the way that Gilbert treats the villagers – with benevolence, but as though they are children unable to care for themselves. Unlike Moses in *GIS* who strikes out at Mary for reasons including a desire to avenge her violent treatment of him, a wish to challenge the unfairness of the colonial system, and, as Fanon suggests in *The Wretched of the Earth*, an effort to fight back against the violence of colonizer/colonized relationship, which is, he writes “colored by violence and...the exploitation of the colonized by the colonizer continued at the point of the bayonet and under cannon fire” (2), *RCG* uses the figures of Matenge, Joas Tsepe, and Sekoto to comment on the colonialism from a native perspective. Even Makhaya, the novel’s central character, experiences what Annie Gagliano describes as a nearly uncontainable desire to lash out violently at figures of authority as a result of the brutal treatment he received under the “psychopolitical terrorism of apartheid” (139). These characters, all black, have been shaped by their interactions with the colonial power, and have been granted certain privileges in exchange for helping to maintain British control over the area. Set right after Botswana receives provisional independence from Britain, the novel shows how deep colonial practices run and indicates that despite gaining independence, Botswanan culture has been so deeply changed by its

colonial history that the tribal chiefs of the area now prefer to continue the imperialist practices that they have adopted.

Despite the specific differences in locale that separate *SAF*, *GIS*, and *RCG*, all three take place in areas that have a similar colonial past. Although South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Botswana are today distinct political areas, they were once part of the colony that grew out of the original Cape Colony founded by the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie*, or VOC. Expansion by Boers and Britons led white settlers to establish farms and other enterprises on land they felt justified in taking based on a widespread belief that their movement into these lands occurred at roughly the same time as Bantu-speaking Africans began to settle the northern areas of the region (Crais 256). Clifton C. Crais discusses this incursion in his article “The Vacant Land: The Mythology of British Expansion in the Eastern Cape, South Africa.” He argues that as people spread out they could not help but come into contact with each other. This inevitable contact led to conflict between the native groups and the white settlers, with both groups often using force either to protect land holdings or to support the annexation of space designed to increase wealth, solidify political standing, and enhance group status (Crais 257).

While previous historians often represented the British as progressive and liberal compared to their Boer counterparts, both groups, Crais argues, are responsible for contributing to the prejudices and belief in white supremacy that helped create *apartheid* (255). The ways that white settlers organized space, built an archive of their activities, and designed their conception of a colonized world helped to create the notions of race that shaped stereotypes of native Africans, civilization, and barbarism in the colonies

(Crais 256). Thus, even the organization of farm society where white farmers as well as native African workers were dependent on the harvest for survival reflects these stereotypes in action. Despite the fact that very little often separated white farmers from their native farm hands, the difference between these groups was carefully observed and reinforced. In *SAF*, for example, Otto and Waldo, although poor, occupy a higher position than any native servant. Likewise, in *GIS* despite Mary and Dick's failure as farmers and relative ostracization from their farming society, Charlie Slatter takes pains to help them avoid appearing to exist on the same level as the native Africans in their district, following what Lessing calls the "first law of white South Africa": "Thou shalt not let your fellow whites sink lower than a certain point; because if you do, the nigger will see he is as good as you are" (*GIS* 205). Even *RCG*, which takes place in a newly independent Botswana, reflects its colonial past by privileging white knowledge over traditional African practices. Despite his lack of experience living and farming in Africa, the villagers of Golema Mmidi accept the advice of an English expatriate. They see his formal training in agriculture as superior to their practical knowledge, and are willing to try his ideas even though they represent a Western, hypothetical style that is in direct contrast to their own ways of knowing. As the only postcolonial novel of the three, *RCG*'s habit of legitimizing Gilbert's designs elevates him within the village and places him on par with Dinorego and Mma Millipede. That a white man who has yet to prove himself is able to attain such stature in Golema Mmidi is just one way that *RCG* reinscribes colonial beliefs rather than challenging them.

The site of the farm, however, is the one place that allows for the confluence of all of the ideas that lead to change. While the beginnings of apartheid can be seen in *SAF* and *GIS*, *RCG*'s homogeneous setting reflects a perspective that is at once both egalitarian and grounded in the idea that although change can happen, the most effective leaders are white and non-African. The farm, then, while a potential site of change, is also a place that works to continuously duplicate the patterns that have been established by imperialism and colonialist practices, suggesting that even change cannot occur until these systems have been dismantled.

CHAPTER ONE:

THE PLAASROMAN: AN AFRIKANER GENRE

History of South Africa: The VOC

South Africa has a rich and vibrant precolonial history. Fossils and archeological records tell the tale of ancient agrarian societies whose practices did not change much over millennia, and whose customs are still observable in the ways of the native tribes that inhabit the land. For the purposes of this dissertation, however, the focus will be on more recent history; specifically, on the colonial history that shaped South Africa.

Founded in 1602, the Dutch East India Company, or *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC), established the Cape Colony in present-day South Africa as a supply post for ships trading with Asia. As Leonard Thompson asserts, “modern South Africa began as a by-product of the enterprise of...Dutch merchants” (33). The colony was under Dutch rule via the VOC, or the Batavian Republic for the majority of the period between 1652 and 1806, except for a brief phase of British control. Under the VOC, the Cape Colony evolved rapidly into a settler colony, with employees of the VOC leasing land from the company in order to grow crops which they would then sell back to the

VOC for fixed price. The colony, designed to be a stop-over for traders, then, began to develop in ways unforeseen by the VOC. Several events contributed to the change from supply post to settler colony. First, by allowing employees to farm the land rather than requiring them to carry out their assigned duties, the VOC created a class of “free burghers” within the colony. Next, in order to provide the labor necessary to build the infrastructure required by the settlers and their new ventures, the VOC began to import slaves, and finally, as the colony grew in size and expanded from its initial boundaries, “it did so at the expense of local pastoralists, who had the option of withdrawing from the fresh water resources and the rich pastures...or remaining there as servants or clients of the Dutch” (Thompson 33). To provide the labor needed by the growing colony, the VOC imported slaves from a variety of locales. The first slaves brought to the colony were from Angola and Dahomey, present-day Benin, but by the early eighteenth century, the majority of slaves in the Cape “came from more diverse linguistic, religious, and social backgrounds than those in the Americas” (Thompson 36). In fact, most slaves were from places other than Africa, including Ceylon, India, and Indonesia. And the VOC kept importing them. Thompson explains that from 1711 onward there were more slaves in the Cape Colony than burghers, and that the increase in number of slaves was due not to natural reproduction, but to “continual import” (36).

The VOC’s authoritarian policies and the need for additional land for farming encouraged settlers to move further inland. Away from the original boundaries of VOC control, settlers had more freedom, but soon came into contact with native tribes, causing competition for land and other natural resources. White farmers began to annex

lands and take possession of cattle held by native peoples, particularly the Khoi, whom the Boers referred to as the Hottentots, leading to escalating tensions between the two groups (Thompson 37-38). “By 1713, the indigenous pastoral society...of Africa was disintegrating. Whites were in control of the fertile territory below the mountain escarpment extending fifty miles north and forty miles east from Cape Town” (Thompson 38). The Dutch had appropriated Khoi land and cattle, subjugated them to Dutch rule, and in order to survive, many Khoi found themselves working as shepherds and cattle herds for Dutch farmers (Thompson 38).

Second-Wave Colonization: The British Offensive

Then, in 1795, the British launched a military expedition into the Cape Colony. The result of this offensive was British control of the cape, and when the colony was finally returned to Dutch governance, it was no longer overseen by the VOC. A few years later the colony became part of the British Empire. While the colony was not a major market for anything that Britain could export, and its mineral deposits at that time were not known to be especially rich, the British military offensive into the Cape Colony, and its subsequent occupation of the land, was done for two main reasons: first, to prevent the colony from falling into French hands, and second, to ensure British ships traveling to Asia would have a safe harbor and a place to refuel and restock (Beck 42).

Despite the relatively low numbers of Britons in the Cape Colony prior to 1820, there had always been British interest in the Cape Colony. Just as the VOC had used the colony as a stopping point for traders making the journey from Europe to Asia, and

thereby allowing them to control access to Far East trade routes, so did the British. The aftermath of war led to depression in Britain, and there was a rise in unemployment and poor. This, along with Britain's desire to keep its citizens from emigrating to the United States, made South Africa an ideal destination to which it could direct people wanting to leave (Keppel-Jones 82). Further, "Lord Charles Somerset wanted a dense white barrier against invasion," a sentiment that was felt all the more acutely following the Kaffir (Xhosa) War of 1819, in which European settlers skirmished with Xhosa tribes in the Eastern Cape (Keppel-Jones 82).

To encourage British immigration to South Africa, the government offered both free passage and small land grants. These grants were provided to parties of men numbering at least nine, and if conditions were met, each man in the party would be given 100 acres to farm. The scheme did not work as envisioned; rather than galvanizing groups of men to emigrate together and work their plots in affiliation with one another, once the men reached South Africa they separated, took their land, and moved on. They usually discovered that the number of acres they had been allotted was far too small to make profitable, sometimes abandoning their land to take up residence in more urban areas where they could ply their former trades, or renting out their lands to natives who were more familiar with the practices that would ensure harvest (Keppel-Jones 82-83). The one farming practice that did lead to profit for these immigrants was sheep-farming in the manner of their Boer predecessors, and in the 1830s Merino wool became one of the colony's major export items (Beck 50).

A few successful British farms were established, primarily along the Cape Colony frontier, but the British, unlike their Afrikaner counterparts, mostly congregated in urban areas. Keppel-Jones suggests that, “the distinction between town and country, the conflict between urban and rural interests and ideas, almost coincided with the difference in national origins” (85). Further, he explains that urban Afrikaners tended to be anglicized, while Britons in the Boer areas tended to be assimilated by their neighbors much more slowly and sometimes much less so than Afrikaners living among the British (85). In *A History of South Africa*, Leonard Thompson explains, “with their different language, traditions, religious affiliations, and experiences, [the British] were culturally distinct from the earlier settlers. They were the first white settlers who did not assimilate,” instead keeping to themselves and even maintaining cultural distinctions between themselves and their Dutch counterparts by referring to the Dutch colonists as Boers rather than Afrikaners as the Dutch-speakers had begun to do (56). British settlers, Roger Beck notes, “considered themselves more civilized and culturally superior not only to Africans but also to Afrikaners,” leading to the cultural divisions between the two groups that have lasted well into the twentieth century (50). Only their need to stand together against African tribes intent on keeping white settlers from appropriating their lands brought the two groups together as a united front.

Briton v. Boer: Cultural and Economic Enterprises

In addition to sheep-farming and returning to artisanal enterprises, the British established themselves as an entity separate from their Afrikaner neighbors by seizing

up lands previously unclaimed by imperial powers. These lands had been left largely unsettled because they were generally barren, but the discovery of diamonds in the late 1860s along the banks of the lower Vaal River, and then in the 1870s in the area now known as Kimberley, led British agents to explore the possibilities for British expansion beyond the Transvaal (Keppel-Jones 92-93). Then, in the 1880s, a rich deposit of gold ore was discovered along the Witwatersrand. The “immense, unequaled quantity of gold ore” made mining commercially viable, and in the end, gold mining had a bigger impact than diamond mining on South Africa’s transition from agricultural to industrial economy, and from rural to urban society (Beck 79). That these heretofore barren lands lay in areas controlled by native tribes that were not altogether friendly to either the Afrikaners or the British was immaterial; both groups set about finding ways to gain control. After a series of annexations, treaties, and political maneuvering, the areas came under British control, marking another major difference between British and the Afrikaner enterprise, and, as Keppel-Jones argues, doing more “to embitter relations between the two white communities than any other single event” (95).

Although the Cape Colony and its expansion under Dutch and British rule helped shaped the borders of present-day South Africa, the growth of the colony also encroached on the areas that became Botswana and Zimbabwe. To ensure continued access to the road leading from the Cape to Rhodesia (modern-day Zimbabwe), the British annexed Tswana territory both south and north of the Molopo River. The area south of the river became the British Bechuanaland crown colony in 1885, while the area north of the river became the Bechuanaland protectorate. The protectorate remained a

“High Commission territory until gaining independence in 1966 as Botswana” (Beck 85). Despite the British intervention, however, large numbers of Tswana were affected by a highly infectious cattle disease epidemic between 1896-1897, which killed large numbers of livestock and forced many Tswana to work in South African mines and for white farmers (Beck 85).

As it became more difficult for Dutch colonists to become involved in the cattle trade, one area that was still open to them within agriculture was the establishment of farms that included *leeningsplaats*, or cattle posts. Although farms were no longer available as freeholds, colonists were able to purchase annual grazing licenses for a modest amount, and in practice these fees were rarely collected. Thus, these farms were treated like the freehold farms of previous years, with colonists “regard[ing] these loan places as their property in all but name” (Keppel-Jones 27). Although the Boers treated the land as their own, it was not, and unlike their compatriots who had become farmers earlier in the century under the freehold system, they were not at liberty to divide their lands to their heirs. Instead, upon the death of the farmer, the land would return to the government’s control, leaving nothing to the farmer’s sons (Keppel-Jones 28). As a result of this situation, the need for additional fertile land, and mounting tension between the Boers and the Hottentots, Bushmen, and the Kaffirs, as the early Boers called the Khoi, the San, and the Xhosa, many Boers left their farms behind. “Their motives were political, social, ideological...and of course economic motives were inextricably interwoven with these,” (65) Keppel-Jones explains, but what became known as “The Great Trek” signaled more than just a desire for land and freedom.

Changes in the way of life to which the Boers had become accustomed caused them to feel threatened, and they chose to deal with these threats by removing themselves from the society that was going through a “social revolution” in its treatment of native Africans at the expense of white colonists’ interests (Keppel-Jones 66). In addition to their discontent with the changes to the social structure of Cape Colony in the nineteenth century, the Boers that migrated from the colony, known as Voortrekkers, were displeased with the Anglicization of their colony. “Between 1823 and 1828 English completely ousted Dutch as the official language,” and many Boers, who at this point called themselves Afrikaners after their particular Dutch dialect – Afrikaans – felt they were existing in an alien environment that no longer supported their way of life (Keppel-Jones 67). The decision to leave, then, despite the lack of protection from hostile natives and the uncharted terrain that they would encounter and have to domesticate in order to set up new farms enabled the Voortrekkers to seek out areas to re-create their old ways of life and to re-establish the practices they felt the British were curtailing.

The *Plaasroman*: The Afrikaner Farm Novel

The lengthy history of Boers in South Africa corresponds to the long Afrikaner literary tradition. Because the Boer lifestyle was primarily agrarian, it is no surprise that their literature deals predominantly with farm life, and that a specific genre would arise that encompasses this type of literature. J.M. Coetzee explains, the *plaasroman*, or Afrikaner farm novel, “prefers to identify the preservation of a (Dutch) peasant rural order.... In (British) capitalism it identifies the principal enemy of the old ways.

Locating the historically significant conflict as between Boer and Briton, it shifts black-white conflict out of sight into a forgotten past or an obscure future" (*White Writing* 5-6). In this way, the genre does two major things. First, it reinforces the initial conflict between Boers and Britons, suggesting that the two groups have fundamental differences that may not be reconciled, and, second, by focusing on the importance of tradition within a white historical context, it virtually elides the presence, and therefore significance, of black/white interaction in South African history. This second point is especially significant given the importance of race relations in the whole of Africa. Ignoring the ways that colonists and settlers interact with black Africans demonstrates an unwillingness to confront the racism and imperialist notions that advanced South African society.

In *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, published in 1988, J.M. Coetzee discusses the literature of South Africa prior to World War II. Although he touches on a variety of genres, his exploration of the *plaasroman*, or farm novel, is especially useful in understanding the importance of the farm and its effect on South African and other southern African literatures. Coetzee's analysis of the *plaasroman* and its place in South African literary history allow for a comparison of the *plaasroman* to the pastoral and the georgic as described by critics Elspeth Tulloch and Pat Louw in order to further the idea that the farm novels by Olive Schreiner, Doris Lessing, and Bessie Head, while indebted to the *plaasroman* tradition, subvert many of the tropes used by the genre to challenge its racist, patriarchal, and imperialist ideologies.

The *plaasroman* as a genre grows out of what early colonists believed was a remedy for Africa's "insidious corruptions" (Coetzee, *White Writing* 3). This remedy, "cheerful toil," ensured that anyone settling the new and unknown continent would avoid "declining into the idle and brutish state of the Hottentots" (*White Writing* 3). Thus, farming the land ensured that white colonists would retain their superiority over the African natives, and supported the driving imperialist belief that "those deserve to inherit the earth who make best use of it" (Coetzee, *White Writing* 3). Farming a tract of land did all of these things, and allowed the colonists to support their families for many generations, as, Coetzee explains, under the system of inheritance in place well into the twentieth century, South African farmers could expect to pass a portion of their farms on to their sons. Later, as the frontier began to close and land was no longer available, these portions became smaller, rendering the size of the inherited lands miniscule. This issue was compounded by long periods of drought, low wool prices, and general economic depression in the 1930s, leading to a wide array of conflicts and attempts to develop new farming practices and create new and hardier crops (Coetzee, *White Writing* 82-83). Many of these developments were reflected in the novels of Afrikaner writers since the first wave of colonists to South Africa were the Boers who had experienced this shift first-hand.

The Afrikaner/Briton dichotomy, created by differing cultural beliefs and social practices in the struggle for control of South Africa during the nineteenth century, is reflected in the concept of the *plaasroman*. As Coetzee points out, the *plaasroman* not only represents farm novels but places them in the history of literature about farming and

agriculture in South Africa, and, more specifically, in Afrikaner South Africa. The genre is, in many ways, a response to changes in Afrikaner society brought about by urbanization, industrialization, Anglicization, and other shifts that seemed to threaten Afrikaner traditions. Coetzee explains that the farm novel was for the Afrikaners an elaboration of “models of the garden-farm as bastion of trusted feudal values or cradle of a transindividual familial/tribal form of consciousness” (*White Writing* 4). He goes on to suggest that while most Afrikaans novels of the twentieth century are concerned almost exclusively with the farm and rural society (“platteland”), “of the major English-language novelists of South Africa...only Olive Schreiner... [has] taken farming life as [her] subject” (*White Writing* 63). At the same time, though, Coetzee excludes Schreiner from the *plaasroman* genre, saying “Schreiner...cannot be said to have defined a ‘farm novel’ genre in English to parallel the *plaasroman* in Afrikaans” (*White Writing* 63). He gives several reasons for this exclusion, suggesting that her gender, her nationality, and her interaction with her subject matter all differ widely enough from the Afrikaner tradition to provide a foil for the *plaasroman* rather than a complement (*White Writing* 63-64).

Considering the reasons for highlighting the differences between Boer and non-Boer writers within novels dealing with African farm life relies on an analysis of the differences between early Boer settlers and British colonials, providing an opportunity to explore changing attitudes toward farming as South Africa began to change. In “Doris Lessing, Social Realism, and the *Plaasroman*,” Julie Cairnie makes two important points about the *plaasroman* genre. First, she notes that the genre “looks back

nostalgically to the agrarian past in order to sustain white supremacy in the present and, by implication, the future” (20). This is significant because it aligns with Coetzee’s assessment about the relationship of the genre to the history of the white farming experience in South Africa, but it also points out that rather than being a mere reminiscence of the good old days on the farm, the genre recalls and reinforces racial instabilities. Second, Cairnie suggests that Lessing, and, I argue, Schreiner and Head, revises the *plaasroman* in ways that bring black labor to the forefront (20). Since “blindness to the colour black is built into South African pastoral” (Coetzee 5), Cairnie asserts that Lessing (and others) “revises the *plaasroman* to show the presence of black labour” and the reality of farm life rather than the sentimental view often expressed in the genre.

Building on Coetzee’s criticism of the *plaasroman*, Christopher Warnes, in “‘Everyone Is Guilty’: Complicitous Critique and the Plaasroman Tradition in Etienne van Heerden’s *Toorberg* (Ancestral Voices),” discusses the 1986 novel to delve further into the genre. Warnes writes, “the *plaasroman* is closely associated with the assertion and exploration of Afrikaner culture and the inscription of essentialist notions about the relations between land and identity, self and other” (121). The farm trope, he asserts, is present in the earliest Afrikaans prose works, and compares the righteous life of the farmer to the sinful life awaiting those who choose to leave the farm for the city (Warnes 123). *Toorberg* represents a tradition that venerates ancestry and the idea that the farm allows man to put down roots – both in a literal and figurative sense – and tend to them over the years, ensuring that successive generations own the land both

because they have material rights to it and because they have worked it for such a lengthy period of time (Coetzee, *White Writing* 83-111). Further, because the *plaasroman* occupies “such a central place in the history of Afrikaans prose and cultural life [it] can thus be seen to be complicit with the coming-into-being of systems of thought and conceptions of identity that were to have profoundly deleterious consequences for the majority of South Africans in the late twentieth century” (Warnes 124). At the same time, though, Warnes notes that in *Toorberg*, Van Heerden works within the tradition to expose the issues of power that exist in South African society (121), much like Cairnie suggests Lessing does, and, as I assert, as Schreiner, Lessing, and Head do.

In her assessment of Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm* as a *plaasroman*, Nicole Devarenne writes, “the novel has been acclaimed both as an exemplar of New Woman literature and as the precursor of a South African prose tradition in English, but it has also had a somewhat less celebrated existence as the first in a series of literary encounters...with the South African landscape” (627). Devarenne’s appraisal of the novel both corresponds to and argues against Coetzee’s assertion that Schreiner’s novel approaches “the reality and the institution of the farm out of a tradition of [her] own, a tradition of the English novel of rural life” (*White Writing* 63). While Coetzee suggests that Schreiner’s English background causes her novel to diverge from the *plaasroman* genre both linguistically and in her understanding of the relationship between farmer and land, Devarenne sees the novel as an early attempt to reconsider the “racist and masculinist nationalist ideology” that characterizes pre-apartheid South Africa (627). In doing this, the novel is undeniably South African, as it

describes encounters with South African landscapes, racist attitudes, and the colonial subjugation that informs many of the *plaasromane* that were to come. Devarenne's article is also useful as it provides a brief overview of several novels that have become symbols of the genre. Since many early *plaasromane* have not been translated into English, this summary is especially helpful in taking the genre out of the abstract and giving it literary context. On the whole, these novels invariably depict the farm as a sanctuary from the dangers of urban life, and focus on the "corrupting influence of the city and of modernity, and particularly of the mines...the importance of hard work for the white Afrikaner's spiritual development...and indolence of black and 'coloured' labourers" (629). At the same time, the farm and the farmer provide refuge from the perils of the city, and suggest that the relationship between farmer and land is such that "farmer becomes husband to the land" (Wenzel 94) and "woman aligns with land, and writer with husband/farmer" (Devarenne 630). This comparison is helpful to keep in mind since the majority of *plaasromane* were written by men. Devarenne's article is also useful in that its overview of several well-known *plaasromane* acts as an outline of the development of the major concerns writers of *plaasromane* addressed; for example, *plaasromane* mention issues like changes in land ownership, urbanization and its corrupting influence, and the threat of Anglicization (Devarenne 631). Thus, Devarenne explains, the farm becomes metaphor for the ways "Afrikaner interests could be best served in a situation of competition with non-Afrikaners" (631-632) and promoting the idea of the stability and constancy of Afrikaner history, providing the illusion of a

persistent Afrikaner character that is unaffected by changes occurring in both rural and urban areas (632).

Another important author within the *plaasroman* genre is J.M. Coetzee. Although he is also a literary critic and critical of the genre, several of his novels can be considered exemplars of the genre. Two of his works in particular, *Life & Times of Michael K* in 1983 and *Disgrace* in 1999, can be read both as *plaasromane*, and as novels that challenge the genre's "glorification of an imagined past in which white South Africans exist in an undisturbed symbiosis with a land depicted as being theirs by right" (Devarenne 634).

In "Rewriting the *Plaasroman*: Nostalgia, Intimacy and (Un)homeliness in Marlene van Niekerk's *Agaat*" Caren van Houwelingen explores how Marlene van Niekerk's 2004 novel *Agaat* "reinterprets the [*plaasroman*] genre's three most important ideological assumptions: patriarchal sovereignty, the white subject's assumed ownership of the land, and the marginalization of the non-white other, who is rendered as an extension of the landscape and denied his/her rightful ownership of the land" (94). By doing this, Van Niekerk interrogates what it means to be Afrikaner, "deconstructing the Afrikaner identity and subjectivity, and demythologizes its relationship to the land, the cultivated space of the farm, and the racial Other" (94), thoroughly questioning the underpinnings of the *plaasroman* as a genre. If the Afrikaner identity can be dissected, then the *plaasroman* can be as well, and it becomes a relic of Afrikaner history. Yet at the same time that the novel questions many of the concepts that articulate the *plaasroman* genre, "the novel shows how a reactionary feminist

reinterpretation of the *plaasroman* might be complicit in in the colonizing mission” (Van Houwelingen 99). That the novel can deconstruct, reify, and critique the genre and its relationship to the colonial project is helpful in thinking about the ways that Schreiner, Lessing, and Head – earlier writers, no doubt, but with similar criticisms of racial identity, colonial interaction, and how the farm both promotes interaction among different races and causes problems thereby – address these issues in their novels.

