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CONFLICTING NARRATIVE IDENTITY FORMATION IN RACIALIZED INTERCULTURAL DISCOURSE NADINE GORDIMER'S *THE CONSERVATIONIST* – A COGNITIVE NARRATOLOGICAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The article is studying the issue of how racialized intercultural relations are analyzed in the formation of conflicting narrative identity. How it is called in question the narratability of racialized subjectivity and lead to conflicting narrative identities of the same character as inferrible from narratorial discourse, vis-à-vis the way the character views itself in its intramental activity. And how all of this shadows from, and is traceable through the manifestations of, racialized cognitive architecture, and thus, paradoxically, unnarratability becomes the source of narrativity. The conflicting nature of racialized subjectivity and narrative identity formation will be examined, then, through a socio-cognitive lens. This study draws on Nadine Gordimer's apartheid-era novel, *The Conservationist* (1974) as a tutor text and will be informed especially by colonial/postcolonial theory, cultural as well as cognitive narratology, cognitive cultural studies, theories of intercultural communication, and discourse analysis.

KEYWORDS

apartheid literature, cognitive narratology, intercultural discourse, Nadine Gordimer, narrative identity.

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

The main character, is always in focus in Nadine Gordimer's apartheid-period narrative *The Conservationist* (1974) that is Mehring, a middle-aged, rich white industrialist, the director of an investment fund and a member of more boards of directors than he cares to keep count of, who – although he is not a farmer – buys himself a farm on the money he earned in industry. He does it "to make contact with the land" and "as a sign of having remained fully human and capable of enjoying the simple things of life that poorer men can no longer afford." It is a "weed-choked, neglected" farm, "a dirty piece of land, agriculturally speaking" (1978, 22). For tax reasons he could have left it "misused or wasted," but he decided to stop "the rot," clean up the place, make it productive (1978, 23). Although he has an experienced black foreman, Jacobus, who runs the farm and manages the black farm workers with great skill, Mehring *is* the farmer, the boss. He thinks he has "to keep half an eye (all he could spare) on everything" (1978, 23). He is open to learning new facts, ready to cope with the new situation since this is what industry required from him in the city after all: he was "accustomed to digesting new facts and coping with new situations" (1978, 23). But is he open to learn, is he ready to cope with the situation, really? What the Transvaal countryside has in store for the central character of this apartheid narrative in terms of human environment – the Afrikaners-alias-the-Boers-alias-the Dutch, the Greeks, the Asian Indians, and especially the native black Africans (even if safely segregated in "the location") – both irritates and confuses him to a greater and greater degree. All this on top of a leftist mistress, Antonia, whom he helps to flee abroad (1978, 264), and a son, Terry with "well-meaning, if half-baked, social conscience" (Smith 1993, 50), with whom the generation gap could not be wider (add a divorced wife, who is an insufferable nuisance to him).

So the more we get to know of Mehring, the less we know who he is. And he has the same problem with himself. Thus the novel gradually develops into a journey, which is his quest for self-definition although, puzzling as it is, he would not be more solidly defined than he is – by the racial and social position that he occupies and the ideological conformity he represents in apartheid society. He was "a fundamental pillar of the oppressive system in South Africa" (Clingman 1990, 209). What we have as his story unfolds are more and more messed-up relationships: interpersonal, interracial, intercultural disengagement, and contrived or cut-off communication in all of these respects.

The author decides not to help her reader. As Nadine Gordimer makes it plain in the JannikaHurwitt-interview, in *The Conservationist* "you have a real narrator," "with a totally dispassionate view from outside," but the book is predominantly an interior monologue (Mehring's for the most part, but not always), and the line between when Mehring is speaking and when he is not "is very vague" (1990, 147). Although the dispassionate narrator clearly, though implicitly, represents Gordimer's antiapartheid stance (much-discussed in Gordimer criticism), and in various ways it is Mehring who is in the explicit or implicit focus of the intramental and intermental activities1 of the other characters too, narrative comprehension takes considerable effort on the part of the reader. The reason why habitual narrative-comprehension mechanism fails us is the vague line just mentioned:

> *the presented intramental activity "jumps about from different points of view" in the book (Hurwitt 1990, 147). "I chose to ignore," Gordimer admits, "that one had to explain anything at all. I decided that if the reader didn't make the leap in his mind, if the allusions were puzzling to him—too bad" (Hurwitt 1990, 148).*

When leaps in our mind are needed to yield clues to understanding a narrative, narrative coherence is accessible through inferences. The latter are what Gordimer's leap-in-the-reader's-mind idea translates into. Constructionist theory of inference generation distinguishes local and global coherence inferences as well as explanatory and communicative2 ones (Graesser, Singer and Trabasso 1994, especially 375–376). The allusions that trigger those inferences can be overt, but in this case are more characteristically covert, embedded in the narrative discourse, which is to say: they are implied. It is so because the true nature of the society the novel is about must "*reveal itself,*" Gordimer argues in the Pat Schwartz-interview: "The suffering inflicted by White on Black, the ambiguities of feeling, the hypocrisy, the courage, the lies, the sham and shame—they are all there, implicit. If you write honestly about life in South Africa, apartheid damns itself" (1990, 83; emphasis in the original).

Racialized Cognitive Architecture: Intentionality

The Conservationist draws our attention towards Mehring's and other characters' cognition, their intramental and intermental activities, then. Thus it is trying to make sense of this narratively organized discourse, is the basic source and container of the cognition of the novel's fictional minds (and ours): their (and our) cognitive architecture. The many kinds and formalized models of cognitive architecture aside (from neuroscience and cognitive psychology through artificial intelligence), for narratological purposes cognitive architecture is "the range of databases" in our mind that are affected by new information, our "knowledge stores" (Zunshine 2006, 48–49). The attempt to interpret Mehring's fictional mind is also to examine the cognitive architecture behind his cognition, in the light of our own. It is tried to interpret him by mobilizing our own. It is in his cognitive architecture, where it could be found what makes a mentality like his tick; where it could be hoped to discern clues to some of the allusions Gordimer talks about. And it will be the hidden allusions, together with what triggers them, on what our inferences could be drown regarding the baffling phenomenon Mehring is. Antiapartheid Gordimer's method of presenting apartheid society in the fictional *universe of The Conservationist makes it possible for her to condemn that society implicitly, i.e. without making her objective narrator judgmental. She described the method to one of her interviewers in simple terms: "I thrust my hand as deep as it will go, deep into the life around me, and I write about what comes up" (Schwartz 1990, 83). But she writes about it in such a manner that judgement is left, through the allusions, to the reader's ability to infer. Apartheid will then fall to the ground by its own weight.*If – to borrow and extend Gordimer's metaphor – we thrust our metaphorical hands deep into the novel, what comes up is a man whose narrative identity is both a solid logical product, constructed by the apartheid social environment and – for the same reason – an identity falling apart before our eyes until he becomes totally dysfunctional in terms of interpersonal and intercultural communication. Socially, he is a successful industrialist. Innately, he is not a bad human individual. Yet he is a dismal failure socially too, to such an extent that Mehring, the boss who lords over everything, ends up on the ground, physically and in a moral sense, with an apprehension that he will be killed in the next moment and will not even know why. Is his whole problem – and it is now readerly inference – ignorance? Failed identity formation (another readerly inference)? A failure that does not know itself? Or rather, a failure that does know, but does not want to acknowledge itself? As Judith Levy suggests, "Mehring is already a dead man, but he does not know it. Or at least that knowledge is kept at an unconscious level as 'unwelcome knowledge'" (Levy 2006, 108)? My suggestion below will be that he *does* know and *is* conscious of it, but is reluctant to act upon that knowledge.

So the reader thrusts his or her metaphorical hand into the novel and what comes up is a central personality, to whose identity that it is gained access through his own thoughts and recollections. But the protagonist does not see the first and most important aspect of his identity: the extent to which it has been claimed by apartheid, whose racist relational and communicative logic he internalized. While processing *The Conservationist*'s narrative discourse as readers, it is sensed that it is being delt with two conflicting identities, then: one which develops through Mehring's narrative of himself, and one that the objective narrator develops about Mehring. How can it be traced where it is with those two narrators, separately and vis-à-vis each other, and then, eventually, with the narrative subject called Mehring? It can be traced by examining Mehring's cognitive architecture in the light of our own knowledge stores, as the only way to recognize some of the allusions that Gordimer had in mind in the interview quoted above – and then by making our readerly inferences. Such an investigation involves, in turn, examining those two of the four levels of cognitive architecture that Patrick Colm Hogan calls the level of intentionalism (the character's goals, beliefs, intentions)3 and the level *of representationalism (the system of structures as well as mental processes and contents of the character's cognition; e.g. images of experience) (2010, 239).*