America in the 1930s: A Similar Crucible

Although this dissertation is concerned with such experiences in South Africa, Rhodesia, and Botswana, which were to various degrees part of the South African colonial project, there is a parallel shift reflected in the agrarian movement among white writers in the 1930s American south. Probing such similarities may be helpful in fleshing out issues relating to racism, economics, and gender in a society that is more familiar to and in some ways easier to understand for American scholars attempting to understand pre-apartheid southern Africa. James Leyburn, in “Native Farm Labor in South Africa,” writes, “there are certain parallels between conditions in the South in the United States after the Civil War and those in modern South Africa” (133). He goes on to suggest that in both locations changes to the old way of life mean that both groups have to adjust. “Former personal relationships between master and servant [disintegrate],” he states, and “agriculture is no longer prosperous as in former times” (Leyburn 133). Although South Africa’s population includes many more blacks by percentage than does the United States’, both countries experience a trend toward

industrialism, with both whites and blacks moving to the cities for work (Leyburn 133). This move, coupled with the end of freehold farming opportunities, minimized the prosperity of farms in both regions, and in many ways began to erode the class and race differences that whites relied upon to maintain their sense of superiority over former slaves and native Africans.

In “Upending the Century of Wrong: Agrarian Elites, Collective Violence, and the Transformation of State Power in the American South and South Africa, 1865-1914,” John Higginson explores the connection between the post-Civil War American South, and the similar time period in South Africa. He asserts that “violence had a direct impact on the expectations of white landowners in both societies during the generations that followed [the Civil War and the Second Boer War]” (399). This violence was carried out by whites against blacks in order to both express their dissatisfaction with the changes enforced by the post-war governments, and their unwillingness to adhere to new developments in the social structure arising as a result of these changes (Higginson 399). Despite occurring in different countries with markedly different histories, Higginson’s work suggests that the resentment that white landowners felt allowed for the creation of a shared “grammar of motives,” as historian George M. Fredrickson calls it (qtd. in Higginson 400). Both countries were, during this timeframe, recovering from wars that resulted in attempts by a centralized government to establish some degree of political equality between blacks and whites. Reconstruction in the United States had as one of its goals the enforcement of a program of equality for formerly disenfranchised freed slaves, while in South Africa, the role of the reconstructionist government,

although less expressly concerned with equality for black Africans, believed that the effect of conferring political rights on black Africans might reaffirm a British military victory in the Transvaal (Higginson 400). Further, that black Africans had participated in both national wars, and in ways that provoked the ire of Afrikaner farmers, forced the issue of black equality and autonomy to the forefront, especially in rural areas populated heavily by defeated white landowners (Higginson 400).

Within this crucible, whites in both countries were poised to act out their frustrations by engaging in violence against the perceived enemy. Higginson suggests that this tendency toward violence was enhanced by a desire to regain some degree of power in addition to reflecting whites' anger and dissatisfaction (400). Describing the situation of both groups of whites, Higginson explains, "in their view it was not possible for white men of property and substance to abandon their expectations and claims on power in countries in which one's standard of living continued to be closely identified with the colour of one's skin" (400). The actual goals of violence against blacks in the American South and in South Africa were to preserve as much as possible white control over black labor, to prevent or impede black land ownership or rental so blacks would be less able to participate in the political affairs of a given community, and finally, to limit the number of blacks who had and exercised political franchise (Higginson 405-406). Thus, from the unwillingness of both groups of whites to accept the enfranchisement of blacks within their countries based on the sense that skin color should continue to define which group holds power and wields it over the other comes

the roots of the racist ideology that would mark both cultures and lead to continued racial inequality.

In 1930 twelve American Southerners from a variety of backgrounds – novelists, poets, essayists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, and writers – came together to produce a pro-Southern agrarian manifesto – published as the essay collection *I'll Take my Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. This group and their works contributed to the Southern renaissance, the revival of interest in Southern literature in the 1920s and 1930s, and can be read as a reaction to the spread of industrialism, modernity, and urbanism in the post-Reconstruction United States. The essays in the collection address the effects of industrialism on the South from different perspectives, but on the whole the work romanticizes the agrarian life. Louis D. Rubin, in his introduction to the 1962 torchbook edition, posits that the Southern Agrarians believed that a return to the antebellum, pre-industrialization lifestyle of the South would benefit man by reminding him of the importance of “his own spiritual welfare and his moral obligations to society” (xxi). The agrarians themselves, in the introduction to the collection, explain the principles the volume espouses thus:

All the articles bear in the same sense upon the book's title-subject: all tend to support a Southern way of life against what may be called the American or prevailing way; and all as much as agree that the best terms in which to represent the distinction are contained in the phrase, *Agrarian versus Industrial*. (xix, original italics)

The collection claims to advocate for, as critic Peter Nicolaisen puts it, “a return to the old ways, for the dignity of the farmer and his simple way of life, for resistance against the ubiquitous machine and encroaching urbanization of the countryside” (684). The

introduction to the 75th anniversary edition, which contains a new introduction by Susan V. Donaldson, carries this even further. The Southern Agrarians, she notes, “appear both eerily prescient and perversely reactionary in their championing of self-sufficient farms and agrarian traditions as viable alternatives to early-twentieth-century industrialism” (ix). She goes on to suggest that their manifesto and collection both endorse a preference for nostalgic ideals of the pre-Civil War past—the white aristocratic planter and the self-sufficient freehold farmer content to maintain watch over his homestead (x), concepts that have parallels in the history of South African agriculture.

In addition to their interest in maintaining the farm as a means of fending off industrialism, the Southern Agrarians were also concerned with the concomitant issue of racial equality. Following Reconstruction and industrialization came the Fifteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution which granted suffrage to citizens of the United States without regard to “race, color, or previous condition of servitude” (Amend. XV, Sec. 1). The effects of this amendment were felt acutely throughout the union, but especially so in the South, where citizens were slow to let go of their desire for the past and their feelings of separateness from the rest of the nation (Nicolaisen 687). Like their Boer counterparts, the Southern Agrarians felt a stronger connection to their land than to their new government, and believed a life close to the land would provide happiness, stability, and fulfillment. Susan V. Donaldson notes that much of their dissatisfaction with mainstream America “had as much to do with resisting rapid social-economic change and their own sense of shifting status and identity” within a

culture that no longer valued them just for being men and for being white (xi, xiv). In his essay "Reconstructed but Unregenerate" John Crowe Ransom, one of the Southern Agrarians, writes, the farmer

identifies himself with a spot of ground, and this ground carries a good deal of meaning.... He would not till it too hurriedly and not too mechanically to observe in it the contingency and the infinitude of nature; and so his life acquires its philosophical and even its cosmic consciousness. (19-20)

While Ransom is referring specifically to agrarianism in America, the same could be said of Afrikaner farmers in South Africa who were dismayed by the changes to their way of life that had come about as the British began to control the distribution of farmlands and the number of British immigrants to the colony continued to increase. As an artifact of the time, the *plaasroman*, or Afrikaner farm novel, portrays life on South African farms during a similar timeframe. In *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, Coetzee asserts, the *plaasroman* "shifts black-white conflict out of sight into a forgotten past or an obscure future" (5-6). Similarly, Donaldson suggests that the goal of the Southern Agrarians, both through their common manifesto and collection of essays, was to bring into focus the idea of whiteness "in part by figuring regional agrarian tradition as white and male at every possible opportunity...and in part by reducing African Americans to near-invisibility and near-silence" (xvi). Most *plaasromane* ignore black labor altogether despite its prevalence in every part of the farming process. Many of the essays by the Southern Agrarians are candid in their defense of slavery; Ransom writes in reference to the antebellum South, "it was a kindly society, yet a realistic one...people were for the most part in their right places." And

about slavery: “more often than not...[it was] humane in practice” (14). In both the *plaastronan* and *I’ll Take My Stand* the tendency is to gloss over both the contributions to agricultural life made by blacks and to minimize the injustice they experienced on white-run farms during the glorious history they invoke.

Commenting more explicitly on the issue of race, Robert Penn Warren in “The Briar Patch” writes,

In the past the Southern negro has always been a creature of the small town and farm. That is where he still chiefly belongs, by temperament and capacity; there he has less the character of a ‘problem’ and more the status of a human being who is likely to find in agricultural and domestic pursuits the happiness that his good nature and easy ways incline him to as an ordinary function of his being. (260-261)

While Warren recognizes that there is a place for blacks in the new order, his description of their place in this order suggests that unless they accept this place and avoid challenging the boundaries set by their compatibility with the agrarian lifestyle, they may not achieve the “certain degree of happiness and independence on the land” that their current levels of education and training will allow (261). This idea is perhaps not as contemptuous of blacks as a whole as other Southern Agrarians, but it certainly does not reflect a liberal view. Warren asserts, “if the Southern white man feels that the agrarian life has a certain irreplaceable value in his society, and if he hopes to maintain its integrity in the face of industrialism or its dignity in the face of agricultural depression, he must find a place for the negro in his scheme” (263). He goes on to suggest that such a place must include education for blacks, and generally fair treatment of black laborers and farmers. This education and fair treatment, however,

need not result in genial integration; after all, he writes, “let the negro sit beneath his own vine and fig tree” (264), a statement that is often read as Warren’s comment on the idea that whites and blacks should coexist harmoniously, but in segregation. Warren, of course, recanted these views much later during the Civil Rights era of the 1950s.

Farm Novel or *Plaasroman*?

Whatever they are called – farm novels or *plaasromane* – one thing is clear: the relationship of the Afrikaner to the land is an undeniable feature of the novels that make up the genre and that are being examined here. That relationship drives nearly every other connection – from the history of expansion within the Cape Colony to the aggression between settlers and natives, Boers and British to the uneasy alliances between white farmers and non-white workers – within South African territory. Considering the connection between history, racial identity, land, and farming allows for a better understanding of the issues and concerns that shaped the colony, and doing so by examining literary works by three different female writers from discrete geographical areas affiliated with South Africa’s historical Cape Colony, yet separated by time allows for a more nuanced understanding of how life on South African and southern African farms should be read as both a microcosm of the local political environment as well as an attempt to create a place to live independently, away from government or social interference.

CHAPTER TWO:

THE FARM NOVEL: REPRESENTING LABOR, RACE, AND GENDER IN THE IMPERIAL WORLD

The Idea of a White African Genre

A project of this dissertation is to reconsider the concept of the *plaasroman* as it relates to South African literature in general and the farm novel specifically. The most prominent critic to discuss the *plaasroman* is South African novelist J. M. Coetzee. His critical work *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* begins with a brief overview of the *plaasroman* as genre. This introduction to the genre is important as it points out what has come to be considered a defining characteristic of the genre. In order to be a *plaasroman*, novels must be written in Afrikaans and belong to a tradition that reflects South Africa's "insular patriarchal culture of the Boer farm" (*White Writing* 63). This requirement is a result of Coetzee's understanding of the Afrikaner as one who existed in a space in which he "claim[ed] to be native" (174), but was not, leading to a type of narrative that Caren van Houwelingen suggests "specifically addressed, and attempted to justify this narrative of assumed belonging to the land" (95). The idea that

the Afrikaner claims nativity but is not native to the land is important to consider; the Afrikaner, like the Briton, has no stronger natal claim to “Africanness” except for coming first in the history of colonial settlement. Coetzee locates this claim of natural “bond between *volk* and *land*,” or connection between Afrikaners and South African soil, in early patriotic Afrikaans poetry (*White Writing* 61, original italics). The poetry of this time celebrates the spaciousness of the land available to Afrikaners and the landscape that allows them to pursue their dreams without fetters. In this respect, an interesting comparison can be drawn between the early literature of Afrikaners and the trope of expansion in the American West (Coetzee, *White Writing* 61-62). Thus, the *plaasroman* picks up on the theme of open spaces and makes explicit the connection between Afrikaner identity and the farm as a way of solidifying that relationship with the land.

In addition to reflecting the connection between Afrikaners and the land, *plaasromane* can also be read as a response to an emerging crisis in Afrikaner history generated by urbanization, which was considered a threat to the social order upon which Afrikaner traditions were founded. Thus, the *plaasroman* provided a conservative, retrospective concept of farm life as a “bastion of trusted feudal values” against an emerging new world order (*White Writing* 4). This interest in rural society and maintaining the farm as the center of life is reflected in many other South African and southern African novels, as are many other elements regarded by Coetzee as essential hallmarks of the genre. Novels focusing on the connection between Afrikaners – and their Boer ancestors – and the land demonstrates what historian

Clifton Crais, in “The Vacant Land: The Mythology of British Expansion in the Eastern Cape, South Africa,” refers to as the “complex and interlinked process of exploration, conquest and settlement” that European colonists used to create and communicate “critical social intelligence on the land and its peoples” (256). These conceptions became especially important as they would lay the groundwork for the archive of colonial history and for notions of race and the struggle between civilization and barbarism within the colonized space (Crais 256).

***Plaasroman*: Representing the Land in Literature**

Drawing on Coetzee’s work, other critics suggest that the *plaasroman* is both a useful way of considering Afrikaner South African history, as well as examining how the genre is simultaneously capable of and inadequate in accurately capturing the breadth of the experience of farm life in the region. In her analysis of Marlene Van Niekerk’s novel *Agaat*, often cited as an example of a modern *plaasroman*, Caren van Houwelingen writes, “I locate the roots of Afrikaner nationalism...within the *plaasroman*: a genre that conceptualiz[es] the ‘domesticated’ African landscape as a mythical Afrikaner ‘home’” (93). Like Coetzee, Van Houwelingen sees the *plaasroman* as being predicated on three major ideological assumptions. These are, in brief, a belief in patriarchal sovereignty, the white subject’s assumed ownership of the land, and marginalization of the non-white other, “who is rendered an extension of the landscape and denied his/her rightful ownership of the land” (Van Houwelingen 94). The *plaasroman* is, then, the Afrikaner’s attempt to justify the narrative of belonging to the

land, using the systemic racism of colonialism to reinforce, as Nicole Devarenne suggests, “colonial subjugation and white supremacist claims to Afrikaner ownership of the land” (627). The idea that Afrikaners possessed some special affinity to the land, however, is explicitly refuted by historical fact. Although both Afrikaners and South Africans of British descent clung to myth that white settlers began to appropriate South African land at the roughly same time as Bantu-speaking Africans entered the area – known as the “Vacant Land” myth, and long supported by the South African government as a way to rationalize white settlers’ land annexation and forceful defense of that land against black Africans – this idea has been disproved by archeological evidence, which proves that “agriculturalists occupied parts of what is now the Republic of South Africa no later than the fourth century A.D.” – well before any colonists arrived in the area (Crais 256-257). Thus, while the connection between van Houwelingen and Coetzee is important to note, van Houwelingen’s explicit criticism of the genre fosters the idea that due to the *plaasroman*’s strict constructs, it is not especially adept at portraying the varied circumstances of farming in postcolonial South Africa, Rhodesia, or Botswana.

Within the traditional *plaasroman*, the creation of the farm relies on the Afrikaner settler’s interaction with and relationship to the African land (Van Houwelingen 97). Being Afrikaner was defined by the practice of owning earth and cultivating it, using the plough to inscribe the land with Afrikaner identity, thereby leaving permanent marks that would stand as a “constant reminder of one’s culture and heritage” (Van Houwelingen 97). Here “owning earth” meant more than having proprietary rights to

it; “owning” it meant working it, cultivating it, domesticating and taming it. By taking land that had been previously untamed, Afrikaners made the land their own, colonizing it just as they would colonize the people that settled it. Further, as they cultivated an Afrikaner identity they erased existing connections between Africa and native Africans—black Africans--basically expunging these people from the record. Thus, most *plaasromane* ignore black Africans’ claims to the land, instead casting blacks in subservient roles when they are allowed to appear. In describing Marlene Van Niekerk’s novel *Agaat*, Van Houwelingen writes, “in revisiting the *plaasroman* [Van Niekerk] partially reinstates the politics of genre...in order to unveil the unspoken inconsistencies that saturate it” (104). Like Van Niekerk, Olive Schreiner, Doris Lessing, and Bessie Head’s works challenge the basic ideological assumptions of the genre to suggest that there are inconsistencies, and to assert that it is time for a more complex and nuanced understanding of South Africa’s farm novels.

Ellspeth Tulloch suggests, in “Husbandry, Agriculture and Ecocide,” that in addition to the *plaasroman*, the georgic can be a useful site for examining the relationship between the human community and the natural world (139). The genre, based on Virgil’s *Georgics*, a series of poems about agriculture, examines “agricultural things,” but is often characterized by tension between theme and purpose stemming from conflict between rural and urban concerns. Georgics are related to pastoral literature, and while pastoral literature tends to celebrate idyllic rural life, “the georgic mode deals with issues related to husbandry and agricultural knowledge expressed through the treatment of biological processes, observation and experimentation,

fertility, growth and their opposites, and natural disaster” (Tulloch 139). Considering the georgic and pastoral elements of the novels helps illustrate how the works by Schreiner, Lessing, and Head extend beyond the natural world of the farm. In other words, reading these novels as georgics in addition to considering their pastoral elements provides an opportunity to consider what Tulloch describes as “the pragmatic effects of agricultural labour,” something that transcends the concerns of the *plaasroman* genre. The novels, then, become studies of how human interaction with the land and the processes of growing food and livestock can be read as commentary on social and political forces.

Georgics and the Anti-Pastoral: New Representations of the Land

If *The Story of an African Farm*, *The Grass is Singing*, and *When Rain Clouds Gather* are read as georgics, it becomes necessary to consider how the environment is affected by human intervention, both by natives and by colonial farmers, and how the imperial enterprise complicates and becomes inseparable from a newly developing human ecosystem within these colonies (Tulloch 138). The land that was once used to raise flocks and farm for trading in order to feed native African tribes becomes the site of commerce farming among the colonists who see opportunities for profit. Examining the land and the relationships between farmers, their workers, livestock, and the products of agricultural enterprise shows both the constructive and destructive relations that humans create and reconstitute as they try to change these interactions in ways that allow for increased success in whatever farming or husbandry projects they attempt.

Thus, these novels should be considered from an anti-pastoral perspective as well; analyzing how they eschew pastoral literary themes and conventions in favor of less idyllic applications provides for a reading that encompasses a more realistic world view.

In “Landscape and the Anti-pastoral Critique in Doris Lessing’s *African Stories*,” Pat Louw examines how the African landscape contributes to readings of *GIS* that are at once pastoral and anti-pastoral. Although he focuses on Lessing, Louw’s work is useful in developing a new mode for considering how all three authors go beyond the concerns of the *plaasroman* and touch on issues that novels within that genre typically ignore. Louw suggests that it is perhaps more fruitful to examine these novels as examples of the georgic tradition, since they question notions of the pastoral, focusing instead on the intricacies of agricultural life and the struggles of maintaining control over the land. In creating a space for considering these challenges, their farm novels, more so than the *plaasroman*, are at once more politically charged, historically accurate, and more inclusive.

To create this space, Pat Louw contends that Lessing’s work addresses both the pastoral and the anti-pastoral in her work. “Although anti-pastoral elements such as racism and sexism are evident...they are counter-balanced by instances where the African landscape supports a space of resistance for marginalized groups” (36). It is within this “space of resistance” that their farm novels allow Lessing, Schreiner, and Head to reconsider and deconstruct a genre that previously excluded them. While, as Coetzee explains, their works might not fit the traditional definition of the *plaasroman*,

reading their works in terms of the georgic, the pastoral, and the anti-pastoral modes contributes to the creation of a more inclusive space. To interrogate this space, however, it is necessary to first understand how Louw defines the pastoral in comparison to the anti-pastoral, which can then provide insight into how these concepts relate to the georgic.

The classical pastoral is based on the songs of shepherds and cowherds in rural areas during the time of the Greeks. A second version of the pastoral refers to literature that describes the country with a contrast to the urban, whether implicit or explicit. Louw explains, “thus, in Lessing’s narratives, the first generation settlers arrive in Africa in search of the colonial pastoral: the land of plenty, where they are to make their fortunes” (37). In contrast, the anti-pastoral can be seen as a way of correcting the idealized view of the pastoral. “The anti-pastoral mode is particularly suited to postcolonial literature as it subverts the imperialistic values on which colonialism is based. It exposes the ugly reality of dispossessed indigenous people hidden by the Edenic pastoral idyll” (Louw 37), and it is this situation that the farm novel, as opposed to the *plaasroman*, seeks to remedy. In addition to the anti-pastoral, Louw’s article mentions the concept of the post-pastoral, a term often used when describing ecopoetry. This idea, Louw notes, can be useful for considering works related to a pastoral or anti-pastoral framework as a way of invoking an ecocritical approach, and “an attitude which gives more value to nature itself rather than focusing on the human interaction taking place against the background of a rural or urban setting” (37). Combining this post-pastoral with the anti-pastoral and pastoral enables an analysis of farm literature

that looks at the value of the land in contrast to an urban setting, while still considering how the pastoral works to hide the real experiences of the natives displaced by the farming practices and concomitant racism of colonialism. Further, by invoking a post-pastoral approach, farm novels become ecocritical, assigning increased importance to the experiences of the natural world rather than to the ways that these experiences influence and affect the humans living within that world.

Representing the Real: Beyond the *Plaasroman*

Representing the real experiences of farm life in postcolonial South Africa, Botswana, and Zimbabwe (Rhodesia) is an important project of the farm novel. Unlike the *plaasroman*, which focuses on the experience of Afrikaners and their connection to the land, farm novels can be simultaneously pastoral, anti-pastoral, post-pastoral, and georgic in their perception and presentation of the farming enterprise. Because the factors that allowed Afrikaner farming to develop as it did (namely the monopoly held by the VOC, few Boer farmers to work the land during the original stages of colonial settlement, and well-established borders between colonials and natives, allowing for peaceful farming opportunities) began to change, the nature of farm life and farming processes began to change as well. James Leyburn explains, “so long as the few Boers could spread out over the vast veld and rest contented with a fairly primitive pastoral existence, their limited standard of living could be satisfied by what nature offered” (133). The influx of Britons and concomitant increase in desire for land caused farming resources to become scarce, and South African agriculture to experience a decline

(Leyburn 133). This change in climate is reflected by the farm novels of Schreiner, Lessing, and Head, whose works illustrate these concerns and comment on the issues of race and gender that *plassromane* overlook. Although of the three novels only Schreiner's is specifically South African, the proximity of Rhodesia and Botswana to South Africa, and their parallel histories as British territories under the colonial system make it useful to establish connections and draw comparisons between conditions in the three areas. There are, of course, differences that must be noted that affect both farming practices and social interaction, but these points will be addressed more distinctly when each novel is considered independently.

The issues of race, gender, and labor that farm novels represent and attempt to clarify are precisely those concerns raised by Leyburn in his article. For while he addresses many of the problems associated with farming in postcolonial South Africa, he presents them in a way that maintains the fantasy of the pastoral ideal as presented in the *plaasroman*. In his discussion of labor systems, Leyburn explains, "there is no intention to blame the farmer for the conditions of his laborers. He merely follows the use and wont in what he does. He is caught in the whirl of economic developments beyond his powers of comprehension, and is a prey to price shifts, nationalist propaganda, desire for a better life, longing for a return to the familiar ways of his parents" (135). Leyburn continues by pointing out that white farmers are justified in their supervisory and remunerative practices; he contends that native workers often attempt to shirk their duties by cutting the workday short, and suggests that considering the wages paid out to farm workers only tells part of the story – the farmer,

in “reckoning wages paid, always includes wages in kind and the privileges allowed his workers” (135-136). These comments reflect a lack of understanding of the true conditions experienced by native workers, and are useful when read in contrast to the depictions of farm life presented by Schreiner, Lessing, and Head.

The question of gender is a particularly interesting one that must be considered – especially given the reticence of many postcolonial farm novels to comment on the role of female workers in the farming enterprise. Each of the authors considered in this dissertation portray female labor differently, using women’s presence, absence, and participation in farming life to suggest that existing literary paradigms are not sufficient for giving voice to all Africans in southern Africa under the racism of apartheid and postcolonial rule. In her chapter “Race, Sex, and Domestic Labor: The Question of African Female Servants in Southern Rhodesia, 1900-1939,” Elizabeth Schmidt examines the role of black African women in domestic service in postcolonial Rhodesia. Her focus on Rhodesia as a locale makes her analysis especially useful for considering the issues confronting Lessing’s Mary Turner as a farm owner, overseer, and white woman, but many of the concerns that Schmidt addresses were equally problematic elsewhere in southern Africa.