"The portrayal of a particular mind-style can often be a major objective of a literary work (probably *the* major objective [...])," Catherine Emmott asserts, "and is important for the reader's overall interpretation of the work" (1997, 30; emphasis in the original). It is enough to look at the level of intentionalism in Mehring's cognitive architecture to realize that his mind-style is the clue to an overall interpretation of *The Conservationist.*But to draw up an inventory of the intentionalist domain of his mind only to prove that he is a racist tycoon and a misogynistic male – something that has been established about him by critics so many times (often rather one-sidedly) – would be superfluous and not to the point in the present context. Instead, let it suffice to quote some examples that would illuminate the point about the conflicting nature of the two identities: the protagonist's identity as he views himself as opposed to the identity that emerges from the objective narrator's discourse, and to how it is rooted in the intentionalist realm of the protagonist's cognitive architecture.

Mehring's beliefs and convictions spring from his aversion to, and disdain for, blacks, also for the Afrikaners/Boers/Dutch; and from the social position which makes it possible for him to buy whatever he wants to, especially property and women. His intentional thinking is fully racialized and sexualized. As Rose Pettersson puts it: he "ruthlessly exploits whatever and whoever comes in his way in order to achieve his own gratification" (1995, 91). His treatment of a girl on an air flight – Dorothy Driver's example – is totally "de-personalizing" (1990, 187). Not that his ruthlessness is that of a zealous backer of the apartheid, though. It is rather nonchalant. "[T]he Great Impartial" – these are the politically radical Antonia's condemning words; "[T]he politics are of no concern. The ideology doesn't matter" (1978, 82). Mehring nonchalantly accepts what an apartheid society has to offer a wealthy white male, not only in social advantages but also in racist clichés, true. Nonchalantly but not quite unthinkingly. He is intelligent enough to have apprehensions: "Soon, in this generation or the next, it must be our turn to starve and suffer. Why not?" – he is meditating, lying on the ground, with earth in his mouth (1978, 46–47). The bodily position is a reminder of the black stranger found dead, face down, in Mehring's third pasture and hastily and insensitively dumped into a shallow grave by the racist Afrikaner police but later washed up by incessant rain and flooding, as a symbolic reminder – a ghost that keeps haunting Mehring as it were. The murdered subaltern of postcolonial South Africa4 is haunting Mehring, aimed at characters, readers by other characters, narrators, and authors. Zunshine distinguishes seven embedded levels of intentionality in a single Virginia Woolf paragraph (2010b: 206–207). *the postcolonial colonizer – who "fails to realize that the colonial era has already come to an end" (Kathrin M. Wagner 1993, 84).5 But it is also an allusion to some dull, unconfessed remorse that does not know itself. It is the objective narrator's allusive device encouraging both backward-oriented and forward-oriented readerly inferencing. One, white minority rule denies black native majority land and life, Mehring being the foregrounded representative case in point – a backward-oriented inference. Two, the reader's forward-oriented inference that the dead man needs to be properly buried anticipates that he will be eventually buried decently by the* *blacks at the end of the novel, a concluding incident coded with significant meaning (about that significance later below).*

But the predominant motives of the Mehring phenomenon, determining his cognitive architecture on the intentionalist level can be found in the multiple meanings of his being a conservationist. Two of these meanings/allusions are overt, both Mehring and the reader are aware of them. The third is covert and Gordimer (her objective narrator, that is) leaves it to the reader to work for it.