Production and Domesticity: Capitalism after Imperialism and the “Perils”

In pre-colonial Africa, Schmidt explains, black African men and women generally had to engage in “productive activities,” or enterprises meant to provide additional income, outside of the home in order to ensure the family would survive.

Although women were usually responsible for food preparation and child rearing, and men participated in governance and other community matters, “the distinction between the domestic and the social in African society was more political than economic” (Schmidt 221). The European notion of domesticity – where men were considered the primary providers and women the “reproducers of the labor force” – was imposed as part of the colonial construct (Schmidt 222). Under the colonial system in Africa, domestic life was influenced by race and class, and of course, by gender. Although many of the tasks usually assigned to the female sphere – cooking, child-rearing, cleaning, for example – were already being done by native African women, the idea of women staying at home to carry out these activities while men worked outside of the home to earn money “was an imported ideology rather than an indigenous cultural concept” (Schmidt 222); thus, indoctrinating native African women into this culture became part of the colonial project. While boys were taught skills that would enable them to participate in European-style wage-based economy, girls learned how to “keep house and to raise healthy, disciplined children in modified European fashion” (Schmidt 222). As a result of training women to stay at home to keep house, native African men were able to engage in paid labor outside of the home, leading to the development of colonial capitalism in Southern Rhodesia, and elsewhere in the southern African colonies (Schmidt 222).

Creating an environment of colonial capitalism in southern Africa was essential for helping to establish and maintain the concepts of “black peril” and “yellow peril.” Traditional European notions of domesticity, upon which colonial society was built,

specified that cooking, cleaning, keeping house, and caring for children were quintessential women's tasks, but having native African women take on these responsibilities as live-in servants within white households elicited fear in colonial women that these native African women, with their overt sexuality, would provide excessive temptation for white men. Thus, Schmidt explains, "the European ideal of women at home and men engaged in wage labor work in the wider society, buttressed by European women's fear of African women's sexuality, took precedence over the gender-specific nature of the tasks." Consequently, colonial women preferred to have native African men enter their sphere as domestic servants, keeping native African women far away from their easily seduced husbands, and controlling the fear of "yellow peril," the idea that sex between white men and native African women would lead to miscegenation (Schmidt 234). On the other side was the notion of "black peril," the belief that native black African men were unable to control their sexual desires, and that white women were the objects of this violent lust (Schmidt 233). The stereotypes of native African behavior helped justify the treatment of black African workers by white colonial employers, but, as Dane Kennedy notes in *Islands of White: Settler Society and Culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1939*, accusations of sexual indecency against native African men served to "instruct and remind white settlers of their common needs and their common fears" (145-146). In other words, "the specter of black peril" was useful in refocusing white settlers' concerns on an easily recognizable enemy: major black peril scares often coincided with periods of economic depression, leading to

lower wages and competition between white settlers and native Africans for the same pool of jobs (Schmidt 233).

Beyond using the fear of “black peril” as a means to unite white settlers against a common foe, Rhodesian women, members of the Rhodesian Women’s League, or RWL, used the concern as guise for advancing their own political agenda. According to Jock McCulloch, in *Black Peril, White Virtue: Sexual Crime in Southern Rhodesia, 1902*, “most of the issues about which women were vocal related to Black Peril ideology and associations such as the RWL exploited the panics as a means to create a political space within which they could maneuver” (87). As the potential victims of “black peril,” white women capitalized on fears about their perceived vulnerability in order to gain entrée into the political arena that would have otherwise dismissed them (McCulloch 87). Despite this, white women in Rhodesia were considered to be both sexually repressed and irresistible to native African men. The bifurcated identity meant that white women needed to be protected from African men, yet could not be counted on to provide the sexual satisfaction needed by white colonists; thus, white men could not help but seek out sexual liaisons with native African women who were far more likely to satiate men’s desires (McCulloch 88-89). This focus on women’s sexuality made it almost impossible for women to participate in rational discussions about social practices – unless those practices could somehow be tied back to concerns about how women might become victims of native African men’s unrelenting sexual advances. Even then, white women’s roles in society reflected their status as “subordinate members of a ruling class” (McCulloch 89). As subservient members of the ruling class,

women had more power than native African men and women; however in practice native Africans were uncomfortable dealing with white women, a fact that made it difficult for women to assert any authority outside of the domestic sphere, even when the situation at home made it necessary for them to do so.

The Nature of the Beast: Black/White Interactions on the Farm

Although the relationship between farm employer and employee required a shared concern for the success of the farming enterprise in order to ensure that crops and livestock would survive, interactions between native African workers and white farmers were often fraught with instability and precariousness. This uncertainty was the result of distrust on both sides. White farmers often believed their workers were purposefully lazy and did inferior work intentionally. Their only recourse, these employers believed, was to instill a sense of fear in their employees. Unlike Olive Schreiner, whose works highlight the abuses native Africans experienced at the hands of their white employers, many white settlers defended the actions of early imperialist farmers. Ethel Tawse Jollie, for example, the first woman elected to the legislative assembly in the British Dominions (Rhodesia), defended local farmers' treatment of workers, explaining that because these settlers had not been given any support by Britain or by the British South Africa Company (BSAC), they had to create their own form of justice to keep order (qtd. in McCulloch 87). Additionally, Schmidt suggests that it is worth considering that African workers used subpar work and laziness as a form of resistance to a system they could not change (Schmidt 232), in addition to

signaling dissatisfaction with their treatment by farm overseers and the low wages. Bart Moore-Gilbert, in “Olive Schreiner’s Story of an African Farm: Reconciling Feminism and Anti-Imperialism?,” uses the example of Schreiner’s description of the “lazy farm boys” response to farm overseer Otto in *The Story of an African Farm* to “recode the myth of the ‘lazy native’ as a form of resistance,” anticipating the work of subaltern studies in many ways (97).

While the *plaasroman* as a genre focuses on glorifying the experiences of Afrikaner farm-life, often hiding the reality of the situation and concentrating on the connection between white settlers and the land to the point that native black Africans and their claims to Africa are elided from history, the works of Olive Schreiner, Doris Lessing, and Bessie Head recreate these relationships, showing to various degrees how white settlers’ relationships to the land and to their workers affect notions of labor, race, and gender among native Africans. Further, these novels show how the imposition of European labor systems furthers the exploitation they endure under the postcolonial system. Relationships in the farm novel introduce, represent, and discuss issues relating to gender, race, and, perhaps most importantly, labor. As microcosms of the society at large—one in which white colonists control the wealth and dole it out to workers who have few other options other than to accept the paltry wages offered them in order to subsist—the farms in Schreiner’s and Lessing’s works reflect the belief systems and practices at work during the time of their production.

A Marxist interpretation of these works suggests that everything is influenced by the politics of class relations, and everything produced by the cultures described in the

novels is affected by class struggle—even the production of literature, which is both informed by class struggle and representative of the concerns and desire for change that members of society believe would be beneficial to those silenced or abused by the cultural apparatuses in power. Thus, using a Marxist approach to interpreting the works of Schreiner and Lessing—and even Head, whose novel considers labor and production from a more communal perspective—allows for a consideration of the material conditions that affect life on South African and southern African farms. These conditions are the result of colonialism and imperialist practices toward native Africans, as well as the subjugation of women in patriarchal society.

Friedrich Engels, in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, examines the effect that the shift from feudalism to private ownership of land has had on the role of women in society. Under the private ownership system, he argues, women, as well as any other individuals that do not own land or other types of means of production, are no better than slaves to landowners or individuals that control another means of production; for example, a factory, a mining operation, or a farm. This is because women and other non-land-owners must utilize their labor power so that they can survive within the system of private ownership.

Engels argues that the subordination of women has nothing to do with biology, but is based on labor power and ownership. He suggests that the nuclear family unit, in which a woman's labor, sexual reproduction, and sexuality are all controlled by her male partner, her brother, or by her father, has allowed for the regulation and subjugation of women. In this way, gender oppression is linked to class oppression,

creating a parallel between gender relations and the tension between proletariat and bourgeoisie. Engels explains, “the modern individual family is based on the overt or covert domestic slavery of the woman” which gives the man the ability to dominate the women in his family and casts him as the bourgeois while the women represent the proletariat (89). The nuclear family, then, relegates women to the private sphere, so that they, like slaves, cannot participate in activities in public life, which Engels calls “the sphere of life of the free citizen” (92). Equality for women, Engels asserts, can only occur when women are “reintroduced” into public industry, allowing them to abandon the private sphere to which they were assigned as part of the family unit.

Reconsidering the Public and the Private: A Place for Agency?

In her work *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba also differentiates between a public and a private sphere, suggesting that women have agency only in the private (domestic) sphere of family. Loomba uses the domestic sphere as a metaphor for the nation as well as an example of a private realm in which women could use their agency for subversive action against the public sphere (181-182). She argues that the violent nature of colonialism – illustrated specifically by the practice of forcing black colonial subjects into slavery, or even by compelling them to work on white farms by limiting other forms of employment – made the family a site of resistance (182). In other words, by avoiding the enforced participation in the colonial project – in slavery, as Loomba suggests, or in compulsory schooling at remote boarding schools, or by abstaining from accepting employment on white farms, or even by performing work considered inferior

when employed by white farmers – the family, and therefore, the woman (as de facto head of the private sphere) resisted acknowledging and accepting colonial power.

At the same time, though, Loomba maintains that while the family is a site of resistance, women themselves cannot hold on to their agency. Even as they resist colonial power, Loomba writes, mothers are “ravaged by colonialism” and in need of their sons’ protection. The reason for this, Elizabeth Schmidt explains, is because despite women’s agency within the family, “the practice of ‘emancipating’ African women threatened to undermine African male power, and consequently the entire system of chiefly authority” (223). Thus, the idea of the private sphere simultaneously provided agency and undercut female power, leaving women at the mercy of men (Loomba 182). Dane Kennedy adds, “one might expect the pervasive concern about black peril to have caused colonists to employ African women for domestic functions, while keeping their men as far away from the domain of the white women as possible” (140). The reverse was actually true; native African men were hesitant to allow their wives/sisters/daughters to work on white farms because of their value within native households, and also because they feared that white men would take advantage of their women sexually. As a result, native African men made up the majority of the domestic servants in white homes, but white settlers took action to lessen the potential threat posed to white women by their presence in the household. These actions included making sure white women were trained in using a gun, advising women to refrain from participating in certain activities unless males were present, and minimizing the sexual potency of native African men by referring to them as “boy” as a way to “deny the

masculinity of these individuals” working in an occupation that was already considered feminine (Kennedy 140).

Although Loomba proposes that native African women’s power was affected by the decisions of native African men, in practice African women were vulnerable to African men, white men, and, to some extent, white women. Their domestic situation was controlled by African men – whether fathers, brothers, or husbands. At the same time, outside of the home their work lives were influenced by whether their white male employers chose to engage in sexual relations with them and then by how these employers treated them and any offspring resulting from their liaisons; and they were susceptible to mistreatment by white female employers who were concerned about their husbands’ ability to stay away from what they believed was “the secret object of white men’s sexual desires” (Schmidt 224). Thus, even when they did gain employment in white households, native African women did not enjoy the agency that usually accompanies wage earning. In fact, as native women began to gain employment as domestics in greater numbers, native African men began to share in white settlers’ concerns about the outcome of native African women’s labor power. While there was some concern about these women’s potential mistreatment by white employers, their deepest fear was “loss of control, the threat posed by female employment to their authority as patriarchs, since even a small degree of economic independence would remove young girls from their fathers’ sphere of authority” and from their management of women’s labor power (Schmidt 228). Further, if their daughters were raped by white men, or if they entered into non-sanctioned liaisons with men of their own choosing, the

“bridewealth” a man might expect would be severely reduced, as might their worth to the family in terms of continuity of lineage (Schmidt 228-229).

Discussing the place of women in the labor force, Margaret Benston asserts that they are a “group of people...responsible for the production of simple use-values in those activities associated with the home and family” (233). This description can be applied to all women in the farm novels of southern Africa; both the white women in charge of the farms and the black women who do the actual work are still defined primarily by the value that they produce in the domestic sphere. Benston goes on to explain that women are not necessarily excluded from commodity production, but that their participation in wage labor is generally temporary and the result of circumstances that make it necessary for them to do such work. Benston presents several situations where such participation might be necessary; for example, a woman’s husband could be unable to work due to absence or illness, requiring her to join the labor force, or she might be single or widowed, making her responsible for providing for herself or her family (233). These circumstances are represented in the novels of Schreiner, Lessing, and Head, where women are forced to engage in wage labor for a variety of reasons including widowhood and protracted spousal illness.

Women on the Farm

Although Schreiner and Lessing depict the participation of women in the farming enterprise, it was not considered an appropriate area for females. White women were usually relegated to overseeing the domestic concerns – making sure the

home was well stocked, supervising domestic servants, and ensuring that family and home were maintained. Native black women, on the other hand, might have been employed as domestic servants, but concerns about miscegenation made this unlikely. Outside of domestic service, native African women would engage in whatever employment was available in order to provide for their families, and the stigma against participating in the farming process did not exist. In fact, in many native families, women grew crops while men tended to the livestock or worked at a larger farm, performing manual labor or as domestics. Thus, the majority of servants and farm-hands on South African, Rhodesian, and Botswanan farms were native African men who had no other options and could not afford to turn down even the low wages offered to them by white farmers.

As a result, the true wealth of postcolonial Africa and the only real assurance of financial stability, Dane Kennedy notes, was the availability of native Africans to perform the duties necessary to keep white enterprises going. "Africans cultivated Europeans' fields, herded their livestock, harvested their crops, worked their mines, nurtured their gardens, swept their floors, cooked their meals" (Kennedy 148). The nature of these duties kept native Africans and whites in close proximity to one another, and despite the fact that whites might prefer to maintain distance from their black employees, the fact that they depended on these workers to keep their farms going meant that in reality they could not preserve the separation between themselves and their native black labor force that they might prefer without "discarding the material benefits of cheap labor" (Kennedy 148). What developed were highly stratified societies

that recognized and sustained racial, ethnic, cultural, and gender differences, using rules and regulations to govern the type of interactions that were acceptable between stratifications, and even among members of the same group (Kennedy 149). For example, Kennedy explains, to keep native Africans from gaining too much freedom given their importance to the farming industry, limitations were placed on where they could live, where and when they could work, and their movement within the country (149-151). Workers on southern African farms were often sold to farmers by gangs of white men who used both promises of favorable employment conditions and the threat of violence to press native Africans into service. These men were then sold to farmers for a one-year contract, meaning that should they attempt to escape, they could be recovered by the authorities and required to return to service to fulfill their contracts with the farm (Lessing, *GIS*, 127). While many of the restrictions placed on native Africans by their white employers were designed to safeguard white business interests, many were established to erect and maintain the social stratifications that whites needed to make sure that their black employees knew their place. This sort of thinking created a “psychological substitute for the physical separation of the races” that whites could not maintain given their reliance on native African labor (Kennedy 154).

The farms in Schreiner’s and Lessing’s novels reproduce many of the characteristics Kennedy describes. Because the farms in both novels are overseen by women, and are therefore considered both less secure business enterprises and less stable communities by fellow farmers and by native African employees, the female characters in charge of each farm – Tant’ Sannie and Mary Turner – are depicted as even

more driven to succeed and harsher in their demeanor than their male counterparts. In *The Grass is Singing*, Mary Turner, who takes over the family farm when her husband Dick suffers from a variety of non-specific ailments, is considered an intrusion when she asserts her authority over the farm workers. Her initial foray into overseeing her employees begins when she demands that they return to work when it is clear they have been enjoying an extended period of rest. "'Get the boys on to the lands in ten minutes,'" she commands (Lessing 123). In response the headboy challenges her authority and asks whether "the boss" – her husband – is better and therefore able to resume his duties as overseer. The tension between Mary and her employees who are loath to accept her as their supervisor illustrates the hesitance that native African workers had in recognizing the agency of white women outside of the domestic sphere. Even her husband Dick, who has no choice but to support her in the position given his poor health, is uneasy with the turn of events. Lessing writes, "he did not like to think of Mary close to those natives all day; it was not a woman's job" (125). To assert herself among the workers, Mary pushes them harder than usual and withholds a percentage of their wages as punishment for what she perceives as their insubordination. Similarly, in Olive Schreiner's novel *The Story of an African Farm*, Tant' Sannie, the overbearing mistress of the farm, is described as being cruel to those under her. Otto, the farm's overseer, when recounting the situation of an employee who has recently given birth, says, "'she has a child six days old, and Tant' Sannie would turn her out into the fields this night. ... that is what I call cruelty – diabolical cruelty'" (97). Later, she turns on her white employees as well, demanding that Otto leave the farm immediately without any

provisions. The language she uses to chastise her old white overseer mirrors the tone and content she deploys when berating her native African servants, suggesting that in order to maintain her position of authority, Tant' Sannie believes she must be inflexible when dealing with perceived infractions. "'Oh, you miserable rag....my Kaffers will drag you through the sand...when the morning star rises, and I will let my Kaffers take you out and drag you, till there is not one bone left in your old body that is not broken as fine as bobootie-meat, you old beggar,'" she threatens Otto when she is convinced that he has stolen from her (Schreiner 105-106). That her punishment includes allowing her "Kaffers," or native black employees, to administer the penalty is indicative of her great degree of anger, as well as her need to reinforce her position as head of the enterprise; as Kennedy explains, boundaries between races were carefully maintained at all times to guard against any potential lapses in preserving the servant-master relationship upon which all farm labor was predicated.

CHAPTER THREE:

THE STORY OF AN AFRICAN FARM: NASCENT ANTI-COLONIALISM, FEMINISM, AND ANTI-RACISM ON THE KAROO

Introduction to the Novel

Published in 1883, Olive Schreiner's novel *The Story of an African Farm* was both a critical and commercial success in England and the United States. In her afterward to an updated edition of the novel, Doris Lessing comments, "when one has done with the 'plot' and the characters, this is what remains: an endeavor, a kind of hunger, that passionate desire for growth and understanding, which is the deepest pulse of human beings ("Afterward" 100). Lessing's observation suggests that the novel is less a story and more an opportunity for Schreiner to explore the elements of South African life that trouble her, that she believes need attention and scrutiny to offer commentary on the condition of life on her African farm. At the same time that Schreiner's characters show insight into the issues of race, colonialism, and class, she has been faulted by many of her critics "because the central concern in her writings is always the plight of women

oppressed within capitalist, patriarchal society – and in particular within the colonial structures spawned by imperialism” (“SAF Note” iii). Further, she has been criticized for avoiding how racism and imperialism affected everyday life, choosing to focus instead on issues affecting women’s rights (“SAF Note” vii). While there is merit to this criticism of *SAF*, it is important to consider that even if its discussion of feminist issues is complex and somewhat obscure; examining how each character functions and analyzing the farm setting itself as a microcosm for emerging issues of racism, racial interaction, and labor and gender relations shows that while Schreiner might not have been especially open in her discussion of these ideas, her novel does anticipate these matters.

Like Lessing, Schreiner biographer and critic Cherry Clayton, in her assessment of *SAF*, notes, “the novel is called *The Story of an African Farm*, as though it is the farm that speaks” (56). The novel, although unusual in its structure in that it is not linear in its narrative, and in that it does not follow one protagonist through a conflict, denouement, and resolution, focuses on the experiences of several characters that are bound together by their relationship to the “African Farm” of the title. And although analysis of several of the characters yields useful results, they are all bound to the farm and to farm life, suggesting that they are symbolic of different types of people making up early postcolonial and pre-apartheid South African and southern African society – and anticipating issues that would emerge as these characters continued on their trajectories within a rapidly shifting colonial order. The idea of working the land as a means to establish self-sufficiency, self-determination, and to reify the importance of

pre-industrial labor evoke the world of the early Boer farmer as portrayed in the *plaasroman*; however, as Laura Chrisman notes, “for Schreiner this version of the pastoral is available only as history; it is romanticized and subjected to a nostalgic treatment ...as part of an irreversible earlier stage of social development” (51). Unlike the *plaasromane* of the previous generations, Schreiner’s novel is not concerned with recreating and reinforcing the connection between the people and the land. While the Boers focus on their rights to the land stemming from their historical connection as colonialists, *SAF* appeals to this past only as an ongoing process of development and nostalgic remembrance of times past.

Christopher Heywood contends that in *SAF*, Schreiner “ventured further than any other novelist writing in English since Hawthorne into the forbidden subjects of her age: childbirth, seduction, the intellectual freedom of women, the cruelty of the settlers’ conduct...” (47), all of which coalesce to comment on the conditions of women and native Africans. Further, in “Literature and History in South Africa” Stephen Clingman suggests that the importance of a work like *SAF* is in its ability to provide readers with a “specific kind of historical evidence” (107). This evidence, historiographic in nature, offers insights into the notions of identity, definitions of self and other, understandings of past, present, and future, and – perhaps most importantly – examines “problematic areas of social life facing such classes and communities” (Clingman 108).

The Farm as Microcosm: Finding a Place for *SAF*

Although he comes at it from a somewhat different perspective, Mark Sanders in *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*, makes many of the same comparisons as Stephen Clingman using several of the same literary works. In his discussion of *SAF*, Sanders asserts that Schreiner's work displays a sense of the connectedness of the human experience as a way of "avoiding complicity in the deepening social fissure that would, once the colonial era drew to a close, coalesce into apartheid" (21). Schreiner's novel, then, offers a unique representation of the intricate social relationships at play during her time, and if she is not entirely successful addressing all the issues modern readers expect, her work is perhaps better read as a chronicle of the concerns — established and emerging — that she was grappling with at the time she wrote the novel.

Although elements of *SAF* fit into the postcolonial category because it is focused on the issues surrounding indigenous people that have been colonized, the inclusion of the novel in the category is somewhat uneasy. Most critics categorize works by Schreiner as examples of "literature of empire," even though she is quite obviously anti-imperialist. Abdul JanMohamed, in "The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature," writes that colonial literature is "an exploration and a representation of a world at the boundaries of 'civilization,' a world that has not (yet) been domesticated by European signification or codified in detail by its ideology. That world is therefore perceived as uncontrollable, chaotic, unattainable, and ultimately evil" (64). Schreiner's farm sits at this boundary. Its actual location relative to any city is never made clear, and much is made by Schreiner of its

proximity to ancient “Bushman paintings” depicting “grotesque oxen, elephants, rhinoceroses, and a one-horned beast, such as no man has seen or ever shall” (Schreiner 9). That the farm is so close to these paintings suggests that it is distant from any urban center; thus, it is at the boundaries of civilization and has not yet been domesticated by the colonial power.

In “Stories of African Farms and the Politics of Landscape,” Simon Lewis explores the role of geography and setting in the inventions of the roles that the farm plays in helping to determine the ways that white land ownership works in Africa relevant to its natural productivity (83). To discuss this issue he considers the literary works of Olive Schreiner and Isak Dinesen specifically, but also examines the role of European representation of nature and landscape in determining the place of the farm. He does this to address one central question: “how is it possible for someone of European origin to write of a farm that is *in* Africa but geared to European economic systems without at least some form of cultural imperialism” (Lewis 84, original italics). He concludes that even if the writer in question develops a landscape that is “resistant to imperial eyes” the representation created is likely to result in complicated consequences that are not necessarily emancipatory in nature (Lewis 84) – perhaps even despite that author’s desire to be subversive.

Schreiner’s representation of the farm relies on an understanding of the land as “uncontested and uncontestable entities, as if [it] really were [a farm] in a sense familiar to European readers,” an idea that Lewis suggests requires questions of Schreiner’s “complicity with a colonialist power” (87). The African farm of the novel was carved

out of lands stolen from native Africans. Although white settlers and South African nationals as recently as the 20th century used the “Vacant Land” myth to defend their annexation of lands held by tribes whose names they did not even know, and often could not pronounce, the truth is that most white farms created out of the Cape Colony and South African landscape – according to Clayton C. Crais – were done so by appropriating land that rightly belonged to native Africans, thereby calling into question the very nature of what farming the colony meant; even to Schreiner, who was, Lewis asserts, concerned about these issues, leading to a new question: “given the ideological baggage of...Victorian culture, and pastoral tradition, is it possible to write an African landscape that *resists* imperialist ideology?” (Lewis 88, original emphasis). Following up on this question, Deborah Shapple Spillman argues that Schreiner’s work includes both a critique of British imperialism that exposes her frustration with the ways that colonialism exploited the land and those who worked it – native Africans and white colonists alike – and a stance that is informed by her “sense of identity as a native-born South African and staunch advocate of a future postcolonial independence,” which, Spillman maintains, reflects her ambivalence (177). *SAF*, then, despite its failings, tries to challenge imperialist ideology – even though it is perhaps not entirely successful.