Firstly, Mehring is an avowed conservationist in the most common (and in itself conflictive) sense of environment protection: he wants to stop "the rot," clean up the land as I have already mentioned. Protection of the environment is a cause that he takes so seriously that, for one, he prohibits the farm workers' children to play games with guinea fowl eggs (1978, 12). He also refines that agenda to the point that it swings over into its own parody: "He is pathologically concerned with the conservation of the land, and he cannot allow himself to drop as much as a cigarette end on his farm" (Pettersson 1995, 94). But the real conflicting elements of the conservationist component of the environmental protectionist's narrative identity are not these; rather, it is how an oversensitive relation to the physical environment (the country, the continent, the oceans, the sky [1978, 11]) is almost totally insensitive to what is happening to, and what he himself is doing to, the human environment. Insensitive on the level of routine intermental activities at least;6 intramentally it is a much more complex issue as indicated above and will be further elaborated below. Another – similarly overt – "conservationist" in him is the one that contributes to the conservation of the racist system, a characteristic that his conscientious-objector son, Terry challenges and his leftist mistress, Antonia castigates with scorn. As we have seen, Mehring has his apprehensions (of the blacks taking over one day, maybe),

> *he is warned that he is a racist after all, he would even "make the world over, if it were easy as that" (1978, 81), and he does have racially-motivated survival reflexes (he turns his back on everything and runs in the end). However, the real clue to his mentality and the fundamental source of who he is, and therefore to the dual identity of this racialized subject is the third (covert) meaning of "conservationist:" he internalized (conserved internally) the ruling white elite's view of the apartness of racialized South Africa. What the narrative is doing here – as it is processing Mehring through his story, so to say – can be described with cognitive naratologist Manfred Jahn's flow-charting method ("an adaptation of Bremond's model"): the internalization of the external into an internal story, which is then externalized*

into an external story (2003, 201). In our context: it is the external (the racist apartheid world) internalized by Mehring which is then externalized as the Mehring-story, viewed both internally (through presenting his mental activity) and externally (by the objective narrator).

Manifestations of Racialized Cognitive Architecture: Intra- and Intermental Activity, Positioning

What is stored in the levels of intentionality and representations of Mehring’s cognitive architecture as his knowledge that is motivating his cognition that is revealed in his intramental and intermental activity as well as in his positioning. it has already been seen the details illustrating how the intra- and intermental point, centripetally, to what Mehring’s cognitive architecture contains as the source of those mental activities. But if it is examined this relation from an inverse direction – i.e. intra- and intermental activity as manifestations of cognitive architecture – the reversed (centrifugal) perspective reveals features of Mehring’s cognitive behaviour that would otherwise remain hidden.

What makes our conservative-conservationist protagonist a much more complex figure than those who seem to be progressive in thinking by comparison (Antonia and Terry) is that although we expect the political conservationist in him to be fully guided by his intentionality, and that he will live up to the requirements of his representations – in fact he cannot entirely, not in every respect. The realization dawns upon the attentive reader early as a forward-oriented inference. Mehring refers to the murdered black man as just “one of them” (1978, 15), as already mentioned. Yet, he instructs Jacobus in the closing sentence of the first chapter-like unit of the text, motivated by some innate humanness, to cover the dead man with something: “You’d better take something – to put over, down there. (His head jerks towards the river.) A tarpaulin. Or sacks” (1978, 21). True, he avoids to refer to him even as “him.” Paradoxically, Mehring’s reaction, once he has seen the dead man, is already an improvement on the initial colonial arrogance with which he related to the news when Jacobus first communicated it to him and he responded by asking: “Why should I go to look at a dead man near the river?” (1978, 13).

What our cognitive narratological approach suggests us to notice a very soon is that Mehring’s intramental and intermental activities (his recollections and meditations, on the one hand, and his interpersonal exchanges, on the other hand) do not go hand in hand. While intermentally he is a faithful representative of the socially constructed role racial discrimination prescribes for the English-speaking white boss (he wants to keep an eye on everything, to have his orders obeyed and detests black Africans), intramentally he is a realist too. Racist power discourse assigns him a place at the top, but intramentally he has no illusions: “They [the blacks] know everything about us” (1978, 57); “They have been there all the time and they will continue to be there. They have nothing and they have nothing to lose” (1978, 260). Intermentally he never uses the harsh tone with Antonia that she adopts with him, but intramentally he is right (the realist again) about how her kind of radicalism is shallow and does not take the world very far. In intermental negotiations he is often tough with his son, Terry, but intramentally he does cherish genuine fatherly feelings for him.