Edward Saïd’s *Culture and Imperialism* attempts to explain “a more general pattern of relationships between the modern metropolitan West and its overseas territories” (xi); this work, which builds on his concept of orientalism, can be helpful in considering the relationship between Schreiner as a Western writer and as an English

settler within a country with Boer history – as a colonizer and as a colonial subject; and as a victim of “the betrayals of colonial domesticity” (McClintock 264) within which her status was always subjugated to white male power. In this way, *SAF* explores the role of the colonizer, the colonized, and the imperial subject, categories with which she was intimately familiar, and always attempting to synthesize.

***SAF*: Feminist and Anti-Imperialist**

The majority of the critical work on *SAF* concerns the novel as an example of feminist literature. Scholars writing about the novel usually agree that it is, as Bart Moore-Gilbert contends in “Olive Schreiner’s *Story of an African Farm*: Reconciling Feminism and Anti-Imperialism?,” “a major, if not the first, example of a distinctly modern feminist literature” (88). At the same time, however, Moore-Gilbert notes that acceptance of the novel as an early example of the women’s movement was not without its detractors; most of the reluctance centered on the novel’s (and its advocates’) perceived “unwillingness to address the racial politics of the novel in any detail” (88) – politics that are present in the novel, I believe, but that are not given the full treatment considering the novel’s locale and temporal setting. Moore-Gilbert and other critics have reason to find fault with Schreiner, but, as Clingman asserts, *SAF* revolves very clearly around the question of “who belongs in South Africa, and who does not” (112). In addition to addressing the question of who belongs in South Africa, the novel is also, according to Clayton, “a complex meditation on what it means to ‘have the power,’ on what is done with power, on how it is used and abused, and on different kinds of

power: political, intellectual, imaginative” (49). Thus, looking at *SAF* more closely reveals that while Schreiner does not address the racial issues of her time in the open manner her critics might prefer, there is much to be gathered on the subject from her representations of life on the farm.

Beyond the *Plaasroman*: The English Farm Novel

Having considered the importance of the *plaasroman* to South African fiction, and of the concept and reality of land to the development of that genre, it is important now to think about how non-Boer authors interact with and portray their relationship to the African soil. Outside of urban settings, the land was immensely important, not only as a means of economic support, but as a means of providing a sense of belonging in a foreign land. In “The Farm: A Concept in the Writing of Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith, Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer and Bessie Head,” Jean Marquard asserts, “the white settler in Africa is intensely conscious not only of his historical situation...but also of his relation to space, the land itself, seen as something to be structured, conquered or possessed” (293). By “structuring,” or working, the land, then, the settler acquires a sense of belonging to it, and derives a sense of attachment that he might not otherwise (Marquard 293). At the same time, themes like alienation, estrangement, and displacement – all of which are present in *SAF* – reflect white settlers’ insecurity with respect to their rights to own and govern the land they have settled; thus, their actions are ongoing attempts to affirm and reaffirm their rights (Marquard 293). The farm at the center of *SAF*, for example, is Tant’ Sannie’s attempt to reinscribe both her right to the

land, and her right to belong to South African history. Schreiner makes the point early on that Tant' Sannie is a Boer, as opposed to Em and Lyndall, who are English, and Waldo and Otto, who are German. Tant' Sannie's status as Boer is a point of pride for her as she is part of the original group to settle South Africa, giving her a special place in the history of South African colonialism, and because she hates the English (Schreiner 16), a sentiment based on her ethnic background, the historical relationship between the Boers and Britons, and her experience with her deceased husband, who was British.

As master of the farm in her dead husband's absence, Tant' Sannie is both supreme ruler of the farm, making decisions about the way the enterprise is run, who remains employed, how punishment is meted out, and so forth, and an example of girlishness gone to the extreme. Because she is a widow without an heir, Tant' Sannie is on a mission to find a new husband. Every man that visits the farm is a potential husband, even if his age makes him unsuitable, or he expresses interest in one of the other women in residence. Despite her initial dislike of Bonaparte Blenkins, for instance, a visitor to the farm whom Sannie calls a "tramp," and insults because he appears impoverished, walking instead of riding a horse (Schreiner 15), once he cleans himself up and trades his rags for Otto's black suit and spotless white shirt she sees him as a possible match; "she wished she hadn't called him a thief and a Roman Catholic. She hoped the German hadn't told him. ... There was no doubt he was a very respectable man, a gentleman" (Schreiner 31). No longer anathema to her, and suddenly a possible marriage match, Sannie's attitude toward Blenkins changes: "'he's a God-fearing man, and one who knows how to behave himself....If he is ugly, did not the Lord make

him?...It is better to be ugly and good than pretty and bad..." (Schreiner 35). Instead of pointing out his faults, Tant' Sannie begins to rationalize her criticisms of Bonaparte Blenkins in order to convince herself that he might be a good match for her. Tant' Sannie's ongoing search for a husband – a project that has not been successful since the death of Em's father – represents her attempt to appropriate for herself not only a male role in society and on the farm, but, as Luce Irigaray suggests in "The Sex which is Not One," a male sexual organ. This is significant because Sannie's search for a husband is sublimated into the actions she takes as owner and supervisor of the farm; "she attempts by every means possible to appropriate that organ [the male organ] for herself": through her search for a husband and desire for a child (preferably male), and "through access to the cultural values still reserved by right to males alone and therefore still always masculine..." (94). Thus, descriptions of Sannie focus on her love of food and her large body. She is, as Susan R. Horton asserts in *Difficult Women, Artful Lives: Olive Schreiner and Isak Dinesen, In and Out of Africa*, "grotesquely unmaternal – though very sexual" (79), a fact that aligns with an understanding of her as in pursuit of the rights and privileges reserved for males, and only available to her through marriage and maternity.

Once Blenkins' chicanery is discovered, Sannie sets her sights on a variety of different men, ending up with Little Piet Vander Walt – a man much younger than she, who seems interested only in her homesteading skills and the fact that she is fat and thus capable of reproducing. He is a recent widower, and he tells her that his dead wife has told him that their deceased child has informed her that he must marry a woman

older than thirty, who has had two husbands, and who is also fat. Little Piet does not share with Sannie the fact that this is not his preference (Schreiner 148-149). Little Piet's lack of excitement about taking Sannie as his wife would likely not cause much concern; although she shows some sympathy for Waldo upon the death of his father, she indicates that husbands are quite easily replaced. She explains, "'one can always get another husband, but one can't get another father'" (Schreiner 60).

Finding a Place for the Native?

In his introduction to *Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization*, O. Mannoni writes, "a *colonial situation* [original italics] is created...the very instant a white man, even if he is alone, appears in the midst of a tribe, even if it is independent, so long as he is thought to be rich or powerful...and so long as he derives from his own position...a feeling of his own superiority" (18). While this description certainly applies to the European imperialist projects in Africa and elsewhere, it also applies to the work of white farmers as they set up homesteads in South Africa. Although sanctioned by the imperialist governments overseeing southern African colonies, such projects would not be successful without the native Africans' acceptance of white farmers' imposition of their practices and superiority. Mannoni suggests that any participant in the imperialist project has an idea of "changing, converting, civilizing" members of the culture being colonized (31). The idea of "changing, converting, civilizing" has at its core a belief that the colonized group is somehow inferior and in need of transformation, in spite of any concomitant feelings of love and devotion to the profession and/or the civilization

being conquered. Further, because colonizers appear to possess superior power, natives can be persuaded to imitate them, and to obey, allowing the colonizer to exploit the colonized for economic gain, as well as for other reasons including personal pleasure and to appease feelings of superiority. Mannoni describes these as “psychological satisfactions” (32), and they seem to be related to the gratification that Tant’ Sannie, and Mary Turner, derives from exploiting the “other.”

Although *SAF* does not argue for racial equality or even include native African characters that are treated especially respectfully, Robin Hackett notes in “Olive Schreiner and the Late Victorian New Woman” that native Africans are “essential to the delineation of Waldo’s and Lyndall’s European newness. New Women and Men are not African themselves...but Schreiner’s representations of New Women and Men are dependent on proximity to Africans” (42). Schreiner uses native Africans, then, as props, as foils, as rhetorical raw materials with against which she can contrast the forward-thinking, intellectual, autonomous, sexually independent New Woman and New Man, ideals that influenced many iterations of feminism, as well as early versions of the anti-racist movement (Hackett 42). Although she does not argue explicitly for equality for her African characters, or even represent them in the same way she does her white characters, “they are central to her critique of European Cape Colony society” (Hackett 52). This society is represented by the microcosm of the farm, on which races mix, but do not mingle, interact, but do not integrate. Native African characters are also essential to the development of the most enlightened of the characters in *SAF*. While Tant’ Sannie’s understanding of native Africans does not change, Lyndall’s emerging

conception of New Womanhood owes much to the way the text portrays what Hackett calls the “quiet African rebellion against colonialism” (53). Watching the ways that native Africans find ways to resist white rule in the context of the farm—for example, the two Kaffir boys, “they cut the cakes of dung, *winked at each other, and worked as slowly as they possibly could*; but the German never saw it” (Schreiner 4, my italics)—helps Lyndall find a way to create a “defiant, modern, European womanhood” (Hackett 53). Further, even though *SAF* has been criticized for, as Ruth First and Ann Scott contend in their critical/biographical work *Olive Schreiner*, “not being the ‘race relations novel’ that people expect, in that blacks are merely ‘extras,’” this is precisely the point the two want to emphasize (97). The “colonial condition,” as they call it, ensured that native Africans were confined to a specific stratum—known to both whites and blacks—that kept whites insulated from indigenous society “but internalized the violence that it used against it; hence the violence of Bonaparte [Blenkins] and Tant Sannie’s behaviour” (First and Scott 97). The pair argue that rather than writing about the effects of this system on native Africans, Schreiner’s work is really about the consequences of colonialism on whites, using the children—Em, Waldo, and Lyndall—as symbols and expressions of that system (97). Thus, the black characters in the novel could never be anything more than “extras”—in that native Africans within Schreiner’s schema are nothing more than supporting figures, that they are used to comment on the violence of colonialism by highlighting the cruelty of white punishment and indifference on the farm.

In her chapter on Schreiner in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, Anne McClintock, like other critics, contends that within *SAF*, African characters are not especially important to the plot or to the development of Schreiner's political and social agenda. As noted, however, often what is absent takes on the most importance, and despite the fact that Schreiner does not focus on her native African characters, the little she does mention them places them center in the mind of readers. The few references she makes to African servants in the farm house and in the field remind the reader that there has to be someone there doing the work – after all, nobody believes that Tant' Sannie, or even Em or Lyndall is doing it. And while perhaps both Otto and Waldo may be contributing to the work of the farm, Otto is portrayed as more spiritual than physical, and Waldo still a mere boy. There has to be someone around to do the work, and by failing to focus on those who actually do the work, Schreiner reminds us that it was the role of native Africans on the farm to do the work satisfactorily or risk the ire of the farm owner. That she chooses not to deal explicitly with the role of farm workers on the farm, and instead focuses on the white residents, suggests that Schreiner was both a product of her time, as well as ahead of her age; her use of racial epithets when referring to native African servants is at once typical of the period in which she wrote, and provides an opportunity for readers to consider how these designations can be useful in maintaining racial boundaries.

That Tant' Sannie calls Otto, her farm overseer, "the German," as well as referring to various servants as "the Hottentot" (Khoikhoi) and "the Kaffir" (Schreiner 31), is indicative not only of her racism, but also of her inability to see others as

anything but representatives of the groups to which they belong. This criticism can also be leveled at Schreiner herself, who uses these categories to further a European self-image that depends, as Moore-Gilbert suggests, “on the presence of the Orient within western discourse as ‘a sort of surrogate or even underground self’” (86-87). In other words, in order for Tant’ Sannie to maintain her definition of self in a society that depends on the presence of an “other” to explain what she is and what she is not, she must rely on concise categories to which other people can be assigned. Sannie puts up with “the German” until he is no longer useful to her, and distinguishes between “the Hottentot” servants whom she tolerates at her weekly church service, and “the Kaffir” servants whom she believes were “descended from the apes” (Schreiner 31). “In so far as Africans are present in Schreiner’s text,” Bart Moore-Gilbert argues, “they are consistently represented in demeaning and stereotypical terms” (90). Moore-Gilbert, however, does not consider in any real depth how allowing for distinctions between native Africans enables Schreiner – and early readers – to interpret, classify, and reconsider the behaviors of individuals that do not fit into her racialized framework. While Otto is white, he is German, so he is not the same kind of white as Tant’ Sannie; therefore, if he does something she does not like, she can ascribe his actions and mindset to the fact that he is German – not Boer – thereby maintaining her Boer identity. Taking this a step further, Cherry Clayton contends that the conflict between Otto and Bonaparte Blenkins represents a key historical shift in South Africa. Otto, “the colonizing missionary presence,” is supplanted by “an overtly economic and exploitative imperialism carried by unscrupulous adventurers [exemplified by

Blenkins], who concealed their avarice under the cloak of humanitarian aid" (46).

According to Clayton, the period described in *SAF* illustrates England's entry into South African trading and "Blenkins represents the most disreputable face of imperialism" (Clayton 46) taking over for a previous presence that perhaps while just as detrimental, was never as overtly so.

Using Gender Inequality to Comment on Racial Inequality

Acknowledging the differences within the spectrum of native African ethnicity gives Tant' Sannie the ability to attribute variations in appearance, action, belief, etc. to ethnic group affiliation. This method of assigning difference to a spectrum, thereby both maintaining and challenging beliefs about ethnic differences among native Africans, reflects what Moore-Gilbert calls "a repressed but often sympathetic acknowledgement of subaltern resistance, albeit in a relative weak form, that conflicts with the general thrust of the text at a manifest level" (92). This emerging recognition of differences even among people of native African descent expressed by Schreiner's text reflects the embryonic development of a newly informed sense of social justice.

While *SAF* focuses on issues related to women's emancipation, Hackett argues that Schreiner, like many feminists to come, followed her interest in gender equality to related concerns including racial equality and freedom (38). Although Moore-Gilbert and Hackett note a hesitance on the part of Schreiner to ascribe agency to her native African characters, focusing on how they play minor roles in the plot and serve only to assist white characters in considering Cape Colony society differently, I believe there is

agency hidden in their actions. While many readers focus on the native African servants in *SAF* as extensions of Tant' Sannie's will; that is, they see these characters as reinforcing Sannie's opinions, echoing her values. Schreiner describes "the Hottentot maid," for instance, as Tant' Sannie's "satellite," (15) suggesting that she exists only in relation to Sannie both in location and mindset. At key points within the novel, the Hottentot maid reiterates her white mistress's beliefs, but, as Anne McClintock asserts, this is a relationship "fraught with acrimony, strained intimacy, mistrust, condescension...and coerced subservience [that] ensure[s] that the colonial home is a contest zone of acute ambivalence" (271). Despite the fact that the Hottentot maid repeats Tant' Sannie's opinions and engages in mimicry, the maid should be read as a character just beginning to grasp the potential value of her resistance. Robin Hackett's analysis that "the defiance of...the lean Hottentot exist[s] not as an effort on Schreiner's part to celebrate covert anti-imperialism, but rather to introduce the theme of defiance that [she] can subsequently develop into a more principled, considered behavior in *Lyndall*" (58) fails to consider how the maid's response to Otto's firing displays the beginnings of an awareness of her own agency. As the bewildered Otto tries to make sense of the situation and turns to the Hottentot maid for explanation – "*she* was his friend; she would tell him kindly the truth" (Schreiner 49, original italics) – the maid responds by saying, "'Give it him, old missis! Give it him!'" (Schreiner 49). Although Otto expects the maid, to whom he has always been kind, to behave as she usually does, he is disappointed in her reaction. The Hottentot maid is not Otto's friend; she is a farm servant, and she takes advantage of the situation to confront social conventions. That

her responses often match Tant' Sannie's is coincidence, for how is she to know that her outbursts will not be punished by her often capricious employer? Up until this point the maid has engaged in the practice of mimesis – recreating the behavior of her mistress in order to maintain Tant' Sannie's favor even when and even if (readers have no way of knowing since many critics have mentioned that the impetus for the maid's actions are never disclosed) she disagrees with her employer's actions. The goal of mimesis, according to Luce Irigaray, is to allow women to call stereotypical views of femininity into question by repeating actions that call those beliefs into question. In other words, by reproducing Tant' Sannie's beliefs and behaviors in ways that call into question the reality of these views, the Hottentot maid begins to demystify the power that Tant' Sannie's views hold over those she commands.

Additionally, that the maid does not stick up for Otto illustrates a second important point in the servant-master dynamic. As Dane Kennedy explains in *Islands of White: Settler Society and Culture in Kenya and Southern Rhodesia, 1890-1939*, “prestige served as a psychological substitution for the physical separation of the races.... In essence, prestige was an amulet against the dangers of familiarity” (154). As farm overseer Otto enjoys a measure of prestige, however he is not the farm owner, and he has to answer to Tant' Sannie who makes the final decisions about the farm and its employees. He might be in charge of farm hands, and he might even be well-liked by those under him, but Otto's mistake is believing that he has enough prestige to protect him both from Sannie's wrath and from being treated with indignation by others in Sannie's employ. In addition, Otto fails to see that other servants are not his friends;

they may express kindness and familiarity, but the state of inequality that exists prevents them from becoming true friends.

The Farm as Representation of South Africa

Schreiner's version of the farm is quite different from the more positive variant created by Bessie Head. Schreiner's farm is dusty, dirty, hot, and, although there is beauty to be found, it is "oppressive" and "weary" (Schreiner 1, 4). The farm is not a place of regeneration or relaxation for white women, but as Chrisman asserts in "Empire, 'Race,' and Feminism," this "does not prevent Schreiner from venerating a notion of intensive cultivation of the land...as an example of the kind of socially useful toil women once participated in" (51). The idea of working the land as a means to establish self-sufficiency, self-determination, and to reify the importance of pre-industrial labor evoke the world of the early Boer farmer as portrayed in the *plaasroman*; however, "for Schreiner this version of the pastoral is available only as history; it is romanticized and subjected to a nostalgic treatment . . . as part of an irreversible stage of social development" (Chrisman 51). In other words, Tant' Sannie, Em, Lyndall, the Hottentot maid, and the Kaffir servant are resigned to "act out the roles that their environment assigns them during the first phase of colonialist settlement in Africa," (Ogede 255) despite the many changes that have occurred since the VOC first settled the Cape Colony. Using Bonaparte Blenkins to make his point, Ode Ogede, in "An Early Image of Apartheid and Post-Apartheid Society: Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm*," suggests that Blenkins, who has been in every country in the world, and speaks

every civilized language except Dutch and German (Schreiner 22), should be read as “Schreiner’s horrific perception of colonialism” (253). That Blenkins succeeds in taking over the farm and turns Tant’ Sannie against her long-time employees despite her initial distrust of him suggests that Blenkins, like colonialism, “is a force defying easy containment” (Ogede 253). Even when he departs the farm, Blenkins moves on to what he perceives is a more lucrative situation; he is never caught or contained, but is free to continue colonizing. Ogede’s analysis corresponds to McClintock’s reading of the farm. The farm itself becomes a site of criticism — of domesticity, of history, of established institutions like marriage, and most importantly, of the ongoing violence of colonialism (McClintock 278). As an example of literature of empire, *The Story of an African Farm* reflects the unequal power structure of imperialist relations between colonizer and colonized. Susan R. Horton suggests that Schreiner’s novel affirms “an erotics of power,” or an attraction toward being mastered within relationships with European men. This attraction plays out in *SAF* as “another site for the same exchange, in which identification with Africa and Africans was alternately an identification with mastery over Africans and the masculinity implied by that mastery and an identification with those who had been mastered” (22). As a white woman in South Africa, Schreiner would have held a position of superiority over native Africans; however, as a woman — even one of European descent — she would have occupied a position of inferiority.

To keep the farm going Sannie relies on conventional methods of maintaining order, and while Schreiner does not spell out those methods, Sannie is not described as a kind and gentle mistress. She takes action to punish her employees for perceived

infractions—even without evidence—and does nothing to stop Blenkins from beating Waldo for eating from her store of peaches, even though she describes them as hard, full of bugs, and not worth the trouble of exacting reparations from whoever ate them (Schreiner 78). Instead, Tant' Sannie stands back and allows Blenkins to assault Waldo, a young orphan. When Blenkins summons Waldo, Sannie giggles, and finds the idea of his being beaten “exceedingly humorous” (Schreiner 78), a depiction that suggests she enjoys the idea of inflicting pain. Thus, McClintock asserts that “from the outset, the colonial farm is figured as pathological,” and the only characters that seem capable of changing things—Otto, Waldo, and Lyndall—end up powerless to do so against the established power of the colonial narrative (278). Each character ultimately escapes the farm, but only through death, suggesting that attempts to flee patriarchy and the “economy of colonial agriculture” will only result in personal demise (McClintock 278). Only Em and Tant' Sannie—characters that accept their lot as women within the patriarchal system of colonialism and imperialism—survive; in order to do so both marry.

Lyndall, on the other hand, engages in actions that challenge the boundaries of what is considered acceptable within her society, and as a result, she experiences what Stephen Clingman in “Literature and History in South Africa” terms “mental destabilization” as a result of venturing beyond the limits respectable behavior (112). For Lyndall this means rejecting the traditional path; refusing to find a husband and marry like other farm girls in order to secure her future. Rather than accepting her lot, Lyndall pledges to fight the system, expressing to Em her intent to “burn down the

window’” in response to being locked inside their room (Schreiner 50). Although Lyndall’s comment refers specifically to the situation she and Em find themselves in, her statement can be read as her antipathy toward life on the farm and anger toward the situation women cannot escape. Later, Lyndall remarks to herself, “‘when the day comes, and I am strong, I will hate everything that has power, and help everything that is weak’” (Schreiner 51). This assertion echoes Schreiner’s belief that women are responsible for improving their own situation. Susan Horton contends that Schreiner “assumes that the inequalities women face are...consequence of their own deficiencies or weaknesses,” yet she also maintains that Schreiner does not hold men accountable for their roles in contributing to the positions women experience (85-86).

South Africa Outside of the Farm

Attempting to change her life, Lyndall leaves the farm to attend boarding school. Upon her return to the farm – something she must do as she is not wealthy enough to live on her own, and she has no husband to support her – she admits that her time away was not exactly as she imagined it would be. Although she confesses that she has learned some things, her experience at the girls’ school that she attended did not teach her what she truly wanted to know. She explains, “‘I have discovered that of all the cursed places under the sun, where the hungriest soul can hardly pick up a few grains of knowledge, a girls’ boarding school is the worst. ... They finish everything but imbecility and weakness, and that they cultivate. ... A woman who has been for many years at one of those places carries the mark of the beast on her until she dies, though

she may expand a little afterward, when she breathes in the free world'" (Schreiner 132).

Despite her dissatisfaction with the boarding school, Lyndall admits that leaving the farm has taught her things she did not expect to learn. Recounting her time away, she says, "'I made acquaintances, saw a few places and many people, and some different ways of living, which is more than any books can show one. On the whole, I am not dissatisfied with my four years. I have not learned what I expected; but I have learned something else'" (133). Lyndall's realization that what she has learned is minimal gives her a new appreciation for the world outside of the farm, and makes returning there difficult – especially when she recognizes that her childhood friends have not changed and are not particularly concerned with the issues she believes are critical.

Discussing her emerging convictions, Lyndall asks Waldo whether he is interested in the "position of women" (Schreiner 134). When he responds that he is not, she berates him for his lack of awareness and acknowledges that she is most interested in the situation of women in society. The beliefs she espouses are feminist and position her against the idea that women belong in the domestic sphere; however, she concedes that their society is not ready for such ideas and that she is likely not the one to advance them, saying, "'I will do nothing good for myself, nothing for the world, until someone wakes me up. I am asleep, swathed, shut up in self; until I have been delivered I will deliver no one'" (Schreiner 141). Lyndall is speaking metaphorically, but she is also referring to her pregnancy. She has not disclosed her condition to either Em or Waldo,

but given her status as a single woman, her pregnancy makes her even less able to fight for women's rights in a society that requires women to follow a strict set of rules regarding their sexual behavior. Lyndall seems aware that the best chance she has to fight for women's rights is to do so covertly, achieving her goals "through indirection and coquettish behavior," as Clayton asserts (52). Despite understanding the way to further her goal, however, Lyndall seems hesitant to take action, tentative to do anything that might alter the status quo (Clayton 52). As Sanders notes, "women take part in intellectual life against the social norm—in the face of the reproductive inscription of female sexuality" (27), although becoming pregnant outside of marriage does not signal adherence to these rules either.

"The Commodification of Women"

Given what McClintock terms her "anguished denunciation of the commodification of white women in prostitution and marriage," (272) Schreiner's compassion for Lyndall's belief system is manifested in her depiction of Lyndall's unwillingness to conform to societal norms for the sake of her child. Although she is willing initially to marry her lover, she ultimately changes her mind. Schreiner depicts this change-of-heart as resulting from a combination of fear of submitting to the one man that could quite possibly hurt her, from a desire to maintain her freedom, and from her opinion that her lover's increased devotion and desire to marry her is a reaction to her uncertainty about their relationship. Lyndall explains, "'you call into activity one part of my nature; there is a higher part that you know nothing of, that you never touch.

... I believe you do love me, as much as you could possibly love anything.... If, when I got your letter a month ago, hinting at your willingness to marry me, I had at once written, imploring you to come.... 'Poor little devil' you would have said, and tore it up.... But because I declined your proposal, and wrote that in three weeks I should be married to another, then what you call love woke up'" (Schreiner 177-178). Ultimately, Lyndall refuses her lover's offer to marry her as she is concerned that their relationship will not provide the level of intellectual stimulation she desires (Sanders 27), and because she is afraid her lover only wants her because she suddenly seems helpless. In this way, woman's entrance into intellectual life becomes inextricable bound to the idea of transgressing established social boundaries; "since intellectual and physical exchange are in practice continuous...that transgressive entry implies contact with men and therefore risks a return to the prescribed life course of pregnancy and/or marriage," as happens with Lyndall (Sanders 31). She becomes determined to find another way to survive, telling herself, "'we are not afraid; we will help ourselves'" (Schreiner 182), and when the opportunity to help herself arises in the form of Gregory Rose's proposal, Lyndall must consider whether a marriage without love is as monstrous as she believes.

After Gregory Rose confesses his love for her, Lyndall responds, "'you could serve me by giving me your name. ... What I am saying is plain, matter-of-fact business. If you are willing to give me your name within three weeks' time, I am willing to marry you; if not, well. I want nothing more than your name'" (Schreiner 173). In addition to offering her protection by bringing her in-line with social expectations, by marrying Gregory Rose, Lyndall provides a name for her child. This solves both of her problems,

but her actions – especially the way she has spoken about motherhood to Waldo, telling him that she has no interest in bringing a “soul into this world,” and then her treatment of Gregory Rose, who has expressed his love to her only to tell him that by marrying her he will be serving her, and “the knowledge that you are serving me is to be your reward” (Schreiner 153, 173) – make Lyndall seem quite the objectionable character. Unlike Em, who recognizes that Gregory does not love her and chooses to end their engagement because of this fact (Schreiner 164), Lyndall, who asserts that she would never marry to conform to social expectations (Schreiner 136), considers using Gregory’s infatuation with her to secure her future. Despite the fact that Lyndall’s actions make her somewhat distasteful, her willingness to do what is necessary to avoid being stigmatized conforms to Schreiner’s opinion that women are responsible for improving their own lives. Further, Lyndall’s situation is “a consequence of [her] own deficiencies or weaknesses,” an idea that stems from Horton’s belief that Schreiner felt that women needed to be even more noble and selfless than men despite the limitations and expectations placed on them by society (Horton 85-86). At the same time, however, Schreiner needs Lyndall; she cannot censure her too harshly for her actions because, as Lessing explains, “she had to love Lyndall, and stand by her, and protect her – and explain her; for Lyndall was the first of her kind in fiction. Of her we can say: that kind of embattled woman was the product of that kind of society, where women had a hard time of it” (“Afterword” 107). Even more than that, Lyndall is part of Schreiner; she is the emerging feminist voice that says all the things Schreiner wants to say, so even if

Lyndall is somewhat objectionable because of what she does and what she says, she is young Olive's voice of "psychic preservation" (Lessing, "Afterward" 107).

In spite of her initial willingness to marry Gregory Rose to protect herself from the stigma of being a single mother, Lyndall changes her mind. Her response to Gregory, when he challenges her decision, is that she cannot go through with the marriage because it goes against her conscience (Schreiner 176). From the beginning of the novel Lyndall has asserted that she would never marry except for love, as she believes that "'marriage without it is the uncleanest traffic that defiles the world'" (Schreiner 136). Thus, even though Gregory seems happy to marry her – even with the knowledge that she does not love him and probably never will – Lyndall cannot go through with their union. She leaves the farm without telling anyone her destination. That Lyndall believes marriage without love is "unclean," and that she conflates ideas of marriage without love with ownership suggests that the only option she believes she has to improve her situation requires her to stay true to her personal beliefs. She cannot marry her lover because she will lose herself and she cannot be sure of his motivation; she cannot marry Gregory Rose because she does not love him and she cannot marry without love. Consequently, Lyndall's only choice is to leave the farm, to find a place where she can do whatever is necessary to survive on her own. This fate illustrates Schreiner's understanding of women's place in the world: women were "destined to sacrifice, to suffer, to be alone, and to triumph through willed acceptance of that lot" (Horton 88). Although Lyndall knows what her situation is and that she does need assistance, she is unwilling to accept that she is powerless. Her sacrifice and suffering

comes from her acceptance of the unknown, from her departure from the farm to live in exile away from the only people she loves – a situation that ensures she will experience the requisite level of sacrifice and triumph through acceptance of the suffering that is to come.

The Farm: Center of the Universe

That all the action of *SAF* takes place at the farm is telling. As readers we experience the world outside of the farm only in narrative – characters relate their experiences away from the farm but the novel’s structure is such that we never follow them on their excursions away from the farm, almost suggesting that there is nothing important, nothing in existence, away from the homestead. This, coupled with the representations of people of other races, ethnic groups, and backgrounds, suggests that Schreiner wants her readers to see her farm as a microcosm of everything happening in South Africa during this period. Cherry Clayton suggests, “although the Hottentot servants and the Kaffir herdsmen are seen as creatures on a lower evolutionary rung or as complicit with Boer farmers, the narrative as a whole is a commentary on patterns and cycles of invasion and dispossession that rely on brute force and a crushing of the generosity or compassion that might undergird a new political order” (57). *SAF*, then, predicts a future South Africa while exposing the history of the colonial processes that led to its current condition – laying bare the hypocrisy, exploitation, and domination that allowed colonial powers to shape it and maintain control – but suggesting alternatives to “entrenched patterns of domination” (Clayton 57). These alternatives are

recognizable in characters that populate the farm, as the potential for progress as well as stagnation is there.

CHAPTER FOUR:
DESIRE ON THE *VELD*: AGENCY, SOCIAL NORMS, AND FARMING IN DORIS
LESSING'S *THE GRASS IS SINGING*

Connecting Rhodesia to its South African Colonial History

From a contemporary perspective it is important to note that Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, is a country with a political and cultural history quite distinct from South Africa. For the purposes of this dissertation, however, the Rhodesian author under investigation makes little attempt to separate the two, suggesting that the colonial history of these areas is similar enough to allow for connections between the material, economic, and social conditions of the two areas. Rather than comparing and contrasting these colonies, it seems appropriate to return to a consideration of the concepts of pastoral and colonial literature, and the *plaasroman*, since the novel *The Grass is Singing*, hereafter *GIS*, subverts traditions associated with each.

Like *SAF*, *GIS* refers to the idea that land in Africa was open for cultivation. Both novels depend on belief in the “Vacant Land” myth, which suggests that Europeans “settled” South Africa around the same time as other Africans began to enter the region (Crais 256). Thus, clashes between white colonials and black Africans were the result of incursions into vacant lands open for annexation. In this scenario, black Africans were

not native to the area; hence, they had no more claim to the land than European settlers. This concept of southern Africa as a space available for acquisition conforms to the vision of Rhodesia described by Anthony Chennells in "Some Versions of Rhodesian Pastoral," in which he comments on depictions of the area by nineteenth century colonists as a "prelapsarian Eden or Arcadia: a lost and ideal world where people at ease with themselves and their surroundings regret nothing and aspire to nothing" (13). While this description of Rhodesia suggests one of the reasons it became so popular with white settlers, Chennells' article also asserts that portrayals of the land are also remarkable for their absence of reference to shepherds, herdsmen, or any native African figures (13). The focus on pastoral depictions of Rhodesia, or, as Chennells describes, on a lifestyle that is possible only in nature, when free from the constraints, "proprieties, artifices, and artificiality of London" (13-14), is central to the importance of the colony as a mode of re-creating within the countryside "an ideal...version of the metropole in the wilderness" (Chennells 14). This can be accomplished, Chennells asserts, by creating literature that recalls for the metropole the noble and atavistic qualities of the colonial frontier (14). Similarly, in his discussion of the *plaasroman* J.M. Coetzee argues that within the literature of white South African settlers "the retrospective gaze of the pastoral has...been a prominent strain in their writing" (*White Writing* 4). Although he is referring specifically to writers of Boer descent living in the South African colony, I contend his assertions can be applied to the literature of all whites experiencing the shift from rural to urban, what Coetzee terms the "end of a *boernasie* (nation of farmers)" that celebrated models of the farm as a stronghold of familiar values based on a notion of

communal consciousness (4). As Raymond Williams observes in *The Country and the City*, this idea of retreat to the country “is more than a mere contrast of rural and urban ways of life” (46), it is a literary mode which expresses a fantasy that relies on a mythical image of country life that may never have existed.

***GIS* as Pastoral**

Read as a pastoral, *GIS*, like most of Lessing’s novels, according to Chennells, subverts the mythology of the veld (18) as a “rural retreat” (Coetzee, *White Writing* 5). Instead, as Oliver Buckton claims, the novel critiques a tradition of literature that “embodies an idealized and unrealistic response to landscape and rural life” and conflates marriage with farm life to “form a female dystopia of entrapment and powerlessness” (8). The novel, then, like Schreiner’s work *SAF*, reveals pastoral to be a male fantasy, Buckton argues, that is achieved only when women and native Africans are exploited and used to power the economic system upon which the rural economy is based (8). In both novels—*GIS* and *SAF*—native Africans do all the work, and women only function to ensure that things run smoothly. They keep house and raise families, and the moment they step out of line, chaos ensues.

In “*Veldtanshouung: Doris Lessing’s Savage Africa*,” Eve Bertelsen contends that Lessing’s portrayal of Africa as a savage and hostile land does two main things; first, characterizing the land this way draws connections between the untamed nature of the bush and its native inhabitants, and second, this depiction suggests a relationship between the savagery of Africa’s natives and “the white man’s savage past,” (650) a past

that has been, and continues to be, overcome by the industry of civilization. Invoking the idea of the past and the land helps to connect *GIS* to the tradition of the *plaasroman*. The novel does not fit into the genre as Coetzee describes it; instead, *GIS* focuses on the land, on rural life, on farming, and most specifically, on the role of black labor in the process of bringing order to the bush so that the farm can become a viable economic project. That most of the characters in *GIS* see the veld as an opportunity to establish a successful economic enterprise rather than as chance to tame the wilderness in order to reinvigorate the heroic essence of the untamed frontier suggests a desire to continue taming the past in order to avoid returning to the brutality symbolized by Moses and the other native characters.

The Economics of Native African Farming and the Disruption of White Colonials

Native African farming practices, unlike those of white colonists, Abdul JanMohamed explains, “centered around a subsistence economy...and did not offer the means of production—namely, land and labor—for exchange on the market” (60). As a consequence, and in order to “commodify land and labor and make them available” as part of the colonial system, “the British systematically destroyed the native mode of production” (JanMohamed 60). In this system, he argues, colonists replaced use-value with exchange-value, thereby favoring the processes and interactions and making native practices worthless. Represented by the material concerns of Charlie Slatter and his wife, *GIS* suggests that the primary interest of white Rhodesians lies in developing economically viable farms and maintaining a social order that preserved the status of

white settlers at the top of the hierarchy. Slatter came to Rhodesia for one reason: “to make money” (Lessing, *GIS* 6). He is described as ruthless, cruel, brutal, and extremely harsh in his treatment of his workers; yet, at the same time, Slatter is acutely aware of the need to protect the boundaries between white settlers and native Africans. The novel, then, both examines and predicts the breakdown of the social system in which the Turners and the Slatters exist, and suggests that the farm, “and by symbolic extension the Southern African system itself [is] a tottering structure propped up by a slave economy” (Marquard 299). Importantly, as Cairnie notes, class distinctions between blacks and whites maintain those in place within white society; there is no concept of economic solidarity as even poor whites like the Turners participate in practices that exploit native African workers and keep boundaries between a black and white lower class in place even when breaking these barriers would benefit both groups (21).

Maintaining the Color Bar: Essential to Maintaining White Supremacy

Despite his dislike of Mary Turner, Slatter cautions Tony Marston to avoid sharing too much information about her murder – and thus possibly blurring racial boundaries by implying a relationship between Mary and her murderer – by commenting, “‘when you have been in this country long enough, you will understand that we don’t like niggers murdering white women’” (Lessing, *GIS* 16). By preventing Marston from revealing the truth of the situation, thereby sustaining prevailing attitudes toward natives, Slatter perpetuates the racist society of white Rhodesia.

Further, because of Mary Turner's interaction with Moses, though unacknowledged by others in her society, and because she has not accepted the social overtures of Mrs. Slatter, making her a pariah within the district, Eileen Mannion asserts "the community directs its anger and resentment toward the murderer and his victim, for Mary failed to keep up 'white' standards of behavior" (439). This analysis corresponds to Katherine Fishburn's belief that *GIS* promotes the idea that in colonial Africa, chaos lies on the margins of white civilization (3). To avert chaos from encroaching, white society must "maintain absolute vigilance over each other...even to the point...of sacrificing the weakest members" (Fishburn 3).

***GIS* as Anti-Pastoral**

Awareness of the ways that white society is reliant on maintenance of racial segregation, often referred to as the "colour bar" in colonial society –and active preservation of it, Pat Louw suggests, indicates that *GIS* moves beyond the pastoral mode into what she calls the "anti-pastoral." A corrective to the idyllic view of the land as a prelapsarian Arcadia, this mode allows authors to "write back" to the pastoral form in order to point out "the negative aspects of the pastoral, especially where it involved... ignoring, suppressing, or exploiting rural people" (Louw 37). The anti-pastoral, then, is well suited to postcolonial literature in that it undermines the imperialist values upon which colonialism is based and lays bare the "ugly reality of dispossessed indigenous people hidden by the Edenic pastoral idyll" (Louw 37).

Even though she has spent the majority of her adult life as a city dweller, upon her marriage to Dick, Mary becomes determined to ““get close to nature”” (Lessing, *GIS* 51). Recalling her experiences at picnics, where she gathered with others outside of town, she convinces herself that living on the veld will be no different; that in spite of the lack of running water and the similarity of her new life to the poverty of her childhood, becoming mistress of her own home has been the right choice (Lessing, *GIS* 52). The reality of the situation, however, leaves Mary “bewildered by the strangeness of it all,” and “weak with foreboding...” (Lessing, *GIS* 54). As Louw explains, “the African landscape [and, I would suggest, the home she is to share with Dick] is constructed as a space of hostility” (38). Arriving at her new home in the veld late at night, Mary’s first impressions of the farm are depicted as “distorted,” “vague,” “dark,” and wrapped in a “cold white vapor” (Lessing, *GIS* 52). She is startled by the sounds of the bush – terrifying and unfamiliar sounds that cause her to run back to the house and away from what lurks in the trees (53). Additionally, even though she makes an effort in the initial stages of her marriage to personalize her home – she buys material, sews curtains, purchases decorative items, and attempts to make the space livable according to her own standards (Lessing, *GIS* 63) – the house defies her efforts to make it her own.

The Domestic Sphere: A Space of Turmoil

Although she is ostensibly in charge of the domestic sphere, her presence complicates the easy rhythm to which Dick has become accustomed. Rather than supporting his wife in her endeavors, he finds her industry and efficiency worrisome.

Referring to Mary's work, the narrator explains, "it undermined his own sense of self-assurance even further, seeing her like this, for he knew, deep down, that this quality was one he lacked" (Lessing, *GIS* 65). When Mary asks for a real roof to cover the iron that has served as one for all the years that Dick has lived in the house, he objects. As a result, Mary finds the house unbearably hot (Lessing, *GIS* 69, 74), and she obsesses about how she might convince him to put in ceilings despite their dire circumstances. However, because Mary challenges Dick's sense of control, in order to maintain his authority, he denies her request. When Mary asks again for ceilings, saying, "'you expect me to cook myself every day because you won't put in ceilings,'" actively questioning Dick's ability to provide for his wife, he responds, "'as for ceilings, you can whistle for them. I have lived in this house for six years and it hasn't hurt me. You can make the best of it'" (Lessing, *GIS* 85).

Dick also upholds his masculine authority by encroaching on Mary's authority within the domestic sphere. When she has problems with her "houseboys," instead of taking her side, Dick minimizes the importance of her interactions with these servants, then tells her she will have to "'let go [her] standards a little,'" (Lessing, *GIS* 71), then commands her to "'treat him properly'" and avoid making a fool of herself again, (85), and then finally requires her to accept a new "houseboy" of his choosing (161). By asserting himself and emphasizing his role as husband and provider, Dick indicates that Mary's feelings and her role in the household are important only if he decides that they are, thereby adding to her experience of the farm and her home as a site of hostility.

The Veld: Echoes of Domestic Anxiety

Just as Mary experiences her home as a site of hostility, the farm and the *veld* itself are characterized as inhospitable. Caroline Rooney, in “Narratives of Southern African Farms,” argues, “the farm is given to us as a backwater of isolation, loneliness and boredom and as a desert of apathy-inducing heat and aridity” (431). The farm induces not only apathy, but antipathy; Mary has not indicated being truly in love with Dick, and time on the farm leads her to enjoy the torment her dissatisfaction with their home causes him (Lessing, *GIS* 69). She cannot find relief from the “intolerable” heat of the veld even inside their home, even after sleeping away the hottest parts of the day and using extra water to cool her body (Lessing, *GIS* 69, 70, 74-75). She becomes consumed by thoughts of cooler weather, as “here [on the veld] body and mind were subservient to the slow movement of the seasons; she had never in her life watched an implacable sky for signs of rain as she did now, standing on the veranda, and screwing up her eyes at the great massed white clouds, like blocks of glittering crystal quartz sailing through the blue” (*GIS* 75). This depiction of the Rhodesian landscape—in which the severe effects of heat on the human experience of the physical world are described as being so great as to limit bodily movement and causing submissiveness to the natural world—is contrasted with Lessing’s representation of a beautiful sky and other stunning natural features.

This juxtaposition of beauty with the grotesque “captures Lessing’s vision of the complexities of the colonial situation. Her critique of the pastoral has elements of the pastoral woven into it, resulting in a powerful and poignant statement about human conflict surrounded by the beauty of nature” (Louw 40). The subversion of the pastoral that Louw notes allows Lessing to expose issues of racism and sexism within colonial society (43)—just as the great heat controls Mary, so too does her husband, whose unwillingness to see her as an equal ensures that she remains in a place of deference. Similarly, the African landscape, just like native African characters, is constructed as a wild and threatening place. JanMohamed notes that imperialists use the colony to create a place of confrontation. This creation of this space is inspired by a need to dominate and subjugate “based on differences in race, language, social customs, cultural values, and modes of production” (64). In the case of *GIS*, this place is the African veld. The land is always described as “dingy and brownish,” and often “indistinct” (Lessing, *GIS* 79). Care must be taken to maintain bushes and shrubs to prevent the breeding of mosquitoes that could carry malaria, which could prove fatal (Lessing, *GIS* 179).

Unlike most pastorals—in which the land is depicted as fecund on its own—Dick’s farm is described as unnatural and unproductive (Marquard 295). Even though Dick has “wonderful dark soil” (Lessing, *GIS* 195), and has practiced crop rotation in order to ensure he does not drain the soil of all its nutrients, while Slatter has done nothing to put back into the soil “what he took from it,” (*GIS* 94) none of Dick’s farming enterprises seem to yield successful results. The land has been planted, but there is little to harvest. Slatter, on the other hand, has nearly exhausted his soil in order to extract

every cent he can. The Slatters' farm is "a monument to farming malpractice, with great gullies cutting through it, and acres of good dark earth gone dead from misuse. But he made money, that was the thing" (Lessing, *GIS* 87). Slatter's "farming ethics," Marquard asserts, "are founded in the merchant capitalism initiated by the large commercial interests in the colonies. Their aim was to extract commodities and they were not concerned with the circulation of goods" (299). Once Slatter takes all he can from his own land, he wants to move on to the Turner's farm, which has not been played out.

Power Relationships in *GIS*: Reflections of the Imperial Process

This need to dominate and exploit the land parallels the colonial enterprise itself, which sees the colonies as sources of raw materials for the metropole, according to Mutekwa and Musanga (242). The Turner's farm, because of Dick's ineptitude, is a financial failure. At the same time, it is coveted because its continued failure means that it has not been exhausted like Slatter's. Thus, it becomes a space for colonization – an area that can be taken over in order to provide the resources that Slatter's farm needs to expand. It is ironic that despite Dick's best efforts, his farm yields nothing. Following Dick, the farm is in danger of being destroyed by Slatter, or overrun by the bush, which waits to reclaim its territory. Although Slatter wants the farm for himself, the novel suggests that the land will ultimately destroy the house and take over the farm, "which had always hated it, had always stood around it silently, waiting for the moment when it could advance and cover it...so that nothing remained" (Lessing, *GIS* 225). All of the

work that Dick has done to cultivate the land, that Mary has done to set up an acceptable home, that Slatter has done to claim it for himself, is meaningless.

While Louw argues that “the wild areas of the African landscape have a profound effect on the way in which the identity of the characters is constructed, especially for those who are in marginalized positions in colonial society,” (43) and further, that in those cases landscape is created as a “space of resistance” (43) in opposition to racism and sexism within colonial society, this is only partially true. Mary, Dick, and to some extent Moses are all defined by their relation to and interactions with the land, and all three experience some degree of marginalization within colonial society, but the degree to which the landscape functions as a “space of resistance” is questionable. Mary’s identity is based in part on her hatred of the wild, untamed landscape, and her animosity toward native Africans.

At the same time, however, within the farm society to which she belongs, Mary experiences marginalization when she is compared to “poor whites” (Lessing, *GIS* 3). The narrator explains, “‘poor whites’ were Afrikaners, never British. But the person who said the Turners were poor whites stuck to it defiantly” (*GIS* 3); thus, Mary is disparaged within Rhodesian farm society – aligned by some with members of a caste considered lower than their own, despite still being white. Further, within her district, “even people [the Turners] knew by name only, or those they had never heard of, discussed them with an intimate knowledge that was entirely due to the Slatters” (*GIS* 192). Marquard explains, the Turners are disliked “on the irrational grounds of their habitual absence from group activities...the community imperative is not grounded in a

natural gregariousness but rather in the defensive spirit of alliance against the unknown and...against the fear of the loss of racial identity" (300). Thus, the "malignancy of gossip" (*GIS* 192) ensures that what the Slatters know about the Turners' actions and the supposed impetus for these actions is known by other white farmers within the district, leading to the exoneration of Dick and the execration of Mary (*GIS* 193-194).

Instead of serving as corrective action — as Marquard argues, "the collective code of behaviour is a lifeline to which whites must cling" — once she has been censured by her district, the power of gossip causes Mary to see herself as a failure, thereby giving Moses even more power over her (301). In this way, as JanMohamed notes, "instead of being an exploration of the racial Other, [*GIS*] merely affirms its own ethnocentric assumptions; instead of actually depicting the outer limits of 'civilization,' it simply codifies and preserves the structures of its own mentality" (65). In other words, despite describing Mary's breakdown by actively discussing her situation and speculating on the forces motivating her behavior, the novel "nonetheless rewards those who conform to the party line (the Slatters) and punishes the one poor soul (Mary) whose own psychological failings make it impossible for her to conform" to the expectations of her repressive society (Fishburn 2). Even more troubling is the fact that Mary's punishment does not even have to be meted out by her social group, whom she has supposedly threatened and betrayed by failing to adhere to social boundaries and standards of behavior; the colonial system in which she lives is so entrenched that it can rely on a native African — Moses — to ensure Mary gets what she deserves (Fishburn 2). In this way, Mary's death serves both as a reaffirmation of the superiority of white society and

a reminder of the depths to which such society must go in order to preserve that superiority.

The *Veld*: Native Man Personified

Cairnie asserts that the African bush is “rendered equivalent to African men: white women...are imbued with an erotic fear of both African men and the African bush” (21). This fear of the landscape prefigures Mary’s fascination with Moses; her initial experience of the bush occurs immediately following her marriage to Dick and right before they consummate their union. Following this sexual act, Mary and Dick’s physical relationship is secondary to her interactions with her various houseboys and her experience overseeing the native workers on the farm. The novel does not address her sexuality again until she notices Moses’ physicality after whipping him in the field for speaking to her insolently (Lessing, *GIS* 133-134). In this way, the landscape, rather than being a “space of resistance” becomes a space of definition within which Dick, the Slatters, others within the district, her native African servants, and even Mary herself comes to define herself and both act and react accordingly based on their and her experience of her position within society and her own sexual desires.