Mehring’s mind “habitually runs” on a “fine crisscross of grooves” (1978, 58). He senses a “gap” that “lies at a deeper level in the text than the undeniable truth of the white man’s ultimate failure to possess the land.” It arouses “terror in him, the sense of standing over an abyss” (Levy 2006, 113). Our context can refine the point further: the “fine criss-cross of grooves” of his mind makes it possible for him to confront his cognitive intentionalism and the representations of his knowledge systems with his experiential knowledge of the world. Thus he is engaging in a task which will be the reader’s too, who, in turn, will compare Mehring’s cognitive architecture with his/her own. The resulting slow process of transformation, is checked and qualified and barely discernable in his intermental activity. But he is indeed making steady progress intramentally, with the nameless black corpse as a concealed catalyst, until Mehring’s subconscious and formless dissociation from his dream of colonialist pastoralism takes shape in his mind, overwhelms him and erupts from under the surface in that humiliating scene at the end of his story.

However, all this happens inside Mehring. At this point one would expect the intramental and the intermental to be in full accord. But very few sentences are actually exchanged intermentally, no matter how radical the nature of Mehring’s decision is. In what is a brilliant piece of writing, the clashing intermental confrontation between Mehring and the “thick-headed ox, guardian of the purity of the master race” (1978, 263) all takes place intramentally, in Mehring’s mind (1978, 261–265). It is one of the many moments (but the most crucial one) of the intramentally presented intermental in the novel. It can also be seen as the intensively imagined intermental that effects a decisive change in the realm of the intramental.

And with this we have reached the problematic of positioning. The protagonist of *The Conservationist* is the embodiment of a paradox;therefore his position is paradoxical. Colonialreflexed postcolonial apartheid is itself a paradox. *That* is the external that Mehring internalized, which internal story is then externalized as his story, mostly through his intramental activity as it has been just seen. And his story is about how he has been positioned by this culture.9 But, as we saw earlier, he also develops dilemmas related to his position. The more closely he examines his alienating and alienated role, the more distressed he becomes.

The whole novel can be regarded as a narrative of position-discomposure – a novel of repositioning eventually. Gordimer called her central character "a kind *of fossil" in the Schwartz interview (1990, 80). And he is too, in that he is the walking embodiment of an outdated social establishment. An establishment that forces Jacobus, Mehring's black foreman into a seemingly easy-to-mold position, a good illustration of what HomiBhabha described as mimicry.*

Jacobus is a position-shifter depending on who he is dealing with. It is an existential imperative for him to do the job to Mehring's satisfaction; but he also does his best to help his own people on the sly side. Jacobus's positioning differs from the rest of the blacks. The latter are positioned by apartheid to be undesirable and oppressed aliens in their own country,10 but *his* positioning comes from Mehring, one character positioning the other. So his activity as a double narrative agent of the storyworld, i.e. serving Mehring, the white boss, but trying to help his black people too, means that in his intramental cognitive operations he rejects the positioning that comes to him from Mehring. "An ironic compromise," "the sign of a double articulation" is what mimicry is in Bhabha's definition; pretended accommodation, inclusive of its difference "that is itself a process of disavowal" (1994, 86). This makes Jacobus a skillful juggler of positions: he tells the black women "to warn the children not to collect eggs *where they could be seen*," and reassures his conservationist white boss that "there were plenty of guinea fowl about if you had to be up at work early enough to see them" (1978, 33). "[T]he discourses of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*" after all (Bhabha 1994, 86; emphasis in the original). As for Mehring, he may be fossil, but he is certainly not petrified. We see him, as we read on, more and more as a man of "disjointed consciousness" – also Gordimer's words, this time from the Diana Cooper-Clark interview (1990, 225). In the cognitive narratological context of the present study we can say that what Mehring is experiencing is a widening rift between his position and his positioning cognitive architecture.

1 Theoretical concepts coming from cognitive narratology like “intramental activity” and “intermental activity” will be much more useful for us than “interior monologue” and “dialogue” since the whole novel is cognition – chiefly Mehring’s – after all

2 The last one (the “communicative exchange between reader and author” – Graesser, Singer and Trabasso 1994, 376) is conceived in the present paper as modified by psychonarratologists Marisa Bortolussi and Peter Dixon, to mean communication between the narrator and the reader, and not the *author* and the reader (Bortolussi and Dixon 2003, 16).