Lessing’s novel is set within “a colonial context where the teleology of domination of one human being over another is the...defining characteristic of human existence,” explain Mutekwa and Musanga (240). They propose using social ecology as a framework for analyzing *GIS*, which for the purposes of this discussion can be considered an environmental philosophy concerned with the connection between the

domination of nature by man to the domination of man by man (Mutekwa and Musanga 240). Considering how relationships of domination connect to domination of the land opens up a discourse that allows for discussion of issues of the ways in which race and gender factor into these social systems, creating women, non-whites, and nature as others. In this way, the authors assert, *GIS* becomes a “critique of colonial racism based on Enlightenment binary notions of civilized and uncivilized, and a Social Darwinian conceptualization of human societies” (241). Using racist and sexist tropes to show how whites are under threat from the savage native Africans and their dark and untamed home, the narrative shows how white characters develop and maintain a sexual politics centered around the “protection of the body of the white woman from the black man’s supposed hypersexual potency” (Mutekwa and Musanga 241-242).

Every interaction between whites and native Africans is designed to illustrate the potential for danger that exists; after Moses kills Mary he is described as “the constant, the black man who will thief, rape, murder, if given half a chance” (Lessing, *GIS* 20). As JanMohamed asserts, “the colonialist’s need to perpetuate racial differences also prevents him...from placing the object of his representation, the racial Other, on the same temporally and socially valorized plane as that occupied by the author and the reader” (69). Thus, even before she encounters native Africans on the farm, Mary has internalized her fear of this “other.” She, like every woman in South Africa, is brought up to be afraid of black men; she has been told since childhood that “they [are] nasty and might do horrible things to her” (Lessing, *GIS* 60). This fear is borne out when Moses murders her, “as if something had happened which could only have been

expected" (*GIS* 1). None of the whites in the district are too keen on considering why Moses might have killed Mary – the fact of the murder is enough, and delving too deeply into the causes threatens their way of living. "Black characters are, therefore, presented in broad strokes as archetypes, in line with the preconceived white racial stereotypes of blacks;" doing so ensures that native African characters are never as fully realized as white characters, and indicates that the text is itself a relic of its history (Mutekwa and Musanga 242).

The Role of the Native Man in the White Settler Home

Although Mary is responsible for the domestic sphere, the novel makes it clear that no white Rhodesian housewife would be expected to keep house without the services of a native African houseboy. Despite her frustrations with the many servants Dick provides, the thought of Mary cooking and cleaning without help is never entertained, and as soon as one boy leaves, another is procured, even when Mary develops a reputation for being a difficult mistress. That the housework is done by a male servant becomes even more problematic, bringing up issues of "black peril" for Mary, as well as a lack of experience in dealing with them. In her life in the city she had little interaction with native Africans, and "she had never come into contact with [them] before, as an employer of her own account" (Lessing, *GIS* 60). In her new home, she has trouble communicating with Dick's houseboy Samson, leading to frustration for both her and the servant (*GIS* 62). Her inability to communicate with natives and her prejudices about them affect all her interactions.

Prone to impatience, Mary is even more so with her native African servants, and shows little empathy for them. Lessing writes, “she never thought of natives as people who had to eat or sleep; they were either there, or they were not, and what their lives were when they were out of her sight she had never paused to think” (GIS 79). Even though Mary’s role as wife and mistress of the house puts her in charge of the house, this role as supervisor of the domestic sphere “does not increase her prestige” (Mannion 441). Instead, because her role is assumed only because of her relationship to her husband, and is therefore assigned by virtue of her role as wife – a position subservient to her husband – her power “to delegate housework to Africans only reinforces the subordination of women...” (Mannion 441). Thus, although Mary is the supervisor of the domestic sphere, her power is not absolute and can be overruled and revoked by her husband at any point. Because of this, the role of houseboy is even more socially demeaning than other servant positions; not only is the man in this position forced to recognize the authority of a woman, he is expected to accept the authority of a woman whose power can be rescinded at any moment.

Re-Thinking the Presence of Black Labor: Re-Thinking the *Plaasroman*

Unlike the *plaasroman*, which obscures the importance of black labor on the farm (Coetzee, *White Writing* 71-72), Lessing’s novel shows how native laborers are procured through coercion and even violence (Cairnie 22). The novel mentions “contract natives,” basically indentured servants, many of whom “had been recruited by what is the South African equivalent of the old press gang: white men who lie in wait for the migrating

bands of natives on their way along the roads to look for work; gather them into lorries, often against their will...lure them by fine promises of good employment and finally sell them to the white farmers at five pounds or more per head for a year's contract" (Lessing, *GIS* 127). Although Dick seems to get along with his workers, he still complains about the fact that he has to "buy niggers at five pounds a head" and chastises Mary for mistreating their boys (*GIS* 156-157). Dick's relationship with his workers exposes the violent truth of labor in the colony. Despite treating his labor force relatively well, his workers are as dependent on him for wages as he is on them for their labor power, creating an uneasy relationship that is often marked by abuse – both physical and economic. Mannion argues, "the capitalist fiction that the worker is a free agent, bargaining with his labour power and selling it on the open market to the highest bidder, co-exists uneasily with notions of paternalism which imply responsibility towards dependents and reciprocal obligations" (443); workers on the farm, however, are not in control of their labor power – except to refrain from exercising it – and even then they are not free to do so, there may be punishment for refusing to work. And the paternalism Dick and Mary show their workers is fraught with danger; they are expected to perform to standards that are often not made clear without any form of redress. And it can be revoked at any moment should it be in their employers' best interest.

Consequences of Breaking the “Colour Bar”

Coming upon him as he washes, Mary cannot help but watch him cleanse himself. When he notices her observing him — stopping and “waiting for her to go, his body expressing resentment of her presence there” (Lessing, *GIS* 163) — the traditional dynamic is broken. Lessing writes, “what had happened was that the formal pattern of black-and-white, mistress-and-servant, had been broken by the personal relation; and when a white man in Africa by accident looks into the eyes of a native and sees the human being (which it is his chief preoccupation to avoid), his sense of guilt, which he denies, fumes in resentment and he brings down the whip” (*GIS* 164). This exchange leaves Mary irrationally angry, and feeling as though she must do something to “restore her poise” (*GIS* 164). What she does is assert her authority, using her position within society as white and as mistress of the farm to reinstate her control; she tells Moses to scrub the floor, and insists that he repeat despite the fact that he has already completed this chore. Unfortunately, the social order has already been broken, and the intimacy between Mary and Moses only deepens. Sensing that something is developing between them that does not adhere to societal expectations, Moses gives his notice. Mary begs him not to go, with the narrator explaining her response as concern for Dick’s anger at losing yet another houseboy (*GIS* 171). While there may be some element of truth to this explanation, it seems unlikely that Mary’s response is based solely on fear of Dick’s anger. Begging Moses to stay on, Mary becomes “wild with panic” (*GIS* 171). She loses control of her emotions, and pleads with him to stay (*GIS* 172). These are the emotions not of a woman afraid of her husband, but of a woman dealing with infatuation for the

first time and not knowing how to handle her emotions. In response to Mary's entreaty, Moses hands her a glass of water, attempting to soothe her emotions. He speaks to her "as if he were speaking to one of his own women," and guides her to lie down. Moses is "loathe to touch her, the sacrosanct white woman..." (*GIS* 172). For Mary, the same event is "like a nightmare where one is powerless against horror: the touch of this black man's hand on her shoulder filled her with nausea; she had never, not once in her whole life, touched the flesh of a native" (*GIS* 172).

The description of this episode recalls Mary's nightmare of being molested by her father: in both instances she is filled with panic and horror, and cannot shake the terror associated with the memory (*Lessing, GIS* 187). While her father holds her head down in his lap so she can smell "the unwashed masculine smell she always associated with him," covering her eyes with his hands so she cannot see what he is doing, Moses treats her with tenderness – "almost fatherly" (*GIS* 172), and she is left obsessing over the incident. *Lessing* writes, "[Mary] never ceased to be aware of him. She realized, daily, that there was something in it that was dangerous, but what it was she was unable to define" (*GIS* 177). Relations between the two of them alternate between awkward familiarity, with Mary feeling that Moses is being impertinent by addressing her in a manner inappropriate to the mistress/servant paradigm (*GIS* 174), and harshness as Mary attempts to understand how their connection has changed. Although she uses stern speech in response to Moses' attempts to show her kindness – when he makes her a breakfast of tea, toast, eggs, and jam, she responds by saying sharply, "'I told you I only wanted tea'" (*GIS* 175) – she is unable to rebuke him as fully as she

would have in the past (*GIS* 176). Lessing explains, “there was a new relation between them. For she felt helplessly in his power.... Never ceasing for one moment to be conscious of his presence about the house, or standing silently at the back against the wall in the sun, her feeling was one of a strong and irrational fear, a deep uneasiness, and even—though this she did not know, would have died rather than acknowledge—of some dark attraction” (*GIS* 176).

Having allowed human interaction to occur, Mary “feels a guilt which she must deny—a guilt that is translated into ‘resentment’ and a need to punish the native who has been the agent of such unwelcome knowledge” (Fishburn 9). *GIS* presents the notion of Mary’s liaison with Moses as surrender to irresistible urges. Joy Wang argues that representations of white women succumbing to black men reinscribe the racist ideology they seek to subvert (38). At the same time, though, she suggests that *GIS* examines the way that abjection, or the act of being excluded from the social group, works as a sign of desire for empowerment, allowing Mary’s choice to permit Moses’ final act of violence toward her to symbolize both her abjection and agency (Wang 38). Mary’s agency, however, cannot be sustained, however, since it requires a projection of her dissatisfaction with her marriage and the social expectations demanded by colonial society.

An Awkward Sexuality

Mary’s dream about her father playing an inappropriate game with her combined with awkward relationship with her mother leads to what Mannion calls her

“stultified sexuality” (437). As a child, Mary’s mother confides in her from an early age, and given the descriptions of the relationship between Mary’s mother and father, and Mary’s mother’s dissatisfaction with their union, it is safe to assume that much of what her mother confided in her had to do with her unsatisfactory marriage (*GIS* 30). Mary’s father “drank himself every evening into a state of cheerful fuddled good humor.... His wife treated him with a cold indifference. ... It was if she did not wish to give her husband the satisfaction of knowing that she cared anything for him at all, or felt anything for him, even contempt or derision” (Lessing, *GIS* 30). Once she leaves home for boarding school, Mary never looks back. She avoids returning home for holidays whenever possible, and when her mother dies, she loses contact with her father. On her own, Mary enjoys casual dates with men and spending time with girlfriends, but she avoids sexual relationships and maintains residence at a girls’ club, despite being the eldest resident (*GIS* 34). An acquaintance, discussing whether she will ever marry – and by extension, her sexuality – says, ““she just isn’t like that, isn’t like that at all. Something missing somewhere’” (Lessing, *GIS* 38). Even after she does get married, Mary avoids sex as much as possible. On her wedding night, giving in to Dick because she knows she must, she finds the experience “not so bad...not as bad as *that*” (*GIS* 56, original emphasis). She finds the experience meaningless, and feels nothing after it is over, withdrawing from the encounter and “immuni[zing] herself against it” (*GIS* 56).

Mary’s avoidance of sex combined with her experience of inappropriate – and possibly incestuous – interaction with her father make her uncomfortable with all forms of sexuality. She finds the naked bodies of African women loathsome, and hates “the

exposed fleshiness of them, their soft brown bodies and soft bashful faces” (Lessing, *GIS* 104). Even more than their naked forms, Mary abhors “the way they suckled their babies, with their breasts hanging down for everyone to see” (*GIS* 104). Even though the African women suckling their babies are engaging in a natural process – one that is not at all sexual – Mary’s discomfort with sex makes her unable to see breastfeeding as a natural act. She associates anything having to do with the body with sex, and is confused and embarrassed by any activity that is remotely connected to the physical being.

Moses: “All Body, No Mind”

After seeing Moses wash himself, Mary begins to obsess over his physical being. Each time she sees him she remembers coming upon his half naked body, and the memory of the event fills her with irritation and causes her blood to throb uncontrollably (Lessing, *GIS* 165). Her behavior following this encounter is much like a teenaged girl coming across her girlhood crush: she blushes, weeps hysterically, avoids Moses as much as possible, and yet seems to find some kind of enjoyment in the sexual tension that follows their interaction (*GIS* 166-167). Discussing Mary’s fixation on Moses, Mannion contends that her sexual desires are combined with “a childlike need to be dependent” (438). As Moses begins to assert power over Mary, their relationship takes on “an erotic dimension, not in spite of her phobic disgust, but because of it” (Mannion 438). Thus, Mary is able to accept the sexual component of her interaction with Moses; it is at the same time more illicit in its breaking of the color bar and its

connection to her childhood sexual abuse, yet also a sign of the onset of her previously stunted sexual development since it expresses a sexuality heretofore unacknowledged.

While the reader is aware of the thoughts and concerns – the forces affecting Mary’s subconscious – Moses’ psyche remains unexplored. Lynne Hanley argues, “he is all body, no mind; always object, never subject.” In this way Lessing addresses the fundamental limitation of apartheid: it prevents whites from imagining the humanity of non-whites (Hanley 499). Likewise, Fishburn questions whether *GIS* “lends itself to a (neo)colonialist interpretation” or whether it is, as many critics have asserted, a critique of colonialism and the color bar (1-2). While acknowledging previous interpretations of the novel, she considers it a Manichean allegory – an allegory that acts to recreate, however unintentionally, the systems of power and dominance of the ruling class (2). This analysis supports Mannion’s assertion that Lessing’s fiction, through what she includes and what she chooses to leave out, “creates an image of a social order which exists to sustain a system of privileges” (435). This, in turn, ensures that readers have no real sense of Moses as a person – the ideas that drive him as an individual and compel him to treat Mary with compassion in spite of her fascination with him, and that ultimately cause him to kill her are left unexplored (Fishburn 4).

The Farm: Change through Violence or Meaningful Connections?

Within this system of privileges white and male always win out. While Mary benefits from the privilege of being white, her gender makes her susceptible to oppressive forces within her society. Dick, on the other hand, benefits from being both

male and white, so despite “talking crazily to himself, wandering in and out of the bush with his hands full of leaves and earth,” he is left alone (Lessing, *GIS* 5). This is the result of two things: first, Dick is a white man in a social system that privileges white men; this fact alone provides some degree of latitude. Second, the authorities in his district are native officers whose power has been granted to them by white men; they cannot forget that Dick “was a white man, though mad, and black men, even when policemen, do not lay hands on white flesh” (Lessing, *GIS* 5). Mannion suggests that characters must adapt to this system, or find ways to obviate it (435). Those that do adapt, she says, are rendered useless or destroyed, and those that challenge the boundaries of acceptable behavior “become for the reader images of future possibilities which might exist beyond the limits of their situations” (435). *GIS* does not spell out the exact nature of Moses and Mary’s relationship. Despite making it clear that the two have a connection that challenges boundaries of acceptable behavior between members of different genders and different races, the novel stops short of indicating that they engage in sexual intercourse. Given Moses’ attitude toward Mary and the ways that his actions cross the color bar, it seems likely that there is some degree of physical contact that borders on sexual. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon writes, “by loving me [the black man], she [the white woman] proves to me that I am worthy of a white love. I am loved like a white man. I am a white man” (45). His discussion of the effect of sex between white women and black men suggests that this relationship, in the mind of the black man, provides a “ritual of initiation into ‘authentic’ manhood” (Fanon, *BSWM* 54). This sort of initiation is necessary, he argues, because the process of colonization

involves imposing on black men the idea that their blackness is a mark of inferiority that must be overcome (BSWM 63). Thus, Mary's interaction with Moses – whether it be merely taboo contact or actual coitus – allows readers to consider the potential for change that exists when individuals defy the limits that their social system requires them to observe.

Although Mary's attraction to Moses on some level signals a continuation of her sexual development – which was stunted by the awkward confessions of her mother and the inappropriate attention of her father – the uncertainty of the true nature of their relationship makes it difficult to ascertain Moses' motives for killing Mary. Mannion asserts that “sexual contact between African men and white women can only mean one thing to colonials: rape” (442), suggesting that any sexual relationship between the two could be seen as Moses establishing his masculinity by engaging in the sex act, and as his rebellion against the colonial power. Moses' violence against Mary can be read as his way of lashing out at the colonial power that has for so long kept him oppressed. This analysis is in line with Frantz Fanon's discussion of the effects of colonization on the colonized in *The Wretched of the Earth*. By killing Mary, Moses not only punishes her for the physical violence she inflicts on him during their first meeting in the field, but exacts further revenge on white colonial society by killing its representative and causing unease among all members of the group – if one native African could break accepted standards of behavior and even kill a white woman, it becomes possible that another could do the same.

While it is clear that Lessing does not support the colonial system that leads to Mary's murder and Moses' fate, it is clear that Moses' capture at the end of the novel will have little effect on relations between native Africans and white colonials. This, coupled with the silence within the novel on Moses' actual motivation, suggests that *GIS* "provides us with an image of colonialism which perpetuates itself through its capacity to mould individuals in accordance with norms which constrict the development of their full human potential" (Mannion 452). At the same time, however, the novel's portrayal of the reliance of white colonials on their native African workers and the potential for meaningful connections between these groups indicates that there is a possibility for social change, and the farm is the locus of that potential.

CHAPTER FIVE:

GOLEMA MMIDI, SOUTHERN AFRICAN MICROCOSM:

THE FARM AS PLACE AND COMMUNITY IN BESSIE HEAD'S *WHEN RAIN*
CLOUDS GATHER

Head: A "Coloured" Woman in South Africa

The bulk of the critical work on Bessie Head concentrates on how her racial status as "coloured" within the South African system affected her sense of self and her ability to feel at home within her homeland. While these issues are represented in *When Rain Clouds Gather* (hereafter *RCG*) and its focus on the importance of belonging and respect, the novel is, as many critics point out, more than just a story about misfits finding a home. Its treatment of racial interactions between the residents of Golema Mmidi and its privileging of Western knowledge over traditional practices reinforce colonialist beliefs, yet the novel extols the need for racial integration and suggests that both racial and gender equality are possible. Although these ideals are alluring, and the characters that make up Golema Mmidi are both engaging and likable, the novel itself is problematic and sometimes conflicting in its assertions. According to Gillian Stead Eilersen, a prominent Head biographer, the goal of *RCG* was to examine "the way changes in traditional family patterns, crop production and family status affect the lives

of the people, especially the women, and the traditional distribution of power” (97).

Nevertheless, it is a strong statement of the possibilities that exist through cooperation and egalitarianism, and is a resolute example of how the farm can become a model for change.

Head was born in 1937 in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, and, according to Rob Nixon, in “Border Country: Bessie Head’s Frontline States,” simply by being born she “bore the burden of a doubly illegitimate birth” (106). Even though her birth preceded the adoption of the first official apartheid laws, there had been, ever since the abolition of slavery by the British in 1833, an act that applied to South Africa given its status as part of the British Empire, a series of acts that severely limited the freedom of native black Africans in the colony and ensured that the white minority maintained control. Head’s “doubly illegitimate birth” was the result of being born mixed-race, and to an unwed mother. That her mother was also confined to a mental institution at the time of her birth only adds to this ill-fated beginning. Rather than accepting their “coloured” granddaughter, Head’s grandparents relinquished her to the state ensuring that she was brought up experiencing family life “not as a natural form of belonging,” Nixon argues, “but as an unstable artifice, invented and reinvented in racial terms, and conditional upon the administrative designs of the nation-state” (107). Thus, in *RCG* we see characters that seem to lack any sense of belonging despite affiliations with families, tribes, and nations; these characters, especially those residing in Golema Mmidi, do not distinguish between familial or national bonds, instead forming relationships based on mutual trust and shared concern for survival. That in the end the characters turn to a

white man for the information that will lead them toward the new beginning they seek is unsettling, despite that white man's obvious concern for the villagers' well-being and his decision to marry a native woman.

A Story of Place

Like *SAF* and *GIS*, *RCG* tells the story of place. It begins by describing the escape of one of its central characters – Makhaya – from South Africa. Makhaya has been identified as a political enemy of the state, but he reveals that his main complaint about life in South Africa is not that whites are in charge, but that he has no freedom and must observe outdated customs that maintain artificial concepts of respect (Head, *RCG* 4, 9). That he benefits from these practices does not mitigate their unpleasantness; as eldest child he is entitled to a special form of address by his younger siblings. Upon his father's death, he ends this tradition, encouraging his siblings to call him "by his first name and associate with him as equals and friends" (*RCG* 9). In response to his mother's protest, he asserts that men should not be raised to believe they are by rights superior to women; he says, "'people can respect me if they wish, but only if I earn it'" (*RCG* 10). This insistence on equality and recognition of authenticity in respect reflects Head's frustration with South African politics. M. J. Daymond points out in her article "Making a 'Home' Elsewhere: The Letters of Bessie Head, 1963-1974" that this frustration was also the impetus for Head's move to Botswana where she hoped to fulfill her dream of freedom that her life in South Africa compelled her to construct, a "dream that would sustain her spirit in the face of the racist policies to which she was

subjected” (160). That this dream would appear in *RCG* as a peaceful, congenial, and charitable village – the very opposite of the South Africa she had experienced – is thus unsurprising and addresses the notion of home as both personal space in which one is free to exist and as a place that offers membership within a larger collective (Daymond 153-154). At the same time, however, although Makhaya asserts that his primary complaint against life in South Africa is the focus on tribalism, his racial identity is also an issue. When *RCG* opens, he has just been released from prison after serving a two-year term for carrying “‘little pieces of paper describing how [he was] going to blow everything up’” (Head, *RCG* 13), a charge that he denies. Thus, Makhaya’s decision to leave South Africa is not only due to his dislike of tribalism; he is also unhappy with the treatment of blacks in the country. As Head explains, “his [Makhaya’s] reasons for leaving were simple: he could not marry and have children in a country where black men were called ‘boy’ and ‘dog’ and ‘kaffir’” (*RCG* 11).

Tribalism: An Alternative to Colonialism?

In addition to issues of tribalism and racism, Alma Jean Billingslea-Brown asserts “in the context of a plot focused on the struggle to bring modern technologies to traditional subsistence farming and alleviate poverty and suffering, *Rain Clouds* offers an original presentation of an engaged spirituality challenging oppressive systems and forming human community free from abuse and oppression” (87). That Makhaya chooses to stay in Golema Mmidi, making the decision to embrace “a rural existence instead of seeking the bright lights of the city” (Eilersen 96) – a setting more closely

aligned with tribalism, which he abhors – suggests the degree to which he distrusts the South African way of life and everything there that keeps Africa from moving forward (Head, *RCG* 75). Craig MacKenzie suggests that this tribalism is represented by the old woman's offering up of her granddaughter as a prostitute to earn a few coins, and by her surprise that Makhaya would reject such an opportunity (32). Golema Mmidi is at its heart a farm, but it is one that has the potential for change as it considers, accepts, and integrates the farming techniques proposed by Gilbert. And as the villagers move toward progress and away from the tribalism Head cautions against and Makhaya loathes, it presages the future Head envisions for all of Botswana, and, she seems to hope, for Africa as well (MacKenzie 34).

The place that *RCG* describes is Golema Mmidi, a village in which the community is less natal than organic. The residents have chosen the locale as home for various reasons, but none can claim it as their hereditary home. Head explains, "it was not a village in the usual meaning of being composed of large tribal or family groupings. Golema Mmidi consisted of individuals who had fled there to escape the tragedies of life" (*RCG* 16). However, its location within the territory of Sekoto, the paramount chief in the area, means that it is under his jurisdiction, and subject to his rule, a circumstance based on tribal practices and tradition. Compared to the suspicious and antagonistic relationship between Head and both the South African and Botswanan governments, Sekoto is much less hostile. At the same time, however, he assigns his younger, "troublesome and unpopular" brother as administrator of the village, and in the characters of Matenge and his cohort Joas Tsepe we see decisions made by whim,

based on avarice, desire for personal gain, and sheer desire to assert power conferred by hereditary status. These depictions of government reveal Head's belief that the nation was not so much a community as a "set of administered categories that militated against her efforts to cultivate community" (Nixon 111). When left alone, however, the people of the nation, in this case Golema Mmidi, come together on their own to form a community based on respect, kindness, and a desire to ensure mutual success. Even Matenge's attempts to sabotage their efforts prove ineffective, allowing Golema Mmidi to become the nation that Head sought to inhabit.

The Advantages of Communal Living: Modern yet Ancient

In Golema Mmidi – unlike the rest of Matenge's territory – the villagers participate in a socialist experiment that does not recognize the rights of tribal rulers to live off of the labor of those under them. Elaine Campbell suggests, "products from individual efforts...are to be pooled so that the common resources can be reinvested by the village. This reflects traditional tribal activity while at the same time it rebels against the entrenched notion that the local chief has prior claim to a proportion of the produce" (84). This challenge to the traditional sense of tribalism reflects Head's belief in a socialism grounded in community, allied against any form of hereditary rule. In this way *RCG* displays sympathy for "the dispossessed of Africa, and her object is to ensure their survival, preferably above the subsistence level" (Campbell 84); thus, the novel not only expresses Head's need for a society based on the idea of a common good, but also a desire for political change. MacKenzie alleges that this thirst for change and

the willingness to take measures that will allow change to happen is based on the fact that traditional practices cannot provide relief from the issues that the villagers of Golema Mmidi face; continuing to do things the way they have always been done is not the key to resolving the poverty, starvation, and despair that afflicts the village (34). In order to find a resolution, they are willing to explore new options, leading them away from their tribal past and toward a communal future represented by Gilbert and his co-operative farming concept.

In addition to providing a place in which Head could feel at home after facing a lifetime of hostility and suspicion, the village and its inscription of traditional life appeals to what Eleni Coundouriotis refers to as a “historical continuity with precolonial times” (21). Focusing on precolonial notions of community, autonomy, and geographic discreteness, the idea of the village expresses both an anti-colonial sentiment and a desire for nationhood that is not influenced by colonialist practices, since the village engages in practices shaped by traditional beliefs and organic processes rather than customs imposed by outsiders. Head, Coundouriotis argues, “imagined the African village...as standing outside the nation-state, and in many respects, before it as a remnant of ancient Africa” (21). In this way, Golema Mmidi is simultaneously a rejection of colonialism, a symbol of the Africa Head believes is possible in the future, and a problematic reinscription – given her tendency to privilege Western farming practices over traditional forms of knowledge – of colonialist beliefs, an impulse that is both unsettling and symptomatic of her status as colonized subject.

Landscape: A Common Point in *RCG*, *SAF*, and *GIS*

As in *SAF* and *GIS*, the landscape is essential to the story. In “The Farm: A Concept in the Writing of Olive Schreiner, Pauline Smith, Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer, and Bessie Head,” Jean Marquard writes, “in South African literature, although the landscape of the Karoo, Southern Rhodesia...and Botswana are differentiated, the narrative usually provides in each case a further dimension of monotony” (295). In each case, Marquard asserts, “political and social anxiety is projected by the writer not only onto her protagonists but onto the physical environment itself” (295). While this is true in *SAF* and *GIS*, I do not think it is for *RCG*, where Head describes the Botswanan landscape as “bewitchingly beautiful” (*RCG* 11), and uses terms like “shafts of gold light” and “ranging in colour from a shimmering midnight blue to bright scarlet and molten gold” to describe the environment (*RCG* 10-11).

These descriptions stand in stark contrast to the way that Schreiner and Lessing introduce the empty scrub land of the *karoo* and the threatening world of the Rhodesian *veld*. Marquard goes on to argue that the land in these South African novels becomes an extension of the social environments at play (295); in *RCG*, however, the land – especially as a site of farming – allows the displaced characters to engage in what Robin Visel calls rituals of healing and regrowth (118). She contrasts this to the characterizations of farming in Schreiner and other white writers, describing the farms

in white fiction as alienating and violent (118). Like Schreiner and Lessing, Head came from and wrote about an area in which agriculture was a crucial part of existence. Unlike Schreiner and Lessing, however, Head's racial status changes her relationship to the farming process; unlike the white authors, Head's "coloured" designation provides a perspective on racial identity that Schreiner and Lessing do not share, and highlights "the differences between white colonial and black experiences of Africa: alienation versus community, sterility versus growth, the past versus the future" (Visel 123). In *SAF*, while the presence of native Africans is at least acknowledged, these characters do little more than carry out the work of the farm. Native characters in *GIS*, while more visible and essential to the novel's plot, are still basically two-dimensional – the motivations that lead Moses to kill Mary Turner are remain unexplored, and can only be guessed at. Comparisons between presentations of race within these novels allows for a myriad of observations about life on the farms of *SAF*, *GIS*, and *RCG*, but to reduce the lived realities of racial experiences to binary oppositions is to oversimplify those experiences.

Farm Novels: Creating a Place for Africans in Africa

J.M. Coetzee notes in *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*, "silence about the place of black labour is common...and represents a failure of imagination before the problem of how to integrate the dispossessed black man into the idyll (or in Schreiner's case the anti-idyll) of African pastoralism" (71-72). In *RCG*, however, there is nothing but black labor; thus, the novel can be seen as an attempt to

introduce native Africans into African pastoralism. The two white characters that appear in the novel – Gilbert, and the district officer George Appleby-Smith – are not actively engaged in doing the same type of work as the native Africans; Appleby-Smith reinforces the imperial power of Britain even as Botswana attempts to assert its own independence, and Gilbert provides assistance to the villagers as they incorporate his vision for making Golema Mmidi a successful farming and cattle cooperative using the concepts and strategies he learned as a student in England.

Many critics highlight Head's desire to find a home that reflects her perception of "Africanness" and that establishes a sense of what Marquard calls "human rather than national identity" (305). Further, although Marquard asserts that Head avoids discussing the consequences of white imperialist domination in Africa, the novel's insistence on the need to replace tribalism with something else – nationalism, humanism, collectivism – reflects an imperialist notion of progress, albeit one that is not based on maintaining rigid racial divisions. Returning to the concept of the farm novel, or *plaasroman* – a genre dedicated, Coetzee maintains, to "the preservation of a (Dutch) peasant rural order, or at least the preservation of the values of that order" (WW 5-6) and to "the Afrikaner's painful transition from farmer to townsman" (WW 63) – Anissa Talahite, in her discussion of a later Bessie Head novel, *A Question of Power*, argues "Head's idealization of the African land...could be interpreted as reminiscent of the pastoral genre in South African literature" (150). Suggesting that landscape serves as "a collective colonial memory" in white South African fiction, Talahite contends that the significance of works like *A Question of Power* – and *RCG*, I assert – is that within these

novels the farm becomes a space for communion, communication, and inclusion compared to their literary predecessors, which limit the interaction between black and white characters.

Land Ownership and the *Plaasroman*

As Talahite claims, the role of the farm, then, is to facilitate the synthesis of ideologies that served to isolate and deny the “other” (150). Modhumita Roy, in her discussion of *RCG*, touches on the utopian quality of the *plaasroman*. The *plaasroman*, she alleges, “reflected Afrikaner settler ideology functioning to justify the fiction of ‘natural’ ownership of land, obscuring thereby the contentious history of land appropriation and eviction of peoples. The rural farm, idyllic and pastoral, was of course a fantasy of homogeneity and genealogical continuity” (187). In *RCG*, Head responds to the idea of natural land ownership. Golema Mmidi is not portrayed as a place of natal belonging — residents of this village choose to settle there and come from all over, rewriting and writing their histories as they take up residence. In this way, the novel deconstructs the idea of land and farm as contributing to origin (Roy 187), yet again challenging the *plaasroman*’s conception of belonging.

Representing Race Beyond Color

Despite minimizing the importance of race in the novel, the only white characters — Gilbert and George Appleby-Smith — are portrayed as helpful and congenial, while the evils of tribalism are clearly represented by Matenge, the village

subchief, who is “troublesome,” “unpopular,” avaricious, and unpleasant (Head, *RCG* 17). James M. Garrett argues that “these simple and clear distinctions between good and evil, between heroes and villains, are characteristic of romance and the placement of such romance elements...offers the possibility of other narratives, narratives of a possible Utopian transformation” (125). Elements of a utopian society have been noted by a wide array of critics (Garrett, Ogwude, and Roy); more interesting than the possibility of utopia in Golema Mmidi is a consideration of why Head invokes such an image. One possibility, Garrett suggests, is that within both a utopian society and a dysfunctional one – like South Africa – evil is clearly delineated, and thus, can be eliminated easily (126). That only a day’s walk from the institutionalized racism of South Africa exists a place like Golema Mmidi in which “a white man can marry a black woman and no one mentions race, a place where technology and modernization are seen as improving the condition of the community and not as contributing to the oppression of the Other” represents a symbolic resolution of the issues that drove Head from her native country (Garrett 126). Garrett goes on to suggest, however, that in this place “a white man is the symbol for progress and a black man is the symbol for oppression,” referring to Gilbert’s role in guiding the village to agricultural success and to Matenge’s determination to maintain traditional practices and tribal customs without regard for their effects on individuals. Garrett’s analysis, although useful, presents a simplistic presentation of village life that reinforces the problematic nature of the novel’s consideration of race relations; although there is some truth to his analysis, suggesting that because progress is represented in the form of a white man with ties to

the colonial power it is disingenuous is to discount all of the positive change that Gilbert's plan provides. Under his scheme, for example, the men of Golema Mmidi would no longer have to spend the majority of the year away from the village at the cattle post since the village itself would be the center of the cattle cooperative. Having the men at home would lessen some of the burden on the village women, and offer a chance for families to spend more time together.

Utopia and the Pastoral

In addition to making it easy to discriminate between good and evil, another reason for invoking the image of utopia is to highlight the idea of an escape from reality. Although Garrett compares this to the concept of the pastoral, in which the idylls and hardships of rural life provide an outlet for men and women to live their lives free from the hypocrisy of the urban setting, rather than escaping to the country, it seems more likely that people would seek out an opportunity to live in a utopia, a place of perfection. "The movement towards Utopia is one towards the future, while the movement towards the pastoral is in the opposite direction, towards the past" (Garrett 127); *RCG*, with its focus on progress and criticism of tribalism and South Africa, seems to point to utopia, not the pastoral. As a utopia, however, Golema Mmidi is not a haven of peace. Arthur Ravenscroft asserts that while the village may be a retreat from the violence of their earlier experiences, it is a place of tough love, a village that demands hard labor, ongoing attention to crisis, and persistent improvisation and ingenuity to handle the many issues that arise (177). This hard labor and need for vigilance,

however, “has the power to draw people closer together, thereby fostering togetherness,” which is, Sophia Obiajulu Ogwude contends, yet another characteristic of utopia (73). Working together to address the problems that confront the village fosters a sense of belonging for all members of the community, reinforcing the notion of the interdependence of all human beings. In other words, as Roy suggests, the utopia of Golema Mmidi is “a complicated, somewhat compromised attempt at imagining cooperation...as a place that humans labour to engender” (180). The village is not heaven on earth, but a place that allows people to create and work toward a positive future that addresses the conditions that make southern Africa a place to flee from (Roy 180-181), and explores what can be “achieved through collective will and cooperative labour, here and now, rather than in some unspecified future” (Roy 182). Thus, rather than being an escape from reality, Golema Mmidi offers a way of running toward the future, toward one that offers the possibility of personal and economic independence; thus, perhaps it is a utopia, an escape from the oppression, sorrow, and uncertainty that exists elsewhere in Botswana and South Africa.

While the novel itself points toward the future rather than towards the past, a hallmark of utopian versus pastoral literature, examining how the novel utilizes the pastoral to comment on the concept of sustainability and other ecological concerns is a worthwhile task. In “The Discourse of Sustainable Farming and the Environment in Bessie Head’s *When Rain Clouds Gather*” Dokubo Melford Goodhead contends that Head uses the pastoral in *RCG* to “explore the concept of sustainability in a region of the earth where pre-industrial agriculture, disastrous farming practices, poverty, droughts...and

the imperative of raising the shoeless out of hunger intersect" (32). Despite the fact that the novel privileges Gilbert and his Western ways – techniques and strategies that not only grow out of the imperialist tradition, but that are informed by the knowledge collected through the practice and institution of colonialism – Goodhead argues that *RCG* is actually a critique of "imperial expropriation of land and the exploitation of the colonized" (35). He comes to this conclusion from the fact that Gilbert, representative of imperialism and colonialism given his race and cultural identity, does not take land from the people of Golema Mmidi. Instead, Goodhead insists, Gilbert works with the villagers to develop sustainable crops and to increase the harvest (35). Further, he highlights Gilbert's role in destroying Matenge's cattle-speculating business by helping the villagers form a cooperative that, with the government's backing, could compete against the monopolies that had been in control of the cattle trade (Head, *RCG* 40).

That Matenge, a native African, would take advantage of his own people by colluding with colonialists in order to maintain control of his cattle-speculating business while Gilbert, a white man from Britain, would work with the Africans to help them succeed inverts an assumed connection between race and exploitation. In *RCG*, then, Head "represents Gilbert as doing his work in opposition to both the colonial settlers who make their enormous wealth from the ill-fed cattle of the peasants and the feudal chiefs, who use their enormous power over the people to exploit them" (Goodhead 36).

Beyond Binary Oppositions: The Postcolonial Georgic

While Goodhead's reading of *RCG* relies on more than just binary oppositions like white/good and black/bad, making his assertions easier to accept, they are nonetheless predicated on the idea that in order to succeed in their agricultural endeavors, the people of Golema Mmidi need intervention from an outside source. Such a belief, while perhaps correct, also reinforces the contention that traditional farming practices are not sustainable, will not provide enough food for the village, and privileges Western technologies over long-established modes of agricultural production. Goodhead asserts that Head's position is that because the region is prone to drought and had trouble producing enough food to sustain its population, such intervention is warranted.

Considering *RCG* as an example of a postcolonial georgic can provide useful results. While Tulloch acknowledges the history of the georgic as a predominantly European form, and one informed by pastoral issues and Western concerns, she also recognizes the intersection of the form with texts like *RCG* that were written by "non-Europeans who received an essentially Western education, as Head did," and with analyses of literature of farming (138). These intersections, Tulloch suggests, provide opportunities for critics, especially those engaged in ecocriticism, to consider how texts like *RCG* interact with the georgic and work to rehabilitate the form (138). At the same time, however, she maintains that critics participating in this project need to remain cognizant of the fact that all agricultural processes – whether small-scale or commercial – are "disruptive to the non-human environment, creating new local

ecosystems” and suppress, change, and/or eliminate the previously existing ecosystem, “imposing a change on the pre-existing ecological relationships that would have...evolved differently” (138). Recognizing that changes will result from the imposition of any new practices – especially those that diverge substantially from traditional methods – is imperative since those changes could have unintentional consequences on the food security (Tulloch 138). For example, despite Gilbert’s training and ongoing research into ways to ensure that farming practices are in sync with Golema Mmidi’s natural environment, many villagers are hesitant to adopt suggestions that challenge their long-standing beliefs.

Because Botswana often experiences periods of sustained drought, and water is always in short supply, much research has been carried out on drought-resistant strains of seed. Discovering that a type of millet had been bred that could germinate in only three inches of rain, that was resistant to a parasite that often destroyed other crops grown in the area, and was also less likely to be scavenged by local wildlife, Gilbert recommends to the villagers that they begin planting this millet (Head, RCG 35). The villagers, however, decline to do so because “certain minority tribes, traditionally considered inferior, had long had a liking for millet and had always grown it as part of the season’s crop. Therefore, other tribes who considered themselves superior would not grow it nor eat it” (RCG 36). For centuries people had grown the same crops in much the same way, participating in subsistence farming that enabled them to survive but not to thrive. Head writes, “somewhere along the line they had become mixed up with tribal traditions” and it was difficult for the villagers to see beyond the safety of

tradition to the truth that there could be “tough little plants...that were easy to grow and well able to stand up to rigorous conditions and could provide...food” (RCG 37). Gilbert’s approach—to grow crops that are better suited to the village’s natural environment and that can provide the most sustenance as opposed to the traditional sustenance—requires the people of Golema Mmidi to change the way they interact with and think about food.

Gilbert: The Great White Help?

The lack of complementarity between nature and agriculture is both the impetus for Gilbert’s desire to increase crop output and a result of his techniques. On one hand, because the villagers are hesitant to grow crops other than what is familiar to them, they do not take advantage of seeds that are well-suited to their area and that require less water than traditional grains. Their tribal beliefs keep them from adopting practices that would enable them to produce a cash crop that could help them move away from subsistence farming (Head, RCG 36). On the other hand, Gilbert’s insistence on planting non-native crops like Turkish tobacco, which he believes will thrive in Botswana, means that land and resources like water and labor will be expended on a product that cannot provide sustenance except through its exchange value. He admits that it is a cash crop as opposed to a food staple, saying, ““if everyone in Golema Mmidi grows a bit and we market it co-operatively—why, we’ll all be rich in no time. The only problem we’re faced with is the flatness of the land. It needs a slight slope and well-drained soil. We’ll either have to create this artificially or lay down pipes”” (Head, RCG 55). Gilbert’s focus

on tobacco — a cash crop as opposed to a food staple — connects *RCG* to *GIS*. Like Mary Turner, who sees growing tobacco as a way to repay their many debts and to leave poverty behind (Lessing, *GIS* 138), Gilbert believes the crop will allow Golema Mmidi to compete in the global farming economy. Neither Mary nor Gilbert seems to recognize the effect that the crop has on the soil; despite the fact that it is profitable, Dick Turner describes it as “an inhuman crop,” (*GIS* 141) as it depletes the soil and provides no sustenance. Despite this, Gilbert encourages the villagers to focus on growing tobacco to the exclusion of other crops, despite the work that must be done to prepare for this undertaking.

That Gilbert understands the actions that must be taken in order to make Golema Mmidi an appropriate site for growing tobacco suggests an awareness of the village’s environment — its climate, elevation, soil make-up, etc. In her analysis of Gilbert’s focus on developing tobacco as a cash crop, Tulloch notes that he claims it will “finance the development of agriculture along modern, high-input lines, bringing material comfort and good education to the community” (144). In spite of this, she argues, the process of introducing the tobacco, a non-indigenous plant, is depicted as both socially and environmentally disruptive, and requires “violent preparation of the land” that “figuratively anticipates the fact that the traditional pastoral way of subsistence farming is...being radically transformed, to be supplanted by a modern yet disruptive one based on trade, fencing, irrigation, and scientific techniques for increasing yield...” (Tulloch 144).

While Head characterizes Gilbert as possessing the knowledge that will enable the villagers of Golema Mmidi to move beyond subsistence farming, it is important to note that many of the suggestions he makes would have contributed to adverse conditions for farming. Tulloch explains, “Head would not have been in Botswana long enough to acquire knowledge about...the complexity of the social and physical demands of dryland ecology” (141). Thus, her depiction of the strategies Gilbert recommends “may have unwittingly contributed to the perpetuation of what became a contentious model about the process of dryland degradation....[and] she also describes agricultural solutions that have proven to be highly problematic for the region” (Tulloch 141).

“Keeping Up with the Joneses”: A Reasonable Goal in Golema Mmidi?

In his excitement to get the tobacco project started, Gilbert shows no concern for the long-term effects his project might have on the land, despite his own research into ways to replenish the depleted soil of the area. Upon his arrival in Golema Mmidi, Gilbert notes “that the carrot-seed showed a preference for impoverished soil” and discovers that it can “build up the humus layer in impoverished soil” allowing other species of grass to grow (Head, *RCG* 31). This shift – from concern for the health of the soil and the environment to a preoccupation with cash cropping, albeit with humanitarian goals as the catalyst – ends when he begins to question the implications of his farming enterprise. Gilbert asks himself, “What was he looking for? What was he doing? Agriculture? The need for a poor country to catch up with the Joneses in the rich

countries? Should super-highways and skyscrapers replace the dusty footpaths and thorn scrub?" (Head, *RCG* 179). Gilbert's response signals a sense of nostalgia for a way of life that he has helped to put into jeopardy by implementing modern practices and insisting on the cultivation of foreign crops.

The Effects of Modern Farming

In his reading of *RCG*, Goodhead concludes that the novel is a counter-imperial georgic and concerned with "cosmopolitan relationships" (36). He counters Tulloch's work directly, disputing her contention that Gilbert's tobacco scheme requires the creation of drainage pits that will capture extra water for the crop, thereby affecting the community's ongoing water needs and contributing to the increased workload of the village women (37). Goodhead reads the drainage pits as a temporary measure, to be replaced by an additional borehole once the project can sustain itself financially, but I think his reading misses the point. Tulloch is clearly concerned with the effects of changing the landscape to accommodate the cultivation of a non-native plant that requires additional water, maintenance, and processing to ensure a successful harvest. To assure that the tobacco is cured properly, special huts must be built — a project that requires additional work by the village women and that does not increase the amount of food available for consumption, except by potentially adding to the goods the village co-operative has available to sell. The growing of tobacco rather than a crop requiring less labor to harvest and prepare it or one that has nutritional and use-value as opposed to only exchange-value, Jonathan Highfield suggests, reinforces the oppression of

colonial farming practices (112), thereby creating a neocolonial system – perhaps one kinder and gentler than the original – under Gilbert’s control.

Despite Gilbert’s knowledge of farming practices and role as advisor to the people of Golema Mmidi, the ones responsible for the actual work of farming are the women of the village. Head notes that Batswana women are industrious, crediting them with the bulk of the work in the village: “no men ever worked harder than Batswana women, for the whole burden of providing food for big families rested with them” (RCG 99). Despite the fact that Head was not an expert in agriculture, Eilersen reports that she got the majority of her background information from Oxfam, which had done research in Botswana in 1965. Head also had an agricultural officer check all of her facts (Eilersen 100). Highfield, however, insists that she “remains oblivious to the negative effects ‘modernizing’ agriculture had on the lives of the women she otherwise so sensitively portrays” (106). Further, in “Agriculture and Healing: Transforming Space, Transforming Trauma in Bessie Head’s *When Rain Clouds Gather*,” Maureen Fielding asserts that the novel links criticism of colonial administration in the area, traditional methods of cattle farming, and lack of access for women to information about agricultural processes to a need for change in the community to prepare for a better future (14).

While Highfield remains skeptical of the results of Gilbert’s interventions and their effect on food and foodways in Botswana, Fielding sees the cultivation of land in Golema Mmidi “from cruel and traumatizing to controlled and cultivated areas” as a metaphor for the changes that take place within the society (18). Focusing on the ways

that each villager has been wounded – psychically or otherwise – Fielding notes that by fencing in areas to promote the growth of particular crops, creating drainage pits and/or boreholes to provide water for plants and cattle, and building drying sheds to assist in the preparation of tobacco, the villagers of Golema Mmidi not only “overcome nature, poverty, and starvation,” but engage in activities that help them heal internally (18). In this way, Fielding suggests, the process of participating in the active development and management of the land allows the villagers to reclaim power over their own lives and to resist being victims of both nature and others that attempt to dominate them (20).

Subsistence Farming in Africa

To understand Highfield’s concerns – and his point – some background is needed. In her 1982 essay “African Women,” Margaret Strobel explains that women form the backbone of African subsistence farming, performing somewhere between 60-70% of the agricultural work (110). Despite this, men were, before the introduction of capitalist labor system, the primary beneficiaries of the labor given that they control – through marriage and custom – the activities and products of women within their tribes (Strobel 110). After colonialism, men’s contributions to the farming process was often diminished due to the requirement that they work for white settlers; “women’s work load also increased because of the impoverishment of the land from intensified farming, which was caused...by population increase...the production of food surpluses for urban markets, and the replacement of subsistence production by export cash crops”

(Strobel 112). In some instances, Strobel suggests, women resisted growing cash crops because they had little control over the products of such labor (Strobel 112). Further, Strobel contends, once men began to leave the farm, taking whatever jobs were available to them under the colonial system, the “below-subsistence wages” they received were based on the notion that females participating in farming could provide for the rest of the families’ needs (115). Women, then, are not just assisting in the work of the farm, they are performing the majority of the labor. In Golema Mmidi especially, where the men are gone for most of the year tending to the cattle, the women are the farmers. “Women,” Head explains, “were on the land 365 days of the year while the men shuttled to and fro with the cattle” (RCG 37). When the villagers are hesitant to accept Gilbert’s plans, he turns to the women, asking, “how could a start be made? How could people and knowledge be brought together? Could the women of the village be given some instruction? ... Perhaps all change in the long run would depend on the women of the country...” (RCG 37). While Gilbert seems convinced of the success of his project, Highfield notes that the villagers’ hesitance is not unreasonable given “the history of land theft and the threat of agricultural servitude under both Afrikaner and British farmers” (109). Further, Gilbert’s emphasis on cash cropping suggests that his goal may diverge from the women of Golema Mmidi who are concerned about feeding their families as opposed to turning their village into a successful commercial farm. As Highfield contends, “the pressure to develop agriculture that will ‘properly feed the world’ will take more and more labor away from local food production” (109). In contrast to this, RCG favors Gilbert’s approach – the cultivation of foreign crops like

millet and tobacco that will produce the results that will allow Golema Mmidi to become the kind of co-operative that Gilbert envisions.