3 “Intentionalism” as defined by Hogan and applied in this paper is not to be confused with Lisa Zunshine’s “intentionality,” a broader term which covers all declaired and concealed intentions

4 The racial institution of apartheid was established (in 1948) many years after the country had already been granted the status of a sovereign state (in 1934), thus, formally, South Africa was no longer a colony at the time the action takes place

5 This is the generally accepted view concerning Mehring, but I side with Lars Engle, who refines the point: “Mehring seems to imagine himself specifically defending industrialism against romantics who find it distasteful, rather than defending colonialism” (1993, 103).

6 *Almost* totally because we do see signs of his concern for others. He does manifest fatherly feelings for his son, not necessarily obstinate or wrong-headed in every respect. He does lend the Toyota pick-up to his unsufferable Boer neighbour, Old De Beer. He does give instructions to Jacobus to assist the dead man’s reburial (“Jacobus must look after everything nicely”) even if Mehring himself does not even want to hear about it (1978, 266).

9 Our place in society depends on the role we take, Gordimer argues. We may run away from our “inevitable role,” or we can “take it on.” “But the fact is that you have a role; there is no such thing as an ivory tower – that’s a place in itself. You are consciously or unconsciously creating a position in your society” (Gray 1990, 180).

Conclusion: Discourse and Narrative Identity

But it would be a sheer tautology to repeat the points already made about how apartheid is a racist discourse, anti-apartheid narratorial feelings are a counter discourse, and the characters have their own discourse. What it could be captured in our discursive net if cast this way would be only parts (significant constituents, though) of the main discursive concern of the narrative as a whole – of the global narrative discourse.it can be looked for *The Conservationist*’s global narrative discourse in the narratorial consciousness. As it is claimed elsewhere in a narratocultural essay: “a narratorial mind is not simply present in a narrative text, but the text *is* the content of that mind since what the text contains is the product of a narrator’s or an implied author’s consciousness” (Abádi-Nagy 2008, 21). And our extradiegetic (external) teller of the tale (Gordimer calls her “objective narrator” as indicated earlier) is an implied-author narrator, who has an anti-apartheid mindset, and that is the cultural determination that produces and rules the Gordimer novel’s text (the *what* of the narrative) and *shapes* the narrative (the *how*). Without getting entagled in the intricacies of Seymour Chatman’s definitions of content and expression (story and discourse) planes vis-à-vis substance and form,15 I wish to adopt his idea of “deep narrative predicate,” which is not the same as (though constructed through a series of) “surface lingusitic predicates” (1978, 146). A deep *narrative* predicate can determine not only longer stretches of narrative, but a whole work, narrated or nonnarrated, directly or in mediated ways, *embedded directly or indirectly* in narratorial consciousness or/and storyworld character-focalizers. The deep narrative predicate – what can be called narratorial global discourse in the contexts of this paper – was already mentioned above as the widening rift between Mehring’s position and the apartheid-driven cognitive architecture that positions him. The Conservationist’s mediated discursive point is that such a seemingly unresolvable tension, culminating in a rift, necessarily disjoins a sensitive human individual from his or her own cognitive architecture in a brutally inhuman society, even if that sensitivity is internally half-buried already under the social values that the individual incorporated into his or her own cognitive architecture. This global narrative discourse or deep narrative predicate organizes the how of Gordimer’s narrative in the senses Chatman theorizes the how: the “structure of narrative transmission” (“form of expression”) and enfolding discourse “manifestations” (“substance of expression”) (1978, 26). Let it suffice to say, more simply, in the concrete terms of the novel, what the how that Gordimer’s deep narrative predicate develops in the novel is: the narrator processes Mehring through a series of events/actions and recollections (inter- and intramental activities), making him think over who he is, what his position in apartheid society is. After all, as Frantz Fanon asserts relating to (otherwise mainly reacting against) French psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni’s ideas: “the problem of colonialism includes not only the interrelations of objective conditions but also human attitudes toward these conditions” (1968, 84). In turn, through Mehring’s own narratives that narrativize the formation of his narrative identity, the extradiegetic anti-apartheid narrator herself thinks apartheid-driven South Africa over, adjusting Mehring’s perspectival filtering to align the reader with the narratorial vantage point. In a word, the discursive method is mapping socio-cultural cognition here.

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