Politics and Farming: The Development of African Society

Gilbert's plans for the co-operative – introducing non-native plants and instructing the villagers in how to harvest them successfully – is reflected in his political beliefs. “What we need here is a dictatorship that will feed, clothe and educate a people” (Head, *RCG* 77). Alan Ramón Ward contends that Gilbert believes “progress must be imported by poorer countries from richer ones with the requisite knowledge, and that it must be forced upon a people if necessary” (3). He is, Eilersen argues, portrayed as an idealist, but also as “a peripatetic handbook on agricultural methods” (97); in fact, after he marries Maria, Gilbert tells her, “you’re my wife now and you have to do as I say. If I go back to England, you go there too” (Head, *RCG* 98). Gilbert’s reference to his homeland so soon after his wedding suggests that a return is quite possible; further, that he insists on securing Maria’s agreement indicates that this is an ongoing concern. Additionally, the tone he uses to tell Maria that he expects her to accompany him to England should he decide to leave is quite different from his usual demeanor, hinting that he may be concerned about her willingness to follow him.

In contrast to Gilbert, Makhaya, a native African, favors a “trial and error” (Head, *RCG* 78) approach that is reminiscent of traditional methods of farming. He “envisions an organic development of progressive ideas and their democratic implementation, whether or not the end result is a mess” (Ward 3). At the same time,

however, Makhaya claims to be apolitical, prefers to avoid political discussions, and is thoroughly disgusted by South Africa's treatment of black citizens and tribal practices, so he does not comment on the connection between Gilbert's tendency to privilege European knowledge and methods over traditional ways. Ward argues that Makhaya represents an "honest and convincing African nationalism," one that is contrasted to the corrupt and morally bankrupt nationalism symbolized by Joas Tsepe (4); that Makhaya does not challenge Gilbert's imposition of Western farming practices on the village, or question whether these practices are good for Golema Mmidi suggests that while he is concerned about the future of Africa, "his politics are seldom more than just a reaction to injustice" (Ward 4). Since Gilbert's methods are inclusive and he treats the villagers with respect, Makhaya spends little time questioning the impact of his suggestions or contemplating whether Gilbert's scheme will create the progress he hopes for. Even when the village experiences the worst drought in its history leading to the death of hundreds of heads of cattle, Makhaya does not question Gilbert's plans. While the rest of the villagers wonder how they will recover from the loss of their cattle, Gilbert takes the opportunity to implement a new plan. "'What would you say if I said that the deaths of all these cattle...are a miracle? What would you say if I said I was hoping it would happen?' he asked" (Head, RCG 149). Taking advantage of the drastically reduced herd, Gilbert slaughters the dying cattle to raise funds for the cattle co-operative, and while this act provides for the community of Golema Mmidi, Ward points out that in killing the cattle Gilbert shows little understanding of the Batswana and their connection to the animals (9). In the novel, Head explains, "if there was no

food or water for a man, then there was nothing for his cattle either. Both were as close to each other as breathing, and it has never been regarded as strange that a man and his cattle lived the same life" (142). That Gilbert fails to recognize this connection suggests that he is the dictator he believes Africa needs in order to move into the modern age; benign, perhaps, but still a dictator.

In his discussion of the novel, Craig MacKenzie suggests that Gilbert and Makhaya's political beliefs are stimulated to the point of action by the combination of Paramount Chief Sekoto and Colonial Administrator George Appleby-Smith. "Sekoto is opposed to tribalism in its most narrow and insidious form," he asserts, "despite the benefits he accrues by virtue of his position in the system. Appleby-Smith represents a curious mixture of officious authoritarianism and humane realism" (36). Together, MacKenzie suggests, the two facilitate the work of Gilbert and Makhaya – Sekoto by allowing Gilbert's work to happen without obstruction despite Matenge's attempts to intervene, and Appleby-Smith by "sticking his neck out" for Makhaya despite Matenge's attempts to have him deported.

While Makhaya maintains that he does not engage in politics, his attitude toward South Africa's treatment of black citizens, his feelings about tribalism, and his desire to make change by participating in activities that would de-stabilize the current regime all point to political interest, albeit a dynamic and uncertain one. "Makhaya voices Bessie's own confusion most particularly," Eilersen states, "when, while recognising his own background of persecution in Africa, he still feels distaste for the 'hate-making political ideologies' intended to counter this persecution" (97). It is clear that Makhaya's politics

reflect Head's belief that "black people can work effectively for their own well-being in a free society" (Ogwude 76); however, Makhaya still accepts as truth Gilbert's version of the future, and his plans to modernize the village and implement foreign farming practices. This acceptance is problematic because of his reliance on Gilbert and his catalog of Western knowledge, which could be seen as neocolonialism, or at the very least, a reinscription of colonialist values.

Food as Politics

Like Gilbert, Makhaya tends to avoid traditional cuisine, which Highfield argues elevates colonial foods over native specialties. He writes, "Head clearly values European food above Southern African; 'good food' is imported...while local food has a 'weird taste' and is cooked by 'the barefoot, illiterate women of Golema Mmidi'" (Highfield 115), and there are signs that European food will win out. Gilbert's plan to grow millet—which is better suited to the region's environment and can provide the sustenance the village needs either itself or as a cash crop—has already been accepted by Dinorego, who grows it on his own land after Gilbert convinces him of its potential despite its stigma (Head, *RCG* 36). Unfortunately, the villagers' willingness to follow Gilbert's lead reflects Head's tendency to "romanticize the role of outside knowledge in the agriculture of Botswana, ignoring the negative effects caused by the importation of agricultural techniques and foodways on the lives of the very women about whom she wrote so passionately" (Highfield 117). This suggests that concerns about food availability may have the power to trump long-held prejudices relating to tribal

practices, allowing a foreign cultivar to gain popularity despite traditional prejudices. That the villagers accept Gilbert's vision of co-operative farming with little hesitance and almost no argument suggests what MacKenzie calls a lack of awareness of what the project stands for, of "what it means to the economic life of the subsistence dwellers of Golema Mmidi" (38). Although Gilbert does not seem to be driven by nefarious motives, he is driven by personal desires – his feelings for Maria, a need to be successful in his endeavor, and an urgency to avoid returning to the "upper-middle-class background into which he had been born, where the women all wore pearls, and everyone was nice and polite to everyone, and you could not tell friend from foe behind the polite brittle smiles" (Head, *RCG* 97). Hence, it is imperative that he convince the villagers to commit to his scheme; because the initial plot was established with funds from grants and donations, "he was under pressure to make the farm economically viable" (Head, *RCG* 34), something that can support itself. Thus, despite creating a climate of change, and a desire for change among the villagers, *RCG* presents an uncertain future given its reinscription of colonial values and its tendency to privilege Western ways over traditional forms of knowledge.

CONCLUSION:

DECOLONIZING THE FARM: FURTHERING AN 'ANTI' AGENDA

The novels *SAF*, *GIS*, and *RCG* are born from and represent three time periods that appear to be quite different in terms of locale and politics. It seems at first that all the novels have in common is a farm setting, but closer inspection reveals that while they may not show a clear linear progression in their portrayal of issues such as women's rights, racial inequality, and the politics of colonialism, the novels do provide a useful way to reconsider the African farm as a site of nascent protest against the oppressive practices of colonial and postcolonial South Africa, Rhodesia, and Botswana. Further, by not eliding the presence and importance of black labor in creating and maintaining the African farm, these novels address and write back to problems with the plaasroman genre as it applies to the experience of farm life in colonial and postcolonial South Africa.

The Politics of *SAF*: A Move towards Recognizing Equality

SAF, published in 1883, shows an attempt to navigate and draw together discourses of race, class, and gender at the end of the nineteenth century. Through the character of Lyndall, Olive Schreiner comments on the position of women in society,

developing a well-defined feminism that illustrates her frustration with society's unwillingness to grant women status equal to men. Women are valued for their beauty and have power only as wives and mothers; even these roles, she argues, have value because they are important to men, so the superficial authority they gain by taking on these roles is mediated by men's acknowledgement of the significance of these constructs. The only power she has, Lyndall believes, is her beauty, her ability to use her appearance to get what she wants from the men that desire her; even this power, however, has limits — once a man possesses her completely he will no longer be as attracted to her and her ability to retain control will be reduced. For this reason, she will not marry her lover despite his entreaties and her need to secure his protection given her situation; she believes his support will be temporary. And although neither Em nor Tant' Sannie comment directly on the position of women in society, that both women feel compelled to find husbands indicates that Lyndall is right; without the authority that the role of wife gives them, Em and Sannie are at the mercy of fate.

In addition to discussing the role of women, *SAF* begins to explore the position of native Africans in South Africa. Although the novel does not call explicitly for racial equality, Schreiner's depiction of the interaction between Otto and the Hottentot maid upon his firing suggests an acknowledgement of the existence of black agency. While Otto expects the maid to support him given that they are friends (Schreiner 49), the maid instead seems to enjoy his distress, egging Tant' Sannie on as she fires him, and even tossing a few mealie grains into her mouth to enjoy as she watches the spectacle (Schreiner 49). The maid's behavior indicates that Schreiner is comfortable creating

black characters that express their own opinions, and while the maid does not further an anti-racist agenda, that she articulates a position explicitly contrary to one of the white men considered her superior can be read as Schreiner's tacit acknowledgement of and support for black agency.

Although her support for native Africans is not explicit, that it is present at all in a novel by a white South African is telling. Placing *SAF* on a spectrum in which native Africans generally fulfill the prejudices and expectations of white society allows us to consider that Schreiner's presentation of native characters still diverges from native Africans as portrayed in the *plaasroman*, the predecessor genre. As previously discussed, the *plaasroman* is silent about the presence of black Africans; the genre as a whole promotes the idea of white South African supremacy – Boer supremacy – by eliding the contributions, and even existence, of native Africans to the establishment and success of colonial farms (Coetzee, WW11). Additionally, these texts were written almost exclusively in Afrikaans, meaning that works by South Africans of British descent were dismissed from the history. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin suggest that language “becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of ‘truth,’ ‘order,’ and ‘reality’ become established” (7). Thus, the connection between the genre and the language, Afrikaans, meant that only the experience of farm life as told by Afrikaners (Boers) was included in the official farm novel genre. Farm novels by British South Africans writing in English became, in Ashcroft, et al.'s contention, supplementary material in which those outside of the Boer primacy could tell their stories.

In “Interpreting South Africa to Britain—Olive Schreiner, Boers, and Africans,” Paula M. Krebs notes that Schreiner has been the subject of a great deal of criticism surrounding her discussion of black South Africans within the context of nationalism (110). Krebs argues that while many critics either celebrate Schreiner for “her progressivism in not being as bad as everybody else” in her depiction and analysis of the place of native Africans in society or rebuke her for “letting her feminism distract her from the *real* struggles of South Africa” (110, original italics), Schreiner’s concept of racial difference is as much about the differences between Boer and Briton as it is about white and black (Krebs 110). Without taking away from Krebs’ assertion, we can still appreciate Schreiner’s willingness to at least *think* about the place of the native African in Africa.

Then, as now, the idea of race was politically charged, Krebs asserts, yet the many definitions of race that were circulating made the concept difficult to define (111). Race was conceived as ethnicity, nationality, and color, and each definition was connected to a specific political aim (Krebs 111). In Schreiner’s case, her conception of race was designed to create a South African identity that was distinct from the country’s colonial English and Boer past, and in this way her definition of race “takes account of Africans without actually incorporating them” (Krebs 110). Thus, that Schreiner even mentions these characters suggests a desire to at least begin the process of reinserting black Africans in the history of South African farms, and that she does so in an extremely early text that both reflects the racial tension of the time and anticipates the ongoing racism that would lead to the legislated segregation of apartheid underscores

the importance of *SAF* as a challenge to and replacement for the *plaasroman* and as an example of the nascent anti-colonialism, feminism, and anti-feminism that was brewing on the *karoo* even during Schreiner's time.

Re-thinking the Black Peril: Intimacy becomes Political in Rhodesia

Doris Lessing's novel, *The Grass is Singing (GIS)*, was published in 1950, well after *SAF*, and while Rhodesia did not participate in the institutionalized practices of apartheid, its politics were mired in a racist agenda that kept native Africans subordinate to whites. The novel uses an everyday fear – that of the black peril, or incidents of alleged sexual violence by black men against white women – to comment on the need for social change. In "Black and White: The 'Perils of Sex' in Colonial Zimbabwe" John Pape asserts that the idea of black peril was used to solidify both racial and gender differences and to construct a white male social order (par. 3). Within this structure the intimacy of domestic contact between white women and their native African servants created a need for white settlers to minimize the significance of these domestic relationships by suggesting that native males were purely sexual beings completely unable to control their sexual urges. Thus, rather than allowing for the possibility of meaningful connection between white women and native African men, the ideal of the "black peril" meant that any relationship between the two was based solely on the fear of unwanted sexual interaction and any attempt to avoid or conceal it.

Forced to take on a native houseboy, Mary Turner fires a succession of servants before being told by her husband Dick that she must "'keep this boy'" (Lessing, *GIS*

167). Thus, Mary is compelled to interact with Moses, to whom she seems unwillingly attracted. More interesting, however, than the fact of her attraction to Moses is the reason for this connection. Despite wanting to get rid of him initially, after Dick warns her not to, Mary begs Moses to stay. Although the text asserts that Mary's reason for asking him to remain is to avoid Dick's anger, as "she could not face it...she simply could not go through scenes with Dick," her physiological and emotional responses to Moses' notice of intent to quit suggests she feels a more personal connection to him (171). Because the prospect of a personal connection between Mary and Moses is impossible within the constraints of Rhodesian society, their relationship cannot be conceived of other than as an example of black peril, since as Pape argues, black peril is the only way for the racist Rhodesian mind to conceive of any interaction between native men and white women—the thought of a human connection is completely out of the question (par. 39).

If Mary and Moses have a relationship based on mutual respect and Moses treats Mary with concern because he recognizes that she is suffering from some kind of trauma, white Rhodesian society has to acknowledge that native Africans are people too. While Lessing portrays Moses with some sympathy, characterizing him as kind toward Mary when she needs it most (Lessing, *GIS* 181-183), her failure to present Moses' motivations is not only a flaw in the novel, but an indication that even though she is concerned with improving conditions for native Africans in Rhodesian society, she is still a product of her time. Writing a novel that explicitly challenged the long-held beliefs of an entire geographical area might not have been the best way to ensure her

career would continue, or to assure that residents of Rhodesia and South Africa would read her novel.

While we might wish that Lessing had been more vocal in her condemnation of the treatment of native African workers by whites in 1950s Rhodesia, we cannot ignore the fact that *GIS* does acknowledge the system of racism that was in place, and exposes the racist practices that led to Mary Turner's death. Pape notes that domestic servants within white Rhodesian households were subjected to both emotional and physical degradation. Compared to beasts of burden, and treated like animals, native African servants were often beaten by employers. The *sjambok*, or cattle prod, was often used, and workers could be prosecuted for refusing to obey any reasonable command, or engaging in behavior or language deemed abusive or insulting to the employer, his wife, or his children (par. 38). "Within such an extensive system of labour coercion," Pape argues, the idea of sexual attacks on the women of the household seems "like one of the few possible outlets for exacting justifiable revenge" (par. 38). Although Pape is trying to point out that native African domestic workers had few methods for demonstrating their extreme dissatisfaction with working conditions and their treatment by employers, the notion that the only recourse they had was to rape white women not only infantilizes these men, but plays into and reconstitutes the idea of black peril.

The true nature of the relationship between Mary and Moses is uncertain. Whether the two engage in sexual intercourse cannot be supported definitively by the novel, but what is clear is that their interaction causes unease among the white

Rhodesian farming community. That Mary and Moses might find a way to connect that in a way lets each of them see the other as a human being challenges the social constructs of race and gender within their society. By challenging accepted roles, Moses and Mary expose themselves to punishment. Moses kills Mary for reasons that are never made clear to us. Lessing writes, “what thoughts of regret, or pity, or perhaps even wounded human affection were compounded with the satisfaction of his completed revenge, it is impossible to say” (*GIS* 238). There is some suggestion that Moses stabs Mary to avenge her treatment of him in the field, or perhaps as a symbolic assault against imperialism, colonialism, and racism, but in any case, after killing her he flees the scene and seems content to wait for his inevitable capture. Given the racist systems in place during the time of the novel it seems likely that Moses would know his fate would include the death penalty, but the text suggests that although he would be killed for having murdered a white woman, his fate was sealed the moment Mary began to see him as human as opposed to just another native African.

Mary’s death, then, is less tragic than the transgression of admitting that a white woman “can have human relationship, whether for good or for evil, with a black person” (Lessing, *GIS* 21). In this sense, Mary’s sin is perhaps more egregious than Moses’; killing or raping a white woman is expected – after all, black men are merely animals. A white woman believing that a native African man is human and forming a human connection to him, well, that is unforgivable. And so despite the problems with the novel and any criticisms modern readers might have with it, in the end Lessing’s point is this: Mary’s death is tragic. But so is believing in the rhetoric of racism that

creates a society that considers Mary's actions more scandalous than Moses' and that creates an environment in which a man feels his only recourse is violence.

Acknowledging and Escaping the "Psychopolitical Terrorism of Apartheid": Creating a Space for Work and a Working Space

In confronting issues of social change, politics, and the conflict between tradition and science, Bessie Head's novel *When Rain Clouds Gather* (RCG) addresses a myriad of concerns brought up by imperialism, colonialism, and the racist policies of South African apartheid even outside of South Africa's borders. The only novel in which native African characters are portrayed as fully developed individuals with clear motivations for their actions, the text remains problematic in that it appears to favor a Western perception of knowledge over traditional ways of knowing.

To get away from this reading of RCG, we can look to Annie Gagiano's work *Achebe, Head, and Marechera: On Power and Change in Africa*. In her discussion of RCG, Gagiano contends that the novel should be considered as having both an "'inspirational' intention" as well as a "commitment to the everyday and the real" (136) that can be seen in Head's portrayal of the many threats that the villagers of Golema Mmidi continue to face, even after they begin to experience psychic healing as part of the community. Even though they have migrated to a "free country" – Botswana (Head 4), which Head contrasts to South Africa, residents are still at the mercy of environmental factors when it comes to the harvest and food availability, and there are a number of other menaces that could destroy their fragile community – Matenge's

thirst for power, the proximity of Botswana to South Africa and its enforced practices of racism, and the uncertain future of colonialist traditions in the region, to name just a few. Adding to this depiction of the situation in Golema Mmidi, Joyce Johnson in “Escaping ‘the heat of the sun’: *When Rain Clouds Gather*,” asserts that Head’s move from South Africa to Botswana in the period immediately preceding Botswanan independence complemented Head’s sense of “white oppression with a close up view of a traditional African elite” that created for her a notion that while the white supremacy systematically enforced by apartheid was not the answer, neither was the self-serving, power-hungry opportunism of tribalism she observed in Botswana (54) represented so powerfully by figures like Matenge and even Sekoto.

Although it is easy to criticize Head for her willingness to accept Gilbert’s expertise over the traditional knowledge of the villagers, especially given that he does not have any practical experience farming the area, Gagliano points out that the villagers’ initial reluctance to accept Gilbert’s suggestions reinforces the tribalist practices of the area. The “irrational blocking out of literally life-improving knowledge and skills...arouse Head’s wry sense of the stultifying effects of this form of social power” (Gagliano 138). By rejecting Gilbert’s suggestions, the villagers of Golema Mmidi actually maintain the conservatism, the rigid gender roles prescribed by tribal and colonialist society, and preserve the male power exploitation they seek to escape (Gagliano 138). Change comes when Dinorego begins to accept Gilbert as a source of knowledge, encouraging the rest of the residents to do so as well.

While it is easy to criticize Head for her willingness to privilege the white man's expertise, we can also read her acceptance of Gilbert as an authority in the field of agriculture as a turn towards modernity and away from the tribalism represented by Matenge, Joas Tsepe, and Sekoto, and the colonialism characterized by George Appleby. Johnson suggests that Head "declines to make an incisive political point, ridiculing the folly of extremism rather than a particular ideological viewpoint" (55), but in declining to denounce colonialist practices, she leaves open the interpretation that they have value. Even in their most benign forms, the tribalism and colonialism of Head's time reinforce practices that led to the abuses from which Makhaya, Dinorego, Mma Millipede, Paulina, and even Head herself fled. In *RCG*, Makhaya, like Head, encounters ambition and greed for the first time "within the context of black nationalism," an experience that is disturbing for someone who believes, as Head and, hence Makhaya, clearly does--that Botswana has been less affected by political posturing than its southern African neighbors. Botswana is, in Head's opinion, "the most unique and distinguished country in the whole of Africa...all its quiet and unassertive grandeur has remained intact there" (*Woman* 66). The turn to Gilbert and his Western knowledge signals the entrée into modern ways of thinking even as it reconstitutes colonial power.

Although Head's novel perpetuates colonial power in several ways, by writing her story she indicates accession into the world of language created by white writers. Ashcroft et al., argue "by the very fact of writing in the language of the dominant culture [a writer has] temporarily or permanently entered a specific and privileged class

endowed with the language, education, and leisure necessary to produce such works” (5). While Head was a native English speaker, her status as “coloured” assured she would never be accepted by Anglo-Africans of the time; her ability to describe her experiences in ways that could be understood by white Africans, however, provided her with a way to infiltrate the privileged class, and by focusing on the lives of non-white characters, Head “writes back” to, or challenges the world view of the culture in power. It is important to note that one of the major complaints against *RCG* – that it does not do enough to challenge the colonial system from which it originates – is characteristic of some postcolonial texts that attempt to “write back” to their colonial histories. Ashcroft et al. maintain, “the potential for subversion in their themes cannot be fully realized” because the discourse available and the “material conditions of production...restrain this possibility” (6). Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin were referring to works much earlier than *RCG*, to be sure – their text references James Tucker’s *Ralph Rashleigh* and Thomas Mofolo’s *Chaka*, two novels published approximately 30 years before *RCG* – but given Head’s mixed race background, the racism she experienced in her home country of South Africa, the discrimination she had to overcome as the child of a mother institutionalized for mental health issues, and a foreigner in her adopted homeland of Botswana, it is useful to compare the process of production of Head’s novel to the forces that would have affected the earlier works. Thus, *RCG*, like the other texts, came into being “within the constraints of a discourse and the institutional practice which limits and undercuts their assertion of a different perspective” (Ashcroft

et al. 6). Perhaps, then, *RCG* is as subversive as it can be given the constraints of language and discourse governing its production.

Furthering an “Anti” Agenda

Reading *SAF*, *GIS*, and *RCG* from a contemporary perspective underscores the fact that while these novels recognize the need for change in their respective societies, none is overtly political in challenging the prevailing political beliefs of its time. While *SAF* begins to question the legitimacy of racism and propounds the importance of feminism, its structure makes those arguments difficult to follow. On the whole, the novel was more popular outside of South Africa, and only among members of the intelligentsia, many of whom already held similar beliefs. The few examples that show Schreiner’s cognizance of the situation of native Africans are subtle. *GIS*, perhaps more accessible and more critical of race relations and the legacy of imperialism in the South African colonies, uses the character of Mary as both an example to comment on the problems associated with institutionalized white supremacy in southern African society and as a way to critique individual modes of interaction between native Africans and white settlers. By trespassing the boundaries of acceptable behavior Mary does not earn the sympathy of her peers. Lessing throws this fact into clear relief at once indicting the community for its apathy toward human life, both white and black; they are troubled neither by Mary’s death nor by their inhumane treatment of native Africans – treatment that has likely caused Moses’ violent action. With its focus on the rehabilitative and community-building effects of farming *RCG* appears to focus on the utopian life that

farming offers. Beneath the façade, however, Head suggests that the twin specters of imperialism and colonialist intervention are never far, and that in an African society poised to enter modernity, the aid offered by the vestiges of this system are perhaps less harmful than the apartheid and tribalism accepted elsewhere on the continent.

To varying degrees, the novels discussed in this dissertation are aware of the need for change within the social structure that emerged from southern Africa's colonial past. Although each addresses the issues differently, as a whole they confront the inequality that marked race and gender relations in South Africa, Rhodesia, and Botswana, and suggest that the farm is useful as both a microcosm within which to consider these inequalities and as a place to enact positive change. None of these novels offers definitive solutions, but by exposing the realities of farm life instead of the idealized picture presented by the *plaasroman*, these farm novels further agendas that are anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and, most importantly, concerned with advancing a more egalitarian perspective. Thus, while each novel is problematic in its own way, taken together these books represent an improvement on the *plaasroman*; the presence and contributions of native Africans are no longer excised from South African history, and by admitting to and representing the complexities that both shaped and grew out of racial interactions in the imperial, colonial, and postcolonial periods, these novels reveal the issues that still plague race relations in the 21st century.

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